

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

STATE-LEVEL POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS



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The call for reform in secondary schools is well documented in American education. In 1918, The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education issued its landmark report, *Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education*. Other significant reform works have included *The Story of the Eight Year Study: A Report of the Commission on the Relations of School and College*, produced by the Progressive Education Association (Aikin, 1942); Boyer's 1983 study, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*; and *Horace's Compromise* (Sizer, 1984).

Other landmark reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), *Prisoners of Time* (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994), and *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) have all provided recommendations for high school reform. More recently, the National Association of Secondary School Principals issued *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (2004). As a sequel to the groundbreaking 1996 National Association of Secondary School Principals report, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, the 2004 report provides a highly focused set of reform recommendations for principals.

Despite this history of searching for reform of secondary education, most of the federal and state reform initiatives over the past two decades have been focused at the elementary school and, to a lesser extent, middle school levels (Viadero, 2001). The same would seem to be true with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Many continue to believe that America's high schools remain obsolete and outmoded and fail to prepare students for post-secondary education and life beyond school. Cohen, Finn and Haycock (2004) have suggested that, despite increased state expectations for high school graduation requirements, enhanced standards and the addition of exit exams, America's high schools continue to reflect an era when higher education was an option for a select group of high school students and good jobs at decent wages were available to motivated but unskilled labor.

The Condition of America's High Schools

In September of 2004, approximately 3.5 million young people will have entered the ninth grade in the United States. Five years later, more than 1 million will have dropped out and another 1.5 million will graduate without the basic skills and qualifications necessary to prepare them for college, work and life (Vander Ark, 2003).

Despite a century of calls for high school reform, the list of shortcomings is long. In the past two decades, the United States has made significant progress in improving elementary education. The same cannot be said for the country's secondary schools. Not only have high schools received less attention but their inherent complexity makes the achievement of meaningful reform much more challenging than other components of the education system (Vander Ark, 2003).

High schools have failed to respond to the changing needs of youth and to the changing demands of society, the workplace and life. Significant systemic change has been rare and most improvements have been focused on the margins rather than on core issues and problems. For a variety of reasons, it has been easier to focus reform efforts at the early childhood and elementary levels, apparently assuming the needs of America's high schools will resolve themselves (McNeil, 2003). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates that *all* students be proficient.

The failure of the high school as it relates to changing economy and the nature of work, the development of an educated and participatory citizenry and elimination of the achievement gap are well documented. For example:

- A college graduate earns 70% more than a high school graduate.
- The unemployment rate for high school dropouts is four times the rate for college graduates.
- Young people are less engaged in collective civic institutions than their parents or grandparents.
- Voter turnout has been steadily declining since 1960, especially among young people.
- In 2000, 69% of U.S. students who had entered the 9th grade four years before graduated; the high school graduation rate was 76% for white students, 79% for Asian students, 57% for Native American students, 55% for African-American students and 53% for Hispanic students.
- Too few students demonstrate strong skills in essential areas of reading and math, and African-American and Hispanic youth score significantly lower than their Asian and white counterparts.
- The U.S. high school completion rate among 25 to 34 year-olds has dropped to ninth position in a ranking of 32 industrialized countries.
- Almost half (46%) of students who enter post-secondary education and 64% of those entering community colleges must complete one or more remedial courses.
- U.S. 12th graders perform near the bottom of participating countries in math and science (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2003).

A recent Manhattan Institute for Policy Research study investigated college readiness rates in the United States. The study used high school completion, completion of the minimum course work required for college admission and achievement of an NAEP "basic" level of achievement in reading to determine the college readiness level of high school graduates. Findings indicated only 32% of all students, less than half of those graduating and approximately one-third of all students beginning high school, leave high school with the minimum qualifications necessary to apply for college. Compared to white and Asian students, African-

American and Hispanic graduates were found to be disproportionately inadequately prepared for college (Greene & Forster, 2003).

Since 1998, Public Agenda has conducted an annual national survey of public school students, teachers and parents, along with employers and college professors. A recent assessment of these survey responses reveals continuing dissatisfaction with the skills and attitudes of today's graduating public high school students. Most parents (67%), teachers (77%) and high school students (73%) believe that a high school diploma means a typical student has at least learned the basics. Employers and college professors are less enthusiastic about the achievement levels of high school graduates. More than one half of the employers (58%) and 68% of the college professors did not believe that a high school diploma was a guarantee that the typical student had learned the basics (Johnson and Duffett, 2003).

