

Blurring the Lines for Learning

Youth and Community Centered Responses to the Challenges of High School Reform

Thoughts and materials offered by Karen Pittman
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to

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Because the time I will spend with you is entirely too short, and because my job, as a panelist and participant is to listen and learn and engage more than it is to inform I have taken the liberty of putting together a "takeaway" package. This package will provide more information about some of the Forum's ideas about youth, youth policy and education that I hope will find their way into conversations. Inside this "editorial wrapper" are a few short publications that lay out our thinking and a resource guide to some of the Forum's relevant documents. Please feel free to contact me if any of these ideas or examples strike a chord. The Forum has worked with the CCSSO staff in a variety of ways over the years and we stand ready to assist as you define and implement state level strategies for improving the high school experiences of all our young people who must be prepared for the 21st century.

GETTING THE CHALLENGE RIGHT

High school reform is in. Discussions about measuring graduation rates and discarding outdated notions of secondary school can now be heard in the halls of the White House and Congress. Educators at every level from the classroom to the state capital are turning their attention to this last reform frontier. Governors and mayors are seeing this as a pressing issue. Foundations are continuing to make major, unprecedented levels of investments in changing the high school experience. Employers and labor force experts like Robert Reich continue to sound the alarm that young people are entering the workforce without the necessary skills to succeed. The higher education community is concerned that students are entering colleges and universities academically unprepared. Youth development experts continue to emphasize the fact that high schools, for far too many youth, are at best bland and at worst toxic environments that thwart rather than provide opportunities to practice citizenship, navigate risks and build healthy relationships.

The common message being sent by these groups is that too many young people leave high school unprepared for college, work or life. Fueling the fire are recalculated dropout rates suggesting that roughly only two-thirds of ninth graders graduate (and only about half of African American and Hispanic students).¹ There is growing consensus among those concerned with transitions to college, work and life that the challenge is not just about graduating, it is about making the transition to adulthood

21st Century Skills and Content

- Information and media literacy
- Communication skills
- Critical thinking and systems thinking
- Problem identification, formulation and solution
- Creativity and intellectual curiosity
- Interpersonal and collaborative skills
- Self direction
- Accountability and adaptability
- Social responsibility
- Global awareness
- Financial, economic and business literacy
- Civic literacy

21st Century Learning Context

- Making content relevant to students lives
- Bringing the world into the classroom
- Taking students out into the world
- Creating opportunities for students to interact with each other, with teachers, and with other knowledgeable adults in authentic learning experiences

— Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003

equipped to meet the demands of the 21st century. It is about making sure that all young people are **Ready by 21: Ready for College, Ready for Work, Ready for Life™**.

In 2003, the Partnership for 21st Century skills issued a report supporting attention to the basics but calling for expansions in content, a focus on 21st century skills, and a retooling of curricula and assessment.² Subsequent polling substantiated the argument that the public does not want

high schools to go “back to basics” but forward, to help students prepare for the 21st century.³ Those polled recognized the challenges of holding schools accountable for an expanded list of outcomes at a time when they struggle to teach the basics. The overwhelming majority, however, thought schools had to be at the center of the solution. (*see* enclosed: Forum Focus: Blurring the Lines).

We agree. Schools must be at the center of the solution. Without fundamental changes in the definitions of what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed, there is only so much that can be done to repair the breach. There is growing evidence that youth-centered approaches to school reform that simultaneously address the goals of the new 3 Rs — relevance, rigor and relationships — through changes in basic beliefs, policies, structures and practice, are paying off (*see* enclosed: The Five Core Elements of Youth-Centered Reform).

But the other reporters’ questions — where, when and why — are important as well. Student motivation spikes when we tap into the why of learning. Learning opportunities expand exponentially when we look carefully at who and what surrounds schools. The non-school hours represent too significant of a developmental opportunity to be left out of the conversation. And nonschool partners — community-based youth organizations, employment and training programs, businesses, libraries, faith communities, cultural institutions — represent too significant of an asset to be left cheering on the sidelines.

The fundamental goal behind high school reform efforts is to better prepare students for life after school — not after 3 P.M., but after graduation. It is impossible to imagine a scenario in which high school students have the time and the supports needed to learn and apply an expanding set of skills within the confines of the traditional school building and school day. The question isn't whether expanded opportunities help students prepare for life after high school, but why they are considered beyond or even peripheral to the scope of high school reform.

