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High Schools at the Tipping Point

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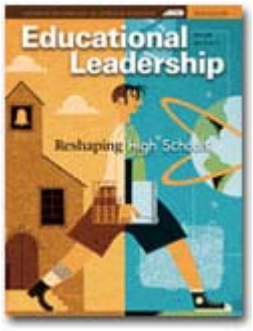

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The United States faces a choice: Do nothing to fix a broken high school system and watch our competitiveness further decline, or summon the political will to demand change.

In today's knowledge-based economy, all students—regardless of their home region, background, or college aspirations—require a high-quality secondary school education. Unfortunately, the education reforms of the past two decades in the United States have essentially ignored secondary schools, focusing instead on the elementary grades. Although building a strong foundation in the early grades is crucial to students' long-term educational success, investing almost exclusively in pre-K through 6th grade is not enough. Every available indicator—state, national, and international assessments of math and reading skills; high school graduation rates; college attendance and remediation rates; and employer surveys—tells the same story: Too many high school students drop out, and too many others graduate unprepared for college or employment. To build on the improvements that committed educators have made in the early grades, we must make an equal commitment to strengthen middle and high school students' performance.

The Crisis That Demands a Response

There is clearly a crisis in U.S. high schools. Nationally, barely 30 percent of rising freshmen can read at grade level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). More than 1.2 million U.S. high school students drop out every year—roughly 7,000 each school day (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007). Forty-two percent of freshmen in community colleges and 20 percent of freshmen in public four-year institutions require remedial courses in reading, writing, or math to handle college-level work (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). In survey after survey, employers express disappointment in the skills of high school graduates. For example, in 2005, 60 percent of U.S. manufacturing companies surveyed said that high school graduates were poorly prepared for entry-level jobs (National Association of Manufacturers, 2005).

On all counts, students of color fare worse than their peers. For too many poor and minority students, rather than driving social equity, our education system exacerbates a preexisting divide. This is exemplified by the 2,000 U.S. high schools—called "dropout factories" and serving mainly minority youth—whose students stand only a 60 percent or less chance of graduating within four years (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

The consequences of this crisis, for dropouts and for society at large, are severe. A high school diploma is now a prerequisite for the majority of jobs. In 2005, a high school dropout in the United States earned, on average, approximately $10,000 less annually than a high school graduate. On average, those with no high school diploma earn $260,000 less over the course of a lifetime than those who graduate from high school (Rouse, 2005). Moreover, high school dropouts are far more likely to be tax consumers than taxpayers, use welfare and public health services, and commit crimes. Researchers estimate that each high school dropout costs society at large about $209,000 over the course of his or her lifetime (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse,

2007).

Designed for a Different Era

Why are U.S. high schools failing us? Partly because they were never designed to meet today's moral and economic imperative of graduating all students. When the "modern" high school system was established in the early 20th century, only 10 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds attended high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). It wasn't until 1918 that all states required children to attend elementary school; in that era, a high school education was a luxury afforded only to upper-income families. Getting a well-paying job without a high school diploma was not simply possible; it was the norm ("Public Education," 2007).

Fast-forward to 2008, when 90 percent of well-paying jobs require post-secondary education or training (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). A constantly changing labor market has created new challenges; students must acquire adaptable, transferable skills as well as specific content knowledge to be adequate employees. And as many markets go global, the skills of U.S. workers—and the standards of education—must meet new international benchmarks.

Clearly, the education goals of the United States have changed profoundly from those of a century ago. Yet the typical U.S. high school education has remained virtually unchanged. Classroom teachers are still often trained to be isolated content lecturers who engage in little collaboration with local communities, colleges, or businesses. And high school students are still pushed into outdated, one-size-fits-all courses rather than given the personal attention and flexibility they need to stay on the path to graduation. These antiquated practices show that the education system has not fully responded to changing demands and continues to be misaligned with the modern workforce.

