

**Written Testimony of  
Tony Habit, Ed.D.  
President, North Carolina New Schools Project**

**Before  
the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
United States Senate**

**Hearing: “NCLB Reauthorization: Modernizing Middle and High Schools  
for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”**

**April 24, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Enzi and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am pleased to be with you to consider the urgency for change in our nation’s middle and high schools. My name is Tony Habit, and I am president of the North Carolina New Schools Project.

We in North Carolina are fortunate to have leaders who appreciate both the urgency for change and the magnitude of the change that must occur. As you know, your colleague Senator Burr, along with Senator Bingaman, has introduced the “Graduate for a Better Future Act” aimed at raising high school graduation rates. Our governor, Mike Easley, has championed innovation in our state’s secondary schools, repeatedly drawing the connection between that work and our state’s continued economic vitality. As Governor Easley has said, North Carolina must create the most skilled, most educated workforce in the world, not simply in the United States.

North Carolina also has benefited from the unparalleled philanthropic leadership of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to transform the nation’s high schools to meet the demands of this century.

And, by many traditional measures, North Carolina is fortunate to have high schools that in relative terms have succeeded over the last century in moving from institutions that served very few to ones that strive to serve all students. At 59%, North Carolina is ranked first in the country in the percentage of high school students taking advanced math courses.<sup>1</sup> Ninety-three percent of our state’s public high schools offer at least one Advanced Placement course.<sup>2</sup> Seventy-four percent of our state’s 12<sup>th</sup> grade students took the SAT in 2005, and North Carolina had the second largest 10-year gain in SAT scores among states with over 50% of the population taking the SAT.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004). *Measuring Up 2004*. Available at <http://measuringup.highereducation.org/default.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> Southern Regional Education Board (2003). *Progress in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate in SREB States*. Available at <http://www.sreb.org/main/HigherEd/readiness/ap-ib.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Public Schools of North Carolina (2005). *The North Carolina 2005 SAT Report*. [http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/sat/2005/sat\\_report\\_2005\\_part1.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/sat/2005/sat_report_2005_part1.pdf).

At the same time, North Carolina has felt acute pain from an unprecedented restructuring of the economy of our state and, for that matter, of our country and across the globe. In the first five years of this decade, for example, North Carolina lost nearly one-quarter of its manufacturing jobs – 184,200 jobs in all. Over the next 10 years, the “Big Four” of our state’s manufacturing base – tobacco, textiles, apparel and furniture – which account for one in three jobs are projected to lose another 18 percent of those jobs.

North Carolina lost 1,000 farms in 2005 alone, leading the nation in that category according to the United States Department of Agriculture. Our state has lost more than 10 percent of its farms since 2002.

The state, however, has rebounded strongly. Investments in education led North Carolina to stronger employment growth in the last 12 months than any other state east of the Mississippi.

As low skill, high wage jobs have vanished, some communities are left bereft of opportunity. Idled middle-aged workers often are trapped in a string of low-skilled, low-wage jobs or are required to return to college for retooling without the preparation in high school required to succeed.

There is strong evidence as well that our most recent high school graduates are under-prepared for the demands they are facing in the “real world.” In a poll commissioned by our organization earlier this month, half of recent North Carolina high school graduates in college reported gaps in their preparation for college academic work and half of recent graduates in the workforce report gaps in their preparation to get a good job. A quarter of the recent graduates in college reported having taken a remedial course.

In addition, far too many high school students never reach graduation. North Carolina recently released cohort graduation rates for the first time. They showed that only 68.1 percent of the students who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2002 graduated with the Class of 2006. For African-American students, the graduation rates was only 60 percent. For Hispanics, it was only 51.8 percent – a particularly troubling statistic given our state experienced nearly a five-fold increase in Hispanic enrollment from 1993 to 2003, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

My organization, the North Carolina New Schools Project, is an independent, not-for-profit corporation that serves as the nexus of the leadership of Governor Easley and our State Board of Education; the strong interest in change among the Gates Foundation and other philanthropies, public and private colleges and universities and the private sector; and the pressing economic need that North Carolina faces.

While impressive in relative terms, the incremental gains of our high schools are insufficient both in terms of scope and in terms of pace to address a changing economy. North Carolina must graduate more students with more skills and knowledge than ever before. The New Schools Project was established to accelerate the pace of innovation in

our state and to ensure that all students have access to high-quality schools that will prepare them fully for college, work and life.

