

# Transforming

*A study of 10 high schools finds that some schools just go through the motions, whereas other schools listen to teachers, parents, and students and make sure stakeholders understand the purpose of reforms.*

**Pedro A. Noguera**

**A**s educators grapple with various strategies for raising student achievement, it is becoming increasingly clear that we face our biggest challenge in improving high schools. Steeped in tradition and dependent on practices that have long outlived their usefulness, high schools are in dire need of reform. We can find many examples of elementary schools that have been turned around, but relatively few examples of high schools that have undergone a similar transformation.

Although the problems confronting high schools do show up in affluent suburbs and rural areas, these problems most acutely affect high-poverty urban neighborhoods. Especially among African Americans and Latinos, dropout rates in many urban districts are high—often above 50 percent (Education Trust, 2002; National Education Association, 2001). In addition, many high schools are plagued by violence and bullying, vandalism and gang activity, poor attendance, low teacher morale, and an inability to attract and retain strong principals. These problems are not limited to high schools, but available evidence indicates that they are more common there (Cohen, 2001).

During the last 10 years, several national studies have attempted to diagnose the causes of the problems that

beset so many U.S. high schools in the hope of devising strategies for reform. The findings from this research reveal that

- High schools suffer from organizational flaws, including fragmentation, insufficient attention to quality control in programs and services, and a lack of coherence in mission (Annenberg Foundation, 2003).

- The school curriculum typically offers a broad but disconnected variety of courses that lack depth and intellectual rigor (Hill & Celio, 1998).

- Teachers tend to rely on a lecture format and emphasize delivery of content without looking for evidence of learning or mastery of knowledge and skills (Cohen, 2001).

- Pervasive student alienation, boredom, strained relationships between adults and students, and anti-intellectual peer cultures undermine efforts to raise academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Steinberg, 1996).

- Many schools are too large and overcrowded to provide students with the support and attention they need (Ayers & Klonsky, 2000).

Responding to the growing evidence that something has to be done to overhaul U.S. high schools, several public and private organizations—including the Gates, Carnegie, Brode, and Annen-

berg Foundations—have funded costly and far-reaching reform efforts. To date, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains largely unknown.

## **The Pathways for Student Success Study**

Aware of the challenges and the failure of past reform efforts, I decided to study the reform process itself to learn why high schools had proven so difficult to change and improve. When I began this exploration in 10 Boston, Massachusetts, high schools, the Boston Public Schools had already spent several years and a substantial sum of money on efforts aimed at high school improvement. These efforts had produced a mixed track record. At several of the most troubled schools, the district's initiatives were clearly not working.

Like many urban districts across the United States, Boston Public Schools had experimented with a variety of reform strategies. In the early 1990s, the district established several pilot schools that functioned with the flexibility of charter schools. At the same time, several charter schools sprang up in the district. Although many of the pilot and charter schools successfully raised student achievement for their own students, the schools did not fulfill their intended role as models for innovative practice. The district's traditional

# High Schools



schools resented the pilot and charter schools' special status, and little communication occurred among leaders from different types of schools.

In consultation with superintendent Tom Payzant and other Boston school administrators, I devised a plan to conduct a comparative study of high schools and their reforms, which were at various stages of implementation. We

launched the Pathways for Student Success research project in fall 2001 with funding from the National Science Foundation, the Nellie Mae Foundation, and the Schott Family Foundation. Ten schools representing the different types of high schools operating in the city participated in the study: four comprehensive schools, three pilot schools, two charter schools, and one exam

school (an academic magnet school for which students must qualify). At all 10 schools, most students came from minority and low-income homes.

At each school, we recruited approximately 15 10th grade students—five high achievers, five midlevel achievers, and five low achievers. We worked with site leaders to select a sample of students that represented the overall



exam. For example, at several schools, students who had failed the exam once or more were enrolled in double-period test preparation courses modeled after the Princeton Review courses used to help students study for the SAT. Close examination of these courses, however, revealed that most of the schools lacked a system of quality control. In many of the classes we visited, the courses were disorganized, poorly managed, and taught by unskilled teachers. For example, in one language arts course for students who had failed the exam

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twice, students informed us that for three months they had been taught by a substitute teacher who took attendance and then spent most of his time reading the newspaper. When we informed the principal of this situation, she indicated that she knew about the problem but could do nothing about it until the regular teacher returned from maternity leave.

