CHANGING URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

By Ron Wolk

INTRODUCTION

Most of the 300 participants in the conference sponsored by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and the Annenberg Institute for Urban School Reform late last October in Baltimore were committed foot soldiers in the school-reform wars. They gathered to discuss the daunting challenge of "Changing Urban High Schools." Like thousands of their peers in every city in the United States, they are battling mightily for every inch of ground in their struggle to change what may be the most dysfunctional of our social institutions.

The teachers, administrators, professors, parents, students, advocates, organizers and funders who have enlisted in this cause continue to believe that, in the end, the good guys win. They are not naïve. They've been in the hard, messy business of trying to improve schools for too long to expect big wins. But they are committed to public schools that work for all children, and the only way they know to accomplish that goal is to keep marching forward. They came to Baltimore as part of strategic delegations from their cities, where they shared successful strategies, celebrated hard-won victories, and commiserated over setbacks. They shared lessons learned and techniques for solving common problems. They exchanged ideas and information. And, perhaps most importantly, they stoked in each other the sometimes flickering fires of faith that keep them going year after year in the educational version of the Hundred Years War.

Within the context of the urban high school, the conference focused on three major themes: teacher quality; assessment and accountability; and equity—all critical components of any strategy to improve urban secondary education.

In small group sessions over the two-day meeting, participants discussed tactics, pilot programs, and models. They talked about creating small schools, building professional communities, empowering parents, giving voice to students. They offered ideas for using time in schools differently, like block scheduling; for structural changes, like freshman academies; for ways of detracking schools and combating racism.

What it all comes down to is that they want young people to succeed—not just score well on the bubble-in standardized tests that bombard them—but to catch the incurable virus of curiosity and learning.

They wove their experiences and aspirations like silver threads through dozens of small group sessions, cautiously suggesting that perhaps the hard work of the past decade is beginning to pay off. Several, for example, reported rising test scores. Some told of successful efforts to convert large schools into clusters of smaller schools. A few pointed to greater community involvement and new leadership. The progress reported suggested that maybe there is a "tipping point" in the not too distant future, a moment in time when all the reform efforts reach a critical mass and a kind of continental shift takes place in the system. After all, polls consistently show that education is at the top of the nation's priority concerns and was a major issue in the recent Presidential campaign. If widespread and growing public awareness is itself a precondition of improving public education, then maybe there is cause for optimism.

The current reform movement is the most enduring in our history, and it shows no sign of flagging.

PAST AS PROLOGUE

Stanford historian David Tyack's words in the opening plenary undoubtedly resonated with these participants. His comments echoed his prize-winning book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*. Tyack did his "gallop through history," sketching the evolution of the American high school as a series of reforms. One of the main reforms, he said, has been the adding on of new subjects to match the interests of an increasingly diverse student body. High schools moved from being mainly preparatory institutions for the college-bound children of the affluent to institutions that served the broad needs of the working and middle class. This well-intentioned development, however, sowed the seeds of "tracking," as education leaders decided that children of varying abilities needed different kinds of education. Thus, an "incredible bias" against working-class kids and certain ethnic and racial groups got built into the system.

David Tyack's reminder that each current reform is an attempt to correct a previous reform was an implicit plea for a touch of humility—as was his observation that the public education system embodied all the elements of standards-based reform a century ago. It is useless to storm the gates of Utopia, he seemed to warn, because you are only likely to get there by tinkering. And he urged that in our zeal for change we be careful to preserve the good in the status quo.

But there were also urban reformers in Baltimore who have blunted their swords on the shields of the status quo for more than a decade and have begun to wonder whether the present system can, or even should, be preserved. These reform activists have become skeptical that the strategy of trying to transform urban high schools one by one has any chance of succeeding. They have seen poorly performing schools turned into good schools only to slip back into mediocrity and failure when the principal leaves or a new school board is elected. School boards, ignoring research and common sense, are commissioning new large, comprehensive high schools. Standardized testing has reached epidemic proportions. Urban districts have resegregated. Tracking is alive and well. And year after year, millions of young Americans drop out of school or graduate without the skills and knowledge they need to be productive workers and responsible citizens.

Most painfully, these activists have watched good ideas and promising reforms be distorted in clumsy implementation. Standards-based reform offers great promise, for example, of making the system more equitable by holding high expectations for all children. But uneven and often thoughtless implementation is jeopardizing that promise and, these reformers fear, is imperiling the very schools that are succeeding with the most disadvantaged students.

