

Making High Expectations Real in All Our High Schools

There is little disagreement about what we want from our public high schools. We want them to graduate all their students prepared for success in college, careers, and civic life. In schools where this is happening, students are engaged, come to school everyday, and try hard to succeed. They take a college preparatory curriculum and are provided support and extra help to succeed in it. Teachers offer challenging instruction and receive the instructional materials, professional development, and support they need to do so. Administrators work with staff to create safe, encouraging, and effective teaching and learning environments. Parents and the community are actively involved in encouraging the behaviors which lead to success, and in providing structured, complementary after-school activities and supports.

Unfortunately these elements are too rare in the high schools that need them the most—those that serve primarily low income and minority students. Our experience working with the Baltimore Talent Development High School and more than 50 other high poverty high schools throughout the nation tells us that this is not primarily because of a lack of effort, desire, or even attention. Rather, most low performing high schools simply need tools, support, and leadership to make high expectations a reality.

Engaging adolescents in schooling, providing sufficient extra help to students who enter high school far below grade level, and creating effective teaching and learning environments, all the while dealing with the many challenges that poverty brings into students' lives is a tall order. It becomes particularly daunting when there are not a few students in need of extra academic or social supports, but hundreds. Yet these are the challenges faced by high schools which educate primarily low income children, and they do so with typically no more resources, and often far fewer resources, than are available in nearby suburban schools with much lower degrees of educational challenge.

Despite these long odds, our experience tells us that much can be done to create powerful high schools in high poverty areas.

First, high schools must be designed to succeed with the educational and social challenges they face. They need to have in place on the first day of school instructional and student support programs that are comprehensive and intense enough to keep disengaged, below-grade level students on track to graduation. These include extended learning time in core subjects, targeted reduced class size for the sub-set of students most in need of focused adult attention, and teachers organized into teams so at least four adults can work together to promote the success of no more than 75-90 students.

Since students who repeat grades in high school seldom graduate, there must be a district-wide focus on doing what it takes to enable all students to continually earn on-time promotion to the next grade. This includes enhanced after school and summer learning opportunities that enable students to rapidly make up or complete failed courses. For those students for whom this is still not enough, second chance schools or programs similar to current efforts in New York City should be provided.

Schools need to be organized and every adult must be trained to collaboratively encourage, nag, and nurture students to do their part. This includes a no excuses message combined with recognition for good attendance, behavior, effort, and improvement. It also includes a comprehensive system of progressively strong interventions based on theories of positive discipline for students who do not attend, behave, and try.

Finally, there needs to be recognition that high poverty high schools need strong teachers. These educators must not only know their subject well and how to teach a good lesson. They also must be able to modulate their instruction so it succeeds with students with widely different levels of prior preparation, and understand how to reach out to and motivate students who, behind their veneer of adolescent toughness, are crying for adult attention. This means teachers workloads and work days need to be organized to enable additional professional development, time for collaborative work with fellow teachers and administrators, and time for student outreach.

Just a regular school with expectations. These are the words Jeffrey Robinson, principal of Baltimore Talent Development High School, used in a recent interview to explain how his school is beating the odds. By putting in place the elements described above, Robinson's school is keeping its students, virtually all of whom are from minority and poverty backgrounds, on track toward graduation. With adequate tools, support, and leadership, we envision more high schools embarking on a similar path toward high expectations and brighter futures for all their students.

Nettie Legters and Robert Balfanz are Research Scientists at the Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools and Co-Directors of the Center's Talent Development High Schools program. Balfanz is also co-operator of Baltimore Talent Development High School, a Baltimore City Public Schools innovation high school operated in partnership with the Center.