

**Burlington Parents and Youth for Change  
Full Research Report on Advisory:  
Students Who are Known Well & Ready for the Future  
June 4, 2014**

Parents and Youth for Change empowers families to improve educational opportunities. We are parents, siblings, recent graduates, high school and middle school students, our newest Vermonters and those who have lived here for generations. We have come together to focus on one issue -- students developing and reaching their goals for college, careers and community. To pick this issue, we heard from over 300 parents and youth, in one-to-one conversations and small group meetings. Our current group evolved out of the New American Parents for Change group that won establishment of a visual, family-friendly report card in 2012. This report card is useful in helping all students understand where they are on the path to college-readiness.

**Research Process:**

This past year, our new focus has been **understanding how students develop and reach their college and career-readiness goals**. Our research has been led by our VNA Family Room Parents and Youth for Change group. Here is what we have done:

- We had 10 research meetings.
  - We met with BHS high school administrators and the guidance department director as well as both middle school principals.
  - We also met with a Partnership for Change fellow, Upward Bound, VSAC, Navicate, and Let's Get Ready.
- We visited a middle/high school in New Hampshire that has already made some significant changes to be more student-centered.
- We met with Vermont Adult Learning to understand their approach to personal learning plans and goal setting and studied personal learning plan templates provided by the State of Vermont and the school we visited in New Hampshire.
- We met with the Annenberg Institute to review research on the pathways to college-readiness.
- We met with Voices for Vermont's Children staff to examine 8th grade test data from 2012 and 2013 so that we could better understand high school readiness.
- We conducted surveys with 100 BHS students to learn more about their goals for after high school, as well as their current support system, challenges and suggestions.

**Key Findings:**

1. Over the last three years, Burlington High School has started making changes. Teachers have re-designed the 9th grade and created the Year End Studies program. Several teachers have tried proficiency-based learning in their classrooms. New courses have been developed, like the Senior Seminar for all 12th graders next year, the elective School Innovation Seminar, and enhanced courses for English Language Learners. There are additional summer school classes and math tutoring programs to help students advance. There are some new options for students to learn in the community, do projects that they are interested in and projects to help solve community problems. Teachers are also working to further develop the new Graduate Expectations. These are very important steps and we are proud to have reached this point. We recognize and appreciate all of this work. We know that much planning continues to develop a student centered learning system where all students thrive.
2. In Burlington middle schools, there are opportunities for students to identify their interests, through exploratory classes, a college and career week, and 8th grade independent project capstones.
3. At Burlington High School, there are opportunities for students to learn about college and careers in several ways, including:
  - a career exploration course that has been part of 10th grade but is being re-structured
  - internships offered by the Navicate TIPS program

- a new Senior Seminar being developed for next year for all students that will include some time for college planning
- two to three “College Night” Workshops at the high school, including some in different languages, and a few workshops and “College Fairs” each year through VSAC and other area partners
- “College Connections” - supported by Navicate to help students to take up to two college classes while they are in high school, in addition to the “Intro to College Studies” course
- special VSAC and Upward Bound college preparation programs - that serve about 90 students who would be the first in their family to attend college

4. At Burlington High School, the main way that students are supported in selecting their high school courses, reviewing graduation requirements and planning for after high school is by working with their Guidance Counselor.

- Each student is assigned a guidance counselor and students are expected to meet with their Guidance Counselor once each year.
- The BHS Guidance Department outlines what Guidance Counselors work on with students each year.
- Each Junior and Senior at BHS gets a special packet of information about many internet college resources, how to get recommendations for college, how to request a high school transcript to be sent to a college, some test preparation and registration information and scholarships.
- Guidance Counselors are available to meet with students and parents more, as requested.
- Each Guidance Counselor works with about 260 students
- In addition to academic counseling and post high school planning, Guidance Counselors:
  - provide individual, short-term student counseling;
  - provide crisis response, referrals and coordination of student supports with community agencies and therapists; and
  - serve on the special education teams for individual students.

Guidance Counselors, teachers, staff and administrators in the Burlington School District work hard to make sure all students have a good education. Many teachers work with students one-to-one to help them with their college essays and provide recommendations. Talented, committed and hard-working individuals and partner organizations work tirelessly with our students to reach their college and career-readiness goals.

### **Path to College-Readiness**

To understand what it takes to reach college-readiness, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University helped us to review the research. We learned that the path to college includes:

1. Attending school - good attendance matters!
2. Knowing college expectations and taking appropriate courses in high school to reach college-readiness and post high school goals
3. Accessing individual support to prepare for college
4. Understanding college entrance exam requirements and achievement levels;
5. A “college-going culture” at school -- the belief that all students can gain the skills to go to college and that students know what it takes to get there
6. Understanding and successfully accessing financial aid.

