



High Schools for the New Millennium

Imagine the Possibilities

BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation

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Every year our country loses thousands of young people—students who leave school without graduating or without the skills and knowledge to succeed in life. This failure to prepare the next generation for tomorrow's challenges threatens our nation's economic and civic health. Our schools, particularly our high schools, must prepare all students for the demands of college, work, and citizenship.

Today's large, impersonal high schools were designed for a different era and a different economy, and they are leaving far too many young people behind. We are asking teachers to succeed in a system that is broken. Millions of young people are drifting through high school without adult attention or the relevant, rigorous coursework necessary to keep them engaged. Consequently, students—particularly African Americans and Hispanics—are dropping out at alarming rates. In fact, three out of every 10 students do not even graduate.

Yet there is hope. A promising trend is emerging around the country. Educators and communities are redefining the American high school and creating dynamic learning environments designed to prepare all students for success in today's world. There is no denying the level of commitment required to transform our high schools. For the transformation to occur and remain sustainable, huge investments of resources, time, and expertise are needed.

The challenge is great. But so are the possibilities.

The Challenge

Preparing Students for the Future



Imagine that an overnight mail service failed to deliver a third of its packages on time, or that three-quarters of the stereos produced by an electronics company failed to meet industry standards. Imagine that a retail clothing company provided high-quality customer service, but only to certain types of customers. Would these companies stay in business? Now, consider that American high schools:

- Allow one-quarter of students to read below basic levels¹
- Fail to graduate 30 percent of their students²
- Prepare far fewer low-income than high-income students for college³

How have we allowed this widespread failure to occur? How can we allow it to continue?

Politicians, bureaucrats, and teachers are not to blame.

The failure stems from today's high schools being stuck in time. Our high schools were simply not designed to prepare all students for college learning, high-tech workplaces, and 21st century citizenship. Ignored for decades, today's high schools have failed to keep pace with the needs of today's young adults, with disastrous results for those requiring the most support to succeed.

AN OUTDATED SYSTEM

Today's high schools were conceived at the beginning of the 20th century to prepare students to work in an industrial economy that looked very different from the economy we have today. In the early 1900s, large comprehensive high schools were designed to educate all of a community's students efficiently, providing different programs, or tracks, for students based on their perceived academic prowess. Top-performing students were guided through a relatively challenging academic track to prepare them for college. Other students—almost always poor and minority students, regardless of their knowledge and skills—were guided into softer academic courses (e.g., business math or general science) or vocational classes

¹ Grigg, W.S., Daane, M.C., Jin, Y., & Campbell, J.R. (2003). *The nation's report card: Reading 2002* (NCES 2003-521, Table 2.1). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2002/2003521.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).

² Swanson, C.B. (2004, February 25). *Who graduates? Who doesn't? A statistical portrait of public high school graduation, class of 2001*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, Education Policy Center. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410934_WhoGraduates.pdf (accessed September 14, 2004).

³ Wirt, J., Choy, S., Gruner, A., Sable, J., Tobin, R., & Bae, Y., et al. (2000). *The condition of education 2000* (NCES 2000-062, Indicator 30). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000062.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).

(e.g., shop or automotive repair) with the assumption that they were not college material.

In an effort to serve all students efficiently, our high schools serve few students well. Top-performing students, although usually prepared for college, often complain that their education is neither relevant to their interests nor challenging. Low-performing students are often pushed through a watered-down curriculum with virtually no individualized support to develop the skills—such as reading, writing, and problem solving—needed to succeed in life. Average students frequently fall through the cracks, virtually ignored by a system that accepts mediocrity. A majority of all students, but especially those in urban districts, report feeling disengaged from school. Public Agenda, a nonpartisan opinion research organization, found that two-thirds of students said they could do better if they tried, and half of students considered school boring and too easy.⁴

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

The philosophy underlying the comprehensive high school was problematic in the early 20th century; it is catastrophic now. Although low high school graduation and college attendance rates were acceptable back in the days when high school graduates, and even dropouts, could support their families and contribute to society, such low levels of education are simply unacceptable today in an economy based on analytic thinking, communication, and problem solving. High schools must help to develop these skills and prepare students for college. This preparation directly relates to a person's earning potential. Recent data from the American Diploma Project have found that both colleges and employers seek the same core knowledge and skills.

