

RECEIVED

534

2008 JUN -9 PM 3:00

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

PCTI

152 Nickle Road
Harmony PA 16037-9125
Phone: (724) 452-5787
Fax: (724) 452-4791
www.pcti.com

2696

June 3, 2008

State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

RECEIVED

JUN 05 2008

PA. STATE BOARD
OF EDUCATION

Re: High School Competency Tests

Dear Mr. Buchheit:

Regarding the pending vote to incorporate graduation competency assessments, I sincerely urge the board with the utmost urgency to vote for and implement these assessments without delay to the entire state. Our country ranks 37th among industrialized nations in math and science and our schools are doing a poor job of preparing them for the jobs in the global marketplace. Our schools are not even preparing them for the domestic workforce. It is estimated that only 10% of our graduates have employable skills by the time they graduate. I can attest to this because I have hired workers for our electronics manufacturing business who are graduates of Pennsylvania high schools who I have later found do not know what a cylinder is and who cannot divide a length into two equal sections.

All other industrialized nations not only have comprehensive exams to obtain high school diplomas, but they also have comprehensive exams to progress from grade to grade. They have national curriculums with required courses that include chemistry, physics and math up through calculus. In light of the rigors of our industrialized counterparts, I feel that it is ridiculous that Pennsylvanians are merely considering an exam to graduate.

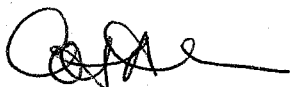
Because we do not encourage higher level math in high school, we have a severe shortage of math and science college graduates. We have fewer math and science college graduates now than we did during the space race of the 1960s. So we have to import our engineers. There are so many Indian electrical engineers in this country, they have their own society. These American jobs are being given to foreigners because our schools aren't producing the graduates that we need. In a world increasingly dominated by technology, we must be able to compete against countries that are presently doing a better job at educating their children.

Students will rise to the level of expectations that are set for them; we are setting no level of expectations for our high school graduates. Cincinnati recently turned around their high school graduation rate from 51% in 2000 to 79% in 2007 and more importantly eliminated the race gap in graduation rates. One of the ways they did this is by setting high expectations for the students.

Although I have paid thousands in school taxes, my children will never attend Pennsylvania public schools. I do not have faith in our public school system. I urge you again to incorporate competency tests for high school diplomas. I also urge you to look beyond that to what we need to do to have a globally competitive educational system. A diploma exam is a first step. I have enclosed two articles that I believe contain key ideas that are important for today's educational decision makers in planning future of our educational system. One of them notes that the current US educational system was conceived in the early 20th century. Look at how much things have changed in merely the last five years. A 20th century educational system is no longer viable. You have the responsibility to make sure the graduates of our Pennsylvania schools can compete not only in Pennsylvania and domestically but globally. I believe that will take decisive measures and there is no time to waste. It is my suggestion that you review the research done on US education by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, devise a comprehensive plan that will fit Pennsylvania and take quick action. We are falling so far behind that an extended pilot of high school diploma exams in one city is a remedial measure and a waste of valuable time that affects all of Pennsylvania students.

If I may be of assistance in moving this issue forward, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely yours,
Power Conversion Technologies, Inc.



Catherine A. Chis
President

Attachments:

- All Students College-Ready, Findings from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Education Work 2006-2007
- The Cincinnati Example by Joe Nathan:

**ALL STUDENTS COLLEGE-READY:
FINDINGS FROM THE FOUNDATION'S
EDUCATION WORK 2000-2006**

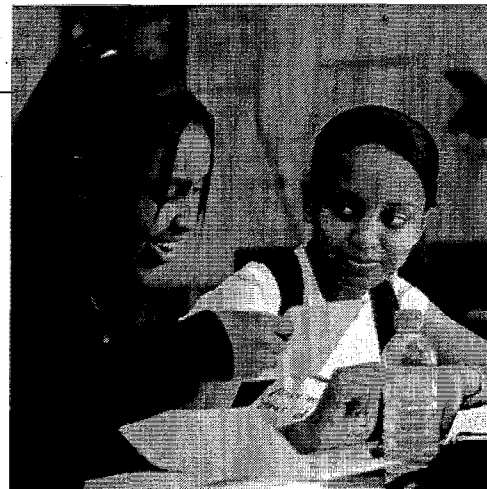
BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Our Goal: All Students College-Ready	4
Our Grantmaking Strategies	7
Key Findings	11
Finding One: Reform Takes Root Quickly in New Schools	12
Finding Two: Change Is Hard in Existing Schools	13
Finding Three: District Commitment Is Critical and Efforts Must Be Comprehensive	14
Finding Four: Policy Sets the Context for School-Level Change	16
Our Ongoing Commitment	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is committed to addressing the world's greatest inequities. In the United States, the primary focus of these efforts has been education, and specifically, improving high school outcomes for low-income and minority students. We focus on high school graduation and college-readiness rates because they define life options for young people and reflect deep inequities in American society and education.



