

# AFTERSCHOOL ALERT

## ISSUE BRIEF



Issue Brief No. 23 – An In Depth Look

November 2005

## High School Reform and High School Afterschool: A Common Purpose

*We are beginning to see success as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act at the elementary level, and now we must improve our high schools so that every graduate is prepared for the rigors of college, for the best jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, or for military service. President Bush has proposed a number of initiatives to improve math and science education, help striving readers, and raise standards for high schools.*

—“A Safer World and a More Hopeful America”  
2004 Republican Party Platform

*Hopefully after-school can influence the outdated notion of high school itself. Maybe time shouldn't be partitioned this way for teens. We need to break open the nature of high school and think of it more like community college. It takes up your whole day, happens in various places in the community, some is academic and some is vocational, it involves relationship and social skill-building—instead of being an 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. schedule filled with 50-minute periods and a drop-dead graduation date.*

—Dr. Milbrey McLaughlin  
Executive Director,  
John Gardner Center  
for Youth and Their Communities<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, a person did not need a college education in order to fully participate in the economy. A high school diploma was good enough to get a decent job—probably in manufacturing—that could support a family and provide a decent pension. For example, in 1950, 80 percent of jobs were classified as “unskilled.” However, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its industrial economy have given way to the information economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that figure has reversed itself. Today, 80 percent of jobs are classified as “skilled,” and employment growth is expected to be fastest for positions that require some type of formal postsecondary education, such as database administrator, physician’s assistant, or computer software engineer.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, students must leave high school with more than basic proficiency in core subjects such as reading and math. High school must be a pathway to higher education, career success and productive adulthood.

Unfortunately, today’s high schools are not meeting that challenge. Only 32 percent of high school graduates are prepared for college coursework, meaning they require no remedial classes.<sup>3</sup> In the worlds of education reform and afterschool programs, the high school years have been largely ignored in favor of focusing on younger children. However, many groups, including the afterschool community, are starting to look at the challenges high schools face and what can be done to help students along every inch of the “education pipeline” and ensure that students come out the end with the skills they need to be productive adults and lifelong learners.

### **The Challenges of High School**

Within the K-12 system, high school is the last opportunity we have to engage students in their own education and get them on the path to productive adulthood and lifelong learning. However, in both the education reform and afterschool communities, the conventional wisdom has been that it’s more efficient to focus on younger children, with the thinking that the problems with high school will sort themselves out as a result, or, in the case of afterschool, that high school students won’t be interested in attending organized afterschool activities. Plus, as young people get older, their wants and needs change dramatically, so any educational system or program that works for fifth-graders must be reconsidered for high school. For example, the typical afterschool program designed for younger students—homework time followed by a snack and some art or sports activities—isn’t going to appeal to older teens who see themselves as young adults. Afterschool programs specially geared toward high school students have to work that much harder to keep attendance up among students who can vote with their feet.

Similarly, high schools themselves have a hard time engaging students who can see the finish line, who see the next four years as waste of time to endure before they are finally released from the K-12 system. For example, one study found that “40 percent of high school students were just going through the motions at school; [more than] one-third of students surveyed said they got through the school day ‘goofing off’ with their friends and neither tried hard nor paid attention when in class.”<sup>4</sup> Another recent survey found that two-thirds of students said they could do better if they tried, and half of students considered school boring and too easy.<sup>5</sup>

- 77 percent of voters agree that afterschool programs can play an extremely or very important role in reducing the high school drop-out rate by keeping high school youth interested in school.
- 75 percent of voters agree that afterschool programs can play an extremely or very important role in providing a solid academic foundation for young people to help prepare them for college and careers.

(Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, Afterschool Alliance Poll, November 2004.)

High school students and those who try to educate them have a tall order to fill. High schools have to help create the workforce of the future by turning out graduates who have the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that colleges and employers demand, all the while overcoming the huge achievement gap that exists for poor and minority students and fighting social pressures such as drugs, alcohol, sex and violence.

### **College Readiness, Workforce Development and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills:**

Producing students who are ready for college, and eventually the workforce, should be a top priority for any high school. Unfortunately, the high school system as a whole is not succeeding. A study of U.S. Department of Education data by the Manhattan Institute revealed that “[o]nly

70 percent of all students in public high schools graduate, and only 32 percent of all students leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges.”<sup>6</sup> Employers and college professors also find high school students to be badly prepared. In a 2001 survey by Public Agenda, the vast majority of professors and employers rated high school graduates as having only “fair or poor” skills in various categories:<sup>7</sup>

- 73 percent of employers and 75 percent of professors said “recent job applicants/freshmen and sophomore students” had only a fair or poor “ability to write clearly.”
- 69 percent of employers and 74 percent of professors said they had only fair or poor “work habits, such as being organized and on time.”
- 63 percent of employers and 65 percent of professors said they had only fair or poor “basic math skills.”