Preparation for higher education and the workforce is not the only rationale for improving high school education in the United States. The health of our democracy depends on it. Democratic institutions require an educated citizenry that is knowledgeable, reflective, and able

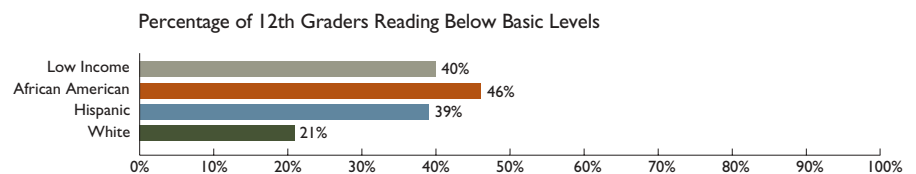
to embrace its civic responsibilities. More than ever, the challenges that our young people face require that all students—not just an elite minority—leave school with an informed point of view, knowledge of the world, a capacity to grapple with complex problems, and a willingness and an ability to engage with people different from themselves. Good high schools not only provide students with these skills and send students to college to further develop them, good high schools celebrate the diversity of their student populations and create authentic opportunities for students to work with and befriend people of different backgrounds and cultures.

It is time to rethink the purpose and structure of the American high school. Today's large comprehensive high schools are obsolete; they prepare a privileged fraction of students for college while placing many students on tracks to nowhere. Many students trying hard to prepare for college find themselves ineligible for some schools, having not taken prerequisite courses such as a foreign language. And while more than 70 percent of graduates continue on to college, more than one-quarter have to

Reading Failure Leads to School Failure

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a multi-subject test administered to a sample of fourth, eighth, and 12th grade students. Assessment results are described in terms of the percentage of students attaining each of three achievement levels: basic, proficient, and advanced.

Reading achievement among 12th graders has declined since 1998, and large numbers of 12th graders are failing to read at basic levels. For 12th grade reading, basic is defined as demonstrating an overall understanding of written text and being able to make some interpretations of the text. It is virtually impossible for a student failing to meet the basic level of reading to succeed in high school.



SOURCE Grigg, W.S., Daane, M.C., Jin, Y., & Campbell, J.R. (2003). *The nation's report card: Reading 2002* (NIES 2003-521, Tables 3.2 and 3.3). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2002/2003521.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).

⁴Farkas, S. & Johnson, J. (1997). *Getting by: What American teenagers really think about their schools*. New York: Public Agenda. Available from http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=52 (accessed September 14, 2004).

take remedial courses in their first year.⁵

We need a system of schools that encourages all students to learn challenging, academically focused material; gives them the support they need to learn it; and sends a much larger percentage on to post-secondary education. Clearly, high school graduation requirements must align with college entrance requirements. A high school diploma should hold value, but it should be only the first meaningful educational credential in a lifetime of learning.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Many changes are needed to increase graduation rates and bring America's high schools into the modern era. Educators must re-define what the American high school looks like and create high-quality, dynamic schools that provide all

⁵ Parsad, B. & Lewis, L. (2003). *Remedial education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2000* (NCES 2004-010). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004010.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).

Berkner, L. & Chavez, L. (1997). *Access to postsecondary education for the 1992 high school graduates* (NCES 98-105). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98105.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).



students with a new version of the Three R's: **rigorous** academic coursework, meaningful **relationships** with instructors who can help students meet high standards, and **relevant** learning opportunities through internships and community partnerships. The New Three R's are most

HIGHTECH HIGH

San Diego, California

Founded in 2000, High Tech High was conceived as a solution to the shortage of qualified high-technology workers in San Diego. By encouraging an interest in math, engineering, and the sciences, and creating a truly high-tech facility, innovative educators and industry leaders have fostered a healthy and rigorous educational environment. Located in a converted naval training warehouse, High Tech High's open floor plan, high ceilings, and low walls encourage its 400 students and teachers to interact freely. Specialized labs take the place of traditional classrooms, and every student uses workstations with Internet-ready computers.

High Tech High's curriculum is project-based, and students design personalized education plans. Technology and a pre-engineering theme are integrated throughout the curriculum, and internships at local companies provide real-world work experience. By graduation, students have built a digital portfolio that provides a window into their entire high school experience, including progress made, projects completed, and skills acquired.

High Tech High students are proof of the school's success. During the 2002-03 school year, 99 percent of 10th graders passed the California High School Exit Exam in reading, and 88 percent passed the mathematics portion. In 2003, all 48 seniors in the first graduating class were accepted to college.



often found in smaller schools. All else being equal, students in small high schools score higher on tests, pass more courses, and go on to college more frequently than those in large ones. Moreover, these results appear to be greatest for low-income students and students of color.⁶

CREATING A PORTFOLIO OF GREAT SCHOOLS

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is committed to the concept that students should be able to choose from several small, innovative public high schools that offer a highly personalized, rigorous education and prepare every student for college, work, and citizenship. The foundation is partnering with communities across the country to promote the transition from large comprehensive high schools to smaller focused high schools. Grants fund both the start-up of new small high schools as well as the conversion of large high schools into smaller, more personalized schools

or learning communities. The foundation expects these new and revamped schools will offer families greater choice within the public school system and create models that can be replicated throughout the country.