Student records revealed that several of the students in our sample who had failed the math portion of the MCAS had failed algebra and had not taken any higher-level math courses. To be fully prepared for the math portion of the MCAS, a student should have taken three years of college prep math: Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. Many of the schools in our study offered only a limited number of sections of advanced math, and few if any 10th graders had completed this course sequence. Moreover, several principals admitted that they did not have enough teachers who could teach the material covered on the exam.

Clearly, many of the schools hoped to raise student scores without actually

school population in terms of race, gender, and native language. We collected a variety of data on the students by observing them inside and outside the classroom, interviewing their teachers and parents, and examining their school records. By studying the students' experiences as closely as possible, we hoped to gain insights into the ways various reforms affected students' academic performance and social development.

### **High-Stakes Testing**

The most significant and far-reaching reform being implemented when we carried out this research was standards-based accountability. The graduating

class of 2003 was the first in which students were required to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams to graduate. Each of the 10th graders in our sample was required to take the exam in the spring. Threatened with the prospect of large numbers of their students failing to receive diplomas, all of the schools in the study were under intense pressure to find ways to prepare their students for the exam. Given these high stakes, what we learned about how schools were preparing their students was surprising and troubling.

On the surface, the schools appeared to be doing all they could to ensure that their students were ready for the state

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improving instruction or aligning the curriculum with the standards. Recognizing that efforts to improve the quality of teaching would take years to bear fruit, the schools most commonly responded to high-stakes testing by teaching test-taking skills to students who were behind academically. This strategy was clearly ineffective: At some of the schools, nearly half of all seniors failed the MCAS and therefore did not receive a diploma.

### Attempts to Personalize Schooling

Several schools were also experimenting with other reforms that had the common goal of providing students with a more personalized learning environment, thereby leading to improved student-teacher relationships and higher achievement levels. These reforms included developing Small Learning Communities (or schools-within-schools), new systems for advising students, and block scheduling to implement a more integrated curriculum.

The rationale behind these changes seemed to make sense. Research indicates that student alienation and lack of engagement contribute to low achievement and that these reforms can help (Newman, 1992; Wasley et al., 2000). As we looked closely, however, we once again saw a tremendous gap between the intent of the reforms and their implementation.

Amazingly, at several of the schools, the administrators responsible for running the Small Learning Communities were the only people who even knew that they were in such a community. Most of the Small Learning Communities had been in operation for three years or less, and they had not yet found a way to create a sense of connection or common identity for students or teachers. Students said that aside from changing the courses they took, the Small Learning Communities had done very little to transform their school experience.

The schools' attempts to personalize schooling through an advisory system, in which teachers served as student

counselors through an extended homeroom period held once each week, seemed equally ineffective. We sat in on several advisory classes where no advising was occurring. The teachers obviously had no idea of how to use the allotted time, and most lacked experience in counseling.

Considering the gap between idea

that had instituted longer periods as part of a new block schedule, we typically found the traditional approach to teaching: heavy reliance on lecture and passive learning. We observed several classrooms in which students were sleeping, putting on makeup, or watching films that were unrelated to the course content.



and implementation, it is hardly surprising that Small Learning Communities and advisory groups had not improved teacher-student relationships, academic engagement, or student achievement. At all of the schools we asked students, Is there an adult at your school to whom you would turn if you were experiencing a serious personal problem? With the exception of two of the schools, described later, more than 80 percent of the students at each school replied "No." We also asked students if they believed their teachers were concerned about how well they did in school. Disturbingly, 56 percent of the students said they did not believe that their teachers really cared.

It was also clear that at most of the schools, adopting new structures had not changed the quality of instruction that students received. Even in schools

During a visit to one of the schools, a student complained to us that if we observed in his class, his teacher would not allow the students to play cards as they normally did. To our surprise and dismay, the student's fears were unfounded: Even with two researchers seated in the back of the classroom, most of the students played cards for the entire class period while the teacher presented an assignment to a small group of students seated at the front of the room.

