

**RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS:  
A VISION FOR  
THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL  
IN SIMSBURY**



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**A Report to the Simsbury Board of Education  
Simsbury High School Leadership Team  
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# **RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS:**

## **A VISION FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL IN SIMSBURY**

### **SIMSBURY HIGH SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT**

Simsbury High School, in striving for academic excellence, seeks to provide a comprehensive education that engages all students in meaningful learning and to develop the intellectual, creative, social, emotional, technological, and physical skills necessary to prepare them for the next phase of their lives.

Revised and Adopted, 2005

In the recent process of adopting a new mission statement for Simsbury High School, all stakeholder groups stressed the importance of including the phrase “comprehensive education” in the end product. Indeed, that concept took a prominent position in the revamped mission as many teachers, parents, and students stressed the strength and the variety of program offerings as a central element of Simsbury High School’s reputation for excellence.

Perhaps ironically, at the same time that the Simsbury High School community was renewing its commitment to providing a comprehensive education, the overall model of the American comprehensive high school was being called into serious question by policy makers, economists, and educational reformers. In short, critics argued that the comprehensive high school model had been invented early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to prepare students for life in the industrial age, when only a small percentage of the population required post-secondary education. In the demanding, complex work world and democracy of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, the educational delivery model of the comprehensive high school had become, to quote Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, “obsolete.” And Gates was hardly alone in his criticism – no institution in American society has been under greater scrutiny than “the high school” in today’s policy debates. Major educational organizations have issued national reports about the need for reform in American high schools (“Breaking Ranks II” from the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, “A Call to Action” from the National High School Alliance, and “The New Standards for Accreditation” from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges).

The challenge, therefore, for the Simsbury High School Leadership Team in preparing recommendations for this report comes in striking the balance between the recognized values of the comprehensive high school model in this town and the equally valid critiques of it from voices both outside and within our community. At the request of the Board of Education, we have undertaken an 18-month study to arrive at the recommendations contained within this document. Reaching beyond the original charge given to the Leadership Team to define more precisely what is meant by the term “comprehensive high school” as it applies to our community, we believe that we are providing a broad-based vision for Simsbury High School’s future – one that outlines the academic, civic, and social expectations for 21<sup>st</sup> century graduates and presents a strategic plan to bring Simsbury High School to a higher level of excellence in service to each of its students.

There are many specific recommendations surrounding credit requirements, curriculum, policies, and best practices for teaching and learning contained in this report. For purposes of this executive summary, we ask the reader to focus on three central themes that encompass the ideas we are presenting.

**Rigor** – We embrace the belief that *all* students must be prepared for further study beyond high school through the delivery of a guaranteed and viable core curriculum. In addition, a majority of students need to be provided the opportunity for advanced high school study in a wide variety of disciplines. However, in a classroom environment, rigor is not synonymous with “difficult” or “hard.” We define rigor as a condition of the learning environment which stretches the individual learner to move beyond his/her current “comfort zone” and grow as an independent learner (Hibbard).

**Relevance** – In the information age, schools that rely on content delivery as the primary purpose for teaching are under-serving their students. While we cherish the importance of in-depth content in our curricula, we insist upon an emphasis on skills of inquiry, problem solving, and analysis in the work of all of our students. To the greatest extent possible, our lessons must be relevant to the experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen. In addition, engagement of the adolescent student is of vital importance when examining both content and approach to learning.

**Relationships** – In an increasingly large high school, students need to interact with adults who both help them to think about their futures and model appropriate civic and social connectedness. We believe that both students and adults must be known as individuals, treated with respect and fairness at all times, and celebrated when they meet our expectations. Furthermore, all school community members should interact with a diversity of the population and have the potential to make significant connections in the wider community. The defining characteristic, for both students and adults, in a school that values relationships is a pervasive sense of *civility and respect*.

We are incredibly proud of Simsbury High School and the reputation for excellence that it has established over the last several decades. We believe that the recommendations in this report do strike a balance in the work of high school reform. We are not advocating here for wholesale change in programs that have served this community well for so many years; instead, the recommendations are a strategic effort to respond to rapid and complex societal influences. With a systematic design to provide rigor, relevance, and relationships to *all* students who enter Simsbury High School, we believe that we can both achieve our mission and sustain the noble concept of the comprehensive high school.

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## I. Introduction

The comprehensive high school is an institution under increasing scrutiny at all levels of political influence – national, state, and local. As the accountability movement has taken root in American education, the ability of the comprehensive high school model to bring all students to high levels of achievement has been called into question. Other criticisms have been voiced about today’s high school graduates in terms of work readiness, civic engagement, and development of higher-order thinking skills. At the same time, it should be noted that in many communities, especially in suburban communities, there are high levels of satisfaction with the existing model of high school and little motivation to change its fundamental structure (Hammack).

This report, requested by the Simsbury Board of Education, has been prepared by the Simsbury High School Leadership Team in an attempt to consider both the strengths and the shortcomings of the traditional comprehensive high school.

Certainly, preparing a majority of students for college is a fundamental aspect of Simsbury High School’s mission. As such, one of the primary objectives of this report is to outline the elements of a guaranteed and viable “core” curriculum that will prepare all Simsbury High School graduates for post-secondary study. Beyond that one-dimensional view of building college readiness, Simsbury High School seeks to prepare its students for other vital roles as democratic citizens, workers in a new economy, life-long learners, and members of a community. All of those aspects of learning in a comprehensive high school – academic, civic, and social – will be addressed within this plan.

It is critical that we consider the original, very purposeful design of the comprehensive high school nearly 100 years ago as we develop this modern strategic plan for Simsbury High School. In its original form, the comprehensive high school was designed to serve two complementary functions:

1. A “specializing function” which would serve the various needs of a heterogeneous student population through a variety of courses, programs, and activities, and
2. A “unifying function” which would include provisions for bringing together students with dissimilar backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations so they would learn to live within a diverse democratic society (Wraga).

