

High School Redesign

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An Idea Whose Time Has Come**
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Redesigning High School: Whole Systems That Work for All Students

Robert Rothman

High schools are now the hot topic in education reform. The nation's governors and business leaders held a well-publicized "summit" on high schools in February. President Bush has declared high schools his top education priority. And dozens of school districts, fueled by foundation funds, have been hard at work creating new high schools and breaking up existing ones.

The reasons for the new attention on high schools are not hard to find. Data from national and international assessments continue to show that the academic achievement of American high school students lags behind that of students from other countries and that large numbers of high school graduates are ill prepared for college or work. Graduation rates are alarmingly low in many cities. And reports from students make it clear that many large high schools are soulless places that fail to engage young people in academic study or the school community. Clearly, for too many young people, high schools are not working.

What should replace them? The answer is not as simple as the rhetoric might suggest. Redesigning high schools so that they work effectively for all students takes more than changing a few schools, as difficult as that might be. It requires developing a system that ensures that *every* young person has an opportunity to pursue an engaging learning experience. Creating such a system requires careful planning by district leaders to ensure that a supply of schools matches student needs. It takes a policy environment that supports diverse learning environments. It takes a deliberate effort to build communities within schools that support students. It takes a different approach to instruction that

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recognizes the learning challenges many young adolescents face and what it will take to accelerate their achievement. And, above all, it takes efforts to engage students to understand their needs and help them develop solutions.

None of these tasks are easy. And they are particularly challenging in a political environment that makes any kind of change in high schools difficult. While reformers may agree that high schools are not working, many parents and community members – particularly those who were successful in high school – do not share that view. They may be reluctant to give up features of large schools that they recall with fondness.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* looks at the many facets of high school redesign and considers what it will take to bring about whole systems of schools that work for all young people.

Constancia Warren and Mindy Hernandez lay out a vision of “portfolios” of schools that provide diverse learning environments to match student needs, while maintaining standards of excellence for all.

Francine Joselowsky makes the case for including youth voices in high school redesign and provides examples of successful efforts to engage youths in reform.

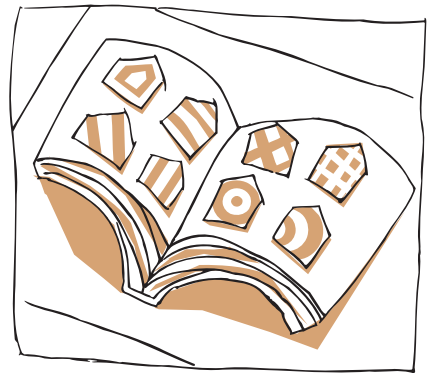
Rosanna Castro offers her own experience as evidence of the way high schools can be alienating to youths of color.

John DeVore describes efforts by the San Diego City Schools to tackle instructional improvement in high schools.

Alethea Frazier Raynor considers ways to build true small learning “communities” in redesigned high schools.

S. Paul Reville outlines a design for an accountability system that supports redesigned high schools.

While the authors’ perspectives are different, they are all grounded in reality. All of the authors are involved in some way with Schools for a New Society, an initiative of Carnegie Corporation of New York aimed at redesigning high schools in seven cities. The



Annenberg Institute for School Reform is part of the technical assistance team for the initiative.

The SNS work demonstrates the challenging nature of high school redesign as well as its enormous potential for helping to improve opportunities for millions of young people. The work also shows that high school redesign is not an event; rather, it is a continual process. Constancia Warren and Mindy Hernandez note that staying true to the values underlying the redesign will offer the best hope of reaping the rewards and minimizing the risks. Measuring results against those values will help ensure that high school redesign is not just another reform fad, but a lasting monument to improved education.

Portfolios of Schools: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Constancia Warren
and Mindy Hernandez

To meet the goal of ensuring success for all students in their school systems, cities are developing portfolios of varied, high-quality schools based on values of excellence, equity, diversity, and choice.

In 2001, as part of the Schools for a New Society initiative, Carnegie Corporation helped launch a nationwide high school reform movement by supporting the efforts of seven cities¹ to transform the way their districts and communities organized and supported high schools. At the same time, New York City, with support from Carnegie Corporation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, launched the New Century High Schools initiative to transform the city's lowest-performing high schools into successful smaller schools. The core challenge in both initiatives is to create entire *systems* of excellent high schools.

Four years later, a powerful pattern is emerging in New York City, the seven Schools for a New Society cities, and other cities around the country that are experimenting with high school and district reform. In different ways, each city is creating an exciting variety of high schools, most of them small learning environments, and many involving external community partners. Cities are developing new small schools, dividing

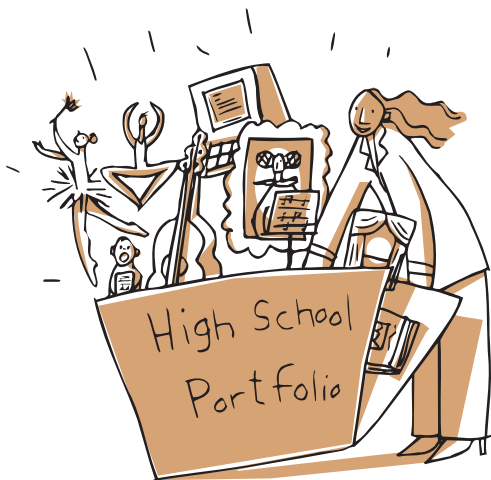
existing large high schools into small learning communities and small high schools, granting charters for new schools, and writing contracts with community-based organizations that operate educational programs where youth can complete high school. In this article, we attempt to position the ambitious and promising work we see in each of these cities within a strong conceptual framework.

The term being used to describe this diversification of organizational format, educational approach, and governance is *portfolio of schools*. In one sense, this term evokes the financial market, with the portfolio seen as a way of organizing the investment of public funds in the education of our children. But it is also a concept drawn from the arts, where the portfolio is an array of work that demonstrates, in different ways, the capacity of the creator – in this case, the school district and the community. A portfolio of schools is much more than a mix of schools among which students choose. It is a strategy for creating an entire system of excellent high schools that uses managed universal choice as a central lever in a district change process.

Transforming high schools is urgently needed if we are to ensure that

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¹ The Schools for a New Society cities are Boston, Worcester (MA), Providence (RI), Hamilton County/Chattanooga (TN), Houston, San Diego, and Sacramento.



today's young people become capable and confident young adults who are able to participate effectively in postsecondary education and training, secure economically stable and personally rewarding employment, and engage actively as democratic citizens. Creating systems of high-quality high schools that ensure this kind of success for *all* students is complex and daunting. But it is also necessary and possible if we acknowledge and confront in a systemic way the structural inequalities that lie at the center of our failing high schools. Replacing the traditional residentially zoned high school with a managed portfolio of excellent schools is a promising way to challenge the not-so-soft bigotry of the "opportunity gap" that feeds and fuels the stubborn gaps in achievement.

History and Emerging Practice

Small high schools already have a long history. And we all know some *individual* high schools – large and small – that are successful in preparing *most* of their students for success. To be sure, most school districts have several types of high

schools, including magnet schools and alternatives for students at risk of dropping out. But if we are serious in our desire for a just and equitable society, the real question is: How do we create, in each of our communities, entire systems of individually excellent high schools that prepare *all* students for postsecondary education and training, employment, and citizenship and where excellence is the product of everyday practice?

In Carnegie Corporation's vision, all high schools in a portfolio share two essential characteristics. First, all the schools have a clear focus that serves to galvanize teachers' and students' work. One school might have an applied concentration, like health sciences, while another might offer a specific approach to learning, such as experiential education. Second, all schools in the portfolio are driven by the same high expectations for students' learning and provide both a rigorous, standards-based college-preparatory curriculum and the academic and social supports students need to meet these high expectations. The portfolio provides multiple pathways to success, organized around a common core set of standards and instructional practices.

While *choice* is a central mechanism, the portfolio approach is not an unregulated free market. Students can choose from among a range of high schools based on their own interests, needs, and ambitions. Individual schools may be operated by a variety of providers – the district itself will operate most of the schools – but careful accountability and some degree of managed choice are critical elements of the model. To be effective, the portfolio of schools must *not* be allowed to become a new form of tracking that narrows rather than expands the opportunities available for students. A continual review of student and teacher assignment and student-

performance data is an essential component of maintaining a balanced and effective portfolio.

Finally, while the school district will still play a leadership role, the portfolio approach depends on building a powerful partnership between the school system and the community in which it operates, both to bring to bear the variety of resources that is needed for the education of young people and to make sure that all segments of the community are treated equitably. Districts operating portfolios of schools must work to overcome the pressure to give preferential treatment to one segment over another.

Core Values and Operational Commitments

Four values are central to our vision of a portfolio of schools: excellence, equity, diversity, and choice.

For the portfolio approach to deliver the high schools we need, *excellence* must be a core value. Whatever their focus or format, every school within the portfolio must be designed to help students meet rigorous academic standards and to prepare students for postsecondary education and/or professional training.

But we also know that the portfolio of schools cannot provide excellent choices for all students without explicitly addressing *equity*. The difficulties we now face in urban school systems reflect deeply embedded systemic inequities in the distribution of resources, teachers, students, and attention across the district. These inequities mirror the differential distribution of power and resources in the larger society and undermine students' access to excellent education. Breaking up the system through the portfolio's use of universal choice will disrupt some patterns of inequality. But because these inequities have a way of reappearing in new forms, portfolios of schools

must be designed to include not only strategies to reduce their impact, but also monitoring and feedback strategies that keep these inequities from emerging in different ways.

At its core, the portfolio of schools embraces the *diversity* of individual aspirations and opportunities, learning styles, and cultural identities. Based on the findings from cognitive psychology that individuals have varied learning styles (see, for example, Gardner 1993; Kolb 1984; Messick 1976), as well as different interests, needs, and aspirations, we know that different schools are needed to provide a range of learning settings for students. This also is true for teachers. The portfolio capitalizes on the diversity of teachers' interests and talents and thereby increases the probability that teachers will feel more engaged by and committed to their work than in the traditional comprehensive high school model.

