

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

COMPARATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF CURRENT & IDEAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

ABRIDGED: CORE FINDINGS

Prepared by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to thank the 125 high school students who generously shared their time, insights, and hopes during these focus groups. Your honesty, courage, and clarity have not only shaped this report but have illuminated a forward path through your insights. Each of you reminded us that the future of education is not just something we plan for, it lives in your questions, your dreams, and your vision for what is possible. We are deeply grateful for your voices and will endeavor to create the quality educational experience that you deserve.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2024, Phase I listening sessions with high school principals and central office staff surfaced a concern: when many high-achieving students leave mid-morning for post-CCR opportunities, on-campus student leadership and elective availability decline, harming school culture. Principals worried that shrinking electives could make traditional high schools less attractive to families.

To test this, HCPS ran student focus groups in April 2025 with 125 students from all 11 high schools—the first step in elevating student voice to shape CCR implementation so all students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Principals selected 10–15 students per school to reflect:

- Diverse grades and academic profiles (both excelling and struggling learners)
- Different post-HS pathways (workforce and college)
- School demographics (socioeconomic status, sex, race)
- The full range of CCR engagement, including the support pathway

The focus group protocol was co-developed by the Strategic Facilitator and Chief of Staff to ensure that HCPS gained valuable insights and that students had a positive, participatory experience. The full Student Focus Group protocol is located in Appendix B.

Monday, April 7	Tuesday, April 8	Wednesday, April 9	Thursday, April 10
Harford Technical High School	Bel Air High School	Havre de Grace Middle/High School	Fallston High School
Swan Creek School	Patterson Mill Middle/High School	Edgewood High School	North Harford High School
C. Milton Wright High School	Aberdeen High School	Joppatowne High School	

KEY FINDINGS

SUMMARY CHART

The following provides a quick summary of the report's key findings.

