Creating Pathways to Success for All Students

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My first job in education, way back in 1968, was an internship with the Superintendent of Schools in Philadelphia. He was a visionary leader and one of his innovations was the creation of small alternative high schools. He believed that a school system's high schools needed to offer a variety of alternatives that respond to adolescents' different interests and learning styles.

Then I moved to New York City and found that alternative high schools meant something quite different. In New York, these were second chance schools for students who hadn't made it in the traditional high schools. The implication was that something was wrong with the students. Some of these schools were little more than holding pens for students. A few were truly extraordinary and formed the base for today's small schools movement.

Whenever I visit alternative schools, I am always awed by the tenacity of students who have held on to their dreams of completing school despite literally years of frustration, failure and efforts by some teachers and counselors to convince them that a high school diploma is beyond their reach.

The popular image of students who drop out before completing high school is that they just aimlessly wander off, particularly when the weather gets warm. Nothing is further from the truth. Young people know that they need to get educated to survive in today's labor market. We are seeing dramatic increases in the proportion of youth who tell us they aspire to a postsecondary degree. But they don't know much about the pathway from here to there, and it is too easy for them to lose their way, to fall off track.

Sorting students always has been one of the high school's major functions in the United States. High schools in the US traditionally included a college-preparatory track, a vocational track, and the general track for those who don't fit either of the first two

pathways. (In my day, this group included girls who never expected to enter the paid labor force.) The results were predictable on the basis of socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity. This traditional form of high school is obsolete in today's economy. All students, whether they plan to go on to post secondary education or enter the labor market directly, need essentially the same skills and competencies to succeed.

In the United States, we are finally beginning to think about how we can transform high schools to prepare all students for academic and economic success. In cities around the country, educators are creating a wide variety of small high schools, dividing their big high schools into smaller units and seeking charters for still other schools to operate independently with public support. Some new schools still teach in a fairly traditional manner, but others have taken the lead of innovative schools at the margins of the system—some of the same kinds of programs and schools that are the focus of this convocation—and they have brought them into the mainstream.

The term being used to describe this diversification is a *portfolio of schools,* which evokes both economic and artistic metaphors. Right now, most cities have portfolios more by default than by design. Moreover, the traditional model that these new schools are trying to change carried within it the DNA of deeply rooted cultural assumptions about limited access to success, about sorting out who will succeed and who will not and about the role of public education in allocating and legitimating success. Without confronting these assumptions, these new portfolios of schools will not lead to different outcomes. What we need is a vision for intentionally developed and managed portfolios that explicitly challenge those assumptions and includes multiple pathways to success for all students.

This is where the work we've been doing at Carnegie Corporation comes into the picture. To put this in context, I need to give you some background about Carnegie Corporation and its work. Then I'll tell you a bit about the American education system and how our high schools have evolved.

Carnegie Corporation is a philanthropic foundation, founded in 1911 by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. The philanthropic sector in the United States—which some credit Carnegie with creating—spends roughly $1.5 billion in grants to some level or aspect of educational programs, systems and institutions from pre-kindergarten through higher education. One and a half billion dollars may seem like a tidy sum, but in context, that adds up to less than half of 1% of the more than US $300 billion (that's more than $400 million in Australian dollars) the public sector commits to educating our young people.

So how do foundation dollars move the agenda? We push the boundaries of policy and practice by supporting research and advocacy on critical problems, bringing people together in new conversations, creating opportunities for different ways of approaching problems and experimenting with solutions, and stimulating new ways of deploying energy and resources.

Carnegie Corporation gives out roughly US $80 (AU $104) million annually. Last year our education division spent roughly US $25 (AU$ 32) million. Under our current grantmaking priorities, we support a major effort to change the way our universities prepare new teachers, an initiative to build the field of intermediate and adolescent literacy, and almost US $12 (AU$ 15) million annually since 2000 on urban school reform. I lead our urban school reform work.

Our signature effort within the urban school reform agenda is *Schools for a New Society,* an initiative in seven cities where we have made 5-year grants to address the crisis in their high schools. We challenged these cities to do three things:

1. Create entire systems of good high schools by transforming *all* their high schools
2. Redesign the way their seven local school districts think about, organize, operate, and support high schools in order to provide pathways to excellence for all students
3. Mobilize community support and demand for excellent high schools.

Beyond this initiative, we've also spent significant resources on the high school dropout crisis, both within some of the seven cities and at the national and state level.