Choice has both intrinsic and instrumental value within a portfolio of schools. Choosing schools that respond to their individual and community interests and aspirations increases the likelihood

How do we create entire systems of individually excellent high schools where excellence is the product of everyday practice?

To be effective, the portfolio needs to tap the creativity of teachers, students, and community members in everything from designing courses to designing schools in order to reduce the number of schools where too few children succeed.

that students will feel engaged by their school work, see its relevance to their future, be more committed to participating in the school as a community, and strive to achieve academically. A choice-based system also responds to adolescents' developmental need to explore different aspects of their emerging identity by choosing different kinds of schools and experiencing the consequences of their choices. Young people should help adults determine the range of choices by working jointly to decide what kinds of schools should be included in the portfolio and the kind of supports students and their communities might need to make those decisions.

At the same time, as parents and students choose which schools to attend, schools that are not serving students well will feel the pressure to improve or will be closed. To be effective, the portfolio needs to tap the creativity of teachers, students, and community members in everything from designing courses to designing schools in order to reduce the number of schools where too few children succeed.

These core values shape the operational commitments for implementing the portfolio. These commitments by districts and communities anchor the portfolio in city policy and community expectations. A portfolio cannot succeed without an ongoing substantial partner-

ship in these areas. The cities involved in the Schools for a New Society and New Century High Schools initiatives, along with others, are beginning to put the following commitments into place.

- The school district commits to playing the central role in creating, managing, and sustaining a system of individually excellent public high schools and guaranteeing all students access to these schools. In Sacramento, the district leadership divided large high schools into small learning communities, started four new small schools as independent charters, and granted an independent charter to a community-based organization to divide a large high school into six small schools.
- The district, through its portfolio, commits to promoting diversity – of students and programs – both within and between schools. Each school includes a mix of students, providing all with both academically challenging work and the supports needed to succeed. At the same time, the different schools in the portfolio include multiple options that address the full range of students' learning styles, interests, needs, and aspirations. Providence has matched its school options to students' diverse interests and academic needs by creating small schools, including a newcomer

academy, an ungraded school where students progress through demonstrated mastery, a school focused on international studies, and another focused on health sciences and technology. In addition, Providence is working to divide its large high schools into small learning communities organized around curricular themes.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to serving a diverse constituency of students, from those who are able to accelerate learning to those who are disconnected from school. Boston is considering a flexible promotion policy that would allow students to progress through high school as they complete course requirements, rather than moving from grade to grade. It also has created a small school for older adolescents who have not yet completed a high school diploma.
- The district, through its portfolio, commits to applying universal standards of excellence across schools and to providing supports that enable teachers and students to reach those standards. Chattanooga is creating a “single path” to graduation; the school board adopted a policy eliminating a two-track diploma and supporting schools to implement the change by expanding the use of literacy coaches to increase reading skills for all students.
- The district, through its portfolio, commits to providing and operationalizing equitable choice. Districts manage student choices by developing a sufficient supply of excellent options so that all students can find a place in at least one of their top choices. Districts also need to take action to close schools that do not serve students well and work closely with community organizations and



institutions to help guide students' and families' decisions. At the same time, the district must focus on eliminating the ways that advantaged families circumvent the student-allocation process. In New York City, the district tries to accomplish these goals through programming that assigns students to schools, taking into consideration their choices and the schools' different racial, ethnic, gender, and academic composition.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to engaging community groups and youth in the portfolio development and management process. Worcester began its process of high school redesign by engaging cultural groups, community-based organizations, youth-serving organizations, and ethnic minority communities, along with businesses and higher-education institutions. The community has maintained its involvement through a citizens' coalition, and each of the small

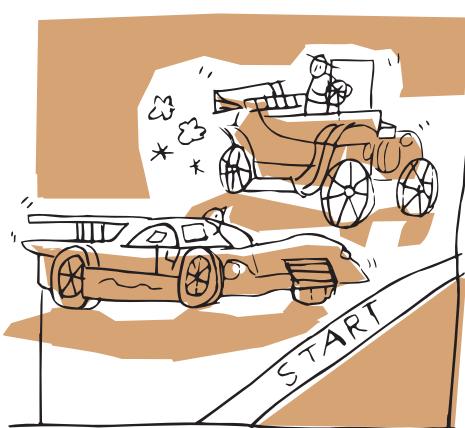
learning communities in Worcester high schools has formed a community advisory committee to produce a formal process for community engagement.

Designing the Car While Driving: Emerging Lessons and Opportunities for Future Research

A portfolio of schools may well involve some difficult trade-offs, and there is much we are still learning about the best way to implement this approach. To learn as much as we can, it is important to be transparent about what we need to know so that we can be strategic about where we focus our research and attention. For example, abandoning one-size-fits-all policies and replacing them with ones that can respond effectively to a diverse and dynamic mix of school formats and governance arrangements will likely increase the complexity of delivering operational supports. It may also create new opportunities for the application of unequal political power to gain educational advantages.

We also know that equitable choice is dependent on an equal distribution of accurate information. But there is *unequal* distribution of information; the neediest families have difficulty using information to advocate for their children. Our challenge is to provide all students and families with reliable information about their options and with the help they need to use that information. More research is therefore needed to know how most students and families are getting and using school information; who the non-choosing families are; and what constraints, priorities, and sense of agency interact to limit or shape their choices.

We are also concerned about ensuring that smaller, more personal-



ized schools have adequate resources to offer all students the support and extended learning activities they need in order to thrive. If only *some* schools in the portfolio have the capacity to respond to special needs, hidden tracking and segregation may well become the unintended consequences of smaller schools. It would be useful to know what kinds of supports smaller schools are currently able to provide, how small schools and small learning communities can work together to provide additional supports for students, and how smaller learning environments can leverage community resources to offer additional activities and classes.

Final Thoughts

Implementing a portfolio of schools requires careful and watchful management and requires the steady collection and use of data to ensure that inequities do not reemerge. It also requires districts – working closely with community partners – to take on some unfamiliar roles. In particular, districts and their partners will have to create a pipeline of new schools to ensure a steady supply as needs change, design and manage a transparent and equitable guidance and admissions process, build the capacity of schools to excel for all students, and provide operational supports to schools.

We believe the portfolio approaches now emerging in urban school districts offer benefits that outweigh their risks. Remaining loyal to the core values that underlie our concept of a portfolio of schools – excellence, equity, diversity, and choice – offers our best chance to reap the benefits and minimize the risks. We must continually measure our efforts against those values to ensure that the portfolios of schools being developed in our cities continue to serve our young people well.

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Students as Co-constructors of the Learning Experience and Environment: Youth Engagement and High School Reform

Francine Joselowsky

One of the most important assets schools and school systems have in redesigning high schools are in schools every day: the students themselves. Yet, few districts engage youth effectively.

What's wrong with the American high school? If you ask students in high schools across the country what they think about their school, they're likely to get to the heart of the matter, distilling poor test scores, low graduation rates, and high teacher turnover into a few profound words that hint at boredom, alienation, and lack of purpose. In preliminary results from the National Governors Association's *Rate Your Future* survey, designed to give students a voice in the organization's education reform conversation, a third of the 1,200 student respondents say they feel overlooked by their high schools, while 43 percent don't believe they are gaining practical and essential life skills in high school (NGA 2005).

None of this should be surprising. Students have been telling adults what they think for years; but often their words get lost in the race to improve test scores and end up only as headlines in newspaper articles, foundation reports, and legislative speeches. Herein lies the paradox: adults want to hear what students have to say but feel that they – the adults – are best equipped to decide how to meet those needs.

Take, for example, the recent tensions and allegedly race-related fights

between students at Jefferson High School in South Central Los Angeles. With 3,800 students on a year-round, three-track system, this comprehensive high school designed for 1,800 students has struggled with overcrowding, depersonalization, and low test scores for years. The response of the district and the city to the violence has been to deploy a heavy police presence and turn the school into a de facto lockdown facility, vowing to beef up security in the long term. But these tensions are not new to the students, who have often voiced their concerns and frustrations.

In a workshop last summer on developing youth-engagement strategies, students, teachers, and a small learning community coordinator from Jefferson expressed their concerns about the lack of student voice and developed an action plan to take back to their school to share with teachers and administrators. These students, who had never before been formally engaged in their school in any way, developed a plan to survey students and then present the collated information to teachers and administrators. Their goal was to motivate students and encourage them to become involved in their school and their education. As a

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priority, they highlighted the need for racial integration and a better physical environment in order to improve education and graduation rates.

However, when they returned to their school and presented their suggestions to administrators, they were dismissed. Instead, administrators developed their own strategy and brought – unannounced – a group of hand-picked students to a teachers’ meeting to tell teachers what they were doing wrong. This left many teachers feeling attacked and defensive. Had administrators taken up the original student suggestions, they might have been able to identify the existing tensions and issues and develop strategies to address them before they escalated and eventually exploded.

Why Engage Youth?

In most schools, creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all students is one of the biggest challenges administrators face. At an intuitive level, adults know that engaging students is a key factor in overall school success, yet many remain hesitant about engaging students in meaningful roles.

Andrew Hopkins of the Philadelphia Student Union, a youth-run organization committed to fighting for a high-quality education for all young people, says:

Part of the problem with schools is that they don’t give students any meaningful roles. I’m not saying we don’t need adult insights, but we’re the ones who care most about it. Adults need to understand that students are the majority; without students, there would be no schools. We’re there every day. We know what works and what doesn’t.

In a Jobs for the Future report, Adria Steinberg and Lili Allen (2002) write:

Effective learning environments make young people feel like they are resources and potential leaders, rather than problems that need to be fixed... Young people want to become capable and competent adults, yet many of them see high school as irrelevant to the goal. While teachers experience the resulting disengagement as laziness, the major reason young people give for disconnection in school is that it’s “boring.”