Some believe that what has been happening to young people in America's urban high schools is the greatest scandal of the 20th century. Others fear that the promise of the civil-rights movement is being rendered meaningless as successive generations of minority youth are deprived of an adequate education then dumped into the mean streets and condemned to a bleak future.

THE POLITICS OF URGENCY

So these reformers say they are beyond tinkering: They speak of the "politics of urgency" and call on parents, teachers, students and the public to organize for social action. They are convinced that the system must be radically overhauled and will co-opt them if they try to change it incrementally. Their comments in Baltimore were reminiscent of the calls to action from another era—social justice, civil disobedience, protest, community organizing, civic action, speaking truth to power, transforming the system.

Unlike most educational conferences, this one featured real, live students, and their needs, as they articulated them, resonated profoundly with other participants. They spoke articulately in blunt, plain English. They talked of labs without equipment, a scarcity of computers, too few textbooks and even those out of date. Some told of classrooms so crowded that students have to take turns standing, and even classes without teachers. One of the participants told of students in a Washington, D.C. classroom who entertained themselves playing computer games for months while waiting for a teacher, and they got one only after outraged parents found out and protested.

Kids get tracked into courses and programs, they said, based on teacher perceptions of their potential and without being given a chance to express their desires. Again and again, the students said that nobody listens to them, and so a number of them are involved in organizing other students so they will be heard. They want a greater say in their education.

UNHOLY TRINITY

These urban reformers applauded the words of Michelle Fine, a professor at the City University of New York, who has spent 20 years in the trenches. She condemned the "unholy trinity of urban schools, the criminal justice system, and the economy that is holding urban youth hostage."

In a passionate call for a major overhaul of the present system, Fine insisted that the important goals cannot be achieved through incremental change. The only real reform is whole-school reform. And don't limit yourselves to schools, she urged, change the system from top to bottom.

She and others argue that we know how to educate urban youth, and can point to examples of success in every major city in the nation—usually small, nontraditional schools educating a relative handful of students. If a few, why not many, some asked. And one answer is that the system, attuned to its own survival, will accommodate a few deviations from the norm, but it will not tolerate any change that threatens it. So these successful schools are extraordinarily difficult—often impossible—to replicate, or, indeed, even to keep alive. Even so, these schools are living proof that poor, disadvantaged students can achieve in the right environment. Their very existence is an indictment of the system. If they can succeed, how can any school justify failure? Yet they are ignored by the low-performing schools that surround them—beacons that go unseen or are ignored.

Obviously there is a tension between those who are working to fix the existing system and those who would reinvent it. But they remain staunch allies, equally committed to the welfare of students and to public education. They may differ somewhat over the theory of action—how we get from where we are to where we want to be—but they are in almost total agreement about the issues.

OBSOLETE HIGH SCHOOLS

There is a consensus among reformers that the American high school is basically unsuited to the needs and opportunities of the 21st century. Highly departmentalized, it is rigid and inflexible; teachers tend to be isolated and there is little collaboration or interdisciplinary teaching; the curriculum tends to be fragmented and superficial. The traditional pedagogy of high schools places students in passive roles where they feel no connection with the outside world. As a result, students tend to feel anonymous and alienated. There is little opportunity in conventional high schools for students to engage in real, meaningful work, and students are assessed mostly on narrow standardized tests.

Expectations for students tend to be low, and there is an unspoken agreement between teachers and students that neither will ask too much of the other.

Those who believe the system can be fixed, call for major restructuring, smaller schools where teachers can work together and students are no longer anonymous. School-to-work programs, service-learning programs, individualized-education programs are seen as antidotes to the remoteness and seeming irrelevance of high school curricula.

Participants who believe the present system may be too flawed to be repaired believe that real reform will only occur when parents become involved and demand real change, when communities and schools forge productive links, and when the public takes responsibility for public education. In one small-group session, the ACORN Community High School was offered as a model for social change. ACORN schools are committed to strong community, parent, and student involvement. Democratic decision making and governance are prized. How can we expect students to think independently and participate in our democracy, asked one participant, when their schools utterly fail to model the basic principles of a democracy.

If the experience, knowledge, wisdom and commitment displayed at the Baltimore conference could be organized and multiplied, new kinds of schools would bloom in cities all across America.

SMALL SCHOOLS, BIG GAINS

Michelle Fine proclaimed that we know how to educate urban kids. We know what a good high school should look like and how it should operate. We have tons of research and decades of experience that make us confident about that.