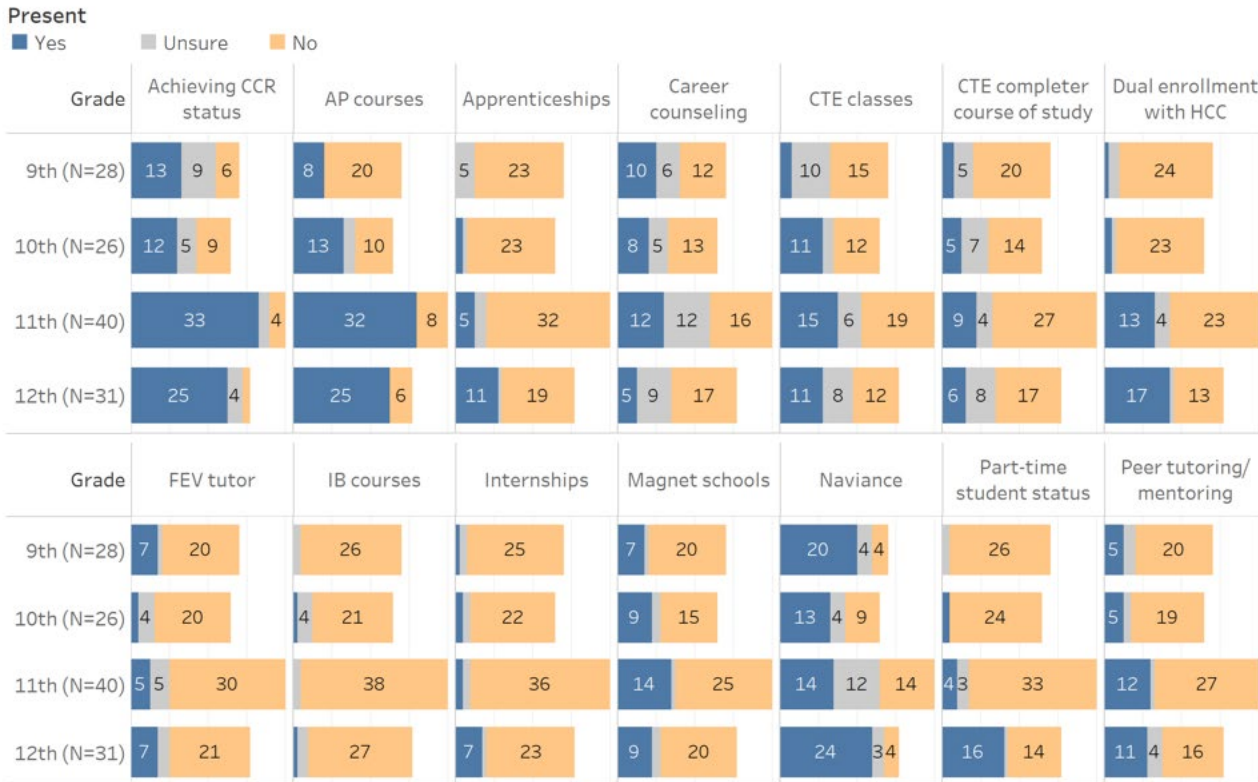
	Themes	Key Findings
Student Vision of an Ideal School Environment	Comfortable Physical Environment and Facilities	Students want schools that are clean, comfortable, modern, and conducive to both learning and relaxation. They also want healthy and accessible food and water.
	Abundance of Opportunities	Students seek enhanced access to advanced coursework, extracurricular activities, internships, and diverse programming options starting early in their academic careers.
	Flexible Structures and Schedules	Students envision flexible, innovative school models that balance academics, wellness, and personal interests.
	Supportive and Respectful School Culture	Students emphasized the importance of mental health support, trusting relationships, and an overall climate of care, safety, and positivity.
	Future-Focused Learning Experiences	Students described learning experiences that reflect real-life applications, offer hands-on engagement, and prepare them for future careers and adult responsibilities.
	Responsive, High-Quality Instruction	Students value teachers who are passionate, prepared, and responsive to different learning styles. They want fair academic systems and consistent support.
Student Perspectives on the Current School Environment	Current Engagement with Various CCR Initiatives	Students reported the most widespread engagement with achieving College and Career Readiness (CCR) status, Advanced Placement courses, and Naviance across all grade levels. However, when rating the quality of their experiences, students expressed the highest satisfaction with internships, dual enrollment at Harford Community College, and the flexibility of part-time student status. Notably, almost half of ninth-grade students were unsure of their CCR status highlighting an area of opportunity for earlier communication.
	Instructional Quality and Engagement	Students reported a wide range of instructional approaches, including group projects, lectures, passive learning, and differentiation critiques. Some praised engaging teachers, but others expressed concern about limited support, outdated materials, and lack of passion.
	Physical Environment and Facilities	Students described dissatisfaction with the physical state of buildings, including broken bathrooms and cleanliness concerns. Concerns about limitations to healthy, accessible food and clean water were also raised.

	Scheduling and Structural Considerations	Students reported that the daily structure, including early start times, crowded hallways, and inaccessible bathrooms, negatively impacts their well-being. Many felt they don't have enough time to rest, take care of their personal hygiene, socialize, or complete work.
	Access to Extracurricular Activities and Support Services	Some students appreciated having access to many extracurricular activities, others cited limited opportunities, inequities, and barriers to future-focused preparation.
	Safety and Mental Health Observations	Some students raised concerns about safety, including student drug use and vaping, as well as the need for expanded mental health support. Some feel rules are overly controlling, and consequences misaligned.
Student Strategies for School Transformation	Enhance Academic and Career Readiness Pathways	Students recommended expanding Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment courses, and magnet program access while building stronger bridges to career exploration and real-world learning.
	Redesign Scheduling and Start Time	Students want more flexible, balanced schedules with time for rest, work, connection, and preparation for the future.
	Support Mental Health, Safety, and Community Building	Students suggested strategies to improve mental health resources, enhance overall safety, reduce disciplinary concerns, and foster a stronger sense of belonging.
	Improve Physical Environment and Technology	Students proposed a wide range of upgrades to their schools' physical environment—from HVAC systems and furniture to safety upgrades, water access, and outdoor gathering spaces.
	Increase Funding and Resource Equity	Students emphasized the need for greater financial investment in academics, arts, extracurriculars, and facilities with an emphasis on equitable distribution.
	Expand Student Voice and Leadership	Students called for more consistent, formal, and meaningful opportunities to influence decision-making across hiring, scheduling, instruction, and school policies.
	Strengthen Instruction and Teacher Quality	Students advocated for improved instructional practices that align with how they learn best, enhanced teacher accountability, and staffing actions that prioritize quality and care.