Research demonstrates that young people who are engaged emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in their education are less likely to show signs of alienation, and that such engagement increases their connectedness to school (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). Increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance, which are all linked to higher academic achievement (Blum & Libbey 2004). Studies have also found a strong correlation between student



As districts, schools, and their partners begin rethinking the nature and structure of their high schools, they also need to rethink the role of young people themselves in the high school enterprise.

involvement in pro-social activities (e.g., performing arts, school-involvement activities, academic clubs) and high grade-point averages and college attendance (Eccles & Barber 1999; McNeal 1995). Steinberg and Allen (2002) note:

To commit to a learning environment, young people need to feel a strong sense of contribution and connection. . . . In such environments, according to studies on motivation, young people can see the connection between effort and “getting smarter.” Studies on the transfer of learning reveal the importance of going beyond rote learning so that learners understand how different modes of inquiry contribute to solving a problem.

It follows logically that if engagement is an indicator of academic success, then the challenge is to develop

¹ In a process facilitated by What Kids Can Do, all students participated in the small schools “movement” in the Bronx, part of the New Century High Schools initiative supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and coordinated by New Visions, Inc. See <www.whatkidscando.org/intheirownwords/Perspectives.html> for more details.

schools that embody practices that engage young people in all aspects of their learning environment. The goal ought to be to create a learning community that is safe and supportive and that not only fosters connections between students, faculty, and the school, but also deepens the learning experience by enabling students to make connections between what they learn and their lives and communities.

And the call from young people around the country is clear: they want to sit at the table with adults and help make the hard decisions. “Involve students in the change process from the start and make sure all students are represented” was the challenge made by students to adults at the May 2003 Bronx New Century High Schools Youth Summit, when students and adults met to discuss education reform.¹

As districts, schools, and their partners begin rethinking the nature and structure of their high schools, they also need to rethink the role of young people themselves in the high school enterprise, not just because it makes sense, but because engaging young people can effectively help schools meet the all-important bottom line: improving student learning.

What Does Youth Engagement Look Like?

What does an engaged student look like? Traditionally, engaged students were defined as students who held leadership positions, were involved in school government, or participated in school clubs or other school activities. However, these tend to be only a handful of students (very often the same students) who generally have good grades, regular attendance, and few discipline problems.

With this narrow definition, opportunities for engagement are limited and

often inaccessible to most of the student population. Moreover, some forms of engagement do not tend to lead to substantive change either on an individual or systems level. Youth engagement can be depicted as a continuum running from non-engagement at the lowest levels to low to high, depending on the nature of students' involvement and ownership in decisions that affect them (see Figure 1).

If the goal of engaging young people is to empower them so they have more confidence and control over their lives in order to take responsibility for their own learning, engagement cannot be a set of disconnected activities for small groups of students. Instead, engagement should be a well-thought-out set of strategies, accessible to all students regardless of educational history and learning ability, that are institutionalized at the classroom, school, and district levels.

In some contexts, youth-engagement strategies may be strong enough to stand alone as interventions. However, in order to be most effective – in supporting young people's own development and in creating systemic growth and change – efforts to authentically engage young people in educational change and in their own learning generally must take place at multiple levels and across multiple strategies (Forum for Youth Investment 2005).

The Forum for Youth Investment, in its work with Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools for a New Society high school reform initiative, has developed a framework that represents a range of strategies for engaging young people in the educational experience. The first two – youths' engagement in their own learning and in their peers' learning – are strategies for engaging young people in the learning process itself. These are central to classroom practice and require a balance of challenging, relevant learning experiences that offer multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility. The third strategy – engaging youth in improving educational opportunities – requires well-thought-out strategies at the school, district, community, state, and national levels that allow youth to partner with adults as leaders in the process of change or continuous improvement in their schools.

The fourth strategy – youth engagement in the community – requires

Hierarchy of Types of Youth Involvement/Ownership	Level of Engagement
1. Manipulation	Non-engagement
2. Decoration	↓
3. Tokenism	
4. Assigned but informed	
5. Consulted and informed	Lower engagement
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with students	↓
7. Youth-initiated, and directed	
8. Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults	
	Higher engagement

Figure 1: Level of youth engagement as a function of type of youth involvement/ownership (Adapted from Hart 1992 and Arnstein 1969)

At the heart of the youth-engagement strategies is the climate and culture of the learning environment and the values that shape it – the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about young people.

opportunities for students to link classroom learning to lived experiences by connecting school and community-based learning opportunities. Adults encourage meaningful youth engagement in these strategies by:

- recognizing the strengths, perspectives, and experiences youth bring to the learning process;
- ensuring that these are integrated and reflected in the learning environment; and
- supporting the deliberate practice of those strengths, perspectives, and experiences.

At the heart of all four strategies is the climate and culture of the learning environment and the values that shape it – the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about young people: how they learn, what they think, what they need from schools and adults, what they believe in, and what they are capable of. It is these values that set the tone for how all members of the school community interact with one another, both inside and outside the classroom. It is in the context of climate and culture that the conditions for authentic youth engagement are created or undermined (Forum for Youth Investment 2005).

Stories and Voices from the Field

Clearly, there is no one way to engage young people, and engagement strategies vary across schools and districts. The efforts highlighted here engage a variety of students and operate on multiple levels, connecting the work young people are doing with larger systemic issues operating at the school, district, or community level.

A District- and School-Level Model: Hudson High School

At Hudson High School – a 600-student public high school in the working-class,

immigrant community of Hudson, Massachusetts, just outside Boston – students are reshaping their educational experience, their school, and their community through an innovative blend of civic engagement, democratic decision making, and service learning. Hudson Public Schools, in a unique model of institutionalized student engagement, developed a district policy that reorganized the high school to create a structure for democratic participation at the school and classroom levels, giving students the opportunity to become co-constructors of the learning environment.

Under the innovative leadership of Superintendent Sheldon Berman, the structural reforms that continue to reshape Hudson are driven by a composite vision that permeates the district and the school – aimed equally at broadening the definition of student success, shifting instruction, and improving the school climate by giving voice and power to student needs and concerns.

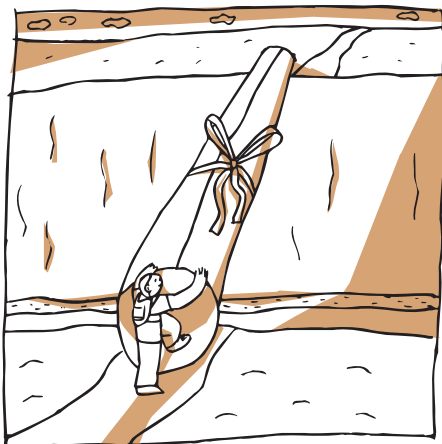
For the last seven years, staff and students at Hudson High School have worked collaboratively to move beyond the traditional “student council” model of engaging a limited group of students to a model that allows students to practice democratic self-governance in weekly town meetings. To facilitate this, the school has been divided into clusters of 130 students, who meet as a whole and in small groups once a week to discuss issues, decide cluster activities, propose school improvements, and recommend policies. Students have tackled issues ranging from improving the quality of the food service to proposing and implementing school climate changes to fostering more effective inclusion of foreign-born students (15 percent) within the school (Berman 2003). According to the school’s Web



At Hudson High School, students are reshaping their educational experience, their school, and their community through an innovative blend of civic engagement, democratic decision making, and service learning.

site, the town-meeting process represents an opportunity to “build a stronger sense of community within the school, richer relationships between faculty and students, a more meaningful instructional program, and a more stimulating professional culture for staff” (Hudson High School, n.d.).

Clusters are organized thematically around broad areas of student interest and are linked to community-service learning projects and independent and collaborative learning opportunities. Many clusters have developed teacher- and student-led study groups and workshops, inviting visiting speakers to



explore topics they cannot pursue in the regular classroom. In the fall of 2003, the high school moved into a new building designed with meeting spaces large enough to hold regular cluster meetings. Superintendent Berman (2003) says:

Our school community decided to embrace democratic practices so students may learn citizenship by doing. Students do not magically become involved as citizens as they are handed a diploma and cross the stage into adulthood. Clustering allows students to explore democracy in action, yielding graduates experienced in civic engagement, practiced in civil discourse, and prepared to be citizens. The Governance plan includes an opportunity for every member of the Hudson High School community to voice an opinion on decisions that affect the school.

**Community and School Partnership:
Gonzalo Garza Independence High
School**

At Gonzalo Garza Independence High School in Austin, Texas, students in the Youth Action for Education Change class do research on education issues

and reach out to other young people and community members to organize youth-led action projects. Garza is home to 400 students, most of whom had not succeeded in traditional high schools and many of whom were on a path toward dropping out. Described by students as the “bomb alternative school,” Garza has turned students around by treating them as “equals” to the school’s adults and teaching them to take responsibility for their own education through individual learning plans and project-based learning.

In this unusual educational environment, a partnership developed between Garza and Austin Voices for Education and Youth, a local nonprofit organization that engages youth, parents, the community, and policy-makers to improve educational and other opportunities for young people in the city. The two groups developed a class that would allow students – youth mobilizers – to conduct research in order to work with Austin Voices to educate and organize the community. According to the student-developed Web site:

We receive academic credit by studying the role young people have played in transforming society for the better, researching our public education system and developing action plans with community members to make an impact on schools today. It’s also an after-school job where we receive a stipend for organizing community members to improve our schools. (Austin Voices, n.d.)

The class is co-facilitated by a Garza teacher and an Austin Voices community organizer, who worked collaboratively to develop the one-year curriculum to meet state standards for school credit.

During the first year of the class, Austin Voices and youth mobilizers

organized and facilitated a series of four weekly public discussions with a cross-section of students, teachers, parents, principals, and community members to develop a grassroots action plan for improving Austin’s public schools. Out of these conversations evolved a series of action teams to tackle issues identified in the community conversations.

