Aspen Institute
Program on Education in Changing Society

REPORTOF THE
ASPEN INSTITUTE WORKSHOP ON HIGH SCHOOLS:
MOVING BEYOND RANDOM ACTS OF PROGRESS II

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?
Incremental and Radical Action Agenda for Transforming the American High School

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PREFACE

When the Aspen Institute Workshop on High Schools first convened in 2000, the participants concluded that in order to meet the educational demands of our new era the American high school needed to be transformed, not merely reformed. The follow-up 2001 Workshop on High Schools was convened in order to identify the necessary action steps to achieve this transformation.

This report documents the efforts of participants in the Aspen Institute Workshop on High Schools II, held in July 2001, to identify the most promising state and local strategies that will promote high school transformation on a large scale.

Workshop participants sought first to identify the essential goals of such reform and to understand what was known and not known about effective strategies to improve the performance of high schools. Then they divided into two groups, each charged with specifying concrete yet comprehensive programs of action for state and local leaders that would lead toward improved achievement and learning opportunities at the local district and its schools, and toward a state-wide system of high performing high schools and out-of-school learning environments. One group identified a series of immediate action steps, those most urgently needed and specially targeted at the neediest schools in urban areas. Their recommendations constitute a powerful set of incremental strategies for transforming high schools. The other group focused on a longer term agenda, *viz.* the policies and changes required to set the foundation for a new system of high schools. Their recommendations set forth a more radical approach to high school transformation.

There were large areas of agreement between the two groups, and many believed that the two agendas could work in concert. Nevertheless, there were several points of tension between the two approaches and significant uncertainty about a unified strategy. Neither a consensus document nor a summary of participants' views, this report aims to integrate into a single narrative the work of the two groups, highlighting the areas and tensions left unresolved.

The report contains seven sections. Section one introduces the need for transformation. Section two identifies the areas of common agreement on goals and the foundation of school reform knowledge upon which educational leaders and policymakers can build. The third section canvasses the five most popular approaches to school reform today. The fourth and fifth sections outline the short term and long term action agendas, respectively. And the final sections identify key common elements, and points of tension and unresolved questions.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?
INCREMENTAL AND RADICAL ACTION AGENDA FOR TRANSFORMING THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

I. Introduction

> *When we come to the realization that not every child has to read, figure, write, and spell . . . that many of them either cannot or will not master these chores . . . then we shall be on the road to improving the junior high curriculum.*
>
> *Between this day and that a lot of selling must take place. But it's coming. We shall someday accept the thought that it is just as illogical to assume that every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on the violin, that it is no more reasonable to require each girl shall spell well than it is that each one shall bake a good cherry pie.*
>
> *When adults finally realize that, everyone will be happier . . . and schools will be nicer places in which to live.*
>
> *A. R. Lauchner, 1951*

How dismally wrong Mr. Lauchner was. Fifty years after his prognostication in the pages of the *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, the United States has entered a new era of educational needs and expectations. It is an era in which every student is expected to be able to learn to high standards. It is an era in which all students need to graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education without remediation, even if they decide not to pursue postsecondary education. It is an era in which we expect a diversity of schools while insisting that each is a high performance learning environment. It is an era in which students must have multiple and flexible academic pathways that provide them with powerful in school and out of school learning opportunities. In short, it is an era exactly the opposite of what Mr. Lauchner desired and envisioned.

In contrast to Lauchner's wish, the mantra of our day is *All children can learn to high standards*. A simple phrase, yet a revolutionary statement. It signals nothing less than a sea change in American education, for it requires both that schools provide all students with a quality academic education and the even more challenging aspiration that high schools successfully graduate their students with substantial academic skills. When one considers that in 1900 few states had compulsory attendance laws, and that as recently as 1960 a mere 41 percent of adults had high school degrees, one can appreciate the truly Copernican change that has taken place.

For the past generation of school reform, states have been busy responding to the 1983 Nation at Risk report with a two-fold strategy. The first approach, now largely in place, has been to stiffen high school graduation requirements and to add new courses to the core academic curriculum. The second approach, still underway, has been to create voluntary disciplinary standards with accompanying testing and accountability mechanisms. Both approaches leave intact, indeed solidify, the basic design model of the high school. But *all children can learn to high standards* is a radical idea. It signaled the need for radical re-thinking of high schools. Using the old model – a model designed for an earlier era – is not sufficient. **To transform the high school, and to realize the goal of educating all students to rigorous academic standards, we need a new approach that re-organizes the way we think about the basic governance and financing of schools as well as the central tasks of teaching and learning. The new era may require nothing less than a re-conceptualization of what we understand a public school system to be.**

II. What We Know and Agree Upon

Good innovators take advantage of already existing knowledge. The task of high school transformation rests on *key assumptions* that are widely shared. It aims to realize a set of *fundamental youth outcomes* that are the product of many years of research and consensus building, and it builds upon research over the past generation that has given us strong evidence about the *features of a high-performing school*. Finally, transforming high schools depends on some widely acknowledged *core enabling conditions* that must be in place for any progress to be made. In short, much is known about what is necessary for high school transformation.

Key Assumptions

- The task of high school transformation is urgent, and while efforts must be beneficial for all schools and students, we must focus our energy and resources on the lowest performing schools and students.

- Transformation involves all constituencies – educators, parents, students, business leaders, community leaders, and elected officials. All bear a responsibility for ensuring the successful development of students.

- The key policy levers reside at the state and local level.

- Schools sit in different contexts, receive policies differently, and require different kinds of supports. The policy framework for fostering high performing high schools must be sensitive to such difference and allow for flexibility.

- The task of transformation is one of energetic intervention and continuous improvement, not the adoption of a cookie-cutter formula.

- Every approach has to be informed by relevant data. We must use data systems that provide rich information about student results and youth outcomes to shape education policy and school practices.

Fundamental Youth Outcomes

All youth should:

- graduate from school with core literacy, (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing) and numeracy (calculating, problem-solving, mathematics) knowledge and skills;

- be prepared to enter post-secondary education and to do college level work without remediation;

- develop a clear and positive sense of self and identity, see themselves as resources of their own learning and accomplishment; cultivate various emotional, physical, moral, and social competencies;

- establish positive behaviors and relationships and develop life and leadership skills.

Features of High Performing Schools

- High performing high schools forge a powerful environment – a shared ethos – with a shared mission that is student-centered, devoted to high expectations and standards for all youth, and performance based.

- High performing high schools focus relentlessly on active and engaged teaching and learning
  - teaching and learning are focused on competence not coverage
  - assessments are frequent and variable, and linked to improving student and teacher performance
  - good high schools engage youth in a mix of disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary learning
  - such schools engage youth in cognitive challenges centered around inquiry, creation, and demonstration
  - learning takes place in settings beyond the classroom and the school
  - sustained professional development opportunities exist for all staff

- High performing high schools invariably have strong leaders who receive support from the district in the form of ample financial resources, policy flexibility, and technical assistance. Such leaders have significant curricular, budgetary, and staffing autonomy. They evaluate personnel based on performance.