### Reasons for the Implementation Gap

What could explain the poor implementation of these reforms and the lack of alignment between the administrators' intentions and the students' experiences? The newness of the reforms and the inordinate pressures of budget cuts

and high-stakes testing were no doubt partly to blame. But our research at the 10 schools provided scant encouragement that the situation would improve over time. Some school staffs expressed a willingness to use findings generated from the research to modify their reform plans. At the most troubled schools, however, administrators were more likely to claim that they could not use the information because they were under too much pressure.

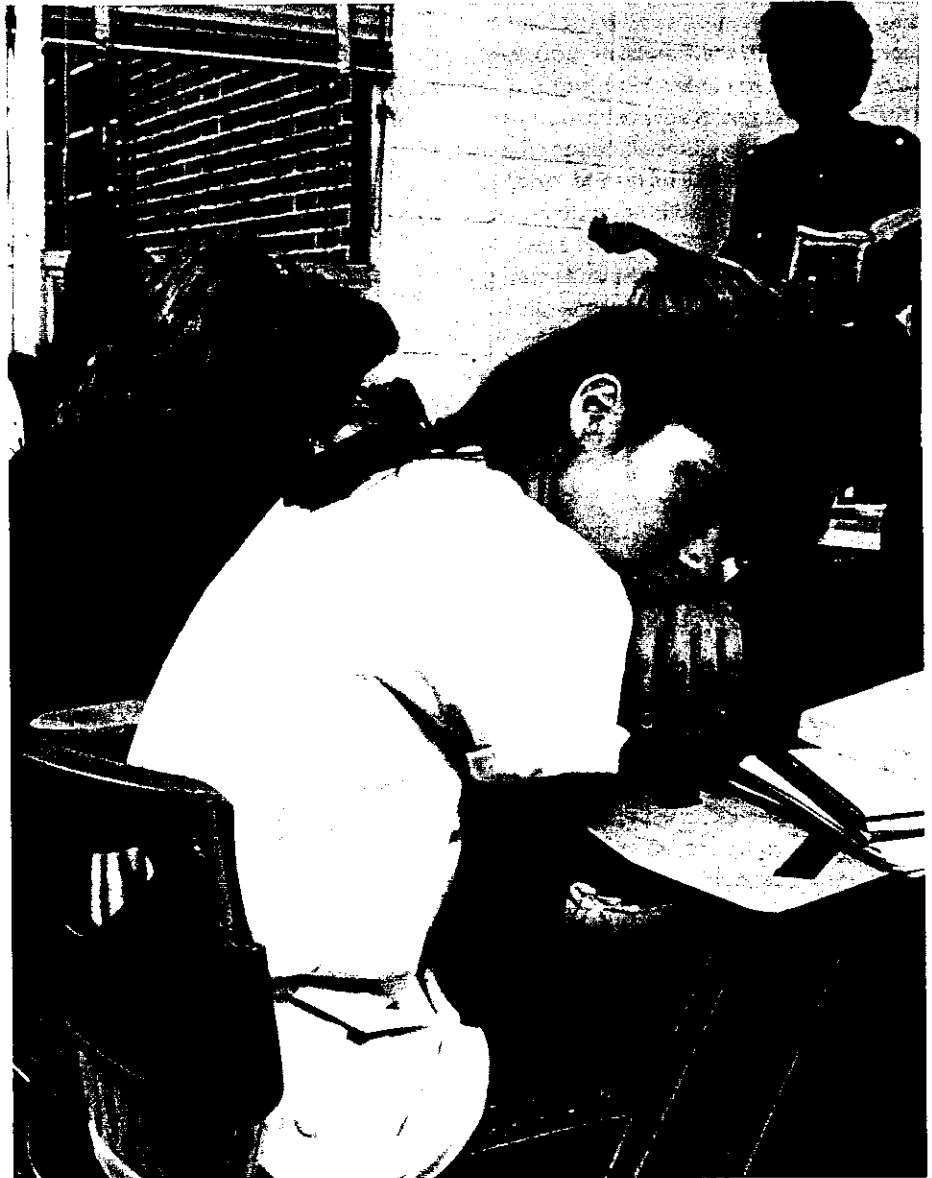
Sadly, the pressure on these principals is unlikely to decrease. And without a commitment to quality control in program delivery, we have little reason to believe that their schools will improve.