As the comprehensive high school model was implemented throughout American society, the specializing function took on greater importance, as varied courses and programs proliferated and thus became a major defining point of “comprehensiveness.” As a result, students became largely isolated within their own schools as they were grouped primarily with peers who had similar interests, aspirations, and perceived abilities.

Because the specializing function has been more fully developed in traditional high schools, it can be argued that the unifying function of the comprehensive high school model has never been fully realized. It must, therefore, be brought back into consideration as we develop plans for our school – one where high standards for all students are a hallmark of a unified effort to develop successful citizens, workers, and learners. Beyond the central unifying concept of high standards for all students, high schools must be places that build community.

Thus, this report is more than an examination of specialized courses or programs at Simsbury High School; its scope is much broader. Its goals are as follows:

- Defining rigorous graduation standards in terms of both the courses that students take and the skills they can exhibit before leaving high school;
- Identifying the elements of the “core” curriculum for all students;
- Restructuring elective program choices in order to prepare students better for the next phase of their learning, whether in academic settings or the workplace;
- Recognizing many “best practices” in high school education that should be considered for implementation at Simsbury High School – strategies such as personalizing the environment, connecting with the larger community, and creating opportunities for “unifying” the student body;
- Suggesting a timeline for the implementation of the recommendations contained within this report that includes an initial analysis of the resources necessary to accomplish the goals.

With that vision in mind, we present this blueprint for sustaining Simsbury High School as a comprehensive high school at the start of a new century.

## II. Graduation Requirements

While formal requirements for graduation from high school are only one lens through which to examine the values of a secondary school, they are nonetheless a significant means for understanding what all students are required to experience as part of a comprehensive education. Certainly, the “Carnegie Unit” has come under recent criticism as a measure more of seat time in a given discipline rather than an explanation of what students should know and be able to do in that field. Still, credit requirements remain an important currency in the discussion of high school outcomes; therefore, they have been considered seriously by the Simsbury High School Leadership Team during the course of this study.

### A. Current Requirements

Currently, Simsbury High School has the following credit requirements for graduation:

English	4.0
Mathematics	3.0
Science	2.0
Social Studies	3.0 (1 credit in U.S. History and .5 credit in Civics)
Physical Education	1.0
Health Education	.5
Art, business, family & consumer sciences, music, or technology education	1.0
Additional Courses	7.0
Total Credits required for Graduation = 21.5	

Furthermore, students are required to meet performance standards in each of three areas: Reading Across the Disciplines, Writing Across the Disciplines, and Mathematics. While statewide CAPT testing is the primary means by which the school assesses these respective performance standards, there are several additional ways that students can demonstrate their basic skill level in each of the areas.

### B. Analysis

In looking at our school’s credit requirements, the Leadership Team surveyed other high-performing schools in Connecticut and examined documents from recognized organizations (The College Board, National Association of Secondary School Principals) to reach the recommendations outlined below. It was clear that Simsbury High School had room for growth regarding the set of required coursework that students needed to complete in order to graduate. This observation became even more important in conjunction with the team’s belief that *all* students should be prepared for post-secondary education – recognizing that some students will not *choose* that option.

### C. Credit Requirement Recommendations

Therefore, we recommend the following adjustments to the requirements for graduation from Simsbury High School (changes to current practice are noted in bold print).

English	4.0
Mathematics	3.0
Science	<b>3.0</b>
Social Studies	<b>3.5</b> (1 credit in U.S. History and .5 credit in Civics required)
World Language	<b>2.0</b>
Physical Education	1.0
Health Education	.5
Art, business, family & consumer science, music, or technology education	<b>2.0</b>
Additional Credits	<b>5.0</b>
Total Credits to Graduate	= <b>24.0</b>

We believe that these requirements reflect the preparation necessary for today's Simsbury High School graduates to succeed as college students, global citizens, and future workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Rather than "minimum" requirements, they represent a rigorous set of expectations for all students – in short, a menu for success in the diverse world beyond Simsbury High School.

We recognize that these requirements may cause other changes in the structure of the school day at Simsbury High School, specifically as it relates to the school schedule. With these expanded requirements, it would be critical to consider an expansion of the schedule to allow students the option to take eight courses during their school day (a structure that many comparable high schools employ). We believe that such a change is worthy of consideration in light of the benefits generated by the increased outcomes for all students. Potential by-products of such a change would be the slight loss of daily instructional time in each of the individual disciplines or a lengthening of the school day.

Lastly, we recognize that these recommendations represent a significant increase in requirements for many students. We therefore believe that it is important to phase in implementation of the increased requirements. While some of the recommendations have already achieved wide consensus (for instance, the increase in science credits and a redefined civics requirement in social studies), other aspects of this plan (such as the world language requirement) demand further study and deliberation with the faculty. We believe that the overall threshold of 24 credits, or six credits per year during high school, is an achievable goal, but we are also concerned that raising the standard immediately to that level could result in negative consequences for some students. We recommend that these credit requirements be increased judiciously over time and monitored for impact.

### D. Performance-Based Outcomes

In terms of the other major component of graduation requirements at Simsbury High School, we recommend performance standards that extend well beyond the current basic skills proficiencies in reading, writing, and mathematics. Again, we see the current standards as a relatively low bar – a statement of minimal competency rather than a rigorous set of expectations for each student.



Following the recommendations set forth by our school's accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, we believe that Simsbury High School needs to implement methods for measuring each of the school's academic expectations (listed below).