- High performing high schools invariably have competent teachers where they work collaboratively, focus on student work, and ultimately lead the educational process.
  - to drive collaborative work, good schools have rich data systems
  - to drive collaborative work, good schools permit teachers ample time to work together, and they compensate them for it

- Small high schools and small class size contribute to improved student learning.
  - effective small schools are no larger than 400 students
  - effective small schools foster professional learning communities and give teachers time to learn and work together
  - effective small schools make students members of a caring community in which every student has an advocate
  - effective small schools make values explicit

Enabling Conditions
What are the enabling conditions that schools and communities must provide to support the realization of fundamental academic and youth development outcomes?

- High schools must be student-centered, caring, respectful, and organized on the principle that all students can succeed academically.

- High schools must be focused on engaged student learning, staffed by competent, caring teachers, and provide multiple academic pathways for students to acquire the knowledge and skills to meet graduation standards.

- Communities must provide learning opportunities outside the classroom (e.g., internships, community service, job shadowing, work study) that are aligned with the

curriculum and can reinforce the acquisition of academic skills, for enrolled students as well as those who have dropped out of school.

- Communities must provide multiple opportunities for students to contribute to the public good, and establish meaningful relationships with a variety of adults.

Taken together, these key assumptions, features of high performing schools, fundamental youth outcomes, and enabling conditions represent a solid foundation upon which to build and a common vocabulary to guide our efforts. This is itself no trivial achievement, our knowledge base is significant. **We know what we're aiming for, and we know what powerful learning environments for youth look like. What we don't know is how to cause these learning environments to come into being, to move beyond isolated instances of excellence and use policy levers to trigger institutional transformation across schools, districts, and states.**

III. Current Approaches to High School Reform-

Many efforts are currently underway to reform the American high school. Five of the most popular reform strategies are:[1]

1. Small schools

The small schools movement aims to generate the creation of new small schools, often charter schools, and to break down existing large schools into smaller units, generally no bigger than 400 students. Proponents of small schools believe that decreasing school size leads to increased student achievement in two ways. First, students in small schools will be well-known by adults who have the time not only to take an interest in their lives, but to be advocates for them. Second, teachers in small schools will have more personalized relationships with students and can therefore engage in student-centered pedagogy and can form professional communities where teachers are more likely to interact with one another, plan and train together, and establish a positive school culture.

2. Applied learning

Attempts to reform high school through applied learning begin from the premise that an integrated academic and vocational curriculum will provide students with powerful, relevant, and hands-on learning experiences, both in school and out of school. These experiences will in turn lead to increased student engagement and achievement. In addition, advocates of applied learning see great value in meaningful internships, job shadowing, and work-site visits that take place in the community, building in the process important relationships between schools and the business community.

3. Professional development/curriculum and instruction

It is a truism that teaching and learning rests at the heart of education. By focusing on improving teaching and learning as a management strategy, reformers aim to spark significant gains in student achievement. The primary vehicle for this particular reform is focused, sustained, and coordinated professional development of teachers, in pre-service teacher training but especially in targeted and ongoing interventions for entire school, or even district, faculty. Other vehicles include the creation of teacher professional communities, organized both by school and by subject matter. Much evidence suggests that, aside from family socioeconomic

[1] Jennifer Husbands and Stacy Beese, "Review of Selected High School Reform Strategies," commissioned paper prepared for the Aspen Institute Workshop on High Schools, July 2001.

status and prior academic achievement, a strong predictor of student performance is teacher quality. Reforms that begin with professional development take improving teacher quality, and curriculum, as their main goal.

4. Youth development
Youth development views learning opportunities as occurring both in school and out of school, and therefore seeks to strengthen the great variety of institutions – schools, community organizations, churches, sports leagues, and so on – that serve youth and to build connections amongst these institutions to promote core academic, social, and emotional growth. Key to the youth development approach is a focus on the "whole child" and on developing competencies and building on assets rather than reducing deficits and preventing discrete problems, such as teenage pregnancy or drug use.

5. Comprehensive or whole school reform
Perhaps the most familiar high school reform strategy is comprehensive reform, which begins from the conviction that school reform occurs from below rather than from above, in one building at a time. From this perspective, what matters most is school design and the creation of a powerful school culture, involving the explicit endorsement of a mission and the participation of all building personnel. Pursuing whole school reform does not imply, however, that each school must re-invent itself from scratch. On the contrary, whole school reform can draw from several prominent reform models or coalitions, where individual schools can, in effect, select and adapt an existing model for their particular circumstances. In this sense, whole school reform can resemble, depending on the design model, any of the previous reform approaches, and indeed many of the most popular "off the shelf" models emphasize small schools that embrace applied learning, youth development outcomes, and pay significant attention to professional development.

In addition to these five strategies, a great many schools are implementing changes that can usefully be grouped under the rubric of "fostering personalization." We do not list this approach as a category of its own simply because the means to achieving it are so varied. School leaders are currently experimenting with policies along a personalization continuum, from creating small schools, schools-within-schools, to forming school houses or academies, to implementing block scheduling, to assigning students to particular teachers for family periods. Still other schools have attempted to foster greater personalization by adopting youth development ideals or by re-thinking the very architecture of the school building. These various approaches stand in close relationship to the small schools approach, which also sees personalization as a key goal, but since almost all of these strategies fall short of re-making schools into small learning communities, the personalization continuum should be considered separately from it.

Which of these reform approaches holds the greatest promise for transformation, and which, alone or in combination, should we build upon?

Small schools have proven to be especially powerful vehicles for improving the learning environment for students and the professional environment for teachers. For some reformers, small schools are in fact *necessary conditions* of transformation, without which the kind of personalization and professional learning communities needed to focus on and improve student work are thought to be impossible. Others reformers are "large fans of small schools" but also "small fans of big schools", noting that the day when every school would enroll 400 students or less was unlikely ever to come to pass.

Despite broad enthusiasm for the small schools movement, no one is prepared to declare that following a single strategy would be a wise approach. If the layer upon layer of past school reforms has taught us anything, it is that there is no panacea for high schools, there is no "one best system."[2] On the contrary, educational leaders, from the school-level to the state-level, should use small schools and other strategies in combination when appropriate, tailoring their overall strategy for the needs of different local contexts.

This implies an important change in the common parlance of school reformers. If we must permit wide flexibility to meet the needs of local contexts, we ought to downplay the language of "going to scale" or "scaling up" reforms. In the vision set forth here, no single reform will be brought to scale. The engineering language here confuses rather than clarifies the essential task of promoting widespread institutional growth and change, in a variety of different ways. Moreover, the obsession with discovering how to bring a reform to scale obscures the fact that there is already consensus on the universe of good educational practice. The goal of transformation is to create a diversity of approaches and pathways, all of which lead to the formation of high performing learning communities and to bringing students to high standards.

How, then, might policymakers at the state and local level take meaningful steps toward bringing about institutional change that permits, indeed encourages, flexibility? How might state and local policy provide schools and districts with the necessary supports – fiscal, material, and human – they need to carry out institutional reforms while simultaneously holding them accountable for progress toward improving student achievement?

