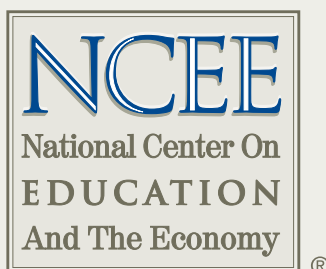


The American High School Crisis and State Policy Solutions

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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
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

Hilary Pennington is Chief Executive Office and Vice-Chairman of Jobs for the Future.

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.

STATE SOLUTIONS

A THREE-PART STRATEGY FOR GOVERNORS

By Kristin D. Conklin

State economies will need many more college-educated workers in the years ahead than their colleges and universities are likely to produce. One respected analyst, Anthony Carnevale of the Educational Testing Service, estimates a training gap of 12 million students by 2020. As a result, state economies can no longer afford the high dropout rates that plague many schools, the number of high school graduates unequipped to succeed in college or to be productive in high-wage jobs, or the many young people who enter college only to fail in earning a degree.

To reverse these trends, state policies must promote dramatic gains in high school completion and in post-secondary success for students from all backgrounds, particularly those who have been least successful in the past. While the federal No Child Left Behind Act focuses tremendous attention on the performance of our nation's elementary and middle schools, we must also direct more attention to the complexities of high school reform and the needs of older adolescents. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices encourages governors to pursue a three-part strategy to increase the percentage of students flowing through the K-16 pipeline and into high-skill, high-wage jobs.

- Set clear goals and collect accurate information to measure achievement.
- Align the governance and finances of secondary and post-secondary systems.
- Target the lowest-performing high schools for major reform.

Expect it and measure it

States should consider following the governors of Kentucky and Texas in championing the importance of readying larger numbers of students for success in postsecondary education. They have made educational reform a part of their vision for state prosperity, set ambitious targets for increasing the percentage of students entering and graduating from college, and publicized college-completion rates by region and racial and

*Kristin D. Conklin is a senior policy analyst in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. This essay is adapted from *Toward Postsecondary Success for All: Remaking Secondary Education for the Knowledge Age*, to be published by the National Governors Association in October 2003.*

socioeconomic subgroups so that the needs of a group of students are not obscured by statistical averages.

To provide accurate measures of progress toward their statewide college-going and degree-earning targets, states should invest in longitudinal databases that track individual student performance from elementary school through college. These data could be used in many different ways to strengthen a state's secondary and postsecondary education systems. High schools, for instance, could use the data to recalibrate their course offerings and to ensure that their teacher training targets gaps in student competencies.

Align, align, align

As part of the process of convincing both educators and the public at large of the importance of readying all high school students for demanding postsecondary education, governors would do well to better align the governance and finances of their secondary and postsecondary systems.

Many policy analysts agree that the signals students receive about successful college preparation need to be better aligned; often, for example, state high school graduation requirements are very different from the admissions standards of state college and universities. States would improve the alignment of the secondary and postsecondary systems if they established statewide college preparatory curricula and tests of core mathematical, reading and writing skills and then used the curricula and tests as high school graduation requirements and for college admissions and placement. Another strategy would be to require students to meet these common standards in order to qualify for funded financial aid.

But these sound strategies have not yet been widely implemented because insufficient attention has been paid to underlying governance and finance issues. In the absence of the sorts of common goals, supports, and incentives that aligned governance and budgeting engender, progress has been incremental and episodic.

Two states have developed promising models to address this lack of alignment in decisionmaking between secondary and postsecondary education. Indiana's Education Roundtable is a legislatively mandated entity that brings together college administrators, state policymakers, high school officials, employers, and other stakeholders in the K–16 education pipeline. The states' governor and superintendent of public instruction co-chair the regular meetings, which recommend policies on standards, assessments, and

curriculum requirements. The roundtable, however, does not advise the governor and legislature on issues of resource use.

Whereas Indiana takes a collaborative approach to decisionmaking, Florida has created a K–20 Board of Education with overarching authority for secondary and postsecondary governance and finance. The Board aligns the different levels’ policies and goals, budgets, long- and short-term planning, accountability standards, technical assistance, and accountability enforcement.

