The American High School Crisis and State Policy Solutions

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Dear Conference Participants,

We are delighted that you are able to take part in today's conference, The American High School Crisis and State Policy Solutions. The National Center on Education and the Economy and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices are pleased to bring together leading educators, policymakers, and scholars to explore ways to leverage high school reform on a large scale. With an increasing percentage of good jobs requiring advanced education, there is a pressing need for strategies to ensure that all high school students are prepared and motivated to continue their education after graduation.

We look forward to your contribution to what we expect to be an engaging day's discussion of a much-neglected topic in school reform.

Sincerely,

Marc S. Tucker
President,
National Center on
Education and the Economy

Dane Linn

Dane Linn
Director
Education Division
National Governors Association
Center for Best Practices

CONFERENCE PAPERS

INTRODUCTION

As part of today's event, we invited our panelists and other experts on secondary and post-secondary education to draft short essays that reflect on high school reform from a number of perspectives. We are pleased to present their insights on the following pages. The ideas and opinions in the essays represent the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the National Center on Education and the Economy or the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.

THE HIGH SCHOOLS' NEW MISSION

By Hilary Pennington

Income and education are more closely linked than ever before in the United States. A U.S. college graduate now earns nearly 70 percent more, on average, than a high school graduate, more than double the 27 percent wage gap of only a decade and a half ago. The new reality is that all students now need to continue their education beyond high school if they are to thrive in an economy that increasingly reserves well-paying jobs for the well-educated. Low-skill, high-wage jobs are a relic of the last century's industrial economy.

High school reformers, as a result, must focus not only on improving the performance of the nation's secondary schools, but also on getting more students to — and through — postsecondary programs. To do this, they must find ways to align the separate and often conflicting governance structures, performance expectations, and funding priorities of the secondary, postsecondary and "second-chance" education systems into a single, mutually reinforcing system that creates greater incentives and opportunities for more students to complete two- and four-year colleges, technical training, industry certification, and other postsecondary education that leads to high-wage jobs (and a more involved citizenry: college graduates vote in much higher proportions than do high school graduates).

The challenge is immense. For every 100 students who enter 9th grade, only 67 graduate from high school, 38 enter college, 26 are still enrolled in college after their sophomore year, and 18 graduate with either an associates degree or a baccalaureate within six years of graduating from high school. The numbers are even worse for low-income students and for African Americans and Hispanic Americans, the fastest growing proportion of the youth cohort.

Raising academic standards, instituting exit exams, breaking large schools into smaller units and/or creating new schools should increase the numbers of students who graduate from high school prepared for careers or college-level work. Expanding awareness of the importance of college among families that do not have a

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tradition of college-going and increasing financial aid for low-income students would also help. But these strategies alone will not improve the percentage of students completing postsecondary education. Only if we improve the pipeline linking our high school, postsecondary and second-change education systems can we be truly successful in that task.

Some high schools have moved larger proportions of traditionally underrepresented students into higher education by beginning to bridge the secondary/postsecondary chasm on their own. These schools, research by Jobs for the Future, Pathways to College and other organizations have found, treat student completion of postsecondary credentials as their highest priority and organize themselves accordingly. They align their expectations, curricula and assessments with those of postsecondary institutions. They place low-achieving students in advanced courses and give them the help they need to be successful (in sharp contrast to the traditional high school practice of watering down the curriculum for struggling students). And they set up data systems to track students longitudinally, gathering information on students' college enrollment and outcomes that they use to improve students' academic preparation in high schools and their postsecondary planning.

The schools also create academic and social support systems for students that includes reorganizing the school day into longer blocks of time for core courses, individualized coaching, and the creation of advisory systems to ensure that every student has an adult advocate in their school and often in their local communities.

Some schools have gone so far as to establish dual-enrollment programs with local community colleges that include the sharing of teaching staff. And a number of innovative school configurations have emerged from these new relationships. So-called early college high schools, middle college high schools and drop-out recovery programs at community colleges, each involving students in grades 11 through 14, permit students to take an accelerated route to postsecondary education. They create more flexible learning environments for struggling students by locating high schools on college campuses, introducing college-level curricula and expectations to high-school age students, encouraging the accelerated accumulation of college credits, and providing students with greater respect and independence than they generally encounter in high school.