One way to approach this problem is to tackle it on two fronts. On the first front, educational leaders and policymakers should focus on the short term. It is clear to everyone, for example, that some problems demand immediate and energetic attention, such as urban schools with long histories of failure. While each action step may be incremental, the comprehensive sum of such initiatives could nevertheless be transformative.

On the second front, educational leaders and policymakers should take a longer view, seeking to chart nothing less than a path toward a re-conceptualized system of public schooling with distinctively new and different policies, processes and institutional functions. The strategy is to combine a short term agenda and a long term agenda: **The short term agenda outlines transformation by incremental change; the long term agenda is far more radical, re-envisioning core educational structures**. Both "incremental" and "radical" can have pejorative connotations, as when incremental strategies are thought to be the mere accumulation of layer upon layer of disparate reforms or when radical strategies are thought to be those beyond the pale of public debate. We intend the pejorative connotation for neither approach. Instead, we describe the two approaches as such for the sake of emphasis in constructing clear alternatives with different time horizons of change.

The two agendas that follow are mutually reinforcing in many respects. The short term steps may facilitate the long term goals, and the conditions necessary to bring about the long term vision ought not undermine the immediate aim of improving the neediest performing schools. Nevertheless, incremental and radical change do not always fit neatly together, and there are some significant points of tension and large areas of uncertainty. The following two sections outline key provisions of each agenda. A third section develops the common vision that unites them while highlighting two especially persistent tensions and unresolved questions.

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[2] See David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

IV. Transformation by Incremental Change

The incremental agenda aims above all else at identifying the key policy actions, for state and local leaders, that will result in transforming the learning environments of the neediest performing schools and districts. Of course, even within the most troubled school, or the most troubled district, there are pockets of success. But the persistent failure of many high schools to provide even an education for basic literacy and numeracy cries out for immediate attention. It is all the more troubling that, in the words of one urban superintendent, we all know which schools are the neediest in each district and in each state, and we knew this years ago.

The features of a high performing school are clear, and they are by definition painfully absent from those schools with long histories of failure. An agenda for aggressive and immediate action begins therefore at the district level, and it emphasizes the need for district leaders to treat high schools differently than middle and elementary schools, and to treat the neediest high schools differently than other high schools.

A. District Roles and Responsibilities

Districts must be willing to support their neediest schools differentially, in particular by providing them disproportionate financial resources and political support. Just as there must be a partnership between a district and the state, so too must there be a partnership between a district and the schools, with the district providing additional aid and flexibility to permit these schools to change in dramatic ways.

District leadership also needs to have a powerful and specific mandate to restructure high schools and at least the baseline resources to carry out that mandate. Additionally, district leadership needs the courage and will to address the challenges of implementing change.

Specifically, the district can and should play a dual role in supporting and managing high-performing high schools. Ten specific actions are critical to this task.

1. **Create a management structure with specific responsibility for high schools.** The needs of high schools are sufficiently different from those of elementary and middle schools that large districts need to assign specific leadership responsibility for managing their high schools. Small districts might create networks with neighboring districts. In addition to setting direction and holding high schools accountable for performance, a central role of this structure is to create a learning community comprising the leaders of the individual high schools, where they can discuss their common challenges and learn from each other and from outside experts how best to address them.

2. **Align and equitably deploy critical system resources, with a focus on the mission and vision for high schools.** To make maximum use of existing resources, district leaders need to inventory and align their substantial organizational, fiscal and personnel resources in a focused manner. For maximum impact, these resources need to be strategically deployed both in relation to demographic indicators of need (e.g., free-lunch eligibility) and performance conditions in schools. To insure both equitable funding and flexibility of design, schools should receive their resources in funds rather than positions. To make efficient and focused use of professional development resources, the core components of the high school curriculum (language arts and mathematics) should be aligned both with state performance standards and with the district's middle school curriculum

frameworks. Whenever possible, curriculum resources should include cutting edge technology-based approaches.

3. **Conduct broad constituency mobilization and public engagement specific to high school restructuring.** Many of the choices and actions needed for significant change in high schools require political will to counter the inertia of large organizations, the interests vested in the current situation, and the public's attachment to the image of American high school as it has been portrayed in print and media. To build this will, district leaders need to mobilize constituency support for change, creating both a sense of urgency and public understanding of what change will entail. This support is particularly critical to sustaining change when there are leadership transitions in the district. The constituencies that need to be mobilized are both internal (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, district office personnel) and external (e.g., elected/appointed officials, parents, community residents and leaders, faith community leaders, business leaders, universities, media, and so on.)

4. **Negotiate contractual labor-management agreements that increase building-level autonomy in return for greater participation in decision-making.** Schools should be able to make their own decisions about such issues as class size, scheduling of classes, and teacher assignment. In return, teachers should have authentic participation in decisions about program design, staff selection, and professional development resources.

5. **Develop the capacity of teachers to help all students reach high levels of achievement.** To change the outcomes at the classroom level, the district should create and sustain a professional development infrastructure for high school teachers. Resources within this infrastructure should be focused on literacy and mathematics, and deployed at multiple levels. Peer coaches should work at the school level, and in larger schools, coaches should be supported by site-based literacy and math supervisors. School-level professional developers in turn, should constitute a professional learning community with the district-level professional development team. In addition to site-based professional development, teachers should be able to participate in both cross-school professional development activities and in voluntary out-of-district professional development.

6. **Develop school-by-school designs for high performing high schools.** To respond to the variety of conditions and needs at individual high schools, each school should be responsible for developing a school plan with broad staff and community participation. At the same time, all plans should address the common elements of high performing schools, with attention paid to personalization and small learning communities, high expectations and rigorous coursework for all students, and specific supports for students performing below benchmark.

7. **Hold schools accountable for student performance and school growth, assessing both overall improvement and the reduction of the gap between students in different demographic groups.** The benchmarks for assessing student performance and school improvement should include:
    - attendance
    - 9th grade promotion
    - test scores
    - dropout (measured by 9th grade cohort survival)
    - graduation

- advanced course participation
- college going and persistence.

8. **Provide alternatives for students who have difficulty learning within the mainstream system.** Despite the best efforts at both district and school level, some students will continue to struggle. Alternatives need to be provided for these students both within schools (e.g., smaller classes, double and triple dosing, extended day supports) and in separate schools (e.g., alternative schools, diploma plus programs, and second chance programs).

9. **Reconstitute schools that are unable, after focused support, to improve student outcomes.** When schools have become so entrenched in failure that district resources are being wasted and students are being ill-served, district leadership must have the political will to close the school and create alternative options for the students.

10. **Create a responsive and rich set of data resources to support change.** Current technology permits data to become a powerful resource in fostering conversations about performance and identifying areas needing focused improvement. District data systems should have a powerful student information system (both hardware and software) that permits easy disaggregation and item analyses at the school level. The system should be inquiry friendly and flexible enough to permit data from student work to be used in addition to test scores. Where possible, school-level data tools should be used to provide data for planning and professional development. In addition, school-based staff must receive assistance in learning to use and analyze data.