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS	
1. Students will gather, prioritize, and organize information.	
	<i>Expectation will be met through the following:</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reading</li><li>• Listening</li><li>• Observing</li><li>• Quantifying</li></ul>
2. Students will demonstrate critical and creative thinking	
	<i>Expectation will be met through the following:</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Problem solving</li><li>• Justifying and defending a position</li><li>• Conducting inquiry-based research</li><li>• Creating original works and products</li><li>• Evaluating work of self and others</li></ul>
3. Students will communicate knowledge and exhibit skills.	
	<i>Expectation will be met through the following:</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Writing</li><li>• Speaking</li><li>• Practicing and performing demonstrations</li></ul>

Again, we point to the limitations of the “Carnegie Unit” as the reason for recommending a measurement of performance outcomes for all students. We are aware of many high-performing secondary schools that have moved toward this model of graduation requirements – a demonstration of developed skills that represents more than the completion of seat time. Various schools have implemented such requirements through digital portfolios, senior projects, or exit interviews/graduation exhibitions before a panel of teachers. Over the next several years, we believe that some means to measure each of these important academic expectations is a necessary complement to the credit requirements outlined earlier in this section. Only through such a system of measurement can Simsbury High School guarantee the mastery of expectations that our faculty has articulated as the set of skills necessary for sustained life-long learning.

Finally, we believe that the Department Supervisors are the appropriate body to recommend the best design for a performance-based system of accountability. Only through the development of such a system of robust performance-based graduation requirements can we collect evidence of what our students really know and are able to do by the time they graduate from Simsbury High School.

### III. Curriculum Recommendations

#### A. Introduction

“The core of any academic institution is its curriculum. The curriculum is the material expression of the institutional mission and should flow from it and be the way in which the institution carries out its mission.” (Cocchiola)

Over the past two years, Simsbury High School teachers have been a part of a district focus on curricular renewal. An effort to align our curricula with state and national standards is a prominent feature of this work; furthermore, the district’s new curriculum template is designed to focus on skill application and in-depth interactions with content. In all disciplines, we believe that this curriculum renewal process will offer clarity to teachers and will provide learning outcomes to students that extend far beyond their ability to “master” a broadly-defined set of content – given that those definitions are too frequently provided by textbook publishers.

While the previous section of this report contained recommendations to increase credit requirements for students at Simsbury High School, those recommendations remain hollow if they are not tied to specific, rigorous, and relevant outcomes. In this section, we will summarize, discipline by discipline, the curriculum work currently being done by Simsbury High School teachers to refine course offerings. In addition to defining the core curriculum that all students must receive, we will outline opportunities for advanced study in a variety of subject areas.

For purposes of this report, we offer brief highlights of the curriculum work currently underway in the disciplines that we define as the new core curriculum of Simsbury High School.

#### B. The New Core Curriculum

##### English

##### 4 credit requirement

The four year literature sequence is being restructured to align more appropriately with social studies, thus allowing for interdisciplinary study. The department is establishing “cornerstone” works of literature and writing assignments in order to create guaranteed experiences for all students, regardless of academic level.

Future work for the department includes the development of writing portfolios that allow students to showcase their best work and to demonstrate progress over time. To that end, department members are developing common standards to assess writing from grade level to grade level. Approaches to vocabulary and grammar instruction are being reviewed to eliminate redundancy in the K-12 continuum.

##### Social Studies

##### 3.5 credit requirement

The core curriculum will consist of two years of study in World History followed by one year of American History. In addition, the department is developing a distinct civics course that will be a graduation requirement for all students. In the past, students have met the state of Connecticut’s requirement for civics through the study of early American history.

As stated above, the course sequence is being examined to align with literature study. For instance, the study of US History in eleventh grade will now align with the study of American literature at that same level.

Students in the honors level would have the opportunity to take multiple Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. Currently offering four courses (US History, European History, Economics and Psychology), the department is examining the development of additional AP opportunities, including AP Government and Politics.

### **Mathematics**

### **3 credit requirement**

The district is examining the 7-12 articulation of coursework in order to create more advanced exit proficiencies for all students. Goals of this work include the creation of course sequences by which *all* students complete Algebra II as well as a measurable increase in the percentage of graduates completing a course beyond Algebra II.

For advanced students, opportunities should be developed to allow for the completion of more than one AP course in mathematics prior to graduation (Calculus, Statistics, and/or Computer Science).

Currently, a very small percentage of students take Statistics or Computer Science because they are offered only on the AP level. The department plans to expand offerings in these content-specific areas through the development of additional courses.

### **Science**

### **3 credit requirement**

We strongly recommend an increase in credit requirements from 2.0 to 3.0 in order to prepare all students for post-secondary study. Data from the Class of 2005 indicated that 83% of students finished high school with 3 or more credits in science; this recommendation would close the gap for the remaining percentage of students who are graduating with just two science credits on their transcript. Beyond that requirement, the department has set a goal to increase the percentage of students completing *four* years of science study.

Honors students currently have the opportunity to take AP Biology, AP Chemistry and AP Physics. The department is developing strategies to improve the retention rate of students in AP coursework from sophomore to senior year.

Simsbury High School has also partnered with “Project Lead the Way” (PLTW), a national program committed to the development of the next generation of engineers. Three courses in the PLTW sequence are currently offered for credit. Additional offerings are in the planning stages.

In the future, the department hopes to develop further elective offerings in life sciences to increase opportunities for students interested in health and medical careers.

### **World Languages**

### **2 credit requirement**

We recommend a world language credit requirement, an expectation not currently reflected in our graduation standards. While additional research is necessary to examine effective practices of districts currently implementing similar requirements, we believe that such a requirement will better prepare students for active participation in a global economy and an increasingly diverse society. In addition, completion of world language study is a virtual pre-requisite for those choosing admission to a four-year college.

As part of the plan to require world language study at Simsbury High School, the department would develop oral proficiency exams to be completed at the end of a student's second year of study. These performance-based outcomes ensure that students have acquired basic communication skills in the language of study.

Offerings in world language include: Spanish, French and Latin. Currently, we are planning the inclusion of Mandarin Chinese as a non-western language offering, replacing the Japanese sequence. Chinese programs are strongly supported by the State Department of Education, as Chinese is the fastest-growing language offering in the country. Simsbury High School plans to offer an introductory Chinese course in the 2007-08 school year.

