



# Meeting the Invention Challenge

## A Background Paper for Participants in a National Convening

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Prepared by Jobs for the Future

**“Whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. . . . This country needs and values the talents of every American.”**

*—President Barack Obama, Address to Congress, February 24, 2009*

In his February address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama called on all Americans to pursue some form of education beyond high school, and he challenged the nation by 2020 to once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. As he noted: “Those who out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”

To reach this goal will take the kind of effort rarely seen at the federal level—a concerted campaign with several distinct and difficult targets:

- Reverse 40 years of decline in the high school graduation rate and increase significantly the percentage of young people who graduate high school ready for college and career;
- Help many more low-income and underprepared young people follow their dreams and enroll in college; and
- Dramatically increase the success rates of students in community colleges and nonselective four-year institutions.

Each step along the way poses challenges, but we know this much: This effort cannot rely solely on picking off the low-hanging fruit. Our school systems are not producing enough to pick. Incremental improvement strategies, while necessary, will not be enough. The scale and depth of the challenge are too great.

Consider these data:

- A Jobs for the Future analysis of national longitudinal data found that only 45 percent of students graduate high school prepared for college-level work; among low-income youth that drops to 23 percent.
- The same analysis concluded that among eighth graders eligible for free and reduced lunch, only 21 percent complete a college credential within eight years of graduating, compared to 49 percent of middle-income peers.
- Nearly 1.2 million Americans each year—almost one in three students—do not graduate high school on time. While a significant percentage claw their way back into the education system and earn a diploma or GED, about 20 percent of all students never earn a high school credential—and close to 40 percent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quintile drop out before earning a diploma.

What if, as a nation, we set a goal of increasing the on-time high school graduation rate from its current rate of around 70 percent to a still inadequate 80 percent in the next decade? Based on data from the class of 2005, the nation's schools would have to reduce the number of students who fail to graduate by 400,000, from today's 1.2 million a year. Many districts, principally in the suburbs, already meet or exceed this goal. The primary challenge is in our cities. A recent report on graduation rates in the fifty largest U.S. cities, published by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, makes the case this way:

- In the principal school system in the nation's 50 largest cities, the four-year graduation rate is 53 percent.
- While these 50 districts educate one in eight students nationally, they produce about one quarter of the students who fail to graduate (279,000).

To raise the graduation rate in these districts even to the national average would require making graduates out of one third of the students in these districts who fail to graduate on time. To reach a goal of 80 percent graduation would require one half of those who fail to graduate to stay in school and earn a diploma in four years.

*And this exercise considers only the graduation rate—not graduation ready to succeed in college-level courses without remediation, which is the right goal.*

With challenges of this magnitude, piecemeal reforms and incremental school improvement strategies will surely fall short. More dramatic changes are needed that result in the proliferation of learning environments that demonstrate success, particularly with students typically left behind—those from lower-income families, minority and immigrant communities, families that have never had a college graduate, and those who attend low-performing high schools where a graduation rate of 50 to 60 percent is the norm.

A central challenge for education reformers today is how to promote the dramatic expansion of innovations that appear to be effective and scalable for students in danger of dropping out (and those who have dropped out) and how to encourage experimentation with new ways of preparing struggling students for whom effective models are few and largely untested. And, of course, to do so in ways that are affordable and sustainable.

These dramatic innovations need to build upon the strong foundation set by the standards reform movement, a foundation that is making significant progress in helping schools and districts see their weaknesses more clearly and set goals for academic quality and improvement. In addition, the support of innovation in teaching and learning must build on emerging evidence of what works in urban high schools, develop ways to sustain progress made, and unleash the power of innovation to tackle education problems that are still unsolved across the nation. Federal and state policy must embrace, as analyst Ted Kolderie has put it, “the other half of the strategy”: the augmentation of current system reform efforts with policies that spur the proliferation of more radically effective ways to educate young people.

### **Accelerating Innovation is the Next Reform Challenge**

It is for this reason that innovation has become a watchword of the Obama Administration. As Secretary of Education Arne Duncan testified at his confirmation hearing, given persistent inequities in college-ready graduation rates, “promoting innovation that accelerates student learning” will be one of his department’s top priorities.