B. Dealing with the Transition to Transformation: At-risk youth and dropouts

At-risk Youth
Even if every urban high school put in place a focused, purposeful, coherent improvement plan, the short-term reality is that there will still be a substantial fraction of students who have entered ninth grade so under-prepared academically that a school-only strategy will be unlikely to enable them to meet any graduation standard. The crisis presented by the possibility that thousands of students may be denied diplomas or may be so discouraged that they drop out of school requires a community-wide response, and creates an opportunity to mobilize the resources of businesses, higher education, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations on behalf of the community's at-risk youth. All community leaders need to send a strong public signal to children and their parents that it is a community-wide priority to help all young people meet the graduation standard, and that they will mobilize the necessary human and financial resources to provide extra help and support to every young person who needs it.

Dropouts
In addition to mobilizing community-wide attention and support for students at risk of not meeting standards and dropping out, communities must also focus attention and resources on those who have already dropped out. We recommend the following action steps to address the challenge of recovering and returning dropouts to an educational path.

Schools must:
- establish school level committees to monitor potential dropouts and drop out data to create prevention and recovery initiatives.

- establish a system for tracking and offering additional support to students and families with poor attendance.
- conduct exit interviews and surveys where possible to gather data on students' reasons for dropping out.

Districts and States must:

- establish a District level committee of all local agencies and community organizations, with school representation to develop a comprehensive plan for supporting and re-claiming youth who drop out of school.

- establish a system for tracking students who drop out of school. Reporting mechanisms that result in re-connecting youth and linking them to alternative learning opportunities should be established.

Community Roles and Responsibilities: The Example of the Business Community

Beyond their role in mobilizing support for dropouts and those at risk of dropping out, non-school institutions and organizations play a crucially important role in supporting high school transformation and improvement. We focus here on the sector that has been most active and organized nationally to do this: the business community. (A complete action agenda would outline action steps for leaders from community and non-profit organizations serving youth, higher education, and faith-based groups.)

The Business Community and High Schools
Business and high schools have a symbiotic relationship. Schools prepare individuals who will enter the workforce and businesses create the variety of jobs that these students will occupy and that will simultaneously support them as adults and contribute to the economic productivity of the community, state, and nation. Recent history reveals that coordination and communication between these is inadequate.

Employers report repeatedly that it is extremely difficult to find qualified workers for today's jobs. In an information economy that demands broad knowledge and increasingly high level and specific skills, many entry level applicants fail to meet even the most basic criteria: the ability to communicate clearly, compute correctly, or come to work regularly and on time.

At the same time, research has shown that the academic achievement of students increases when learning is hands-on, relevant, and connected to the future. The variety of schools adopting applied learning as a reform strategy testify to the power of educational environments that integrate academic and vocational learning through the use of, amongst others, internships at work-sites, job shadowing, and learning academies with partnerships with local and state businesses.

There is a clear need for schools and businesses to collaborate on the project of transforming high schools and creating institutional change to support this transformation. State, district and school governing bodies should therefore work with business leadership in order to adopt the following policies, where the explicit goal is to maximize the schools' ability to produce employees ready for the contemporary work force and informed civic participation.

For schools, businesses should:

1. Provide at least one business partnership for each high school.
2. Provide specific job opportunities for students and teachers that familiarize them with the modern world of work.
3. Provide mentorships, internships, and job shadowing opportunities for youth.
4. Collaborate with schools to integrate the knowledge base and skills required by employers into the academic curriculum of the school.
5. Utilize the training programs of the business community to broaden the skills and knowledge base of educators.
6. Provide a representative to serve as an active member of each school's site-based management team.
7. Organize a regular forum for a school's business partner and the school instructional leadership team to meet, discuss, and respond to the implications of student performance data.
8. Encourage and support parental involvement in all aspects of children's education.

For the district and the state, businesses should:

1. Ask for transcripts as part of the hiring process to demonstrate to students that employer value their achievement in school.
2. Offer public and political support for the high school transformation agenda.
3. Communicate with parents at the work-site the need for a more rigorous, academic, high school curriculum.
4. Establish strategic and prioritized corporate giving that is aligned with the high school transformation agenda.
5. Campaign to ensure that schools are sufficiently and equitably financed.
6. Organize a regular forum for a representative group of CEOs and the Superintendent to meet, discuss, and respond to the implications of student performance data.
7. Provide technical assistance through loaned executives to evaluate and improve non-instructional systems.
8. Partner with the Governor and State Superintendent/Commissioner.

C. State Roles and Responsibilities

The state has responsibility to provide for and support the education of the state's youth, and to ensure that this education allows *all* students to reach high standards. State leadership must set the standards agenda, and perform and finance evaluation and research on progress toward those standards. But to do this, the state has to work in partnership with other constituencies that share responsibility for, or have an interest in, the adults that students will become.

To fulfill this responsibility and to improve the performance of high schools in preparing all students to meet high standards and become productive adults, four imperatives must characterize the state's efforts:

1. Focus first and foremost on academic learning, with literacy as the top priority.
2. Ground policy in current research on adolescent development
3. Build on and through adult learning and professional development
4. Incorporate ongoing evaluation of student performance that provides rich data for organizational learning and improvement at the school, district, and state level.

The state has a leadership role to play in three main areas: (1) setting standards and creating accountability systems, (2) establishing a knowledge base of best practices informed by the latest research, and (3) organizing professional development and deployment.

1. Standards and Accountability Systems
States should **establish an accountability system** promotes ongoing and dynamic development in response to data on student and school achievement records..

- Review and refine state standards toward the developing collective understanding of what knowledge and skills are necessary and *essential* for all high school graduates
- Assess and improve the tools and tests to allow assessment of that knowledge
- Support the development of tools for alternative assessment
- Create or review the opportunities-to-learn standards to accompany them
- Assess, call for, and provide the capacity to deliver those opportunities

States should **set the standards agenda, and perform and finance evaluation and research on progress toward those standards**. They can do this by:

- examining classroom, school, and district responses, looking for both best practices and unintended consequences;
- assessing the consequences for students, with particular attention to unintended negative consequences;
- addressing issues of capacity and the distribution of resources; and
- establishing at least a moderately accurate mechanism of tracking dropout rates and cohort completion patterns.

The accountability system of the state must be a product of collaboration between the state and districts, and it must embody principles of mutual accountability. Districts must be able to hold state leadership responsible for providing sufficient resources, both fiscal and human, and enough flexibility, to create high schools in which all students meet high standards. Likewise, states must be able to hold districts accountable for persistently low performing schools. Accountability entails:

- working in partnership to identify failing schools and building the political will to do something about them;
- targeting resources to improve conditions of teaching and learning; and
- providing and supporting building and instructional leadership.

Most important, if these actions are insufficient to trigger meaningful change, the state should intervene aggressively, and in the neediest scenarios permit performance-based contracting of the kind detailed in the following long-term action agenda section.

