

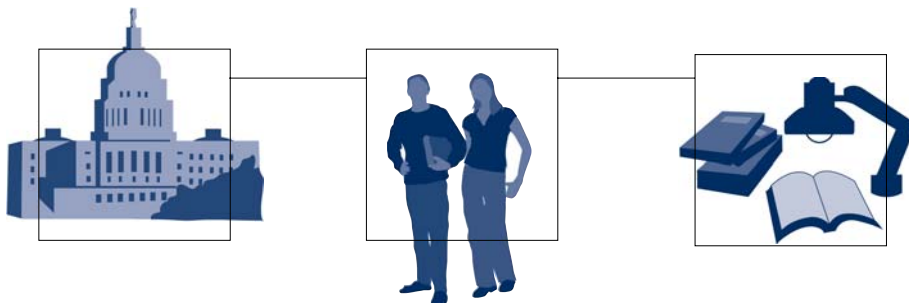
# Transforming the American High School:

**Lessons Learned and Struggles Ahead**

**Betsy Brand**

**December 2004**

BRIDGING YOUTH POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM



## American Youth Policy Forum

- Bridging Policy, Practice and Research

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) is a nonprofit professional development organization based in Washington, DC. Our mission is to bridge policy, practice and research by providing nonpartisan learning opportunities for professionals working on youth policy issues at the national, state and local levels.

Our goal is to enable policymakers and their aides to be more effective in their professional duties and of greater service—to Congress, the Executive Branch, state legislatures, governors and national organizations—in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting our nation's young people. We believe that knowing more about youth issues—both intellectually and experientially—will help these busy professionals formulate better policies and perform their jobs more effectively. AYPF does not lobby or take positions on pending legislation. Rather, we work to develop better communication, greater understanding and enhanced trust among these professionals, and to create a climate that will result in constructive action for the benefit of the nation's young people and their families and communities.

Each year, AYPF conducts 35 to 45 learning events (forums, discussion groups and field trips) and develops policy reports disseminated nationally. For more information about these activities and other publications, visit our website at [www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org).

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to help policymakers learn about and become more engaged in supporting high school reform efforts. From October 2000-April 2004, AYPF provided a variety of experiences for policymakers to help them gain knowledge of strategies to create more effective learning environments for youth, particularly disadvantaged youth, that lead to increased academic achievement and better preparation for further education and careers. AYPF conducted this work by organizing speaker forums, field trips, discussion groups, and roundtables and by producing a number of relevant publications for policymakers and practitioners. This report summarizes what we learned from these events.

### How to Use This Report

This report draws heavily on the material already written about the programs and sites we visited, as well as speakers at our forums, presentations at roundtables, and summaries of discussion groups, available on our website, [www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org). This report is not meant to summarize or encapsulate the entire knowledge of the field that exists on each topic or issue, but rather to describe some of the common approaches, strategies, and policies that reformers are using, as well as to highlight a number of unique strategies that we learned about.

Each topical area includes a brief description of programs, strategies, or policies that address that area. For example, under the topic of *Successful Transition of Underachieving Students to Postsecondary Education*, the report includes descriptions of various schools and programs that help students, ranging from the community-based Cleveland Scholarships Program to a unique charter school located at University of California San Diego, the Preuss Charter School.

The descriptions are meant to give the reader an idea of the range of strategies in place and

to demonstrate different approaches to solving a problem or dealing with a challenge. Descriptions are kept purposefully brief (1-2 paragraphs), with a web link to the full document on AYPF's website. This will allow the reader to access more detail and depth on the programs or strategies of greatest interest. Appendix A of this report provides a complete listing of forums, field trips, and other events conducted for this project and also contains web links to forum summaries, field trip reports, and other publications.

### AYPF's Learning Events

AYPF's goal is to help policymakers learn about what works to help youth be successful, and more particularly for this project, what works with regard to reforming high schools. As we share information with policymakers, we do not take positions or advocate for specific legislation or governmental programs. Rather we seek to find the common strategies that support youth and lead to their success. The principles and elements of effective education and youth programs that we believe in have been described in the [High Schools of the Millennium](#) report and our series of compendia that describe evaluated programs that

have positive outcomes for youth.<sup>1</sup> These principles help guide our work in determining what programs to showcase in our forums and field trips.