The single most powerful intervention is to reduce the size of high schools—to create new small schools and break existing large schools into clusters of smaller schools. One study after another through the years has documented beyond question the educational advantages of small schools.

How We Came To Believe Bigger Is Better

A main argument for large schools has been that they offer economies of scale. But at least one study has challenged conventional wisdom by showing that small schools are more efficient and economical when costs are calculated by graduate, because dropouts are a very costly human and financial waste in large urban high schools.

Some four decades ago, Harvard President James Conant defended the comprehensive high school "on social and political grounds as an instrument of democracy, a way of mitigating the social stratification of society." He modified his opinion when residential racial segregation became America's reality. Creating comprehensive high schools in that context, he wrote, would mean transporting children across cities to maintain diversity. He urged, instead, that the nation concentrate on improving urban schools, without regard to racial composition.

Society at large, however, was less willing to abandon large schools and continued to build them. As a consequence, schools that resemble giant warehouses dot the streets of our inner cities, often in obvious disrepair. As often as not, students must pass through metal detectors as they enter. They are largely anonymous, and, in some instances, are required to wear identification badges.

Armed uniformed officers are a common sight at the front door of large urban schools. Almost as terrible, society has begun to take that prison atmosphere for granted.

High school students in big cities are 25 percent more likely than the average U.S. teenager to attend a school of more than 900 students. Brooklyn Tech, one of New York City's exam schools, was built to hold 6,000 students. Our acceptance of large, comprehensive high schools remains deeply entrenched—but anchored less by a belief in its contribution to democracy than by the influence of nostalgia and interscholastic sports.

How Small Is Small?

Another common argument for larger schools, which reflects back to David Tyack's evolution of reforms, is that they can offer a diversity of academic offerings and a diverse student body. One participant with experience in breaking up large high schools supported this position, arguing that a high school of 200 or even 300 is too small to provide the diversity and academic offerings students need. She recommended 800 or 900 students as being ideal. Some research has found that high schools with 800 to 1,000 work better than those that are much larger or much smaller. *Breaking Ranks,* the highly regarded report of the National Association of Secondary Schools calls for high schools with enrollments of 600.

So how small is small? Perhaps the appropriate number is better determined by the mission and concept of a school than an abstract benchmark. Is the school of a scale that allows teachers to collaborate with each other and continue their own professional learning? Is it small enough so that teachers and students know each other? Is it impossible for students to fall between the cracks? Is it large enough to offer demographic diversity? The appropriate number of students will also be affected by the kind of curriculum the school offers, whether it embraces a school-to-work approach, whether it places its students in the community for a significant part of the school week and uses mentors. Technology is clearly a wild card in this debate. Greater access to the incredible resources offered by the World Wide Web and distance learning obviously change our perspective about how large a school must be to offer the necessary array of academic experiences.

Then there are extracurricular activities to consider. In contemplating small schools, Michelle Fine exhorted participants not to "worry about [possible loss of some extracurricular activities, like] the prom or football." Admittedly, research has shown that extracurricular activities can help students develop social skills, learn teamwork, build self-esteem, and even increase their intellectual capacity; and, undoubtedly, large schools can offer a wider range of extracurricular activities. But, as Fine suggested, smaller schools, sharing a facility, can collaborate on social and athletic activities. Freestanding small schools can cooperate in forming club leagues for sports. She noted that there are creative ways to solve the problems of after-school activities that are a lot easier than solving the problems of regular school activities.

Research On Small Schools Is Unequivocal

The recent Bank Street study, *Small Schools, Great Strides*, was cited repeatedly at the conference. It focuses on about 150 small schools in Chicago established between 1990 and 1997. "Small" means 350 or fewer students in elementary schools and enrollments of 400 or less in high schools. The research team looked at a variety of indicators of school performance, including dropout rates, attendance rates, retention rates and academic achievement (including grades as well as standardized test scores). The database the researchers built also included demographic profiles of the schools, such as racial composition, socioeconomic data, and special education percentages. Beyond this quantitative analysis, the researchers looked in depth at eight schools to understand what actually happens in small schools.

The findings of the Bank Street Study match those of previous studies and should surprise no one who has thought at all about education.

- Students in small schools earn better grades, fail fewer courses, are absent fewer days, and are much less likely to drop out than students in large schools.

- Reading scores have increased in small schools.