2. Knowledge Base of Best Practices

States must assume responsibility for identifying, on the basis of the latest research, the knowledge and skills necessary to take adolescents from non-reading or elementary grade reading levels to meeting high school graduation standards. The same must hold true for math achievement. Unfortunatelyu, this knowledge is not yet well developed, and what little has been developed is not widely available to the teachers charged with that task.

The state must play an active role in **building that knowledge base and in providing for its connection to classrooms** where it is needed. It can do this by:

- gathering information from districts and schools about current needs, about practices in use, and about missing pieces;
- convening a network of district instructional staff, school personnel, subject associations, and specialists in adolescent literacy;
- focusing that work on building a body of knowledge and expertise that is centered on literacy connected to academic content, grounded in adolescent development, supportive of adult learning and teaching, and tied to strategies for organizational implementation;
- working with that network to develop resources in instructional strategies, curriculum materials, and organizational change;
- providing public leadership and support for the initial training and ongoing professional collaboration of adolescent literacy specialists connected directly and indirectly to classroom practice
- working with districts to deploy those resources where they are most needed.

3. Professional Development and Deployment

The organization of professional development and teacher training is crucial to creating and sustaining a high quality teaching force. The state's role here is to:

- **Develop, in partnership with districts and institutions of higher education, a system of recruitment, preparation, certification and distribution of teaching staff capable of preparing students to meet high standards.** This requires that every school has access to a supply of teachers that is sufficient in numbers and in the necessary knowledge and skills. It also requires that the state help districts and hold them accountable for the distribution of qualified teachers so that differential patterns are purposeful and reflect the differential needs of students.

- **Encourage research and development on high school organization and instruction.** The research must inform professional development programs so that districts and schools are aware of the variety of paths that can prepare students to meet high standards. The state also has a role to play in facilitating communication across districts about best practices. It can do so by supporting networks of small schools or of internship providers, establishing websites to highlight exemplars of curriculum units, classroom practice, student work, or funding travel grants.

V. Transformation by Radical Change

If coordinated, targeted, aggressive and immediate action by local and state leaders with the aim of transforming the neediest performing high schools characterizes the incremental action agenda, the long term agenda sets out a radically new system of high schools. The guiding assumption here is that though the incremental agenda may yield clear benefits the current structure of urban schooling will not be able to meet the goal of educating all children to high standards that prepare them for postsecondary education without remediation. A more dramatic structural reorganization is necessary. The long term agenda thus seeks radical change. It is based on a far-reaching and fundamentally re-conceived system of schooling generally, with changes to core institutional structures of financing, governance, and accountability.

Though this new system is radically different, it is not unrecognizable, and it builds upon key components of a successful incremental agenda. It begins with the shared goal of educating all students to high standards, supports healthy youth development, and is anchored in the large base of knowledge we have about high performing learning environments. It takes advantage of many strategies for school and system improvement that many states and districts are already implementing, especially the development of standards and some accountability mechanisms. Moreover, it preserves the best schools and practices that exist in many communities throughout the country. It seeks to foster the creation of many new schools and to help others move from their current practices and approaches to new, more highly effective ones. And it responsibly dismantles schools, school systems, and state policies that have persistently failed.

The radical action agenda is built on a two part strategy:

1. **The creation of small, autonomous, and publicly accountable high schools operating on performance contracts.** These are essential conditions for creating the powerful normative environments that will engage students and staff alike in ongoing growth and learning. These schools will replace existing high schools, many of which are large and low-performing.

2. **The creation of new governance and management structures to nurture, support, and ensure the quality of these schools.** Replacing existing school boards and district central offices, these new structures will serve three functions. First, they will act as chartering agencies, authorizing the creation of entirely new

schools on the basis of performance contracts. We call these new chartering agencies "**School Portfolio Management Boards**." Second, they will be a new locus of accountability, able to close down schools that fail to meet their performance contracts. Third, they will enable schools to receive professional development in a market-based, customer-focused, client-driven environment.

At the heart of this two-part strategy for transformation are four main ideas.

1. **First, local and state leaders must vigorously support, indeed incubate, the widespread creation of new, small schools.** There must be financial and technical assistance available to help educational entrepreneurs plans and start these new schools.

2. **Second, already existing schools should have the opportunity, and persistently failing schools should be required, to be re-chartered under the aegis of a new educational authority, a School Portfolio Management Board.** The SPMB shall charter new schools on the basis of performance contracts, and it shall offer these new schools professional development support.

3. **Third, independent but publicly accountable networks of like-minded schools will develop over time, through the creation of new schools and the re-chartering of old schools.** The networks serve as the coordinating mechanism for a set of schools, but unlike the typical school district office, networks are customer-oriented, market-driven service providers. These networks should be numerous enough to offer meaningful educational choices to parents and students but few enough to be manageable. In the end, multiple networks that exist alongside high performing traditional public schools form an integral part of the re-designed educational system.

4. **Fourth, the network vision is driven by public school choice.** Parents should be able to select from a variety of different network schools, each of which is publicly funded and subject to the authority of the public SPMB. The goal is to introduce market energies to the re-configured educational system in order to stimulate demand-side accountability and supply-side school incubation.

A. LOCAL GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The radical agenda is driven by significant governance changes at the local level. The following structures need to be put in place within localities:

1. A community wide **School Portfolio Management Board** (SPMB) that authorizes autonomous status, interacts with possible school providers and local communities around their needs, and makes judgments about contract renewals. This group would have principal concern for assuring that school-community equity issues are addressed, i.e., that every student has meaningful choice opportunities, that every community has good school opportunity, that the needs of diverse sub-populations within the locality are well served, and so on. This would be a new entity established to run in parallel but separate from the existing board of education or central office. Existing boards of education are eventually phased out (say at the end of 5 years).

   In short, local School Portfolio Management Boards (SPMBs) act as the local education authority, and they are aligned with the city, county, or district. Additional functions include:

   - Authorize autonomous status for schools

- Interact with potential school providers
- Interact with local communities around their needs
- Make judgements about contract renewals
- Create and manage local public information system (provides summary of available schools, results of quality reviews, publishes graduation rates, student/parent satisfaction measures, and so on.)
- Collaborate with community leaders to ensure vibrant youth development learning environments in the community and informed, engaged, empowered community support for youth.

2. **A professionalized, independent school accountability agency** that develops and maintains a set of statistical indicators on school performance; conducts periodic, rigorous systematic school quality reviews, and assures that all of this information is made broadly accessible. The information generated here would be used: inside school communities to stimulate improvement; by parents, to make more informed school choices; and by the school system portfolio board in making its judgments about performance contracts. This function might be undertaken by a state agency. In a state with a very large urban district, the state might create a regional structure, including a city specific group to undertake this work. Key point: however this is arranged this must be a professional organization driven by professional standards of practice and buffered from short-term local political considerations.

