

Presentation at the Colorado Association of School Executives Annual Conference
Panel Session "High School Reform: What it Means for School Boards"
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Introduction

When school district administrators and school board members work to improve high school outcomes, it's important to view solutions and reform from both a long-term and short-term perspective. It's also critical 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 my leadership of the Colorado Commission on High School Improvement (CCHSI), the State Board of Education, and two new public high schools that serve at-risk populations, I will offer practical and effective approaches for all of these contexts.

These three efforts reflect my work on high school reform at the vision, policy, and practice levels:

I will talk about this perspective from all three of these levels.

Vision: CCHSI Co-chair

Practice: New America School (NAS) and Academy of Urban Learning (AUL)

Policy: SBE Vice-chairman and Chairman

VISION – HIGH SCHOOL COMMISSION

Last December, the bipartisan Colorado Commission on High School Improvement released its final report, "High School Reform in Colorado: Meeting the Expectations of a New Era." (See the website on the overhead.) I co-chaired this commission, along with CU Regent and former SBE chair Pat Hayes. It was comprised of school board members, school and district administrators, district organization representatives (including CASE – Tim Westerberg, your former president), legislators, researchers, advocates, and foundation officials, and it was staffed by the Colorado Children's Campaign.

The commission met for a year and a half and agreed on a set of conclusions and recommendations for a range of stakeholders in the public education system, including state and local policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. It also examined how changes would affect rural schools, and looked at what businesses and community leaders could do to help high school students.

The 4 areas that the report covered includes:

1. Teaching and Learning
2. School choice
3. Transitions to and from high school
4. Data uses

Teaching and Learning

The 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

- Closing the Achievement Gap

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 set up a voluntary 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.

- Advisement/Counseling System

Schools should have a formal system of adult and student advising for every student. All students enrolled in middle and high schools require strong supportive relationships with adults in the school to help guide and support their learning, and future educational opportunities. These adult advisors can be teachers, counselors, administrators or other school staff that provide an additional formal link to school beyond the typical relationships generated through classroom experiences. Adult advisors can help students make the connection between the student's learning, the school and their family. These advisors will need to be advocates and coaches for students' success in a school.

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 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 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.

Mapleton

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 administrators, Damon Brown. Another approach is establishing concurrent enrollment programs that our panel's other speaker, Scott Mendelsberg, will discuss.

Manual

DPS similarly split Manual High School into 3 small schools several years ago (one for math and science; one for arts; and one for business and government). Manual's experiment did not work out, as test scores remained low and the dropout rate remained high, resulting in the school's closure this year. Although the school's ambitious plan succeeded in increasing attendance, reducing class size, and increasing school autonomy, there were problems with dramatic reform that seem to be related to rushed implementation. We have learned lessons from the challenges that plagued the reform, including the need for the following, which were lacking at Manual's new schools:

- Personalized support and counseling for students as they transition from middle school
- Teachers tracking student progress over time
- Lessons taught in a way that links to the schools' vision and theme
- Administrative support for consistent enforcement of school rules
- Positive relationships between administrators, teachers, and students
- Autonomy for school curriculum
- Well-articulated school vision

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 parent 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 several school districts that address the learning needs of needy student populations – I'll discuss these in a few minutes.

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 – this year the legislature added over \$500,000 to make these supplemental programs more affordable to districts – a funding increase that the SBE has supported for a couple years. 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. The SBE approved a resolution in February resolving that online schools must meet state content and accreditation standards and other state and federal requirements. State law currently restricts both by limiting state per pupil funding to the statewide minimum and requiring that a student has 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 this fall. 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 last 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.