### **Key Themes from Student Survey:**

We also asked students directly about their goals, worries and what they need in our survey of 100 high school students and one-to-one conversations:

1. 90% of Seniors surveyed said their goal is to go to a 4-year college; On average, at the end of the school year, about 60% of Seniors report that they are going to a 4-year college.
2. Students biggest worries about their future are: figuring out what to do after high school; figuring out how to navigate the college process and having the money to pay for college.
3. for some students, just passing classes and getting through high school was a big worry;
4. many students don't feel like they know their guidance counselor very well, but shared that they work with Guidance Counselors to pick courses for high school and understand the requirements to graduate and don't use their meetings with guidance for future planning and don't often proactively schedule meetings
5. in general, students don't feel like they have enough support to navigate how the college planning process works, financial aid, and where to get help; there are gaps in information, understanding their skill-level, college admissions expectations and readiness, and how students access college and career preparation resources;
6. many students don't feel like they have the time, support, or opportunities during high school to map out a plan for after high school, select the best match for them from different college/career preparation options and understand how to get the financing to reach their goals.
7. in general, students shared that they have conversations with their parents about their future, and occasionally with their teachers, but that they don't regularly have conversations with anyone at school about their future.

### **College-Readiness Skills and Students Accessing College/Career Preparation:**

Through our research, we also looked more deeply at college-readiness skill development and how students access college and career exploration and support.

1. Many students are not reaching high school readiness as measured by the 2012 and 2013 8th Grade standardized test or NECAP in Reading, Writing, Math and Science - this is particularly true for students whose families have less money, with just over half of students are reaching "proficiency" in reading and about a third of students reaching "proficiency" in math.
2. To take appropriate courses in high school that match college-entrance requirements, students must reach a certain "skill level". If students are not reaching "high school readiness", it is hard to access and succeed in these courses and this limits opportunities for after high school graduation.
3. Other activities that help prepare students for college, like taking college classes during high school and the Upward Bound college preparation program also require that students reach a certain "skill-level" - this includes taking, and succeeding in, the high school courses required to gain college admission. To take some college classes, students must demonstrate that they have a good attendance record and they must get a certain score on the Accuplacer test. This means that many students who would benefit from these opportunities cannot access them.

Students do not access opportunities for interest and career-exploration in a systemic way. In middle school, there are very limited opportunities that match the work world of the future. In high school, small numbers of students participate in internships.

### **What Would Make A Difference -- Strong & Effective Advisory:**

Our research showed us that while there are lots of opportunities for students at BHS and with partners, there are some significant gaps in access and information, and there is a lot that students and families need to know to get on the path to college. So we continued to look for what would make a difference in helping students prepare for their future. Our research led us to advisory, and the importance of personal relationships. When we reviewed what we had learned, it became clear that for students to develop and reach college and career-readiness goals and skills, students need the time, space and a strong relationship with someone who knows them well. To find out more about how this could connect with the student-centered learning re-design at the high school, we met with Partnership for Change fellow Beth Brodie about Advisory systems. We also met with Vermont Adult Learning, looked at personal learning plans, and visited a school in New Hampshire that has a strong advisory program.

An advisor is a teacher who meets with 12 to 15 students, usually every day. Based on the doctoral study of Beth Brodie, we know that currently about 85% of high schools in Vermont have some type of high school advisory program that focuses on every student being known well. Only three schools in Vermont that have graduating classes of more than 50 students do not currently have any form of advisory.

We also learned that in a strong and effective advisory program:

- A student usually has the same teacher advisor for all of high school.
- The teacher advisor is a point person who helps students with academic goals, identifying interests and future planning for after high school.
- The teacher advisor also helps to build strong relationships with each student and with the group as a whole.
- The teacher advisor is the primary contact for and partner with families.
- In a school with personal learning plans, the teacher advisor oversees this process and helps monitor student progress.
- The teacher advisor encourages students to connect with resources and try different learning options like internships, college classes, and community service linked to their post high school planning and goals.
- Teacher advisors nurture, advocate and guide.

To develop an effective advisory system, it's critical to:

- clearly articulate goals and vision
- ensure that adequate time for advisory is allotted in the school schedule to meet these goals
- provide support for advisors through professional development
- have support from the school and district administrators
- and have a school-wide vision for an advisory system that helps ensure that “the student is at the center” of their education.

We visited Pittsfield Middle/High School in New Hampshire where some significant school-wide changes to be more student-centered have already been implemented. We observed a strong advisory system where the teacher advisor knows each student well, believes in them, helps students access opportunities and support, encourages students to set goals and reach high expectations, and makes sure students do not fall through the cracks. At this school, students shared with us that advisory was like having a family within the school - a place where students could lend support and be supported. Visiting this school gave us a great opportunity to see what is possible.

We also investigated proposed personal learning plans that are envisioned in the BHS re-design and part of the new law in the State of Vermont that will take effect in the 2015-2016 school year. We studied personal learning plan templates provided by the State of Vermont and the school we visited in New Hampshire. We believe that the personal learning plan can be a great tool to help students get organized. But students need a “person” in their “personal learning plan” helping students focus on the “big picture” and reflect, get their thoughts organized and not just see school as learning about specific subjects. The structure of strong and effective advisory will help ensure that students don't just worry about getting their school work done, but help them connect their interests and strengths to long-term goals.

Lastly, in our survey of 100 BHS students, 70% of students said it would be helpful to work on their goals, figure out how to access opportunities connected to their interests, and explore options for their future with a teacher advisor as part of their regular school schedule multiple times a week.

We believe that developing a strong and effective advisory program at Burlington High School is critical to ensuring that students develop and achieve their goals and skills for college, careers and community and are prepared for their future. At this Public Action, on June 4, 2014, we will ask Principal Amy Mellencamp and Partnership Director Hal Colston to focus on making this kind of advisory program a reality.

Now is the time for action!