

Forum Brief

Building a Portfolio of Options to Ensure All Students Graduate **A Forum – Friday, June 11, 2010**

In the United States, an estimated 1.3 million youth drop out of school every year. The Association for High School Innovation (AHSI), a national network of youth development organizations, is responding to this crisis by working to create new opportunities for youth for whom traditional school settings have not been successful. Currently operating alternative secondary school programs in over 290 sites nationwide AHSI members offers youth diverse pathways to graduation through a variety high quality schools and programs modeled to meet students' specific needs. This forum showcased the work of AHSI and two of its founding member organizations, Big Picture Learning and Gateway to College, in addition to the Newark-AHSI Partnership, a partnership among the city's mayor, school district, higher education institutions, and other local education stakeholders, which aims to create more opportunities for youth in Newark to gain access to high quality alternative education programs.

Talmira Hill, Director of the AHSI, began the discussion by providing an overview of AHSI and its commitment to dropout prevention, high school graduation, college completion and career achievement. Hill emphasized AHSI as a network of youth development organizations that provide youth with learning and enrichment opportunities beyond traditional in-school education. Formed in 2003 with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as the Alternative High School Initiative, the collaboration began as a consortium of six organizations operating 29 schools. It has since grown to include nine founding members and one new member organization operating over 275 schools, and in 2010 the network changed its name to the Association for High School Innovation (AHSI). Today, AHSI members reach more than 38,000 students in 35 states and over 170 cities nationwide. AHSI's member organizations include Big Picture Learning, Communities in Schools of Georgia, Communities in Schools National, Diploma Plus, EdVisions Schools, Gateway to College National Network, National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education & Families, Our Piece of the Pie®, StreetSchool Network, and YouthBuild USA.

While the alternative high school options offered by AHSI and its member organizations vary based on the program and the needs of students, Hill emphasized that they are all student-centered and endeavor to let youth voice, project-based learning, and leadership development guide the learning process. Evident in the design of all AHSI schools are the following five principles:

- Authentic learning, teaching and performance assessment
- Personalized school culture
- Shared leadership and responsibility
- Supportive partnerships
- Future focus for students

Students who attend AHSI schools benefit from programs that deliver learning experiences based on their personal passions, interests, learning styles and needs. Such learning opportunities are

aligned with state standards and structured according to clearly defined learning goals. As a result, when students graduate from AHSI schools, they earn the same high school diploma as students at traditional high schools, but simply achieve the credential through an alternative pathway.

Hill credited AHSI's success in large part to the collective expertise of its member organizations and the highly specialized nature of its schools and programs. Each school or program within AHSI's network is different and each model targets specific groups of students in particular situations and stages of education. Hill also called attention to AHSI's Place-Based Partnerships currently operating in three cities: Indianapolis, Nashville, and Newark. With the support of the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families, AHSI has partnered with the mayor, the school districts, higher education institutions, and a variety of community partners in these three cities to create a portfolio of alternative education options for students within the school system. The initiative aims at providing all students, including those who are struggling in traditional school settings, those at-risk of dropping out, and those who may already be out of school, with the opportunity to attend high quality alternative high schools, earn a diploma, and continue on to college or a career.

Hill acknowledged several policy conditions necessary for the large-scale national success of alternative secondary school programs. Her recommendations for policy include increasing college access for all students, expanding education options for students and parents, opening more alternative high schools, creating strong accountability structures for all educational programs, and developing rigorous and reasonable academic standards and assessments. She also encouraged greater coordination among cities, school districts, community organizations and other public agencies, and pushed for the adoption of a need-based, adequacy approach to funding.

Dr. Elliot Washor, co-founder and co-director of Big Picture Learning, introduced Big Picture Learning as a group of alternative schools that aim to personalize education for students and make learning relevant and authentic through experiences in the community and the real world. Big Picture Learning currently operates over 60 small schools in the United States and numerous schools abroad.