Transitions to and From High School

- P-16 approach - You've probably heard about this term – it refers to providing learning environments in a context of understanding the effects of one grade level to another. Preschool affects elementary through higher ed. What happens in middle school is critical to high school experiences and higher ed. A bill to create a council that would have examined P-16 issues was vetoed by the governor. His alignment council looks at a piece of this, but only focuses on high school transitions to higher education. SB 24, a new law, requires a student ID number from preschool through college.
- Apply to higher ed – In an effort to increase high schoolers' participation in higher education, our report also discusses the need for school leaders to have regular conversations with students about postsecondary opportunities, including instruction and guidance on how to apply. One recommendation is to require all students to apply to a college or community college.
- Undocumented students – The commission unanimously agreed that the state should make all high school graduates eligible for in-state tuition at higher ed regardless of whether the student is a US citizen or not. This would encourage our most vulnerable high school graduates to pursue higher education, which would bolster graduation rates, improve the state economy, and ultimately create safer and more equitable communities.

Data

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.

- Track students over time – new laws – Over the last couple years, the legislature has supported tracking longitudinal student academic growth on the SAR, and now for improved school awards.
- Improve data on school finance costs by identifying the true costs of personnel, incentives for improvement and other changes, and costs of serving types of students
- Accurate student performance measurements (not just testing, but attendance/ truancy, graduation, dropout, completion, higher ed attendance)

---This brings me to my last area – my policy work on the State Board of Education, and our recently adopted rule that sets a statewide measurement for high school graduation, completion and dropout rates.

POLICY – STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

As most of you know, the Colorado constitution makes SBE responsible for general supervision of the state's public schools. In effect this means that we oversee the work of the commissioner of education, approve school district accreditation, administer the CSAP, hear charter school appeals, and distribute school funds.

Today I will discuss a few recent examples of how the SBE has affected high school reform.

1. Graduation rate measurements
2. 5th year programs
3. Unsatisfactory School restructuring

Graduation Rate Measurements

Regarding district graduation and completion rates - all high school reform improvements are founded on the importance of schools and districts using accurate student outcome data to support learning. A key aspect of performance data in the high school context is understanding students' rate of completion in your school. To provide this accurate picture, the 2005 legislature required the State Board of Education to specify a uniform method for school districts to calculate and report graduation and dropout rates. Prior to this change, districts used different ways to calculate these rates.

Some of you followed our work on this issue, and I know that some of you had concerns about our approach because of questions about adding to and complicating the work of district staff and your district numbers looking worse. Neither of these were the state board's intentions, but rather to provide 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. The two top issues that the state board examined were:

- Transfers. How do schools verify that a student has transferred to another school rather than dropped out?
- Defining GEDs. Do we count them as graduates or completers? Are they transfers?

Governor Owens, along with 46 other governors, 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. As we debated the calculations for the rule, we considered these findings along with your and other stakeholder input.

1. Documentation of Transfer

All researchers in this field recommend that the only ways to document whether a child has transferred to another school is by a written request for a student's records by the new school or by verification by the old school through the student ID number. What is not verifiable documentation of transfer is simply a call by a parent, other relative, or friend of the student telling a school that the student has transferred. We made this change in the rule.

2. GED Students

The second issue that we addressed was how to define a student who left school for a GED program. Prior to our rule, districts counted GED students as a transfer, meaning that these students were excluded from the number of students in a class (or the denominator), which essentially increased the graduation rate.

These students did not transfer to another school, but instead left school to get their GED. To exclude them from the class cohort does not reflect the percentage of graduates or completers.

Fifth-Year Programs

The next SBE issue that I'll mention is dual enrollment programs. The state board has recently examined these innovative, supportive programs in the context of what are called 5th year programs. You will hear more substantively about these programs from our next speaker, Scott Mendelsberg, who actually ran one.

Essentially, they involve school district partnerships with higher education institutions (community or 4 year colleges) to allow K-12 dollars to go to high school juniors or senior who are interested in taking college-level courses while they're still earning their high school diploma. They are also sometimes called "early college," "middle college," or "concurrent enrollment programs." Two schools that ran these programs found positive results, including significant increases in poor students attending college, and better graduation and attendance rates.

Within the past year, our board and education community had controversy over the legality of these programs. Many of you may remember receiving notification from CDE and CCHE about 5 years ago telling you to stop operation of these programs because the state auditor found them to be illegal. The state board passed a narrow rule outlawing 5th year programs about a year and a half later based upon the commissioner's interpretation of that audit report.

