

Colorado Association of School Boards Annual Conference
Panel Session "High School Reform: What it Means for School Boards"
December 3, 2005

by Jared Polis

Introduction

When local school board members and administrators work to improve high school outcomes, they have to view solutions and reform from both a long-term and short-term perspective. They also have to look at strategies from both a general and specific viewpoint, which translates into action on both the systemic and individual student level. Drawing from the recommendations of the state high school commission report that will be released next week, the next two speakers and I will offer practical and effective approaches for all of these contexts.

Over the past five years, I've been working on high school reform at the vision, policy, and practice levels:

Vision: State High School Commission (CCHSI), Co-chair
Policy: State Board of Education (SBE), Vice-chairman and Chairman
Practice: New America School (NAS) and Academy of Urban Learning (AUL)

Teaching and Learning

The state high school commission report offers several key recommendations on teaching and learning, mainly in the areas of high academic expectations and strong investments in professional development.

- Curriculum

The report emphasizes the need for requiring that every student take a rigorous, sequential, aligned standards-based curriculum. What this means is ensuring that each student's educational experiences address state and local content standards. The 13 state standards, set by the State Board of Education under state law, are wide-ranging. They include not just the CSAP-tested areas of math, reading, writing, and science, but also history, civics, geography, economics, foreign language, P.E., music, art, dance, and theater. In the spirit of local control, school districts can exceed and add on to the state model content standards, and many do so to fit the unique needs of their specific communities and student populations.

- Professional Development

The report discusses ways to ensure effective teaching and academic leadership in schools. Specific recommendations include:

- ? Invest in high-quality professional development for teachers and school administrators, including induction and mentoring programs – some non-traditional program, to recruit and retain effective teachers and principals
- ? Ensure that students in high-poverty schools have the most qualified teachers
- ? Direct resources that help your district hire, train, supervise, evaluate, and compensate great school leaders
- ? Work with teachers' unions to remove ineffective teachers and reward effective ones

Colorado, like most states, has an achievement gap, meaning that White and Asian students perform better on the CSAP than African American and Hispanic students, and that students from low-income families perform worse than their wealthier counterparts. Many of your schools have sizable achievement gaps. As required by state law, the State Board of Education is setting up an assistance program to help these students, using research-based best practices. Some of these apply to high school improvement, including parent and community involvement, cultural respect, family literacy, individualized student instruction, peer networks and mentoring, good health and nutrition in school, and up to date technology.

Choice and Alternatives

To help students succeed in high school, it is critical to keep them interested in school. To do this, school leaders must match the school's curriculum with students' learning needs and interests. This does not mean sacrifice rigor and strong academic standards, but instead schools and districts need to understand students' needs and fit them into a standards-based curriculum, as I described earlier.

Some students have particular learning interests, such as science and technology, outdoor and experiential learning, career and technical education, a pre-collegiate curriculum, or core knowledge. For early childhood education, this might mean a Montessori approach, or programs that emphasize parent involvement. Some students have particular circumstances that necessitate certain types of learning and teaching. Such circumstances are: being gifted and talented, being a teen parent, a recent immigrant or child of migrant workers, a delinquent, at-risk of dropping out, chronically failing, social challenges, and generally disengaged with school. Central to ensuring equal access to all students, regardless of their particular interests or circumstances, is providing adequate transportation to students and information to students and their families.

For system-level decision-makers like school board members and administrators, tailoring a rigorous high school curriculum to student needs can be done in many ways.

- District schools

Ideally, districts and schools can adapt their instruction, course offerings, and even school structures to prevent a need for external schools of choice, like charter schools or online schools. The report discusses different ways of doing this. One is to ensure that all district schools offer a wide variety of effective, standards-based classes; another is to create new small high schools that provide specific areas of learning.

The Mapleton School District in Adams County has done the latter. Many of you have heard about the high school reforms in Mapleton, and you'll hear more about them this afternoon from one of that district's board members, Norma Frank.

Another important way of enhancing student engagement in high schools is to provide several ways to earn both a high school diploma and college credits. Both the Sheridan School District and the Denver Public Schools have established innovative programs that allow high school students to take courses at the community college level to give them a head start in higher education. My co-chair, Pat Hayes, will discuss these important programs a little later. At the State Board of Education, we fought to allow state K-12 funding (PPOR) to support these programs. Unfortunately, we lost the battle to change this restrictive rule on a 4-4 tie – hopefully we'll change that vote in the near future. We also anticipate seeing state legislation on this issue in the upcoming legislative session.