In order to succeed in the information-driven workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, young people must master “the new basics,” which include “the ability to read at high levels, do at least elementary algebra, use computers for word processing and other straightforward tasks, solve semi-structured problems where hypotheses must be formed and tested, communicate effectively orally and in writing, and work in diverse groups.”<sup>8</sup> As the preceding statistics indicate, high school students are getting few opportunities to develop these skills.

### **The Achievement Gap:**

If graduation and college-preparedness rates are unimpressive overall, they are especially grim for most students of color. According to the same Manhattan Institute study, “[o]nly 51 percent of all black students and 52 percent of all Hispanic students graduate, and only 20 percent of all black students and 16 percent of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.”<sup>9</sup> Also, according to a report from the National Governors Association, “Hispanic and African-American high school students are more likely to drop out of high school in every state. Of these high school graduates, college matriculation rates for African-American and Hispanic high school students remain below those of white high school graduates—although they have risen in recent years. Furthermore, of those students enrolling in college, Hispanic and black young adults are only half as likely to earn a college degree as white students.”<sup>10</sup>

Economic status and parental education are also factors in a student’s likelihood of attending college. According to a report from the Pathways to College Network:<sup>11</sup>

- Of high school graduates, those from high-income families enter college at rates 25 percentage points higher than those from low-income families.
- More than 90 percent of students from the top two income quartiles graduate from high school, compared to 65 percent of those from the bottom quartile. This gap has barely changed for 35 years.
- In 2000, 82 percent of high school graduates from the top income quartile enrolled in college, while only 57 percent of students from the bottom income quartile did so.
- Sixty-five percent of students graduating from high school in 1992 whose parents had bachelor’s degrees enrolled in four-year colleges, compared with only 21 percent of students whose parents had a high school diploma or less.

### **Keeping Kids On Track:**

The conventional wisdom is that by the time youth reach high school, they are old enough to take care of themselves and don't need adult supervision. However, if they lack the support of caring adults or see their future prospects as bleak, teens might fall victim to peer pressure and not make the best choices. For example, the fact that the rate of juvenile crime triples between 3 and 6pm includes high school-age teens. Also, self-care and boredom can increase the likelihood that a young person will experiment with drugs and alcohol as much as 50 percent,<sup>12</sup> and ages 12-15 are the years in which youth develop their patterns of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use or nonuse.<sup>13</sup> Finally, a study of high-risk teens from an urban school district found that the likelihood of having sex for the first time increased with the number of unsupervised hours that teens have in a week. However, research shows that teens are more likely to postpone sexual involvement and avoid pregnancy when they can envision a positive future, and teens who are "interested in school and do well academically...are less likely to engage in criminal behavior."<sup>14</sup>

### **Common Approaches**

With all the challenges high schools face, there is hope—and proof—that change is possible. Both the afterschool and high school reform communities are demonstrating that they can have an effect on student achievement by developing new approaches in their respective fields. Afterschool program providers are throwing out the traditional model most programs use for younger students—homework time followed by a snack and some art or sports activities—and designing programs that meet the varied needs of older, more autonomous students. High school reformers, too, are finding ways to revamp the structure and environment of high school. And as they share a common goal—improving the educational experience of high school-age youth—the two communities are facing similar problems and adopting similar solutions. Below are a few examples of common outcomes sought by both high school reformers and afterschool program providers, and how their approaches are similar and/or complementary.

**The challenges of high school reform are the challenges of creating quality afterschool:**

- Keeping youth engaged.
- Creating supportive learning environments.
- Maintaining quality staff.
- Building support to create a system of quality schools or afterschool programs, rather than having only isolated pockets of excellence.

### **Both seek to make the high school learning experience relevant to students' lives by offering real-world opportunities for work, community service and higher education.**

A NIOST survey of afterschool programs determined several common characteristics of high school afterschool, including: "A majority of programs are oriented toward youth mentoring, academics, community service and/or career/work/internship opportunities."<sup>15</sup> The After-School Corporation has also found that not only do these kinds of activities benefit teens, but they're what teens want. According to one TASC program evaluator, "For high school students, it really is about activities they feel will benefit them personally and, if they're on the college track, offer useful skills."<sup>16</sup>

- After School Matters (ASM) in Chicago is a partnership between the city, the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Park District and the Chicago Public Library that offers apprenticeships and other enrichment activities to more than 20,000 teens. The city's teens

told the program operators that they wanted to learn “authentic skills,” and these skills they learn frequently benefit the city. For example, the city was experiencing a lifeguard shortage, so the ASM worked with the parks department to start a training program for these jobs that pay \$10-\$12 an hour.<sup>17</sup>