More than half (59%) of employers reported that the high school graduates they saw were not ready for the work force. Seventy-three percent described public high school graduates as having "fair" or "poor" skills in writing clearly, grammar and spelling. Six of ten employers characterized high school graduates as having "fair" or "poor" basic math skills (Johnson and Duffett, 2003).

College professors were similarly critical of high school graduates. Less than half (47%) believe that high school graduates they encounter are ready for college. More than seven in ten rate public high school graduates as having "fair" or "poor" skills in writing clearly, grammar and spelling. Sixty-five percent also rate high school graduates as having "fair" or "poor" basic math skills (Johnson and Duffett, 2003).

Confounding the issues surrounding the failure of the country's high schools to implement substantial change is an apparent lack of consensus among the general public and other stakeholders as to the purpose of the 21st century high school. This lack of a shared vision for high schools and consensus on the issues and the need for change make reform at the secondary level an even more daunting challenge (McNeil, 2003).

Developing a Climate for Reform at the State Level

Historically, states have had a significant impact on high schools. They have an even greater role in developing a new vision for high schools. While most states have taken actions (e.g., adopted content standards, revised graduation requirements, adopted state assessments, developed exit exams, etc) to reform the high school, few have developed initiatives to think systematically how state policies and practices would support the development of a new vision for high school (McNeil, 2003).

A recent study from the Aspen Program on Education looked at four states - California, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont - that have taken a systematic approach to rethinking what their high schools should be and produce. Each of these states adopted similar strategies. Their reforms are standards-based

and each appointed a state commission or task force charged with creating a vision and recommending the accompanying goals, principles, practices and policies needed to support the reform. Each state also created an organizational focal point for the reform, focused resources from federal programs, pursued foundation support, provided technical assistance, monitored results and invested modest amounts of state funds (McNeil, 2003).

McNeil (2003) identified several significant lessons for states that have emerged from the experiences of these four states. Initially, building a strong case for reform is critical. Stakeholders need strong, compelling reasons to change. Reform efforts must also be based on a clear vision of what high schools should be, and the vision for high schools should provide a basis for the alignment or realignment of state policies. Providing technical assistance in building leadership capacity at the state, district, school and classroom levels and improving classroom instruction are also critical in planning and implementing reform. States should also commit to providing additional resources for at least three to five years to support the reform initiative. Finally, reform takes time and policy-makers need to be realistic about the time required for results.

McNeil's findings regarding establishing a climate for secondary school reform are reinforced by the lessons learned from the High Schools That Work Project. Bottoms (2002) has identified a series of key conditions that influence efforts to improve secondary schools. These conditions for success include rigorous high school graduation standards, technical assistance for low-performing schools, a commitment to and a focus on a comprehensive reform design, a focus on student achievement and a commitment to increase the number of teachers with deep subject matter knowledge who can effectively engage students in learning.

A recent report from the National High School Alliance (Harvey and Housman, 2004) provides some additional insight into what is needed to effect change in secondary schools. Synthesizing the conversations and content from a series of fall 2003 national conferences on high schools, the report identified several key "levers" that are important to facilitating institutional change in America's high schools. The need to conceptualize K-12 and post-secondary education in a seamless manner and a commitment to preparing practically all students for college-level work were noted as important to secondary school reform. The report went on to outline five other changes necessary for effective change. First, the need to improve teacher preparation and professional development is paramount. Second, there must be a commitment from secondary education to ensure that all students can read at or above grade level. Third, the high school drop-out rate must be reduced. Fourth, a commitment to pursue the promise of smaller, more personalized learning environments for high schools must be demonstrated before true improvement can be made. Finally, a commitment to revisit existing standards is critical.

In articulating the design for developing the 21st century high school, Cohen (2001) identifies several key principles that should be considered when contemplating high school reform. These principles include a focus on creating small high schools/smaller learning communities, promoting diversity in organizational

structures, curriculum, pedagogy and use of time, and developing linkages to post-secondary education and all available community resources.

