

Educational Leadership

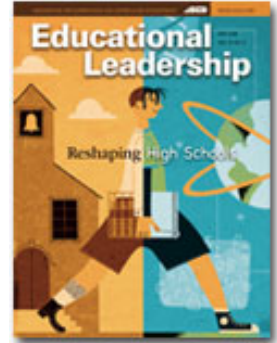
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Reshaping High Schools Pages 14-21

Creating Excellent *and* Equitable Schools

The right design features and policies can promote exceptional high schools on a broad scale.

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A business maxim holds that every organization is perfectly structured to achieve the results it achieves. We could say the same of schools.

And when outcomes are particularly problematic—as is true for many large urban high schools that lose most of their students before graduation—attaining substantially different results in our schools will require more than just teachers "trying harder" within traditional bureaucratic constraints. Such a shift typically requires new organizational structures.

Some high schools that have made those changes offer an education that not only helps students achieve academically but also can dramatically transform students' life prospects.

Take the case of James Williams.¹ As a young black male moving from one low-income neighborhood in San Francisco to the next, James faced the kind of challenges that lead many young people to drop out of school. His mother, who experienced health problems, was out of work for several years and struggled to raise a family on her own. Although James was raised around drug use and alcoholism, he never succumbed to gang violence or street life and always wanted to go to college.

However, college seemed like a far-off dream. James could not get into any of the college-preparatory high schools in San Francisco, so his mother decided to enroll him in a new small high school—June Jordan School for Equity. The school combined a college-preparatory curriculum organized around social-justice issues with highly personalized instruction and a strong advisory system. With two other young children to care for, James's mother could not easily attend parent conferences, so June Jordan teachers went to her home. James's advisor provided emotional, academic, and even financial support to help him get through rough patches when his family faced a number of hardships.

James developed a passion for writing as a result of the school's continual emphasis on writing and inquiry. Now a freshman at the University of California, Santa Cruz, he is considering a major in literature or writing. He noted,

June Jordan got me ready for a four-year college. ... we had a lot of help, and people

had our backs at June Jordan, but they also made sure that we were able to take care of ourselves when we needed to. ... My life is just beginning, and it was a great thing to have June Jordan to start.

High Schools for Equity

James's story reflects those of many other students attending one of five California high schools we recently studied that have beaten the odds in supporting the success of low-income students of color (Friedlaender, Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007). The schools—Animo Inglewood Charter High School (Los Angeles); Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy (San Diego); June Jordan School for Equity (San Francisco); Leadership High School (San Francisco); and New Technology High School (Sacramento)—are located in California's largest cities and are nonselective in their admissions, yet they have graduation and college-going rates significantly higher than the state average. A majority of the student body in each school is composed of low-income students of color.

All five schools have developed innovative settings and practices that offer distinctive opportunities for learning. For example, Animo Inglewood offers a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum coupled with strong academic supports to ensure that all students meet high expectations. Animo's equally high expectations for its teachers are reflected in its intensive professional development model based on that of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Construction Tech Academy integrates academic study in college-preparatory courses with applied projects and internships in construction, engineering, and architecture.

June Jordan School for Equity provides its students with a project-based college-preparatory curriculum infused with social-justice and civic-engagement themes. Students participate in community-service internships and complete portfolios of their work that they present in exhibitions. Leadership High School focuses on creating community leaders by infusing the core values of critical thinking, effective communication, and personal and social responsibility throughout their college-preparatory curriculum and portfolio assessments. Staff members also take considerable time in professional learning communities to analyze student work and other data with the goal of ensuring equitable outcomes for all students.

New Technology High School offers fully implemented interdisciplinary, technology-intensive project-based learning that is completed in self-directed small groups. Students supplement their learning at New Tech High, as they do at the other four schools, by taking several classes at the local community colleges.

These schools are, in many respects, anomalies in the current landscape of secondary education: All of them send 80 to 100 percent of their students to higher education, exhibiting college-going rates more than twice the state averages for the kinds of students they serve. Equally important, these schools engage students in intellectually stimulating, relevant, and personalized learning that empowers them to contribute to their communities and learn throughout their lives.

