

By Thomas Toch and Nettie Legters

News from the U.S. Department of Education that high school seniors in 2005 scored significantly lower in reading than their counterparts in 1992 has produced a fresh round of hand-wringing about the nation's 14,900 public high schools.

There's a lot to worry about: by some calculations, barely more than half of black and Latino students earn regular high school diplomas and the new federal study reports that only 35 percent of all students who stay in school into their senior year read well enough to make inferences from a passage. In an economy where low-skill, living-wage jobs have all but disappeared, these results have devastating consequences for the 1.2-million students who drop out every year.

But reformers, and some schools, have been working hard on solutions. And though the reforms have been introduced too recently and in too few places for the results to move the needle on tests given nationwide in 2005, the early returns are encouraging: with the right reforms and enough resources, it's possible to fix failing high schools.

One key to success is replacing outsized comprehensive high schools with smaller, more-personal settings where students and teachers care because they feel cared about. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation since 2000 has spent over \$1 billion on the effort, including \$12 million in Baltimore.

While these "small learning communities" haven't all fit seamlessly into the public school fabric, studies show they are much more likely than their comprehensive counterparts to create conditions conducive to learning, especially when teachers are able to collaborate closely. Such schools tend to have higher student and teacher attendance, for instance, and fewer disciplinary disruptions.

But a community-building climate isn't enough to turn the corner on reform, especially for the 2,000 deeply troubled high schools that produce half the nation's dropouts.

Empowered leaders, strong teachers and intensive academic supports are essential elements." Giving principals greater freedom to spend more to attract top teachers in hard-to-staff subjects like physics and math is one solution here. Classroom coaches who work with teachers on both rigor and ways to engage students with innovative instruction are another—treating students like so many empty vessels merely to be filled with facts and figures, the norm in many American high schools, is a sure way to turn struggling students into dropouts.

Another big challenge is the large number of students who enter high school lagging badly in reading and math, and who are thus unable to do high school work. But when schools give struggling freshmen intensive instruction in reading and math, many students catch up, especially when schools combine this extra

help with a more personalized environment. And they do even better when schools layer on counseling, mentoring, and social services.

Putting outside pressure on high schools to perform is also important. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to test students in basic reading and math in one high school grade and report the results. But a test of generic reading and math skills isn't going to push high schools to beef up their curriculums the way end-of-course tests in American history, biology, and other subjects would—and the way Advanced Placement tests already do for some students.

Recognizing this, the Bush administration is pushing Congress to require states to create challenging course-based English and math standards and assessments such as those found in Maryland—a smart step in the direction of more effective accountability systems. Shining light on attendance, grade promotion, student engagement in class, and graduation rates would give educators even stronger incentives to improve.

High school reform can be expensive—for the most challenged schools, about \$800 per student a year in coaches, curriculum materials, additional staff, and time for planning and collaboration. And that level of funding has to be sustained for the five years or more it takes to turn around troubled schools.

While foundations and federal programs have established direction and lighthouses, a larger investment is now necessary to extend reform to the many schools that need it. It would be a wise investment: researchers estimate that reducing the dropout rate by half would generate \$45 billion in increased tax revenues and health-care and social-services savings from every high school graduating class—and secure a brighter future for our nation's youth in the process.

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