At the same time, the foundation believes that federal, state, and local policy must change to help promote vital reform of today's high schools. Innovative schools are threatened as states grapple with new federal requirements and implement ongoing improvement efforts. While still demanding a high level of achievement and accountability, policymakers must also promote the development of a range of quality high school options for students. The foundation is actively working with states, school districts, local non-profits, and partner philanthropies to ensure that high-quality schools can flourish in a supportive, accountability-based policy environment. Creating large numbers of high-quality small high schools from which students may choose and a supportive policy environment is extremely difficult. There is no question it will be a challenge. But there is no question as to the possibilities for the future.

⁶ Cotton, K. (2001, December). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

The Possible

A Vision for High Schools in the New Millennium



Imagine a system of high schools designed for the modern era. Like a good business, we must begin by focusing on the consumer: in this case, the high school student—and the product: the education our schools provide. To serve all students well, today's high schools must offer a meaningful course of study that prepares all students for college. A high school diploma should represent the mastery of this material and serve as a signal that the graduate is prepared for the rigors of college.

In other words, high schools for the new millennium must expect students to learn a great deal of challenging, interesting, and relevant material—and provide students with the support to ensure that they can. What would these schools look like?

SMALL SCHOOLS, BIG BENEFITS

Smaller school size—generally no more than 400 students—can help to counteract many of the problems plaguing high schools today, such as overburdened teachers who barely know the names of their students; low expectations

for all but the highest-performing students; inadequate support for students needing extra assistance completing their coursework or planning for college; and curricula that fail to engage students in their own learning. Small schools are no panacea, but, done well, they offer environments that can make teaching and learning rewarding and successful.

Strong small schools offer another benefit. Since several small schools replace one large comprehensive high school, students have a choice of schools that best meet their needs and interests. Aside from increasing the satisfaction of students and their families, choice provides a check on school quality. Few students will choose a school that offers a disruptive learning environment or an undesirable curriculum.

Intuitively, it makes sense that smaller, more personalized schools are better positioned to serve students, and recent research confirms it. Small schools have been shown to increase graduation and college-going rates, improve attendance, bolster teacher morale and

effectiveness, and reduce incidents of violence. Moreover, although small schools *may* be slightly more expensive on a *per-student* basis, new research suggests that they are actually more cost effective than large schools on a *per-graduate* basis, since they graduate significantly larger percentages of students.⁷

Small high schools are not automatically better than large ones. There are plenty of underperforming small schools. But small size offers many advantages that can help promote teacher professionalism and student learning.

Getting the Mission Right

Like good companies, all schools of the new millennium would have a well-articulated mission. A school's mission guides the development of a coherent curriculum (a description of what students should be taught), its approach (the way lessons and programs are delivered by teachers, counselors, and other school staff), and its culture (the way in which staff and students interact). The mission permeates all that a good school does, resulting in an unshakable understanding among students, teachers, and administrators of the job they are there to do.

A clear mission is not unique to small schools. Some large high schools have well-articulated mission statements. The difference comes down to buy-in. Small high schools are more effective in eliciting the help of all teachers and administrators in developing a mission and using it as a guide to educate students. Students typically feel more engaged in these schools as well. This results in a school culture in which learning, exploration, and collaboration are valued.

Accomplishing any complex mission requires expertise and commitment. It should come as no surprise, then, that fulfilling an educational mission requires talented and dedicated teachers and administrators. Faculty in good schools work together, avoiding the isolation and lack of support that many teachers and administrators experience

in typical comprehensive high schools.

Small size facilitates such collaboration, allowing faculty to share ideas about teaching and to serve as friendly critics by offering suggestions about how to improve lessons and classroom management. Teacher collaboration can also be instrumental in evaluating students' work. Through collaboration, teachers see the type and quality of work that students can produce in different settings with different teachers, a practice that almost always results in a greater appreciation of students' talents and raised expectations of even the lowest-performing students.