Last year when publicity of these programs resurfaced, we on the state board re-examined whether the programs would be allowed and found that the state auditor never said they were illegal. In fact, the auditor said that the Post Secondary Enrollment Options Act does authorize them, and that CDE and CCHE should examine the costs and benefits in order to make a recommendation to the legislature about how to handle these programs. When it became clear that the commissioner had mischaracterized the audit report to the state board in 2001 and 2003 leading to the rule banning 5th year programs, several of us tried to overturn our rule, but we stalemated in a 4-4 partisan tie vote so the restrictive rule stands. The vote occurred despite clear testimony that state law allows for the programs, that they are very effective, and that the commissioner's interpretation of the audit report was incorrect.

After the failure to overturn the rule on the state board, legislators tried to allow the programs last year. First, Representative Fran Coleman proposed a bill to authorize them on a pilot basis with a moderate expenditure, but this was rejected late in the session. Another attempt by Representative Anne McGihon to reverse the state board's rule was also removed after a fiscal note was attached of up to \$200 million, in my view improperly, because if the programs are already authorized, then the legislature must have already considered the fiscal note when PSEO was passed.

At this time, it's unclear how broadly the SBE rule applies to concurrent enrollment programs, how it will be enforced, or whether it can be enforced. I encourage you all to challenge this rule by speaking out against it, and questioning its applicability. The four of us on the state board who voted to repeal our rule value these programs as a shining example of creative, successful high school reform at the local level and view prohibiting them as improper state interference.

Unsatisfactory School Restructuring

Most of you have heard about the state board's restructuring of Cole Middle School in Denver two years ago after the school received "unsatisfactory" ratings on its SAR for three consecutive years. State law required the SBE to convert such schools to charter schools and decide who would be the new operator of the school. This law was extremely problematic for several reasons:

- it required the state to intervene in an area that the school district is most equipped to do;
- it consumed too much of the SBE's time and efforts in an area outside of our primary functions and expertise; and
- it distorted the notion of charter schools by mandating that one be artificially created, rather than organically through parent and child interest and need.

Thankfully, the state legislature enacted HB 1240 in the 2006 session, which expanded the ways that an "unsatisfactory" school could be restructured, starting with allowing the SBE to approve what a district wants to do. Last month we approved DPS's plans to restructure Randolph Middle School and Mitchell Elementary School after receiving excellent plans from the district. This effort underscored the importance of letting districts come up with solutions to their schools' difficulties rather than forcing the SBE to impose plans from the top down. That was the intent of last year's legislation, which our board had been favoring for the past two years.

Specifically, DPS proposed the following to make Randolph and Mitchell succeed:

1. Research-based curriculum changes

More time for literacy, social studies, science, including double blocks of skills development for students struggling with reading and math, extended day for students struggling with reading and math, and a newly developed teacher guide on these topics.

2. Replacement of a majority of licensed staff

Including teachers, principals, and assistant principals as of last year. The district added instructional superintendents and a team of specialists to work with the principal and staff on ELA, early childhood, humanities, math, science and special education.

3. Substantial change in grades served

Randolph is changing from serving grades 6-8 to 6-9 next year and adding one grade level each year thereafter until it becomes a 6-10 school. Mitchell added Grade 6 and the district is considering additional grade level changes.

4. Standards-based staff professional development

The schools will train full-time reading and math facilitators to help staff teach, and they added six pre-service training days. Mitchell teachers will have 45 minutes of intensive professional development per week. Teachers will also be required to take professional development classes after school and during the summer.

5. Enhanced student assessments

The school has newly designed the benchmarks for its math, writing, and reading assessments that are given three times per year, and teachers will be trained on how to inform instruction with these assessment results. New academic student intervention plans have been added to assist with differentiated instruction.

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, Scott and Damon will discuss specific examples of effective high school reform.

Thank you for your interest in this important issue.