Washor acknowledged the disconnect that often occurs in traditional public high schools among the rigor and relevance of academic content and the relationships students form with their teachers, peers, and other school personnel. Big Picture Learning eliminates this disconnect by surrounding students with adults whose primary responsibilities are to form meaningful and supportive relationships with students, to challenge them, and to make learning relevant. At Big Picture Schools, all students are assigned an adult advisor who stays with them for all four years. This individual gets to know students, learns what interests and motivates them and builds an individual learning plan for each student based on his/her interests and needs.

The schedule at Big Picture Learning schools affords students time to build additional relationships with adults and to engage in authentic and relevant real world learning experiences through internships matched with their interests. Two days a week, students participate in

internships outside of school under the guidance of a mentor from the community—a lawyer, engineer, merchant or other professional working in a field or industry of interest to the student.

By developing personal learning plans for students, providing them with meaningful internship experiences and surrounding them with a network of supportive adults, Big Picture Learning creates an educational program that allows students' interests to guide their learning and real-world experiences to prepare them for college or a career. The Big Picture Learning model provides students with what Washor considers the ten essentials for learning: Relationships, Relevance, Choice, Challenge, Practice, Play, Authenticity, Application, Time and Timing. Big Picture Learning's graduation and college acceptance rates are 92% and 95% respectively.

Nick Mathern, Associate Vice-President for Policy and Partnership Development for Gateway to College National Network, described Gateway to College as a partnership between school districts and community colleges that aims to empower youth who have dropped out of school or are not on track to graduate to earn a high school diploma by taking dual credit courses in supportive college environments. The Gateway to College model was initially developed in 2000 at Portland Community College. In 2008, Gateway to College National Network became an independent nonprofit organization that now includes a network of 27 colleges in 16 states partnering with over 100 school districts.

Since its inception, Gateway to College has worked with populations of students historically underserved in secondary and postsecondary education. It continues to work with a population of students for whom the traditional comprehensive high school model is inadequate. In order to qualify for Gateway to College, students must be between 16 and 21 years old, out of school or on the verge of dropping out and behind in high school credits. Additionally, their GPA cannot exceed 2.0. Among the population of students participating in Gateway to College, 59% are students of color, 74% are first-generation college-goers, 26% have at least one parent without a high school diploma, 9% dropped out of high school due to homelessness and 25% dropped out of high school due to health problems not related to drugs and alcohol.

Despite the educational setbacks many Gateway students have faced in the past, Mathern characterizes them as a highly ambitious group that recognizes the value of college. By placing students in adult learning environments and developing curricula relevant to their lives, Gateway to College has created a program that engages and empowers students, and provides them with an alternative pathway for earning a high school diploma.

For every student involved in the program, Gateway to College begins with a Foundation Semester. During this semester, students take courses only with other Gateway students in math, English and reading, as well as a course called College Skills. All of these courses are designed to strengthen students' academic skills and prepare them for learning in a college environment. Following the Foundation Semester, students begin taking courses for dual credit that applies toward their high school diploma and toward a college credential. Their instructor for the College Skills course, a Gateway resource specialist, continues to serve as a mentor or advisor for students for the duration of their Gateway to College experience, which can last up to three years.

According to Mathern Gateway to College's success and the success of its students can be attributed to four key program components. Like Washor, he stressed the importance of supportive adult relationships. He also discussed how empowering and transformative it can be for students to be on a college campus taking college courses. Additionally, for students who have responsibilities aside from school, for example they are a parent, a caretaker or have a job, the flexibility of schedule offered by the Gateway program is key. Finally, Mathern acknowledged the financial sustainability of the program and how it mutually benefited both the community colleges that take students in and the school districts they hail from. School districts benefit as they reclaim funding for students re-enrolling in school, while colleges benefit as much of this aforementioned funding actually follows the student to the college hosting the Gateway program.

Mathern concluded with a brief discussion of the outcomes Gateway to College has produced for students involved in the program. Students who previously struggled to attend school regularly have an average attendance rate in their college classes of 87%. Additionally, Gateway students pass 71% of the courses they take for which they earn a letter grade, and by the time they have completed the program, Gateway graduates on average have earned two-thirds of the credits needed for an Associates of Arts degree. The strong relationships students have built with the adults on Gateway's staff have also changed students' attitudes toward school and ultimately changed their lives.

