



HIGH SCHOOL REFORM POSITION PAPER

High school reform has become the focus of politicians at both the state and national level of late. President Bush has recently outlined a \$1.5 billion dollar high school initiative to help every high school graduate gain the skills necessary to succeed in college and be competitive in the work force. California Superintendent of Education Jack O'Connell has proposed reform of high schools in California to meet those same goals.

National education groups have also made suggestions for reform of America's high schools to better meet the needs of business, colleges and students. The NASSP published Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform. ACSA is involved with and supports the document. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, The Coalition of Essential Schools, Ed Trust, the Stanford Redesign Network and others have called for reform in high schools.

The impetus for reform comes from the changing needs of workers in an increasingly technological society. Good paying jobs in industry that require few academic skills no longer exist. As a result, the skills workers need and the skills students need in college are converging. Interestingly, these skills are not strictly academic. A survey of college professors and employers on the skills most lacking in students and new employees were very similar (Education Week, Feb. 16, 2000). The six top skills needed and lacking were:

- Writing
- Work habits
- Motivation
- Basic math skills
- Curiosity
- Respect

The basic math skills on the list were described as an ability to understand statistics and probability and an ability to organize and understand data. Richard Murnane of Harvard and Frank Levy of M.I.T. list the new basic skills needed for work in our changing society in their book Teaching the New Basic Skills (1996). They indicate that employers still look for reliability, a positive attitude and a willingness to work hard, but they add these other skills:

- The ability to read and do math at the ninth grade level or higher
- The ability to solve semi-structured problems where hypotheses must be formed and tested
- The ability to work in groups with persons of various backgrounds
- The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing
- The ability to use personal computers to carry out simple tasks like word processing

Some of the skills on the two lists are addressed in traditional high school courses, but many of the skills are not.

Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League and leader of school improvement efforts, urges that standards students are required to meet should reflect proficiencies students need to succeed in the real world. They shouldn't be mirror images of the admissions standards for selective universities ("The Aim of Urban School Reform, unpublished paper, Oct. 12, 1999). Price proposed "six clusters of competence" that have been adopted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. All high school graduates should be:

Literate: Capable of demonstrating a working command of reading, writing and speaking English.

Mathematically competent: A command of the basic computational skills required in the modern workplace and in everyday adult life.

Problem solvers: Eager to seek out information, discover answers and apply their skills in reasoning and critical thinking to solve problems.

Scientifically literate: Capable of appreciating nature and the environment, familiar with scientific method and the role of science in modern life, and cognizant of the uncertainties of the scientific method.

Good citizens: Well-grounded in the forces and values that have shaped this nation historically, culturally, demographically, politically and economically with an appreciation for the relationships of the United States to the rest of the world and this country's role in the world.

Technologically advanced: Comfortable with technology and capable of using computers and related technology in the normal course of everyday work and learning.

It is apparent that educators, politicians and citizens need to take a serious look at high school reform. To simply impose an academic solution, increased rigor on all students is to ignore the real needs of students in today's world and perpetuate the system currently in place. Certainly more students should meet A-G requirements for entrance into UC and would benefit from doing so. Our focus, however, should be on more than the completion of courses but should be focused on the acquisition of necessary skills. As noted, these skills are not just academic. High school reform requires a collaborative effort at each school site. Any reform efforts from Sacramento or Washington should provide leadership and support for this collaborative effort.

WE FEEL REFORM EFFORTS SHOULD MEET THE FOLLOWING EXPECTATIONS:

Serve all students – Any reform movement should address the needs of all students, not just university-bound students. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of English Language Learners, special education students and minority students. Closing the achievement gap should be the priority. A one-size-fits-all solution will not work.

Expand the range of opportunities for students – Any reform movement should not reduce the opportunities that students have or narrow choices after high school. Rather, it should expand the choices that students have and lead to better preparation for entering the work force after high school, technical school or college.

Prepare all students for life – Any reform movement should include a strong school-to-career component for all students. Career education is part of a strong academic program, not a separate path as part of a two-path system. All students will enter the work force either after high school or after a post secondary school. Each high school student should be prepared for work, for citizenship and post secondary education when they leave high school.

Support students – Support structures must be in place to help close the achievement gap in scores that we see in some students. These support structures should not be at the expense of career education opportunities for students.

Support principals – Principals need to be supported in efforts to change cultures in schools. This will require greater community and parent involvement. It will require collaborative, inclusive leadership and strategic use of data. It will require creating and sustaining communities of practice among principals and staff.

Support teachers - We need to develop the culture of teachers working together in professional learning communities. We need to find ways for teachers to work together to create activities, assessments and evaluation of assessments in order to improve learning for all students. The culture should be one of collaboration, support, experimentation, evaluation and commitment to become better.

REFORM MOVEMENT SHOULD ALSO ADDRESS:

Rigor – The academic program in high schools should develop students who meet the standards students need to function in today's society. Each student, at graduation, should be prepared to take the next step toward his or her career and academic goals. Focusing only on the completion of classes does not address other skills needed for success, including citizenship, technology use, ability to function on teams and get along with diverse people, communication and other soft skills needed today. These need to be

addressed in the curriculum. A standards-based approach is preferable and better meets all students' needs. In addition, traditional mathematics courses required for college and university (Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2, and Trigonometry) do not address the mathematical skills of statistical and data analysis. Acquisition of probability, statistical and data analysis skills by students needs to be included in the curriculum.

Relevance – The curriculum needs to be meaningful and useful to all students. All students are headed to a career, but not all are headed to traditional four-year colleges after high school. Most students in California enter community colleges after high school and would benefit from the focus offered by school-to-career programs. A comprehensive school-to-career program for all students is essential and can benefit all students, including college-bound students. According to the Report of the National Assessment of Vocational Education Independent Advisory Panel (Washington Commentary, Lewis, A., November 2004) high school graduates with some vocational/applied learning experiences in school, ranging from community service work to internships, attained higher grade-point averages in their freshman year in college than students with no career experience in school. School-to-Career programs need to be imbedded in the high school curriculum and need to be considered when making curriculum decisions.

Relationships – Students need to feel that they are recognized, respected and listened to at school. They need to have a productive and meaningful relationship with an adult at school who cares about them. Smaller learning communities block scheduling, active club participation, career paths, and interdisciplinary teams are some ways that relationships can be fostered. Relationships also need to be fostered with parents and community members, providing mechanisms for their input into curricular decisions and inclusion issues.

The document that provides many strategies to reform high schools are found in the National Association of Secondary School Principals publication Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform. It recommends a collaborative effort at each school site to personalize the learning environment and make it relevant for each student. It also calls for focusing teacher efforts on improving rigor in the curriculum to better meet needs of students, based on achieving necessary skills. It is a document that should be widely studied and discussed as we make plans to reform California high schools.

We know that legislative timelines are often too short and that bureaucratic timelines are too long. Because of this impatience, the impetus to induce change grows. While high school reform needs broad input, there is a clear sense of urgency; thus, there is a need for a “call to action.” The discussion of the need to reform and what should happen to reform high schools is critical to driving the reform itself.

Adopted by ACSA Board of Directors March 8, 2005.