Each year since then, mobilizers have chosen an action team and partnered with community members working on those teams to develop an action agenda. This design builds an institutional memory and ensures that the work of the mobilizers becomes embedded in the larger organizational agenda of Austin Voices. Action team agendas include developing student empowerment clubs at area high schools (similar to the Garza model), engaging community members to influence school policies, and promoting stronger connections between schools and communities. Each year before the youth mobilizers graduate, they hire and train a new group of students who can pick up where the original group left off. “This class allows us to voice our opinions and change educational systems in Austin,” Patrick, one of ten students in the class, told a reporter for the *Daily Texan* (Michel 2004).

As one of their action projects this school year, a team of youth mobilizers researched each of the six propositions in a \$539-million Austin Independent School District (AISD) school bond proposal, interviewing community leaders and developing informational flyers. They distributed the flyers at meetings and other community events and at churches, produced public service announcements, and secured spots on local radio shows. All six school bond measures passed by a substantial margin.

In addition, Austin Voices and the youth mobilizers are positioning them-

selves to assist in, and possibly help influence, a districtwide high school reform effort announced last fall. Thus far they have developed a fact sheet (in English and Spanish) to educate the community on high school reform issues, providing information on what’s happened so far, what initial plans look like, and how to get involved. They have also publicized AISD community forums and will co-host and co-facilitate a series of community conversations on the redesign this summer.

Garza has turned students around by treating them as “equals” to the school’s adults and teaching them to take responsibility for their own education through individual learning plans and project-based learning.

Charting the Course Forward: From Tokenism to Authenticity

The strategies profiled here illustrate efforts to intentionally connect the voices, ideas, and concerns of students to larger systemic or institutional issues. In these cases, at least some piece of the strategy is not only housed within the school or district, but also owned and supported by the school or district. But this level of ownership over youth engagement is not always the case in many school systems.

In the 500 pages of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the notion that students can help improve their schools does not appear once. Much of the current movement around accountability has pushed the voices of young people

Schools and organizations need to recognize that engaging young people is not just a feel-good activity but is the foundation for creating effective high schools that challenge, connect, and prepare young people for their lives beyond the school walls.

out rather than bringing them to the table. Creating integrated, authentic roles for students in the reform and improvement process is easier said than done.

“Balancing the urgency with the complexity of this work is the biggest challenge,” says Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, director of the technical support team for the Carnegie Schools for a New Society high school reform initiative. There are inherent tensions between the need to improve and reform high schools and the desire to find authentic ways to engage key stakeholders in that process. And for young people, the sense of urgency is immediate. They are in schools every day, struggling to find their way in institutions that often don’t recognize or meet their needs as learners and as individuals.

The challenge – aligning youth voice and youth action with larger organizational and institutional agendas and decisions – is an area of continued tension. These same tensions are found at the classroom, school, and district levels; schools and the systems that support them are rarely set up as democratic institutions where clear pathways exist between student needs and institutional decision making. “We get

student input all the time. The problem is, we didn’t have a systematic way to hold onto that information; issues kept coming up, and we hadn’t figured out how to act on them,” says Arturo Vasquez, superintendent of Klamath-Trinity (CA) Joint Unified School District.

Schools and organizations need to recognize that engaging young people is not just a feel-good activity designed to boost student morale but is the foundation for creating effective high schools that challenge, connect, and prepare young people for their lives beyond the school walls. To achieve this recognition, youth engagement needs to be understood in the context of teaching and learning and used as a strategy to motivate and engage young people in their own learning by creating engaging classrooms and schools with a culture and climate that make students want to learn, take initiative, and seek out opportunities to learn and lead.

As Beth Rubin and Elena Silva (2003) argue in the introduction to the book *Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living Through Change*:

The student experience reveals a mosaic of daily choices and decisions that are remarkable both in their complexity and their significance to the schooling process. This recognition of student agency offers a dialectical view of schooling, a perspective on teaching and learning that acknowledges not only how school structures and processes shape students, but also how students shape the character of their schools and, in turn, shape their own environment and learning objectives.

Youth engagement is conceptually simple, but it is often difficult to pull off without intentional training for adults. “Adults need help learning how to collaborate with young people just

as much as youth need help adjusting to their transformed role with adults,” notes Wendy Lesko (2001) in the *Mega-Planner Toolkit*, an action guide and toolkit for young people and their adult allies.

What is needed are more inclusive and equitable models of youth-adult partnerships that bridge the power gaps that typically exist in schools, giving young people clear opportunities to share responsibility both for their own learning and for school-reform processes designed to improve achievement, climate, and culture. Superintendent Vasquez of Klamath-Trinity says:

The greatest challenges for me as a superintendent were letting go of power and sharing it more equally, and becoming an active listener. Getting to the point where I listen to students at the same level and find ways to incorporate their interests, desires, and the services they request and integrate these pieces into a coherent reform effort has been an interesting process. I have to let go of some of the control. I've been watching myself, how I react to this. Sometimes I have a hard time, but it has been very good for me.

Creating pathways for and maintaining a focus on youth engagement in the context of the extremely complex and multifaceted process of high school transformation is a difficult charge and requires a dual focus on developing the capacity of both youth and adults to do this work. But it is an essential component of any reform initiative; and if the voices of youth are lost in the shuffle, reform initiatives run the risk of missing key indicators of success or failure. As Rubin and Silva (2003) put it:

The understandings to be reached through observing and soliciting the perspective of students as they move



through daily life in schools are invaluable. These perspectives enrich both the theory and practice of education. It provides teachers with a valuable window into how their practices are experienced by students, as well as helping them to look beyond their own classrooms for the causes of and solutions for pressing inequities.

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Giving Voice to Discomfort

Rosanna Castro

A young Latina woman confronts her often-painful high school experience, relates how she learned to voice her discomfort, and advocates for an empowering education model to counteract the misunderstanding and bias that so often destroy opportunities for youths of color.

As I sat down to write the last essay of my college career, a flood of memory engulfed me. I remembered the White male high school English teacher who would never scream at us, no matter what havoc we caused in his classroom. One day, though, this teacher became so frustrated with me that he elevated his voice to what I can only describe as a shout. Exasperatedly raising his hands, he said, “Why are you so recalcitrant? You have so much potential!” I felt his strong gaze fixed on me as if waiting for an answer, and as I sat dumbfounded, he stormed out of the classroom.

After recovering from my initial shock, I grabbed the nearest dictionary and looked up the word *recalcitrant*. “Recalcitrant: Marked by stubborn resistance to and defiance of authority or guidance.” Wanting to make sure I had not been called something perverse, I grabbed a thesaurus to look up some synonyms: contrary, defiant, unsubmitive, insubordinate, intractable, obstinate, opposing, radical, rebellious, resistant, resisting, stubborn, uncontrollable, undisciplinable, undisciplined, ungovernable, unmanageable, unruly, unwilling, wayward, wild, willful. I can live with *recalcitrant*, I thought.

It was then that the sneaking suspicion that he really cared about educating us penetrated my wall of cynicism. To this day he remains the kind of teacher who will buy books and materials for his students out of his own pocket. He was angry because I wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about applying to colleges. He didn’t know that my guidance counselor could have discouraged Jesus from the cross. Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to tell my teacher about it because I was afraid that maybe my guidance counselor was right about the choices open to me. Later that year, with only two days before the admission deadline, my teacher went to the Brown admissions office and got me an application.

It perturbed me at the time that he didn’t seem to understand or care about “the rules.” I mean, didn’t he understand how students of color and teachers in inner-city schools were supposed to act? His job was not to care about our future, but to try to “teach” us (mostly, keeping the classroom quiet and making sure we didn’t beat each other up or wear hats). And our job was to find creative ways of making his job hard. We had an infinite variety of methods to do our job. We would play

Rosanna Castro is a 2005 graduate of Brown University in Education Policy.

There are few things about our educational system and society I grieve more over than the loss of so many of my high school peers to the kind of misunderstanding and bias that I and my friends experienced.

dumb, do the absolute minimum to receive a passing grade, mock Whiteness, intimidate faculty, be oppositional, and make life a living hell for Brown student teachers (a practice that, as a future educator, I hope doesn't come back to haunt me!).

It wasn't that we were villains bent on driving our teachers to the bottle or the local psychiatric hospital, but we naturally resisted the inculcation of an alien culture that disempowered our identities and ignored our experiences. It was our way of rejecting the Eurocentric curriculum that ignored our race, culture, language, and the social conditions that plagued our realities – except when it meant to demean us.

We were angry at the fact that our schools didn't have the resources to teach us properly and that nobody seemed to care. We were angry at the labels that were attached to us. We were angry that some of our teachers didn't even pretend to teach us anything. We were angry that our guidance counselors believed that most of us were a complete waste of a college-application-fee waiver. We were angry that we were harassed in hallways and classrooms by administrators for showing a predilection for a color or for wearing the ever-dangerous doo-rag. We were angry that we were harassed

outside of our schools by police officers, for the same reasons.

We were angry that, despite all we faced, we were supposed to swallow the Horatio Alger–derived belief that we all had the possibility of escaping our harsh realities if we worked hard and played by the rules, regardless of our race, class, or culture. Resistance was our way to exert power in our powerlessness. Yet, in our teachers' eyes, our recalcitrance denied us “intellectual development” and thwarted our potentials.

There are few things about our educational system and society I grieve more over than the loss of so many of my high school peers to the kind of misunderstanding and bias that I and my friends experienced. A great part of my passion for education was born out of my desire to understand our struggles with schooling, where our schooling fails, and why it so often fails for people like us. There had to be more to it than the simple explanation we understood to be true: that the education afforded to us was not really about expanding our possibilities.