Approaches to Reforming State Policies and Practices

The need for secondary school reform is clear, yet there is no general consensus as to how this reform should take place. A recent study by the National High School Alliance found two distinct views of the reform process emerging. One model appears to be more policy-oriented and managerial in focus and favors top-down solutions that are directed at forestalling economic disaster if they are not implemented. This model has a high public profile, relies on an analysis of economic trends and focuses on standards and assessment. The second reform model emerging is more focused on resource equity for students than for systems. Proponents of this approach strive to develop models of effective schools and are more supportive of local solutions than those prescribed from the national or state levels (Harvey and Housman, 2004).

The mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the continued call for improvement in America's high schools have also spawned a number of whole-school approaches to reform. This approach to schoolwide reform and the focus on "research-based" approaches was facilitated by the U. S. Congress in 1994 when, for the first time, schools with student poverty rates as low as 50% could use Title I funds for improving the entire school. This model received additional support in 1997 when Congress authorized an additional \$145 million per year to assist low-performing (mostly Title I) schools in raising student achievement by adopting "research-based, school-wide" approaches (American Institute for Research, 1999).

With so many school-wide reform models available, it is often difficult to determine the most effective strategy. In an effort to address this situation, the American Institute for Research conducted a comprehensive study of 24 widely recognized school-reform models. Of the high school reform models reviewed, only High Schools That Work (HSTW) was found to have "strong evidence of positive effects on student achievement." Three other K-12 models, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Community for Learning and the School Development Program were found to have "promising evidence of positive effects on student achievement." The study also concluded that, in general, the school-wide reform initiatives provided little evidence of positive effects on student achievement resulting in an environment in which policy-makers are making school reform decisions without the benefit of critical information (American Institute for Research, 1999).

An earlier report, *All Over the Map: State Policies to Improve the High School* (Martinez and Bray, 2002), organized state policies concerning high schools into three clusters. The first cluster included

policies specific to high schools and dealt with issues such as graduation, course credits and diplomas. The second group of state policies focused on policy options beyond the high school such as ensuring opportunities to learn, funding and teacher certification. The third cluster of policies focused on issues related to standards, assessments and accountability.

Harvey and Housman (2004) have identified four significant factors that provide guidance for secondary school reform. These factors, or dimensions, emerged from an analysis of national policies and programs affecting high schools. These four dimensions included the alignment of standards and assessment, the preparation and continued development of educators, the importance of involving knowledgeable “communities” in the reform effort and the identification of bringing successful innovations “to scale.”

Based on the findings from work with California, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont, McNeil (2003) identified several specific steps for states seeking reform in their high schools. States must review the status of their high schools and high school students in relation to stakeholders’ perceptions regarding high schools. A review of state policies and regulations must be undertaken. Once the review has been completed, the policies and regulations must be aligned with a new vision and goals for high schools. States must identify resources to promote reform and create an organizational focal point to support the reform initiative. Sufficient time for reforms to develop must be provided and the results must be carefully monitored.

Acknowledging the foundation that has been created as a result of the standards-based reform initiatives, Cohen (2001) has proposed an approach to reform that is a combination of incremental and more radical strategies. He has grouped these strategies into actions that can be taken to accelerate current reform practices, those that are focused on making mid-term corrections in state standards and graduation requirements and those that are focused on bringing about some of the more fundamental and transformative changes that are needed to truly institutionalize the reform initiatives.

Recommendations for accelerating current reform efforts include providing immediate assistance to the lowest performing high schools, investing in capacity-building, providing incentives for creating small high schools/small learning communities and stimulating the creation of new school models. Recommendation for mid-term corrections include creating a system of rigorous and aligned standards, ensuring that standards and assessments are aligned and real-world, increasing academic rigor for all students and requiring participation in community-based activities. Finally, Cohen (2001) suggests that states plan and pilot more fundamental changes focused on capacity-building, using performance contracts, replacing existing governance and management structures and making the needed changes in certification, finance and other areas.

Cohen (2001) identifies three overarching guidelines for state policy-makers. First, he suggests that

state and local partnerships are essential to successful reform, as neither level can be successful without the support and cooperation of the other. Second, a successful reform effort will require the use of both “inside-out” and “outside-in” strategies. Third, Cohen believes that effective reform is based upon a balanced combination of both incremental and radical change strategies.