As a private-public partnership with our state's various education sectors, elected officials and the private sector, the New Schools Project can be nimble without sacrificing meaningful impact. We can work across institutional and political boundaries so that innovation is not frustrated by real or perceived barriers.

In pursuing change and innovation, and with the leadership of Governor Easley and the State Board of Education, we have an aggressive three-pronged strategy:

- Establish more than 100 focused, academically rigorous and effective innovative new high schools across the state;
- Foster greater urgency for higher standards and schools that will make achievement of these standards feasible; and
- Advance policies and funding to ensure that all North Carolina communities benefit from the promise of new schools.

### **Lessons Learned on the Road to Meaningful Change**

Since 2003, New Schools Project has partnered with local school districts and, in some cases, with national partners such as the Asia Society, the New Technology Foundation, and the KnowledgeWorks Foundation to open 58 innovative, highly effective high schools across North Carolina. We engage with a school and its school district for six years – a planning year followed by five years of implementation. This time frame recognizes both the scope of the change we are pursuing and its complexity. This day-to-day, on-the-ground experience in working to foster innovation – along with what we have gleaned from the experience of others in the field – has offered us important insights into what it takes to, in the vocabulary of this hearing, modernize high schools and middle schools. Let me offer you four specific observations to consider:

#### **Changing Beliefs**

Simply put, low expectations are a cancer that can weaken a school enough to make significant changes in teaching impossible. It is clear how this occurs in a typical high school – some students are tracked into demanding courses which prepare them for a future beyond high school, while others are tracked into classes that offer little challenge and even less future. The usual justification is that “those” students were not “ready” for Algebra II or honors English. Some parents reinforce these beliefs by advocating that certain students be discouraged from enrolling in advanced courses.

If I do not believe that all students can do the work, I do not feel obligated to assume responsibility for changing the way my school is organized or the way resources are allocated to ensure that all students succeed. In the schools we partner with, we work to instill the notion that preparation to tackle new demanding content is the responsibility of the teachers, not the students.

In our partnership with schools, we insist that they be fully representative of the student population of their district; we do not allow access to innovation to be limited to the best and brightest. This is one of our stakes in the ground to enforce what we believe as an organization about who can do the work. Notably, 12 of our 16 partner schools subject to No Child Left Behind's growth provision last year made Adequate Yearly Progress.

Teachers and administrators typically do not believe all students – particularly poor and minority students – can master the knowledge and skills that lead to true opportunity until they see it first hand. As part of our work, we have taken hundreds of educators from across North Carolina on study visits to schools in other parts of the country whose results are irrefutable. Educators study some of the country's most successful high schools to learn how changed instruction and high levels of student support combine to improve student outcomes. This includes direct classroom observation that leads to deeper reflection about changing instruction. More than 20 schools such as University Park Campus High School in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Urban Academy at the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City are used for these site visits. We are working with our partners across the state to establish these kinds of "schools of promise" within our state to make these transformative site visits even more accessible.

By way of example, we are working with a school on the western edge of our state and meeting some resistance. Two teachers who were themselves graduates of the school went on a site visit to University Park and saw the possibility as well as the gaps in their own work. They have become our strongest advocates and have brought their colleagues along in moving forward.

While it seems counter-intuitive, there is strong evidence supporting the premise that with greater challenge, students put forth greater effort and perform at higher levels. This is particularly the case when schools and students focus on the most important content and skills and when the material relates to students' own aspirations. The term "comprehensive high school" speaks to the difficulty of achieving this kind of focus in the traditional setting. We work to create high schools of no more than 400 students that provide focus either through an academic theme, an instructional approach, or their location on a college campus in the case of our Learn and Earn early college high schools. Additionally, a school's focus represents one strategy to enable teachers in the core courses to work together to make connections between courses and the world of work. The intent of a focus is not preparation for a specific career, but rather preparation for a lifetime of learning and workplace changes.

As adults, we should not shy away from expecting more from all students. In our survey of recent graduates, 77 percent said that high school graduation requirements were easy to meet. Eighty percent said that they would have worked harder had the expectations been higher. And 68 percent said that they would have worked harder in high school had they known then what they know now about real world demands. As adults, we must bear the burden of our knowledge of what preparation for college, work and life requires and must act on that knowledge.

## Setting College as the Goal

Often, the limitations of beliefs about students' capabilities emerge around the notion of making every graduate "college-ready." Inevitably, someone raises the challenge that not every graduate will go to college.