- Because they are of human scale, teachers and students know each other, and there is less violence, fewer disciplinary problems, and an atmosphere that encourages learning.

- Teachers in small schools report greater job satisfaction, engage more in professional development, and collaborate more with each other. They are more likely to fit their teaching to their students' needs.

Participants from Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Oakland, New York, Chicago and other urban districts spoke about their efforts to improve teacher quality and empower students and teachers by breaking big schools into small schools in which the focus is on students and learning.

Nathan Hale High School

The Seattle contingent described how Nathan Hale High School has created two freshman academies, each with 250 students and six teachers. They noted that the structure allows for personalized integrated education, consistent policies and practices, teacher collaboration, strong communication links, and focused use of mentoring.

Julia Richman High School

Participants from New York City described their work in replacing large, failing high schools with small schools. Julia Richman is perhaps the most notable example. Once a proud all-girl's school, it deteriorated into one of the city's worst schools. In 1993, the Center for Collaborative Education, a New York City affiliate of the Coalition of Essential Schools, worked with the city school system to design a plan for Julia Richman. The center took over the ailing school, opened six smaller schools off site, and then moved them back into the same structure.

Manual High School

Key school administrators and teachers from Denver reflected on their efforts to create small schools and develop a standards-based curriculum. Manual High School was transformed by a partnership of staff and community working together to build consensus for radical change.

MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS

Time and again, on panels or when they were speaking individually in a session, students spoke of *relationships* when describing their most memorable and helpful experiences in high school. They especially cited relationships between teachers and students—the kind of relationships that are much more likely to flourish in the warmer climate of the small school.

Participants with experience in breaking large schools into smaller schools warned that the entire school must be made up of smaller schools. To create only one small school and nest it in a large comprehensive high school is to make it a target. Unless the whole school changes, the school-within-a-school is doomed to a rocky, and perhaps short, future.

If small schools are so obviously part of the solution, why are there not more of them? Participants, speaking from experience, gave the answers: fear of change; turf battles; union contracts; lack of leadership; lack of know-how and experience; and the simple matter of logistics—how do you find the time and energy and resources to change the existing system? These seem to be such garden-variety obstacles, but they are deep-rooted and thorny barriers to penetrate.

While nearly everyone agreed that smallness is an essential condition, they also realize it is not a sufficient one. Smallness provides an environment in which relationships can grow and enhance learning, but there must also be high standards, a fair and effective accountability system and equity–which means access for all to safe orderly schools, adequate resources, well-prepared teachers, a challenging curriculum, and the opportunity to learn.

QUALIFIED TEACHERS

The mantra of the current school reform movement has been “All Children Can Learn.” Now another one, equally important, has emerged: “A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom.”

As with small schools and small classes, the research documenting the central importance of teachers to student achievement is overwhelming, but unfortunately relatively little of it deals with high school teaching. What studies do exist, however, find a strong correlation between teacher qualifications (especially expertise in the subject they teach) and student achievement.

A comprehensive review of research conducted in the mid-1980s on various explanations for student achievement at all grade levels found that "in virtually every instance in which researchers have examined the factors that account for student performance, teachers prove to have greater impact than programs.” Those findings have been confirmed repeatedly since then.

Every additional dollar spent on improving teaching produced higher gains in student achievement.

A study of 900 Texas school districts found that teacher expertise accounted for about 40 percent of the difference in reading and mathematics achievement among students in grades 1 through 11. It also found that every additional dollar spent on improving teaching produced higher gains in student achievement. This is true for average students and exceptional students, for normal classrooms and special classrooms. There is an enormous amount of evidence that teachers have a significant impact on efforts to change schools and on the nature of the students' experience, whatever the formal policies and curricula of the school or classroom may be.

A Boston study found a significant correlation between the qualifications of teachers and the achievement of their 10th grade students in reading and mathematics.

What is true for any classroom is doubly true for the urban classroom, given that it is much more likely to be staffed by a first-year or, at least, an inexperienced teacher. The greater diversity of the student body, the prevalence of poverty, the complex social problems that exist in so many of our inner cities, and a worsening shortage of teachers to staff urban schools, greatly increase the challenges for teachers and raise the stakes for students.

What Makes A Teacher Effective?