This is not an indictment of professionals working in schools. The fact that educators today graduate 70 percent of the nation's teenagers within a system that originally graduated 10 percent is phenomenal. But even qualified and well-supported educators struggle to meet continually growing demands because they work in a broken system. There are exceptions; in many high schools, innovative educators are successfully preparing even the most challenged students for today's world. However, national efforts have, for the most part, simply propped up an antiquated system instead of rethinking and repairing it. As one educator complained to me, "Every era of reform simply results in adding something onto the existing system instead of systematically redesigning it."

Three Approaches for Reform

The old adage "If you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting" is nowhere more true than in U.S. high schools. But many high schools across the country—even in some of the most challenging educational environments—are *not* doing what they've always been doing. Such schools have altered how they do business so that all students graduate prepared for life. Three key overall approaches have emerged from successful schools' experiences.

Align what schools expect of students with the demands of college and the workforce. A growing body of research suggests that the skills needed for work readiness increasingly mirror those needed for college readiness (ACT, 2006). This collective standard is the new bar that all students need to reach. We need to set common, high expectations for every student that match the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college, at the workplace, and as a citizen. Schools, districts, and states need to align their systems—including curriculums, assessments, teacher preparation, and accountability—to such benchmarks. Many states have taken steps to raise standards, with the support of such organizations as the American Diploma Project, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the College Board, and ACT. However, we should support a collective effort among states that would be more time and cost efficient, and more politically feasible, while freeing up state resources for other endeavors.

Offer a rigorous, option-rich curriculum; personalize learning; and provide necessary supports. Schools must take an individualized approach to supporting student achievement. School leaders are using many strategies to personalize the learning environment, including creating smaller learning communities, developing student advisories, keeping teachers with the same students for multiple years, and helping each student develop a personal graduation plan.

Many schools offer multiple pathways to a high school diploma (some of which are described elsewhere in this issue). These include alternative programs for overage students, early-college and dual-enrollment programs, and high-quality career and technical education. And effective schools arm struggling students with individualized supports to get them back on track.

Improve instruction by mining data and using digital technologies. Ultimately, education happens through interactions between students and teachers. To help ensure that these interactions lead to the most productive, engaging instruction possible, we must arm educators with essential training and tools. One common element of successful high school instruction is teachers' use of rich data on student performance to make informed decisions about practice. Schools need to develop comprehensive data systems, a balanced set of formative and summative assessments, and a culture of data use.

Teachers also need support to use digital technology systemically and thoughtfully in the classroom. The key to using technology effectively is providing significant, ongoing professional development to maximize the opportunities that technology-based projects offer. Teachers often lag behind their students in familiarity with such tools. McKinley Technology High School in Washington, D.C., is one school that provides essential preparation for teachers. By creating a team of teachers and administrators to support classroom instruction, sharing best practices throughout the school, and making the most of personalized instruction, the school uses technology as a lever for reform.

Needed: Strong Federal Policy

Although reforms by some states, districts, and schools are bringing about positive changes, deep change requires federal leadership. We cannot transform secondary schools from bastions of outdated practices into high-performing centers of learning through disconnected pockets of innovation.

The costs of the dropout rate, rising industry demands, and stiffer international competition constitute a national call to action, equal to that the United States took in response to the launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957. After Sputnik, the government invested massively in education in math, science, and foreign languages. In the same decade, the nation focused on a second educational imperative, equity, as the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, exploded on television screens. The government recognized that both national security and equity warranted a federal response, but officials viewed them as separate issues and sought to address each without reference to the other.

Today, the imperatives of national security and equity have converged. The modern-day equivalent of Sputnik is the massive global economic competition facing U.S. businesses and workers. Until the late 1970s, the U.S. education system coped with a slowly shifting economy, changing demographics, and increasing demands from the workforce—and set the standard for the world. However, the decades since have seen the United States reach a tipping point. Growth in high school graduation rates has leveled off while workplace requirements continue to rise. At the same time, countries that once had subpar education systems have retooled to meet new demands and are progressing rapidly.