States could help create a coherent K–16 strategy by taking six important steps.

- Set goals for increasing the numbers of students who finish high school and complete a recognized postsecondary credential by age 26.
- Establish rigorous statewide high school exit standards limited to the gateway skills of numeracy and literacy — standards calibrated to the requirements of credit-bearing postsecondary courses and to entry into high-skill occupations.
- Dramatically increase the supply of early college high schools and other secondary-school options that build bridges between high schools, colleges and our second-chance education system. This should include allowing postsecondary institutions to issue high school diplomas.
- Link students' movement up the educational ladder to their academic performance rather than how many courses they have taken and encourage the transferability of credits between institutions.
- Develop financial and other sorts of incentives reward both secondary and postsecondary institutions for students' successful progression to and through college.
- Hold postsecondary, as well as secondary, institutions accountable for how well they do at helping students complete a recognized postsecondary credential by age 26. This will require data systems that track students' progress longitudinally.

As difficult as these tasks would be to achieve, there are few things that states could do today that would pay them greater economic and civic dividends.

SCALING UP

REFORM IN SOUTH BOSTON

By Karen Daniels

Three years ago, I was ensconced in a comfortable teaching job at the prestigious Boston Latin School when Boston Superintendent of Schools Thomas Payzant asked me to be part of a three-person team that he was organizing to revitalize long-troubled South Boston High School. It did not take long for us to realize the magnitude of the challenge that Dr. Payzant had given us: The labyrinthine 201-year-old building was a kaleidoscope of broken furniture, shattered glass, rodents, and falling plaster. Fire alarms sounded several times a day. Attendance never reached 80 percent. There were no books. Teachers were in survival mode. Teaching and learning was not a priority. Yet the chaotic conditions that we inherited at South Boston High School exist in many urban high schools and high school reformers are not likely to make much progress unless they deal with them. The three of us had no choice but to do so and we learned a lot of lessons about urban high school reform along the way — lessons that might be helpful to others.

The first thing we had to do was to stop the madness. We changed the culture of the school so learning could take place. We got tough. Virtual lock down went into effect until we were able to remove overage students, drug pushers and disruptive students. We also started enforcing what we called the "non-negotiables," rules on everything from dress code to respect. If students showed with radios, walkmans, beepers, wireless telephones, or "headgear," they could be confiscated. Eating and drinking was confined to the cafeteria. Period. It has been amazing what the enforcement of 10 non-negotiable rules has done to improve the climate and culture of the school.

But we also moved quickly to create school pride and a sense of belonging among students — things that had been utterly lacking in the past. Our most important move was to break South Boston into three autonomous small high schools of about 400 students each, one school per floor. This helped to counter the anonymity that the school's vast scale had made almost inevitable. We worked to ensure that each new school had a distinct identity that students could connect to. The Odyssey School, on the third floor, focused on marine and environmental sciences. My school, Excel High, is

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located on the second floor and offers an enriched information-technology curriculum, offering students courses and certification in MOUS, CISCO and Webmaster. The Monument School is a public safety program, with specialized courses in social justice, law and emergency rescue that are taught as part of the school's partnerships with the Boston fire and police departments and other city public safety agencies.

We also worked hard to create a sense of community building-wide. We started a student government, created after-school clubs, rewarded improved attendance and academic excellence, and improved our contact with parents.

We also began to tap resources in the Boston area to help us address the many problems that our students, many of whom live in poverty, bring with them to school, including drug abuse and the troubling consequences of South Boston's high teen suicide rate. A partnership between our three schools-within-a-school and the agencies of Mass Mental Health, for example, has enabled us to bring counselors, therapists, and health providers into our schools, critical resources that we would never have been able to afford on our own. A partnership with the Downtown Waterfront Business Association has provided students with jobs and badly needed mentors and role models. Relationships that we have forged with Northeastern University, Harvard University, MIT, and Boston College have created learning opportunities for students and teachers alike.