When we began this work only about 50 percent of low-income, minority students graduated from high school and only about 10 percent earned college degrees. We are encouraged that after decades of stagnation, American graduation and college-readiness rates are improving in part because of the hard work of our grantees. And we expect this slow and steady increase is only the beginning: in the last year more than 30 governors have committed to improving college-ready graduation rates signaling widespread recognition that our education system must better prepare all young people for the challenges that lie ahead.

To date, most of our investments have sponsored new and improved schools through several significant initiatives including:

- Early college high schools, \$114 million invested in 10 networks that will result in 160 schools where most students will receive a high school diploma and college credit, perhaps an associate degree
- Alternative high schools, \$60 million invested in networks that will provide 224 high-quality options for at-risk and out-of-school youth
- Charter management organizations, \$128 million invested in high performing charter networks including KIPP and Aspire, representing 365 schools
- District partnerships, \$448 million invested in 28 urban districts, representing 832 schools
- State networks of improving schools, with \$200 million invested in Texas, Ohio, Oregon, North Carolina and Maine, representing 284 schools
- State and national advocacy efforts, with \$85 million invested, aimed at scaling and sustaining school and district improvement efforts

These efforts will result in over 1,100 new schools and over 700 improved schools, serving over one million students. Many are demonstrating that with a rigorous curriculum, relevant instruction, and powerful relationships low-income students can graduate prepared for college and work.

This report reflects the progress and key findings of the foundation's education team over the first seven years of its grantmaking. As a foundation, we are committed to sharing what we have learned, and incorporating it into our strategies. As an organization, we will help people know not just what we do, but why we are doing it, how we are working, and what we are learning.

Based on the first seven years of our work, we have found that:

- Results will take root most quickly in new schools
- Improvements happen more slowly at existing high schools
- District-level commitment is critical and efforts must be clear and comprehensive to work
- Policy sets the context for school-level change and is a critical path to scaling best practices

These findings have enabled us to make critical directional shifts in our grantmaking. Our focus now is to expand the impact of the most promising approaches and to work to solve the problems that remain before us. In communities across the country, momentum is growing to create systems of schools that work for all students. We remain committed to learning from the successes and challenges that we and our dedicated partners and grantees encounter. We continue to work towards the day when all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college, work, and citizenship.

OUR GOAL: ALL STUDENTS COLLEGE-READY

Since 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has focused its efforts on improving high schools and increasing the value and relevance of the high school diploma. This focus is driven by the belief that high schools represent the area of education with the most acute need and the level of the system most resistant to change—one of the reasons that, until recently, most other funders had shied away from high school reform. We also have funded more than 14,000 scholarships to promising students who do not have the financial means to attend college. In all of these efforts, we are particularly focused on increasing academic achievement, attainment, and ultimately, life outcomes for low-income and minority students.

The foundation has set ambitious national goals for improving graduation and college-readiness rates—goals to which we have been committed since 2002.

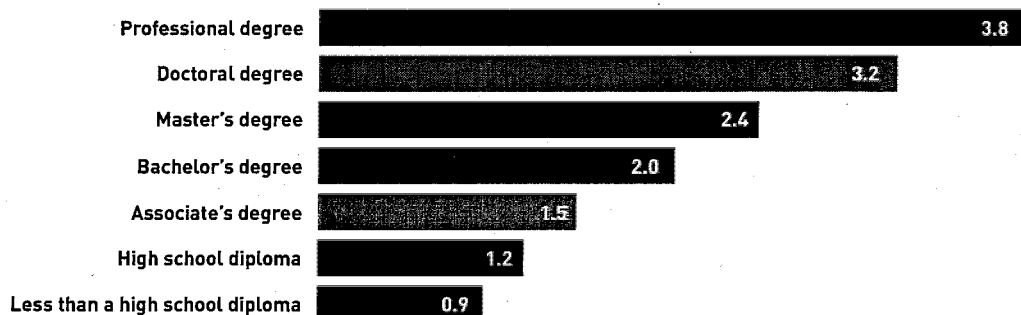
- Increase high school graduation rates—for all students and specifically for low-income, African-American and Hispanic students
- Increase college-readiness rates—for all students
- Increase college entrance and completion—for low-income, African-American and Hispanic students

Our approach is underscored by the core belief that if our nation is to improve educational outcomes for all young people, it will require the collaboration and contribution of foundations, entrepreneurs, politicians, community leaders, and most importantly, the educators, administrators, and students that comprise the core of the system. Therefore, through our work we seek to contribute to the efforts already underway, catalyze change in the communities in which we work, and inform the debate around how best to achieve the goal of ensuring every student graduates from high school ready for college, work and citizenship.