The High Schools for Equity study, conducted by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University in collaboration with Justice Matters Institute (Friedlaender, Darling-Hammond, et

al., 2007), describes the school practices that support this extraordinary student success. The study also focused on the policies needed to develop and maintain such schools on a broader scale so that they become the norm rather than the exception for students of color.

Successful—By Design

The 20th-century factory model remains the pervasive model for high schools in the United States, especially in cities. Factory-model schools were designed to process a great number of students efficiently, selecting and supporting only a few for "thinking work" while tracking others into a basic-skills curriculum aimed at preparation for the routinized manufacturing jobs of the time. These schools favored size and specialization over strong relationships. They assigned thousands of students to a single building, sending them to a different teacher for each 50-minute class period; they assigned teachers to 150 or more students (and more than 200 students in some California cities); and they organized teaching as an isolated activity, with little time for teachers to plan and work together on supporting students or designing a coherent curriculum.

The schools in our study operate quite differently. Located in varied urban communities, serving different student populations, and operating within different policy contexts, all five schools nevertheless have a number of design features in common.

Personalization

A key feature of all five schools—perhaps the most striking in contrast to the traditional urban high school—is their degree of personalization. Said one community organizer at June Jordan, "When kids are slipping, there's this expectation that teachers grab hold of them and will not let go." The schools' efforts in this respect include constructing small learning environments; fostering continuous, long-term relationships between adults and students; and creating advisory systems that systematically organize counseling, academic supports, and family connections.

In each school, teachers have an advisory group of 15 to 25 students who meet with them several times a week and, in most cases, stay together from two to four years. The advisor works closely with the family, other teachers, and the student to ensure availability of the needed academic and personal supports. "We build a really close family relationship [in the school]," said the principal of Animo Inglewood. "Students work hard not to let the family down."

To provide personalization, these schools have redesigned traditional staffing to hire more classroom-based staff, thus enabling them to maintain smaller class sizes and reduced pupil loads for teachers. The average class size is 25 students, with each teacher having a pupil load of between 50 and 100 students. Teachers also teach fewer students for longer blocks of time. By knowing students well, teachers are more able to tailor instruction to students' strengths, needs, experiences, and interests.

Personalization substantively influences students' investment in learning by nurturing strong relationships and accountability between students and teachers, both in the classroom and

through advisory periods. As one Construction Tech student expressed,

The whole small schools thing really helps because of the teacher/student relationship. ... You get to interact with your teachers a whole lot more and get to know them. When you're learning from a friend, not just some random person, it's a lot easier to learn.

Rigorous and Relevant Instruction

Each of the five schools has designed a rigorous, coherent instructional program that enables all students to overcome barriers often associated with race, poverty, language, or initially low academic skill. All establish high expectations, link performance assessments to clear standards, and teach intellectual and research skills in the context of rigorous coursework that has been made relevant through application to real-world problems.

Consider the case of Eduardo Rodriguez. As a student in special education, he had managed to progress through the school system reading at only a 5th grade level; for a considerable time, he could not spell his last name. When he was in 10th grade, he attended a chaotic public high school that was unable to meet his needs. "He wasn't learning; he wasn't reading," his mother explained. "The school just didn't expect anything of him." When Eduardo was almost stabbed while trying to defend a student who was about to be attacked, his mother decided to pull him out of school. She believed that if she didn't, either someone would kill him or he would end up in prison.

Mrs. Rodriguez tried to enroll Eduardo in private school, but he could not pass the entrance requirements. When she found out about New Tech High School and went to visit in 2004, she was impressed with how courteous and articulate the students were. She enrolled her son even though the school was a 45-minute drive from her home. Mrs. Rodriguez warned the principal and the counselor that her son was unlikely to ask for help or talk to the teachers.

However, as the staff reached out to him, Eduardo soon developed close relationships with his teachers and his counselor, whom he calls regularly, including during holiday breaks. His reading level has risen six grade levels, and he is now nearly on par with his current 11th grade placement. He writes enthusiastically and has developed close friendships with other students. As his mother explained,

It's expected of him to perform. It's not, "We'll see if you can do it," but, "You can do it and you're going to do it." So he thinks like that now.

