

Helping Students Find Their Success: WEST ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL



Enrolled, Employed or Enlisted

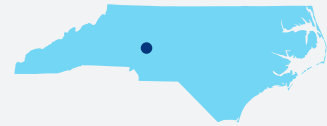
At Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS), we have a guiding belief: **children are more than their test scores.** We know not every student learns in the same way—and that when educators have the flexibility to try new, innovative teaching approaches, we can truly help students learn and succeed.

That's why the RSS team called state legislators with a bold request. **We asked for charter-like flexibility that would empower our schools and local Board of Education with more autonomy.** The policymakers were inspired by our data and experience-backed vision. They introduced legislation, which passed in less than a month. North Carolina's Renewal district was born!

Through our Renewal status, we enjoy curriculum, personnel, financial and scheduling flexibility. Every school in our district has created a plan to serve their students' specific needs, while building academic and interpersonal skills—and helping students pursue their unique life goals, too.

Now, through our case studies, we're sharing more specifics about what we've done, how we've done it and what school leaders across the country can try in their own districts.

ABOUT WEST ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL



LOCATION
MT. ULLA, NC

GRADES
9-12

SIZE
~1,100 STUDENTS

CHALLENGE:

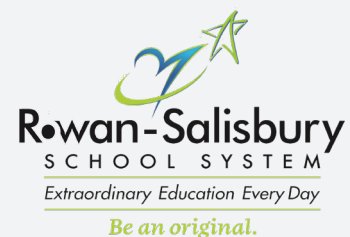
Through no fault of their own, students were struggling to plan for their futures, find their purpose and understand the value of graduating.

SOLUTION:

The school is focused on a comprehensive set of programs to help students prepare for their futures, including career technical education, mentoring and life skills teaching.

RENEWAL FLEXIBILITIES USED:

The school used their budget, hiring and scheduling flexibilities.



THE CHALLENGE

At West Rowan High, education leaders knew they needed to redesign support for students, with three main focus areas:

**1**

FINDING WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE—FOR EVERY STUDENT.

In the traditional education system, students are often pushed toward a narrowly defined vision for success: graduating high school and heading to college. The full high school experience centers around this priority, which can leave many students—who have varying aspirations and life goals—behind.

At West Rowan High, some students are excited about ongoing education—but for many, success looks like enlisting or beginning their careers upon graduation. The West Rowan team knew they needed to ensure every student had the right supports to find what success looks like for them—and to then work toward that goal.

2

BUILDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) AND LIFE SKILLS.

Through conversations with students, surveys and research, the West Rowan High team learned that students felt a need to build on their SEL skills, in addition to practical skills that would help them succeed as adults. From effective conflict resolution to learning how to buy a car, students wanted and needed to learn “how to adult”—which is not a course most high schools offer.

3

PRIORITIZING GRADUATION.

It is not uncommon for West Rowan students to be the first in their families to earn a high school diploma. With this in mind, the West Rowan High team set out to build a high school experience that considered students’ full lived experiences—both in the school setting and in their communities. They knew they needed to build connections to why graduation matters, what it can mean for students’ futures and showing them the value of a high school diploma.

How the Team Identified the Need

West Rowan High started the Renewal process by analyzing the school's data, conducting in-depth research and engaging the community.



Staff Engagement

At West Rowan High, leadership invited every staff member to join a **teacher-led design team**. The team included teachers, but also professionals such as counselors, intervention specialists, administrators and instructional coaches to ensure varied points of view were represented. The staff members grounded the full team in the key concept that would shape every piece of their work: ***it doesn't matter what high schools around us are doing. What matters is our students, our demographics, our challenges and what will help our students specifically thrive.*** For example, they knew that students living in New York City have vastly different experiences than students living in and around Mt. Ulla, North Carolina. They worked together to identify how they could best support West Rowan students—and then created a plan for them.



Data Analysis + Research

The team started by looking **deeply at data** to identify what the biggest needs were as a school, from social-emotional skills to graduation rates to what students were doing after they left high school. This ensured the team made decisions based on their students' experiences specifically. The data made it clear that students needed more support with social-emotional learning, life skills and finding their purpose, too.



Student Engagement

At West Rowan, **student engagement was one of the most important pieces of Renewal planning**. The team reached out to alumni to build a data-backed understanding of what students did after leaving West Rowan. They led in-depth conversations with current students and exiting seniors as well. They asked questions such as, "What do you want to do in life? What are your goals? How has school prepared you—or not prepared you—for these goals?" The team also conducted exit surveys. They broke down all the data into core themes that would then help them shape their Renewal plan.



Continuous Improvement

West Rowan staff continue **collaborating as a Renewal team** to discuss what's working well, where there are opportunities for updates and improvement, and new ideas. The team continues engaging closely with students as well. As a matter of fact, they share a short student survey—about two questions—every Thursday to continue incorporating their feedback deeply into the work.

THE SOLUTION

Preparing Students for the Future *They* Want

Based on their extensive Renewal planning process, the team decided to focus deeply on giving students practical experience, in addition to focusing on SEL, life skills programs and personal mentorship to help every student find their “ideal E” after graduation: enrollment, enlistment or employment.

This work includes everything from Experience U—lessons tailored to help students succeed in all aspects of life—to specialized career technical education courses through which kids can earn certifications.



