



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

Schools for a New Society: Systemic High School Reform in Three Cities

**Cosponsored by the American Youth Policy Forum and
National High School Alliance**

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Introduction to Schools for a New Society

This forum provided an opportunity to learn about a national high school reform initiative, Schools for a New Society, managed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). High schools in many communities, especially urban communities, are not serving their youth well. High student dropout rates, lack of student engagement, and poor academic performance are just some of the signs of failure of many urban high schools to prepare youth adequately for postsecondary education and careers. While various high school reform efforts have been undertaken, few look at the role of the school district and community in changing high schools. The Schools for a New Society Initiative (SNS) supports districts and communities as they engage in the process of high school reform.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have committed a total of \$60 million to help reformers in seven cities reinvent the high school experience for more than 140,000 students in more than 100 schools. From 2001-2006, school and community partnerships in Boston, MA, Chattanooga, TN, Houston, TX, Providence, RI, Sacramento, CA, San Diego, CA, and Worcester, MA will receive up to \$12 million (to be matched locally) to support reform efforts. Additional funds will be provided for technical assistance and evaluation.

Constancia Warren, Senior Program Officer and Director of the Urban High School Initiative at Carnegie Corporation of New York, argued that it is essential to reform today's high schools. Factory model high schools will not prepare youth for the realities of the 21st Century. Jobs with adequate pay, security, benefits, and advancement opportunities now require postsecondary education and training, and youth must acquire sophisticated literacy and problem-solving skills for both job performance and to participate in today's complex democratic society. Yet our high schools are failing to prepare large numbers of young people for this future, she continued.

Warren said the SNS Initiative is guided by four core principles: 1) Traditional high schools must be transformed into learning communities that help all children reach high standards. 2) School and community representatives (including students, teachers, parents, school officials, business and civic organizations) must jointly redesign their outmoded comprehensive high schools. 3) The challenges presented by high schools are systemic and require district-wide leadership and reform. Districts create the conditions for teaching and learning, set policy and performance expectations, allocate and deploy resources, and hire teachers; therefore, they must be an important focus of reform efforts. 4) Schools cannot succeed alone. Community partners who can provide resources in a coordinated effort to help all youth develop into well-educated and productive citizens are needed.

To help districts with their reform efforts, CCNY is providing leadership, a theory of change framework, and focused technical assistance based on what each city and its schools need.

Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, Director of Schools for a New Society Technical Assistance Program at the Academy for Educational Development, spoke about the difficult and complex

activity of high school reform. Think of a car, she said: all parts must work together for the car to run properly. The same is true of school reform: it is a complicated set of activities that must work together harmoniously if the reform is to succeed, and technical assistance is a critical component of school reform. In the SNS Initiative, technical assistance is provided by knowledgeable and experienced teams from prominent national research and development organizations that support education reform.

Technical assistance providers have taken on the role of critical friends and have sought to create a community of learners, build local capacity, and promote information exchange between various partners. One critical component of the technical assistance has been the provision of direct, face-to-face consultation at the site level for participating schools. The Initiative has also supported opportunities for sites to come together to engage in reflection and help apply lessons learned to the school and district setting.

Nichols-Solomon then introduced representatives from three of the SNS cities – Chattanooga, Providence, and Sacramento – who spoke about their reform initiatives.

Description of SNS Cities

Each city was represented by a team consisting of a high level district administrator, a representative of the community partner organization, and a practitioner at the school level. The teams were asked to provide a brief overview of their work and identify key strategies of their plan.

Chattanooga

Panelists from Chattanooga identified several successful strategies they have used to reform their high schools. According to **Jesse Register, Superintendent of Hamilton County Department of Education**, these include extensive involvement of all members of the community; freedom for schools that allows them to produce desired outcomes using multiple approaches rather than a cookie-cutter approach; and extensive use of data for strategic planning. Changing organizational structure and curriculum, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing change all take time, Register cautioned. It may be necessary to change the language of teacher contracts, the structure of the district, and the role of school faculty.

Cheri Dedmon, Principal of East Ridge High School and Dan Challener, President of the Public Education Foundation (the community partner), both emphasized the importance of using professional development to help current teachers be prepared for and deal with change. Panelists said that several changes at the district level have also supported the reform efforts: the adoption of a single path diploma for all students and the development of academies, unique schools within a school which, despite their thematic differences, share common curriculum.

Providence

Melody Johnson, Superintendent of Providence Public Schools, emphasized that public engagement is one of the most critical elements of their reform strategy, although it has taken a while to develop. The district has implemented a number of reform strategies including increasing graduation requirements for all students, setting aside time for teachers to work together, developing individual, four-year plans for each student, and establishing activities that engage and involve youth in leadership and reform activity. Johnson added that if we are to “bring about change effectively, school and district personnel should also have the freedom to determine how funds are distributed and allocated.”