Questions are also being raised about the effectiveness of reform initiatives that have been widely adopted. A recent study of six states that require students to pass a graduation exam to receive a high school diploma concluded that most test questions reflected material that students that study early in their high school careers, that required pass scores reflected modest expectations and that the tests measure only a fraction of the essential knowledge and skills. The study also recommended that states should not lower standards, should commit to improving their tests over time and should focus on building more comprehensive assessment systems (Do Graduation Tests Measure Up?, 2004).

One specific secondary school reform strategy that is growing in popularity nationally is the creation of small high schools or the reconfiguration of larger high schools into small learning communities. Two major sources of funds for this effort have been the federal government’s Smaller Learning Communities Program and the Gates Foundation, which has provided some \$650 million for this effort since 2000. Several states and large school districts are involved in state- and district-wide strategies focused on creating smaller high schools and learning communities. The New York City school system has committed to an initiative focused on eliminating the lowest-performing high schools and creating small schools in their place. Forty-two schools were opened in 2003 and plans call for the creation of 60 additional small schools in 2004. Other large school districts including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago and San Diego have also implemented initiatives focused on creating smaller high school learning environments (Hendrie, 2004).

Despite this growth in the small high school movement and the availability of both private and United States Department of Education funding, several issues remain unresolved. Results have been mixed, as scaling-up small school successes is challenging, the ability to sustain the reform over the long term is being debated and there is a lack of consensus in the reform community as to whether creating new smaller schools or reconfiguring existing large schools into smaller learning communities is the most effective strategy (Hendrie, 2004).

Implementing Reform at the State Level

Despite a lack of consensus regarding the most effective model for reforming the nation’s secondary schools, the available literature does provide sufficient guidance for states seeking to move their secondary schools into the 21st century. This model comprises several distinct yet interrelated components. The first component involves a focus on establishing and supporting a climate for reform. The primary goal of this component is to involve all relevant stakeholders in an assessment of the need for reform. The outcome should be a strong and very publicly visible and compelling rationale for change. Creating this supportive climate for reform must also include a realistic acknowledgment about the time required for true reform.

Although many states have enacted specific policies directed at high school reform, only a few have formally committed to a model which systematically develops a new vision and goals for high schools. Doing so is an essential step in any long-term reform initiative. This new vision for high schools, developed within a climate that is supportive and committed to reform, then becomes the sieve through which all ensuing policies, regulations and practices must flow.

States that have committed to a true systematic effort to reform their high schools should consider creation of a state-level task force or commission. Such a group can become the vehicle for conducting a comprehensive assessment of the status of high schools, creating the new vision and goals and reviewing and revising existing state policies and regulations to ensure alignment with the new vision.

The availability of resources to support and sustain the reform effort is a critical component of all reform models. The resource question includes not only the pursuit of new sources but the identification and refocusing of existing resources.

Ensuring success of the reform initiative over the long term requires the creation of an organizational focal point responsible for the initiative. Practically speaking, such an action formally and visibly demonstrates a commitment to the initiative and provides an organizational point for accountability.

A commitment to capacity-building is a theme in almost all of the current high school reform initiatives, regardless of their focus or approach. This capacity-building should be conceptualized in the broadest sense to include teachers, administrators and other stakeholders at the classroom, school, district and state levels.

Related to this commitment to capacity-building is the need to provide technical assistance. This assistance should be targeted and focused on improving classroom instruction and student achievement. One strategy that is being effectively used in some reform models is the development of pilot projects/schools. Such an approach provides an opportunity to implement and evaluate specific elements of reform initiatives at reduced cost and low political risk. Such small-scale efforts can also be initiated fairly quickly, thus providing some early concrete examples of state activity and commitment.

Summary

The quest to reform secondary education in American education has a long and rich history. The current education climate with its focus on reform offers yet a new opportunity to transform secondary education. States must assume a major role for this transformation effort to be successful. Preliminary results from initiatives in several states suggest that states can make a difference.

Policy Implications for States

- Involve stakeholders in creating a climate supportive of reform.
- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the status of high schools and high school students.
- Systematically develop a new vision and goals for high schools.
- Create a state-level task force or commission.
- Acknowledge that true reform takes time.
- Pursue new sources of funding and refocus existing funding to develop and sustain the reform initiative.
- Create an organizational focal point for the initiative.
- Plan and implement a capacity-building program for all stakeholders.
- Provide targeted technical assistance.
- Combine incremental and radical change strategies.
- Develop pilot projects.
- Create state, regional and local partnerships.

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