ERIN SHELTON
WEST ROWAN HIGH SCHOOL
INTERVENTION SPECIALIST

“We used to see education as an 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. thing—but we can be so much more creative about it! How can we get students across that graduation stage and prepare them for a future that works for them, that they are excited about? From learning how to fix an engine right here at school, to college visits, to job shadowing, to teaching real life skills, there are so many ways we can help our students succeed, on their terms.”

The Work in Action

Every year, West Rowan students put on their caps and gowns, go back to the elementary schools where they started and are cheered on by kindergarteners as they prepare for their next step in life. It's just one of the events of Decision Day—a celebration much like signing day for athletes—when every student signs a certificate with their plans for their next adventure after graduation. Whether it's enrollment, enlistment or employment, the goal is for every student to know their purpose after graduation—and to be excited about it. To help reach these goals, the West Rowan team leads many programs.



We aren't in the business of simply teaching students facts, we are in the business of building experiences. Students can Google on their own—what they need is hands-on learning, to know how what they are learning will apply to life. This is what creates excitement about learning, shows the value of school, helps them figure out what they truly want to do in life.”

JAMIE DURANT
WEST ROWAN PRINCIPAL



West Rowan Starts the Conversation Early and Continues Offering Students Support

Business, culinary arts, farm-to-table, masonry, welding, drafting—West Rowan offers varied programs and courses to teach kids, no matter what they are interested in. In North Carolina, students only need 22 credits to graduate, but can earn up to 36, meaning **there are many opportunities to explore what students are excited by (or hate!)**

The West Rowan team starts the conversation early with students—in the eighth grade, before they even begin high school—about all their options. They offer kids tours through their programs and opportunities to ask questions, too. Then, when students start at West Rowan High, the team continues supporting them in exploring their options.



Students Can Choose From Nationally Ranked Career Technical Education (CTE) Programs

In addition to offering strong academic programs, West Rowan offers CTE programs that help students both if they want to start their careers right out of high school, or continue their education, too.

• **Industry recognized certifications.** For example, the team leads about five courses focused on engineering and architecture—and even offers industry recognized certifications, which means students can apply for jobs, with relevant industry certifications already in hand.

- **Partnerships with local colleges.** West Rowan has partnerships with local community colleges as well, through which kids can learn trade skills.
- **CTE courses on campus.** When you walk through the campus, you'll notice veggies growing right in the courtyard, farm animals thriving beside greenhouses and fisheries centers. Students can learn everything from health tech to farm-to-table catering, right on campus. Since the community has a strong agricultural presence, West Rowan offers nationally ranked programs focused on these skills as well.



Students Build SEL Skills Through Connections Home Rooms and Lunch Power Hours

When students graduate from West Rowan, they sit in a row of seats with their Connections teacher. They join this teacher at the beginning of their high school careers. This educator then serves as **a trusted mentor and advisor for all four high school years.** These educators focus on teaching SEL skills, on offering extra supports and making sure every student has what they need to thrive.

The high school also offers “power hour lunches,” during which students have extra time to work with teachers and practice skills (from band to preparing for CTE competitions) as needed, giving students extra support to help them learn and grow.



Experience U

At West Rowan's Experience U, students get the experience they need to succeed in life.

- **Life skills.** Do you remember the first time you did your taxes? Changed a tire? Bought a car? These can be stressful experiences—and ones we are often unprepared for. West Rowan focuses on teaching skills such as these to prepare students for life challenges.
- **College and university visits.** Students get to visit colleges and universities, helping them decide what the right option is for them.
- **Internships and job shadowing.** The West Rowan team knows that experiencing a career in real life can help students solidify their interest—or realize they aren't interested after all. The team helps students gain practical experience so they can find their passion.



With the help of Renewal funding and scheduling flexibility, no kids are left out of these opportunities—ensuring every student gets the chance to succeed.

Lessons From the West Rowan Team

The West Rowan team wants education leaders, superintendents, principals and educators to know that this work is very much worth it—challenges, victories and all. Their biggest advice includes:

- **Start now.** When the West Rowan team started working on its Renewal plan, the team realized that they could have implemented some of the initiatives even without Renewal. Think about what you can accomplish as a school—and then talk to your school board, your superintendent and your team about making it happen.
- **Always center your students.** When adults come together to make plans, it's easy to create plans by adults, "for" students. Never forget that every good plan centers students.
- **Don't be afraid to fail.** When you're trying new, innovative education practices, not every strategy will succeed—and that means you're doing something right! This is an opportunity to learn and do better for your students to find the tactics that DO work.
- **Get to know your students.** Test scores never tell a full story. Get to know your kids personally, so you can then best serve them.
- **Meet YOUR students' needs.** Your high school may look completely different than high schools around you. Concentrate on what your students—specifically—need, and then create solutions for those students.



West Rowan High School's Vision

At West Rowan High School, the team has a bold vision: every single student will have a plan when they walk across the graduation stage, from enrollment to enlistment to employment. To help make this a reality, teachers are empowered with the autonomy and flexibility to respond to and engage with each child's unique needs so every day, everyone discovers and achieves the extraordinary. As a result, students have the opportunity to explore what they're passionate about while still in high school, from internships to hands-on CTE courses right on their campus. Kids are heard, supported and celebrated for who they are and what they want to do with life—helping them build the right skills to succeed in their chosen field.

Learn More about our Renewal work

- Download more case studies at resources.rssrenewal.org
- Reach out to principal Jamie Durant at durantjd@rss.k12.nc.us to schedule a conversation or school visit.