The Challenge Facing Our Nation

It has become clear over the past two decades, that high school graduation is an increasingly important milestone and good predictor of life opportunities. On average, the annual income of a 25-34 year-old high school dropout is roughly \$18,000, compared with \$25,000 for someone with a high school diploma and \$36,000 for someone with a bachelor's degree.¹ The impact is magnified throughout an individual's life. The average high school dropout earns \$1 million less over a lifetime than a college graduate.²

Estimated lifetime earnings by educational attainment (in \$millions)



¹ U.S. Department of Labor (October 2000). "The Outlook for College Graduation."

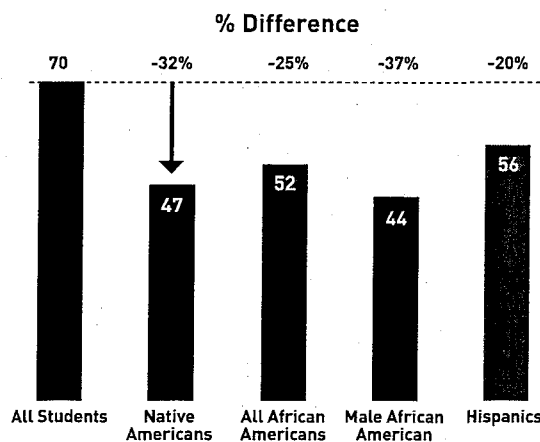
² Civic Enterprises (2006). "The Silent Epidemic: Perspective of High School Dropouts."

However, nationwide, nearly one in three 9th graders fails to graduate from high school.³ These young people are more likely to end up in prison, on welfare, or reliant on social services. Seventy-five percent of state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal inmates are high school dropouts.

In many parts of the country, students are successfully graduating from high school and completing college. The system is filled with inspirational examples of high-performing students, schools, and districts. However, this success is not distributed equitably. While the national graduation rate is 70 percent,⁴ the ten largest school districts have a graduation rate of only 51 percent.⁵ Of all students who do earn a high school diploma, only one-third graduate from high school ready for college.⁶

Minority and low-income students fare the worst. The high school graduation rate for African-American students in 2003 was just 55 percent and the rate for Hispanic students was 53 percent.⁷ Markedly fewer minorities graduate high school college-ready when compared to the overall student population. In 2002, only 23 percent of African-American students graduated college-ready; and for Hispanic students, the figure was only 20 percent.⁸ The dropout rate of low-income students is twice that of middle income students and 5 times higher than the rate for those from high-income families.⁹

2002-03 National Graduation Rates for Minority Students (CPI) Percent



³ "Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002," Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2005.

⁴ Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) approximates the probability of graduating using grade-to-grade enrollment data (9th to 10th, 10th to 11th, and 11th to 12th grade) and the number of graduates.

⁵ The ten largest school districts (2002 enrollment) are: New York City Public Schools (1,077,381), Los Angeles Unified (746,852), City of Chicago School District (438,048), Dade County School District (373,395), Broward County Schools (267,925), Clark County School District (256,574), Houston ISD (212,099), Philadelphia City School District (192,283), Hillsborough County School District (FL) (175,454), Detroit City School District (173,742). "Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates." Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2006.

⁶ Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002, Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2005.

⁷ Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2006.

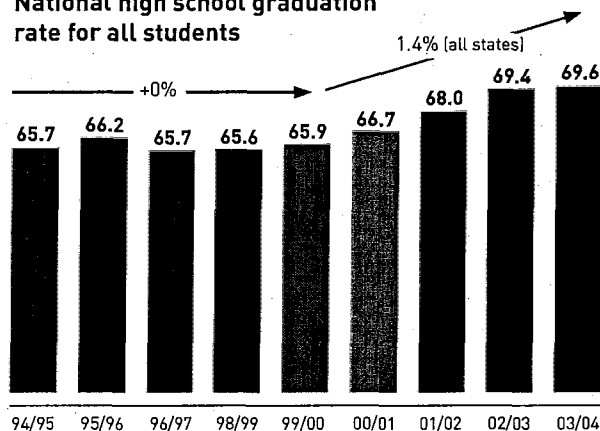
⁸ Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002, Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2005.

⁹ National Center on Education Statistics, Quickfacts, 2002.

OUR GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

While we have a singular focus on the goal of improving educational outcomes for all young people, we have continued to evolve our strategy based on our lessons learned and changes in the sector. Our primary focus has been expanding the supply of high quality high schools available to those young people who have traditionally had few options.

National high school graduation rate for all students



Source: Editorial Projects in Education, 2006; Note: compound annual growth rate

A STRATEGY FOR UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

Historically, the foundation relied on a few contractors to examine the effect of its program in a relatively small sample of schools across multiple locations. Having learned general lessons from these evaluations, we have launched a new approach to evaluation that will give us the breadth and depth required for continued learning. Moving forward we will rigorously track the performance of each grantee school, learn as much as we can from each grant and groups of similar grants and study the impact of our grants annually to improve our grant making strategies. This will enable us to better understand the local conditions that can influence reform efforts.

