

Reforming High Schools for the 21st Century—An Imperative

We must provide all students with the skills and knowledge they need for success in college and employment, and to be good citizens in a global economy. NEA believes we must also provide every student the supports he or she needs to graduate. NEA's agenda for high school reform includes a comprehensive plan that recognizes the needs of all students, and it provides strategies to improve graduation rates, particularly among minority and disadvantaged students.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

America's high schools are in crisis. Far too many of our high schools are responsive not to 21st century realities but to the demands of an earlier time, when the foremost aim of education was to sort thousands of students into tracks and prepare them for employment in an industrialized economy. Today's schools have a different mandate. Our nation's secondary schools must prepare students for engaged citizenship in a pluralistic democracy and productive employment in a high-tech global economy.

To succeed in today's environment, students need more than basic skills. In addition to mastering solid content, they must become effective problem solvers who are comfortable with abstract reasoning, adept at higher-order thinking skills, and proficient in the use of high-tech tools. The high school in its traditional 20th century form cannot effectively serve today's students. Tinkering at the margins of school reform will no longer suffice. Profound economic and demographic changes demand new ways of thinking about high school reform.

Valid concerns are being raised about declining achievement levels, high dropout rates, low academic performance, and college remediation.¹ Statistics provide compelling evidence that America's high schools need improvement. The national graduation rate hovers around 70 percent, with even lower rates for Black and Hispanic students. In some communities, almost a third of ninth graders leave school without

fulfilling the requirements for a diploma. Adolescent literacy studies report that 25 percent of all high school students are reading below basic levels.² These problems disproportionately affect the poor, minorities, and students with special needs, particularly those in rural or urban communities.

In addition, too many students who do complete high school are underprepared for the challenges of postsecondary education or the workforce. Survey results from groups such as the ACT highlight the gap between the academic preparation colleges expect of high school graduates and the level at which their freshmen are performing.³ Employers also express dissatisfaction with the skill level and training of new workers.

The key to transforming high schools

The literature on creating high-performing high schools identifies a particular set of components that are remarkably consistent for effecting high school transformation. *Breaking Ranks II*, a seminal text that NEA has endorsed, offers a series of recommendations for recasting high schools. Among both educators and educational researchers, a new consensus is emerging. This consensus holds that effective school improvement requires (1) a high set of expectations and a rigorous curriculum, (2) a repertoire of instructional strategies that engage students in real-world applications, (3) an environment that fosters academic and personal relationships between staff and students, (4) an empowered leadership, and (5) a professional community of collaboration that focuses on improving teaching and learning for every child.⁴

Improved student performance demands school transformation. For decades, the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) provided the foundation for all subsequent learning. In today's information society, those basics skills, while necessary, are not sufficient. Revitalizing education and making it relevant to 21st century realities requires supplementing the traditional three Rs with three new Rs: rigor, relationships, and relevance. Elevating the new Rs will require integrated student support systems, improved curricular content, and resources that enable and foster professional development.

Rigor: In a revamped high school, the concept of rigor is broadened to include mastery not only of core academic subjects but of the higher-order cognitive skills that the global economy demands. A rigorous high school program aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessment with high standards and high expectations. It focuses on the integration of skills and knowledge.⁵ It is coherent and sequential and encourages students to tackle challenging Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors courses. In rigorous programs, student progress and performance is assessed in multiple ways; assessment methods may include projects, portfolios, and exhibits, in addition to standardized tests. Student progress is measured against specific, articulated benchmarks.

Relationships: High schools in the process of transforming are often divided into smaller learning communities that provide individual support to each student. In these smaller environments, students develop a sense of belonging to the school and take responsibility for decisions related to their own learning. Students work cooperatively on challenging tasks and rigorous assignments, and they take responsibility for assessing and documenting their progress. In the transformed high school dedicated to building relationships, empowered staff members learn to share leadership responsibilities, innovative ideas, student profiles, and best practices. Research tells us that students in such contexts have improved attendance, achieve at higher levels, and graduate in higher numbers.⁶ To foster relationship building,

each student in the community is assigned an advisor to guide, mentor, and support him or her through the high school experience. This pairing nurtures an adult/student relationship that can minimize student frustration and provide early warning signals of potential student disengagement.

Relevance: According to findings from *Education Week's* "Diplomas Count," a growing number of students disengage from learning when the course content and the delivery of instruction have no relevance to real-world applications.⁷ Interest is growing in career and technical education (CTE)—formerly vocational education—where teachers reengage students by coupling academic preparation with career and technical education. Students in CTE programs craft personal learning plans that accommodate balancing employment with studies. With the assistance of an advisor, students design programs that include online courses, internships, service learning, job shadowing, and extended time for completing work/school instruction.⁸

As noted earlier, employers have expressed concern about the limited number of applied skills that high school graduates have mastered. These skills include working comfortably with individuals from other cultures, writing and speaking clearly, demonstrating the capacity to think critically and solve problems creatively, and having the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information. In addition, punctuality, dependability, and industriousness are desired workplace values. All of these skills and values must be integrated if students are to be prepared for the 21st century workplace as well as the next phase of their lives.

The public understands students need more than the basics

The American public understands that unless students master the skills that the global economy demands, our nation's economic competitiveness will suffer. A 2007 poll of registered voters found near universal agreement that teaching skills such as critical thinking, ethics and social responsibility, teamwork and communication is critical to the country's future economic success.⁹ There is broad understanding and

agreement that the jobs of the 21st century require a set of skills different from those needed 20 years ago. High schools must do a better job of helping students acquire those skills.