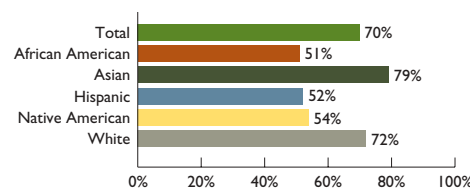
Relationships: A Supportive Environment

Collaboration also enables faculty, including school counselors, to compare notes about students, decreasing

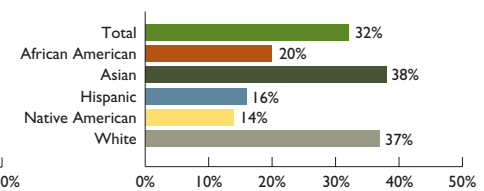
School Failure: The Hidden Crisis

In 2001, Dr. Jay Greene, a researcher with the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, decided to reexamine high school graduation rates. For years, the Department of Education included in its graduation rates students who have earned a high school diploma or an equivalency diploma such as the GED. Using this methodology, the Department of Education reports a graduation rate in the United States of approximately 86 percent. Dr. Greene decided to calculate the graduation rate by comparing enrollment and diploma counts. He asked, what percentage of ninth-grade students graduate from high school four years later? Stated this way, the graduation rate does not include students who were held back one or more years, students who left school to earn a GED or other equivalency diploma, or students who dropped out of school temporarily or permanently. The results are astounding—and disturbing. Today, other researchers are developing similar graduation rate methods and are producing remarkably consistent results.

High School Graduation Rates – National (Class of 2001)



College Readiness Rates



⁷ Lawrence, B.K., Bingle, S., Diamond, B.M., Hill, B., Hoffman, J.L., & Howley, C.B., et al. (2002). *Dollars & sense: the cost effectiveness of small schools*. Cincinnati, OH: KnowledgeWorks Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.kwfdn.org/ProgramAreas/Facilities/dollars_sense.pdf (accessed September 14, 2004).

SOURCE Greene, J.P., & Forster, G. (2003, September). *Public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States*. New York: Manhattan Institute, Center for Civic Innovation. Retrieved from http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_03.htm (accessed September 14, 2004).

the chances that students will fall through the cracks. In good schools, counselors take primary responsibility for advising and knowing the personal history of up to 80 students. Counselors ensure that no student is ineligible for appropriate post-secondary education because he or she failed to take prerequisite courses. This is an unfortunate reality that happens too frequently today. Finally, counselors serve as the primary contact to the students' parents or guardians, help students set personal goals and select courses, and ensure that students receive needed support. Such advisories are beneficial to all students.

Personalized support in small schools manifests itself in other ways as well. Small schools of the new millennium would keep standards high, push students to prepare for the rigors of college, and allow students to progress at speeds appropriate for their strengths and weaknesses. Juniors and seniors would be encouraged to add college-level courses to their schedules that challenge them and give them an opportunity to earning college credits.

Students arriving at high school with less academic preparation would find an appropriate safety net. Some would merely take a brush-up course, such as essay writing, to prepare them for the challenges of advanced high school courses, such as English literature, while other students would benefit from more intensive interventions such as tutoring or counseling.

In general, small schools foster an environment in which teachers know their students' emotional, academic, and social needs, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, and use this knowledge to tailor instruction. Students in turn feel recognized and cared for by their teachers and counselors. Students feel comfortable and confident enough to ask for help, admit errors, take risks, and experience failure while they learn.

Rigor: Challenging and Coherent Instruction

High schools of the new millennium would set expectations for learning that demand a lot from all students and schools—expectations that virtually guarantee student success in post-secondary education. Currently, high schools offer too many courses that are disconnected from

WEST CLERMONT

Cincinnati, Ohio

Urban high schools are not the only ones transforming into smaller schools. The West Clermont School District outside of Cincinnati is one suburban district that wanted to improve the graduation rates for its 9,000 students.

In 2002, after three years of planning, the district's two large high schools were divided into 10 small learning communities serving no more than 300 students each. Each small high school focuses on a particular discipline including creative arts and design, business and technology, performing arts, scientific studies, and world studies. The goal of the transformation was to promote high levels of academic achievement, foster stronger relationships among students and teachers, and graduate a larger percentage of students who are prepared for college and meaningful work. The rigorous academic curriculum stresses active, hands-on and in-depth learning, as well as the integration of subjects. A single team of teachers instructs the same students throughout their high school years. The academic year is divided into trimesters to allow students more time to take additional courses or to pursue internships. For the 2002-03 school year, the graduation rate of the 10 schools rose to 79 percent.

what colleges expect students to know.

High school standards, curricula, and textbooks are a mile wide and an inch deep. Consider a typical treatment of American history. Students memorize dates, and learn about key events such as the Civil War and important



figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. But they rarely spend significant time or energy on any single topic (e.g., the causes and implications of the Great Depression). This approach results in a relatively superficial understanding and little interest in the topic. Students fail to develop important skills such as writing, research, and problem solving, which can only be acquired through in-depth study.

Research and common sense tell us that we learn best by focusing on fewer topics and grappling with their subtleties. Not only do we learn those topics well, the analytic thinking required applies itself to most other topics, regardless of whether or not they were learned in school. Consequently, if high schools set standards, or learning goals, that are narrow, clear, and tied to college admissions, they would increase the odds that students who are successful in high school will be successful in post-secondary education and beyond.

