BILL & MELINDA GATES foundation

Enlisting States in Preparing All Students for College and Careers

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Program Area

U. S. Programs: Education

Our Goal

Build momentum at the state level for dramatically increasing the number of students who graduate from high school ready for success in college and careers.

Our Progress in Brief

In February 2005, a three-year process of grantmaking and relationship-building by the foundation culminated in the first National Summit on High Schools, which was attended by 45 of America's 50 governors. Although the impact of any single event is hard to gauge, this summit could prove to be a turning point in a growing national campaign to redesign high schools. In the wake of the summit, more than half the nation's governors committed to reforming their states' policies to help raise graduation rates and improve students' preparation for college and careers.

The Challenge

The story of the American high school is a tale of an institution that has not kept pace with a changing world. Today's employers need workers who can break down complex problems, use math as an analytical tool, and communicate effectively. Yet only one-third of all students entering high school this year will graduate with a high-quality education that provides these kinds of skills. Another third will graduate unprepared for college or careers. One third will drop out entirely.

The first group will have what it takes to succeed in a global economy. The second two groups, which consist mostly of low-income and minority students, will struggle simply to make a wage that can support a family.

Millions Left Behind

Cesar Gomez, a 17-year-old from Los Angeles, is typical of the millions of students who are falling through the cracks every year. Neither his mother, who works in a garment factory, nor his stepfather, who works for a meat-packing company, finished high school. Cesar wanted to be the first. But almost as soon as he entered high school, his troubles began. Nearly 5,000 students crowded the halls, and many of the kids were older, bigger, and intimidating. Classes were dull. Cesar began ditching school with friends and doing graffiti. A counselor told him he was good for nothing and would end up in jail.

To get back on track, Cesar switched schools—and lost a year of credits in the process. The new school was no better. He remembers some teachers just sat in the front of their classes and told students to open their books and read. He dropped out in his junior year.

Redesigning for Today's Demands

Cesar was one of the 1 million students who drop out every year. One of the main reasons so many students leave school is that our high schools were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age. Even when they are working exactly as designed, most high schools do not teach students what they need to know in today's global economy.

Many countries around the world have reinvented their education systems to become more competitive, while the United States has held steady. The U.S. once led the world in high school and college graduates. Today, eight other nations have a greater percentage of young adults who have graduated from high school, and we have dropped from first to fifth in the percentage of young adults with a college degree.

Over the past five years, the foundation has invested more than $1 billion to help redesign the American high school for the demands of the 21st century. We are supporting more than 1,800 high schools—about half are totally new, and the other half are existing schools that are being redesigned. The common denominator among these schools is that they are built on what we call "the new three Rs"—a rigorous curriculum for all students, relevant classes, and meaningful relationships with adults who push all students to achieve.

The Need for Champions

But we recognize that our grants alone cannot possibly solve this enormous national challenge. The schools we support represent less than 10 percent of America's public high schools. Without deep engagement by the public sector, the foundation's efforts will do little to bring about wholesale change.

Elected officials, especially at the state and local levels, have the power to build on what is working and to bring these new models to the students and families they represent. But first they will have to face up to the failure of America's high schools. They need to dispense with the idea underlying the old design—that we can train an adequate workforce by sending only a third of our students to college, and that the other students either can't do college work or don't need to. They need to recognize that every student can graduate ready for college and careers—and that the nation will lose its competitive edge if we don't give them the chance to do so.

The Response

"America's high schools are obsolete." This is the statement that made headlines when Bill Gates spoke to the nation's governors at their National Education Summit in February 2005. But Bill's assessment of the crisis in America's high schools was even tougher than that one line conveys.

He told the governors, "When I compare our high schools to what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow." He said that elected leaders "should be ashamed [of] breaking our promise of a free education for millions of students." This passionate declaration was the culmination of three years of effort to bring national attention to the plight of America's high schools and students.

Gaining Appreciation for Advocacy

In the foundation's early years, we assumed that our grants, some of which were among the biggest in their respective fields, would produce large, lasting impact. But we soon came up against the limitations of grantmaking and understood that without the engagement of the public and commercial sectors, our grants would always be just a drop in the bucket. The investment we'll make in U.S. education in the years ahead is less than one-quarter of 1 percent of the $536 billion this nation spends on K-12 education every year.

In 2001, the foundation established a small office in Washington, D.C., and began to explore how to build new partnerships with governments and industry. One of our first goals was to use advocacy to put high schools on the radar for policymakers and to share the lessons—positive and negative—that we had learned in our own grantmaking.

Partnering With Governors

We soon realized that two organizations could help us reach the top decision-makers in all 50 states: the National Governors Association; and Achieve, a nonprofit started in the mid-1990s by governors and business leaders concerned about the state of American education. In 2002, we began providing funding to both these organizations in order to help their staffs develop deeper expertise in issues related to high schools.

Until that time, governors and other key decisionmakers had done a great deal to strengthen schooling between kindergarten and eighth grade, but they had not focused much attention on the high school years. We felt we could interest them in high schools if we could convince them that only a fraction of their students were graduating ready to join the workforce or attend college. Many of the governors simply did not know the extent of the problem. As we learned by sponsoring in-depth research on graduation rates by the right-of-center Manhattan Institute and the left-of-center Urban Institute, states were using a hodgepodge of inadequate measures to determine graduation rates. Some schools were reporting graduation rates of 95 percent even if they had a thousand people in ninth grade and only 250 people graduating in 12th grade.

A Summit Is Born

When Virginia governor Mark Warner was elected to chair the National Governors Association in 2004, we found the champion we were looking for. Governor Warner, who was a product of public schools and the first person in his family to graduate from college, had shown his interest in high school policy by pushing for reforms in Virginia focused on the 12th grade. He also was taking steps to explore a possible run for president in 2008.