Following the successful implementation of a Chinese program, the department plans to study the feasibility of offering American Sign Language as a further opportunity for students.

### **Physical and Health Education**

### **1.5 credit requirement**

Simsbury High School has restructured its state-mandated physical education (PE) and health offerings to include an eleventh-grade component in each area. In PE, the Project Adventure curriculum emphasizes teamwork, problem solving, and physical activity. With the curriculum shift into eleventh grade, the health education curriculum is able to explore more developmentally-appropriate topics.

### **The Fine and Applied Arts**

### **2 credit requirement**

Currently, students are required to complete one credit of study within the disciplines that have become known as the fine and applied arts: music, art, business, family and consumer science, and technology education. We believe that an increase in credit requirements here is important in that it would ensure that all students pursue "elective" choices in greater depth.

Furthermore, we strongly believe that students should develop a purposeful program of study in an elective area within the arts; as such, we are proposing a restructuring of these course offerings into "Student Learning Clusters" that will allow for articulated sequences of study within interest areas – some of which are linked directly to career exploration. While completion of a sequence of courses within a cluster would not be a requirement, we will encourage and counsel students to pursue their elective studies within this structure. For more information on this concept, see the following section on "Developing Student Learning Clusters."

In addition, some districts within Connecticut have made specific study in the fine arts (music, theater, visual arts, and dance) a requirement for graduation. Indeed, the fine arts are recognized as part of the core curriculum by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the College Board, and the U. S. Department of Education. The Simsbury Board of Education has also set a goal related to the demonstration of achievement in the fine and performing arts. We are supportive of instituting a fine arts requirement for all Simsbury High School students; at this time, however, we see that scheduling restrictions would make such a requirement difficult for many students. Certainly, we believe that the issue of a fine arts requirement is worthy of further deliberation by the Leadership Team, department supervisors, and the Simsbury High School faculty.

### C. Developing Student Learning Clusters

Given the credit demands of a redefined core curriculum, we believe it is imperative that students approach their “elective” choices in the fine and applied arts with a sense of purpose. For many years at Simsbury High School, *some* students have pursued the fine and applied arts through in-depth programs that offered a logical sequence of skill development. Examples of this pattern of course-taking include students who have proceeded through the choral and band programs, fine arts electives, vocational culinary arts, architectural design, accounting, and many others. However, an analysis of course-taking patterns for other students revealed a trend toward “sampling” of courses in many different disciplines. In short, students were filling their day with a variety of courses that, while perhaps interesting, did not allow them to pursue areas of interest in-depth.

Just as we structure the learning opportunities within other disciplines contained in the new core curriculum, we believe it is appropriate to structure course-taking patterns in the fine and applied arts. Certainly, we value the importance of student choice in being able to pursue varied interests; however, we feel it is our obligation to give students appropriate guidance as they make those choices.

Therefore, we are recommending a restructuring of elective program offerings at Simsbury High School through the formation of Student Learning Clusters. These clusters, based broadly on national research surrounding career awareness and development, would capitalize on student interests and, where appropriate, be interdisciplinary in nature. Well-designed clusters would provide appropriate structures and viable pathways for students as they consider their choices within the fine and applied arts. As such, students could proceed from beginning courses through advanced study if they chose to continue within a defined cluster. The program for the most advanced students in a cluster area would be characterized by authentic experiences outside Simsbury High School’s classrooms (internships, independent studies, job shadowing, dual enrollment at local colleges, etc.).

In terms of credit requirements in elective areas, students would be expected to complete two credits in the fine and applied arts. While completion of those requirements within a specified cluster would not be a requirement, we will certainly counsel students to consider the benefits of concentrated study in their area(s) of interest. We hope to define these clusters broadly enough to allow for flexibility within a given interest area. However, by no means would we want to see a student “locked” into a cluster that no longer appeals to his/her interest.

Based upon a review of research and discussions with state leaders in the fine and applied arts, administrators, leadership team members, and department supervisors have begun initial discussions to determine Student Learning Clusters that make sense for Simsbury High School. Some possible Student Learning Clusters that have emerged include the following:

- Architecture and Construction
- Arts and Design
- Business and Finance
- Culinary Arts
- Education and Human Services
- Health Sciences
- Information Technology
- International Studies
- Performing Arts
- Science and Engineering

In one example, students with an interest in the business and finance cluster take our exploratory class, “Introduction to Business and Finance,” to be followed by possible courses in marketing, accounting, personal finance, or entrepreneurship. In addition, students might take classes outside the business department such as law or public speaking. Advanced students might culminate their program by taking AP Economics or by completing an internship with a personal wealth manager in the Simsbury community. Extracurricular activities could be a part of the cluster as well; we would expect that these students might also be involved in the Future Business Leaders of America.

Similar examples/courses of study could be developed for any other cluster. For purposes of this report, we define a well-designed cluster as one that offers opportunities for both the exploratory and advanced learner, develops authentic skills and dispositions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aligns with post-secondary study (college or other training), appeals to a wide variety of students, and has the potential to become a center of excellence at Simsbury High School and in the wider community.

The list above is preliminary; there is still much work to do in defining exactly which Student Learning Clusters we will develop. As we re-examine our offerings in the fine and applied arts, we want to be sure that the programs that have served large numbers of students well over the years remain a part of this structure. Therefore, a thorough review of current course offerings will allow us to make strategic decisions about already well-developed clusters, as well as those that may require further refinement. As part of that process, current course offerings that do not fit logically into a defined cluster will come under greater scrutiny.

We are excited about this restructuring of our fine and applied arts offerings, as it will allow us to provide students with rigorous, relevant, intentional, yet flexible pathways of study in their chosen areas of interest. As educators, we value the opportunity to gather a fresh perspective on the experiences we offer our students in the fine and applied arts – especially in light of undeniable changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace and society.