Reformers in Baltimore discussed what makes a teacher effective. The answers are well known. High on the list are the teacher’s content knowledge and pedagogical skills, which correlate directly with student achievement. Teachers in high-poverty schools are less well prepared than the average teacher, and are the most likely to lack even a minor in the academic field they teach. Indeed nearly half of the math teachers in our large cities lack a major or minor in math. Urban teachers are also more likely to hold emergency certificates. Eight out of 10 urban districts allow "non-credentialed" individuals to teach because they cannot recruit and retain enough certified educators. Almost as many rely on long-term substitutes to solve the problem.

Rochelle Nichols Solomon, former senior program director for the Philadelphia Education Fund, stressed the urgency of dealing with the teacher-quality issue. Of the 13 high schools with the fewest certified teachers in Philadelphia, she noted, 10 are high-poverty schools. Of the 8 high schools with the highest number of certified teachers, 7 have student bodies where fewer than half are from low-income families.

Research confirms the obvious: Teachers become better teachers if they continue their professional development. One large California study found that math teachers who participated in sustained professional development in curriculum building tended to modify their teaching practices in ways that were associated with higher mathematics achievement among their students. Another California study in 1993 found performance higher at all grade levels when teachers had extended opportunities to learn about mathematics curriculum and instruction.

An Educational Testing Service (ETS) study found that math students whose teachers received professional development in higher-order thinking skills, and science students,

whose teacher received professional development in laboratory skills, outperformed their peers by about 40 percent of a grade level.

There is professional development and then there is in-service training. Teachers argue that they should control their own professional development and that it should be embedded in their everyday work. Instead of bringing some highly paid consultant in for a "dog and pony" show, they said, let us work in developing curriculum, reviewing student work and crafting rubrics to make assessment more objective, sharing our problems and discoveries as teachers. That's professional development.

Collaboration and team teaching seem to be growing in popularity among teachers as a way to increase student learning, but also as a way to build a sense of community among the teachers.

Alisal High School

Teachers from Alisal High School in California and their principal described their efforts to assure that all of their students—the majority of whom are not fluent in English—will graduate with options. There is a strong focus on literacy, as well as active participation by students in guiding school change. They use several methods to achieve that, but chief among them is teacher education and creating a professional community of teachers who will do whatever it takes to reach that goal. Peer observation plays a central role as teachers watch and learn from each other.

Manley High School

Similarly, at Manley High School in Chicago, the "instructional improvement process" rests on the premise that teachers must change the way they teach if they are to change the way students learn. Lead teachers mentor other teachers and mobilize the faculty to align the curriculum with district and state standards and assessments. Thus far, the changes have resulted in a 13.3 percent increase in median reading scores between 1999 and 2000.

Further, the ETS study found that students whose teachers conduct hands-on learning activities outperform their peers by more than 70 percent of a grade level in math, and 40 percent of a grade level in science.

Teachers must change the way they teach if they are to change the way students learn.

For many, the most important characteristic of an effective teacher is his or her commitment to the students, adapting to their needs and interests. To get better teaching we have to help teachers change their perception of their role. Only when they understand that the traditional concept of teacher as authority with all of the answers is obsolete, can they begin their journey to a new kind of teaching. A major challenge to educators—not only in urban schools—is to liberate the immeasurable talent and enormous energy that is largely untapped in millions of students by helping them to take more responsibility for their own education.

Throughout the conference, participants cited teacher resistance, lack of teacher buy-in, and teacher attitudes as obstacles to school improvement. But they also noted that the more teachers become invested in the learning and welfare of their students, the more they become involved in wanting to change their school. In one session, participants discussed the Blum Mentoring Model, which uses mentoring as a catalyst to change the culture of a whole school. All teachers, not just beginners, are involved in the mentoring activities.

Many of the reforms discussed at the Baltimore conference could help improve urban schools, but none is more crucial and promises more dividends than staffing every urban school with well-prepared teachers who are committed to the welfare of their students.

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

The issue of standards-based reform arose in many sessions and discussions. How could it not, given that 49 states and many major districts have adopted content standards and accountability systems that rely, for the most part, on off-the-shelf standardized tests to evaluate school and student performance?

The promise of the standards movement can only be realized if it is implemented thoughtfully and effectively. The discussion in Baltimore revealed growing concern about the implementation. As one speaker said, "Standards should not mean standardization." Participants worried that standards that are too detailed and defined for every grade stifle creative teaching. Some argued against setting standards for children in the primary grades.

Most of the discussion involving standards-based reform focused on accountability, and, particularly, on high-stakes testing.

