

Boston invites public to reimagine high schools

By [Andrew Ryan](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 03, 2015

The nation's first high school opened in Boston in 1821, and now, nearly two centuries later, the city has launched an effort to reinvent high school for the future.

Think about High Tech High, a cluster of San Diego schools where the high ceilings and funky splashes of color make it look more like offices of a cutting-edge startup than classrooms. Or it could be Penske, a footwear design academy with a “learn by doing curriculum” that gives students a taste what it would take to create the next Air Jordans.

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Mayor Martin J. Walsh has launched what he has described as a “critical conversation” to redesign Boston's improved but still struggling high schools. Starting Monday in Brighton, Walsh's administration will hold a series of four public meetings to get students, parents, educators, and others to envision the future of Boston's roughly three dozen high schools.

“My hope is that it’s something pretty radical,” said Turahn Dorsey, Boston’s chief of education. “The challenge for us is to really spark the imagination of the public. . . . We have to get people to imagine beyond what is the current conception of high school.”

In addition to the four public meetings, the city has invited more than 40 advocate organizations, colleges, and other institutions to host conversations about how to transform the city’s high schools.

The brainstorming sessions will be followed by a more formal high school redesign competition that will include a yet-to-be determined amount of prize money.

“I think it will be significant enough to attract a number of different designers,” Dorsey said, adding that all entrants must include young people and teachers. “We would love for corporations to team with schools, higher ed institutions to team with youth serving nonprofits.”

Tommy Chang, incoming superintendent of Boston’s schools, will play a key role in the initiative, which has a goal of implementing its first changes in 2016.

In January in his State of the City address, Walsh spoke about redesigning high schools to make better pathways to college and careers. At the time, Walsh announced a partnership with global software company SAP that allows students at Charlestown High School to earn college credit toward a technology degree.

The city launched a [website](#) as part of the effort to redesign high schools, which includes video from Walsh underscoring the importance of the initiative.

“Right now a quality secondary education isn’t available for all Bostonians,” Walsh said in the video. “Many of our high schools need updating to provide the tools needed for success in college and careers.”

All meetings will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. The discussion Monday in Brighton will be hosted by the Presentation School Foundation. Other meetings will be held May 11 at Boston Public Schools’ new headquarters in Roxbury; May 20 at East Boston High School; and at the Boston Foundation on May 21.

City officials want to encourage participants to think beyond the four walls of a classroom.

“The city is the classroom,” Dorsey said, adding learning will be done at companies, in museums, and at universities developing skills. “In the high school of the future, students may only be spending 30 to 60 percent of their time in a traditional classroom.”

Andrew Ryan can be reached at andrew.ryan@globe.com Follow him on Twitter [@globeandrewryan](https://twitter.com/globeandrewryan).

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