Forty years ago, the United States ranked first in the world in the percentage of students completing high school. No longer, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). While the U.S. graduation rate plateaued, nations such as South Korea, Finland, and New Zealand achieved enormous increases in education attainment. As a result, the United States has slipped from 1st to 13th in rankings of the percentage of the adult population with a high school diploma, whereas Korea, for example, has risen from 27th place to 1st (OECD, 2007a). U.S. 15-year-olds now rank below average among the 30 OECD countries: 25th in math, 21st in science, and 15th in reading (OECD, 2007b). At the same time, the United States shows larger achievement gaps between socioeconomic groups than many other countries (OECD, 2007b). In terms of producing a high-quality workforce, the United States is being outperformed in quantity, quality, and equity.

At the same time, historically disadvantaged minority populations are growing rapidly and will make up half the U.S. population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Thus, the national security goal of educating every student for a competitive workforce is overlapping the civil rights goal of equity in education. In 1957, the federal government responded to a perceived national

security crisis by directing top students into essential fields of study. In the 21st century, however, with post-secondary education a prerequisite for most jobs, skimming the cream off the top will not be enough. No longer can the nation handle a Sputnik moment by relying on its most fortunate students to pull everyone else along.

To enable high schools in every school district to prepare students for this competitive century, we need comprehensive federal policy that works in conjunction with local efforts. I am not proposing turning control of the education system over to the federal government. But we must recognize that states, districts, and individual schools need federal-level support to meet the increasingly global, complex demands placed on our education system.

As a former federal and state elected official, I apply the "first, do no harm" principle to federal education policy. Instead of undermining state and local efforts, federal policy must build on those successes by complementing, encouraging, and supporting them. Our goal should be to create a coherent, comprehensive education system with federal, state, and local efforts working collaboratively—not a top-heavy collection of federal mandates that ignore work being done at other levels.

Policy initiatives are particularly important in several areas. The federal government should

- Support a state-led effort to develop common national standards that are benchmarked to international requirements. The federal government could, for example, provide financial incentives or flexibility on accountability time lines for states that adopt those standards.
- Address the needs of the two-thirds of middle and high school students who are struggling readers.
- Target resources to support state and local efforts to turn around low-performing high schools. This would require a new funding stream directing funds to every state to support a data-driven system of differentiated improvement. Districts and high schools would use funds to provide targeted interventions, implement whole-school reform, or replace low-performing high schools.
- Encourage local development of innovative practices, particularly those that are readily replicable. Study and evaluate promising innovations and disseminate information on those that prove effective.
- Help educators learn to use data to improve teaching and learning.

A Crucial Choice

The reauthorization of No Child Left Behind provides a good opportunity to ensure that federal policy reflects what we know from research to be the best practices for creating effective 21st-century high schools. Educators and researchers should work closely with elected officials to inform legislative deliberations. Education is no different from any other endeavor; ultimately, every important decision affecting it will be made or ratified by an elected body, whether a school board or the U.S. Congress. We must therefore build the public will to demand action from elected officials.

Building such public commitment will require overcoming what I call the 25–75 hurdle: Only 25 percent of the U.S. population has direct involvement with the public school system, and the remaining 75 percent see education as a peripheral issue. Those of us with insight into education and economic realities need to persuade that 75 percent that *all* citizens have a stake in a strong education system. All of us—students, educators, employers, citizens—stand to lose by preserving an outdated system, and we therefore share an obligation to act.

At this point in history, the United States faces a crucial choice. We can do nothing to fundamentally change the way we educate students in their high school years—guaranteeing a continuing educational decline and, inevitably, a weaker nation. Or we can choose the course that will secure a qualified workforce, a thriving economy, and a vibrant, democratic society by summoning the political will to transform secondary schools into thriving institutions of learning.

Who would not choose the second option? Our challenge now is to understand the crisis, recognize the solutions suggested by emerging research, and build the public will to take the necessary actions.

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