The irony is that my high school was supposed to be different. It was part of a reform effort whose stated intention was to provide students, especially those of color from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the “nurturance,

guidance, and resources they need to reach their fullest potential.” But I and my classmates saw that this stated vision inevitably fell flat in practice because it ignored the underlying tensions of race, class, and culture that affect our high schools. Reformers often say that traditional schools are to blame for our educational dilemmas and have presented alternative learning communities as the solution. Yet, when asked how their educational models will specifically address the needs of children of color, these reformers will throw up their hands dismissively and say: “Good practice is good practice, and it will serve all students regardless of class or color.”

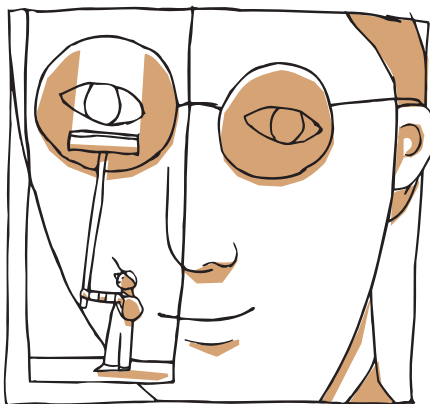
I was able to give voice to my frustration over my educational experience near the end of my time at Brown. For most of my years at Brown, my education was very painful. It was painful when I started and realized how unprepared I was. It was painful when I left the campus two years ago – depressed and obligated by necessity to seek employment and take care of my mother – realizing that a traditional Brown education was not meant for me. I continued taking classes, navigating with mounting anger and frustration between two worlds: on the one hand, my low-paying, full-time job and run-down apartment in a dangerous neighborhood and, on the other hand, Brown’s classrooms, with breathtaking views of flowers and trees imported from other countries and where food and shelter were available at the swipe of a card.

Yet, it was in those same comfortably lavish Brown classrooms that I was learning about the harsh realities of my life and the societal explanations for these realities. I was being taught to reflect and learn about my own lived

experiences – but often, ironically, this process of learning and reflection was distorted by coming through the very lenses of bias, scorn, and ignorance it claimed to critique. It was no wonder to me at the time that schooling had become so uncomfortable, unnatural, and painful.

Then, a shocking realization hit me: *I can voice my discomfort!* Now, I am finally able to explain the ways in which my schooling was disempowering for me – and, more important, to understand why.

While often frustrating, my Brown education permitted me to carve out spaces of empowerment. I was able to take classes that opened my mind to new, affirming ways of looking at the world. I was able to read materials created by intellectuals of color that validated and affirmed my experiences. And I was able to seek the mentorship and guidance of faculty of color who



finally helped me understand the ups and downs of my educational development. Where before I would blame myself for not being able to adapt to this experience and for being academically unprepared, now I could support and explain my discomfort within frameworks that were provided for me by these intellectuals of color.

I began to wish that I had had these experiences earlier and that all students in situations similar to mine could have them as well. I wished for an empowering educational model that chooses not to ignore the importance of race and class, that encourages different ways of viewing the world, that is based on the belief that the oppressed need the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences, and that provides young people with the tools to confront this oppression without becoming oppositional.

With an education system like that, high schools like mine could finally live up to their vision and lift up – rather than continue to put down – the students they are now losing. I'm one of the lucky ones. But there are many, many more students like me who aren't lucky. Our education system has failed them. It doesn't have to be that way.

Tackling Instruction Head-On: The San Diego Strategy

John DeVore

By developing districtwide curriculum maps and assessments and engaging teachers in creating units of study, San Diego has attempted to strengthen the rigor and reduce the variability in high school instruction.

San Diego City Schools has earned a national reputation for focusing on improving instruction in every classroom. Data suggest that these efforts have paid off in improved performance at the elementary school level. As in most cities, high school performance in San Diego has continued to lag.

As part of Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools for a New Society initiative, a seven-city effort to redesign high schools, San Diego has elected to build on its foundation of instructional improvement and to focus its high school redesign on teaching and learning, concentrating initially on the ninth grade in each of ten high schools. The district created curriculum maps – linked to district standards – and end-of-course assessments. The district also organized teams of teachers in each school to develop units of study, guided by the maps, that are aimed at enabling students to demonstrate that they have achieved the standards.

VUE editor Robert Rothman spoke with John DeVore about his district's instructional-improvement efforts, the successes and challenges it has faced, and its plans for the future.

Much of high school reform has focused on *structure*: creating small schools and breaking down large schools into smaller units. You've focused on *instructional reform* in San Diego. Why did you choose that route?

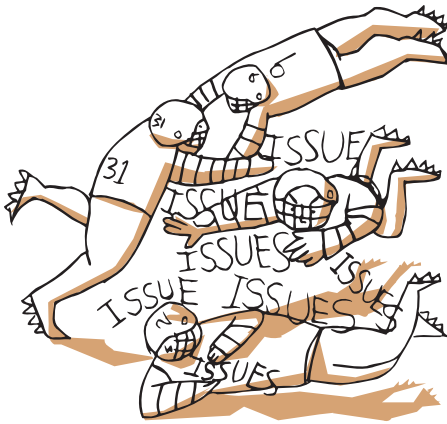
When [former superintendent] Alan Bersin got to San Diego City Schools in 1998, he developed a theory of action that revolved around building instructional leadership of the principal and building the capacity of school sites. It was a theory of action that instruction was going to be the way to improve

achievement. Building off of that, what we attempted to do, using Carnegie money, was create structures that would allow us to get at deepening the instruction. So, first, it was about continuing that theory of action.

Then it was about building teams of teachers so that people were not in isolation – so that there was a lot of participation by teachers. Teachers were part of the design of the units of study while they were being framed and calibrated at the district level.

Alan's Blueprint for Success had a lot of positive impact in the elementary

John DeVore is high school reform administrator of San Diego City Schools.



schools, a little bit in middle schools, and almost none in the high schools. Our theory of action was that the reason it didn't take in the high schools was that it didn't really talk about standards; it talked about strategies. We needed to get more rigor into instruction on a day-to-day basis. One of the big needs I saw the first six months I was here was that instruction was not rigorous. The second thing we saw was that every teacher had a different approach. We felt we needed to lead the English 9 teachers in the design of rigorous instruction that would help kids demonstrate proficiency in grade-level standards.

We tried to bring all the English 9 teachers to the table – we got them a common prep period – to design how to approach teaching toward a standard. And they created a common road map at the school site for teaching toward each of the standards.

What we had done prior to that at the district level was create a curricu-

lum map and a pacing calendar, as a framework for all schools. We had a curriculum map that had essential questions and threads that needed to be woven through the different grade levels, which were all aimed at helping kids leave high school proficient at a college level in reading and writing. It had some very strong, high-altitude, rigorous ideas in it.

And we had a pacing calendar. The first unit, for example, was on informational text. It would last four weeks. So all the schools were designing a road map, selecting text, that would aim, over a four-week period, to engage kids in multiple opportunities to see informational text and to learn the structure and the text features, in order then to be able to write their own informational kind of document. So reading always led to writing.

So, were the main issues you tried to address in this process rigor and the variability among schools?

Correct. Had to have rigor. We had to involve people at the school site, so, instead of the system doing something to them, we tried to call them out to participate. But we had created a framework for their work. All of the ten schools were trying to figure out over four weeks how they were going to get kids to be proficient in a bundle of standards that were aimed at informational text.

You also tried to address teacher capacity by encouraging the most qualified teachers to teach these units.

We had asked principals to develop a cadre of ninth-grade teachers and invite some of the best teachers who may be in the upper grades right now down into the ninth and tenth grades, at least for part of the day. We tried to have a measure of expertise. And we encouraged them to put these teachers in a

common prep period so that when the year started, they would have regular opportunities to meet that were embedded in the day. Trying to get the best teachers into the lower grades was a challenge.

How successful have these efforts been?

With respect to my own personal observations of instruction, it's been a significant upgrade. We're a little cautious here. We implemented it in September. It's been in for [less than a year]. The potential, full impact hasn't been realized yet. We don't have multiple grade levels exposed to this yet. We just have a first brush at it.

We're still trying to collect the state and federal data to measure this, but we have some benchmark data. Twice during the year we have student-work protocols in English 9 and 10 at every school, where they have essays that were part of the units of study, where teachers are examining student writing. We've seen some large improvements in student writing, as measured by the protocols, and as measured by the midyear final and end-of-course exam.

What are some of the challenges you've faced in going about this?

Our greatest challenges are probably still out in front of us. The first challenge, I believe, was causing people to go through change – just that in itself. And to significantly raise the bar in terms of what we expect. Here's one specific example. The first year I was here, teachers spent anywhere from a fourth to 50 percent of the time that they had kids in English classes engaging kids in, let's call it "independent reading," which is reading at a student's actual proficiency level – in some cases, lower than the student's grade level. So they spent, in some cases, up to 50 percent

of their time engaging students in reading fourth-, fifth-, sixth-grade-level books. And the research will say you need to have kids reading stuff they like, and at their proficiency level, because it builds vocabulary and increases a student's reading comprehension over time. But this work was not in service of helping kids get to grade level. Another way to say it is, there wasn't any rigor going on in any of these classes.

The first big change we insisted on was that there would be no independent reading at high school during the school day that was not at the student's grade level. That kind of independent reading had to be homework. All the reading done at school during school time had to be grade-level material. We had to face that. That was a *huge* shift – huge – trying to get people to let go.

We also had to let a few teachers go because they wouldn't latch on to what we were trying to accomplish. What they wanted to do was teach

One of the big needs I saw was that instruction was not rigorous. The second thing we saw was that every teacher had a different approach.



In the end, everything you do is aimed at strengthening the relationship between the teacher and the student around making meaning of the content.

a book, teach a piece of literature. But the standards do not test *Romeo and Juliet*. *Romeo and Juliet* has to be a piece of text that helps students demonstrate some strategy for reading comprehension. We don't test the content of the text. That was a big mind-shift, to move toward standards-based instruction instead of teaching to a text – that was a second challenge.

