L
ike many, I have fond memo-
ries of my high school days. At
Eastside High School in Greenville,
South Carolina—class of 19…cough…
cough—I cultivated life-long friendships,
played the lead in the school’s musical
“The Boyfriend,” took great classes with
amazing teachers, cheered on the mighty
Eagles, and so much more. I volunteered
at the Greenville Little Theatre and played
organ for the church choir. My 60+ self,
however, realizes how oblivious I was to
the experience of other students. I lived in
a world that was a good fit for me.

My next personal experience with high
school was as a parent. When the dean of
students at a charter school in Columbus,
Ohio, told me my child would spend two
days a week in internships, beginning as
a sophomore, I hesitated. “When does the
learning happen?” I asked. I learned soon
enough. My children worked in a guitar
repair shop and volunteered at Mount
Rainier National Park as part of their
Graham School experience, and they
learned so much.

Also notable was the absence of courses
like “Freshman English” or “World
History.” The faculty designed courses
based on student interests, with catchy
names and engaging descriptions (like
those in a college course catalog), yet they
were still covering the state-mandated
learning standards. In the “winterim”
term, students took things like photogra-
phy, computer programming, and skiing.
My children had amazing high school
experiences in a converted office building
in a commercial strip north of the city.

As Ohio’s superintendent of public
instruction, I enjoyed visiting high
schools. I loved listening to high school
students whose learning inspired them
and made them joyful. In the encounters
that moved me most, a student would say,
“I found where I belong,” or “This school
saved my life!”

After visiting schools such as Columbus
Arts and College Preparatory Academy,
Dayton Early College High School,
Lincoln-West School of Science and
Health in Cleveland, and Firestone High
School in Akron, as well as many amazing
career and technical education centers, I
landed on a list of attributes of great high
schools. They are relevant, challenging,
student directed, project based, commu-
nity and career connected, and places of
caring and belonging.

In this edition of the State Education
Standard, you will find ideas and reflec-
tions that I hope will inspire you to
envision ways in which you can ensure
that many more students enjoy outstand-
ing high school experiences. Fortunately,
there are wonderful student-centric high
schools in every state. My advice is find
them, visit, and probe into what they are
doing well.

You might say, “Sure, but what
can a member of a state board of
education do?” You can make this
transformational work a priority! And
you can commit to catalyzing and
advancing a policy and action agenda
that will create the conditions for many
more communities and schools to
create the best possible experiences for
high school students. We at NASBE are
ready to help you! A great high school
experience can make a tremendous
difference for so many students.