Target lowest-performing high schools for major reform

Many dropouts are concentrated in chronically low-performing high schools, so turning these troubled schools around should be an immediate priority.

States should integrate strategies that:

- Establish high standards in core subjects
- Test and publish students’ performance against the standards
- Create smaller high schools with more narrowly focused curricula
- Provide struggling students with tutoring and other targeted assistance
- Give schools flexibility to hire staff that are suited to the schools’ academic focus
- Create a diverse supply of high-quality high schools and permit students and families to select from among them

Texas has just adopted comprehensive high school improvement legislation that embodies these objectives, and North Carolina has launched a system of high school choice.

With these three strategies, governors can help transform the United States’ fragmented and under-performing systems of secondary, postsecondary, and second-chance education into a coherent, high-performing network of pathways to advanced education and training for all the nation’s students.

SENDING A SINGLE MESSAGE

By Stanley Jones

Indiana, like many industrial states, never sent a very large percentage of its students to college. They did not need more than a high school education because high-wage, low-skill jobs were plentiful. As recently as 1986, just 38 percent of Indiana students continued their education directly after earning a high school diploma. Only 10 states had a worse record.

Today, 60 percent of Indiana's students go to college, the 17th highest percentage among the 50 states. Critical to this transformation has been Indiana's work in recent years to align the academic standards and expectations of its secondary and postsecondary systems much more closely than in the past. Doing so has sent a strong message to the state's high school students (and high schools) about the importance of demanding academic courses.

The Indiana legislature has played an important role in promoting this new collaboration between the state's secondary and post-secondary education systems. Two years ago it created the Indiana Education Roundtable, an organization that brings together leaders from the state's elementary, secondary and postsecondary education systems, businesses, and other stakeholders in the Indiana education "pipeline." Indiana's governor and superintendent of public instruction convene regular meetings of the panel, which advises the governor and the state's top educator on Indiana's curriculum, standards and assessments at every level.

The roundtable's new P-16 Plan for Education identifies a number of areas, from education finance to teacher training, where greater alignment across the state's entire education system, from pre-kindergarten to higher education, can produce higher standards and increased student achievement. A cornerstone of the panel's plan is a proposal to teach the state's rigorous "Core 40" high school curriculum to all students.

The state introduced the demanding core curriculum a decade ago and today about 60 percent of the state's students earn a Core 40 diploma or an honors equivalent. We have found that students taking the Core 40 curriculum enter and graduate from college at significantly higher rates than students without that preparation. We have also found

Stanley Jones is the commissioner of the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

that rigorous course-taking in high school can overcome a variety of socio-economic disadvantages, including poverty and low levels of parental education.

To ensure that the state's higher education system supports this rigorous curriculum, Indiana is participating in The American Diploma Project, an initiative sponsored by several national education organizations that aligns high school graduate requirements in reading, writing and mathematics with the admissions standards of the state's colleges and the skills employers expect of new hires.

Under the ADP we are aligning Indiana's new high school End-of-Course Assessments with the exams the state's public colleges and universities use to place new students in courses that have the appropriate level of difficulty for them. Students in several years will be required to take and pass a set number of high school End-of-Course Assessments as a standard requirement for high school graduation.

The new end-of-course system will improve the quality and consistency of the state high school courses, and it will help align high school course work with Indiana's Academic Standards. It will also compliment other steps that Indiana has taken to signal the importance of rigorous course work: The state has raised its high school standards, implemented a rigorous system to measure student performance against the standards; and adopted a new system for holding schools accountable for continuous improvement.

Linking Indiana's standards, Core 40 curriculum, end-of-course exams, and college course placements in this way should create a powerful incentive for all Indiana students and schools to achieve at high levels.

MAINE'S ROADMAP FOR REFORM

By Duke Albanese

Six years ago Maine launched an overhaul of its 157 high schools to increase significantly the percentage of Maine students entering and completing college, a strategy to bring greater economic prosperity to Maine and its citizens. The results have been encouraging. Our secondary schools have become increasingly focused on teaching a rigorous curriculum to all students. Enrollments in Advanced Placement and other advanced courses have risen, as have graduation rates and the percentage of students going on to post-secondary education. The lessons that we have learned in the course of our work may be helpful to other states as they embark on high school reform.