Relevance: Real World Application

Using these standards as a guide, staff in a small school can set priorities around a few important goals and create conditions for in-depth learning. In great schools students are given the time to explore important topics and apply

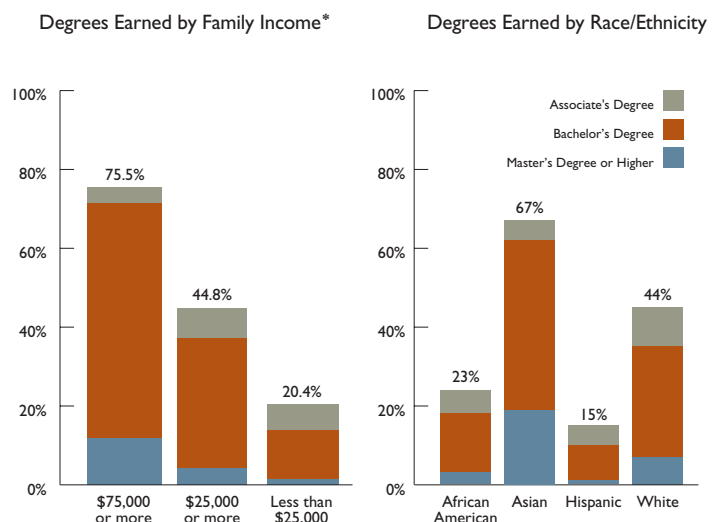
their learning to new problems in a variety of settings. These schools enable students to become experts in topics they are passionate about by completing projects and community learning experiences.

The best schools tap into their intimate setting to bring the curriculum to life by developing a focus, or organizing principle, that helps teachers and students engage in academic material. Some small schools are organized

Failure to Prepare for College

Too few students earn a post-secondary degree, an increasingly important experience and credential for economic success and informed participation in American democracy. Low-income students and students of color earn degrees at disproportionately lower rates than other students, contributing to the inequality in our society.

Affordability is unquestionably one reason for this gap. Low expectations and poor preparation, however, are also prime factors. Since many schools do not expect low-income students and students of color to attend college, these students are not encouraged to take high-level courses. As a result, these students are less prepared for the rigors of college. The chart illustrates that taking high-level courses almost erases the gap in college attainment.



*Data represents survey responses in 2000 from 1988 8th graders

SOURCE U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (2000). Unpublished tabulations from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Washington, DC: Author.

SOURCE U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, (2004, June 29). Educational attainment in the United States: 2003 (Current Population Report, P20-550, Table 1). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2003.html> (accessed September 14, 200).

around a theme, such as the arts, math and science, health services, or international studies.

Instruction is not necessarily given in the traditional way. Rather than learning about literature in English class and history in a completely separate class, students tackle a subject, such as the Great Depression, by exploring how literature, art, and news reports depict the period. Instead of lecturing, teachers serve as coaches, pointing students to various source documents and giving examples of the quality of work expected for the final project. When students know what the priorities are, why they are important, and what high-quality work looks like, they begin to take responsibility for their own learning, a key goal of any successful education system.

Students in schools of the new millennium will have to demonstrate their learning constantly and in a variety of ways. Although tests can and should be a measure of

learning, they are neither the only way, nor the best way to assess how much students have learned. For example, presenting a business plan for a new company to other students, teachers—and even community business leaders—offers students the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned in several subjects while motivating them in a way that a test simply cannot. Small schools make this type of experience more likely than schools with thousands of students.

EQUAL CHOICE

Moving to a system of great small schools would create greater choice for students and their families. Since high schools of the new millennium would be small, there would have to be significantly more schools than there are today. This change would foster competition and promise quality schools. Rather than choosing from 100





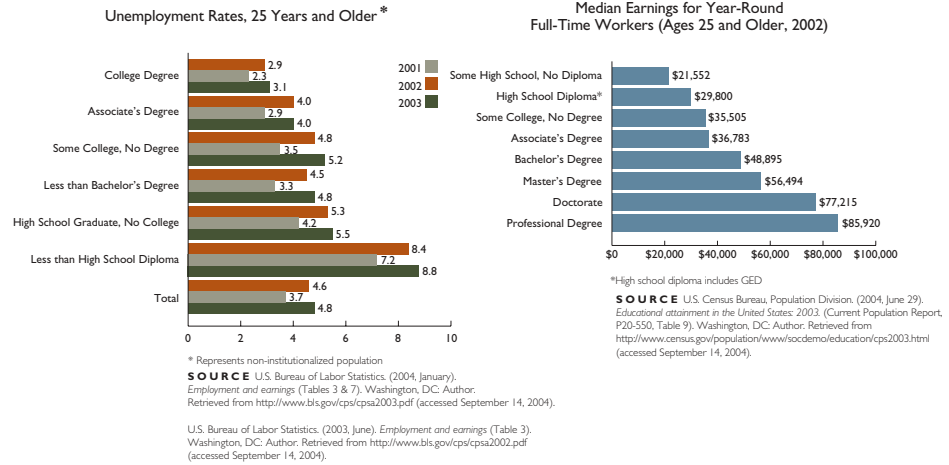
courses with five tracks of varying difficulty in a single large comprehensive school, every student would have a choice among several small schools, each offering a streamlined but academically challenging set of courses that prepare all students for college, work, and citizenship.