To date we have funded 1,885 high schools, including 1,124 new schools and 761 existing high schools, directly benefiting over one million young people. As of fall 2006, more than 1,100 schools have opened and are educating more than 625,000 students. Each of these schools operates under a common mission: all students should have the opportunity to graduate from high school ready for college, work and citizenship. These schools each approach this mission differently—some are large, many are small, some are organized around themes, others offer a standard college-preparatory curriculum—but all have three elements in common:

Rigor: They have high expectations for all students and engage all students in challenging coursework

Relevance: The curriculum is organized in a way that is highly engaging and meaningful to students given their interests and aspirations

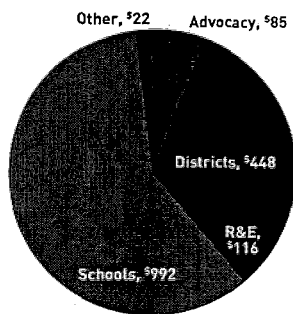
Relationships: All students get personal attention and support in a safe, respectful environment

We have joined this effort to create high-quality schools by investing directly in schools and districts, through policy and advocacy work and research and evaluation. Our investments to date, excluding scholarships, total over \$1.5 Billion.

Selected Initiatives

Most of our grantmaking has been organized around a series of key initiatives.

Grantmaking

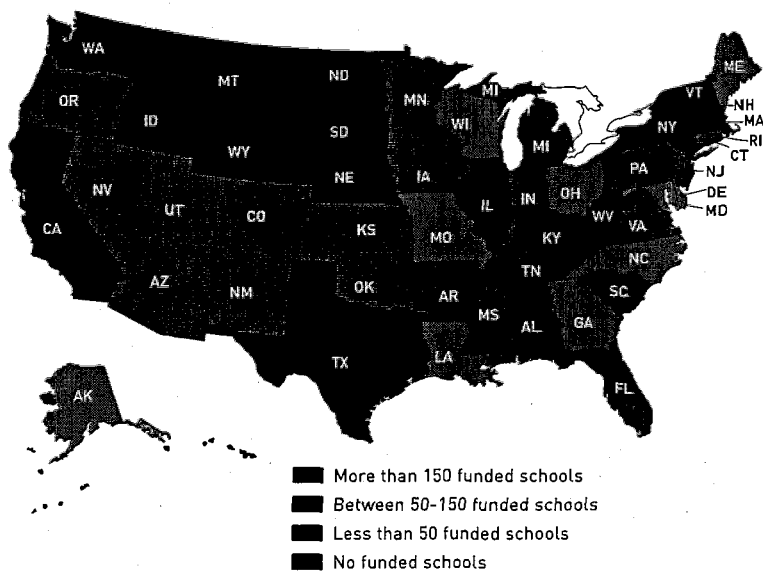


Advocacy	85
Districts	448
Research & Evaluation (R&E)	116
Schools	992
Other	22

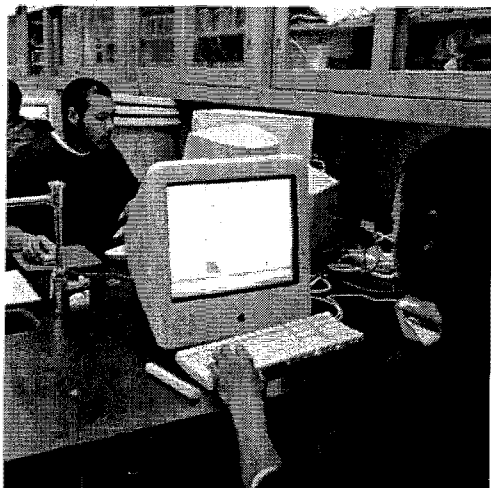
Total \$1,663

Note: Excludes scholarships

School investments



Early College High Schools (\$114 million, 160 schools): The early college model is counter-intuitive to most, at least initially: recruit traditionally low-performing students, many below grade level, to attend high schools that require enrollment in college courses. The schools provide the corresponding support and guidance for students to graduate earning two years of college credit and/or an associate's degree. Today, there are more than 125 early college high schools in operation in over 20 states with an additional 35 planning to open in the next two years. The results? Thus far, over 95 percent of entering ninth graders have graduated with a high school diploma, over 57 percent of entering students have earned an associate's degree, and over 80 percent of students have been accepted into a four-year college.¹⁰



Charter Management Organizations (\$128 million, 365 schools): Many of the schools that have most effectively prepared traditionally underserved students are charter schools. To ensure consistently high results across charter schools, the foundation has invested heavily in charter management organizations (CMOs). CMOs enable successful charter school models to replicate their approach at the individual school level into larger networks of schools that share common principles. Our earliest cohort of CMO investments, including High Tech High and Aspire Public Schools, have outpaced their district peers in student achievement tests and student engagement levels, and have graduation rates exceeding 90 percent.¹¹