Build Consensus

To win the widespread backing we would need for a statewide initiative, our first step back in 1997 was to have the Maine Department of Education convene a commission of state and national high school experts to articulate a reform vision for the state's secondary education system. The state told the commission that its reform recommendations had to focus on helping students meet Maine's new statewide achievement standards. Another premise of the commission's work was that the majority of the state's students could learn to high levels—a notion not widely shared in public education in the past. The commission's mantra became, "Maine people will be among the best educated in the world."

The commission held hearings throughout the state, including three "student summits" that attracted nearly 800 high school students. They told the commission that they wanted more hands-on learning that was relevant to the real world and that they wanted to be pushed harder in the classroom. Standards were too low, they testified, especially in high schools' lower tracks, which, the students said repeatedly, were "a joke."

Naming a prominent professor at the University of Maine and one of the state's celebrated high school principals as commission co-chairpersons signaled that colleges and other "outside" stakeholders had important roles to play in the high school reform

J. Duke Albanese is a policy advisor for the Great Maine Schools Project at the Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute. He was Maine's commissioner of education from 1996 to 2003.

process. The commission heard testimony from them, as well as from principals, teachers and others within the high school system.

Push the Product

After two years of work, the commission issued a tough report that detailed the failings of Maine's high schools and outlined a blueprint for reform. Every student, the report argued, should study a rigorous curriculum and schools should include essays and other "exhibitions" to measure student performance rather than rely heavily on standardized, multiple-choice tests. (In 2002 the Maine legislature codified this recommendation in state law, requiring students to complete "performance" tasks such as write effectively in addition to passing an 11th-grade standardized test to demonstrate mastery of Maine's statewide Learning Standards.) Schools should develop personalized educational plans for students early in their high school careers so they take the courses they need to be ready for college.

The report relegating to an educational "junkyard" such long-standing high school traditions as grades-only transcripts that gives parents and colleges scant information about students' achievement and traditional 45-minute periods. The commission also recommended for the junkyard high schools' long-standing use of curriculum "tracks" that deny many students access to rigorous courses.

The Maine Department of Education sold *Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine's Secondary Students* aggressively. It sponsored a launch event that attracted nearly 700 educators statewide and distributed the report in every school system and high school in the state, steps that got the attention of the public and the state's press as well as educators.

Build Capacity

The state department of education then moved quickly to support local high schools' efforts to implement the *Promising Futures* agenda. It earmarked federal "comprehensive school reform" funds for the work (later supplemented by major foundation grants) and also created a Center for Inquiry on Secondary Education in the state department of education to give the department the capacity to carry out a statewide reform strategy.

The center serves as a repository for research, sponsors workshops and other training for local educators and nurtures as network of committed secondary educators and policymakers. The center has also sponsored residential summer institutes for five years,

helping school teams of teachers and principals develop their local game plans for implementing high school reform based on Promising Futures. Well over a hundred high schools have participated in these institutes and other statewide forums.

Maine's experience suggests the importance of articulating a convincing vision of reform, cultivating local ownership of the vision, and then giving schools the financial and intellectual resources they need to accomplish the hard work of implementing reform.

FIVE LESSONS FOR STATE LEADERS

By Patricia W. McNeil

State policymakers are critical players in high school reform because they regulate so many important aspects of the nation's secondary school system. States set graduation requirements, license teachers, select standardized tests, dictate the age when students can legally leave school and, of course, pay about half the cost of running the nation's high schools. Some states have even linked the right to drive to a student's high school performance. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* will only increase the states' sway over their secondary schools.

Four states — California, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont — have been working to harness their regulatory powers to the task of readying a wider range of high school students for the rigors of post-secondary education. There are some valuable lessons to be learned from their labors.