CALLING FOR THE RIGHT RESPONSES

The National High School alliance has issued a Call to Action that has put student success, not simply high school reform, at the center of the diagram, stating that the purpose of high school is to ensure that “all youth are ready for

college, careers, and active participation.” The Forum for Youth Investment is pleased to be a member of the Alliance and pleased with their focus on all youth. The phrase “all youth” makes the six principles outlined in the call to action a truly non-negotiable package. There is little doubt that high schools produce better outcomes for more students when educators are empowered, leaders are accountable, standards, curriculum and assessments are aligned and learning environments are personalized. But, as

I note in my reflections on the call to action (attached with chart on back), there are two reasons that high schools cannot help all youth become” ready for college, careers and civic engagement,” or, as we say at the Forum, “ready for college, work and life” without implementing broad and sustained strategies for youth and community engagement:

The question isn't whether expanded opportunities help students prepare for life after high school, but why they are considered beyond or even peripheral to the scope of high school reform.

- Learning does not end inside the classroom
- Not all of our students stay inside the classroom

The combination of these two realities coincides with rapidly growing evidence that real options for extending the responsibility for formal, rigorous learning beyond the temporal, structural and staff boundaries of the traditional high school do exist. Public legislation and private funding have cultivated an unprecedented growth of new schools (small schools, charter schools), frequently created and staffed by new partners (community colleges, nonprofit organizations). Some of these “alternative” institutions are demonstrating better retention, promotion and college-going rates than “traditional” high schools. Equally important, an expansion in community ownership of formal education responsibilities has been accompanied by an equal, if not greater, accountability for ensuring that middle and high school students have a range of informal learning opportunities (e.g., the After-School and Community Schools movements).

If the broad goal of high school reform is to ensure students leave school ready for the future, and getting there means ensuring students experience positive, sustained *relationships*, *relevant* learning opportunities and *rigorous* instructional experiences — the road that lies ahead for many schools and districts is a daunting one. We believe the necessary changes can be complemented by — and perhaps only fully implemented through — intentional collaboration with community partners. Preparing young

people for the future requires more than improving high schools; it requires the full engagement of all community institutions, small and large, public and private, in supporting learning and development.

This country's commitment to public education is unwavering, but the broader commitment to “youth development” — to ensuring that all young people have the services, supports and opportunities they need to be ready for college, work and life — is not as strong. This is in part, we would argue, because responsibility for these larger preparatory goals is not clear. This responsibility will not be clear until educators join forces with community leaders to define youth-centered not system-centered goals and recognize and leverage all learning opportunities, not just those provided by schools.

Forty-five states have now linked arms behind a common measurement of drop-out rates that will allow the communities to understand the extent of the problem within their midst. With one-third and, in urban areas, one-half of students diploma-less and out-of-school, educators have to engage all community learning partners in developing and funding an expanded system of educational alternatives that addresses the new 3 Rs in ways that make sense for disconnected youth.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE: POSSIBLE ROLES FOR SDEs

In 2003, the Forum for Youth Investment was honored to be asked to help shape and support a unique public/private partnership between the State of California and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with additional support from the Walter S. Johnson and Hewlett Foundations, occupies what we believe is a fairly unique niche in the sprawling space of education reform. It was not an expensive, foundation-driven redesign initiative, nor was it a prescriptive school-level reform model. HSPSA was a public/private partnership focused specifically on building district/community partnerships for high school reform in 11 school districts in California.⁴ The work focused on high school transformation but emphasized district-level change; it required planning but encouraged action. From a very rough cost-benefit perspective, we are quite encouraged by the level of response compared with the level of investment.⁵

The Forum partnered with the Office of the Secretary of Education and the California Department of Education to provide support and technical assistance to district-community alliances. The emphasis of the technical

assistance was on partnership development, stakeholder involvement, public engagement and community planning, with less emphasis on the implementation of specific educational reform strategies.

