AMERICA'S COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

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Honorable George Miller, Chairman

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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the crisis in American High Schools. It is a privilege to join this group of friends and partners you have convened to inform your work on this issue. Educators across the country are grateful to this Committee and its members for their past work, and present commitment, to addressing the most important challenges of American education.

The Problem

The crisis in American high schools is brutally simple: too few students are making strong academic gains during the high school years. Indeed, for too many students, academic performance remains flat or even declines in high school - and this is especially the case among those student populations which are of special concern to our Foundation. The result is that too few of our high school graduates are prepared for the rigors of college or the demands of competitive jobs.

The flatline of high school performance is well-documented by NAEP as well as other indicators (see attached Figures 1 and 2 for the NAEP trends in reading and math). Flat scores in math and reading for older students have persisted since the early 1970s – despite the fact that in math for example, the proportion of 13-year-olds taking algebra has more than doubled from 1986 to 2008. Darv Winnick, Chairman of NAGBE, which over sees NAEP said it best:

> If you ask me, What is the single most perplexing problem since I've gotten involved in education, that's it…The data is not only flat, but it is flat while the kids are taking more math.[1]

We need to face the fact that too many students in high school are frozen; they are not making nearly the academic progress they need to make to be ready for the demands of college, work and life.

What We Have Learned and Implications for Strategy

We have learned about this crisis from the research as well as from our own work over the past 9 years. Our early investments focused on small schools – and we found some success in improving graduation rates, but much more rarely did we see significant gains in academic performance or increased college readiness.

We realized that students needed to make a breakthrough in performance. The structural and design changes in schools we focused on in our earlier work simply did not yield those gains. So we reviewed the evidence in an effort to determine what would contribute most. We took a close look at the schools that were most successful. We took at critical eye to our track record. But we also looked outside of our work to what worked elsewhere as well as what the research says.

Our strategy to radically increase the number of low income students who graduate college and work ready – who actually learn in high school - has three parts based on the evidence we gathered: the

[1] Older Students Less Successful on Math NAEP. *Education Week*, April 28, 2009

primacy of effective teaching; the importance of a common core of standards that are fewer, clearer and higher; and the pursuit of innovative approaches that would lead to breakthrough performance.

I will address each of these components briefly.

1. **Teacher effectiveness and empowerment**

   A. Effective teachers play the single most important role in accelerating student achievement. The data here are overwhelming. A body of research spanning 30 years has demonstrated that the differences between top quartile and bottom quartile teachers account for vast differences in student growth, as much as a quarter of the achievement gap *per year*.

      No other factor within our power has this great an impact on student achievement. Different teachers within schools make twice the difference that different schools make. An effective teacher is far more important than smaller class size; even in the earliest grades (k-2), where the effects of class size are strongest, it is five times more important to have an effective teacher than a small classroom. Our considered position is that we cannot narrow the gap or substantially raise performance for all without dramatically increasing the percentage of effective teachers.

   B. We can't fix this just by recruiting teachers with stronger credentials. After numerous studies, we can say with confidence that master's degrees in education in no way predict which teachers will be effective in the classroom. Likewise high SAT scores, high scores on certification exams, and other impressive credentials fail to predict effective teaching very well. Because we don't know how to predict who will be effective in the classroom and who won't, credentials are a very blunt instrument and will not take us very far.

   As a result of those findings, the Foundation has made a centerpiece of its strategy increasing the number of effective teachers teaching low income children. We are investing heavily in developing measures to determine reliably which teachers are effective and which are not.

   We are also researching the most promising ways of making the teachers we have more effective. It is essential that we develop and distribute proven mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of teachers. Through several in-depth district partnerships, we will work on realigning policies and practices to better measure and increase the numbers of effective teachers. We will announce those partnerships later this year.

2. **Supporting standards that are fewer, clearer and higher, and meaningfully assessing them**

   As you know from your recent hearing, there is a lot of discussion about national standards these days. But the real question is not whether standards will be local or state or national, but whether they will be focused enough on what the evidence shows is most essential.

   Once again the evidence is clear. In both math and English language arts, the standards process is asking students and teachers to undertake too much that is not central to success. In mathematics, it has long been known that high performing countries focus their curriculum far more than we do in this country.

My own commitment to standards that are fewer, clearer, and higher comes partially from my work closer to home. When I was Secretary of Education in Pennsylvania, we drove the development of anchor standards which for the first time gave teachers and students a much more vivid view of the core that really mattered for achievement.

In English Language Arts, students are overwhelmed with complex requirements, when what they really must do in order to be successful is to read complex texts of all types – in history and science, not just English. Without a strong reading core, students cannot gain knowledge through reading and must be spoon-fed by simplistic presentations that don't mirror the demands of college and good jobs.