First, it is important to have a vision for reform. In a sentiment attributed to Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there!" California, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont have chartered commissions to examine the current state of their high schools, build a case for reform, involve stakeholders, and articulate a set of principles and practices that define a new vision for high school. This approach does not impose a one-size-fits-all reform model on local educators; instead, it provides a blueprint for reform while acknowledging the importance of local involvement and flexibility in meeting the needs of today's high school students. Among the key principles of reform to emerge from the states' commissions: setting high expectations for all students, creating smaller and more personal learning environments, focusing on ways to design instruction to meet the learning needs of individual students, and preparing students for further learning after high school.

Second, there is a tremendous need for technical assistance that helps high schools build the capacity that they need to undertake change. This support needs to be well

Patricia W. McNeil is president of High School Solutions. She launched the federal New American High School Initiative as an assistant U.S. secretary of education in the Clinton administration. This essay is adapted from Rethinking High School, available from the Aspen Institute.

McNeil can be reached at p_mcneil@att.net

funded, focused, customized, delivered on-site, and seen as credible by those it is supposed to help.

State education departments and their counterparts at the school district level traditionally administer programs and initiatives and monitor compliance, while high school principals have been trained and expected to focus on building management, discipline, budgeting, personnel, scheduling, and handle the crisis du jour. But the skills that are needed to support school transformation include the ability to create a vision, set goals, lead and manage change, build a team to plan and implement change, use data to inform decision-making, and align policies and practices to support change. By creating an organizational focal point, such as Maine's Center for Inquiry into Secondary Education, to lead reform, provide technical assistance, and mobilize networks of reform-minded schools, states can develop the leadership skills of their own staff and those of local educators.

Improving teaching and learning needs to be an equally important objective of technical assistance. In the short term, this means focusing on what happens in the classroom. But it also means thinking creatively about how to use the community outside the classroom to support learning and how to change teacher preparation and certification programs. Too many reform initiatives get hung up in haggling over governance, scheduling and the like; they fail to pay attention to the kind of learning that is or is not taking place in the classroom. Structure and instruction should compliment one another, but changing the structure while ignoring instruction is a recipe for failure.

Third, reform costs money. States can provide additional resources by redirecting federal funds, seeking foundation support and marshalling state resources. Maine, for example, used all of its federal Comprehensive School Reform monies to support its high school reform efforts, aligned the grant requirements to the recommendations of its high school task force and recently landed a \$10 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Federal Smaller Learning Communities grants and professional development monies can provide additional support.

Fourth, state policies, regulations and financing need to be reviewed, updated or abandoned to support the new vision for high schools. State standards and college admissions policies, for instance, are often based on the traditional Carnegie unit system that measures the number of courses students have taken rather than their performance in the courses that they take. There is an emerging consensus today, in contrast, that the high school graduation and college-admissions systems should be based on student

mastery of skills and knowledge. Similarly, school construction policies may encourage the building of big schools rather than small ones, though research has shown that small high schools outperform large ones on many measures.

Finally, states need to be willing to “stay the course.” Policymakers need to be realistic about the time it takes to get results. Pulling reforms up by the roots or replacing them wholesale with a new set of policies is a lose-lose approach. Policymakers need to have good indicators of both short and long term expectations for improvement, but it is unlikely that they are going to see big, sustained increases in standardized test scores in the early stages of reform. Attendance and behavior usually improve in the first couple of years, while significant improvements in test scores may take five years or more to materialize. Reforms take place in classrooms, schools and districts; state policies, standards and technical assistance support need time to take hold.

Most states in recent years have targeted K–8 education with the hope that if we get those years right, the problems in our high schools will take care of themselves. The experiences of California, Rhode Island, Maine, and Vermont suggest that hoping that success will trickle up to high schools or that some tinkering around the edges will suffice is wishful thinking.¹

¹ Valuable studies on the states' experience include *We're from the State and We're Here to Help*, by Edmund Hamann and Bret Lane of the Education Alliance at Brown University, and *Lessons About Comprehensive School Reform: California's School Restructuring Demonstration Program*, by Judith Warren Little and Rena Dorph, published by University of California, Berkeley.