The types of schools from which students could choose would vary greatly. Some would work closely with local museums; some would be charters, which are public schools that function independently of a district bureaucracy; some would be geared to students who have been arrested; and others would operate as traditional public schools. Regardless of their mission and structure, all schools of the new millennium would cater to the needs of every student by combining a challenging academic environment with a support structure that ensures their success.

The choices that are currently available to affluent suburban students most closely resemble this approach. Affluent families can choose between public schools with advanced college-preparatory tracks or small private schools, some with a traditional orientation, some organized around a theme such as technology, and some with a particular educational approach. All students should have the opportunity to select a program of interest that pushes them to be ready for college.

Education Pays Off

There is simply no questioning the economic value of education.



American Diploma Project

High school graduates need the same kind of rigorous academic preparation whether they are going to college or straight into the modern workplace, according to *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*, by the American Diploma Project (ADP).⁸

ADP's report, issued in 2004, warns that high school diplomas fail to signify that graduates have the knowledge and skills necessary for success after graduation. Colleges find that many of today's graduates need remedial help in college and never obtain a bachelor's degree, while employers say too many high school graduates lack the basic analytical and communications skills they need to succeed in the modern workplace.

Based on both employment data and analysis of real-life skill requirements, ADP's researchers concluded that mathematics standards should include content from Algebra 1 and 2, geometry, data analysis, and statistics. English standards should include strong oral and written communication skills, as well as the kind of analytical and research skills currently taught in most advanced courses.

While these standards are higher than the standards states already are struggling to achieve, ADP asserts they are necessary to ensure that every graduate is prepared for college and for work.

ADP is a partnership of Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, and the Thomas Fordham Foundation.

⁸ American Diploma Project. (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. Washington, DC: Achieve Inc. Retrieved from [http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/ADPreport/\\$file/ADPreport.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/ADPreport/$file/ADPreport.pdf) (accessed September 14, 2004).

Achieving the Possible

Getting There from Here



Currently, 61 percent of students attend high schools of 1,000 students or more⁹ and many others attend schools that are small but fail to incorporate the essential elements that make many small schools so effective. With few exceptions, local, state, and federal policies are silent on the topic of high school reform in general, and on how to create a coherent and effective system of great small high schools. So, how do we get from here to a system of great small high schools?

MODEL SCHOOLS: SHOWING THE WAY

There are many small schools across the country demonstrating every day that they can prepare all their students for college. The dedicated staff in these schools have created learning environments that are vibrant, academically focused, and challenging. Students and adults alike report being intellectually stimulated and valued. Student achievement is high. Many students

who probably would not have attended college had they attended other high schools are enrolled.

A number of organizations are assisting these schools and helping to create similar ones. Local colleges and community-based organizations send advisors to the schools to develop mission statements and curricula, help train staff, and evaluate the success of the educational programming.

Other organizations, including businesses and foundations, are providing resources that serve as a catalyst for reform. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to support the creation of new, small high schools and the conversion of large high schools into smaller learning communities (distinctive schools or academies within a large school building). Many of these schools serve as exemplars of how high schools can educate all students to meet state and local standards and succeed in college.

The foundation believes that the success of these schools and their supporting organizations, combined with community indignation over the failures of large

⁹ Snyder, T. D. (2003). *Digest of education statistics, 2002* (NCES 2003-060, Table 94). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003060.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2004).

comprehensive high schools, will stimulate demand for more innovative small schools. Once these schools are in place, students and their families will be able to choose a school from among several options. That act of choosing will encourage all schools to offer interesting educational options of the highest quality.