Mary Sylvia Harrison, President of the Rhode Island Children’s Crusade for Higher Education (the community partner), said it is essential to move forward with a sense of urgency: children are moving through a failing system and too often, reforms and the changes they produce are too slow to help those children. She said it is important for the community to demand change and keep pressure on the schools. Harrison also said that it is necessary to consider reform on a broader scale and that for serious change to take place, school finance formulas must be changed to support a more

equitable distribution of sufficient resources across districts, states, and the nation.

Sacramento

The team from Sacramento said that the extreme diversity of their community has been an asset rather than a barrier to reform, as some might expect. They have found that partnerships with community groups and technical assistance providers are essential; neither districts nor schools can create and sustain reform by themselves. **Deanna Hanson, Chief Executive Officer of LEED-Sacramento** (the community partner), said that chambers of commerce, community colleges, youth service provider networks, county offices of education, and student and teacher groups must work together and these partnerships can provide a strong impetus for schools and districts to engage in and implement reform.

The Sacramento team also said that more autonomy should be provided at the local level so that school and district personnel have the ability to determine what kind of reforms they will use to achieve the specified outcomes. Internally, schools should be allowed and encouraged to develop their own unique culture as they work to implement reform: policymakers must realize that “bad schools all look alike and good schools look different,” said **Richard Owen, Associate Superintendent for High School Improvement in the Sacramento City School District**.

Topical Discussions

Following the brief introduction of the cities, a moderated discussion took place on two topics – community engagement and district level strategies to support reform.

Community Engagement

This discussion focused on: how the community partners have been involved in various aspects of the reform process; how parents and community members who have traditionally been most disenfranchised are successfully engaged; the role community partners play as a force for change; and how community partners can help sustain reform efforts after the end of the Carnegie Grant.

Panelists agreed that for reform to be successful, it is essential to involve all stakeholders from the beginning. As things stand now, educators are more or less alone as they do the difficult work needed to implement reform; this is like “pulling an elephant up a hill,” Johnson said. “This is where the community can add value by pressing for reform.” Engagement is not just about having parents and community members in the school building, a panelist said. Parents who are outraged by the poor performance of their students can help create the demand and climate for change and support ongoing reform efforts. Panelists recommended that public forums and other types of community-school interactions be used to garner public support and involvement.

The depth of community engagement is key, said the Chattanooga panel. Many of the participants noted that it is not enough to say that parents should be involved and to make cursory efforts to bring this about: there must be a serious campaign to help parents understand how they can and should be involved in improving their child’s school in concrete ways. Students, too, are essential to the reform process. Students have an inside understanding of the schools they attend, yet too often this perspective is overlooked, and they are left out of the conversations about reform. Schools must ask themselves whether they are fully engaging students in reform efforts. In Providence, the school district and community partner organized study circles with small groups of adults and students on issues like youth development and elevating the voice of youth in the reform process. Providence panelists said they also visited parents in their homes and held forums with teachers, students, and community members. Panelists from Chattanooga surveyed 10,000 students and held a series of discussions to get their perspective, said Challenger.

Johnson said that their partnership with the Rhode Island Children’s Crusade for Higher Education has led to success “we could never have achieved alone. Our partner has helped with a load of work – it’s been a relief to have a partner to help out. Also, the core partner can say things that need to be said, especially with the teacher’s union. When we had a change in the superintendency, it was very

helpful to have the community partner and community, in general, commit to the funders that they would stick with the reform efforts and keep focused.” Owen agreed by saying, “accountability and autonomy are our two biggest issues. We need external pressure on the school system, and the community partner provides that.”

Johnson said you can't leave community engagement and involvement to chance. You need a support system to keep the community engaged on a regular basis, which requires human resources. Providence has a division of parent and business engagement with 11 staff, as well as a youth council with youth governance, and a staff person who is responsible for long-range planning. Owen added that “we also need a better power-sharing arrangement at the school so that parents feel they have a say in what happens and how the money is spent.”

Challenger said that a way to sustain reform is to keep good data and show progress, but there is not a lot of good data available or much of the data confuses the public. Challenger said Chattanooga is now tracking the transition rates of students from 9th to 10th grade, which is very important outcome data for parents and the community in general.

Another way to involve the community is to help it see the value of the programs. Because many small learning communities are career themed, it is easy to involve business, and once they understand and see the importance of the programs for their future workforce, they become champions for change.

Some participants said that for reform to be successful, it may be necessary to dramatically rethink our current approach to schooling. It is not sufficient to reform schools, “they must be reinvented,” Owen said. We need to face the alarming possibility that reforming schools might merely be “moving furniture around in a haunted house.” He suggested that by moving toward a market-based model of schools, we could create competition and let those schools that don't want to do the work go out of business. The community, parents, and businesses should be able to develop a school if they want, he asserted. “Most change takes place when you are on the edge of chaos, and we want to be convicted for bringing about real reform and change,” said Owen.