AYPF serves a diverse audience of national policymakers, including Congressional staff, Executive Branch aides, officers of professional and national associations, Washington-based state office staff, researchers, and education and public affairs media. We also include state and local practitioners, particularly from the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia areas, in many of our events.

Speaker forums, held on Capitol Hill, are AYPF's most popular and well-known learning events. At forums, research experts and innovative practitioners and educational leaders are invited to share their knowledge on reform strategies and approaches on a wide range of high school reform topics to help inform the policy dialogue. Forums are designed to allow for an interchange between audience and speakers, and this is often the most interesting part of the program, as policies are questioned and debated.

AYPF field trips, usually one to two days in length, provide a group of about 20 policymakers an opportunity to see reform efforts first-hand at the state, district, and school levels. Visits are made to schools, colleges, and youth and community programs and allow

participants opportunities to talk with students, teachers, parents, employers, educational leaders, and elected and appointed officials. During these visits, participants have a chance to see the realities that many urban schools face and better understand the challenges to high school reform. At the same time, participants learn about innovative programs and leaders and see what is possible given a willingness to change.

In addition to forums and field trips, AYPF organizes discussion groups and roundtables. Discussion groups are designed to allow a group of individuals to delve deeply into a complex topic, such as developing a vision for reformed high schools, or improved career and technical education. Discussion groups meet multiple times over a year or two, and allow for consideration of issues and consensus-building in a non-partisan, non-threatening manner. Discussion groups almost always result in a summary publication. Roundtables are one-day meetings that allow for a more in-depth examination of an issue than could occur at a regular lunchtime forum. Roundtables were held on issues such as new forms of student assessment, the value of contextual teaching and learning as an instructional strategy, detracking the high school curriculum, and the Schools for a New Society Initiative.

<sup>1</sup> *High Schools of the Millennium, Report of the Workgroup*. 2000. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; *Some Things DO Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices*. 1997. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; *More Things That DO Make A Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices, vol. II*. 1999. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; Jurich, Sonia & Steve Estes. 2000. *Raising Academic Achievement*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; James, Donna Walker, Sonia Jurich and Steve Estes. 2001. *Raising Minority Academic Achievement: A Compendium of Education Programs and Practices*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; James, Donna Walker and Glenda Partee. 2003. *No More Islands: Family Involvement in 27 School and Youth Programs*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

## SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Our work for the Carnegie Corporation of New York highlighted a number of policy issues, including strategies and policies that increase student achievement, particularly for low-performing students; help low-performing or disadvantaged students transition more effectively to postsecondary education; provide high quality career preparation; and create connections to caring and knowledgeable adults.

In addition to these major issues, participants in our events learned about communities that are creating a range of learning options from which youth can choose; youth employment programs for youth who have left school; alternative assessment strategies; contextual teaching and learning; the use of technology to improve teaching and learning; and financing and resource issues affecting high school reform. Other policy topics dealt with that deserve much deeper attention and discussion include community engagement and involvement in high school reform; helping English language learners and students with disabilities master rigorous curriculum; building stronger connections between high schools and alternative education programs; and ensuring that reform efforts include dropout prevention as well as dropout recovery. We were also fortunate to have several speakers, such as Deborah Meier, Vice Chair Emeritus, Coalition of Essential Schools and Paul Hill, Center for Reinvention of Public Education, University of Washington, who provided their own unique perspectives on high school reform.

The remainder of this section provides a summary of lessons learned by topical area.

### Improving Student Achievement, Particularly For Low-Performing and Disadvantaged Students

Improving student achievement and outcomes is obviously a priority for anyone involved in high school reform. Little by little, the public, policymakers, and educators have acknowledged the problems of academic performance of high schools. Reports like *Locating the Dropout Crisis*,<sup>2</sup> *Public High School Graduation Rates and College Readiness Rates in the United States*,<sup>3</sup> and *Projections of 2003-2004 High School Graduates*<sup>4</sup> highlight

the low graduation and high dropout rates at many schools and the realities that lead to them. The current focus on standardized testing, assessments, and high school exit exams has also helped raise the issue of poor student performance to a new level of prominence. Disaggregated data has led to a clearer understanding of which students do well and which ones do not and is leading to more focused intervention strategies.