Likewise, without mastery of essentials in mathematics they are limited throughout their work in math, science, and even social science, and they get passed along to the next math course without a secure footing in the last one. We at the foundation are excited that state governors and chief state school officers have embarked on a process to define a core set of common standards in Reading, Writing and Math.

Now we all have to ensure that the core that emerges is truly based on what students need to be college and work ready. The core needs to be demanding enough so that students have the mastery to apply these core skills to diverse courses and tasks. For the past two years, we have funded the collection of specific evidence as to what are the core skills most essential for college and work success, and we aim to ensure that evidence plays a strong role in producing standards that are truly fewer, clearer, and higher.

Everybody knows that standards are not enough. There is also a need for assessment – not just assessment for accountability, which is important, but also assessment for teaching and learning, which is what teachers need in the classroom but which has not had nearly the same level of investment.

Beyond standards and assessment, we will support the building of a spine of excellent materials to support excellent classroom work, built on technology that allows easy access and sharing by students and teachers alike

The hard part of this standards process will be making the radical leap from the vast numbers of standards states have today to a focused core that can accelerate performance. Dedicating ourselves to the *fewer* standards of what students really need for college and career readiness will require courage. Everyone can posture about whose standards are higher – what takes courage is making the tough choices about the fewer things that demand students and teachers attention.

3. Support for breakthrough innovations and school models that dramatically accelerate performance.

The other benefit of common standards – provided they are focused – is that they will foster innovation across classrooms, districts and states for the first time. With a common focused core we will share innovations that most accelerate performance in specific skills and skill areas.

The evidence is clear that the combination of high schools as currently constructed and the tools in our hands will not be sufficient to meet our goal of 80% of low income students ready for college by 2025. We cannot make a leap in performance without a leap in innovation that much more directly and productively engages students in accelerating their learning.

We are going to continue to fund school models that break the mold and achieve results, and next generation models of teaching and learning. The measure for the success of any innovation will be true acceleration of performance – as measured by student achievement.

Over the next few years, we will be particularly focused on driving innovations that accelerate academic performance in 9th grade. 9th grade, a transitional year, is particularly critical – students' achievement in 9th grade is remarkably predictive of their later performance. If students fall behind in this crucial year, it is very hard to catch up. The good news is that if students in 9th grade make sufficient academic progress they are often on their way to success. I saw how important 9th grade performance was to my students in Portland, and from my seat at the foundation can see it is a national issue. Of course, we need kids to accelerate earlier, especially in middle school as well.

Data systems and assessments that make progress in high school classrooms visible are essential

For all three elements of the strategy, we are going to need data systems and assessments that tell us clearly which students in which classrooms are making gains. Today, despite hundreds of millions invested in data systems and assessments, we do not have the most crucial information we need: which teachers already are effective, which teachers are not, and which teachers are becoming more effective. Among many other things, this requires linkages between students and teachers, which today are often incomplete; we do not know which teachers are teaching which kids. Recently there has been increased focus on the importance of data and measurement systems at the federal, state and local levels. The Foundation is preparing a data strategy to improve demand and use, and advance an architecture of common data standards that would enable states and districts to implement these systems in a cost-effective way. We would be happy to brief the Committee on this strategy as it evolves.

Conclusions and Recommendations

That is an outline of the Foundation's strategy to accelerate academic performance in high school. I would like to end with the messages I am most concerned to convey in these remarks to your Committee:

1. We must shift our focus from credentials to demonstrated effectiveness in the classroom: from teacher quality as measured on paper, to teacher *effectiveness* as measured by student outcomes.

2. The common core of standards must be based on evidence as to what is truly and demonstrably necessary for college and work, not political or ideological turf battles. The standards must be focused enough to make mastery possible for more kids and to support teachers in developing their craft in teaching their subject.