#### **D. Defining the Process for Curricular Revisions**

There is a need for Simsbury High School to review its process by which new courses are approved. Currently, most new courses are developed and designed through teacher interest in a particular area. Teachers submit informal proposals to their department chairperson and building administration. A determination is then made as to whether the course is to be placed in the Program of Studies, and if enough students express interest in the course, it is offered.

While the informality of this process has allowed for quite interesting course offerings over time, it has also created an eclectic collection of courses that are sometimes dependent upon the skills of a particular instructor rather than a sequence of departmental offerings that represent a purposeful plan of study.

We believe a more formal process for the development of course offerings is required. Such a process would include a small team of instructional leaders who would review proposals and make determinations about new course offerings based on a set of criteria. Approved courses would demonstrate a rigorous curriculum, development of relevant 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, placement in a logical sequence of courses (student learning clusters), articulation with further education, and sustainable student interest over time. Teachers would be required to submit formal course maps (curriculum) with any proposal so that new courses could be considered within a context of other curricular

offerings. Upon successful review and subsequent recommendations from the review team, the administration would then work with the Curriculum Subcommittee of the Board of Education through the final stages of approval.

Through a process such as this, we believe that the school community will be more deliberate in considering whether resources should be targeted toward the development of new course proposals at Simsbury High School.

**Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development  
Position on Curriculum Balance**

“We believe a comprehensive approach to learning recognizes that successful young people are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, motivated, civically inspired, engaged in the arts, prepared for work and economic self-sufficiency, and ready for the world beyond their borders.”

## IV. Best Practices

Graduation requirements and curriculum are only two ways that we define a quality comprehensive high school. Although those are important elements, there exist many other factors that have a crucial impact on the success of a high-performing secondary school. Through the Leadership Team's review of literature on high school reform, as well as through initiatives that have already begun at SHS, we developed six broad categories of "best practices" that reflect the characteristics of a high school culture in which *all* students and educators are valued. While the Leadership Team found that many of these best practices are already in place informally, we need to develop more systematic means to guarantee that they are a regular and unquestioned part of the Simsbury High School culture. In this section of the report, we define those best practices and give a glimpse into what Simsbury High School might look like in the future as these concepts are fully realized.

### A. Personalization

"The success of every school, and arguably, all other human organizational settings, depends on personal relationships." (Chaney and DiGennaro, 2005)

Research clearly demonstrates that personalization of the school environment is one of the most vital factors to student success. Countless educators and national education organizations (ASCD, NEASC, NASSP) embed personalization principles into the cornerstones of high school reform. Furthermore, when students are asked to identify the most crucial factor which would heighten their success, the overwhelming majority says, "having teachers who know me and care about me" (Wagner). Therefore, the personalization of the school experience becomes a priority when defining the comprehensive high school. It is the responsibility of Simsbury High School to ensure that every student has a meaningful connection to at least one adult in the building, has the opportunity to pursue personal interests within the school structure, is celebrated for meeting and exceeding expectations, is supported when difficulties arise, and is treated with respect and fairness at all times. In essence, personalization is about relationships.

Moreover, we believe that the personalization of the high school experience is especially crucial for those students who have typically struggled to achieve academically or socially at Simsbury High School. The collective recommendations contained in this report represent a "raising of the bar" for many students in our school who have met minimum requirements in the past. These recommendations can only be successful if students are known well, supported when they struggle, and motivated to meet high expectations. A systematic plan for interventions with these students is a vital part of the personalization effort within the school. In addition, the restructuring of elective courses into Student Learning Clusters may have the greatest impact on this group of students in that it has the potential to put their learning into a context that makes sense beyond the walls of the high school. Community-based learning (in the form of internships, job shadow, etc.) is even more important for our struggling learners. In short, we believe that these students are the ones most in need of personalized, informed counseling that will allow them to leave high school with clear goals and realistic plans. While Simsbury High's guidance department staff is simply extraordinary, counselors can not hold the sole responsibility for meaningful connections with students outside the classroom.

Finally, our strategies for personalization should be defined by the need for adolescents to have balance in their lives. Already, we have many students at Simsbury High School who are stressed by the demands of academics, extracurriculars, part-time jobs, family commitments, and more. The recommendations described in this report are not designed in order to add new demands on students who are currently pressed to meet their commitments; in fact, we know that the students who are feeling the most stress about school are the ones who are already surpassing the



expectations outlined here. Again, we trust in the importance of personalized, informed counseling to help students make healthy choices about their course of studies and the pursuit of interests. We believe that the new structures called for in this report will allow all students to develop solid academic skills across the disciplines while still leaving room to go in-depth in an area where a student has a particular interest. We return to the same mantra – students who are known well and counseled well by trusted adults are far more likely to make balanced decisions about their schooling.

*Practices to Consider:*

- a formal personal success plan for each student, to include academic planning, extra-curricular activities, career exploration, and areas for personal growth
- an adult advocate for each student
- established avenues of periodic review to determine whether students are meeting academic, social, and civic expectations
- a “pyramid of interventions,” containing strategies to implement when students are not experiencing success
- celebrations of student achievement -- creating “good news” systems
- class size guidelines that support environments where students are seen as individual learners; in addition, overall student loads for teachers that do not exceed 90-100 students (Sizer).
- formalized 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition plans
- teacher duties that encourage positive connections with students
- enhancement of the current House System so that counselors and administrators stay connected with students over time

*Looking Forward:*

Steve is at his annual meeting to review his personal success plan. In attendance are his parents and guidance counselor; Steve has already reviewed his plan with his homeroom advisor. In planning for junior year, Steve and his parents are debating whether he has the time to commit to AP US History; especially since he earned some less-favorable grades during his freshmen year. Given the good grades he has earned through his first semester in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and by recommendation of his counselor, Mr. Goodman, Steve and his parents decide that this rigorous addition to his schedule will put him in good stead when applying to college. As the talk turns to career exploration, Steve indicates on his plan that he would like to pursue his interests in engineering. Mr. Goodman recommends that Steve take one of the “Project Lead the Way” classes as his elective choice for the upcoming year. Before leaving, Mr. Goodman sets up an appointment in the Career Resource Center so that Steve can investigate job shadow opportunities in the field. The conference continues with a discussion about informally beginning the college search, and concludes with a review of Steve’s extra-curricular activities. Steve will continue to play baseball with hopes of making varsity next year, and he will fill a role as student council representative for his class. Mr. Goodman recommends that Steve also think about a new club – the National Engineering Design Challenge. Steve and his parents thank Mr. Goodman for his time and ask if they can set up another appointment once they earnestly begin the college search process.