In recognition of the need for economic competitiveness and work/college readiness, many reforming high schools are placing renewed emphasis on career and technical education. Research suggests that a balanced career and college program reduces dropout rates. (American Youth Policy Forum, 2007) Interviews with students who have dropped out confirm this finding.

Change is underway in the nation's schools

While many educators believe American high schools are in crisis and require wholesale reconstitution, the picture is not entirely bleak. Educators across the nation are collaborating with researchers, policymakers, parents, business leaders, and representatives from higher education to implement comprehensive systemic change. In classrooms across the nation, innovative models, frameworks, networks, rubrics, and strategies are being implemented to better prepare students for their roles in an information-rich, competitive global marketplace.

A 2007 report by the Center on Educational Policy indicates that student scores on reading and math tests have shown some improvement over the past five years. In the *Nation's Report Card of 2007*, the data showed improving achievement for fourth- and eighth-graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹⁰ The study reported by ACT (2007), cited earlier, concerning 400 U.S. high schools, finds that some schools adopting a rigorous core curriculum are experiencing improved student achievement and improved readiness for college.

NEA policies and positions

For NEA, transforming the nation's high schools is a part of the *NEA's Positive Agenda for ESEA Reauthorization*, which is built on the premise that every student deserves great public schools. Accomplishing this

goal requires access to a comprehensive, 21st century curriculum.

The *NEA Positive Agenda* advocates for an educational system that rewards success, improves achievement, closes achievement gaps, respects diversity, embraces a rigorous curriculum, and is staffed with highly qualified, caring teachers.

A new name for a new approach to secondary schooling

In 2006, the NEA Representative Assembly charged NEA's Professional Standards and Practices (PSP) Committee with developing a position statement on high school reform.¹¹ Following intense discussion, PSP Committee members concluded that high schools needed to be transformed culturally and structurally. They suggested the new entity might warrant a new title. Transitional learning centers (TLCs) seemed a more appropriate descriptor. TLCs encourage their staffs to build their capacity through continuous professional development. TLCs ensure that their graduates are prepared for work, school, and careers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to succeed in all three.

Transitional learning center schools—

- are supported with clearly defined visions, goals, missions, and high expectations;
- ensure all students master the knowledge, skills, and training requisites for success, whether in the workforce, postsecondary education, or career paths for the 21st century;
- engage all students more actively in the learning process;
- make authentic connections between the curriculum and the community;
- are safe, flexible, challenging, and responsive to the needs of all students;
- prepare students for civic responsibility in a democratic society.

Transitional learning centers incorporate all of the elements necessary for comprehensive change.

Hopefully, they will serve as beacons for improvement in America's high schools.

Rigorous, relevant, curriculums built upon close relationships must include the development of academic, technical, and interpersonal skills to meet the readiness requirements of students for college, work, and careers.

References

¹ Joftus, Scott September 2002. *Every Child a Graduate: A Framework for an Excellent Education for all Middle and High School Students*. Alliance for Excellent Education.

² Steinberg, Adria, Cassius Johnson, Hilary Pennington. November 2006. *Addressing America's Dropout Challenge: State Efforts to Boost Graduation Rates Require Federal Support*. Center for American Progress.

³ ACT: *Rigor at Risk*. March 2007. *Reaffirming Quality in the High School Core Curriculum*.

⁴ National High School Alliance. March 2005. *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth*. Washington, DC.

⁵ Zemelman, Steven, Henry Daniels and Marilyn Bizar. 1999.

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⁶ Colby, Susan. November 15, 2006. *Reclaiming the American Dream: Report Finds Rigorous High School Coursework and a "College-Going Culture" Vital to Success in College*. Bridgespan Group.

⁷ Education Week. June 12, 2007. *Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life after High School*.

⁸ Harris, Alexander, David Wakelyn. June 2007. *Role of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in High School Reform: State Efforts to Integrate CTE with Rigorous Standards*. American Youth Policy Forum.

⁹ McInturff, Bill, and Geoff Guerin. October 2007. *A National Survey of 800 Registered Voters Conducted September 10-12, 2007*. Public Opinion Strategies & Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

¹⁰ Maurer, Matt. September 25, 2007. *US Students Show Progress in Math and Reading, According to 2007 Nations Report Card*. National Assessment Governing Board.

¹¹ National Education Association Representative Assembly. July 2007. *Report of the Professional Standards and Practices Committee*.

Resources

National Association of Secondary School Principals. 2004. *Breaking Ranks, II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*. Seven cornerstone strategies cut across all three core areas and most of the 31 recommendations. Together, these seven strategies, if implemented effectively, will form the foundation for improving the performance of every student. www.principles.org/breaking-ranks/BR11_exec_sum.pdf

National High School Alliance. This partnership of more than 40 organizations represents a diverse cross-section of perspectives and approaches to high school reform, but members share a commitment to promoting the excellence, equity, and development of high school-age youth. www.hsalliance.org

The American Youth Policy Forum. This organization, which focuses on professional development and leadership, has several briefs on issues related to high school improvement. www.aypf.org

Center on Education Policy. This independent advocacy group has several briefs among its resources on the gaps in student achievement, NAEP trends, and high school exit exams. www.ctredpol.org