Student Engagement with Various CCR Initiatives

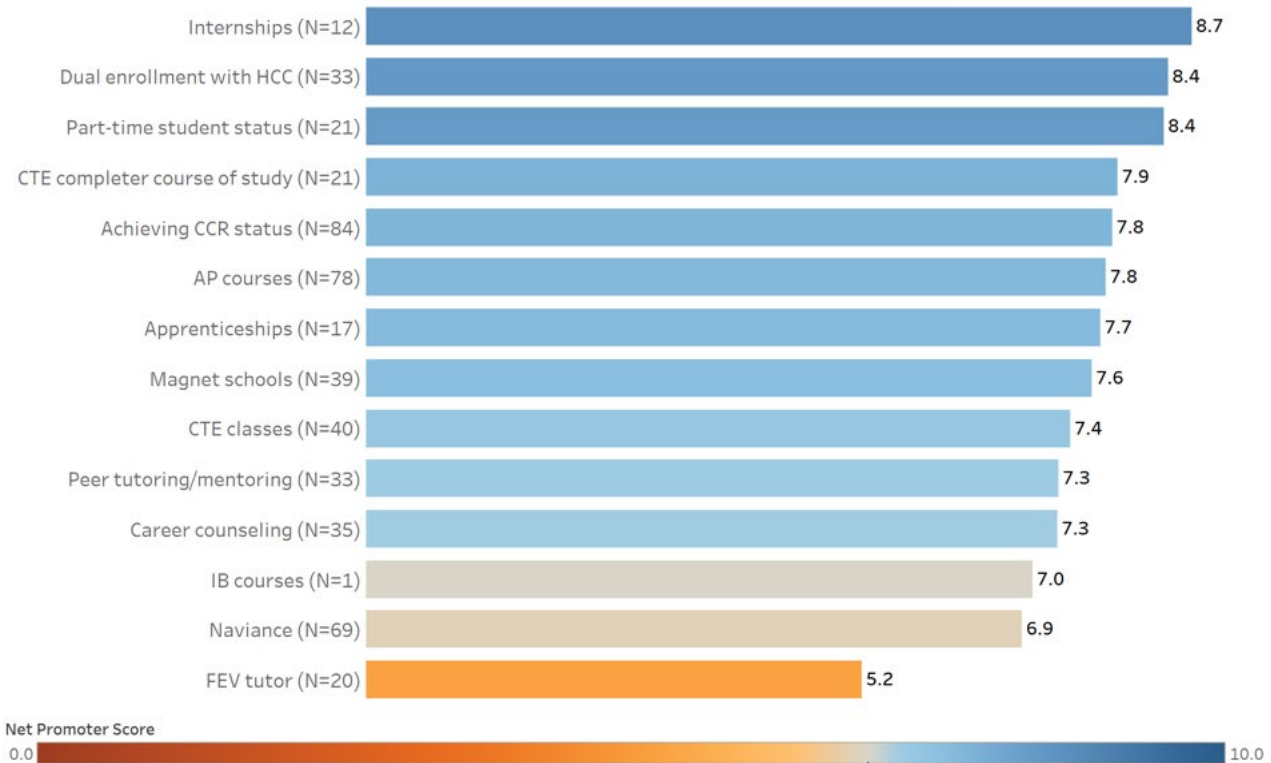
Students were given the opportunity, through a brief questionnaire (see Appendix A), to indicate their current engagement with various CCR initiatives. Response choices were “yes,” “no,” and “unsure.” Students were also asked to provide a Net Promoter Score for each of the initiatives in which they had participated. The following table presents a view of all participating students, by grade level, and their indication of participation in each CCR activity.