## **B. Collaboration**

“Creating a collaborative culture is the single, most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives, and the first order of business for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their schools.” (Dufour, 2005)

We believe that the work of educators is growing in complexity. If we have any hope of meeting the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century adolescent learners, we must work together to solve problems of practice within Simsbury High School. A culture of informal collaboration clearly exists in Simsbury High School, but given the demands of engaging today's learners, teaching higher-order skills, and creating authentic assessment measures, we must be able to share our expertise formally and learn from one another.

In addition to collaboration surrounding issues of teaching and learning, both students and teachers must be given opportunities to voice their opinions and share in the leadership regarding the school culture.

*Practices to Consider:*

- professional development (PD) that is modeled around the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), so that teachers are regularly engaged in problems of practice closest to their classroom
- more regular and systematic professional development opportunities
- priority for common planning time for teachers with similar courses
- common curriculum and expectations
- adult meetings that are about instruction and are models of good teaching
- teachers with the opportunity to define their own PD needs
- educators who are given resources to stay current with practices in their field
- interdisciplinary study groups around teaching challenges such as differentiated instruction, uses of technology, or protocols for examining student work
- interdisciplinary teams that share common students
- regular opportunities for staff and students to participate in the decision-making process surrounding issues of school culture
- formal and informal leadership opportunities for teachers
- formal and informal leadership opportunities for students

*Looking Forward:*

The ninth grade science team is meeting during one of its regularly scheduled PD opportunities. After reviewing assessment data about the latest hands-on experiment, they realize that across classes, students demonstrated difficulty collecting reliable data in the lab setting. As they examine actual student work to see where errors occurred, it was clear students made considerable mistakes when calculating the volume of a gas. Over the next hour, the teams share their various methods of teaching this process, and then design an additional experiment to re-assess the same skill set. The team decides to conduct this new lab within the next month and will meet again to assess student understanding.

### **C. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

“We believe that there is a technical core in teaching. We must collectively develop an understanding of that core and commit to using it.” (Ullman)

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be broadly defined as the means by which we achieve the academic engagement of all students. In short, this is the work of educators. Certainly, NEASC, our accrediting body, has recognized the primacy of these aspects of a school in developing their teaching and learning standards. Furthermore, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are interdependent, and we must commit to excellence in all three areas.

*Practices to Consider:*

- continued development of curriculum course maps and individual units
- curriculum that balances depth of understanding with breadth of coverage
- curriculum clearly derived from state and national standards
- development of teachers' expertise with differentiated instruction – meeting the needs of diverse learners
- emphasis on project-based learning
- critical thinking and problem-solving as driving forces behind instruction
- intentional selection of content that is relevant, meaningful, and applicable to authentic learning experiences that include but are not limited to traditional tests and quizzes
- further utilizing technology as a teaching tool
- requiring multiple measures to assess student outcomes
- digital portfolios to showcase student work and demonstrate growth
- regular use of assessment data to inform curriculum and instruction
- performance-based graduation requirements
- consistent use of rubrics to assess student performance across disciplines
- increased practice of student self-assessment

*Looking forward:*

Dave is a new English teacher at Simsbury High School. He is meeting with his mentor, Mark during the week before school opens. Mark has shown Dave the district's on-line curriculum, and they are reviewing the course map for 10<sup>th</sup> grade English, a class that they both teach. Through this sharing, Dave gets an instant picture of the expected student outcomes for 10<sup>th</sup> grade English students. Mark and Dave go in-depth into the first area of study for the year, examining the completed unit template. They discuss the standards to which the unit is linked, as well as the enduring understandings that are designed to be the "big picture" ideas for students. In looking at the assessment plan, Dave is impressed with the end-of-unit project that is suggested, as it provides self-assessment opportunities and gives students some choice in how they will demonstrate their understanding of the novel's themes. However, Dave is concerned that the project may be too complex for some students; Mark shares with him some of the ways he has altered assessments and teaching practices to meet the needs of similar learners. Mark offers to sit in on Dave's class when the project is introduced, and they agree upon a timeline by which they will both administer the first common assessment in English 10.

## **D. Community Connections**

School and system leaders cannot do the hard work of high school transformation alone. All facets of the community are needed to articulate a shared vision for high school-aged youth that includes relevant experiences beyond the walls of the high school classroom. Therefore, we believe that community members must be our partners in providing authentic learning opportunities associated with academic pursuits, career connections, and community service.

Contrary to the prevailing notion that parents should be less involved in the high school experience than that of the elementary or middle school, we believe that increased communication and connectedness are vital in pursuing our shared interest in the success of their sons and daughters.

*Practices to Consider:*

- increased job shadow and internship experiences
- dual enrollment opportunities at local colleges and training institutions
- development of a full program in Simsbury High School's new Career Resource Center
- creation of lasting school/business partnerships
- regular outreach to other generations, both young and old
- student-led charitable efforts in the community
- enhanced parent communication: website, electronic messaging, more systematic reports of student progress, public forums on high school issues, regular invitations to appreciate student work, etc.