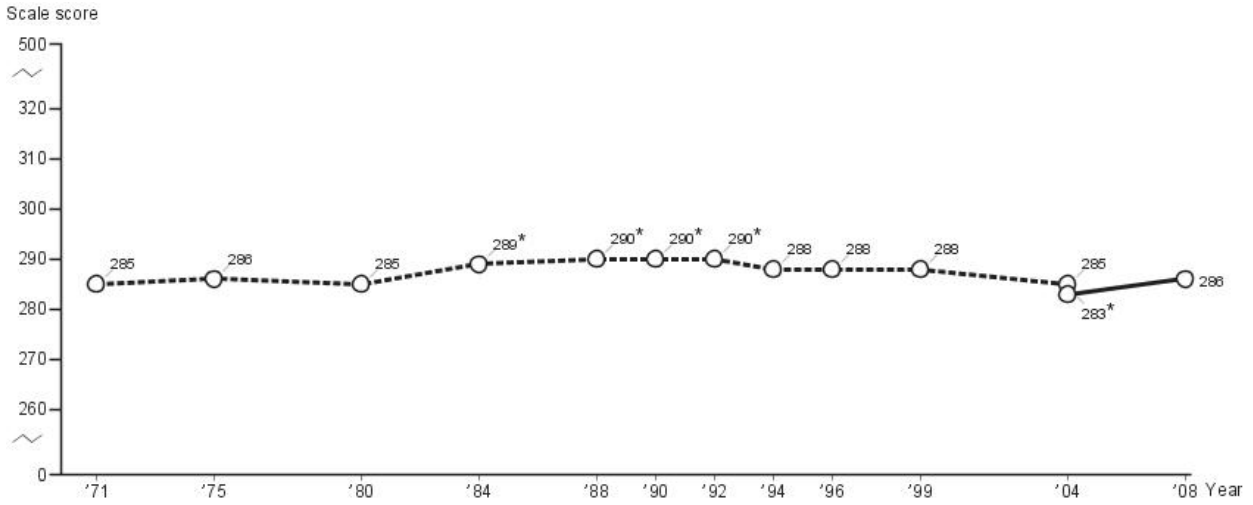
3. Support the innovations that can demonstrate performance leaps. Be even bolder in models that break the traditions of seat time and credits and keep our eye on academic growth of students.

We cannot succeed if high school is a stopping point. But we all know it doesn't have to be. When Socrates taught, through his famous conversations, he preferred to talk to young people, most of them adolescents who would have been in high school. He knew that if you spark a young person's mind during the critical period in which they are becoming an adult, you can change forever how they will develop as students and citizens.

When I was in the State Secretary of Education in PA, we chose to call our high school reform agenda Project 720. Given there are roughly 180 instructional days in each school year, in four years of high school you have only 720 days to prepare students for the demands of college, work, and life. Those days and years are far too short and far too precious to waste.

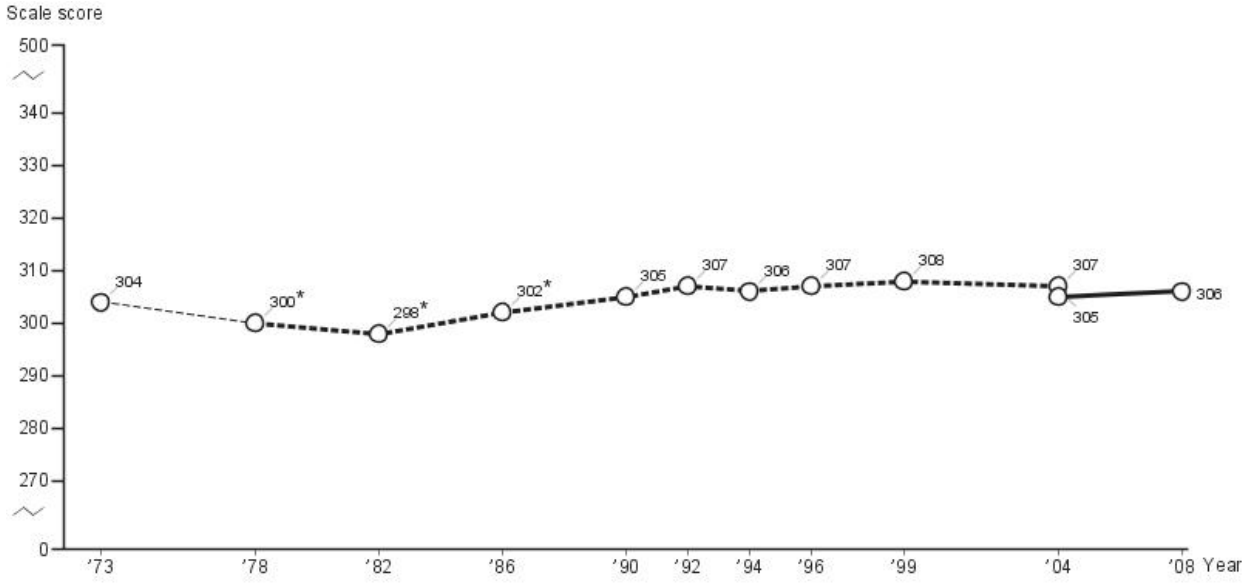
ATTACHMENTS

Figure 1. Trend in NAEP reading average scores for 17-year-old students



Source: http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltt_2008/ltt0003.asp?subtab_id=Tab_3&tab_id=tab1#chart

Figure 2. Trend in NAEP mathematics average scores for 17-year-old students



Source: http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltt_2008/ltt0002.asp?subtab_id=Tab_3&tab_id=tab1#chart