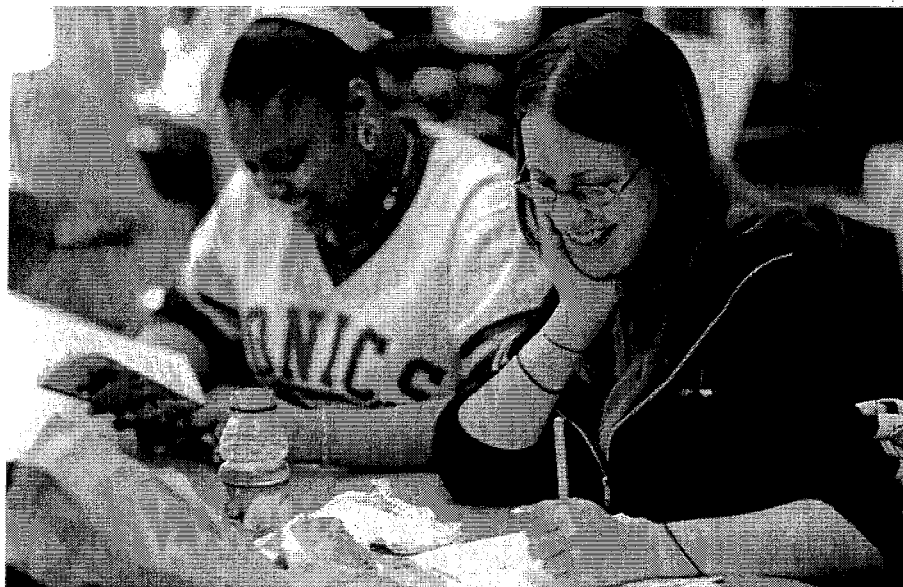
Alternative High School Initiative (\$60 million, 224 schools): They dropped out of school. They were expelled from school. They were bored. They felt like no one cared. There is a group of students that

needs access to schools designed and centered specifically on its needs. The schools in this portfolio enable these students to have a future that includes a high school diploma that prepares them for college, career and the challenges that lie ahead. Today, there are close to 100 schools—enrolling 6,500 students—each focused on that common mission. Some of the schools offer more hands-on opportunities for learning than those that might be found in traditional high schools. Some provide mentors; others include faith-based programs as part of their curriculum. Many of the schools in the initiative are showing results. A handful of grantees in the network, including the Big Picture Company, Maya Angelou and Portland Community College, have schools that have sent more than 70 percent of their students to further learning after high school.¹²

District Partnerships (\$448 million, 832 schools): Much of our earliest grantmaking supported district-wide improvement strategies. Over the last six years, we have partnered with 56 districts around the country. Of these, the most successful have been districts with a clear mission, strong accountability system, a well developed improvement strategy and strong supporting systems. Within these districts, we have supported planning, curricular and instructional improvement, new school and improvement strategies and district capacity to incubate and support this work. This remains some of our most challenging work. Several of our district partners, including Cincinnati, Kansas City, New York City, Chicago and Boston, have seen significant increases in their graduation rates over the last five years.

¹¹ Lionel Wilson Prep (Oakland) in the Aspire Network had a 2006 graduation rate of 100% [Source: Aspire Public Schools]. High Tech High (San Diego) has posted a graduation rate of over 90% for the last three years [Source: West Ed, Rethinking High Schools, 2005 and the High Tech High Foundation]

¹² 80% of Met Providence students go onto college and 100% of students at Met West (Oakland) were accepted into college. In a typical year, more than 80% of Maya Angelou students go on to postsecondary programs. Ultimately, nearly 2.5 times more Maya Angelou graduates earn Bachelor's Degrees when compared with low-income, African-American graduates from other high schools across the nation [Source: Maya Angelou]. At Portland Community College (Portland, OR) graduates earn an average of 73 college credits and 73% continue their college education [Source: Portland Community College].



State School Partnerships (\$200 million, 284 schools): Where there has been significant state leadership committed to high school improvement efforts, grantmaking strategies have been structured as state-wide initiatives. Maine, Oregon, Washington, Texas, Ohio and North Carolina have all launched aggressive state-wide reform initiatives in the last several years. Across these states, there are more than 200 schools now opened focused on ensuring more students graduate ready for college and work. Schools in these networks have benefited from guidance and support from a single state-wide intermediary and have been able to share best practices and lessons learned with colleagues within their states. Across these states, there has been steady upward progression in graduation rates and student engagement levels.

National and State Advocacy Partners (\$85 million): Our policy and advocacy grantmaking has grown steadily over the last several years as we recognized the importance of aligning the state policy environment with school and district-level investments. We work through national membership organizations to build visibility around the challenges facing our nation's high schools and identify programs and policies that have demonstrated success. In the last year, most of our nation's governors have made significant commitments to raising high school graduation and college-ready graduation rates: 34 states have made college-ready commitments and 50 states have signed a compact to report graduation rates consistently.

