

## New American Secondary Schools Ventures (Grades 7-14)

The scene is the bedroom of an energetic 15 year old named Carlos. Surrounding his worktable are his grandmother and his two younger sisters, Maria and Rose. Although they have watched him speed through his computer screen for more than two years, they are still amazed at his proficiency and his sense of determination.

Carlos' grandmother asks Carlos to explain what he is doing. Carlos tells her that he is trying to decide whether to attend an all-night poetry read-in at a local university and write a reflection paper on the event (and thereby earn some English credit) or join the weekend environmental design team in Central Park (which will earn him science and social studies credit). Unfortunately, both of these learning experiences are scheduled for the same weekend. But wait, there are seven other new choices that have recently been added to the educational options menu posted by his support team of peers and professionals.

Grandma asks whether Carlos has had a recent physical examination. Carlos is unsure. He flips to a different "menu" on his computer screen and the family discovers that it has been over 18 months since Carlos' last medical exam. He further searches and discovers that the youth clinic at St. Luke's Hospital can handle him without an appointment this same week. He will take care of that important piece of personal business. The hospital team will post a report of his exam on his personal page.

Carlos looks at his watch and tells his sisters and his grandmother that he must rush off now, because his cohort group is having a meeting tonight to finalize the layout for their e-magazine, which they are publishing for his neighborhood. He wants to make sure that his study of the sanitation services makes it into this issue. He has the digital pictures, interview analysis, and story ready to post and print.

Carlos rushes off and his sisters, ages six and nine, tell each other that they cannot wait until they are old enough to be in Carlos' school program. They are not entirely sure how it works, but it surely does seem to be a lot more fun than sitting in their classroom all day.

## New American Secondary Schools Ventures (Grades 7-14)

Ventures is an ambitious new model for schooling. It completely questions, challenges, and radically changes what, how and where students learn. At the same time, its basic design is not unlike the broad experience youth leadership programs, such as Scouts and 4-H, have successfully developed over the past century. The major difference is that Ventures responds to the skills required for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is a design that addresses both the intellectual/ academic needs and the civic/ social service needs of adolescents, and, as argued by Robert Reich and others, it is a design that truly empowers students to take control of their own lives, while being under the watchful eye of a caring adult – much as a Scout troop leader, a good coach or a 4-H Club leader might do. The major difference between Ventures and the youth leadership development programs is the scope of Ventures. It is not limited to a sphere of interest and it incorporates academic, social, and personal needs of the youth.

This is a choice plan. Students and their parents select to participate. They represent families from a specific middle-junior high school and they opt to become members of a secondary school cohort that begins in grade 7 and lasts until graduation from a community college. Since the students' work is monitored through an instructional management system, the records seamlessly transfer from one institution to another.

In this grade 7-14 plan, each student will be placed in a cohort of 25 peers. Each cohort will have an adult cohort leader, who is a teacher who serves as mentor, coach, advisor and guide for the 6-8 years of this venture. Most students will “graduate” at the end of the regular grade 12, but some may take longer and some may enter the college sooner. Some students may in fact engage in dual enrollment during their later years in the program.

As James Comer, James Coleman and others have argued, students need to experience functional communities and bring “social capital” to their educational experiences; therefore, the cohorts will begin in specific neighborhoods. The cohort, including students and their affiliated adults, become a functional community, through both face-to-face and electronic exchanges. Furthermore, through some of their work, they will generate social capital for the neighborhood. The cohort leader will become a member of an extended family and a citizen of the neighborhood. To nurture these social connections the cohort leader will become both a family worker (in the social service sense) and a guidance counselor (in the education world sense). The cohort leader will be available for students in the cohort – and for the families – to consult, reach out to, lean on. When not in physical contact, the cohort will maintain electronic contact.

The educational program design is customized. Each student will have an array of educational options, just as Scouts have an array of merit badge activities from which to choose and 4-H members have an array of projects. First, each student will be trained in the logic and skills necessary to participate in digital project based learning, as described by leaders in the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). These

projects will be entirely student centered and initiated, with coaching from the cohort leader. Second, students will have access to a comprehensive data base of physical and digital experiences (developed in collaboration with external sources) that tells students how, in many different ways, they can complete their school program in all their subject areas. While varied in nature, these experiences will all be keyed to national core standards for the content areas.