High school reformers are also finding that looking outside the school building for learning opportunities has proved to be a successful model. A report from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recommends high schools focus on a “new version of the Three R’s: **rigorous** academic coursework, meaningful **relationships** with instructors who can help students meet high standards, and **relevant learning opportunities through internships and community partnerships.**”<sup>18</sup> [italics added] Another report recommends changing graduation requirements to “[r]equire participation in community-based activities that promote positive youth development.”<sup>19</sup> The Met model, from the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, Rhode Island, is one example. As it says on its website, “all students work on projects in real-world settings related to their interests and develop strong relationships with teachers and project mentors.” The Met also says that all of its graduates have been accepted to college.<sup>20</sup>

- Paula Pereria attends Met West in Oakland, California. Two days a week, she goes to work at the Broadway Pet Hospital in downtown Oakland, where she helps care for the animals, under the supervision of her mentor, Verena. Pereria’s teachers and Verena work together to create projects that link Pereria’s work experience and class work and help her develop key academic skills such as researching, writing and analyzing data. When she’s not at the pet hospital, Pereria takes classes at Met West and Laney College, a nearby community college. She also spends several hours a week with her advisory group, a small team of students and one teacher who remain associated for all four years.<sup>21</sup> Established in 2002, Met West doesn’t yet have any seniors to graduate, but in its second year of operation, the school registered the third highest Academic Performance Index (API) score among all Oakland public high schools.<sup>22</sup>

**Both seek to create smaller, safer learning environments that offer students individual attention and the chance to form meaningful relationships with their peers and caring adults.**

Evaluations of afterschool programs have found that the ability to build relationships, as much as activities offered, is a key element in keeping teens engaged in programs. A TASC evaluation found that a crucial ingredient to success is “the creation of small, supportive learning environments that are rich in positive relationships and a sense of belonging and camaraderie.” Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *California* lists “meaningful relationships with adults” as the first among key elements to quality afterschool programs in a recent report on afterschool programs for high school students.

Teens gain a sense of responsibility and self-worth through healthy expectations and guidance from adults. They also learn and enjoy the value of a trusting relationship with adults rather than seeing them as authoritative or antagonistic figures. Establishing trust and connections with adults not only gives young people a place to turn when facing problems, but also encourages them to build similar relationships with other adults and their peers.<sup>23</sup>

Creating smaller schools is frequently listed as a key step in reforming the high school system. Currently, 61 percent of students attend schools of 1,000 students or more,<sup>24</sup> but evidence suggests that small high schools generally have higher achievement levels, higher graduation and lower dropout rates, and are safer than larger high schools.<sup>25</sup> One report asserts that good high schools provide “caring, personalized environments and make sure each student is known well by at least one adult,” and small high schools help create the conditions for success: “more personal relationships between school staff and students, reduced feelings of anonymity among students, a more appropriate student load for teachers, more student-centered and in-depth instruction, active learning, and greater collegiality and shared accountability among teachers.”<sup>26</sup>

**Both place a premium on giving youth a voice in their education process and offering them choices and a chance to receive a more personalized education.**

Knowing that teens are more independent than their elementary and middle school counterparts, afterschool program providers have to offer greater incentives for teens to attend programs. Successful programs are those that listen to youth voices and give them a role in making decisions about the program, thereby giving participants a sense of ownership in the program. According to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California’s report on high school afterschool, “Youth input and leadership are also critical to a good quality after-school program...By increasing their roles in the program, young people will gain a sense of personal autonomy, self-direction, responsibility and belonging. Offering leadership opportunities can both attract and sustain teen interest, while effectively instilling skills in planning, conflict resolution, decision making, and communication.”<sup>27</sup>

High school reformers say that good high schools are student-centered, and students have a say in how the school is run.<sup>28</sup> In fact, many reform models involve student-designed “personalized education plans.” High Tech High in San Diego is one example. The school’s philosophy is that “if you treat kids like adults, even the most bruised and battered will play up to the role.”<sup>29</sup> The curriculum at the technology and pre-engineering-themed school is project-based, and students design their own education plans. Evidence suggests that the school is truly effective. In 2003, 99 percent of 10<sup>th</sup>-graders passed the California High School Exit Exam in reading, and 88 percent passed the math portion. Also that year, all 48 seniors in the first graduating class were accepted to college.<sup>30</sup>

**Both understand the importance of community involvement in education.**

Afterschool program providers for all ages understand the benefits of community involvement, but it is especially important at the high school level in order to be able to offer the students learning opportunities outside of school. Both NIOST and Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California list community interaction as an element of successful programs, and community service components are commonplace in afterschool programs.