Schools and districts are engaged in various strategies to help low-performing and disadvantaged students improve their academic outcomes. One of the more common strategies is to provide ninth graders with increased attention in smaller settings. Creating smaller

<sup>2</sup> Balfanz, Robert and Nettie Legters. 2004. *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts? Where are They Located? Who Attends Them?* Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools.

<sup>3</sup> Greene, Jay and Greg Forster. 2004. *Public High School Graduation Rates and College Readiness Rates in the United States*. New York: Manhattan Institute, Center for Civic Innovation.

<sup>4</sup> Swanson, Christopher. 2004. *Projections of 2003-2004 High School Graduates*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

schools or groups of students with more personalized instruction based on student needs is also a common strategy. Many of these interventions include a laser-like focus on reading, literacy, and mathematics to ensure students have the basic skills to advance. Other strategies add more instructional time.

The **Talent Development with Career Academies** model is an education reform initiative that aims to improve the academic achievement of students in large, non-selective, comprehensive high schools. In operation at 33 high schools in 12 states across the country, the approach encompasses five main features: small learning communities, organized around interdisciplinary teacher teams that share the same students and have common daily planning time; curricula leading to advanced English and mathematics coursework; academic extra-help sessions; staff professional development strategies; and parent and community-involvement in activities that foster students' career and college readiness. One feature of Talent Development is the Ninth Grade Success Academy, a school-within-a-school organized around interdisciplinary teams designed to provide incoming ninth graders with a smooth transition to high school. In the Academy, students take a double dose (two periods) of reading (including a Strategic Reading course) and math, learn important study skills and are exposed to future career pathways through a Freshman Seminar, and remain with a small team of teachers and peers.

Another part of the Talent Development model is to provide "twilight" academies, alternative after-hours programs provided for students who have serious attendance or disci-

pline problems or who are coming to the school from incarceration or suspension from another school. Instruction is offered in small classes, and extensive services are provided by guidance and support staff. The Talent Development model recently received a positive independent evaluation<sup>5</sup> in terms of increased grade promotion and course completion for ninth graders.

**Morris High School** was one of the lowest-performing high schools in **Bronx, NY**, and one of the hardest to reform. In 1997, only 80 students from a freshman class of 600 graduated, with half of the students already lost by tenth grade. The underlying problem was that the school was never designed to prepare all of its students for college or high-wage careers; rather, it was structured to help only high achievers. For this reason, the district leadership in the Bronx selected Morris as one of the first high schools to be transformed into small schools.

The Morris High School campus began its transition to smaller learning communities with the opening of the Bronx Leadership Academy II, High School for Violin and Dance, School for Excellence, and Bronx International High School in 2002. As the new schools were phased in, the remaining students in the comprehensive school formed a fifth school that will eventually be replaced by a fifth new small school. The transition from the comprehensive school to the new small schools is taking place over a period of four years, starting with the freshman class and adding a grade each year. There are approximately 850 students in the four new small schools on the Morris campus, with 700 students attending the "old" Morris High

<sup>5</sup> Kemple, James and Corinne Herlihy. 2004. *The Talent Development High School Model: Context, Components, and Initial Impacts on Ninth-Grade Students' Engagement and Performance*. New York: MDRC.

School program.

One sign that the small school design is having a positive impact is that the number of students graduating from the “old” high school has increased from 77 to 220. Staff believes that because the “old” high school is getting smaller, students are benefiting from the small school environment, and the culture of the school building is changing to one of high expectations and support for all students.

Each school has at least a 90 percent attendance rate, and the number of students who want to attend the schools has increased over previous years. The principals of the small schools agree that there are other positive changes as a result of moving to small schools: the building is calmer and quieter, even though there are more students; there is a better learning atmosphere and higher attendance; security problems have been alleviated; and security and administrative costs have been reduced.