Students will have two different paths to academic success: self-initiated projects and completion of organized options. Both paths will be comprised of a combination of digital and physical activities.

It will be up to each student to decide which combination of options he or she will exercise in order to complete the academic/ intellectual dimension of the program. At all times, the student (and the family members) can access both the options and the credits earned by merely checking the educational account, much as people do with their ATM accounts, which in this case involves an instructional management system. Each family will have a laptop/ smartphone at home to use in this endeavor and to use for many of their classroom and independent assignments. The cost will be less than that of one year's set of standard textbooks.

The program will operate with a dual-curriculum; that is, in addition to the academic requirements that each student must complete, each cohort will be required to complete four cohort group projects each year for the six years. Half of these projects will have precise requirements, so as to ensure that students engage in authentic academic learning. The other half of the projects will have general guidelines and allow the cohort to be creative in designing the specific activity for an authentic audience. In designing and conducting the projects, the students will be engaging in essential leadership skills and demonstrating their ability to do meaningful work that is important to adults outside the school.

The projects will earn educational credits for all cohort members (if successfully completed) and have the following goals.

1. Provide application opportunities so that students can show that they have mastered the required concepts (in, for example, science or mathematics) for the year.
2. Emphasize an interdisciplinary approach so that students can understand that the "balkanization" of academic disciplines is quite arbitrary and that knowledge crosses into many areas simultaneously, e.g. a project might bring together computer art, English, archaeology and ecology into one coherent presentation.
3. Involve critical and creative thinking in true problem solving.
4. Insist that student work as a collaborative group that communicates effectively both orally and through an array of electronic means, skills essential to the 21st Century.
5. Stress creativity, responsibility, and the entrepreneurial spirit.

Among the ideas for cohort group projects over the six year period are the following illustrative activities.

- Staging a dramatic production, perhaps in relation to a social issue
- Designing, writing, editing and publishing a special interest magazine
- Completing a series of community service projects based upon a survey of community needs
- Completing an anthropological study of 4 different ethnic neighborhoods
- Completing an Outward Bound leadership experience
- Analyzing an environmental impact statement
- Getting out the vote for a local election
- Conducting a comparative study of local public and private schools
- Preparing a series of lessons to be taught in an elementary school
- Organizing and conducting appropriate physical activity for senior citizens
- Formulating a “city improvement” project for a local neighborhood
- Studying an issue and performing an advocacy role
- Conducting a public health research and reporting it to an adult audience
- Preparing a social issue analysis and posting it on a website
- Completing a college visitation tour and presenting it on a website

The program will place a great deal of emphasis on the opportunities for an individual student to shape when, where, and how he or she will earn academic credits. These “credits” can be accumulated in many different denominations. Imagine, if you will, the six years of English (grades 7-12) as the equivalent of six earned, one dollar bills. In our program, these “six dollars” can be earned in smaller denominations. In addition to whole dollars, the six dollars could be some combination of dimes, quarters or half-dollars, as students complete smaller discrete learning experiences that have been designed or adapted by adults supporting the program. These “earnings” would be posted on an individual’s ATM account for personal monitoring.

It is paradoxical that many students take more than 4 years to complete high school – some as long as 7 years – at a time when digital tools make access to education a 24/7 activity. Students no longer need to be “at school” at 7:30 in the morning, Monday through Friday. While students will have access to regular school courses and will select them when appropriate, there is no need to limit students to the standard program of studies. There no longer needs to be “school days” and “school hours” with summer down time. At least 27 states provide virtual schooling and several commercial enterprises provide well-developed academic courses. Clayton Christensen says that, based upon his projection of data, by the year 2019 half of all high school courses will be conducted over the web. Under the guidance of the professional cohort leader, this program will accept transfer credits from any legitimate source, so that students can take control of their own lives and can at least complete junior college.