The overarching goal of North Carolina's innovative high schools is to ensure that every student graduates college-ready. We are even more explicit in asking, first, that students meet the admission requirements of the University of North Carolina system and, second, that every student earn college credit before leaving high school.

This college-ready imperative is intentionally provocative. It becomes a point on which a faculty must agree and collaborate. Another value to the small scale of our innovative high schools is that they allow teachers to be flexible in meeting the academic needs of students, to alter what is offered and for how long in ways that a 2,000-student high school cannot.

At the same time, this imperative is based on a growing body of research that shows that the skills high school graduates need in order to be ready for college and ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace are the same.<sup>4</sup>

The most recent such study, conducted by ACT, analyzed data and items from its college and work readiness tests, found that 90 percent of jobs that do not require a bachelor's degree but that do provide a "self-sufficient" wage require the same level of mathematical and analytical reading and writing skills as those needed by students who are planning to enroll in a four-year university.<sup>5</sup> The report goes on to state that this finding suggests that "all high school students should be educated according to a common academic expectation that prepares them for both postsecondary education and the workforce. This means that all students should be ready and have the opportunity to take a rigorous core preparatory program in high school, one that is designed to promote readiness for both college and workforce training programs."<sup>6</sup> However, another ACT study released this month showed that high school teachers' view of college-ready content misses the mark in terms of focus.

Voters in North Carolina, perhaps intuitively, understand this convergence. In a poll we commissioned, 70 percent agreed that the skills to succeed at work and in college were the same. Eighty-four percent said it was important for nearly all high school graduates to move on to a two- or four-year college, with 69 percent calling it very important.

---

<sup>4</sup> See ACT, *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*, 2006 and Achieve, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of jobs cited in the report that do not require a bachelor's degree but do provide a "self-sufficient" wage include electricians, construction workers, upholsterers and plumbers. From ACT, *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> ACT, 2006, page 2.

We have good reason to believe that students can meet this higher expectation. Last year nearly three-quarters of students in North Carolina's early college high schools, from which students graduate with both a high school diploma and two years of college credit, took at least one college course. Their passing rates in those courses ranged from 76 percent to 100 percent. Nine high schools recorded passing rates of 90 percent or better.

And the Governor's budget proposes to dramatically change this landscape by creating Learn & Earn Online opportunities for all students across the state, with a goal of enrolling 40,000 high school students in college courses by next school year. This coupled with his new EARN Scholarship opportunities, will provide students the opportunity to complete a four-year degree debt-free.

### **Managing for Significant Change**

Meaningful change in high schools is essential *and* elusive; it is worth remembering that *A Nation At Risk* was a report about changing secondary education. Schools and school districts are rewarded for maintaining the status quo and for adding new programs. For example, rather than consider the absence of personalization and effective student supports within a school, districts will add a dropout prevention program or a specialist for that problem. At its heart, however, changing schools to graduate all students to be college-ready means redirecting all of the resources of a school to provide greater student support and to address highly focused targets for achievement. This is especially true in using the resources represented by the role and responsibilities of adults in the school.

While the private sector has experienced decades of organizational restructuring in which workers are displaced in one function and then rehired in another to adapt to changing market conditions, the education sector possesses no such history. Changing the roles of adults in schools typically results in conflict and undermines the overarching school change process – if not derailing it altogether. Most schools and districts lack the expertise or organizational structure with which to manage change and innovation.

Further, since communities and educators must embrace the need for change, the absence of resources and expertise for most schools and districts to effectively engage their communities means that well-intentioned efforts can be undermined by relatively few, well-organized citizens or disgruntled educators.

Current funding and professional development programs reinforce a piecemeal approach to change and typically fail to support a coherent, sustained and focused model for schools. It stands to reason that if tools and plans for school change are not supported by high-quality and aligned training that the likelihood of success will be greatly diminished.

The New Schools Project and its partners provide specific supports for new and redesigned high schools that deviate from this norm. They include:

- **Teaching for Results:** This annual series of intensive professional development sessions for teachers supports the use of protocols and other tools to sustain the

focus on instruction, academic rigor and professional learning communities. The sessions stress differentiating instruction, teaching literacy across the curriculum, facilitating meaningful learning, and providing effective student support.

- **Leadership Institute for High School Redesign:** In cooperation with the University of North Carolina Center for School Leadership Development and the Principals' Executive Program, the Leadership Institute for High School Redesign offers a peer support and professional development network for principals in new and redesigned high schools. The network promotes effective instructional leadership.
- **Coaching:** Each new school also benefits from coaching services in which experienced educational leaders and master teachers assist with facilitating the overall change process and with the development of instructional strategies such as differentiation of teaching to meet individual needs of students; lessons and units which engage students in learning; and the improvement of literacy and mathematics skills.

