

# Different choices, equal chances

## Helping high school students achieve success on their own terms

### CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

#### Abstract

Nokomis Regional High School, which draws nearly 600 students from eight different towns in rural Maine, has spent 10 years transforming its instructional model to immerse students in meaningful learning experiences that relate to their interests and passions. Project-based learning, interdisciplinary courses, and career exploration units are designed to help students explore various options and feel secure about their postsecondary choices. As students near graduation in this rural community, some plan to enroll in college, while others envision entering the trades or starting a job. Staff at Nokomis want students to achieve success on their own terms, which means challenging the predominantly college-oriented attitude that persists in high school practice and policy. But many teachers and administrators are still grappling with how to ensure that students choosing different pathways—some involving college, some not (or not yet)—will have an equal shot at long-term success and stability relative to their peers. Some staff think the school should more assertively push students toward college and career options beyond the local rural community. This case wrestles with how high schools can expand students' postsecondary horizons while remaining responsive to their values and interests—especially if those values differ significantly from those of the adults who support them.

#### Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of a [series of teaching cases](#) featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.
- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the document. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high school education.
- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

#### KEYWORDS

## Introduction

Located in rural central Maine, Nokomis Regional High School is a traditional open-enrollment school that draws nearly 600 students from eight small rural towns across the RSU19 district, an area covering 400 square miles. The school serves as the area's community hub, where many students, staff, and families have attended and stayed in the area for generations. As a result, the staff are deeply invested in students' success and have spent the past decade developing an environment that prioritizes interdisciplinary classes and project-based learning connected to real-world dilemmas.

"We're a home away from home for our students. Our school is the hub in the community for our students and their families." - *Administrator*

These instructional changes have been well-received by students and staff, and graduation rates at Nokomis are higher than the state median.<sup>1</sup> However, as the school continues its work to transform student experiences, staff are thinking deeply about what students choose to do after high school and whether they are prepared to make a choice that will serve them well.

About half of Nokomis's students are economically disadvantaged. High schools with similar demographics are often focused on college awareness, preparation, and access. Decades of education reform have pushed to ensure that lower-income students can enroll and succeed in college, with good reason—college graduates earn higher salaries, so increasing college completion rates can result in economic and social mobility for disadvantaged communities.<sup>2</sup>

This challenge is a key area of focus in Nokomis's home state of Maine. While 55% of Maine high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education the fall after graduation, there is a 25 percentage point gap in enrollment between economically disadvantaged students and their higher-income peers.<sup>3</sup> Maine has adopted several initiatives at the state level to encourage college-going, such as making community college free for students who earn a high school diploma in 2020-23.<sup>4</sup>

But the Nokomis community illustrates why averaged trends and numeric statistics don't always tell the whole story about what students and families want from high schools and in their lives after graduation. While Nokomis's students seem like good candidates to push toward college and the promise of higher earnings, lived experiences among the school's students and families in the community tell a different story. Nokomis staff say it's common for students to come from families that have found success in trades rather than higher education. Some students say they have considered college but prefer to work immediately after graduation and earn a steady income. Students also say the rising costs of college—some real and some perceived—have made it less appealing or relevant. Additionally, students, caregivers, and staff alike can point to many local jobs that don't require college, but make good money—"even more than me," one school administrator said with a laugh.

Given this local context, the school encourages students to consider college as one option after graduation, but not necessarily as the best choice for every student. Instead, the Nokomis team wants high school students to explore their options, develop a sense of their own interests, and make postsecondary plans that involve college, trade school, paid work, or some combination of those. Rather than setting a universal standard for what success looks

1 "Nokomis Regional High School," last modified 2023, U.S. News & World Report, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/maine/districts/regional-school-district-19/nokomis-regional-high-school-8943>.

2 "Employment Projections," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified September 8, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>.

3 "Postsecondary Education," last modified 2022, Educate Maine, <https://educationindicators.me/post-secondary-education>.

4 "Free College Scholarship," Maine Community College System, 2023, <https://www.mccs.me.edu/freecollege/>.

like and pushing students toward it, staff want students to define success on their own terms and choose the path that's right for them.

This ethos isn't unique to Nokomis. A recent survey showed that college prep had dropped precipitously on the ranking of what Americans want from high schools.<sup>5</sup> And a movement is growing to open up a wider range of differentiated pathways after graduation—not just college as the “best” way.<sup>6</sup>

But alongside this shift runs a current of anxiety about how lower-income students and other historically marginalized groups will be impacted in the long run, given the evidence linking higher education to higher income. Will opening up many pathways turn back into unequal “tracked” pathways that don't challenge underrepresented students to consider college? How can a greater range of differentiated postsecondary pathways still offer students equal chances at stable jobs, good pay, and happy lives? The Nokomis team is actively wrestling with these questions.

## The context: Nokomis Regional High School

In 2019, Nokomis distributed a survey that asked students, staff, alumni, families, and community partners what they valued most in education. The school used the survey responses to identify key academic and social skills that stakeholders believed students should have by the time they graduate. The “Portrait of a Graduate”<sup>7</sup> integrates the school's five guiding principles, Maine learning standards, and community values. These skills and characteristics are not tied to one specific postsecondary pathway and instead speak about traits they should have as Nokomis graduates.