KEY FINDINGS

The Foundation is committed to continually mining for information, identifying progress and noting challenges to ensure that our strategies evolve with the benefit of lessons learned. Given time lags in educational data, we rely on both qualitative and quantitative evidence to make observations. Over the last several years, based on our findings, we have made key directional shifts in our strategy, including:

- In 2000, we expanded two professional development programs and made school improvement grants—largely encouraging large schools to convert to small—based on attributes of high performance (high expectations, personalization, teacher collaboration, a culture of respect and responsibility, and effective instruction). We found that struggling schools needed more than limited outside guidance.
- In 2002, we began combining new school development with school improvement and began advocating a policy platform of college ready standards, strong accountability, school choice, equitable funding and college access. We found that school-as-the-unit-of-change underplayed the important role that districts and states can play in school improvement. Our early evaluation results also pointed out a key challenge with our initial grant making approach: in going small many schools either (a) got caught up in internal struggles on how to make the change or (b) made the structural change without making changes in academic rigor or classroom instruction.
- In 2004, we strengthened our school-level funding by requiring grantees to have a well-defined model in place to ensure consistent outcomes. We also encouraged existing high schools to use technical assistance providers to guide their school communities as they make necessary changes to structure, instruction and curriculum. We often made these school-level grants in combination with significant district-level funding to make certain that schools are supported by district-wide processes. We also began to expand our advocacy work to support broader state and national advocacy to strengthen and institutionalize the overall context for reform, as well as wider efforts to increase support for these reform models
- Throughout this grantmaking period, we have continually refined our approach, evaluating the performance of our grantees and incorporating findings into our investments.

We have also identified several key findings that can inform our partners and colleagues committed to improving educational outcomes for all young people. These include:

1. Results will take root most quickly in new schools
2. Improvements happen more slowly at existing high schools
3. District-level commitment is critical and efforts must be comprehensive to work
4. Policy sets the context for school-level change and is critical to scaling best practices

FINDING ONE: REFORM TAKES ROOT QUICKLY IN NEW SCHOOLS

In the most challenging situations, new schools can be an important way to address seemingly intractable problems. They provide an opportunity to introduce innovation and entrepreneurship into education. The excitement around the opening of a new school can inspire a renewed sense of optimism about the future of education in the community, revitalizing local efforts.

- **School replication work shows promise.** New school developers and entrepreneurs¹³ continue to enter the education field, and innovative school models are being developed.
- **Scaling school models can be challenging.** Despite the promise of new school models, scaling strategies are limited by the capacity in the field generally. The people and organizations required to effectively reproduce quality school models can be difficult to find.
- **Geographic portability varies by school model.** While some school networks have demonstrated the ability to use the same model in multiple states, the success of other models, like early college high school networks, are subject to state policies. We have found that those models that embody well defined designs and oversee their networks with strong management strategies are most likely to yield consistent results across their schools.
- **Planning matters.** Strong up front planning is critical for school networks and intermediaries to develop strategies and plans that can sustain growth. Partnerships with technical assistance providers and others can provide important supports.

Outcomes

Attendance and Progression: Two important leading indicators in student performance improvement are attendance rates and 9th to 10th grade progression rates. We have been able to review some small sample sets of new schools, and results have been positive. For example, in one evaluation of new foundation-funded schools with a small sample, the majority of schools had rates in both of these areas considerably higher than the corresponding districts.¹⁴

Percentage of New Schools with Rates Higher Than District Averages¹⁵



¹³ Our school developer partners are non-profit entities committed to starting schools designed to educate low-income, African American and Hispanic students. They include New Tech Foundation, High Tech High, Urban Assembly, New Visions, Envision, Aspire Schools, etc.

¹⁴ The American Institutes for Research and SRI International (2006). "Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants Initiative: Executive Summary of the 2001-2005 Final Report." Washington, DC: AIR. pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 4-5.

Reading and Math Performance: Student reading and math performance is an important measure of learning, yet a challenge for urban schools who serve many students that start high school already behind. Again, in small samples of new schools we have seen student performance above respective district averages. Students in this sample have demonstrated higher quality work in reading than their counterparts in traditional schools. However, math results in those same groups have been less encouraging, with student performance in new schools roughly equal to that of students in existing area schools.¹⁶

College Enrollment: Along with college-readiness and graduation rates, increased college enrollment is one of the foundation's primary goals. Overall, new schools and charter schools have demonstrated strong gains in this area.

FINDING TWO: CHANGE IS HARD IN EXISTING SCHOOLS

Nearly everything needs to change in struggling secondary schools—curriculum, instruction, structure, relationships, culture and leadership. This makes the change process technically and politically difficult. Change on the scale required to make an existing school a high-quality learning environment can be difficult because it involves the collaborative effort of many diverse groups and ultimately requires students, teachers, parents and leaders to come together to change the expectations and culture within a school.