How we learn, where we learn, how fast we learn, in what size groups we learn – all important questions. But, the digital age frees us from our historical answers. This program permits individuals and small groups of peers to design operationally how they

will “do schooling.” The content or substantive knowledge of the program is still largely defined by adult experts, but not as daily lessons to be completed as prescribed.

While Ventures places great emphasis on the individualistic component (itself quire entrepreneurial and a system that rewards initiative, self-starting, curiosity, and exploration – all qualities that have made this nation great), we are also strong believers in collaborative work; thus, the requirement for group tasks or cooperatively planned cohort activities. Social analyst and advocates recognize the 21<sup>st</sup> Century need for learning the use of digital communication tools and for learning to work collaboratively.

Venture students will not be left to flounder. They will receive the guidance of the cohort leader, the support of adults in their lives, and the support of their entire cohort, a group that will travel together for the six years or until an individual graduates. This cohort group will serve as an emotional and psychological support system – again another mechanism to build social capital within the community – and will serve as a learning group. Unlike the unattached, isolated individuals in many schools, individuals in these cohort groups will most likely form strong relations that sustain themselves after the school experience.

In summary and in visual format, the design of the program looks like this.

<p><u>Student and Family Enter Program by Choice</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Student and family make choice prior to grade 7.</li> <li>2. Student placed in cohort with adult leader.</li> <li>3. Cohort goes through “get acquainted” experiences and confirms choice.</li> <li>4. Family is trained in the logic and methods of the program.</li> <li>5. Summer induction program using the system.</li> <li>6. Student earns lap top computer and/or other digital tools.</li> <li>7. Student starts grade 7 as cohort member.</li> <li>8. Cohort builds on summer experience to organize individual programs and cohort activities for the first month.</li> <li>9. Student, related adults, and cohort leader monitor work and activities.</li> </ol>
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The summer program deserves special mention. It is something of an academic boot camp. During these intensive two weeks, preferably on a college campus, the cohort leaders, drawn from experienced teachers from all disciplines (mathematics, English, social studies, science, and others) will forge their collection of cohort members into a working team, who know and

<p><b>Educational Options</b> Individual experiences, including regular school courses Solo or collaborative small group Cohort activities, required and other.</p>	<p><b>Digital Tools and Access to Learning</b> Individual computer and/or other digital tools. Access through phone lines in student's home. Accessible to student and to family. Service provided by district.</p>	<p><b>Social Services Options</b> Access to Information Integrated Services Direct Assistance</p>
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respect each other. A series of experiential learnings (e.g., Outward Bound type exercises) and a set of digital projects will bond individual cohort groups, while teaching them new skills and patterns of behavior.

Students will be responsible for learning how to use the digital tools – both for learning operational skills and for developing an understanding of how to access and judge the range of educational options and of social service options available to them. While in summer session, they will use a model of the system to choose individual and group activities. In this summer program, students will learn social and intellectual skills, as well as operational procedures and academic content, and thereby establish the foundation for their secondary school/ college career.

How many of the student's experiences are in "regular classrooms" and how many are "new options?" How many experiences are individual and how many are small group or cohort activities? The answers depend upon the decisions made by individuals and their cohort. Needless to say, learning to "do Ventures" is itself a learning experience, one that models successful adults. In the early months, students may rely upon old patterns of behavior, spending much of their time in regular classes. As they learn the Ventures system, they will design and choose a greater variety of options.

At the same time that students are learning to control their own educational choices, similar access to information and options regarding social services will be provided so that students can manage their personal life. Some information systems, such as NYC 311, will be linked to an individual profile. It may be feasible to provide a comprehensive health profile, similar to the one developed by the US Veterans Administration, which becomes a life-long digital health record. The research, as advanced by McLaughlin, Kozol and Wehlage among others, clearly indicates that students cannot attend to their intellectual and academic growth if the "other parts" of their life are not under control. These issues of health, housing, employment (for self and family members), nutrition, justice (for immigration rights issues) and counseling need to be incorporated into the integrated system provided students. Many of these services are already accessible through digital tools, but access is seldom coordinated.