Nevertheless, we saw some huge gains in teaching this year. Some incredibly strong gains. Now the biggest challenge we face is that the content administrators – each of these ten high schools had a full-time literacy-content

administrator who was our entry point in working with these teachers – all these content administrators have been released by the school board. There's no longer a position. So all these literacy-content administrators who had been in all the schools and who worked with the system to help with teachers are out of a job next year. We've lost that leverage. That's a big challenge we're currently facing.

What are your next steps? What are you planning to do this coming year and the next few years?

We're asking each school site to reevaluate the units of study and what they did and redesign them. These need to be fluid documents that are constantly being revised. We're in the process of helping each school think through a redesign of the units of study, to ratchet up, to align them more tightly, based on the successes and challenges we had with them.

We're working to identify a new professional development model, since the one-on-one coaching isn't really an option for us with the content administrators gone. We're looking at another model for ongoing professional development to support principals and teachers. We're looking at lesson study as a possible model to do that.

At our end, at the district end, we're going to lift ourselves up and be more focused on the assessment pieces. The reality is, the district can't be involved in what happens every single minute of every single day in every single school. The system is holding on very tightly to the end-of-course exams and benchmark protocols. And we're going to be more conscious of helping schools with their summative assessments.

We still believe that, in the end, everything you do, every structure you put into place, everything you do in

professional development, and the culture you try to build, is aimed at strengthening the relationship between the teacher and the student around making meaning of the content. I would say we made some really significant strides, and, of course, depending on the strength of the leader – both the principal and the content administrator – and on the strength of the group of teachers, some had more success than others. But we saw some incredible gains in terms of the level of rigorous instruction, and we have a belief that this works. We don't want to abandon what we've begun, despite the fact that we've lost some of the leadership. We're going to try to get better at it in a different way.

Small Learning Communities: Putting Power in the “C”

Alethea Frazier Raynor

Much of the effort to create small learning communities in high schools has emphasized the size of the communities. What does “community” mean? How can schools and school systems unleash the power of communities?

The evolution of small high schools and small learning communities within high schools over the last ten years has given us fertile ground for discussion about the nature of “small” and its advantages for school improvement and student achievement. Much of our thinking and practices rest on the belief that large comprehensive high schools are outmoded models that can no longer serve students well. In fact, we are left wondering if they ever served us well at all.

There have been numerous studies that support the belief that “small” is an important condition that can enhance teaching and learning (Cotton 1996). However, among this research there are also studies that have tempered our view; these suggest that small size is a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful teaching and learning (Wasley et al. 2000). And more recently, researchers have called into question whether we have sufficient evidence across diverse and random small learning environments to warrant with certainty that small schools are universally better for young people (Stern & Wing 2004).

But rather than continue to debate the merits of “small,” I would like to shift the focus from “small” and “learning” to the third component of the

“small learning community” paradigm – which draws less of our attention and imagination – the idea of “community.”

Unpacking the Notion of “Community”

We are always creating new buzz words in education, and *community* joins a long list of popular favorites (Sergiovanni 1994). Over the past five years, both the federal government and major foundations like Carnegie Corporation of New York have used the term small learning community (SLC) in both their grant-making and policy guidelines for high school reform. The U.S. Department of Education has outlined a set of structures and strategies for creating small learning communities. And Carnegie’s Schools for a New Society initiative identifies key conditions for the development of effective SLCs.

The conscious (or perhaps unconscious) stringing together of the words *small*, *learning*, and *community* suggests (to me, at least) that these three words in relationship to one another have the potential for some extraordinary meaning that we have not yet fully explored. There is power in the notion of “community” that remains untapped, in part because we have to struggle with how it is that community is important to

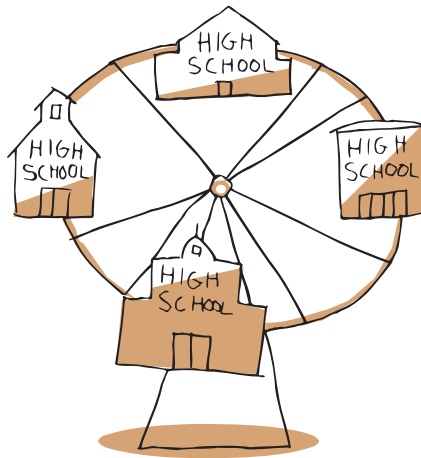
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us in the midst of high school reform. There is something uncomfortable (albeit compelling) about trying to articulate a phenomenon that seems so abstract. But by not doing so, we may miss embracing the very notion that is sufficiently important and complicated to engage students with teachers, with families, and with community members in grappling together to understand what community can really mean in a learning context that is small.

Instead of a making powerful the relationship between “small,” “learning,” and “community,” we often default to superficial attempts to insert community rather than cultivate and build it over time. The results often yield new school structures with a sense that there is something artificial in place that neither students nor teachers feel really matters. Such structures and processes feel less than “authentic” in spite of good intentions that are situated in years of research about students’ needs for belonging, identity, and attachment.

For example, we have often narrowly defined students’ basic human needs in terms of processes such as “personalization,” and then we are off and running to create advisories, advocacy, and other such programs. There is nothing inherently wrong with advisory or advocacy programs – they are worthwhile pursuits. But, alone, they cannot stand in the place of real commitment and connection in schools, just as “small” by itself does not constitute a rigorous environment for teaching and learning. Yet, the hope for community is a universal and often unmet need that could become the bridge that connects students, teachers, families, and community members.

We have also tried to capture that sense of community in other symbolic ways such as borrowing terminology like *houses*, *families*, and even *neighbor-*



hoods to describe newly created structures in high schools. These words have meaning for us in other contexts, but, like *community*, they require some thoughtful inquiry about why we would want to appropriate them to describe high school settings.

The salience of a notion of community has driven us to create a set of companion communities for teachers – professional learning communities and communities of practice, to name a few. In some cases, we have explicitly tried to show how these groups represent what we mean by “a community” (AISR 2004). But we have been less successful in following through in forming these communities so that they are real opportunities for connection among adults.

Experiencing Community in Schools

The tensions we face in exploring a “community” metaphor in schools are complex. First, community can simultaneously have many different meanings.

Second, even when we are able to discern which particular meaning we are making reference to, there are still multiple interpretations around that one meaning. Yet, I can vividly recall the experience of walking into a small learning community and declaring, “Ah, *this* feels like a community!” There was a certain kind of energy pulsating among the people in that environment – reflected in their talk, their interactions, and their priorities – that felt different from other settings, even some at the top rung of the achievement ladder.

What is it that makes certain environments feel like a community? While their structures are important, that is not all that we talk about when we describe these kinds of places. Nor is instruction the major factor, as central as it is to their purpose. I believe that what makes a learning environment a true learning community is the ability of its members to relate the structures and the instruction to each other and to keep them balanced by ideals that transcend the power of either one.



Thomas Sergiovanni (1994, p. 4) gives a sound interpretation and context for thinking about the *c* in *small learning communities*:

In communities ... the connection of people to purpose and the connections among people are not based on contracts but commitments. Communities are socially organized around relationships and the felt interdependence that nurture them (Blau & Scott 1962)... The bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. Communities are defined by their centers of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of “we” from “I.”

Facing the Challenges of Implementing Small Learning Communities

A research study of middle schools points to key dimensions of a sense of community: shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact (Belenardo 2001). But before we can think about how these elements might assume greater importance for us in developing SLCs in high schools, we must first identify what is currently occupying our thoughts as we design these environments.

Small learning communities are often conversions of large comprehensive high schools into separate, but not necessarily autonomous, units within a single building. In the best of such conversions, both teachers and students have an opportunity to choose membership in a particular SLC; but they may be less likely than students and teachers in start-up small schools to have the full range of choices. The point is that

I can vividly recall the experience of walking into a small learning community and declaring, “Ah, *this* feels like a community!”

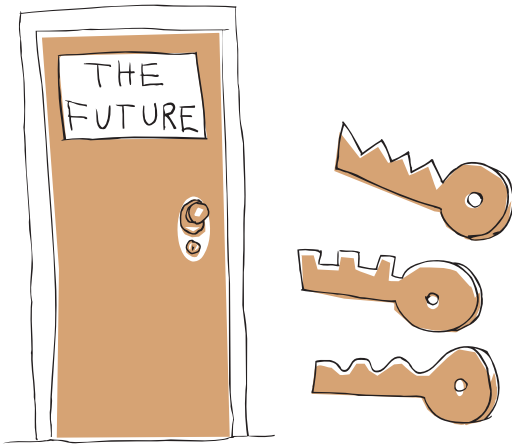
developing the willingness and commitment to work together at something new may require more time and attention before teachers, students, and others in the community feel vested in an SLC.

Another challenge for SLCs is the quest for a distinctive identity for each. At high schools with newly formed SLCs, I have found that the distinctiveness of the SLCs is more evident in the literature that I received than in the interactions in classrooms and other spaces that I observed. In some cases, slogans were created to promote affiliation and generate a new kind of “school spirit.” But in one district, where the students in a high school all wore brightly colored T-shirts to represent at least six different SLCs, many students I questioned seemed more adept at explaining what made their SLC different from the others than they were at articulating what made their particular community something special. Small learning communities should be places where young people and adults are supported and nurtured in their development. The burden of distinctiveness can foster artificial boundaries between small learning communities rather than developing authentic bonds within them.

As districts pursue high school reform, it is likely that many cities will continue to carve up existing buildings into SLCs rather than create new small

schools. But one must call into question whether the kind of territorial boundaries that we create between SLCs and within school buildings can appropriately apprentice young people into a society that will expect them to navigate both within and across boundaries. Do these insular structures defeat our ability to create learning communities within each school that are fully aligned with the larger learning community of the district? If, in fact, we believe that an authentic sense of community is tied deeply to a sense of interdependence, are we fostering this dimension, or are we promoting isolation and often-unhealthy competition?