**James Ford Rhodes High School, Cleveland, OH** began breaking into smaller learning communities in 1997 with the implementation of a ninth grade academy. The following year several other smaller learning communities were added for upper classmen, including a Naval Junior ROTC program and the Ford Academy of Manufacturing Sciences (FAMS). Now the entire school is being transformed into three themed schools, each with grades nine through twelve.

At Rhodes High School, a gateway program designed for ninth graders who are off-track and low in credits was also implemented. This program focuses on basic skills and offers no electives. In partnership with Johns

Hopkins University, the gateway program provides double-dosing of English and math, world history, and science. Another intervention, the Sylvan Learning Lab, offers remediation for math and English. These smaller environments allow teachers to assess the skills and abilities of each student more readily and to determine what individual assistance might be needed.

Some large comprehensive high schools, like **Mission Bay High School in San Diego, CA**, (1,600 student body) provide needy students with intensive literacy and mathematics instruction. Students who enter ninth grade reading at a third or fourth grade level take two English and two math courses each day, supplemented only by lunch and physical education. Classes use high interest texts for adolescents, and teach a variety of reading skills, from decoding to fluency to comprehension. While many high schools have moved to these intensive blocks of time devoted to reading and literacy, some schools still struggle with the most effective ways of teaching adolescents. Mission Bay has found that reading and literacy coaches are an effective way to help teachers in various disciplines learn how to support the teaching of reading.

The “Credit Recovery Program” and “Make Up” school at **Central High School, Providence, RI** seek to get students who fail ninth grade back on track by 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Ten percent (approximately 50 students) of the 2000-2001 freshman class at Central earned fewer than two credits. The Credit Recovery Program was designed to serve ninth grade repeaters, allowing them to engage in extended work after school, curriculum compacting (i.e., covering more course material by covering a subject during regular *and* after

school hours), and a community service component. Students in the Credit Recovery Program attend a double period of English and math. If successful after the first quarter, students are also assigned community service and journal writing. Community Service earns students additional credits to keep them on track for graduation. The “Make Up” school is offered to ninth grade students failing Algebra I or English after their first semester. Students attend a half credit make-up class to replace the failing grade they received during the first quarter and avoid repeating or going to summer school. Students in the program come to class immediately after regular school two nights per week for English instruction and two nights per week for math instruction. Students and their parents sign a contract with clear expectations and pay a \$20.00 fee, which is refundable if a student successfully completes the class. Students must be present during the day to attend the after-school program, and after two absences, students are dropped from the program.

At **Southwest High School, San Diego, CA**, the principal reported the most difficult aspect of his job was to cause a shift in the way teachers think about the abilities of their students and the way they think about their teaching. “Teachers can no longer be a content teacher; they must now be a reading and writing teacher in a content area. In other words, a chemistry teacher is a reading and writing teacher in the content of chemistry,” he said. This has changed the way students gain basic skills, as each class supports student growth in literacy and math. The school has also eliminated all remedial and lower level classes because they do not meet the California “A-G” university entrance requirements and has instead pushed students to take more rigorous classes.

**Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams)**, started in **Houston, TX**, is a holistic intervention that helps children when they are young and follows them through school into college by providing a range of supports to them and their families. Project GRAD consists of five components: summer institutes and scholarships for students; classroom management and disciplinary strategies; Move It Math, a specially designed math instruction; Success for All, a reading and writing program; and a Communities in Schools program that provides counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and help to families to keep students focused on their work. These components are placed in elementary, middle, and high schools in feeder systems to ensure consistency of effort across all grade levels.

Project GRAD has been implemented in three feeder systems in Houston, which affect 41 schools and approximately 26,000 students. For the past ten years, Project GRAD has conducted an evaluation of its effectiveness by collecting data on high school graduation and college attendance and student behavior, discipline, and achievement. The following are indicators of the program’s success:

- The percentage of college-bound high school graduates from the Davis High School feeder system has increased from an annual 12% to 45%, well above the national average of 37% for Hispanic seniors and 33% for African-American seniors.
- Students qualifying for the scholarships at Davis High School increased from 47% of graduates in 1992 to 60% of graduates in 1999.
- At Davis High School, passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) increased from 42% in 1994 to 79%































































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