- **Structural change alone is not sufficient.** Changing a school requires more than simple modification of the physical configuration. The alignment of curriculum, instruction, professional development and student supports like academic counseling and college guidance can provide the structured environment that students and teachers need to thrive.
- **Sustained leadership commitment can drive success.** Commitment to change must encompass not only short-term acceptance of structure, but a long-term dedication to the moral and social imperative that is driving the need for change. This perseverance is particularly important at the district level.¹⁷
- **Community and teacher engagement is critical.** The public, particularly parents, should be involved early and often in planning and implementation of reform efforts. Equally important are teachers' needs and concerns that must be addressed in order to ensure their support for school- and classroom-level change.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ Fouts, Jeffrey T., Duane B. Baker, Carol J. Brown, and Shirley C. Riley (2006). "Leading the Conversion Process: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Converting to Small Learning Communities." Tucson, Arizona: Fouts & Associates, LLC.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Outcomes

Attendance and Progression: Redesigned schools have not generally seen the same level of improvement in these two leading indicators that new schools have. Again, quantitative studies to date have been on small samples of redesigned schools. In one such study, far fewer redesigned than new schools had attendance or 9th to 10th grade progression rates higher than district averages.¹⁹

Percentage of Redesigned Schools with Rates Higher Than District Averages²⁰



Reading and Math Performance: Schools undergoing improvement efforts have seen lower student performance levels than new schools. In addition, math proficiency appears to be even more of a problem in redesigned schools than in new schools. However, in both types of school environments—new and redesigned—less than one in five students demonstrated even moderate or substantial quality on math work in a small sample of schools, so this area remains a substantial challenge across the country.²¹

College Enrollment: The redesigned or new alternative schools that address some of the most at-risk students have seen little movement on this measure.

FINDING THREE: DISTRICT COMMITMENT IS CRITICAL AND EFFORTS MUST BE COMPREHENSIVE

Schools require support from their districts to succeed. The strongest districts have a clear mission and goals, a good accountability system, a well-developed strategy for improving schools and strong support systems. Districts with these characteristics play an important role in creating and maintaining meaningful change at the school level.

- **Effective district work targets multiple reform levers.** A comprehensive approach to reform in a district involves complementary investments in structure, curriculum, instruction, and data and accountability systems.
- **School districts that perform well combine high challenge and high levels of support.** The district leadership is committed to a college-ready mission and to achieve that mission they have implemented strong accountability systems, rigorous curricula, and support for students, teachers and families.
- **Districts can serve the needs of all students well.** Historically, districts have struggled to provide a common academic foundation while meeting vastly diverse student interests and needs. Elementary schools have demonstrated success in aligning a core curriculum with student and teacher supports, and districts are poised to apply those lessons at the

¹⁹ The American Institutes for Research and SRI International (2006). Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants Initiative: Executive Summary of the 2001-2005 Final Report. Washington, DC.: AIR. pp. 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 4-5.

²¹ Ibid, p. 8.



high school level. By concurrently providing a range of school options, including charter and alternative schools, districts are finding they can serve all students well.

- **An up front, fact-based planning process enhances district work.**

Using and improving existing data systems is important. Data allows for detailed analysis and planning and then supports the creation of a performance management-driven culture.

Outcomes

Graduation Rates: Increasing high school graduation rates is one of the foundation's central goals. Graduation rate results in the districts where we have done work have been mixed. Those cases in which we have seen little improvement to date are often in part due to the newness of schools. When

new schools open, they often open with only one grade, so it can take four years for them to have their first graduating class. However, in those districts for which we have data, we do see improvement based on a conservative Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) calculation, with gains of 8 percent or more in 44 percent of districts. And state-reported cohort graduate rates have increased dramatically in a number of districts.

While these results are quite promising, actual graduation rates remain low in many districts in which we work, and in 42 percent of the districts, fewer than 5 out of 10 students graduate. Overall, there have been moderate gains to date, albeit from a low starting base.²²

Language Arts Proficiency: Reading proficiency is a leading predictor of student success in both high school and college and is widely considered one of the most important factors for success in work and life. Most of the foundation-funded districts for which data are available have shown gains in reading proficiency among high school students.²³

These are strong results. However, work remains to ensure that reading proficiency improves for low-income and minority students. In eight sampled districts, fewer than 50 percent of students overall were proficient in reading. Overall, there have been encouraging gains in most foundation-funded schools, especially new schools.

Math Proficiency: Proficiency in math is also an important predictor of students' high school and college success. In addition, the modern workplace demands an understanding of mathematics and related concepts. Most foundation-funded districts for which data are available have shown increases in math proficiency.²⁴

However, math performance overall remains quite low, and in eight districts fewer than 50 percent of students were proficient in math. For minority students, the problem was even greater. In 12 of the 14 districts that report math scores by race and ethnicity, fewer than 50 percent of African-American and Hispanic students are proficient in math. Overall, there have been modest gains in some foundation-funded schools, but math performance is still below acceptable proficiency levels. These results have caused us to launch a series of math studies that will strengthen curriculum and instruction in our grantee schools and enable us to share key best practices with the field.

