



Turning Around Low-Performing High Schools

Issue Papers The High School Leadership Summit

Under the accountability provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, hundreds of U.S. high schools will be identified as needing improvement. Even generally high performing American high schools have pockets of mediocrity where some students, for a variety of reasons, are not gaining the academic and workforce readiness skills they will need for future success. As high schools needing improvement gain more visibility, interest in ways to turn around high schools may soar.

While there is not a great deal of solid evidence on the effectiveness of various approaches to high school reform, an intense phase of innovation, experimentation, and evaluation is shedding more light on several approaches to creating effective high schools. This issue brief is intended to call attention to some of these noteworthy practices and innovations.

The Continuum and Degree of Improvement Needed

How severe and widespread is the problem of low-performance among U.S. high schools? How many schools need to be improved? The simple answer is that all schools need continuous improvement toward the goal of helping all students reach proficiency in reading and mathematics and graduate on time with a regular diploma, which are the core indicators of *No Child Left Behind*.

Clearly, out of the approximately 16,000 U.S. high schools serving over 14 million students, some schools are in greater need than others. One useful measure of the need for improvement is on time graduation or “promoting power.” According to research from the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, for the class of 2001, there were about 1,000 high schools across the U.S. that promoted fewer than 50 percent of their students to 12th grade on time. For the same cohort, there were about 2,100 high schools that promoted fewer than 60 percent of their students to 12th grade on time. About 6 to 12 percent of American high schools, then, appear to be deeply troubled institutions that need major transformation.

More targeted interventions may be needed in the remaining high schools. In focusing on high schools with the most dramatic needs, we should not lose sight of improvements needed in other high schools. We cannot afford to be complacent about any school because the individual toll for any student “left behind” is unacceptable. But for education leaders and policymakers, the 1,000 to 2,000 troubled high schools with weak promoting power give a sense of the scale of the most serious problems we face.

Where are these schools concentrated? According to the Hopkins research, for the class of 2001, seven states have more than 100 high schools with weak promoting power. Twenty-five states have 20 or more high schools with weak promoting power. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia have between 1 and 19 high schools with weak promoting power, and only 1 state has no high schools with weak promoting power.

While it is true that many of these schools are concentrated in high-poverty communities, this is not to say that high-poverty is the *cause* of low performance: in fact, *Dispelling the Myth Revised: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Analysis of High-performing Schools*, a publication produced by the Education Trust, identifies over 4,500 high-poverty and high-minority schools across the U.S. that are also high-performing. If the causes are multiple, the solution must be more complex than a one-size-fits-all approach. Indeed, it seems logical that if there are schools with a continuum of promoting power, there should be a similar continuum of interventions to improve high school student preparation—from a major overhaul of curriculum, school organization, and teacher development to reforms that are more incremental and targeted.

Working at the School-level

The *school itself* is an important site of intervention for improving student achievement. At the school-level, organization and administration (e.g., strong principal, teachers working together) and, in some cases, external "comprehensive school reform" models or methods are needed to help turn around schools that have either pockets of persistently low-achieving students or an entire student body that is low-achieving.

Reevaluating High School Expectations

Most importantly, virtually all American high schools need a dramatic re-evaluation of their expectations. The schools we have today were never created with an eye toward establishing a high level of academic expectations for all students. Regardless of how they may have changed their graduation requirements over the last 20 years, most large comprehensive high schools—the kind that serve about 70 percent of American youth—have never seriously addressed the way they track students into vocational, general or “college prep” paths, offering different expectations and curricula for different students. Fewer still have then taken the next step and planned varying degrees of programmatic change and staff development that are aligned with heightened expectations.¹

Noteworthy Networks and Models

To create entire high schools based on high expectations for all is extremely challenging, particularly for schools where large percentages of students are being tracked toward lower expectations. The following are networks of high schools that are noteworthy for working toward improving performance for large numbers of students:

- **Carnegie Corporation High Schools Initiatives** www.carnegie.org/sub/program/education.html
- **Gates Foundation National District and Networks Grants Program and Related High School Initiatives** www.gatesfoundation.org/Education/SmallHighSchools/RelatedInfo/EvaluationNationalSDNetworkGrantsProg-030421.htm
- **Schools Making Progress** www.sedl.org/slc/ and <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/descriptions/index.asp>

While not all of the following programs have large amounts of research yet to support their effectiveness, each addresses a different set of circumstances that can impair achievement. The American Association of School Administrators has produced a directory of these and other comprehensive school reform models that identifies the available evidence on their successes. The directory, *An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform*, is available at www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/district_organization/Reform/approach.htm.