3. **A coordinated citywide capacity for youth development strongly tied to the emerging new system of schools.** We are asking school professionals to build much more engaging learning engaging learning environments for children. Rightly, their primary focus will be on more ambitious academic work for all students. But, these environments must do more than just focus on "academics"; they must support each students' full development into adulthood. The emerging networks of schools need to connect to a diverse set of youth development opportunities:
   a. Athletics that support each students physical development
   b. Community service that nurtures a sense of responsibility to others and a sense of membership in a larger democratic society
   c. Career internships/work opportunities that allow individuals to explore interests and create meaningful adult-life experiences organized around work
   d. Expeditionary learning that promotes development of responsible selves
   e. Engaging diversity in our society where we create opportunities for students to work and live in another community or country, quite different from their own, and learn how we live together as a diverse, convivial democratic society.

   Thus, another key piece entails integrating resources and governance across a wide range of primary and secondary services that intend to support youth development but currently do not do so very well.

4. **A support services infrastructure with which school might contract.** Autonomous schools will need access to a variety of services previously provided by districts. Some of these such as maintenance, payroll and accounting might continue to be supplied on a fee-for-services basis by districts or could be purchased more generally in the marketplace. Other specialized services such as special education might be best addressed through some cross network, perhaps even citywide, collaboratives. In general, extant departments within the district would be afforded opportunities to transform themselves over a five-year development period to compete as possible service providers.

A. NETWORKS

The creation of independent networks of schools that contract with a School Portfolio Management Board is a new and powerful idea. Networks of like-minded schools should have broad authority and autonomy, freeing them to pursue in a coordinated way their vision of what constitutes good schooling.

Among other things, networks will do the following:

- Forge an educational vision that builds on the belief that all kids can learn at high levels
- Supports educational vision with curriculum, assessment, admissions processes, graduation standards, and so on
- Provide professional support within a community of like-minded people
- Serve as critical friends, introducing horizontal accountability to a system dominated by vertical accountability
- Provide or contract for pre-service and in-service education for leaders and teachers
- License teachers and leaders
- Develop new schools
- Market the network by providing data and other information about school goals to the public
- Set guidelines and carry out appropriate human resource functions (e.g., hiring, firing, evaluation). The distribution of these functions between networks' central office and individual schools' human resource responsibilities will vary by networks.
- Maintain a high ratio of adults directly involved with students in the overall count of personnel in the network
- Ensure each school site's facilities, payroll, and other material needs are met
- Engage in or contract for research and development
- Serve a geographical area, though the network may be replicated in different regions or states
- Limited to a finite number of schools
- Review school sites to determine if network guidelines are met
- Provide or contract with organizations that support their vision
- Meet state requirements in literacy, math, and civic development

The idea of re-structuring the system of providing education through the creation of networks of like-minded schools is new, but networks already exist in a rudimentary form. In order to illustrate the core educational unit of a school network, consider these examples of potential networks. What are examples of potential networks?

Two distinct forms of networks meet many of the characteristics above. The difference between the two forms might be characterized as "franchise" versus "chain." Montessori, Waldorf and Success for All are franchises which operate under an agreed to set of guidelines but with considerable variety between sites. Aspire Public Schools in Northern California and the nation-wide Edison Schools are more like chains since they ask very particular things of each of their schools. Aspire and Edison operate and manage each of their schools from one central office. The Met in Providence, Rhode Island, New Tech High and High Tech High in California are in the process of establishing their replication process and it is yet to be seen if they will operate as chains or franchises.

In his recent book *The Disciplined Mind*, Howard Gardner promotes an educational vision not unlike the one we endorse here. Gardner describes the creation of distinct "educational pathways" – perhaps a dozen – that provide different yet high quality choices to parents

and students. Each pathway possesses its own landscape that embody different educational missions, or more lightly, different school cultures. As an illustration, Gardner offers six potential pathways, ranging from the multicultural pathway (schools emphasizing the study and comparison of racial and ethnic groups), the progressive pathway (schools inspired by the progressive pedagogy of educators such as John Dewey and Deborah Meier), the canon pathway (schools committed to transmitting traditional American and Western values), to the understanding pathway (Gardner's preferred educational vision in which students pursue deep and authentic educational experiences organized around simple and age-old concerns about the true, the beautiful, and the good).

Another analogue for our proposal can be found in Paul Hill's proposal that states move past charter schools and begin to create charter districts. In a charter district, all local public schools are charter schools. The school board opts, in effect, to provide schooling not by operating schools on its own but by working with independent groups. According to Hill, charter districts create a number of benefits for administrators, teachers, parents and students, ranging from increasing the number of school options available to students to boosting funding for individual schools. [Paul Hill, "Charter School Districts", Progressive Policy Institute, May 16, 2001.]

C. THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The goal of every state is to ensure that families have access to a variety of quality educational options that prepare all students for college, work and civic contribution.

The six roles of the state:

1. Set common academic standards and graduation/college entrance requirements
    - Academic standards cover literacy, math, science, and social studies
    - Other required learning experiences may be required in civics, job internships, community service, working with diversity, and outdoor education. These learning experiences would be locally defined and participation/completion would be verified.
    - Statewide annual assessment in literacy and math (online, grade 3-8) and a high school exit exam
    - Sanction a board (e.g., a higher education board, state school board, or independent board) to approve assessment systems by which students demonstrate mastery of high school exit/college entrance standards
    - Require high school graduates to 1) pass state literacy and math exit exams; 2) demonstrate mastery in all subjects through an approved assessment system; and 3) complete any other required learning experiences (high school students could begin earning college credit after completing 1 and 2)

2. Create robust public information systems to inform parent choice through:
    - Summary of school offerings and special features
    - School quality reviews
    - Test scores and other assessment results
    - Graduation rates, attendance rates, safety rates
    - Parent, student and teacher satisfaction measures

3. Create a system of needs-based funding that allows:
    - Operating funds to include base plus allowance for special needs, poverty and cost of living

- Capital allocation for purchase/lease of facility and scheduled replacement of assets

4. Ensure human resource quality
   - State sets minimum education and competency standards for new teachers
   - State approves school, network, district, or generic (i.e., NBPTS) certification which demonstrates pedagogical expertise and content knowledge
   - Certified staff become eligible for pensions which are portable across all public schools

5. Use performance contracts as a primary means of achieving accountability
   - Between states or district (community boards) and schools or networks of schools
   - Between states and districts (community board) where the district has been approved as an operator of schools (see roles of district/community board)

6. Streamline inputs, program requirements and funding to allow for flexibility:
   - Performance based system with limited input and programmatic requirements other than health, safety and civil rights
   - Streamlined funding

D. GETTING THERE FROM HERE:
A TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY FOR A LARGE URBAN DISTRICT

Given this vision, how can state and local leaders change policies to foster the transformation of large urban districts into a system of intense, small learning communities that advance high standards of learning for all students? In keeping with the conviction that no single policy, or even set of policies, is appropriate all situations, we emphasize again the need for flexibility. Policy leaders should build however off four key premises.