²² Total of 27 school districts evaluated.

²³ Total of 22 school districts evaluated.

²⁴ Total of 22 school districts evaluated.

FINDING FOUR: POLICY SETS THE CONTEXT FOR SCHOOL-LEVEL CHANGE

A supportive policy environment is essential for lasting school change. There are many factors that can undermine school reform efforts. These include the instability of school district leadership, regulatory complexity, and low high school standards that do not align with college requirements.

- **Federal and state policies provide an important approach to reproducing best practices.** Federal and state policies drive most education funding. The federal government's role has increased further through the No Child Left Behind Act, sparking more education policymaking at the state level. States are likely to share best practices and compete with one another, creating even more momentum for change.
- **State-level policies are changing, so the focus must move now from commitment to capacity and execution.** State commitments to improve graduation and college-readiness rates occurred quickly. Now, states require assistance to convert those commitments into policy and practice. Support will be needed from legislatures, state education agencies and the public to ensure implementation takes place.

The foundation invests in opportunities to highlight the need for high school reform at the national and state levels. Specifically, at the national level the foundation supports national membership and policy organizations to help states enact and implement policy commitments. At the state level, the foundation funds public-private partnerships, research, community engagement, and policy working groups. This work has increased awareness of the problem of low graduation and college-readiness rates and led many to develop standards that address it. In specific states, we have supported gubernatorial strategies to create new high schools, state and district efforts to implement college-ready standards and assessments, and convenings that draw greater attention to the problem.

OUR ONGOING COMMITMENT TO LEARNING AND RESULTS

The foundation remains committed to improving graduation and college-readiness rates so all students have the opportunity to succeed. We will continue to advocate for public and political support for reform and the corresponding policies that support it. We will find and support solutions that improve student outcomes. We will strive to demonstrate that significant improvement is possible in schools with low-income and minority students. And we will build capacity within the public sector to implement these solutions at scale. We have learned much from our past work and expect to continue to learn, grow and change in pursuit of our mission to increase college-ready graduation rates for all students.

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Joe Nathan: The Cincinnati example

By Joe Nathan

October 29, 2007

Powerful progress in the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) may help efforts to improve Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools. Despite its problems, CPS grew from a four-year, 51-percent high-school graduation rate in 2000 to a four-year, 79-percent graduation rate in 2007. It also *eliminated* the graduation gap between white and African-American students. Graduation rates for all students increased. Cincinnati appears to be among the first (if not *the* first) major urban districts to eliminate this gap. No one is satisfied with a 79-percent graduation rate. There are differences among Cincinnati, St. Paul and Minneapolis (including higher funding in Minnesota schools, and a higher percentage here of limited-English-speaking students). But having represented the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Cincinnati for the last seven years, I've learned lessons that may be useful locally.

1. Visit urban schools with significant achievement that closed or dramatically reduced achievement gaps. CPS students, parents and educators visited many schools. Conversations changed from whether major progress was possible to how it could be achieved.

2. Set a few explicit, ambitious goals: Seven years ago, the superintendent and Gates Foundation agreed that within five years, the district would aim for a 75-percent graduation rate and cut the racial gap in half. Both ambitious goals were exceeded.

3. Create small schools at several large high school buildings, along with a few new small schools in separate facilities. CPS used research about benefits of small schools, open to all students.

4. Focus workshops for teachers in three areas: reading, math, and ways to work with urban youth. Respect and encourage faculty. Gates and other funds paid for workshops that teachers and principals helped select. Training was done in pleasant surroundings, often during the summer. As schools made progress, they received additional money, as well as public recognition.

5. Empower schools to select faculty. Teams, including a building principal, faculty and sometimes parents, selected staff. Seniority did not guarantee a job.

6. Create focused partnerships. For example, Cincinnati Bell donated hundreds of hours of tutoring, along with free cell phones for students who excelled in what was perhaps the district's most troubled high school. Huge gains resulted. Xavier University provided free summer classrooms and other assistance to ninth-graders at another

school, helping convince students that they belonged in a college classroom. Families Forward placed social workers at several schools to help strengthen families and serve students. KnowledgeWorks Foundation provided grants, advocacy and technical assistance.

7. Involve union leaders in helping to develop, lead and encourage the changes, as they did in CPS.

8. Support chartered public schools. Competition helped encourage and inform improvements.

9. Give principals authority and hold them responsible for results. Some superintendents encouraged effective principals and removed several who, it appeared, were not up to the task.

10. Expand service and learn to help students see connections between classroom and community. This also helped convince students they could make a difference with others and themselves.

...

Cincinnati faces typical urban challenges. Although gains are encouraging, much work remains. But Cincinnati, like Minneapolis and St. Paul, has many talented, committed people. The right strategies, with open-minded, collaborative people, can produce major, measurable progress.

Joe Nathan directs the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute.

© 2008 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.