We also launched what we call roundtable, a monthly meeting of police representatives, correctional officers, representatives of the Department of Youth Services and the District Attorney's office, our community field coordinators, guidance counselors and student support coordinators. This group has been invaluable in helping us create a safe school and in supporting students who are making the transition back to school from incarceration.

The distinctive curricula of Odyssey, Excel and Monument have helped draw students into academics, in part by making learning fun. Students at the Odyssey School, for example, work alongside scientists conducting experiments in the Neponset River Watershed. They also sail on an MIT research ship, studying marine life.

We have brought college teaching interns to help signal to students that academics matter. In addition to teaching classes, the interns do college and career counseling and expose students to the many colleges and universities that Boston has to offer.

We have also worked hard to rebuild the demoralized teaching staff that we inherited. We have given teachers lots of new teaching strategies such as Looking At

Student Work, Links, Creating Rubrics, Readers and Writers Workshops and Literacy Across The Curriculum. And all new Excel Excel High School teachers must attend the Teachers' Institutes, bi-weekly instructional/mentoring sessions, for up to three years. The message is clear: Improved instruction is the order of the day.

We have sought to promote collegiality and a sense of professionalism among our teachers by organizing them into small teams that monitor both the academic and social progress of about 100 students. The teams convene two or three times a week to talk about instruction, look at student work and test results, and do case management.

Another way we signal to teachers that their work is important is by sending them to observe teachers in other schools.

These strategies have paid valuable dividends. Average attendance has gone from 78 percent to 89 percent. The three schools that replaced South Boston High are focused on teaching and learning and student achievement is rising, as are the number of students going on to college. Fully 81 percent of the class of 2002 went on to two- or four-year colleges, while only 12 percent of our 10th graders have not passed the MCAS, our statewide proficiency test, compared to 25 percent of the 10th graders in Boston as a whole. Much has begun to turn around for students in what we now call the South Boston Educational Complex.

Superintendent Payzant's office has played a key role in South Boston's improvements: breaking the large, dysfunctional school into three smaller, more personalized educational communities; paying for renovations that breathed new life into a very old building; securing federal and foundation grants to pay for the development of the schools' specialized curricula, tutorial programs, and technology; and providing each of our schools with an assistant headmaster who frees us to focus on instruction.

But there is more that central offices could and should do to help in the reform of troubled urban high schools like South Boston. We must streamline the process for removing under-performing teachers and dissolve the seniority-based system of teacher staffing that makes it harder for schools to hire qualified teachers who are dedicated to reform. Closing troubled schools like South Boston, moving out existing staff and starting new schools with the autonomy to select their teachers would help.

School systems and states should revise standardized testing schedules to ensure that schools are able to use test results to respond to students' needs effectively; too often test scores arrive too late in the school year for schools to use them to target extra help for students.

And the Boston school system needs to educate its central office staff about the reforms that are going on in the city’s schools. We have to deal with an immense amount of red tape because Boston’s bureaucrats refuse to believe that there could be three headmasters under one roof. “Let me speak to the real headmaster,“ is a common demand. This lack of understanding of the new organization at South Boston makes our struggles to replace needlessly expansive curricula and arcane special-needs staffing models, among many other challenges, that much tougher. Reforms like those that have taken place at South Boston High are hard won. In urban school systems, officials should take every step possible to improve the odds of success.

A MARKETPLACE STRATEGY — WITH STANDARDS ADDED

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Historically, the reform of American high schools has followed two paths. One involves the creation of unique schools, ranging from the private academies of New England to "mom and pop" charter schools to the painstakingly crafted and sometimes boutique-like institutions associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. The other involves sweeping policy-level changes in masses of institutions, such as those wrought by James Bryant Conant's push for "comprehensive" high schools and by the consolidation of small rural schools into immense "regional" institutions.

The first approach sometimes produces great schools — and sometimes really flaky ones — but they are like wildflowers, springing up almost at random and largely immune to being cultivated, replicated or even expanded.

The second strategy stresses uniformity and scale but (we now know) is at least as apt to produce mediocre (or dreadful) schools as great ones and, in the end, has little to do with teaching, learning or standards: as if those wielding the cookie cutter do not care how the cookies taste so long as they all look alike.