The schools connect students to their communities and their futures through community service, internships, and partnerships with community groups and local colleges. Authentic learning experiences connect to the world outside school. For example, students may complete a project determining the fuel economies of gas-powered and hybrid-powered vehicles, which they then present to a panel composed of their parents. Ambitious research projects—such as studying, designing, and building an ecologically sensitive scale model of a zoo for various species—require students to investigate problems, find and organize resources, develop designs and products, and present their results orally and in writing to a range of audiences.

Most of the schools require the completion of portfolios for graduation; these typically include students' exemplary work across domains, such as literary analyses, original scientific investigations, social science research, demonstrations of mathematical concepts in an applied setting, and artistic exhibitions. Students must often present their research before a jury of teachers, parents, peers, and reviewers from outside the school.

If students don't get a passing score on the multidimensional rubric that reflects the standards, they must present their work a second time. One San Diego district official who participated in a jury recalled an exhibition in which the student wasn't prepared. The student admitted it, and one committee member said, "Well, son, what is it going to take next time?" The student, who acknowledged the reasons for his failure and came to understand what it would take to succeed, became successful and now has graduated and moved on to post-secondary education.

Teachers provide students with opportunities to revise their work in response to teacher feedback as well as feedback from peers and outside experts. The schools provide additional classes and tutoring to help students close skill gaps, especially students who enter high school performing below grade level, new English learners, or students in special education. Both students and educators see this performance-based instruction and assessment as more powerful and rigorous than traditional schoolwork based on textbooks and tests. Said one student at Leadership High,

At other high schools, it's just "you passed." Kids can't tell what they got out of high school. Students here know what they've learned.

Professional Learning and Collaboration

The five schools in our study allocate considerable time for teachers to collaborate, design curriculum and instruction, and learn from one another. They organize extensive summer learning opportunities and retreats to look at evidence of student learning and to plan and organize instruction, advisory practices, and student supports. Said a counselor at Leadership High,

Everything is very intentional here. At other places I've worked, it's like, "Let's try this. Let's try that." Here, we look at the research; we look at the data and figure it out. There are reasons for everything.

Overall, the schools allocate 7 to 15 days to shared professional learning time throughout the year. In addition, they organize substantial time during the week—usually several hours—for teachers to plan and problem solve together. With teachers meeting regularly in grade-level teams, the schools have venues for examining student progress, creating a more coherent curriculum, and enabling teachers to learn from one another. Planning within departments also occurs regularly, and teachers develop curriculum and assessments that prepare students to meet common schoolwide outcomes.

Mentoring and coaching systems for new and veteran teachers also augment professional learning. In staff meetings, teachers engage in focused inquiry about problems of practice—

such as how to improve curriculum or attendance or meet the needs of individuals or groups of students. To learn about student thinking, standards, and curriculum, teachers collectively evaluate student portfolios, projects, and exhibitions.

In small schools with school-led professional learning, the line between professional learning and school leadership and decision making is often blurred. All the schools use models of democratic decision making and engage teachers in a range of leadership roles, including mentoring new teachers, leading professional development, running the performance-based assessment systems, developing advisory curriculum, conducting data analyses, determining a schoolwide instructional focus, and helping manage the day-to-day logistics of running the schools. Shared governance often involves students, parents, community members, and industry leaders, which supports widespread commitment to the vision and mission of the school. For example, at June Jordan, parents, students, and staff meet regularly to ensure the school is meeting its mission, to discuss program plans, and to advocate to the school district on behalf of the school.

Collaboration has a positive influence on teacher morale as well, as one teacher at Animo Inglewood explained:

I can't imagine working in a big school district and feeling like I'm pushing a rock up a hill. It's nice to know everybody on staff is pushing that same rock because we have the same kids.

A Need for Policy Changes

In our research, we identified four policy areas that influence the ability of high schools to construct practices that enable students of color to succeed. In some cases, the schools in our study benefited from specific policy supports. In others, they succeeded despite lack of supports that would be needed for more widespread reforms to take root.