Extent to Which Each Element is Present by Grade (N=125)



CCR achievement, AP participation, and Naviance use were the most common experiences across grades, while dual enrollment, internships, and part-time status were more typical of upperclassmen. Students expressed the highest favorability toward internships, HCC dual enrollment, and part-time status, and the lowest toward FEV Tutor and Naviance. The low Net Promoter Score for IB courses reflects a very small sample size (one student), compared to 69 participants for FEV Tutor. The following tables show overall and grade-level Net Promoter Scores by CCR element.

Average Net Promoter Score by Element



Net Promoter Score by Grade Level

Element	Grade				Element	Grade			
	9	10	11	12		9	10	11	12
Achieving CCR status	7.5 (n=21)	9.4 (n=7)	7.6 (n=30)	8.0 (n=26)	FEV tutor	3.7 (n=7)	7.3 (n=3)	5.7 (n=6)	5.5 (n=4)
AP courses	8.0 (n=21)	7.0 (n=6)	7.7 (n=28)	7.9 (n=23)	IB courses	7.0 (n=1)			
Apprenticeships	7.0 (n=9)		8.5 (n=2)	8.5 (n=6)	Internships	8.7 (n=6)		7.3 (n=3)	10.0 (n=3)
Career counseling	7.0 (n=5)	6.0 (n=7)	7.6 (n=14)	7.9 (n=9)	Magnet schools	6.6 (n=8)	6.5 (n=2)	7.9 (n=19)	8.1 (n=10)
CTE classes	5.3 (n=10)	10.0 (n=2)	7.5 (n=16)	8.6 (n=12)	Naviance	7.4 (n=21)	6.5 (n=13)	6.9 (n=18)	6.5 (n=17)
CTE completer course of study	6.7 (n=7)	10.0 (n=1)	7.0 (n=6)	9.6 (n=7)	Part-time student status	9.0 (n=14)		10.0 (n=1)	6.7 (n=6)
Dual enrollment with HCC	8.5 (n=15)		8.1 (n=9)	8.6 (n=9)	Peer tutoring/mentoring	6.5 (n=11)	7.0 (n=2)	7.7 (n=13)	7.9 (n=7)

Net Promoter Score scale: 0.0 to 10.0. Note: Larger circles denote larger n-sizes.

Few sophomores joined the focus groups due to testing conflicts. Overall, seniors reported the most positive CCR experiences and freshmen the least. Students viewed CCR status, HCC dual enrollment, and part-time status

most favorably, while FEV Tutor and Naviance were least liked. (FEV Tutor ended in early 2025.) Ninth graders most often selected “unsure” for CCR elements, with uncertainty decreasing by grade level. Notably, several students, including upperclassmen, were unsure of their own CCR status, warranting further review.

Student Strategies for School Transformation

A. Enhance Academic and Career Readiness Pathways

Ten of the groups made recommendations that prioritize expansion of Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment courses, and magnet program access while building stronger bridges to career exploration and real-world learning experiences. To *Enhance Academic and Career Readiness Pathways*, students recommended:

- Adding more class options such as survey-style classes in early grades to explore options, SAT prep or test-taking strategies, a freshman class for Advanced Placement prep, more foreign language choices, healthcare, nursing, cosmetology, and consumer science
- Expanding access for more students to participate in dual enrollment, technical, and magnet programs; remove the lottery system
- Communicating opportunities to students earlier through a HCPS resource guide, informed school counselors who provide consistent information about college and career resources
- Providing students with access to tutoring during the school day
- Prioritizing experiential learning opportunities such as field trips, internships, and outside speakers from the field (do not ignore the arts as a career path)
- Exposing students to the outside world more so they deepen their appreciation for the resources they already have
- Maintaining high, but realistic, expectations for students
- Including more semester-based courses

B. Redesign Scheduling and Start Times

Ten of eleven student focus groups offered recommendations to create more flexible, balanced schedules with time for rest, work, connection, and preparation for the future. To *Redesign Scheduling and Start Times*, students suggested:

- Starting school later, perhaps by switching elementary schools to begin at 7:00 a.m. and secondary schools to begin at 9:00 a.m.; students could possibly work and practice sports in the morning
- Revising the master schedule to allow flexible time and open periods to access tutoring, work on resumes and college applications, catch up on schoolwork, participate in mental health activities, and socialize during the day
- Providing a longer lunch period and more time between classes by shortening classes a few minutes
- Creating a rotation of classes for the first four weeks of school to help students meet their teachers
- Bringing back junior waivers so students don’t take unwanted or unnecessary classes just to fill their schedules
- Ensuring a consistent late policy and expanding reasonable excuses for tardiness

- Establishing expanded hours for the school libraries
- Posting an advance schedule for major assignments at the beginning of the year with staggered testing
- Syncing the HCPS calendar with the Harford Community College calendar
- Developing larger classes taught by multiple teachers and support staff
- Ending expectations for athletic events during school breaks
- Staging dismissal to help with overcrowding
- Making Fundamentals of Technology a semester-based class (or optional)

C. Support Mental Health, Safety, and Community Building

Ten of eleven student focus groups suggested strategies to improve mental health resources, enhance overall safety, reduce disciplinary concerns, and foster a stronger sense of belonging. Students shared the following ideas to *Support Mental Health, Safety, and Community Building*:

- Enhancing positive relationships between students and caring adults by encouraging more non-academic and out-of-school interactions and helping adults learn how to have truthful and honest conversations to get to know students well
- Prioritizing opportunities for positive conversations between school personnel and families by making interactions less intrusive
- Developing student awards for good community citizenship and prizes for family engagement
- Amplifying community engagement by holding more school-based community events and establishing community mentors
- Helping students make connections with others outside of sports and clubs through upperclassmen mentorship programs and encouraging athletes to support each other across teams
- Maintaining consistent consequences for students who violate rules and are disrespectful to others by addressing individual offenders instead of entire groups, supervising bathrooms appropriately, and studying smoke/vape detectors to ensure they are used fairly
- Taking swift action when safety concerns are raised
- Allowing students to access their phones in case they need emergency assistance
- Minimizing isolationism by creating opportunities for connection among schools such as pairing schools that are geographically adjacent
- Amplifying school spirit through intentional branding and public relations campaigns and by holding more events such as pep rallies for every sport planned by committees rather than one person
- Training school counselors to be proactive and identifying reasons why students are falling behind and providing focused supports for Black male students
- Hiring more athletic trainers and providing professional development for coaches to keep students safe and minimize injuries
- Providing inter- or intramural opportunities for aspiring athletes who were not selected for schools' teams to improve those students' sense of self and community

D. Improve Physical Environment and Technology

Ten of eleven school focus groups proposed a wide range of upgrades to their schools' physical environment

from HVAC systems and furniture to safety upgrades, water access, and outdoor gathering spaces. Recommended actions to *Improve Physical Environment and Technology* included:

- Investing in new buildings, comfortable indoor and outdoor spaces for learning and socialization, greenhouses, sports equipment and facilities (including bleachers)
- Repairing intercom systems and HVAC systems to allow for greater temperature control
- Ensuring schools are clean and presentable by creating volunteer opportunities for campus maintenance
- Adding more trash receptacles around schools
- Creating bright and interactive classrooms where student work is displayed
- Providing students access to free, clean water, healthy food, and vending machines before, during, and after the school day
- Allowing culinary students to operate a test kitchen in school cafeterias
- Opening all bathrooms
- Redesigning parking areas and cafeterias to accommodate more students
- Investing in new and replenished computers, upgraded Wi-Fi, and Smart Boards
- Integrating Canvas and Hack as one system modeled from Harford Community College's Brightspace platform
- Hiring an in-house IT professional at each school
- Ensuring that college instructors have fewer cybersecurity restrictions
- Providing tactile fidget items to improve student focus and attention

E. Increase Funding and Resource Equity

Nine of eleven student focus groups emphasized the need for greater financial investment in academics, arts, and extracurriculars with an emphasis on equitable distribution. Suggestions for this theme center upon financial advocacy and responsibility and include the following suggestions to *Increase Funding and Resource Equity*:

- Advocating for greater commitment to education from local and state education leaders that leads to additional funding effort
- Reallocating existing resources so teachers don't have to personally fund projects, clubs and athletic programs, to ensure equitable funding across all sports programs, to support arts programs, clubs, and field trips, and to expand the number of extracurricular programs offered to students
- Engaging in competitive purchasing to get optimal prices and bulk discounts
- Organizing volunteer programs for cost-savings and fundraisers for extracurricular activities

F. Expand Student Voice and Leadership

Nine of eleven student focus groups called for more consistent, formal, and meaningful opportunities to influence decision-making across hiring, scheduling, instruction, and school policies. Students shared these ideas to *Expand Student Voice and Leadership*:

- Asking students, intentionally and frequently, what they want and need from their educational experiences; this can be done through focus groups, polls, and committees.
- Including student voice in staff hiring processes and decisions about reductions in force
- Teaching students to advocate for themselves

- Creating leadership roles and experiences for students, particularly seniors
- Providing students with more freedom of choice in which classes they take
- Addressing previously articulated student concerns such as:
 - Raising the capacity for bathroom passes
 - Ending the policy of removing students from class to address tardiness
 - Ending the policy of giving detentions for tardiness
 - Ending negative consequences for reasonable absences
 - Revising the dress code for reasonableness
- Giving privileges and fee discounts for students who display good citizenship while restricting privileges for students who violate rules and trust
- Permitting student choice for music while working

G. Strengthen Instruction and Teacher Quality

Nine of eleven student focus groups advocated for improved instructional practices that align with how they learn best, enhanced teacher accountability, and staffing actions that prioritize quality of instruction and student-teacher relationships. Students provided the following recommendations to *Strengthen Instruction and Teacher Quality*:

- Hiring more and highly qualified staff
- Changing the teacher interview process to involve students and changing the process for reductions in force to ensure the highest quality teachers are the least impacted; prioritize quality over longevity
- Holding teachers accountable for timely feedback and grading and adhering to school policies themselves, such as cell phone usage during class
- Lowering tolerance for mistakes made by substitutes
- Developing engaging instructional practices that are aligned to student learning objectives such as incorporation of hands-on activities, gamified learning, activities that require physical movement, class projects, and use of available equipment such as 3-D printers
- Allowing students to access extra credit opportunities
- Eliminating cumulative tests, providing more notice for consequential assignments with fewer consequences for failure
- Restructuring class time to minimize lecture and worksheets and providing more time to complete tasks
- Encouraging teachers to work across grade levels to keep overall workloads manageable for students
- Providing incentives for students, such as stickers, to encourage them to complete work and stay on interested
- Creating more opportunities for students to practice public speaking
- Decreasing computer-based activities for instructional content unless the associated careers are also computer-based

APPENDIX A: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Focus Group Questionnaire

April 7-10, 2025

Purpose: To understand how HCPS student currently experience College and Career Readiness initiatives. The *Blueprint for Maryland's Future* articulates, "students must graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills required to be successful as they enter college or begin their career."

School: _____

Date: _____

Current Grade: _____

Please mark the appropriate box to indicate which College & Career Readiness initiatives you have experienced as a student in HCPS.

Initiative	Yes	No	Unsure	Rank
Achieving College & Career Readiness (OCR) Status: <i>earning a 3.0+ GPA and demonstrated math proficiency with a C or better in Algebra I MCAP or proficient in both ELA 10 and Algebra I MCAP assessments</i>				
Advanced Placement (AP) courses				
Apprenticeships				
Dual enrollment courses with Harford Community College				
Career counseling				
Career & Technical Education (CTE) classes				
CTE Completer Course of Study				
FEV Tutor				
International Baccalaureate (IB) courses				
Internships				
Magnet schools				
Naviance				
Part-time student status				
Peer tutoring/mentoring				
Workforce Investment Program through Harford Community College (available to some seniors)				

BLUEPRINT
for our students' future

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you very much for being willing to talk to me. My name is Laurie Baker, and I work as a consultant to help districts incorporate new initiatives that help students. Your school and district, like all other schools and districts in Maryland, has begun implementing systems and supports to ensure that all students are prepared to access college and careers upon graduation. This is a relatively new priority for Maryland, and we want to learn more about your experiences and aspirations to help guide future decisions. I'm going to ask you a few questions about college and career readiness that I will later summarize for school and district leaders. The information you share today will be combined with information shared by students from the other high schools, and I will not directly identify any individual student in my reporting.