Key Premises

- Every high school that is not high performing will eventually operate on individual school performance contracts.
- All new and re-chartered high schools should be designed as small schools or with small learning communities
- Each school should identify, and more importantly, embody a distinct vision, philosophy, or instructional system, including most prominently a view about how youth and adults should interact with one another.
- Meaningful choice options should exist for all parents and students within a diverse landscape of schools.

Starting Points: A Taxonomy of Schools

Policymakers and leaders confront, obviously, a condition of considerable variability among existing high schools. Speaking very generally, large urban districts contain at least five kinds of schools.

> **High performing schools:** These schools are already high achieving, or are registering strong improvements in response to existing accountability mechanisms. Such schools typically desire more autonomy from the current system, and their work is frequently threatened or undermined by "standardized" system policies. These schools would move immediately to a new status as autonomous units operating under performance contracts under the authority of the relevant School Portfolio Management Board (SPMB).

Successful schools: These schools succeed in educating many students to high standards; large numbers (75 percent or more) percent pass standardized tests and the overwhelming majority meet exit exams and graduation requirements. But in successful, as opposed to high performing, schools, slow or no improvement toward even greater student achievement is seen. These schools should be given all possible support to bring all students to high standards, and should be encouraged to form a performance contract with the SPMB.

Struggling schools: A large middle group of schools educate some students to high standards but stand in need of substantial improvement if they are to succeed in bringing all or even many to the standards. Moreover, within this group of schools quite varied capacity exists for self-improvement. These schools will be given strong incentives and substantial support for restructuring themselves into small learning communities. Small groups of teachers both within and across schools in this sub-group should receive support to develop and begin implementing plans for small learning communities and drafting performance contracts. These small development groups will have access to assistance in a variety of forms (e.g., time, money, connections to newly designated autonomous schools, consultant resources from local, state, and national groups). Over time, some struggling schools will successfully transition into smaller and higher performing learning communities; others will continue to struggle. Those that succeed would be granted autonomous status by petition to the SPMB. The small learning communities that fail, or whole schools that fail, would be candidates for subsequent closure and their facilities freed for future rounds of new school development. A third group of promising small learning communities that need continued support and resources seems likely, and these might be identified as early as year 3 or year 4 in the process and targeted for expanding assistance.

Dysfunctional schools: A small but distressing number of schools, almost always immediately identifiable by any district leader, are grossly and continuously dysfunctional. In these schools few students meet state standards, drop out rates are high, staff turnover is legion, and violence may be common. They have little if any organizational and leadership capacity to improve. Dysfunctional schools are candidates for closure, and the most disastrous of these schools should be targeted for immediate shut down and reconstitution. Their facilities would be designated for new small school start-ups, and authority over future use of the facilities would transfer to the SPMB.

Alternative schools: Alternative schools usually exist apart from the traditional operation of the broader system; they possess more autonomy and are driven by particular missions. Almost every urban district has fostered the creation of such alternative and focus-driven schools, ranging from charter schools, magnet schools, career academies, separate schools for pregnant girls or violent youth, and so on. Such schools already possess, as a rule, significant autonomy. Though all alternative schools are not high performing -- indeed some might be classified as dysfunctional -- all alternative schools should be converted immediately to performance contract schools under the authority of the SPMB. Those that fail persistently to reach their performance goals will thereby be subject to the accountability mechanisms established by the SPMB.

Five Year Transition and Capacity Building

What can state and local leaders do to build upon the efforts of the incremental action agenda, leading toward large scale institutional change? We envision a five year staging period designed to build system capacity for two essential tasks: transforming schools into

small learning communities and transitioning from existing district control to performance contracts under a SPMB. Over this transition period, district offices themselves must be transformed. Some functions will disappear or will be assumed by new entities, such as networks or SPMBs. Other aspects of the extant central office will be restructured into fee-for-services provided under contracts with autonomous schools or networks.

During the transition period, state and local leaders should:

- Support capacity development in initial rounds of authorizing new autonomous schools with an eye toward building a network infrastructure for starting new schools and/or reorganizing existing high schools into smaller learning communities. A variety of different schools and school networks are desirable. The key element here is boosting capacity within communities for incubating new school development.

- Establish a fund for innovation to support and conduct research on new school development. These resources should be used to assist: teachers or community leaders who coalesce around a vision for a new school; community groups who wish to pursue a distinctive educational vision that builds upon their own knowledge and programs; school and district leaders to seek out promising design models or networks in other cities or states; and to stimulate and support local schools of education to start new schools and develop public school networks.

- Close and reconstitute dysfunctional schools in order to create the physical capacity for housing new schools. In addition, this activity sends an unmistakable message to struggling schools that more serious change is on the horizon if school improvements fail to materialize.

- Provide significant resources, both money and professional development to assist schools and subgroups of teachers, community leaders, or networks to plan, develop, and submit performance contracts.

We recognize that no district or city will have the capacity initially to guide all of these developments. By coupling policies for change with available resources for locally initiated action, and relying on outside pressure from both business communities and market energies aroused by public school choice, many strong learning communities will evolve on their own. That will leave only weak and dysfunctional districts as targets for focused action.

State Action Steps Checklist

- Develop a preliminary plan and timeline (6 months) and take public comment for 6 months.
- Develop a detailed implementation plan and timeline, including a date to sunset the education code, implement the new funding model, and initiate performance contracts (12 months).
- Plan for a public/private investment fund to support the creation of new schools and the redesign of low performing schools.
- Re-write the education code and prepare necessary legislation (12 months).
- Develop and modify state literacy and math assessments.
- Launch an early version of a rich, responsive, and public information system.
- Begin early development of support systems and contracting capacity of local community boards and districts.

- Conduct performance review of districts and schools; notify districts regarding their option:
    1. high performing and some alternative schools are eligible for submitting performance contracts
    2. Middle of the road districts and low performing districts that have demonstrated recent improvements are eligible for performance contracts with approved improvement plans.
    3. Low performing and dysfunctional districts will be targeted for conversion to chartering authorities (SMPBs); in effect, they become charter districts.

VI. Combining Incremental and Radical Change: Common Elements of the Agenda

Can the incremental and radical strategies be combined into a single comprehensive approach for local and state leaders? In many respects, the answer is yes. The two approaches, as already noted, share key assumptions, strive to achieve common youth outcomes, and build upon existing knowledge about the features of high performing learning communities. They both locate fundamental problems in the structure and governance of high schools, agree about the promise but not the panacea of small schools, identify important state responsibilities in setting standards, conducting research, and providing data-rich public information systems, and insist upon flexible pathways to graduation and the imperative public engagement. **But most importantly, when taken together, the incremental agenda and the more radical agenda may represent a robust plan for an inside-outside strategy of transforming American high schools.**

The incremental action steps outline a strategy for states and districts to engage system-internal institutions in placing unprecedented pressure upon and in providing substantial support for the most troubled schools. The radical actions steps outline a strategy for states and districts to introduce powerful and new system-external institutions in the form of the School Portfolio Management Boards, more powerful mechanisms for holding schools accountable to both public officials and to students and their families, and in the form of market energies created by school choice, an equally potent bottom-up accountability mechanism. When combined, the system-internal reforms of the incremental agenda can proceed with the ever-present threat of the system-external reforms of the radical agenda. If fostering incremental change for struggling or dysfunctional high schools fails, the radical agenda of inviting new groups to create performance contracts and open new and small learning communities within the old facility comes into play.