Policy Focus 1: Organization and Governance

The schools benefited from policies that encourage the creation of new small high schools designed to offer the personalization and instructional supports needed to create more successful learning. Schools needed extra funding to support start-up costs associated with planning the new design, recruiting and developing staff, securing facilities and equipment, and growing to a level that supports scale economies. These school-design efforts were supported by small schools grants from the state and federal governments as well as foundations.

However, the policy environment has not provided steady support for the continuation of this work. Grants end, and local budgets are often inadequate to support essential features of the schools' work—especially their professional learning needs—without continual outside fund-raising. Thus, we recommend that states and the federal government

- Expand grants to support new schools and small learning communities whose designs promise to attend more effectively to students' needs and increase their success.
- Create a means for documenting and sharing effective school organizational and

instructional practices through clearinghouses and networks that enable schools to learn from one another, like the school networks established by reformers in New York City and Boston.

One crucial aspect of the governance problem is the extent to which the education system relies on *bureaucratic accountability*—that is, on regulations that prescribe and manage what schools do—or, alternatively, on *professional accountability*, which strives to develop knowledgeable educators who can be trusted to make responsible decisions about practice. The ongoing tug-of-war between bureaucratic control and autonomy cannot ultimately be resolved without investments in school capacity and professional knowledge and skill. The autonomies regarding hiring, professional development, curriculum, and assessment that these schools rely on to construct more powerful learning environments are not likely to be granted unless the public has a high degree of confidence that the schools will make defensible decisions.

The goal is not only to support a vanguard of uniquely situated schools, but also, eventually, to enable *all* schools to adopt practices that will be more successful for all their students. The success of these vanguard schools and the transformation of others will rely on investments in schools' capacities and changes in the current regulatory and funding structure for education. These investments include

- Teacher preparation and development to enable the kinds of instructional strategies and advisement responsibilities that teachers have taken on in these new models.
- School leader recruitment and development to hone principals' skills in instructional leadership, organizational design, and change management.
- A system of curriculum, assessment, and instruction that encourages the development of 21st-century skills and that is both rigorous and relevant.
- Funding streams that are sufficiently flexible to enable strategic investments in innovative approaches.

Policy Focus 2: Human Capital

The schools we studied succeed in part because of their ability to recruit and develop strong teachers. However, there is a substantial shortage of teachers who are armed with the kinds of skills needed for the sophisticated pedagogies used in these schools and who are available to teach in urban districts. Once teachers are working in schools, they need ongoing, high-quality opportunities for learning that focus on concrete problems of practice in the content areas they teach with the specific students they serve. Although some states have initiated programs to address these concerns, such programs often come and go with budget shifts, creating a yoyo diet of initiatives rather than a steady set of policy supports for developing high-quality teaching in all schools. To address these needs, federal and state governments should

- Completely underwrite high-quality preservice preparation for candidates who will teach in high-need schools. Strategies might include creating or expanding service scholarships and forgivable loans for individuals who prepare to teach in low-income schools, with special incentives for teachers with language skills and content

backgrounds that are in short supply.

- Provide support for improving the capacity of teacher education programs. Teachers need to know how to provide rigorous, relevant, and responsive instruction to low-income students of color. Essential teacher skills include teaching content to diverse learners—including new English learners and those with learning differences—and designing an engaging and relevant hands-on curriculum.
- Provide funding for at least 10 days of professional development each year. As all high-achieving nations do, the U.S. federal and state governments should fund learning time for teachers. Schools should have flexibility to determine how to use this time.
- Support high-quality professional development in the specific areas teachers need to be effective. This includes increasing support for sustained, curriculum-focused professional learning institutes as well as coaching models that help teachers put ideas into practice.
- Support training for professional development providers and mentors to ensure they learn about successful methods of teaching students of color and English language learners. Such training should include teachers helping other teachers acquire these skills.
- Provide time for planning and collaboration so that teachers can develop coherent, high-quality curriculum and learn from one another.