Administrators' limited ability to institute reforms that have an impact on teaching and learning in the classroom is disturbing. Many administrators continue to assume that changes in the organizational structure of schools—block scheduling, advisories, Small Learning Communities—will result in changes in the classroom. Research on school reform has shown that such change rarely occurs (Fullan & Miles, 1992), and that lasting improvements in teaching and learning can only come from a strategy focused on improving instruction (Elmore, 1996).

A laserlike focus on teaching and learning is precisely what we saw at the two schools in the study that were experiencing the greatest success. These exceptional schools provide lessons that can help guide other districts' efforts to improve their high schools.

### Learning from Success

At two of the schools in the Pathways study—one a pilot school, the other a charter school—reform efforts appeared to be producing higher levels of student achievement. Both schools were relatively small—the pilot school had 330 students and the charter school had 226—and both had specific requirements for admission, intended not to screen out students but to let them know that they would have to meet high standards and expectations.



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Although some other schools in the study were also small and selective, these two schools combined these features with others to shape a positive school culture.

For example, students at both schools were required to work harder—and in some cases, longer—than students in traditional schools. The charter school had a longer school day (9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) and an extended school year that went through the first week of July. The pilot school required a portfolio assessment and a junior and senior project in addition to the state exit exam.

Both schools had also gone to great

lengths to develop their own school cultures. The charter school was organized around an Asian theme and required students to study Mandarin Chinese and martial arts. Although relatively small, the pilot school was divided into three Small Learning Communities, and students spent significant amounts of time in community-based internships. Both schools provided on-site, year-round professional development designed around teachers' needs. Finally, both schools required a high level of parent involvement and provided students with college counseling beginning in 9th grade.

Student achievement data and student responses to our interview questions indicated that these practices and the schools' other reform efforts were effective. These two schools were the only ones in the study in which all seniors passed the MCAS. Even more encouraging, at both schools the average student scored at the proficient level, and several students achieved the highest level on the state exam. In contrast to most students at the other schools, who reported that there were no adults to whom they would speak about a personal problem, 93 percent of the students at the charter school and

reform and hope for the best, these schools took the time to make sure that teachers, parents, and students understood the purpose behind a given reform strategy. Equally important, they looked for evidence that the reform was achieving its goals.

In contrast, at most of the other schools the adults responsible for implementing reforms were oblivious to how the changes affected students. These schools had no systematic process to evaluate their reforms, nor did they seem to recognize the value of seeking input from students.

Listening to students is, in fact, a

Too often we assume that if the adults do things right, the kids will fall into line. If we were more willing to listen and solicit their opinions, we might find ways to engage students more deeply in their own education. The students may not have the answers to the problems confronting high schools, but perhaps if we engage them in discussions about how to make school less alienating and more meaningful, together we might find ways to move past superficial reforms and break the cycle of failure. ■

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100 percent of the students at the pilot school said that they did have access to such adults. Similarly, when asked whether or not they felt encouraged to do well at school, students at both schools responded affirmatively. One 11th grader put it this way:

At school, you have no choice but to work hard. They're on you from the time you first get here. If you don't do your homework, they call home, and then they make you do it. You can't get away with nothing here, and after a while you start to realize that everybody's working, and it starts to feel good to know that everyone is going to make it. They make sure that we're all going to college at this school.

### Students Want Meaningful Reform

The two high-performing schools in the Pathways study had no secret strategies or special resources that were not available to the other schools. In fact, many of the reforms they pursued were also being implemented at the other schools. What set these schools apart was not what they did, but how they did it.

Rather than simply introduce a

radical departure from the way schools typically run. The Pathways study purposely focused on students, gathering various data to show how high school reforms were affecting students' school experiences. At the suggestion of the students from one of the schools in the study, we decided to supplement the in-school observations by asking students directly what their schools should do to make learning more meaningful.

We brought all 150 students together at Harvard University for a retreat one Saturday. We divided them into small groups and asked several questions: If you were to attend a school where you would be excited to learn and study, how would that school be organized? How would you be taught? What would you learn? For two hours, the students brainstormed responses to these questions. As they reported to the whole group, some consistent themes emerged: Students wanted a more interactive teaching style, a more relevant curriculum, school rules that were responsive to their living circumstances, and schools that gave them a role and a voice in their own education.

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