Shared Strategies
The incremental and radical agendas are united on many strategies:

> *1. Incubate, start, and support many new and small schools.*
> Both approaches call for the creation of new schools with greater building-level autonomy. The vision of the radical agenda to create networks of like-minded schools is by no means incompatible with the incremental agenda. On the contrary, the slow proliferation of new schools opened in the short run can facilitate the formation of networks as successful school models are identified.
>
> *2. Initiate drastic intervention in enduringly dysfunctional schools.*
> Both approaches display no patience with failing schools and prescribe immediate intervention in the form of reconstitution or closure. Schools which persistently fail to educate even small numbers of children to high standards and which exhibit little or no capacity to improve should have no warrant to welcome new students.

3. Create rich, responsive, and public data systems that serve as the core vehicle for holding schools accountable and providing information about schools to parents.
Accountability mechanisms, be they from state or district authorities or from the marketplace of educational consumers, cannot work without publicly available data. Nor is it possible for school staffs to engage in continuous self improvement without data about the performance of their students. Both the incremental and radical approach rely on information systems that drive accountability and serve as the fuel for professional development and school improvement.

Much can be learned from the variety of approaches to public data systems currently underway in different areas. Rhode Island, for instance, has a robust school quality review that is available for review on a website. Another approach relies more heavily on the evaluation and feedback of parents and community leaders; in California and Arizona the GreatSchools.net website offers a wealth of information about every public school. Another web vehicle, Just4Kids.org, provides resources that range from analyses of school data to literature on best practices to specific training modules and tutorials for community leaders and parents. These are meant to serve as tools both for the assessment of schools and to better enable community leaders and parents to hold schools accountable.

4. Foster a stronger role for the state, far beyond what most states do today.
Even if different states decide to undertake their responsibilities in different ways, both the incremental and radical agenda envision a strong state role in setting standards, providing accountability, offering professional development, creating and managing public information systems, and re-examining high school graduation standards and aligning them with institutions of higher education.

VII. Areas of Tension and Unresolved Questions

Despite the broad compatibility of the incremental and radical action agendas, it would be a mistake to claim that they easily form a unified and comprehensive plan. Plainly, tensions between the two strategies exist that would have to be addressed. In addition, several unresolved questions remain. Though we have presented this report with the confidence befitting a policy proposal, an honest appraisal of the incremental and radical agenda would find great promise but also great uncertainty.

A. Tensions

1. Role of choice.
The agenda for radical change relies on introducing widespread public school choice for parents. The agenda for incremental change, on the other hand, directs enormous energy and resources at transforming the neediest schools in urban districts. The incremental approach is not averse to school choice, but it does not depend on choice for its realization.

2. Relationship of districts to states, and districts to schools.
The state has a strong leadership role to play in both agendas. But the incremental agenda envisions a strong partnership between the states and districts to improve schools while the radical agenda sees relatively little role for conventional central-office style direction or support to schools in the long run. Here is perhaps the most significant tension: if the incremental agenda succeeds in improving poorly performing high schools through tough-

love partnerships with districts, the radical agenda aims at the ultimate elimination of the very structures in districts instrumental in bringing about improvement.

This particular tension is not insuperable. One way of thinking about the relationship of existing school districts to states in a combined action agenda would be the following. All schools will eventually operate under performance contracts, as envisioned in the radical transformation strategy. One of the many performance contracts, however, might be an arrangement between a state and a district. So long as student achievement is exemplary, there is no reason for the state to insist upon the disappearance of the traditional district. Seen in this light, high performing districts can rely on implementing aspects of the incremental action agenda while low-performing or entrepreneurial districts deploy the more radical agenda.

3. What counts as a public school?
Educational reformers have long been engaged in a debate about what should constitute a "public school." Is a public school one that is governed by a public authority such as a democratically elected school board, or is a public school any school that receives public funding, be it publicly run or not? The incremental and radical agendas for transforming high schools raise this question in a new form. In both agendas, public schools are subject to public authorities, either the district, state, or School Portfolio Management Board. But in the radical agenda, the teachers and administrators of many schools will be employees of networks rather than employees of the state. Though network schools are funded by public monies, the networks operate under performance contracts. Networks are therefore quasi-private organizations. At the most abstract level, then, combining the incremental and radical agenda forces us to grapple with what the "public" in "public" education means.

B. Unresolved Questions
Beyond the tensions between the two agendas, there exist a host of unresolved questions. Neither agenda here is a complete blueprint for change, and it is inevitable that there would be areas left unexplored. A fully worked out action plan would have to include consideration of the following questions:

- How do teachers unions figure into the plan? Are they partners or obstacles to change?

- What is the appropriate timing for holding students and schools accountable to standards?

- How can the capacity of states and localities improve in order to carry out these reforms? Is there a sufficient supply of talent available for the creation of many high performing schools? Is there sufficient commitment of state and local leaders to stimulate the political will necessary to implement these reforms?

When low-performing students enter high school, how much and when should high schools be held responsible for bringing these students up to high standards of achievement?

Those who have skills in running systems may not be best suited at converting or transforming them. How can we ensure that transitions are well-managed?

Do districts have the capacity to transform themselves into high performance organizations that are more responsive to schools, allow greater flexibility/autonomy, etc.?

Would choice, autonomous schools, etc. result in a form of voluntary resegregation? If we dismantle a dysfunctional school, how do we ensure enough alternatives are in place to serve the young people? What happens to them during the transition?

C. Hope in the Future: Conjoining Humility and Urgency

Like most exciting visions, a world of possibility exists alongside a parallel world of uncertainty and peril. We are impelled by the recognition, however, that inaction and reliance on the status quo is more than unacceptable; it consigns many future generations of students to a world of unequal educational opportunity and it ensures that the credo "all children can learn to high standards" is nothing more than a feel-good incantation.

Yet the needed, large-scale transformation of high schools is as complex a task as any in recent education history. There are unique challenges to overhauling one of the most stable if not intractable institutions in the last half-century. Addressing these in most large cities means also taking on an additional set of education, bureaucratic and political challenges endemic to urban education.

We can't be certain if either the incremental or the more radical approaches proposed here will be sufficient to bring about the needed changes and, more importantly, produce the necessary results for students. The fact of the matter is that at present, we lack the empirical evidence, experience and overall knowledge to permit us to proceed with great confidence down one path or the other.

However, we certainly know enough to get started, without delay or hesitation. We are smart enough to design and carry out the necessary research, documentation and evaluation studies to enable policymakers and practitioners at all levels to identify the need for both large and small midcourse corrections when appropriate.

If we are also bold enough to act in the face of uncertainty, and persistent enough to mobilize the political, human and financial resources necessary for ultimate success, we can be hopeful about the prospects of ultimate success for our youth.