Some background on education in the United States

To help you understand our reasons for taking on this daunting challenge, let me give you a very quick orientation to the education system in the US. In the United States, the 50 individual states are charged with the responsibility for overseeing education, but local control of education is deeply rooted in American political culture. The main funding source for schools is local revenues, with some help from the state governments and very little help from the federal government. Urban areas are notoriously ill served by this system of school finance.

The critical policymaking unit, then, is the school *district*, which includes the school board, the superintendent, the central administration, and the professional organizations or unions that represent personnel. Even within local school districts, funds are inequitably distributed, with those schools in affluent neighborhoods often getting more funding and better-prepared teachers. We're just beginning to understand the complex dynamics that produce this maldistribution of resources and to work toward change. It will be a very tough battle. When the fundamental issue at hand is the redistribution of privilege in a society deeply divided by class, race, and ethnicity, the politics become even more intense.

Recently, our federal government stepped in—at least at the pre-high school level—with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which requires all states to set academic standards, assess student progress at regular intervals, and disaggregate data in order to reveal disparities in performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Many consider the law—me included—important civil rights legislation with fairly radical implications. For the last four decades of the 20th Century, the US had promised students equal educational *opportunity,* with disappointing results. NCLB moves from equality of opportunity to the achievement of equal educational *outcomes*.

We are still early in the implementation of this law, and there are unintended consequences that we need to examine as the law comes up for legislative reauthorization next year. We also have a long way to go in assessing the equitable distribution of the inputs that are intended to lead to outcomes.

Although, the federal mandate of NCLB does not extend to high schools, many states have implemented end-of-course tests and high-stakes exit examinations for high schools. Until a student passes the examination, they cannot graduate from high school. In practice, this far too often ratifies and legitimates the inequitable preparation of students entering high school.

These painful consequences do have a silver lining: for the first time in all my years of working in education reform, people cannot hide from the extent of the disparities between the have and the have-nots. I am seeing a sense of urgency and clarity that rarely existed in the past except in isolated pockets of the system. The data has forced major stakeholders to re-examine their deployment of resources and attention and to rethink the way they have structured and operated their high schools.

When Carnegie Corporation decided to focus on urban high schools and urban school districts a joint target of change, NCLB had not even been proposed, but these exit exams were on the horizon, and we took advantage of that strategic opportunity to invest in rethinking and redesigning high school education. Let me give you a bit of history about our high schools to help you see why we made that decision.

Until the late nineteenth century, very few students attended school beyond the eighth grade in the US. Then the rapidly growing student population sparked a national debate about how best to organize secondary education. *The Committee of Ten*, a panel chaired by the president of Harvard College (our most elite postsecondary institution) advocated a common academic curriculum for all secondary school students. Members of the Committee were unanimous in their concern with improving the education offered to students who were *not* college-bound.[1] .

Sadly, this egalitarian vision never took hold, and in 1918, a report of a Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education declared, "The work of the senior high

[1] Report of the Committee of ten posted at http://tmh.floonet.net/books/commoften/mainrpt.html

school should be organized into differentiated curriculums [sic]." This fit the role education was expected to play in the United States' industrial economy, preparing workers for the factories sprouting up in our cities. It was also an efficient solution to rapidly exploding school enrollment as immigration expanded the population in the early 20th Century, particularly in large cities. And it must be noted that this countermovement also reflected the racial and economic biases of the larger society about which students would be the most likely beneficiaries of vocational rather than academic preparation.

To be fair, this differentiated or stratified model was created at a time when not all students were expected to complete high school, and only a minority of students went on to post-secondary education of any sort. Ample employment opportunities existed for those without a high school diploma. The results were inequitable, but not catastrophic.

Later 20th Century reform efforts ratified and strengthened the belief that differentiating educational opportunities is appropriate. In 1958, a year after the Soviet space satellite was launched, the National Defense Education Act was enacted by the US Congress to improve mathematics and science education. But it also contained provisions that required states to develop academic guidance programs to test students for aptitude and ability and identify talented students and guidance programs to "advise students of courses of study best suited to their aptitude, abilities, and skills."[2] And in 1959, James Conant's book, *The American High School Today*, financed by Carnegie Corporation, called for the comprehensive multi-track high school that is the norm today Ability grouping went from common practice to explicit policy.

So where are we today and who are the winners and who are the losers in this picture?
We have no standard methodology in the United States for calculating our high school graduation and dropout rates and given the politics around dropout rates, this is highly contested territory. Most states report rates that are patently false because they rely on methods that dramatically overstate the number of graduates.