Accountability as designed by states, some argue, is largely punitive. They said that accountability should come primarily from relationships and a sense of responsibility. But in a public system like ours, where more than $2 billion a school day is spent on education, accountability tends to be more regulatory than relational.

In any event, everyone agrees that an accountability system should be fair and effective. Moreover, accountability should be reciprocal—that is, it should also apply to policymakers and politicians whose actions or lack of action often determine how well educators and students can perform. If teachers and students are to be held accountable, one participant said, then they must have the wherewithal, the capacity, and the authority to perform the function for which they are being held accountable. So far, most of the accountability is falling on students who are being held accountable largely on the basis of test scores.

<u>Anger Over High-Stakes Testing</u>

Testing—particularly high-stakes testing—generated genuine anger among participants, particularly among students. In one session, students from Massachusetts assailed the state's comprehensive assessment system exam (MCAS), noting that the 20 hours of testing involved exceeds that of the bar exam and medical school admission tests. The complaint goes beyond the time and effort that goes into the test. Some students said the test doesn't measure what they are taught or that it doesn't measure what is important. Certainly, they said, there is much about education that is important that cannot be measured on a standardized test. Students and teachers in Massachusetts and several other states are working to organize the public against high-stakes testing.

There is a fairness issue as well. In most instances, students may take the state exams several times if they don't pass initially. Still, in theory at least, a student could be held back or denied a diploma by missing just one question over the allowed maximum on the exam. Although he said he shares the dislike for high-stakes testing, one participant stressed that the high stakes are there with or without the test. In our rapidly evolving knowledge society, students who drop out or who fail to earn a diploma pay a high price in human and economic terms.

(Shortly after the conference, results of last spring's MCAS were released, revealing that statewide 25 percent of the 10th graders failed English, 37 percent failed the math section, and 28 percent failed science. In Boston, 49 percent failed English, 59 percent failed math, and 54 percent failed science. Next school year, when the high stakes go into effect, failing students will not graduate.)

Both opponents and most supporters of high-stakes tests agree on two compelling conditions: First, the exams should be aligned with the standards that students are being taught; and, second, test scores should never be the sole measure by which a student or a school is assessed.

Participants from Texas made the case for "The Learning Record"—an approach that uses technology to gather and organize data about student performance and to conduct analysis of that data. Portfolios, student exhibits, and other ways of evaluating student performance are more harmonious with the spirit and practice of the small learning communities that the great majority of conference participants believe in. And presenters from Muhlenberg College offered a ray of hope by noting that an increasing number of colleges are allowing students to apply for admission without submitting SAT or ACT scores.

EQUITY AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Discussion of standards-based reform inevitably spills over into concerns about equity. In a very real sense, the standards movement is a civil-rights movement. By raising expectations for *all* students and setting high standards for *all* students, states are undermining a tradition of low expectations for poor and minority students and of tracking them into watered down programs that left them at a disadvantage in the workplace. As Michelle Fine exclaimed: Tracking is the structural embodiment of racism.

Even with standards, students are still being tracked. The practice is so much a part of the culture and is so widely accepted by teachers that it will not be rooted out quickly or easily. Pedro Noguera, a professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, reminded the conference that "schools largely work to produce inequity. Race and class are the predictors of school performance both among and within schools." And for at least a century, schools have served as sorting machine, assigning students to education tracks that would prepare them, as Harvard president Charles William Eliot said in 1908, for their "evident or probable destinies."

The Forgotten Standard

The standards movement raises another fundamental equity issue—discussed in one small group session entitled, "The Forgotten Standard: Opportunity to Learn."

At the beginning of the 1990s, advocates argued that standards should be parsimonious, focusing on the few key ideas and concepts in each discipline; that learning should be held constant and time should be variable, recognizing that students learn in different ways at different speeds; that assessments should be aligned with standards; and, finally, that there should be opportunity-to-learn standards to guarantee that every student has access to the intellectual, human and financial resources necessary to master the standards.

None of those essentials has been fully realized, but the most egregious omission has been the opportunity-to-learn-standard. For students to have a reasonable opportunity to learn, they need qualified teachers, a coherent and rigorous curriculum, safe and orderly schools in good repair, supplies and equipment to enhance teaching and learning.

Because all of these prerequisites cost money, the opportunity-to-learn standard was jettisoned early in the discussion of standards in the Congress. Politicians argued that insistence on opportunity to learn would doom the standards movement because it would give momentum to the forces working (mostly through court suits) for equitable school finance systems in the states. Even ardent standards advocates demurred, lest the whole movement be shot down.