Today, the United States finds itself massively discontented with the quality and effectiveness of its high schools — the stepchildren of K–12 reform to date — and in hot pursuit of any number of approaches to setting them right, reinventing them, breaking them up, starting new ones, etc. It is a lively time of ferment and innovation.

What guidelines should this lively but messy reform process follow? What policies are most apt to cause it to succeed? Below are ten suggestions that draw on the strengths of both reform traditions, and — I hope — avoid their flaws:

1. Welcome the diversity and the experimentation, mindful that it is far too early in this process to declare any model or strategy superior to the others, much less foolproof. So we should commit ourselves to trying lots of approaches and models — and evaluating the heck out of them all.

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2. Unlike the “wildflower“ scenario, however, these innovations should all take place within a framework of standards-based reform, in particular academic standards that spell out (probably at the state level) the skills and knowledge that all high-school graduates need to possess in core subjects. Such standards should be set in conjunction with the real-world expectations of higher education and employers, not just by K–12 educators sucking their thumbs.
3. The statewide standards need to be accompanied by suitable assessments and accountability requirements so that they gain real traction and the state does not find itself continuing to hand diplomas to people who do not deserve them. One approach would be uniform statewide tests in a few core areas accompanied by optional statewide “end of course“ exams in other subjects.
4. We should expect and encourage diverse modes of delivering high-school instruction: traditional brick-and-mortar schools, “virtual“ instruction, workplace-centered instruction, “early college“, etc.
5. We should also expect and foster diversity among high school operators: traditional public “systems“ and private schools, charter schools, non-profit and for-profit EMOs, colleges, curriculum providers, etc.
6. Ample public reporting on school models, curricula and performance will maximize everyone’s ability to know what is going on where, learn from what others are doing, and avoid needless duplication and reinvention. Transparency must be the watchword.
7. The basic policy arrangements should attach public dollars to the student and let him/her take those dollars to the school or education provider of his/her choice. The high-school marketplace should become more like the college marketplace, the big difference being that all high school providers (and students) operate within a framework of standards, tests and accountability.
8. As is manifestly happening at the postsecondary level, high school students will mix and match education offerings from more than one school or other providers, coming up with all manner of hybrids. (For example, a student who studies part-time at home, perhaps with the help of a “virtual“ provider, but takes some courses and extracurriculars in a brick-and-mortar school.)

9. High school is the right place to start decoupling the requirements for teaching and leading schools from traditional teacher (and administrator) preparation and certification practices. This is where it makes the most self-evident sense to ensure that every teacher be a master of his/her subject and to allow non-educators who are proven executives to take the school helm. This means permitting entry from many directions — and compensating people accordingly.
10. Public and philanthropic dollars can most usefully be used as venture capital to encourage the development and piloting of new school forms; to revisit and strengthen the statewide academic standards and tests that bear on high school (and to engage higher ed and employers in the process); to devise the mechanisms by which transparency will be possible; and pay for the requisite evaluations of different approaches to high schooling.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

By Thomas Toch

In building a new secondary school system we must address an important but often neglected problem: the large proportion of apathetic and often alienated students and teachers in our high schools. Too many of our high schools are large, impersonal places where anonymity begets indifference, where students are unmotivated to learn and teachers are unmotivated to teach. It is a problem that takes a huge toll on public high schools' productivity and threatens today's goal of all students achieving high academic standards.

What we need are high school settings with a strong sense of community, where students and teachers care because they feel connected. Where they work hard because they feel they are valued members of an important enterprise.

To create these conditions on a large scale in American secondary education we need to do a number of things. The first is create smaller schools, either as free-standing institutions or as a group of autonomous programs under a single roof. Their maximum size should be about 400 students (over 60 percent of the nation's secondary students attend high schools of 1,600 or more). Schools of this size are far more likely to engender strong bonds between students and teachers and generate a level of genuine caring and mutual obligation between them than are large, comprehensive high schools.