- Initiated by the Southern Regional Education Board, **High Schools That Work** has worked with documented success to help 27 participating states turn around low-performing high schools.
- Developed by Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on Students Placed at Risk, the **Talent Development High School** reform model divides large, urban high schools into smaller units ("academies"), including a Ninth Grade Success Academy and academies based on career themes for students in the upper grades.
- **First Things First** is a K-12 reform model developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education that is supporting widespread reforms in Kansas City, Kansas; Houston, Texas; Shaw, Mississippi; and other communities.
- **Co-NECT** emphasizes integrating computer technology with project-based learning.
- **Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound** engages students in “expeditions” consisting of cooperative learning projects that integrate content from different subjects, such as mathematics, language arts, social studies, and art.
- **Modern Red Schoolhouse** individualizes student progress through different educational levels (as opposed to conventional grades), while using the Core Knowledge curriculum.
- **Paideia** strongly emphasizes student-centered learning (as opposed to teacher-directed instruction), featuring teachers as “coaches” and students engaging in Socratic questioning.

State and District Policies

Leaders of school reform efforts are quick to point out that reform on a school-by-school basis is extremely difficult, if not impossible, without support from the school district. State policies also need to be aligned to support the right expectations and programmatic reforms that make higher expectations reachable.

The National Governors Association has made the following set of recommendations for state policymakers to pursue in turning around low-performing schools:

“All states must start by reviewing their processes for identifying low-performing schools to ensure the indicators they examine are accurate measures of high school effectiveness. Low-performing high schools need comprehensive, not piecemeal, reform. Research suggests that governors should develop detailed high school improvement plans that include the following five strategies:

1. Align standards and assessments with the expectation that all students need to be ready for college success.
2. Increase student and teacher supports, including sustained professional development and time for collaborative efforts.
3. Ensure adequate human and financial resources to meet the scope and degree of educational challenges faced by the schools.
4. Create small, focused high schools that prepare all students for the future.
5. Support robust, high-quality public school choice options.”²

High Schools: Too Big, Too Impersonal?

A good amount of literature points to smaller scale or size as an important ingredient in making schools more personalized and engaging for students.³ There is a relationship between the size of schools and the percentage of teachers who report that apathy, tardiness, absenteeism, dropping out, and drug usage are serious problems in their school.⁴ Moderate size (e.g., a primary instructional unit of 100 students and a school of no more than 800-900 students) may be a necessary factor contributing to a more focused program, effective teacher development, and an atmosphere of personalization⁵.

Structure vs. Instruction

In this era of educational reform, the focus of most initiatives has been on changing the external structures and processes of schooling (e.g., adopting a block schedule, changing from a junior high school to a middle school model, reducing the size of school units, etc.). A caution about overemphasizing structure is in order. The underlying assumption of these efforts is that changes in the organizational structure of schools will have a major impact on how students learn and perform. While such changes may be important, they are seldom sufficiently powerful in and of themselves to influence student outcomes because they largely ignore what lies at the core of the teaching process (i.e., how teachers relate to students around knowledge, how content is allocated to time, how student work is assessed, how student mastery is ensured, etc.).

In short, by overemphasizing the role of structural changes in school improvement, some reformers have largely minimized or, in many cases, totally overlooked the pivotal role that quality instruction plays in determining the amount of learning that takes place for all students in academically diverse classrooms. There is a growing and very compelling literature base that underscores the vital role that such factors as time on task, opportunities to practice skills, providing quality feedback, and administering meaningful assessments of student work have on student outcomes. As James M. Kauffman so powerfully summarized:

“...if we are going to help students...we are going to have to change course. We cannot continue to avoid focusing on instruction! We cannot continue to suppose that consultation and collaboration [and structural changes] will somehow make up for the deficit in instruction. We cannot rely on substitutes for.... intensive, relentless instruction.”⁶

Conclusion

High schools of all sizes and shapes need improvement. Some need wholesale change, including the creation of new programs and new organizational structures. Others may need more targeted interventions to help improve the performance of a specific subset of students who are being left behind.

As leaders from each state and school district implement the accountability requirements and adequate yearly progress goals of *No Child Left Behind*, they will need to think strategically about how best to target a continuum of interventions, keeping an eye on emerging research and avoiding the tendency to overvalue purely structural reforms. School leaders should set up-to-date and challenging expectations for all students, and relentlessly push to improve teacher content knowledge, upgrade the content of the school curriculum, and improve classroom learning and the interaction between teachers and students.

Endnotes

¹ Brady, R. *Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003.) Available from www.edexcellence.net/library/failingschools/failingschools.html.

² National Governors Association. 2003. *Reaching New Heights: A Governor's Guide to Turning Around Low-Performing Schools*. Washington, DC. Available from www.nga.org/cda/files/0803REACHING.pdf.

³ Ibid. National Governors Association.

⁴ U. S. Department of Education, NCES. 2003. *The Condition of Education 2003, NCES 2003-067*, p. 151. Washington, DC.

⁵ Lee, V. and J. Smith. *Restructuring High Schools for Equity and Excellence*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

⁶ Kauffman, J.M. "Commentary: Today's Special Education and its Message for Tomorrow." *Journal of Special Education*. 32(4), (1999) p. 244-254.

This paper is one of a series produced in conjunction with the U.S. Secretary of Education's **High School Leadership Summit**. For more information about the U.S. Department of Education's work on high schools, visit <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/index.html>.