MOVING FROM ISLANDS OF EXCELLENCE TO A SYSTEM OF EXCELLENT SCHOOLS

Demonstrating success in model schools is not sufficient to ensure that all students have the opportunity to choose from a variety of excellent small high schools. Although there are currently a number of excellent schools in districts across the country, they are isolated islands that are difficult to replicate district-wide, let alone nationwide. The key is to develop a system that can support these schools and use the lessons learned to ensure that all schools are providing every student with a world-class education. That system must include accountability, funding, and technical assistance for schools.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

High schools must be accountable both for student achievement and attainment. This means that they must be held accountable for student performance, measured according to state academic standards, as well as high school graduation and college enrollment rates. To be effective, achievement and attainment must carry equal weight. In the past, graduation requirements without achievement standards led to social promotion. And achievement standards without attention to graduation rates have tended to increase dropout rates. Together, each provides a check on the other and offers clearer direction for policy and practice.

High schools that fail to meet goals for graduation and student achievement would not be allowed to continue serving students. Like a failing business that cannot attract customers or earn a profit, schools that continuously fail to raise the achievement of their students would be closed and reopened—with a new principal, carefully selected teachers and counselors, and a structure designed to help all students graduate prepared for

NYC MUSEUM SCHOOL

New York, New York

The many museums of New York City have a lot more to teach kids than just art appreciation. In fact, the almost 400 students of the New York City Museum School study science at the American Museum of Natural History, the French Revolution at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, geometry and computer animation at the Children's Museum of Manhattan, and navigation at the South Street Seaport Museum. Students spend up to three days a week in their assigned museum, and are taught by specialists and professional museum educators. Museum exhibits help bring to life the subjects students study and stimulate their curiosity.

Founded in 1994 by a former Brooklyn Museum assistant director and a former teacher with the Lab School, the Museum School provides the academic rigor of a college-prep school with the fun of an innovative school. At the end of their internships and lessons, students must complete a thesis-like project that explores a theme. Students are achieving success here. Three-fourths of the class of 2003 passed the state's English Regents exam and the percent passing the math Regents exam increased from 38 percent of the class of 2001 to 69 percent of the class of 2003. Of this class, 88 percent of students graduated, and nine out of 10 graduates continued on to two- or four-year colleges.

college. This practice should not be viewed as punishment of the adults who run the school. Rather, it is a means to ensure that our children receive the best education possible. Anything less should simply be unacceptable.

FUNDING TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

The ideal high school system would ensure that schools receive the funding necessary to enable every student to meet standards and complete high school ready for college. Funding levels would reflect the real costs of educating students, not the wealth of local communities, as happens today. Schools educating large numbers of needy students, such as recent immigrants who speak little or no English, would receive additional resources. In other words, dollars would follow students. A needier student would have more dollars attached for use by the school that educates that student. Schools, then, would have the flexibility to use the funds in the way that they believe would best serve their student population. Schools demonstrating success in adding value—raising the achievement of students regardless of their starting place—would earn additional dollars and flexibility.

To make this happen, the federal government and states must play a stronger role in financing public education.

Currently, the federal government plays virtually no role in funding high schools, and most states, which have the primary responsibility for providing public education in this country, pay no more than half the costs to educate a child. This requires districts to pick up the majority of the tab for educating students and places a heavy burden on many poor communities, which educate a disproportionately larger number of needy students than wealthier districts. Support services for needy students are costly, and districts with large numbers of low-performing students are frequently forced to find their own funding—a task comparable to squeezing water from a rock—or do without.

With added support from the federal and state governments, recognition from states that some students cost more to educate than others, and freedom from districts to spend their budgets in a way that fits their mission and best educates students, schools can do a better job of creating and sustaining high schools for the new millennium.





PROVIDING MEANINGFUL ASSISTANCE

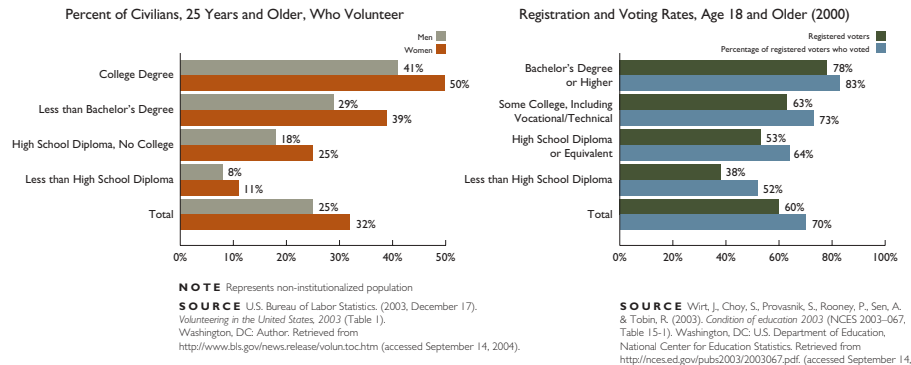
The system should not only provide schools with resources and play the heavy when schools fail to educate their students properly, it should also work with schools along the way to make sure that closure is not necessary. A supportive infrastructure is needed to help schools plan for improvement and assess the results of their reforms, develop curriculum and appropriate tests, offer training to school faculty, and provide other forms of assistance that would help schools educate their students more effectively. One form of assistance might be to help identify resources for struggling students.