School and district leaders must realize that “you don't change without risk, and you don't take risks without alienating some people in the community. You should be prepared to take ‘hits’ from various groups. As a leader you must do the right thing,” said a Chattanooga panelist. While leaders may find that “some people involved in the reform initiatives are cynics who cannot be changed, some skeptics can be your best friends, and you should not drive this group underground,” another panelist concluded.

District Strategies to Support Reform

During this discussion, panelists explored how districts, in order to bring about wide scale reform, must change the way they lead and are structured and the types of assistance they offer. Some of the questions posed to the panelists included: have you changed the way you allocate finances and/or personnel; how do you determine how much autonomy schools can handle vs. how much direction and technical assistance they need, and how can the district's services be structured to recognize these variations in school capacity?

First, all panelists agreed that teachers are critical to school improvement because they control what happens behind the classroom door. “Nothing will happen unless teachers buy into the reforms,” Johnson said. For this reason, if reform is to be successful, it is essential to hire teachers who are highly qualified. **David Andrews, Director of High Schools in the Providence Public Schools**, said that reformers and policymakers should realize that measuring the quality of current teachers by the number of years they have worked in the school system is not sufficient. Other measures must be used, which can involve changes to union contracts.

Panelists also strongly agreed that if teachers are to improve their practices, it is essential that they have access to high quality professional development. Teachers especially need help understanding and translating state content standards into classroom-based curriculum and instruction. To support

quality teaching, there must be instructional coaches who work with teachers in schools. Teachers should also have opportunities to come together to discuss their beliefs and values concerning teaching and learning. Reformers should not assume that teachers universally resist top-down decisions. While some teachers do balk at mandates from above, panelists have seen that many teachers welcome structure and guidance about what they are expected to do in their classrooms. Finally, inspirational principals can often generate and support the impulse in teachers to improve the quality of their teaching practices. Districts have a large role to play in setting up appropriate professional development for teachers and school leaders.

Dedmon said it was important to pay attention to how resources are used as the reform progresses. For instance, she said, new teachers should not be assigned to the ninth grade, unless they have a great deal of support. Schools and districts should have the flexibility to move resources around to meet their needs, but they need to do it with the understanding and input of teachers. In Chattanooga, teachers agreed that some classes, small schools, or academies, as new reform initiatives, would get more resources than others. Teachers were willing to live with the imbalance because they knew why the new programs were getting more resources, and they knew that it was only a matter of time before more resources would be directed to them.

Andrews said it is important to have a policy that guarantees autonomy of schools and allows them the flexibility to make decisions based on their students' needs. Johnson agreed and said she supports site-based management, but the district must also provide an instructional framework. There was no such system in Providence, she said, and as a result, they created common standards, a common framework, and expectations across grade levels and classes. Johnson said teachers welcomed the structure and guidance on what is expected. Dedmon suggested that you need to flatten administration and district structure to get more money to classroom level, but at the same time, she said, it is also important to provide guidance from the district. To help equalize the quality of instruction across Chattanooga schools, the district is developing end-of-course exams, so grading is not so variable and capricious.

Johnson said there aren't many resources to help do this work, especially at the national level. The Perkins Act is one of the few that provides flexibility, but more could be used. Hanson said school financing is put together to reward economies of scale and there are disincentives for small schools. The funding and technical assistance from the Carnegie and Gates Foundations have been invaluable, all presenters agreed.

According to panelists, districts can support school reform by supporting other strategies such as:

Collecting and using student level data to inform site-based professional development and student assessment.

- Providing ninth grade teaching teams with common planning time every day.
- Putting a deliberate professional development plan in place to help teachers learn how to help students meet standards.
- Providing coaches for principals and assistant principals to help build the capacity of school leaders.
- Revising district leadership to focus on support of the instructional process.
- Amending teacher transfer policies so they are based on instructional needs of the schools, not seniority.

Finally, panelists spoke about the necessity of high expectations for all students. Students should not be provided with differential opportunities, said a panelist from Providence: "Schools should not be in the business of deciding who is smart and who is not." Reform leaders in Chattanooga said that they had given up a multi-track system and a moved to a single-path diploma. "We'll never go back," said Challenger. "This is a critical part of our reform goals." To determine what all students should learn, "we should determine what students should know upon graduation and work back from that to determine our curriculum." To help each student acquire the requisite skills and knowledge, accurate data are essential. We must also make excellent use of this data in order to know each child's strengths and weaknesses, to track their progress, and to modify instruction as needed to ensure that all students

achieve the desired outcomes, Challenger concluded.

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This brief summarizes an American Youth Policy Forum that took place on January 8, 2004 on Capitol Hill, reported by Nancy Martin.

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