



scores and such quantifiable numbers to prove its value, New Tech's own [2013 annual report](#) frames success by focusing on deeper learning that can't be measured by standardized test scores and their college readiness. Yet it's that lack of emphasis on test scores, an all-consuming worry for many districts, that makes it more difficult for the organization to pin point numbers to tell its story.

## **“From where we stand, public school districts are as capable of innovative schools as charter schools.”**

Here are a few of the [statistics](#) New Tech has gathered from their schools: students graduate at a rate six percent higher than the national average and enroll in college nine percent more than the average. They also persist in four-year universities at a 17 percent higher rate and 46 percent higher rate when it comes to two year colleges. Perhaps most importantly, they claim that students' higher order thinking skills between freshmen and senior years grow 75 percent more than a comparison group that did not attend a New Tech high school.

New Tech calls itself a school development organization and is a non-profit subsidiary of [KnowledgeWorks](#), another non-profit that acts as a foundation, education policy advocate and on-the-ground work through mergers with groups like New Tech, [Strive](#) and [EdWorks](#).

### **GRAPPLING WITH THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM**

New Tech offers whole-school change to any school interested in contracting with them, including public schools. It has implemented the model in charter and private schools as well, but the majority of its clients are public schools. “From where we stand, public school districts are as capable of innovative schools as charter schools,” said Lydia Dobyns, president of New Tech Network. But as everyone in education knows, every school and every district has different needs, and the organization's offerings are changed accordingly.

New Tech schools are entirely [project-based](#) and cross-disciplinary. Students take courses like Bio-literacy, which mesh subjects together, emphasizing that disciplines are not stand-alone endeavors. Technology is woven throughout the school day and at home seamlessly. Many New Tech schools have one-to-one programs and all schools in the network use a learning management system called Echo that tracks student progress, is open to teachers and students, and connects New Tech educators around the country.

Assessments are designed to measure different kinds of learning outcomes. Mike Reed, principal of [Columbus Signature Academy](#) in Indiana, said that only 60 percent of assessment is based on content. The other 40 percent is based on what

he called “school-wide learning outcomes,” things like written and oral proficiency, work ethic, presentation skills and the ability to give and take feedback. Students can see the project rubric and know where they need to improve their skills.

“Looking at school performance is really different from looking at student growth, which is really what we want to focus on,” Dobyms said. That’s why New Tech doesn’t promise to increase school test scores – it sees that as a separate question, and one that they’re not necessarily interested in.

The schools that have taken on this model don’t seem to mind that test scores aren’t the focus. “A big difference you’d see is student engagement,” Reed said. “Students are working on authentic projects and problems.” He gave an example of a cross curricular physics and environmental science class that studied the physics of power and electricity. “Our students learned those skills and then rewired houses that were destroyed in New Orleans’ 9th Ward. They’re going to remember that far longer than regurgitating a test or a lab.”

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

New Tech works with schools individually, offering professional development as the school gets started. “One of the things we’ve learned and changed is that every implementation is now a custom designed implementation plan,” Dobyms said.

New Tech sticks with a school for five years, spending the first year laying ground work, listening to what schools want and need and garnering teacher buy-in. They offer intensive trainings to help teachers retool skills to teach entirely-project based and cross-curricular classes. Each school is given a coach who visits throughout the school year, checks on lesson plans, suggests changes and helps troubleshoot problems. And New Tech focuses on nurturing the leadership capacity of principals so they can continue to innovate with teachers.

At Columbus Signature Academy, Reed and his staff discussed the professional culture they wanted to promote and decided they’d make decisions by consensus. “That changes everything in a school,” Reed said. Those affected by a decision get equal say in making it, and that includes students. For example, teachers are in charge of the master schedule because it affects them most, but students can weigh in about how changes affect them too.

If gaining consensus is important in New Tech Schools, so is transparency. Teachers share and vet lessons with colleagues at the beginning and end of every project to learn from successes and mistakes. Teachers aren’t penalized if something they try doesn’t work out. They share their successes, experiments, and failures and everyone learns from the experience. That’s the kind of

collaborative learning schools expect from students and Dobyns thinks it's important that teachers experience and practice it too.

## **TRANSITION CHALLENGES**

Opening or converting to a New Tech school can mean some growing pains.

"It's almost a month of de-programming," said Randy Hollenkamp, director of [Bulldog Tech](#) in San Jose, one of the few middle schools New Tech has begun to pilot. When kids enter his seventh grade they are so used to the traditional school system, they don't know how to work collaboratively on projects. "At first their grades go down just because it's projects. It's actually kind of harder because you have to be a self-learner." In traditional schools, kids are constantly being directed, so they don't have to think for themselves as much, Hollenkamp said.

"Every year, as you grow into it, it's difficult for the group of students who aren't a part of New Tech," said Jason Witzigreuter, principal of [Adams Central](#) in Monroe, Indiana. Adams Central is a unique school in the New Tech Network because it is a K-12 school under one roof, but only the high school uses New Tech's model. Witzigreuter calls his school a hybrid model and a learning experience. The school is three years into the experiment, which means the seniors are the only class without their own laptops and without some of the communication and presentation skills that the freshmen quickly pick up.

"Our kids at a lower grade are able to understand how to collaborate better and use those soft skills, or 21st century skills, better because they've been taught that through New Tech," Witzigreuter said. He tries to use the younger students' success to encourage seniors into demonstrating the same kinds of higher order thinking and maturity.

From New Tech's perspective, one of the hardest things about working on a five-year timeline can be school leadership changes. And, like any part of the public school system, funding cuts can affect whether a district is able to continue to pay for the program.

## **COSTS**

New Tech's model is not cheap. It costs about \$100,000-\$120,000 per year for each school. That hefty fee includes support, training, professional development, and access to the knowledge and experience of all the other schools in the network. Still, to pay for it, districts have done everything from pass school bonds, apply for state innovation grants, apply for private foundation grants and beg districts for the money. In addition to New Tech's service fees, schools have to pay for the technology that accompanies the program and often facility redesign to foster more collaborative "studio" spaces.

Though it's a big price tag, the principals interviewed at three New Tech schools thought the money was well spent. [Success For All](#) is another school development program that uses a "whole school" model at the elementary school level. They estimate that for 500 students, their program costs \$120,000 in the first year and decreases to \$50,000 in the second year, finally reaching \$30,000 in the third year. High schools programs generally cost more than elementary programs, though.

## **NEW DIRECTIONS**

New Tech has proven that its model is scalable, in part with extra cash from its parent company KnowledgeWorks. Now they're trying to see if it can work beyond high school. In the past year New Tech has opened 10 middle schools in various states and is dipping into the elementary school scene as well. They're also trying to find ways for districts to expand the model to other schools nearby on their own. "The first New Tech School can be an anchor in their district and then the strategies can spread across the schools," Dobyms said. Leaders and teachers at the anchor school could act as trainers and coaches to others, lowering the cost of transitioning future schools.