By reframing identity within an SLC to allow for porous boundaries among various communities, we can open up new opportunities for young people and adults to explore the notion of multiple identities. This idea might be closer to reality for most students, who find that membership in an SLC often forces them to stay separated from established friends, sports teammates, or other existing relationships. It seems counterintuitive to present young people with models of interaction that do not represent the dialectical nature of community in their own lives. As we create distinctive SLC identities, we must simultaneously pay careful attention to the threads that we can



weave across SLCs so that the interactions between young people and adults can be facilitated across multiple and permeable boundaries.

Finally, the issue of SLC “purity” – scheduling students so that they remain with the same teachers for at least 80 percent of their classes – is also a challenge for schools with SLCs. Added to this is the challenge of maintaining the same SLC configuration of teachers and students as those students progress from ninth through twelfth grade. These logistical hurdles often leave schools struggling just to keep students and teachers “in relationship” with one another. But an even greater struggle is to make those relationships really meaningful. The work of building relationships is not easy or formulaic, but it can be supported by more collective efforts that draw upon expertise and resources internal as well as external to an SLC.

These challenges highlight the overwhelming attention we have paid to the structural aspects of creating SLCs, leaving little or no room for advancing the important ideas of community. We can redesign school buildings, have distinctive identities, and maintain SLC purity at 80 percent or higher, but it will also be important to cultivate an interdependent web of relationships among the people in SLCs that gives them a sense of “community” in pursuit of learning.

Including a Community-Building Framework in SLCs

Community building in SLCs can be the means to an end or an end in itself. Let’s first examine the construct of “community” as means to an end in much the same way that we understand the notion of “small.” Leaving “learning” where it should be, at the center of the small learning community, the question becomes: How do we give

power to the idea of “community” in the interest of learning?

We can begin with questions that focus on the relationship of learning to community. For starters, we might ask, What can we do to foster a sense of community in ways that promote learning? What are the untapped resources and “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al. 1992) that we can draw on to extend learning within an SLC? What would it mean to take advantage of a community-building framework to enhance our thinking about personalization within an SLC? And how can teachers, students, school leaders, families, and community members take collective responsibility for teaching and learning within an SLC?

I believe that we should broadly conceive of a community as people, place, and principles, rather than evoke one decisive meaning. By people, I mean those individuals who live in the neighborhoods of our cities in an interdependent social network. By place, I mean the actual local environments that we name as “the community.” And by principles, I mean the set of values, norms, and beliefs that are held in common by community members.

If we allow all three of these aspects of community to coexist, then we free ourselves up to engage in conversations that could produce a wider range of possibilities for small learning communities. These kinds of conversations are happening in some school districts, but they tend to occur in the design and planning process for SLCs, with limited carryover when the implementation phase begins.

The potential of bringing in new voices and new sources of knowledge to explore “community” as people, place, and principles can be channeled into thinking about relevant and rigorous curriculum content, ways to engage

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students that acknowledge and dignify their cultural diversity, and opportunities for place-based learning as an ongoing practice with the community. If we can put our expanded notion of community to use in the service of teaching and learning to give young people a richer experience, then we have used community as a means to an end.

Parents, families, and community members should hold an esteemed position in the planning and implementation of SLCs because of the knowledge they contribute and the roles they play in the community. Their participation can bring to the table such community-building strategies as “assets mapping” (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993) that could be used in the development of new SLCs. With such strategies, SLCs could expand learning opportunities by drawing on a community’s assets. Moving from design phase to implementation, these individuals would also be more likely to have the necessary skill sets to map the assets of the SLC and to organize them in ways that expand the opportunity for community building. In this way, community becomes an end in itself.

There is no greater incentive for giving power to the idea of community than its potential for young people to realize their own efficacy and agency in transforming high schools into places where they can serve and that serve them well.

But there is no greater incentive for giving power to the idea of community than its potential for young people to realize their own efficacy and agency in transforming high schools into places where they can serve and that serve them well. The Forum for Youth Investment has laid out a framework for youth engagement in high school reform that supports the idea of community as a central theme (see Francine Joselowsky's article in this issue of *VUE*). The small learning community should be that place where students exercise values of caring, respect, mutual support, and responsibility. These should be the spaces in which a student's talents and unique contributions can be acknowledged. In short, the small learning community is where students should shine!

The advent of high-stakes testing carries with it enormous pressure and consequences for high school students. More than ever, young people need

many and varied opportunities to demonstrate and connect what they know. Small learning communities must be those places where they can expect that their assets will be "discovered" and put to use in ways that stimulate their own learning and also contribute to the fabric of their "community."

Engaging students in building a sense of community enables them to experience the dynamics of reciprocity as a core value of living in an interdependent world. Students can see and appreciate that learning is a social act, not an individual one. I saw vivid evidence of the internalization of this value in a large urban high school where students from one SLC with a rigorous science focus emphasized to me how the collective and interdependent nature of their relationships helped them to scaffold and support one another – rather than simply to compete with each other – to meet high expectations for academic success.

Sustaining Community

It is in these smaller environments that we have the ability to develop rituals to support the ideals of the small learning community and to connect students within or across SLCs through school-wide projects. I recently visited an urban district where there has been intensive work to support youth voice and student engagement in high schools. One of the facilitators of this work shared with me a rich and compelling example of how students in one of the small schools expressed their need for "community."

In response to low school morale, students on the leadership team decided to hold a Community Day, to which they invited thirty or more presenters with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Some presenters were parents, others were community members; some

were degreed professionals, others were lay workers. The presentations ranged from demonstrations of culture to dialogue groups.

The student-organized day was an overwhelming success. Community Day was an opportunity for students to share about themselves and their cultures and to have fun. But in the words of the facilitator, “It brought people to ‘center’... To have young people involved means you have to bring in their communities.” The values of caring and respect for one another were rekindled that day, and young people felt supported and proud of their multiple identities. I can imagine that through the interactions of students, teachers, parents, and community members, the experience of Community Day embodied for these students a sense of community as people, place, and principles.

Strategies and Opportunities for Change

Transforming large comprehensive high schools into small learning communities or restructuring them into small schools is hard and multifaceted work. Numerous structural considerations are needed to make “small” advantageous for learning. The issues of scheduling, purity, common planning time, and physical plant are all important concerns; yet, these issues must be addressed in ways

that squarely enhance the instructional core. But we can complete the “small learning community” paradigm by connecting *small* and *learning* to *community* in new and innovative ways.

Teachers cannot do this work alone – not because they aren’t competent, but because it really does take a village. And I am ever mindful of the propensity in education reform to add on yet another clever idea with the hidden assumption that teachers and principals can take on leadership and sole responsibility for its implementation. Yet, there are some strategies that our experience thus far suggests might be useful and effective. I offer the following ideas on the premise that students, parents, families, and community members must be integral voices and actors in thinking about “community” as a metaphor that embraces people, place, and principles.

- *Extend the co-construction of new SLCs with school personnel, youth, parents, and community members beyond the design and planning phase.* There is a distinct difference in my mind between input and participation. Input means you are called upon to contribute to the development of an idea; participation means that you are engaged in some ongoing way from development through implementation and reflection about the consequences of those ideas. The



investments in community building that result from the design stage of the work are a springboard for participation in other areas.

- *Integrate the work with youth-engagement/student-voice strategies.* Some schools and districts are developing rich opportunities for young people to shape their own learning experiences. Building a sense of community within and across SLCs can provide real entry points for students to connect in purposeful ways and to shape their shared values and norms.
- *Design orientation and school-year start-up activities with an intentional focus on community building.* One immediate reflection from the stu-

We must wrestle with how we view parents, families, community members, and, most important, students as agents, actors, and producers in this work of transforming high schools.

dents who sponsored Community Day was that they wanted more of them and more frequently. There are many creative ways that students can design an orientation to their new SLC that makes their identity and distinctiveness mean something in the context of their community.

- *Use resources based in the broader community to enrich and expand the curriculum and learning opportunities for everyone in the SLC.* While expanding learning opportunities for students should be the central objective, teachers and members of the broader community should also find opportunities to learn directly from one another so that they are continually reinforcing the important value of reciprocity.

An ideology of community in the development of SLCs entails certain shifts in our current thinking. Fundamental to those shifts are assumptions about who has ideas that are worthy of exploration. We must wrestle with how we view parents, families, community members, and, most important, students as agents, actors, and producers in this work of transforming high schools. As educators, we must acknowledge the privileged roles that we have carved out for ourselves in shaping the trajectory of young people and their communities. But, after all, bringing out the best in everyone is what makes us cling to the hope of “community” in the first place.

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Reinventing High School Accountability: Authenticity, Pressure, and Support

S. Paul Reville

Accountability policies are critical to ensuring that new high school designs thrive. An effective system should provide authentic information about school performance and provide pressure and support for improvement.

From the White House to the National Governors Association, a clarion call has risen, articulated recently by none other than Bill Gates, for a transformation of the American high school. Gates (2005) minced no words in describing the challenge: “American high schools are obsolete. . . . By obsolete I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and underfunded. . . . I mean that our high schools – even when they are working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.”

Some foundations, like Carnegie Corporation of New York and Gates’s own Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have, in collaboration with many reform partners and school systems, been seeding high school reform for some years. The investments have been huge. Prescriptions for new policies and practice abound and sometimes conflict. In the field, there is excitement – and some apprehension – about this long overdue attention to the nation’s most reform-resistant category of schools.

The case for reform is compelling. High schools have indeed been slow to reform. They continue to fail badly with certain populations, especially low-income, urban youth. They inadequately prepare significant numbers of young

people for higher education and employment; for instance, approximately 40 percent of graduates reported key gaps in their preparation in a recent poll (Achieve and the National Governors Association 2005). And they are generally organized in ways that better serve the interests of early-twentieth-century America, rather than the world of today.

As the efforts to redesign high schools move forward, though, it is essential that the policies being put in place at the district, state, and federal levels fit with and support the new educational designs of schools and school systems. Accountability policies are critical. As anyone who has watched school reform since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) knows, accountability can be a powerful tool – for good or for ill. An accountability system for high schools that supports improvement can accelerate change; an ill-conceived plan can stifle reform.