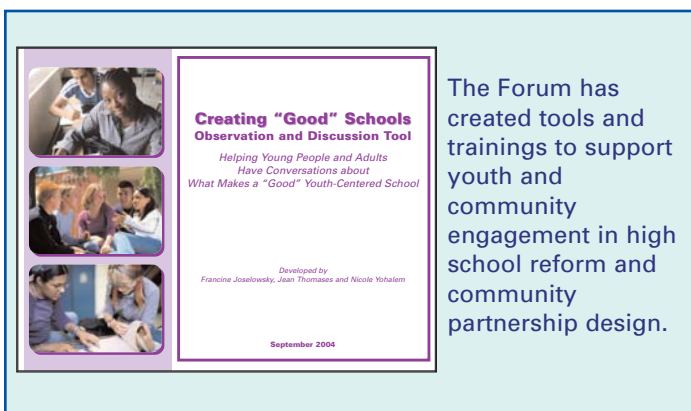
The HSPSA experience reinforced what research, experience and common sense tell us — that improving educational outcomes requires finding better, more powerful and more permanent ways for school districts and community stakeholders to work together, for districts and state departments to work together, for private foundations to partner with districts and collaboratives seeking long-term change, and for technical assistance providers to work with districts and schools in ways that provide relevant lessons and strategies that help accelerate the change process.

After reflecting with individual sites and as a TA team, we found that many of the anticipated critical elements proved to be important in moving the work forward:

- **The key role of community partners.** Community partners are critical in generating and sustaining the momentum for the change process.
- **Balance of power.** Separate funding streams for the district and community partner are essential in developing a balance of power and establishing equity in the working relationship.
- **Flexibility.** Not prescribing the “what” or the “how” is important: Flexibility in the planning process allows sites to develop plans in accordance with local momentum and need.
- **A plan, not a proposal.** Requiring a plan and not a proposal allows districts to use the planning process to develop a long term vision for the work and identify things they could do, rather than things they would do if they had additional resources.
- **Customized, flexible technical assistance.** Providing support, resources and coaching to meet the needs of individual districts stood out to districts and community partners as useful and unique.
- **District and school level change within a state context.** Intersection between state policy and both district and school level change was an essential ingredient to the work.
- **Emphasis on youth engagement.** By challenging sites to engage young people the planning process sites had rethink assumptions about the roles and capacities of young people.

The good news is that all 11 district/community alliances made significant strides during the project year:

- Forging and strengthening alliances with key community partners;
- Engaging key stakeholders including teachers, students, administrators, parents, the business community, elected officials and the nonprofit sector in the work of the schools;
- Developing a vision for high school transformation that is shared by a range of stakeholders; and
- Identifying and in many cases, implementing specific structural and pedagogical changes designed to increase student success.



The bad news is that the initiative did not withstand the major political shifts in the state. But while dedicated funding to continue to provide technical assistance to the original HSAPA sites and bring on new cohorts was not secured, nearly every site involved has put structures in place to move the work forward in the coming year, in some cases with, but in many cases without, additional outside resources.⁶

The challenge facing states is how to spark and support district level high school reform. One solution, we believe, is to accelerate progress toward the vision of Community Education Partnerships that was articulated by Paul Hill in *It Takes a City* who urges us to “create a community education partnership” recognizing that the “traditional boundaries between the public school system's responsibilities and those of other community agencies are themselves a part of the educational problem.”⁷

ENDNOTES

1. Greene, J.P., & Winters, M.A. (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991–2002. Education Working Paper No. 8*. New York, NY: The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Retrieved July 26, 2005, from www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm.
2. Swanson, C. (2004). *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
3. Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2003). *Learning for the 21st Century: A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*. Washington, DC: Partnership for 21st Century Skills.
4. Time Warner Foundation. (2003, June). *21st Century Literacy: A Vital Component in Learning*. Survey conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and Market Strategies. New York, NY: Time Warner Foundation.
5. Calipatria Unified, Emery Unified, Fresno Unified, Grossmont Unified, Inglewood Unified, Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified, Local District 2 -Los Angeles Unified, Local District 5- Los Angeles Unified, Petaluma Joint Union District, Washington Unified, West Contra Costa Unified.
6. Districts received anywhere from \$50,000 to \$250,000, based on the number of eligible high schools in the district, with a maximum of \$250,000; community partners received \$97,250.
7. Five of the eleven sites were able to secure federal Small Learning Communities grants that are allowing them to carry the work they did this year forward.
8. Hill, P.T., Campbell, C., & Harvey, J. (2000). *It Takes A City: Getting Serious about Urban School Reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Included in this Packet:

- *Forum Focus: Community Partnerships for Learning: Blurring the Lines*
- *The Five Core Elements of Youth-Centered High School Reform*
- *All Youth Ready*. Reflections on “A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth” released by the National High School Alliance in April 2005.
- Forum Online Resources: Effective Learning Environments.