- Choice schools (charter and online schools)

Sometimes, a district will approve a charter school or contract school to run a specialized educational program. When the sufficient parental interest arises to have charter schools in your district, it's essential to have processes of good district accountability and assurances that the charter school is clearly addressing the needs of your community, and especially of underserved, at-risk students. Through my foundation, the Jared Polis Foundation, I have initiated two charter schools in a few school districts that address the learning needs of needy student populations.

Another helpful option for some students is online education where a student takes some or all of the classes on the computer. One approach is supplemental online courses, where a student takes one or two classes online – the SBE supports increased funding for these supplemental programs to make them more affordable. Another approach is student enrollment in an online school, or cyberschool, where a student takes all classes online. In the latter situation, the cyberschool can be a district-run program like Branson Online, or it can be a charter school, like the Colorado Virtual Academy.

During my years on the State Board of Education, I have advocated for both equal funding and equal access to full-time online education students. Online schools (like all Colorado public schools) must meet state and local content standards, and accreditation standards, and all cyberstudents must take the CSAP. And CDE and the SBE are now working on additional accreditation standards that will apply specifically to online schools. State law currently restricts both by limiting state per pupil funding to the statewide minimum and requiring that a student have been enrolled in a public school the previous year in order to be counted for funding. The State Board of Education has unanimously agreed to support legislation that will ensure online education access for all Colorado students.

- Specialized schools (NAS, AUL)

The Jared Polis Foundation founded two charter schools to serve needy students: the New America School provides education to older English language learners – ages 16-21 - many of them recent immigrants and children of migrant workers. The school also gives them an opportunity to gain a diploma and valuable academic and workforce skills. The other school is the Academy of Urban Learning, which provides education to students who are homeless or highly transient.

New America School (NAS)

The NAS has two campuses, one on the Lowry campus chartered with Aurora Public Schools, and a second one in Thornton chartered with Adams County District 14. We have received approval from Jefferson County School District to charter a third school with them that would open in fall 2006. Our current enrollment is 679 (457 in Aurora and 222 in Adams County). The school will likely pass the 1,000 student mark when we open our third school next fall. Because Colorado has such a large population of English language learners in many districts, I recommend looking at this model.

Academy of Urban Learning (AUL)

We opened the AUL this fall in Denver under a charter with DPS. It's the only school in the state focused on holistic needs of the homeless and highly transient population. Most of the 40 students who are enrolled are high school dropouts, and many of them need just one more semester to complete high school. We've heard from many of these students that they didn't think they'd have another chance to graduate, and the prospect of them gaining just a GED discouraged them from continuing. The school, which serves a diverse student population, was inspired by successful schools in Eugene, Oregon, Washington, D.C., and Phoenix. A crucial component of the AUL is the extensive community partnership it has with Denver Urban Peak, which provides wraparound services to students, such as counseling, shelter, and employment and grant opportunities.

Data Analysis

The last area that I'll address is the importance of school and districts using accurate student outcome data to support learning. For example, it's important that schools set clear measurable benchmarks for all subgroups of students, and analyze the data as they transfer between schools and transition from middle school to high school.

A key aspect of performance data in the high school context is understanding students' rate of completion in your school. In Colorado, school districts use different ways to calculate this rate, which includes several elements:

- Graduation rate
- On-time graduation rate
- Dropout rate
- Mobility rate

Last year, the legislature required the State Board of Education to specify a uniform method for school districts to calculate and report graduation and dropout rates. Next week, we'll be finalizing this rule, and we hope it will give the state, school districts, schools, parents, and the public a better understanding of the

extent to which kids stay in school. With the availability of the student identifier number for each K-12 student, monitoring a student's enrollment is much simpler than before.

Some of the key issues that we're facing are:

- Defining GEDs. Do we count them as graduates? Dropouts? Neither? Both?
- Transfers. How do schools verify that a student has transferred rather than dropped out?
- Grade repeaters. How do we distinguish students who are held back from transfers into a school?

Governor Owens, along with 46 other governors, has signed on to a national agreement through the National Governors' Association that recommends specific definitions and reliable measurements that will show a more accurate picture of these rates across states. The NGA recommendations are supported by major studies conducted by the top researchers in this field. I invite your views on this issue.

Conclusion

As you look to ways to support high school students' success, I encourage you to consider the points that I've laid out.

Next, my co-chair Pat Hayes will talk about what you can do to support high school students' achievement as they make transitions to and from high school, and she will address some key questions that local education policymakers may want to consider in implementing high school reform.

Thank you for your interest in this important issue.