*Looking Forward:*

Mr. Woods, a community business owner who remodels homes, has been invited to the Career Resource Center during the month dedicated to the architecture and construction student learning cluster. He is one of ten different speakers who will visit during the month to talk about his background, experiences, and reasons for choosing his field. Barbara, a student in the Introduction to Architecture Design class, is one of three girls attending this presentation held during the lunch periods at SHS. After listening to the presentation, she recognizes that Mr. Woods worked on her neighbor's house, and she asks him some questions about the new sunroom he installed. As they continue to talk, she asks Mr. Woods if he would be willing to host her on the upcoming job shadow day. Having taken several SHS students before during job shadow days, Mr. Woods agrees immediately. On the day of the visit, Barbara is taken to three different remodeling sites, and is shown both the architectural plans and the work in progress. She even gets a few good ideas for her design project that she has been working on in class. As Mr. Woods is impressed with Barbara's questions and observations, he tells her to call him in a couple of weeks, as he may have opportunities for summer employment.

## **E. Unifying Experiences**

Providing unifying opportunities enhances community in any school. In any large comprehensive high school, and SHS is no exception, students in the same graduating class can go through four years of school and have few experiences that resemble one another. Although specialized programs are important, they must also be balanced with a sense of shared experience among classmates – especially given the expectation that *all* students will be educated to high levels. Certainly, a guaranteed core curriculum is central to accomplishing unifying experiences, but beyond the academic setting, we must share a common set of civic and social beliefs about the way we are to treat each other. Finally, students should have the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of peers, both in and out of the classroom setting.

*Practices to Consider:*

- Continued examination of current leveling practices to ensure standard expectations for all students
- Defined student outcomes in all courses that are a part of the guaranteed core curriculum
- Sharing of practices by teachers who have traditionally taught non-leveled classes (physical education, health, art)
- Mapping of the guaranteed experiences in the core curriculum that occur regardless of level
- Expansion of school-wide assemblies, gatherings, and celebrations

- Examination of intramural sports and other unifying activities
- Empowerment of student leaders to create additional avenues for shared experiences
- Enhanced class identity through social events, competitions, traditions, and community service
- School-wide forums, to include students, parents and staff, in order to reach shared expectations of civic and social standards
- Commitment to civility in all interactions

*Looking Forward:*

Rich and Ken are teammates on the Simsbury High School cross-country ski team, one of many interscholastic sports with a “no-cut” rule. For Ken, cross-country skiing is a sport he uses for conditioning between football and lacrosse season. In contrast, it is Rich’s only interscholastic sport. Even though they do not know each other well going into the season, the two strike up a friendship and spend a lot of time talking on the bus ride to and from meets. In one conversation, Ken brings up his research assignment from US History in which he has been asked to interview a member of “The Greatest Generation,” in order to experience a first-hand account of the era his class has been studying. Because this assignment is a guaranteed experience in the US History curriculum, Rich mentions that he has the same project even though he has a different teacher. As it turns out, Ken’s mother knows a resident of the McLean Home, who would be happy to discuss her experiences. Rich and Ken decide to work together on the project, and by the time they arrive at their meet, they have compiled a list of interview questions to be asked next weekend.

## **F. Opportunities for Specialization**

Certainly, the redefined demands of the core curriculum will dictate the course-taking patterns for a large percentage of each student’s day. However, we firmly believe in the importance of allowing students to specialize in an area of study for which they are passionate. The development of the Student Learning Clusters is a central aspect of our strategy to deliver specialized course offerings in a structured and reasonable way. However, there need to be multiple avenues for students with unique needs or interests to pursue learning that is “outside of the box.”

*Practices to consider:*

- Opportunities for many students to pursue advanced study beyond the core curriculum (honors classes, advanced placement, academies, select ensembles, advanced art courses, etc.)
- Awarding of “Certificates of Concentration” for students who have taken a full course of studies in a particular Student Learning Cluster
- Full implementation of Virtual High School partnership to allow students to take specialized on-line courses
- Senior Projects
- Expansion of dual enrollment programs with local universities and training centers
- Internships/Job Shadow
- Independent studies
- Continued flexibility and support for new student-initiated extracurricular activities (i.e., fencing club, American Sign Language club, Anime club)

*Looking Forward:*

Cindy is a student who struggles in school but has always loved the movies. With the help of her guidance counselor, she has planned a schedule throughout high school that has allowed her to

take several different courses that capitalize on this interest: Digital Production, Creative Writing, 3-D Computer Animation, Multimedia Design, Film Study, and a Virtual High School course on scriptwriting. Her English teacher, Mr. Stewart, is aware of her passion for film and notices in the daily announcements that applications are being accepted for a summer program at a local university designed for aspiring movie makers. He encourages Cindy to apply and even works with her to review her essay that accompanies the application. Cindy gets accepted and spends four weeks in the summer refining her talents. In senior year, she signs up to complete a Senior Project, producing a 45-minute original film that plays before a packed house of her peers and teachers.

## V. Resources and Timeline for Implementation

In order to realize the vision set forth in this report, it is crucial that the Simsbury High School community has appropriate resources – most specifically, time – to accomplish the work ahead. While many of the recommended actions mentioned here are already underway, we see full development of the proposals to be at least a 5-year process. By that time, we believe that the vignettes presented in the last section will not be “Looking Forward” events but rather be commonplace realities in the Simsbury High School culture.

### A. Resources

Obviously, it is not possible to forecast all the resources that might be necessary as we complete this work, but we can see certain needs that will have to be considered during future annual budget seasons. Fortunately, we do have the advantage of a vastly improved facility given the recent expansion and renovation project, and we are extremely grateful to this community for its support of that project. Still, other needs exist. In no particular order, we present a list of necessary resources that need to be monitored and enhanced over time:

- Commitment to professional development and teacher training
- Increased time allotment for professional development and collaboration
- Continued infusion of technology in SHS classrooms
- Adherence to class size guidelines
- Appropriate staffing to meet the needs of increased credit requirements
- Appropriate staffing to support efforts at personalization of the school environment
- Continued support of the curriculum development process
- Full program development for new Career Resource Center
- On-going support of specialized learning opportunities (Virtual High School, academies, etc.)