Our process for today will consist of four parts. First, I am going to ask you to answer a very brief survey that will help me know which initiatives you've participated in. Then, we'll complete an activity where you can design and describe your ideal high school experience. For the third step, I'm going to ask you to revisit your questionnaire and score what from that list has been most helpful to you. And lastly, I'm going to ask a few general questions to help me understand more about how you experience school. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Step 1: Introductory Questionnaire (10 minutes, including facilitator introductory remarks above)

The purpose of the introductory survey is to gauge which Pillar 3 initiatives students have experienced. The questionnaire itself will take no more than 2 minutes to complete and will ask students to check all that apply with "yes," "no," or "unsure"; student names will not be collected:

- What grade are you in?
- Which of following initiatives have you experienced?
 - Achieving College & Career Ready (CCR) Status – *earning a 3.0+ GPA and shown math proficiency with a C or better in Algebra I MCAP OR proficient in both ELA 10 and Algebra I MCAP assessments*
 - Advanced Placement courses
 - Apprenticeships
 - Dual enrollment courses with Harford Community College
 - Career counseling
 - Career & Technical Education classes (CTE)
 - CTE Completer Course of Study
 - FEV Tutor
 - International Baccalaureate courses
 - Internships
 - Magnet schools
 - Naviance
 - Part-time student status
 - Peer tutoring/mentoring
 - Workforce Investment Program through HCC (available to some seniors)

Step 2: Educational Visioning (45 minutes)

This interactive student ideation session is based on a modified Futures Protocol. The facilitator will serve as the scribe, using chart paper, and lead students through a three-stage activity. In the first stage, students will be asked to pretend that they are now 5 years in the future, looking down into their high school. What they see is the ideal learning environment, where everything they need to prepare for or succeed in their future career has been provided or experienced. Students will describe what they see in this future projection while the facilitator

collects their “observations.” The facilitator will probe, if needed, to ask about college and career activities, differentiation, student supports, experiential learning, extracurricular activities, etc. This stage will take ~15 minutes.

In the second stage, students will be asked to return in their minds to the current day and describe what high school is like now. The facilitator will once again probe with general questions to encourage students to describe the full breadth of their current experiences. This stage will take ~15 minutes.

In the final stage, students will be asked to imagine what changed between the present day to achieve the future vision. For example, if students say in phase one: “All students have apprenticeships or internships,” but in phase two say: “Only a few students participate in internships,” in phase three they will be asked “What will it take to get all students in apprenticeships and internships five years from now, as you have envisioned?” This stage will also take ~15 minutes.

Step 3: Valuation of Current Initiatives (5 minutes)

Students will be asked to return to their introductory questionnaire and assign values to the initiatives they previously checked with the following prompt:

*Please indicate how much you feel each item has prepared/is preparing you for future success.
(Likert scale: 1 – Not at all helpful. 3 – Somewhat helpful. 5 – Has positively changed my future path.)*

Step 4: Interview Questions (30 minutes)

Follow up questions will be selected from the list below to probe further about what students want from high school, what they perceive is needed for future success, and how their lived experiences align to those aspirations.

- What are your plans after high school? What does your family think about your future plans and how the school is helping you achieve them?
- When you imagine your future career, what is most important to you?
- What is most important to make you feel confident about life after high school?
- Is College and Career Readiness eligibility important to you? Why or why not?
- How did you learn about the various opportunities on the questionnaire?
- How does your family engage with your high school?
- What are your plans after high school? What does your family think about your future plans and how the school is helping you achieve them?
- What makes school a happy place for you?
- What adults in your school have helped you become more prepared for the future (school counselor, career coach, teacher, etc.)?
- How have your high school experiences helped to prepare you for your future career? Your future college?
- What else could the school or district do to support your success?
- Is there anything else you’d like to share about your school or your experiences with College and Career Readiness?