This resulting vision for Nokomis graduates motivated school leaders to push forward their constructive and actionable ideas around student-centered learning. For example, the Portrait of a Graduate survey revealed that the Nokomis community wanted “students to be employable right away.” The school's Career and Education Development department responded by developing an engaging approach to meet the state's career preparation credit requirements.

The school offers career development preparation for freshmen that includes visits to local businesses and career interest surveys. Sophomores learn how to apply for jobs and receive coaching on resumes and cover letters. Juniors participate in internships and take a financial literacy course where they learn about paychecks and paying bills. Seniors design their own projects and present them to community members in an annual event that includes mock interviews. They can choose projects ranging from planning and cooking an elaborate meal that builds on the school's culinary program, to traditional science projects where students study and create their own clouds.

“[Financial literacy] is definitely something that [most high schoolers need, especially after they leave high school.]” - *Student*

5 Greg Toppo, “Irrked by Skyrocketing Costs, Fewer Americans See K-12 as Route to Higher Ed,” *The74*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/purpose-of-education-public-views-college-pandemic-future/>.

6 “U.S. Department of Education Launches New Initiative to Support Career-Connected Learning and Increase Job Pathways for Young Americans,” U.S. Department of Education, November 14, 2022, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launches-new-initiative-support-career-connected-learning-and-increase-job-pathways-young-americans>.

7 “Nokomis Regional High Portrait of a Graduate,” <https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Nokomis-Regional-High-Portrait-of-a-Graduate-4-10-2019.pdf>.

Nokomis's career development offerings are enhanced by relationships with local businesses and the nearby technical school. Students interested in trades such as commercial truck driving, culinary arts, welding, and construction can earn credits and certifications through courses at Tri-County Technical School. Students can also get a head start on potential careers by pursuing internships with local businesses who partner with the school. These work experiences also translate to credit at Nokomis.

"If you do the metals manufacturing program [at Tri-County], then you get certified and you get work experience from it. You can get hired by Bath Iron Works and get benefits right away." - *Student*

In interviews, Nokomis students generally defined postgraduate success as being happy, rather than obtaining other common social markers of success, such as a college degree or a certain level of wealth.

"How I measure success isn't exactly in scores or numbers. Do I enjoy where I'm at in life? Is this where I saw myself going, and where can I go from here? There are always milestones to look forward to and they don't rely on test scores. It's big picture: do I like where I'm at?" - *Student*

Students also believed the ability to choose different postsecondary pathways can lead to happiness and success.

Some students said they were eager to continue pursuing their passions in college, such as higher-level learning, sports, or military training. In other words, they saw higher education as a means to continue doing the things that made them happy, rather than as a means to earning a degree and a potentially higher income in the working world.

"For me, success means that I wake up in the morning excited for the day... I'll know it was a successful day if I learned something new." - *Student*

Students most interested in pursuing a career or trade after graduation viewed working right away, or bypassing college for a shorter stint of training for work, as a means to achieving happiness. Some students noted a passion for traveling, and they knew they had to make money to afford it. Others wanted to provide stability and security for their families as quickly as possible.

"Success means I am not living a paycheck-to-paycheck life or struggling to provide for myself and the others around me. I've always been a person who puts the people around me ahead of others. And if I am struggling to do that, then I don't feel like I am as successful as I'd like to be." - *Student*

Nokomis students, in general, said they felt staff members were heavily invested in their future lives and not solely focused on their accomplishments in high school.

"Almost every single teacher is extremely supportive and helpful towards any goal that any student wants. Not just me alone. I can say that my advisor or most of my teachers that I've had, especially here, if I needed help with coming up with a decision or some guidance, I could easily go to them and they could put me towards the next step that I need to go." - *Student*

## The challenge: How can high schools help students achieve their personal definitions of postsecondary success?

The Nokomis team wondered whether they are doing enough to ensure students consider the full suite of postsecondary options. Given the variety in students' backgrounds, life experiences, and interests in different pathways, the Nokomis team raised the questions: How can high schools help students explore a range of futures—from trades to colleges—and equitably discern a path based on talents, interests, and potential growth? And given the variety of pathways to success, how can high schools provide the “right” high school experience that feels both relevant and rigorous for all students?

The team believes different postsecondary pathways can lead to happiness as students and families define it. What's less clear is how much the school should push students to consider broader career options outside of jobs that initially appeal to them based on where they see family members working.

“Do [students] know they have many possible options, regardless of their background and their family's experience? Do they pick one, not because they feel constrained by money or experiences, but because it's the best path for them? Do they feel like they are set up to be successful? I never want a kid to be uneducated about the possibilities or assume that they couldn't do certain things.”  
- Administrator

Additionally, staff and leaders actively grapple with which high school learning experiences and outcomes are critical for every student's success and which need to vary based on a student's desired path. They question whether they are providing the most relevant and realistic high school experiences, especially for students who already have a strong sense of what they want after graduation.