Part of the solution here, particularly in center cities, is to locate small schools of several hundred students in office buildings and other spaces that are more readily available than new school buildings and less expensive to procure. A network of such schools could share centrally located sports, music, and music facilities.

Ensuring that these new-style schools have distinctive and circumscribed educational programs is critical. School systems have to resist the temptation to try to deliver every type of educational service in a single school. If they do not, their chances of establishing a strong sense of community are much diminished. Instead, they should respond to students' diverse needs and interests through a wide range of independent programs. If towns want to create big marching bands and powerhouse sports teams, let them do so

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Thomas Toch is the director of the NCEE Policy Forums program. This essay is adapted from his book High Schools on a Human Scale *(Beacon Press, 2003).*

with students from several small, independently run schools. The point is that there are ways around the collective and idealized remembrances of high school "as we knew it."

It is far easier to maintain a school's distinctiveness and sense of community when its students and teachers are permitted to select their schools. There is less pressure to expand a school's mission when its key constituents have chosen to be part of the school community. They tend to be loyal to the school rather than want to change it. And as the educator Deborah Meier has written, "Good schools thrive on the eager and passionate loyalty of its members."

Another critical ingredient of coherent, tightly knit schools is autonomy — the freedom to hire and fire staff, shape budgets, and set instructional strategies. Building a distinctive educational vision is far easier when a school is able to hire teachers who share the vision and when it is able to deploy its resources and tailor its teaching to support its distinctive strategies. When schools are put in charge of their own fate, the educators in them are more than willing to work hard and be held accountable for their performance.

Many state and federal regulations undercut schools' autonomy. In some instances, state and federal programs operate in high schools independently from the schools' principals, who have no role in the programs' staffing or budgeting. Similarly, rigid, externally imposed funding formulas make it difficult for schools to forge unique identities.

Teacher-union contracts contribute to the problem. Seniority-based hiring systems, which give teachers with the most years of service the first shot at job openings regardless of whether they are the strongest candidates or embrace a school's educational philosophy, undercut the sense of community and the level of loyalty in many high schools. The new American high school requires enlightened union leadership.

In effect, we need comprehensive school systems, not comprehensive schools. We need many different types of high schools, each distinctive and with a strong sense of community. And school systems need to permit students and teachers to select from among them.

But creating such a system of schools is not enough. Schools, ultimately, have to educate students and educate them well. In the words of Michelle Fine, a New York University professor and an advocate of small high schools, "Small…will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately, but hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together, or we run the risk of creating small, nurturing environments that aren't schools." Keeping kids connected to schools and schooling is critical, but it is merely a means to a larger end — high standards of student achievement. Ultimately, the first priority of every high school must be to stretch students academically to prepare them for the intellectual rigors of post-secondary education.

That is a daunting challenge for schools that serve large percentages of disadvantaged students. But, there are many examples nationwide of redesigned high schools that have produced impressive academic results with students who have performed poorly in traditional comprehensive high schools. Studies also have found that student and teacher attendance and high school graduation rates are higher in coherent, close-knit school communities.

That is not to say that small, personalized schools are only suited for struggling students. Today's comprehensive high schools educate perhaps a third of their students well. That leaves millions of students in urban, suburban and rural schools alike that would benefit for very different school settings.

Additionally, the cost of creating and sustaining such settings is not great. Opening a new building with several small, autonomous schools under a single roof is typically no more expensive that constructing a new large, comprehensive high school, while dividing a large existing school into several smaller schools costs perhaps $250,000 in renovations and staff planning time. And while the advocates of large high schools claim that they are more efficient, recent research suggests that small schools with under 400 students are only about 5 percent more expensive to operate than those with over 2,000 students. Moreover, researchers have found that on a cost-per-graduate basis, the smaller schools cost slightly less to run than large ones, because a higher percentage of students drop out of big schools.

Yet recasting the nation's traditional comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personalized educational settings is not an easy task. It requires policymakers to think flexibly about longstanding community institutions such as interscholastic sport; it requires more school autonomy and, ideally, more public school choice. But the performance of the small, but growing number of secondary schools with those qualities suggests that replacing the comprehensive high school with a new model is a task well worth undertaking.