- To teach students about local government, the Constitutional Rights Foundation created CityWorks, an interactive curriculum that requires students to create and complete a service project to address a real community issue. Past projects include students working with their principal to improve their school’s decrepit, graffiti-covered bathrooms, and working with the city council and neighborhood residents to close down a dangerous alley. In all their projects, CityWorks students “take learning out of the classroom, get deeply involved in a local community problem and follow a process to resolve it.”

*Students learned that age does not matter in making a difference if they collaborate, plan, and generate a solution... It is amazing how service learning brought Civics alive for my students.*

--Cathy Lee, CityWorks teacher, Diamond Bar High School in Los Angeles County<sup>31</sup>

As they work to improve high schools, reformers are also bringing the community into the process. “High schools that make a difference in young people’s lives are connected to their communities— to employers, postsecondary institutions, and community-based organizations— and learning takes place in the context of the entire community, not just the school.”<sup>32</sup> On a broader scale, a system for creating and supporting better high schools would also bring in community support.

State, district, and school leaders would work together to mobilize community and faith-based organizations, colleges and universities, businesses, libraries, and other institutions on behalf of students at risk of failure. These institutions would provide after-school programs and study space, trained tutors, community service internships, summer jobs, and an array of other supports and incentives. for young people to work hard and stay in school.<sup>33</sup>

### **Working Together**

The ground is ripe for collaboration. Many high school reformers already see an extended school day as essential to giving students enough time to learn all they need to be prepared for the future—especially if students are entering high school at a disadvantage and have to catch up to their peers. In fact, high school reformers are finding that it isn’t possible to do all that needs to be done with in the confines of the traditional school-day structure, and most afterschool program providers would argue that they cannot be solely responsible for students’ success if schools aren’t doing their jobs. Therefore, it makes sense for these two movements, which have a common purpose, to work together to establish a high school system that produces graduates who are ready to tackle the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment, *Policy Commentary #2: High School After-School: What is it? What Might It Be? Why Is It Important?* The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies Inc., 2003, [www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc2/pdf](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc2/pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “2002-12 Employment Projections,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t04.htm>, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Buehlmann, Beth B., VP and Executive Director, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “Careers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Importance of Education and Worker Training for Small Businesses,” testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Small Business Committee, June 2, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Michael. *Transforming the American High School: New Directions for State and Local Policy*, The Aspen Institute, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Farkas, S. & Johnson, J. *Getting by: What American teenagers really think about their schools*, Public Agenda, 1997, [www.publicagenda.org/research/research\\_reports\\_details.cfm?list=52](http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=52).

<sup>6</sup> Greene, Jay P. and Forster, Greg. *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2003.

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- <sup>7</sup> *Reality Check 2002*, Public Agenda, [www.publicagenda.org/specials/rcheck2002/reality.htm](http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/rcheck2002/reality.htm).
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- <sup>10</sup> *Closing the Achievement Gap*, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, [www.subnet.nga.org/educlear/achievement/index.html](http://www.subnet.nga.org/educlear/achievement/index.html).
- <sup>11</sup> *A Shared Agenda: A Leadership Challenge to Improve College Access and Success*, Pathways to College Network, 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse VIII: Teens and Parents, 2003; and *Pediatrics*, Volume 84, Issue 3, The American Academy of Pediatrics, 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> Bailey, William J., *Critical Hours and Critical Years: Precision Targeting in Prevention*, Indiana Prevention Resource Center, 1998, [www.drugs.indiana.edu/publications/iprc/newsline/indiana\\_data.html](http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/publications/iprc/newsline/indiana_data.html).
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- <sup>15</sup> Hall, G., Israel, L., & Shortt, J. *It's about time: A look at out-of-school time for urban teens*, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2004.
- <sup>16</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment, "High School: The Next Frontier for After-School Advocates?" *Forum Focus*, 2(1). The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies Inc., 2004, [www.forumforyouthinvestment.org](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org).
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> *High Schools for the New Millennium: Imagine the Possibilities*, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004, [www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Cohen, 2001.
- <sup>20</sup> Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, [www.metcenter.org](http://www.metcenter.org).
- <sup>21</sup> Furger, Roberta, "High School's New Face," *Edutopia*, Volume 1, Issue 2, November/December 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> Ryan, Joan, "Big Picture Schooling in a garage," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 2, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *California*, 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> Gates Foundation, 2004.
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- <sup>26</sup> Cohen, 2001.
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- <sup>32</sup> Cohen, 2001.
- <sup>33</sup> Gates Foundation, 2004.