[2] D. Gamson, From Progressivism to Federalism: The Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunity, 1915-1965, Paper presented at the Advanced Studies Fellowship Conference, , June 2005, pp. 26-27.

Last month, the author whose methodology many consider the most reliable released a report on graduation patterns. His calculations showed that 70% of the Class of 2003 graduated from high school. But that national rate hides some important differences. Our 100 largest school districts educated 23.1 % of the high school students, but produced only 18.5% of the graduates. The rate for white students was 78 percent, compared with 72 percent for Asian students, but only 55 percent for African-American students and just 53 percent for Hispanic students graduated.[3] This pattern of unequal outcomes is most pronounced in big cities, where nearly half the students are from low-income families, and where residential segregation is reflected in the schools.

Today, good jobs—those with decent salaries, benefits and opportunities to advance—require many of the same competencies that are needed to attend postsecondary education Jobs that once required only a limited education now demand higher levels of literacy and problem-solving skills. A high school diploma can no longer be seen as a terminal degree. In fact, the real value of a high school diploma in constant dollars has declined over the last 30 years.[4]

Beyond the devastating impact of early school-leaving on the well-being of our young people and their future families, the miseducation of our youth leaves our communities with too few potential workers to support their local economies, and too few citizens with the knowledge and skills they need to understand the complex political issues facing us and to participate in a modern democracy.

Considering Portfolios of Schools

If we are serious in our desire for a just and equitable society, the real question is: How do we create, in each of our communities, entire systems of individually excellent high schools that prepare all students for postsecondary education and training, employment, and citizenship and where excellence is the product of everyday practice? To answer this question, let's return to this notion of a school system offering a portfolio of schools.

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[3] *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, by Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, Manhattan Institute, April 2006

[4] R. Murnane and F. Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills*, New York: The Free Press, 1996.

This idea is gaining a foothold in our cities as people rethink the traditional one-size-fits all high school, and try to provide an array of good choices for young people. Most school districts already have parts of the portfolio, including comprehensive high schools, selective high schools, vocational schools, magnet schools, and alternative schools or programs for students at risk of dropping out. But in our vision, a portfolio of schools is more than just an array of schools. It is an intentional strategy to assure that all students and their families have access to a diverse array of high quality schools, and that all students have clear pathways to success.

To achieve this vision, all high schools in the portfolio must share two essential characteristics. First, all the schools have a clear focus that serves to galvanize teachers' and students' work. One school might have an applied concentration, like health sciences, while another might offer a specific approach to learning, such as experiential education. Second, all schools in the portfolio are driven by the same high expectations for students' learning and provide both a rigorous curriculum and the academic and social supports students need to meet these high expectations. The portfolio provides multiple pathways to success, organized around a common core set of standards and instructional practices.

Core Values and Operational Commitments

Four values are central to our vision of a portfolio of schools: excellence, equity, diversity, and choice. For the portfolio approach to deliver the high schools we need, **excellence** must be a core value. Whatever their focus or format, every school within the portfolio must be designed to help students meet rigorous academic standards and to prepare students for postsecondary education and/or professional training.

But we also know that the portfolio of schools cannot provide excellent choices for all students without explicitly addressing **equity**. The difficulties we now face in urban school systems reflect deeply embedded systemic inequities that mirror the differential distribution of power and resources in the larger society. Breaking up the system through the portfolio's use of universal choice will disrupt some patterns of inequality. Because these inequities have a way of reappearing in new forms, portfolios of schools must be

designed to include not only strategies to reduce their impact, but also monitoring and feedback strategies that keep these inequities from re-emerging.

At its core, the portfolio of schools embraces the **diversity** of individual aspirations and opportunities, learning styles, and cultural identities. Based on the findings from cognitive psychology that individuals have varied learning styles as well as different interests, needs, and aspirations, we know that different schools are needed to provide a range of learning settings for students. This also is true for teachers. The portfolio capitalizes on the diversity of teachers' interests and talents and thereby increases the probability that teachers will feel more engaged by and committed to their work than in the traditional comprehensive high school model.

Choice has both intrinsic and instrumental value within a portfolio of schools. Choosing schools that respond to their individual and community interests and aspirations increases the likelihood that students will feel engaged by their school work, see its relevance to their future, be more committed to participating in the school as a community, and strive to achieve academically. A choice-based system also responds to adolescents' developmental need to explore different aspects of their emerging identity by choosing different kinds of schools and experiencing the consequences of their choices. Young people should help adults determine the range of choices by working jointly to decide what kinds of schools should be included in the portfolio and the kind of supports students and their communities might need to make those decisions.