The computer and other digital tools will be the tools of empowerment. Working with a high level, experienced team of local social service providers, Ventures can build a second data base with pertinent information about accessing a wide range of services. The family needs to arrange for new child care for a younger sibling? There is an issue regarding tenants rights? Welfare payments have been delayed? A family member is anxious about AIDS testing? The student and the family can access answers to these questions and find out where to go to get proper assistance.

Ventures is not proposing to provide direct services, nor proposing to manage social services. What Ventures is proposing is to facilitate the organization of a gateway to services already provided to students and families by a plethora of uncoordinated agencies and organizations. There are a number of full-service agencies that can

collaborate to bring about the integrated “one stop shopping” model envisioned by New Beginnings in San Diego. Unlike that effort to consolidate the services in one physical site, Ventures will use the computer to link services provided in multiple sites. Many social service agencies, like Ventures, have a commitment to develop consumer control over service provision; thus, they will participate as willing partners.

Ventures is a program that will serve all students, regardless of ability level, past school experience, or special interest. It will open an array of wonderful, magical worlds to all. Sabrina, for example, would like to earn some credit in science by completing a series of “seek and discover” exercises at the Museum of Natural History. Cole will gain English credit by shadowing a New York Times reporting and discussing the development of a story. Lilly will accumulate both mathematics and social studies credits by working with a team of urban planner who are debating social implications of a downtown renewal project. Allison will take an advanced marine biology course at Kingsborough Community College. Ray will amass science credits by completing a digital based research on the ecological impact of off-shore drilling, work that will be enhanced by a Skype conversation with a university specialist in Texas.

In each instance, the student will initially propose an interest, a topic, or a program of work, as opposed to being required to complete a program of the teacher’s choosing. Ventures will recruit teachers who are adept at using technology for learning. These teachers will be specially trained to guide students in the development of their ideas and to employ digital tools in their work. The primary source of such training will be Reinventing Project-Based Learning by Suzie Boss and Jane Krauss, who are leaders in technology and teaching. They are professionals at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Boss) and the International Society for Technology in Education (Krauss). We will also establish a working relationship with prototypical high schools that emphasize technology, such High Tech High in LaJolla and New Tech High in Napa and their affiliated sites in other states.

Each of the learning experiences, and there will be hundreds over the students’ careers, will be developed and approved in collaboration with the student’s cohort leader. The cohort leaders will jointly monitor the program, along with a panel of curriculum specialists. To provide an external perspective, we will affiliate with a university’s school of education. These monitors will be guided by the following set of design principles.

1. They will be based upon curriculum standards accepted by educational officers.
2. They will be based on competencies and performance outcomes so that the required content in the disciplines will be mastered over the student’s career.
3. They will be based upon authentic problem-solving and critical thinking.
4. They will be complex and time consuming, much like adult work.
5. They will introduce new ways of learning and provide new types of learning sources, e.g. access to experts in the field, to research, and to continuous learning
6. They will give students a flavor of what “real people” in a variety of endeavors do to develop a career, thereby providing informal career exploration

7. They will prepare students to demonstrate their competencies via portfolios entries, cohort activities, and mastery of “world class standards examinations”

The basic unit of Ventures is the cohort of 25 students, who work together over the 6 years from grade 7 through community college. The school per se is a community of cohorts, much like medical or law school which is composed of cohorts of students. As with the more traditional school, there will be a principal, who leads the faculty and monitors the progress of the cohorts by analyzing the data on the instructional management system. Students who have special interests, such as athletics or music, can petition any regular school for participation, since these activities are sponsored by the system in which Ventures is an option.

Ventures is a program designed to move schooling closer to the adult work world of the 21st Century. As Dreeban noted some years ago in On What Is Learned In School, students learn more than the academic content of their courses: they learn what it means to know and to work. One of the basic problems facing the traditionally designed school is that the teacher-centered, fragmented courses, where students learn to do school work, do not reflect the adult work of the digital age; thus, in the traditional school, students are not learning how to live in their own time. Ventures is a design to move towards the time in which students live.