Dr. Vincent L. Mays, Director of Alternative Education for Newark Public Schools, discussed the crisis facing youth in Newark, New Jersey, where only 53% of students graduate from high school each year. He addressed the urgency of this situation and outlined the strategic plan Newark Public Schools has undertaken to combat the dropout rate in Newark and to improve and diversify educational opportunities for the city's youth.

Today Newark is one of three cities engaged in a Place-based Partnership with AHSI. These partnerships involve cooperation and collaboration among city governments, school districts, community organizations, post-secondary institutions, and high quality alternative high school programs. Prior to partnering with AHSI, Newark already had an Office of Alternative Education, however, the programs overseen by this office were not producing adequate results. The objective of the Newark-AHSI Partnership was to create a continuum of high quality alternative high schools to serve students in the Newark area who are struggling in traditional schools, at risk of dropping out or who may already be out of school. The first step toward accomplishing this goal was restructuring the Office of Alternative Education and adopting a number of research based, nationally recognized replacement models designed to better meet the needs of Newark's youth.

Another aspect of restructuring alternative education in Newark involved the creation of the Youth Education and Employment Success Center, what Mays referred to as a "one-stop center," for all young people in need of educational placement, social service referral and employment/training services. The center works to help place youth in the program that best meets their needs, whether it be one of the three Big Picture Learning schools now operating in Newark, one of the two Communities In Schools Performing Learning Centers, the Diploma Plus program or Gateway to College.

According to Mays, one of the biggest challenges Newark faced over the last year of the Newark-AHSI Partnership was transitioning from previously existing programs to the new AHSI models. Looking forward to 2010-2011, Newark's next step will be to turn these new alternative high schools into in-district charter schools. Reclassifying the schools as charters will allow them to maintain their autonomy and continue to receive financial support from the city.

Question and Answer Period

In response to a question asked about the biggest challenges, aside from funding, that AHSI and its member organizations face when attempting to scale their programs and reach more students, Mathern discussed the challenges Gateway to College faces working with two school systems—community colleges and school districts—with different accountability systems. Metrics by which traditional schools and school districts are evaluated, such as AYP and graduation rates, do not apply to community colleges. He recommended new policies reflect the growing number of partnerships between schools and community colleges specifically with regard to accountability structures for community colleges. Washor's response emphasized the unpredictability of students' lives and the complexity of the situation that has resulted in 4 million youth being out of school and not at work. He also cited the challenge to create meaningful pathways for older students, a group generally underserved by existing programs. Hill called attention to how existing policies rarely offer incentives for engaging and utilizing resources in the community. She identified a need to facilitate connections among educational programs and resources outside the school district, such as community based organizations and nonprofits. Mays considered the biggest challenge currently facing alternative education programs to be the small number of individuals working in the field who are willing to acknowledge the failures of the current system, take a risk and try something new.

Another question followed up on a comment Dr. Mays made during his discussion about the challenge of transitioning from older models to new alternative education programs, specifically with regard to placing and training staff. Mays explained that they had improved and increased professional development for staff in transition and worked hard to place staff in positions where they would be the most effective. He also noted how introducing new programs that were perceived to be legitimate and worthwhile served to rejuvenate staff who had been frustrated by the poor outcomes of the previously existing programs.

An additional question asked about whether any of the organizations had plans to operate schools or programs in rural areas. Hill mentioned that a few AHSI organizations operate schools in rural areas and acknowledged the need to assemble information and use it to better target these communities. She also mentioned that EdVisions Schools has the highest number of programs in rural areas and is leading efforts within the AHSI work group on High School to Career and College Transition, for example, to identify challenges in rural areas. Washor asserted that Big Picture Learning already had a presence in many rural areas, operating schools on reservations, in rural California, rural New Zealand and the Australian outback. Mathern acknowledged that reaching students in rural areas was currently a challenge for Gateway to College, as the program depended on partnerships with community colleges and student access to the college. In rural

areas, community colleges often serve large geographical areas, which can present challenges for students who lack the means to travel a great distance in order to get to school.