While choice is a central mechanism, the portfolio approach is not an unregulated free market. Students can choose from among a range of high schools based on their own interests, needs, and ambitions. Individual schools may be operated by a variety of providers but careful accountability and some degree of managed choice are critical elements of the model. To be effective, the portfolio of schools must not be allowed to become a new form of tracking that narrows rather than expands the opportunities available for students.

Operationalizing the portfolio

The design for a portfolio of schools must begin with a careful analysis of young people's needs and preferences, including all young people who are still entitled to a public education in that analysis. While the local school district administration will still play a leadership role, we believe that a successful portfolio approach depends on building a powerful partnership between the school system and the community in which it operates. This is needed both to bring to bear the variety of resources that is needed for the education of young people and to make sure that all segments of the community are treated equitably in the face of the inevitable pressure to give preferential treatment to one segment over another.

Several large school systems in the US are now moving toward a portfolio approach at the high school level, including Boston, Chicago, Portland (OR) and New York City. New York City, in particular, has pursued a mandatory choice program at the high school level. Students must indicate their choice, even if it is to attend the high school closest to their home. This has been accompanied by the creation of 100 new small high schools, many of which are housed in buildings that were formerly failing high schools. Among these new schools are ones designed specifically to address the needs of incoming immigrant students, or are built around curricular themes ranging from environmental studies to social justice. All the new schools work in partnership with community organizations and institutions, which play a central role in developing the curriculum and providing social and academic support to students.

Alongside these new schools, the Department of Education is working to transform some of the city's largest traditional high schools into smaller learning environments. Finally, New York City's portfolio also includes a multi-strand strategy for reaching out to students who have dropped out or are considering doing so. This includes:

- Transfer schools, which are small, personalized learning environments with rigorous academic standards, student-centered pedagogy, counseling supports to help achieve instructional and developmental goals, and a focus on connections to college.

- Young adult centers, which offer an accelerated evening program for over-age and under-credited students who need to work or who have family obligations. The

educational program includes career exploration and work experience as well as tutoring and academic support.

- Transition centers to help ease the re-entry of students coming from the juvenile justice system back into school.

Let me close with some practical recommendations.

1. We need to carefully examine the ways that the sorting function of the high school is built into its every day culture and practices. For example, in the US, it is common for 9th grade teachers to try to scare students into getting serious, with the assumption being that those who are able will straighten up and those that don't will fail. But we now know that many 9th grade students already are scared, and that first failure may have disastrous consequences, frightening otherwise able students into paralysis.

2. Youth voice and youth engagement are critical. Young people are the most astute observers and critics of their schools. One superintendent told me that he saw schools as a dynamic triangle, with the three points being organizational structure, instructional program and human relationships. As he put it, "we can't get the relationships right without listening to the students."

3. The role of good data systems and practices is essential in implementing a portfolio approach. We need to know how students and staff are allocated among the different schools, whether by individual choice or system policies, and what the learning outcomes are of these arrangements.

4. At both the system and school level, we need high-yield early warning indicators to quickly spot students who are falling off track so that we can reach out to them. This needs to be coupled with quickly providing the supports students need to succeed or getting these students into schools that are better able to meet their needs. And we need to monitor those indicators EARLY so that intervention comes just-in-time rather than after the fact.

5. We need to recognize that, even if we create the most creative and supportive high schools imaginable, we probably still will need a recovery system for those students whose life circumstances or personal learning issues get in the way of their education. It is essential that this system include a way of reaching out to students quickly and redirecting them to alternatives before they suffer learning losses.

6. We also need to stimulate, create, and support community-based alternatives to district-operated schools. In my experience, many community-based organizations have education programs that more effectively and more efficiently serve some students, and we should include these programs as part of our portfolio.

7. We need to create financing mechanisms that provide these alternative academic pathways with—at minimum—the fiscal support students would have received had they remained in traditional school settings.

8. We need strong linkages between alternative academic pathways and both post-secondary education and the labor market. Innovative programs in the United States are finding that many dropouts have significant academic potential and can make the transition to postsecondary education with appropriate support. But for those who will head into the labor market, we need to provide much stronger linkages between alternative academic pathways and jobs.

9. We need to continually monitor our progress, to turn around and look behind to see what the unintended consequences have been.

Changing deeply rooted assumptions and redefining what it means to succeed in high school entails a direct challenge to the values that have informed the development of our educational system. Yet it is absolutely essential if we want all young people to grow up into competent and confident adults in the new society of the twenty-first century. The future demands no less.