President Bush proposes to bring the accountability pressure of NCLB to bear on high schools. Secondary educators, now in the spotlight (or is it headlights?) express a new sense of possibility, coupled with uncertainty and apprehension, about the direction and substance of the reforms as well as the operation of new accountability systems. Scholars

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such as Michael Kirst of Stanford University have noted that the power of accountability systems to drive reform and school improvement may vary depending on level of schooling. Based on his analysis of reform in California, he finds gains in elementary schools, but no improvement in the high schools, even with an accountability system that operated similarly for all schools. This variability, coupled with the myriad problems associated with the implementation of NCLB's accountability provisions to date, suggest that a headlong rush to applying the same NCLB accountability approach to high schools would be unwise.

The complexity of high schools, the need for multiple and qualitative indicators of success, the variability of the high schools, and the sheer scale of these schools are all factors that call for a fundamentally different approach to accountability than has been applied at the elementary level. How can policymakers avoid the mistakes of the past and craft a more realistic, genuine, and helpful accountability mechanism for American high schools?

Basic Principles

Achieve Inc. and the National Governors Association (2005, p. 17), the organizations that sponsored the meeting at which Gates made his provocative remarks, advised that data produced by a new accountability mechanism ought to be "more focused on the success of each high school in preparing students for college, work and citizenship." What kind of a system would produce such data?

Here are a few basic principles that a new system might strive to attain, along with some potential indicators.

Genuine Accountability

The accountability system should present a rich portrait of school performance that presents meaningful, actionable data for

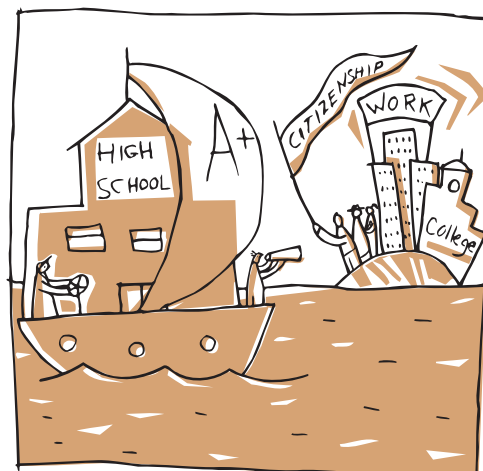
school-improvement purposes. The focus of the system should be on the degree to which the school increases student learning of the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in the next stage of the student's life. Naturally, the system should employ instruments that are valid and reliable.

Pressure for Improvement

The accountability system should leverage pressure for school improvement. The system should have consequences for performance, especially intervention with support and assistance for those not making progress.

Useful, Diagnostic Data

The system should provide data that administrators and teachers can use to shape strategies for improving student learning and school performance. The data should drive increased productivity in education by pointing to the areas in which capacity and performance need to be increased.





The consequences for persistent under-performance should be real and work to maximize benefit and opportunity for children. Consequences should feature strengthened intervention and technical assistance for schools, coupled with enhanced, supplemental extended learning opportunities for individual students.

Constructive Consequences

The consequences for persistent under-performance should be real and work to maximize benefit and opportunity for children. Consequences like the school-choice provisions of NCLB have been largely ineffective, for a variety of reasons. At the same time, the technical assistance functions that were expected to be offered to schools “in need of improvement” have frequently not materialized.

Consequences under a new high school accountability mechanism should feature strengthened intervention and technical assistance for schools, coupled with enhanced, supplemental extended learning opportunities for individual students. Also, some form of recognition/reward system should be applied to those schools making continuous progress. Public acknowledgment, regulatory relief, and modest financial rewards for whole schools should be part of the system.

Growth Oriented

Any high school accountability system ought to focus on growth in learning. Individual student learning progress ought to be tracked longitudinally through the use of “value-added” systems that measure improvement from a baseline. Individual growth ought to be aggregated into collective indicators for schools and systems; then such data ought to be disaggregated for analysis by subgroups such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, grade level, etc. The focus should be on school improvement, not just attaining a level of proficiency.

Reasonable and Research-Based

A new accountability system ought to incorporate research-based assumptions about expected rates of growth. The emphasis should be on improvement and closing the achievement gaps, but the expected growth intervals ought to be based on what we know

about learning and school improvement. Unlike NCLB targets, which in many cases are far higher than any school has yet demonstrated, growth expectations in a new high school accountability system ought to be reasonable and founded on evidence drawn from the experience of improved schools.

Flexible to Accommodate Variability

Comprehensive high schools prepare some students for higher education, at a wide array of colleges, and some for employment. We also have vocational high schools, alternative high schools, and small learning communities, to name just a few of the many variations on the high school that students experience. The new accountability system needs to be flexible enough to recognize these varying goals.

Affordable

The costs of the NCLB accountability mandates have been the subject of much controversy, dispute, and litigation. Additional NCLB accountability mandates must not only be feasible, but also, to the extent that they are federally mandated, they should be federally funded. In any event, there will be significant new costs to bring a strong accountability system to bear on high schools. If the federal government seeks to have a major impact on high school education, government leaders might wisely invest in fully supporting a radically more comprehensive accountability system.

Multiple Measures of Performance

One of the most challenging aspects of designing the new system of high school accountability is determining appropriate measures of school performance. Issues of measurement are, of necessity, complex and somewhat technical. However, architects of this system

It's much easier to say that we should have multiple indicators of school success than it is to put that concept into practice.

must strive to make the data it produces understandable and readily available to educators and the general public.

As Achieve and National Governors Association put it, the results ought to be both “user friendly and accessible.”

In contrast to NCLB, the new system should include *multiple measures* of school success, rather than just test scores. The emphasis on test scores is obvious and logical because we want to know the extent to which students attain mastery of academic standards. But the weaknesses and limitations of tests are well known. We should have other indicators of school performance to supplement test data and reduce the misuse associated with overreliance on a single measure.

However, it's much easier to say that we should have multiple indicators of school success than it is to put that concept into practice. Finding other measures that are not only valid and reliable but practical to administer, as well as financially and politically feasible, is no easy task. The following types of performance measures might meet such criteria, in addition to test data from a variety of sources and instruments.

The time has come to make the investment in measuring the success of education by looking directly at how well prepared an individual is to succeed at the challenges presented at the next stage of his or her life.

Graduation and Drop-Out Rates

Although experts regularly and sharply disagree on methods of calculating persistence to graduation, a new system must set a standard for judging the capacity of schools to prepare all their students to meet graduation requirements. Close consideration should be given to the intervals during which graduation is expected. New, higher standards may require more time in high school, thereby making a four-year standard obsolete. A six-year “persistence to graduation” indicator would be helpful. Distinctions should be drawn between graduation from school and earning a diploma via the GED (General Educational Development) exam.

Next-Stage Success: College and Employment

The time has come to make the investment in measuring the success of edu-

cation by looking directly at how well prepared an individual is to succeed at the challenges presented at the next stage of his or her life, usually higher education or employment. Such follow-up work is labor intensive and therefore costly, but it is so immediately relevant to understanding school performance that we can no longer afford to ignore it.

Small samples of employers’ and college faculty members’ views on high school graduates’ readiness are regularly done by academics, national commissions, and various associations. But school systems seldom gather this information because of the labor and costs of such research. If we acknowledge that the primary short-term users, or “consumers,” of graduates’ skills and knowledge are employers and colleges, then it seems foolhardy not to include their views, in some measure, in our assessment of high school effectiveness.

Customer Satisfaction

Next-stage research will involve surveying consumers like employers and college faculty on how well prepared graduates are, but we also need to ask the “customers” themselves. How do high school graduates rate their preparation to meet the challenges they face after graduating? How do families rate the education their children receive?

Some school districts, like Duval County, Florida, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, routinely take satisfaction surveys of parents, teachers, and students (Grossman, Honan & King 2004; Cambridge Public School District, n.d.). The Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts has done one-time surveys for a handful of school districts of graduates’ views of their preparedness.

Expert On-Site, Qualitative Review

All high schools should have a regular visitation by an expert review team. Such visits would be similar to, but more fre-

quent than, the periodic visits made by regional accrediting associations. The review team would be charged with making qualitative judgments about a range of important topics such as school climate and expectations; the quality of teaching and learning; the degree of rigor of the curriculum; the availability of Advanced Placement and college-level courses; the nature of student-faculty relationships; the availability of support services; the equity in course offerings and enrollments; drop-out prevention/retrieval; occupational preparation; and success in the development of nonacademic skills in problem solving, interpersonal relations, and collaboration. A number of states, including Massachusetts and Rhode Island, are already employing comprehensive school visitation models (including qualitative elements) that could be adapted to the particular circumstances of high schools.

Undeniably, these subjects are each, in themselves, complex, presenting challenging measurement problems. But there is no reason that educators, like service providers in other sectors, cannot devise a fair and reasonable approach to making some qualitative judgments about educational services. Ultimately, teams would be charged with summing up their assessments in the form of a hard numerical or letter-grade designation coupled with a written report. Tough decisions are central to this work.

***Accountability for
Educating All Students:
Big Commitment,
Unprecedented Goal***

The proposed system is not only more costly but more labor-intensive and time-consuming than current approaches. It certainly injects a substantial qualitative ingredient into the school-evaluation process. Devising such an accountability



system would undoubtedly be challenging work. But if the ideals of such a system could be realized, then high school accountability could truly become an instrument for school improvement. Accountability “on the cheap,” on the other hand, would only yield misleading information.

An accountability system such as that described here is not a silver bullet or an answer to all the woes afflicting high schools. Major issues like teacher quality and the poor preparation of entering students, to name just two, require urgent attention as well. Finally, this accountability system should complement – but not substitute for – human resource and professional development systems that must be designed and installed to build the expertise and effectiveness of educators to do what our society has never, until now, asked them to do: educate *all* students to a high standard of learning.

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