Funding inequities and inadequacies still prevail and significantly limit the opportunity to learn for many youngsters. The brunt of the inequitable funding systems falls disproportionately on poor urban and rural districts. Some dispute this by pointing to data showing that urban districts are often allocated more dollars per pupil than the average statewide because the formula is weighted to favor poor students. But the cost of educating those students generally exceeds the allotment. And the tax base in most urban and rural districts is insufficient to provide the local revenue necessary to make up the difference.

Despite nearly half a century of bitter litigation in many states, the fact remains that the quality of education that children receive depends largely on where they live, the color of their skin, and the affluence of their family. In a system that is basically inequitable, the imposition of high standards and high-stakes tests without an opportunity-to-learn standard will heighten the inequity. Students in urban districts who have not had qualified

teachers or an adequate curriculum are now being held to standards that they have little chance of meeting. That is likely to have two unintended consequences: First, it is likely student dropout rates will begin to increase again; second, state and districts, by combining high-stakes testing with an unwillingness to provide equitable opportunity to learn for all students, will likely face class-action challenges in court.

The long struggle for equality in education is not likely to end soon.

FUNDING CATALYZES REFORM

Along with the hands-on practitioners, philanthropic supporters of school reform also weighed in with their sense of the urgency about high school. Zoe Gillett, associate program officer of the Mott Foundation, echoed a fundamental belief of nearly all reformers: that all children can learn and should have the opportunity for higher education. Her view was that high school served as a useful lens for all school reform, underscoring the need for community involvement and a high-quality program of study.

Michele Cahill, senior program officer of the Carnegie Corporation, called for mobilizing all constituencies–parents, community organizations, the business community and schools–to commit together to create schools "for a new society." Today's high schools, she said, need to become more democratic institutions that foster youth leadership, while providing students with personalization, higher expectations, challenging curriculum and equity. In acknowledging the voice and contributions of young people, she added, high schools can better serve them as a pathway to higher education.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, represented by program officer Kenneth Jones, offered a three-tiered list of priorities it deemed important for education funding, which include educational expertise; a commitment to school reform; and a belief in large-scale systems change. Jones explained that the foundation's criteria for what it considers a high-achieving school are very specific, with staff looking for: a research-based instructional approach; a common focus, and high expectations among staff; a small, personalized learning environment; respect and responsibility–meaning schools are safe and studious; time to collaborate on improving teaching and learning; multiple ways of assessing student achievement; innovative ways of using technology as a tool; and efforts to engage the entire community.

CONCLUSION:

In virtually every session of "Changing Urban High Schools," participants made clear in their comments that they realize the problems of public education are systemic. Although the meeting was about fixing the urban high school, no solution could ever be crafted that did not assure that the other parts of the system were functioning well: pre-kindergarten, elementary, and middle.

The current school reform movement began with the 1980s, mainly over concern with the high school. In those first few years of the decade, several publications gave voice to the

poor performance of American secondary students, mainly as reflected in 20 years of declining SAT scores: Ernest Boyer's *High School,* Ted Sizer's *Horace's Compromise,* Art Powell's *The Shopping Mall High School,* and John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* painted worrisome portraits of the traditional high school.

Not until the publication of the now famous "A Nation at Risk," however, did the public become aware of an "educational crisis." The turbulent reaction in virtually every state launched the first wave of reform—tougher curricula, tougher standards, pay raises for teachers. The general assumption on the part of the educators, policymakers, and the public was that education was suffering from the permissiveness of the 1960s and that we could get things right if we ratcheted up the pressure, continued to do what we were doing, only did it harder. "A Nation at Risk" hammered home that theme, but barely mentioned minority and disadvantaged students, and didn't even use the word "dropout." The only time the word "urban" was used was to say that some urban districts were reporting increases in elementary students' achievement.

By the mid-1980s, it became clear that whatever its problems, the high school was not the sole cause of the "educational crisis." High schools didn't become failures all by themselves. Something was also obviously amiss in the lower end of the system that supplied students to them. It also became clear, with the publication of "The Forgotten Half" and the introduction of the term "at risk students," that the great achievement gap that had so alarmed the authors of "A Nation at Risk" was largely in our poor urban and rural schools.

In response to these "discoveries," the second wave of reform shifted more attention and effort to the elementary schools, then a few years later to the middle schools, and especially to the intractable problems of large city districts.