Former Governor Mark Warner (D-VA) addresses the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools.

With encouragement and financial support from the foundation, Governor Warner and Achieve President Mike Cohen set out to host a combined summit on high schools in early 2005 for the nation's governors and top business leaders. When they invited Bill Gates to speak, we saw it as an ideal opportunity for Bill to use his credibility as a leader in the knowledge economy and as a philanthropist to bring attention to the crisis in high schools.

The summit and Bill's speech generated far more attention to this crisis than we had expected. There were about 100 business leaders and governors in the room during Bill's speech. But his diagnosis of the problems—and his thoughts on promising approaches to solving them—reverberated far beyond the room. More than 27 million people saw an account of the speech in newspaper reports, editorials, or television broadcasts.

Carrots for Commitments

To ensure that the summit would be more than just a collection of good sound bites, the foundation, the NGA, and Achieve used the occasion to launch a competitive grant program to encourage governors to make concrete commitments to change their states' education systems. To qualify for the grants, states would have to commit to five "non-negotiables," such as using one of a handful of highly rigorous methods of tracking graduation rates. We hoped to get applications from about six states for these NGA Honor States grants. Instead, 40 states applied, and 26 of them are now being funded (10 by the Gates Foundation and 16 by a consortium of seven other foundations).

In addition, 13 states representing a third of America's students announced that they would partner with Achieve and its American Diploma Project to raise their high school graduation requirements so that all high school graduates would have the skills necessary to be successful in college and work. Within a week, nine additional states made the same commitment. With funding from the foundation, Achieve is now providing hands-on assistance to help all 22 of these states make their pledge a reality. Prior to the summit, Achieve had predicted that only four states would participate.

Results

- Following the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, all 50 governors committed to adopting a common standard for calculating graduation rates. The new standard will create much greater transparency and accuracy in the reporting of graduation and drop-out rates.
- Prior to the summit, only five states had high school standards that ensured students would learn the skills necessary to be successful in college and work. Since the summit, 30 additional states are taking action to align their learning standards with the expectations of colleges and employers.
- At the time of the summit, only six states had high school tests in place that indicated whether students were ready for college-level work. In the past year, eight additional states have committed to adopting these assessments.
- Currently, only three states have data systems that can track individual students' progress from high school through college. Following the summit, 31 states are now in the process of creating this capacity. These systems provide critical information that states need in order to increase the number of students who graduate ready for college and careers.

Key Lessons

- Policy change doesn't work according to strict schedules. All the states we are working with have shown that they intend to adopt policies that will improve high school graduation rates, but many factors can make it hard to implement a plan of action. For example, some states' education agencies have limited staff capacity to take on new efforts. In other states, political will for these efforts has wavered as other pressing issues have commanded attention.
- The foundation and its partners still have a long way to go to get legislators and boards of education engaged. No single organization like NGA can possibly drive important changes in every state. Successful reform requires many different groups—governors, legislators, boards of education, chief state school officers, and others—to work closely on both the design and implementation of the reforms.
- It has proved valuable to foster a network of states all working on the same reforms. States participating in the NGA and Achieve projects get credibility from being part of a broad national movement. Having a critical mass of states that are making progress on tough issues also helps keep the pressure on the rest to act. And one of the most important sources of help for states is other states working on the same agenda. Leaders benefit greatly from learning about how other states designed policies, built political support, and planned for implementation.
- States need more help than we anticipated. Achieve and the NGA are providing significant technical support to the leadership teams that are implementing the action plans that emerged from the summit, but we all underestimated the number of states that would seek support. We also underestimated the depth of support individual states would need. They have needed not only help with identifying policy priorities but also technical guidance in developing their reforms, such as creating better assessments, determining how to best intervene in low-performing high schools, and communicating with citizens about what will be hard changes in their states. Both the NGA and Achieve are now working hard to add new staff and to identify better ways to help states prioritize.

- Our grants to Achieve and the NGA, involving dozens of states, have been hard for us to manage internally. Given the unexpectedly high demand from states, these grants have proven to be more complex and time-intensive to manage than we had expected. With limited staff to handle these grants, we have been stretched too thin to ensure that the sometimes difficult lessons states are learning are fed into our school- and district-level efforts.
- We must learn from mistakes and leave room for course correction. Our outside evaluations provide ample evidence that the work of high school redesign is very complex and that we have a lot to learn. They have shown that we have been less successful at redesigning old schools than in creating new ones. Classes—math classes in particular—in some of the schools we've funded have been less rigorous than those at comparison schools. And the evaluations have taught us that curriculum development is difficult and technical work—and that it is often best done across a network of schools, a district, or a state (rather than by individual schools alone).

Governors Bob Riley (R-AL), center, and Frank Murkowski (R-AK) greet Bill Gates during a break at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools.

Next Steps

Twenty-seven states have now made significant commitments to high school reform. However, there are no guarantees that all of them will implement their reforms successfully. It is incumbent upon the foundation to make sure that the NGA and Achieve apply the right level of pressure and support to keep the states on track.

Even if all these states prove to be successful, there will still be many others where these reforms are needed. We hope that a grassroots campaign known as Stand Up, launched in April 2006, will help build momentum by mobilizing millions of students and parents to demand high standards and quality high schools for all.

Five years from now we hope to look back at 2005 as the end of 20 years of stagnant graduation rates. We know that improvement won't be fast, but we hope that the National Summit on High Schools touched off an important trend.

Web Sites:

National Governors Association:
www.nga.org

Achieve:
www.achieve.org

Stand Up:
www.standup.org