### B. Timeline

We mentioned above that this work involves at least a 5-year process. However, many of the recommendations addressed in this report have already been initiated, and we will continue to work toward bringing more formalized and systematic approaches to the good practices that have always been a part of our culture. We know that reaching the most reluctant and disconnected students is our greatest challenge as we proceed. Building better systems to make that happen will simply take time.

Certainly, the strategies discussed in this report will make up the majority of our Continuous Improvement Plans over the next several years. Additionally, we recommend an annual “Progress Report” to the Board of Education and to the larger community, providing information about accomplishments to date and lingering challenges/next steps as we strive to realize this vision. We look forward to continued dialogue surrounding our efforts to provide a quality comprehensive high school experience for every student.

## VI. Conclusion

Simsbury High School is already highly regarded by members of this community, educators from other schools, college admissions officers, residents of neighboring towns, and appreciative alumni. During this study, we have heard the questions asked many times: “Aren’t we already one of the best high schools in the state? Can there really be that much that needs to improve?” Without attempting to be frustrating, we suggest that the answer to both questions is “Yes!”

Surely, Simsbury High School has *earned* its reputation as a center of educational excellence. It is a wonderful school that continues to serve many students and families remarkably well. To say anything less about the level of achievement of Simsbury High School would be to dishonor the tremendous accomplishments of the educators, community members, and students who built this remarkable institution.

We are convinced, however, that the core goals of high schools have shifted dramatically as the world, to borrow Thomas Friedman’s phrase, has “flattened.” Secondary schools are now obliged to educate all students to very high levels, and they are not necessarily designed to perform that task well. Simsbury is surely ahead of other places in rising to the challenge of high standards and outcomes for all students, but there is more work to do. Gone are the days when students can just “get by” in high school and go on to earn living wages. Statistically, those who earn only a high school diploma in today’s economy will have virtually no ability to access a middle-class lifestyle.

The work of high school reform is not about that which has gone well in the past. The successful aspects of a high school are relatively easy to preserve and to expand to more students.

The heavy lifting of improving our school comes in building systems by which all students – even the most reluctant learners – are known well by adults and are engaged in rigorous and relevant learning. Students have the right to expect that from us, and we must persevere with students who, in previous days, may have chosen the path of least resistance.

Fortunately, we can simply not imagine a secondary school in Connecticut or beyond that has more capacity to accomplish this vision than Simsbury High School. Beginning with its incredibly committed and professional staff, and including factors such as a supportive community, a tremendously improved facility, and remarkably talented students throughout the classes, Simsbury High School has a jumpstart on the work of high school reform and of sustaining the model of the comprehensive high school. We already have high-functioning examples of so many of the improvements called for in this report: a rigorous core curriculum for many students, viable pathways for advanced study, inclusive and engaging extracurricular activities, educators who innately understand and deliver “best practice,” a number of elective area pathways that are well-articulated and relevant to today’s world, and a record of success for the majority of our graduates. Replicating those examples of excellence in all areas and for all students is the task ahead. The accomplishments are great, but so are the challenges of delivering a world-class education to all students who enter our doors.

Above all, we hope that this report creates a sense of urgency about our mission. We believe that the comprehensive high school is a vibrant and promising institution in this community. Through the realization of the recommendations in this report over time, we believe that we can provide all students with challenging academic experiences, make learning more meaningful in the context of a changing world, and build a greater sense of community. In short, we insist that the efforts toward renewal of the comprehensive high school in Simsbury be unwaveringly focused on the overarching principles addressed here – **rigor, relevance, and relationships** for all students.

Together, we begin now.



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**MEMBERS**  
**SIMSBURY HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM**

**Parents**

Cynthia Atiyeh 2004-2006  
Annemarie Brimmer 2004-2005  
Eric Dobkin 2004-2005  
Catherine Gallo-Blumenthal 2004-2006  
Elisa Genovese 2004-2006  
Randy Giangiulio 2004-2006  
Mary Hashmi 2004-2005  
Marian Hendershot 2004-2005  
Andrew Imse 2004-2006  
Leslie Imse 2005-2006  
Karen Kolosieke 2005-2006  
Marc Sacher 2005-2006  
Hemchandra Shertukde 2004-2005

**Community Representative**

Phillip Janes 2004-2006

**Board of Education**

Michael Goman 2004-2006

**Faculty**

Regina Battaglia 2005-2006  
Daniel Bergman 2004-2006  
Janet Black 2004-2006  
Scott Dunn 2004-2006  
Meredith Jacob 2004-2006  
Donna Kottas 2004-2006  
Deborah Manning 2004-2006  
William Mickewicz 2004-2005  
Marie Miller 2004-2005  
John Mudano 2004-2005  
Amy Muska 2005-2006  
Cynthia Parsons 2005-2006  
Joan Ramsay 2004-2006  
Jan Sands 2004-2005  
Stuart Younse 2005-2006  
Diane Zalewski 2004-2005

**Administration**

Michael Cicchetti, Assistant Superintendent 2004-2005  
Susan Homrok, Assistant Principal 2005-2006  
Stephen Patrina, Assistant Principal 2004-2006  
Scott Shuler, Assistant Superintendent 2005-2006  
Neil Sullivan, Principal 2004-2006  
Walter Zalaski, Assistant Principal 2004-2006

**Students**

Glynis Arnold 2004-2006  
Ivan Berardelli 2004-2005  
Sara Hendershot 2004-2006  
David Hugel 2005-2006  
Steve Rancourt 2004-2005  
Daniel Strongwater 2005-2006