Investing financial resources and expertise in building the capacity of schools and districts to manage change is essential. Schools and districts must be expected to define a single, comprehensive model for change regardless of what that model might be and sustain the work over time.

Further, within the broader model for change, strategies for professional development of teachers and school administrators and district office personnel must be tightly aligned and integrated so that they are connected at all levels to point in the same direction. In our work this year to help schools define rigor, the sessions involved both principals and teachers; in essence, they debated within their school the definition after visiting other schools in North Carolina thought to offer rigorous instruction. Expectations of teachers and principals must be aligned with those of district administrators for high school innovation to be sustained.

### **Rethinking Leadership**

Finally, a new generation of student-focused schools calls for a new model for school leadership. The principal in a traditional high school is a building manager first and an educator second. Schools which place teaching and learning above all else are led by principals who understand both school design and who facilitate among teachers an unrelenting focus on high quality teaching and learning.

One element of our partnerships aimed at ensuring the sustainability of innovation is our expectation that our partner schools are completely autonomous, with its own principal and school budget, an essential step to create more entrepreneurial faculties with both the responsibility and accountability for the success of all students. This increases the demand for capable leaders.

New, proactive initiatives to identify, recruit, place and support principals to lead schools are required. Leadership preparation programs should emphasize both school designs that support achievement and the role of principals as facilitators of adult learning in schools intended to strengthen teaching.

Since most district administrative staff begin as principals, creating a new generation of school leaders who believe and act as though all students can succeed will inevitably change districts over time.

### **Early, but Promising Results**

In the 2005-06 school year, 24 redesigned high schools and Learn and Earn early college high schools were open serving 3,000 high school students. This was the first year of operation for nearly all 24 schools. While transforming a school in meaningful ways that actually change teaching and learning is hard work, there are some initial results emerging that indicate that high school innovation is taking hold in North Carolina.

- **More students staying in school** – Nine of the 24 innovative high schools last year had no dropouts. In the crucial 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, where research has shown that most high school students either dropout or choose to dropout, 14 of the 24 innovative high schools had no 9<sup>th</sup> grade dropouts. Overall, the 24 innovative high schools had a combined dropout rate of 3 percent (compared to the statewide high school dropout rate of 5 percent).
- **More 9<sup>th</sup> graders are being promoted** – To graduate, a student must complete required courses and be promoted from grade to grade. Research has shown that promotion out of 9<sup>th</sup> grade is an especially strong indicator of a student's likelihood to graduate. Last year, 15 of the 24 innovative high schools promoted more than 90 percent of their 9<sup>th</sup> graders, with seven schools promoting 100 percent. Overall, the 24 innovative high schools had a combined 9<sup>th</sup> grade promotion rate of 88 percent (compared to the state 9<sup>th</sup> grade promotion rate of 85 percent).
- **More students come to school** – Student attendance in the first group of 11 redesigned high schools topped that of their comparison schools by nearly one percentage point. The initial 13 Learn and Earn Early College High Schools had attendance rates that surpassed their districts' rates by nearly two percentage points. Even fractional increases in high school attendance are considered significant.
- **More teachers believe in their schools** – The percentage of teachers in innovative high schools who “strongly agree” that their school is “a good place to work and learn” is nearly double the percentage in traditional high schools (48 percent compared to 26 percent). In fact, teachers in redesigned and early college high schools are significantly more satisfied in every area measured by the state's Teacher Working Conditions Survey.



- **It's early, but some schools do better than expected** – In the first year of implementing their planned transformation, a third of the innovative high schools met or exceeded the expected academic growth projected for them in the state's ABCs accountability system. Nine of 24 schools outperformed the other comprehensive high schools in their districts.

I know first hand that the observations I have made today place a tall order before our schools and our educators. They will not be able to meet this test alone. It will take sustained and strong support evidenced by political will and committed leadership. We bear dual burdens in this regard. We know what it means for students to be fully prepared for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and the cost to them and to society when they are not. We also know based on our work in North Carolina and on the work of our peers in other states what it takes to create schools that can graduate all students ready for those challenges. We all must put our shoulder to the task of carrying that load on behalf of this nation's children as Americans always have. They deserve nothing less.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. I welcome any questions you may have.