“People talk about wanting to blow up the high school experience, but do they really? It's like, we want you to have everybody have great SAT scores and have all these unique experiences. And for kids coming out of poverty in a small town, I just don't think that's realistic. And sometimes I question if it's necessary. I'm like, do you have to like poetry, really? And conversely for kids that like poetry, do you need to be able to frame up a wall or wire an outlet? So I wrangle with that a lot.” - Administrator

Nokomis works hard to expose students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who would be first-generation college-goers to information about the college experience and options available in both big and small universities. But some teachers said they thought Nokomis could further increase equity of access if they developed more ways to help those students and their families understand the benefits of attending college—and how to specifically go about the myriad, complicated processes of applying and enrolling.

“Our students struggle because many are first-generation college-goers. We have a high ratio of low-income students. We need to do much better around fully supporting students through processes like the FAFSA...They need that one-to-one help to complete that process. Without the FAFSA, your college plan becomes not much of a plan.” - Teacher

Students and families need more guidance about ways to make college affordable and how to ensure postsecondary education leads to a career with a salary that justifies the time and expense of higher education. Even with state-level college access initiatives such as free community college, some Nokomis students outright dismissed the idea of going to college due to high tuition costs. Some of these concerns are real, as tuition costs have steadily

increased over the last twenty years.<sup>8</sup> However, some students don't see the routes they can take to affordable postsecondary education, such as free community college or scholarships, because they don't apply for these opportunities, given their perceived cost.

"He's not applying for college this fall. He's a cost-conscious kid. It would probably most likely be out of pocket for the full tuition. He's like, 'how do I do this and how do I afford this at the end of the day? And how do I have a career that will afford a payment if I go to college?'" - *Caregiver of a student*

As a relatively small school in a rural community, Nokomis is sometimes challenged by the impossibility of offering exactly what every student wants, interviews showed. One caregiver of a student with ambitious college goals said she wished the school could offer more advanced courses. Meanwhile, the principal worried about how to award credit for another student's on-the-job learning experience that didn't clearly line up with academic standards.

Despite Nokomis expanding postsecondary pathway options that combine training, further education, and work, many students still viewed their choices as binary: college or trades.

"Usually...when [students] say they want to go to college, they go to college. When they say they want to do a trade, they do a trade." - *Student*

The same theme came up among school staff and caregivers, leading to a sense that students are locking into one of only two perceived pathways before they have a chance to explore the different avenues under college and careers. Given this, some staff worry that students choose one pathway too early on, potentially blocking them from seeing other opportunities, before they can understand the pros and cons of different careers and degrees.

"Every student should be pushed towards their capacity so that they have the greatest amount of opportunities and options to them. [But] when kids specialize at too young an age, they may not be properly motivated to see that there are opportunities down the road." - *Teacher*

Regardless of where a student is in terms of a postsecondary decision, Nokomis staff are aligned on the idea that while students' pathways out of high school may be different, their chances at a happy, financially secure life should be equal.

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8 Kerr, Emma and Sarah Wood, "A Look at College Tuition Growth Over 20 Years," last modified September 13, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/see-20-years-of-tuition-growth-at-national-universities#:~:text=Tuition%20and%20fees%20at%20private,the%20most%2C%20increasing%20175%25>.

## Discussion

### On Nokomis Regional High School

1. **What key changes did the school make to encourage students to consider a broader variety of postsecondary options?**
2. Nokomis students and staff know there are many paths to happiness and financial stability, but some worry about the persistence of a binary view of life after graduation: college or trades. **How can Nokomis illustrate more pathways that involve combinations of work, ongoing training, and higher education? Is it necessary to show students pathways that go beyond the binary view of postsecondary options?**
3. Maine now offers free community college to students who graduate high school from 2020-23, and Nokomis staff sometimes worry their students aren't taking advantage of that benefit. **How would you advise the Nokomis team to encourage students to consider college without overly favoring either college or careers?**

### On high schools in general

4. One Nokomis staff member described grappling with whether all high school students need the same knowledge and skills to be successful in the pathway they choose to follow after graduation. **What skills and knowledge does every high school student need, versus which might be variable based on individual students' goals and interests?**
5. At Nokomis, staff emphasize that happiness and decent work are in everyone's reach, but college isn't a requirement to achieve it. **Do you agree? What are the risks of exposing students to multiple pathways, some of which don't require college? What are the risks of continuing to push college as the idealized path? Are these risks greater for students who are underrepresented in higher education? What are the barriers to taking those actions? How might you address them?**
6. The majority of Nokomis's students come from rural, high-poverty backgrounds, and their experiences and interests are largely shaped by their vast outdoor environment. Many students grew up enjoying outdoor activities, such as hunting, and watching their parents achieve success in trades, such as welding. Those experiences don't always align with traditional college-centric expectations. **What more can high schools do to better expose students from trades-centric backgrounds to see college and degree-requiring careers as equally viable options? Additionally, what can high schools do to invite students who assume college is the next step to explore a wider range of postsecondary options? For both, what can high schools do to help students understand the steps needed to get there?**