State, district, and school leaders would work together to mobilize community and faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, businesses, libraries, and other institutions on behalf of students at risk of failure. These institutions would provide after-school programs and study space, trained tutors, community service internships, summer jobs, and an array of other supports and incentives for young people to work hard and stay in school.

In general, the role of districts, states, and the federal government would be to build the capacity of all schools. To do so, they would need to continue the progress they have made over the last several years from command and control centers to genuine partners with the schools in their effort to provide all students a rigorous and personalized education.

Education's Contribution to a Healthy Democracy

Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be engaged and contributing members of society.



National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education

According to *School Choice: Doing It the Right Way Makes a Difference* (November 2003)¹⁰, choice in education has become far more common. Public school districts are expanding choice by offering options like charter schools, schools within schools, early college high schools, theme and magnet schools, and other small schools.

More options allow students to find a school that matches their particular learning style and their plans for the future. Choice also increases accountability: In a system with choice, schools are judged by their students' success.

Because the effects of choice depend on a combination of factors and their relationships, choice is not a panacea. Instead, as the report warns, "Choice's outcomes, good or bad, depend heavily on how communities structure and implement it... The results of choice depend on how it is defined, established, and organized." Choice must not be seen as an end in itself, but as a way to encourage the development of better schools for our children.

The success of public school choice depends on the community's balance between funding and regulation. Communities with tight control are unlikely to create many new options, while those generous with funding and loose in control risk increased segregation and other negative results. There is no right formula; communities need to make choices based on their values.

The report recommends that governments allocate funds on a per-student basis, provide good school performance information, ensure that schools run fair lotteries for admission, and create an environment of fair competition and reliable rules.

¹⁰ National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education (2003, November). *School choice: Doing it the right way makes a difference*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Brown Center on Education Policy. Available from <http://www.brookings.edu/press/books/schoolchoice.htm> (accessed September 14, 2004).

We Must Insist on Success



Businesses that fail to provide a meaningful product or service, earn a profit, or care for their customers will not succeed. Similarly, large comprehensive high schools, which fail to educate and prepare large numbers of students for college, must be revamped. We should not continue to support these institutions which were designed for a different time, a different economy, and a different America. However, we must not lose faith in public education altogether. It is our best hope for furthering our democracy, fostering greater equality, and ensuring that our economy remains the envy of the world.

How do we insist on large-scale change of the dysfunctional American high school without abandoning our support for public education? Developing and creating strong small schools, like those described here, is a place to start. These schools offer the best of public education—commitment to enable all students to reach high standards—while providing choice among excellent educational options. All options would be dedicated to serving the individual needs of *each* student while ensuring that *all* students graduate high school prepared for college.

Ultimately, our goal as a nation should be that every student graduates high school and that all students attend college. Most people think of college as a four-year institution offering a bachelor's degree. But that's only one of the many and varied educational possibilities that can follow high school, including community college, technical school, and apprenticeships.

To achieve our goal, we must insist on change. Locally, we must demand that large high schools be broken into smaller schools that cater to students' needs and that new, innovative small schools be created and supported. Students, then, must have the opportunity to choose from among these small schools the one that best serves their needs. We can no longer tolerate schools that fail to educate students to high standards and prepare them for college.

At the state level, we must insist that effective systems be put in place for supporting schools and holding them accountable. States must be responsible for setting clear standards for student achievement, and working with school districts to hold schools accountable for student learning and graduation. But this accountability needs to allow for flexibility and choice. States also must ensure that high schools receive adequate funding, flexibility to use that funding to educate their students most effectively, and assistance in areas such as teacher training and curriculum development.

Finally, we must challenge the federal government to take some leadership. For too long, the federal government has focused its attention on elementary schools to the virtual exclusion of high schools. The federal government must continue supporting elementary schools (and pre-kindergarten and post-secondary education), but add leadership and support for high schools as well. Support for one part of the system without support to another detracts from education's overall benefits and is ultimately ineffective.

Creating a system of high-quality, small high schools that prepare students for the new millennium is perhaps one of the greatest domestic challenges this country faces. High schools, and the achievement of their students, have been notoriously difficult to change. Fortunately, we have many excellent model schools proving that success can be achieved through thoughtfulness, hard work, and commitment. Now, we must insist that all students have access to such schools. The challenge is real, but the possibilities for schools of the new millennium are endless.