In addition to having adequately prepared teachers, schools also need well-prepared principals who are strong instructional leaders. Principals need to know how to plan professional development, redesign school organizations, and manage a change process. In addition, they need to know how to organize staffing and teacher time to reduce class size, create teams, incorporate advisory systems, and provide time for collaboration and professional learning opportunities. To develop such leaders, research (see Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007) suggests that states should

- Recruit dynamic future leaders into the principal pipeline. Subsidize high-quality preparation—including paid internships under the guidance of expert principals who effectively lead schools serving students of color—for candidates who have strong instructional and leadership capacities and who reflect today's students.
- Provide support for systematically improving principal preparation programs and developing clinical experiences and content that prepare principals to lead in schools that are organized in new, more productive ways.

Policy Focus 3: Curriculum and Assessment

Although the schools we studied give their students access to a college-preparatory curriculum, they also offer more innovative learning opportunities. The schools' forward-looking curriculums rely both on redefining traditional requirements and on using challenging performance-based assessments that demand applications of knowledge, provide students and staff with timely feedback about students' progress, and support revision of student work to meet standards of quality. Collectively scoring assessments—such as juried portfolios or

performance tasks—also helps teachers construct shared ideas about what constitutes good work and discuss how to improve curriculum and teaching.

The performance assessments the five schools use resemble those used in high-achieving countries, such as Finland, Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia. There, local assessments require students to conduct research and scientific investigations, solve complex real-world problems, and defend their ideas orally and in writing. Such assessments promote serious intellectual work. Although the schools in this study attend to the demands of California's accountability system, they find that the state's multiple-choice tests do not promote the kind of 21st-century learning that enables students to find and use resources, analyze and synthesize information, produce and explain ideas, apply knowledge to novel situations, use new technologies, and work productively with others.

If more schools are to create strong curriculums oriented to their students' and society's future, as well as assessments that prepare students for college and the workplace, state and local policies must evolve to support these efforts. States should

- Rethink traditional curriculum requirements to more fully acknowledge modern conceptions of learning and curriculum, including interdisciplinary and applied learning that incorporates new technologies.
- Improve assessment systems and encourage performance assessments at the state and local levels, including appropriate assessments for English language learners.

Policy Focus 4: Funding

To provide a rigorous, relevant, and responsive education to low-income students of color, the schools we studied were required to raise additional funds beyond those the state provided. This was particularly necessary in a high-cost-of-living state that spends far less than the national average on its schools. The schools studied spend these funds on hiring additional core staff, funding professional development, and purchasing books and materials. Still, four of the five schools have no library, and three lack a gymnasium. Several share buildings with other schools and have little common space or outdoor space for students. The urban districts that sponsor them have struggled, like many across the United States, with the lack of investment that has occurred as a result of growing inequities in spending during the past two decades.

Moreover, schools serving low-income students lack flexibility in using the funds they *do* have to best serve their students. All the schools in this study achieve an integrated system of support by reallocating resources to reduce pupil load and class sizes, instituting an advisory program, and monitoring academic achievement. In spite of these efforts, the schools are still hindered by the state's fragmented funding streams. Aside from their state per-pupil funding, much of the funding that schools receive comes in small categorical dollops for additional programs and is often insufficient.

This fragmented, overly prescribed allocation of funds gets in the way of schools carrying out their vision and undermines their efforts to provide meaningful supports for students. It can also create a set of unglued programs that detract from a core instructional focus. To better

address the needs of currently underserved students, states and the federal government should

- Increase and equalize funding for schools by establishing weighted student funding formulas in which funds follow the student and additional funding is allocated for students with the greatest needs.
- Create less-fragmented funding streams. With the exception of major programs intended to address specific population needs (for example, special education and English language learners), reduce the number of small programs and roll funds into core funding through the weighted student formula so that schools have more flexibility to align funding to their instructional missions.

Dismantling Inequities

This study offers examples of high schools that are challenging the status quo by providing opportunities for low-income students of color to become critical thinkers and leaders. Unless policy systems change, however, these schools will remain anomalies rather than harbingers of the future. The policy changes we propose could create a context in which the kinds of schools we describe become the norm and all students, regardless of race, income, or zip code, have the right to learn.

Endnote

¹ Student names are pseudonyms.

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