Whatever progress may have been made in improving the first eight years of schooling, few significant positive results are yet being seen in high schools, particularly urban high schools. Indeed, the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study clearly show that U.S. students lose ground as they move from elementary through middle to high school. U.S. 4th graders score 2nd in the world in science and 8th in math, but 8th graders were only slightly above average in science and below average in math. The performance of 12th graders placed them near the bottom of the 41 participating countries. The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that half of African-American and Latino 8th graders score below basic in reading, math, and science.

Since such a large proportion of urban high school students are significantly deficient in reading and mathematics, one must conclude that both the elementary and middle schools are failing to teach literacy and numeracy adequately. Fourth graders seem to falter somewhat when they encounter more complex texts that include concepts and ideas. Middle schools generally lack the staff and the expertise to make up this deficit and only recently have some begun to teach reading. Out-of-field teaching is commonplace, and far too many middle schools are not prepared to teach science and mathematics, let alone algebra.

Demographer Harold Hodgkinson has written compellingly about the need to consider education as "one system" from pre-kindergarten to college. Communication among teachers from one grade level to the next is rare; communication between elementary, middle, and high school is virtually nonexistent. State and district education leaders have too rarely considered the way in which one part of the system influences the other. The emergence of middle schools, for example, led to 9th graders being dumped into high schools that were unprepared to deal with them, and districts continue to struggle with that problem.

A number of the reformers in Baltimore addressed the need for systemic improvement and systemic reform: We can't make real progress, they insisted, with the present infrastructure. Given its most radical interpretation, this means restructuring the entire system. In the opening plenary session of the Baltimore meeting, David Tyack called the organizing of schools by grade levels a "machinery for failure," and wondered aloud if the grade-level organization is so deeply engrained in the system that a learning revolution can occur without a complete restructuring." Dismantling the traditional structure of grade levels would be a major step in that restructuring that would help to shift the focus from the convenience of organization to the learning needs of the students.

The national spotlight on education notwithstanding, the American public has very low expectations for its schools, and particularly for its high schools. People who take to the streets to protest a rise in gasoline prices or are ready to recall the mayor if snow is not promptly removed from their streets, are incredibly placid about the fact that the majority of American high school students are not proficient in reading or math, that nearly half the students in big city schools drop out, and that too many of the teachers in their schools are not qualified in the subjects they teach. Polls have shown that parents are more concerned that their children leave high school as well-rounded individuals than as academically prepared for the future.

Perhaps this apathy is the result of ignorance and not knowing what to do. Public schools have long been "black boxes" in which very little about the way they operate is visible to the public. Except on those occasions when the school is prepared for show and tell, parents and the public have not been welcome at school. They generally know almost nothing about how schools spend their money, the rationale for the curriculum, the qualifications of the teachers, how and why time is used the way it is. Only in the past few years have legislatures begun to require the collection and publication of data about school operations and performance. And, as someone at the Baltimore conference said, reliable and complete data represent the gateway to real reform.

In a number of sessions in Baltimore, the call was raised for more data, disaggregated data, the publication of data. Clearly, information is a prerequisite to concern, and concern is a prerequisite to action. One speaker said, "We need a theory of change." In a subsequent session, one participant said that the theory of change must be based on engaging the public in the transformation of public schools.

Indeed! That may be the endgame of the current school reform movement.

NEXT STEPS

Wrapping up all of the ideas and lessons learned from the conference into an action agenda was the charge led by Genethia Hudley Hayes, president of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education and co-chair of the Cross City Campaign board of directors. With issues as vast and localized as union contract negotiations and lawsuits over equity in funding already underway in some districts, the struggle toward a plan of action was complicated. Participants determined that still more widening of the circle–bringing in more stakeholders who were not already involved in the discussions–was critical. Others noted the continued challenge of building consensus among those already involved. Among the reverberations that could be heard were these common themes: create more small learning communities and time for teacher collaboration and improved professional development.

In response to these issues, the Cross City Campaign during the next few years will be working to catalyze public engagement around policies and practices that support small, equitable and excellent urban high schools.

"Changing Urban High Schools" participants were solidly united around the belief that a significant reform of high schools was long overdue. Faced with what Michelle Fine called the "systematic realignment of public interests with the needs of corporations and elites, a gentrification of the public sphere"– the mission of the meeting as well as the call to action were also probably best summarized in her words: "Whole-school reform is the point!"