Coming from an eight-year stint as superintendent of one of the largest urban school districts, Duncan knows that one of the bright spots in urban education in recent years has been the proliferation of highly successful urban middle and high schools.

- New York City created close to 200 schools created as the core of the city’s high school reform effort. These schools achieve graduation rates consistently above 75 percent, nearly 20 points higher than the city average and often twice the rate of the schools they replaced. And this is with a higher-than-average percentage of English language learners and students with disabilities compared with other schools in the city.
- The national network of early college high schools, initially launched with generous resources from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has expanded to more than 200 schools in 24 states. Early data show that grade-to-grade promotion rates exceed 90 percent. In the network’s first two graduating cohorts of students, 85 percent earned at least a semester of transferable college credit; 10 percent earned two full years of college credit or an Associate’s degree. More than 81 percent enrolled in postsecondary education.

- The Green Dot network has opened 18 public charter high schools in high-need areas of Los Angeles. Eighty percent of entering ninth-graders graduate within four years, compared to just 47 percent in Los Angeles Unified School District high schools. Three-quarters of graduating seniors have been accepted to four-year universities, and nearly all the rest go on to two-year colleges.
- In *Sweating the Small Stuff* (2008), David Whitman documents six inner-city secondary schools that have eliminated or come close to eliminating the achievement gap between low-income, minority students and middle-class, white students. One is the SEED School in Washington, DC, a public, college-preparatory boarding school that has expanded its model to a campus in Maryland. As of 2008, 85 percent of SEED alumni are on track to graduate from college.
- New innovative schools that operate with non-traditional flexibilities and rules are now educating a significant share of students in some of the nation's largest and most troubled urban communities. Charter school attendance has reached 55 percent in New Orleans, 31 percent in Washington, DC, and 22 percent in both Detroit and San Antonio. Roughly 7,000 (13 percent) of Boston public school students attend district "pilot" schools that have greater flexibility and autonomy, while another 1,300 students attend charter schools in the city. In Chicago, 24 of the city's 116 high schools are now small schools serving 500 or fewer students, emphasizing a more personalized learning environment and a cohesive staff vision.

However, Secretary Duncan also knows that despite pockets of high school innovation, the number of effective high school learning environments for lower-income students is still too low. Too many political, cultural, and fiscal and other policy barriers stand in the way of expansion and experimentation with new learning innovations. The need is great for strategies that can accelerate better teaching and learning and expand promising and effective approaches.

Duncan knows as well that new schools do not in and of themselves guarantee improved outcomes. When Bill Gates reflected on his foundation's strong support for the development of new small schools during the past decade, he noted that New York City was the one district where this new high school development had led consistently to better outcomes for predominantly minority and low-income students and for the district as a whole.

Why? Chancellor Joel Klein, in an article in *Forbes*, said that New York City created new schools not as a reform in itself but as a *strategy for delivering reform*—built on strong teaching and leadership, high expectations, and the use of data and accountability. New schools came on line to replace the worst performing schools, simultaneously freeing up resources and sending a clear message about performance across the district.

Although they differ greatly in areas of curricular focus, particular identity, and whether they were launched inside or outside district governance, successful urban high schools share a set of core characteristics of good teaching and learning that can meet the needs of underprepared low-income youth, including:

- Rigorous academic standards that define and promote a college-going culture for all students;
- Strong and committed teachers and school leaders who engage in collaborative professional practices that keep them focused on teaching and learning;
- A curriculum that is aligned with high expectations and a college-going culture;
- Careful, regular monitoring of student progress and extra help as needed to keep diverse learners on track to college-ready graduation;
- Extended learning time during the school year and/or summer; and
- A supportive yet disciplined atmosphere that personalizes education, structures and focuses student choices, and accepts no excuses from adults or young people.

In addition, these innovative schools were born through a common process. Almost all have been launched through the efforts of innovators and educational entrepreneurs who have important autonomies from traditional school system rules and constraints. Some are charter schools, but all have received or negotiated freedoms to design and build quality organizations that traditional school systems usually do not provide. And they benefit greatly from partnerships with foundations, nonprofit intermediaries, community-based organizations, and other special-purpose service providers that target specific challenges and deliver solutions designed to improve student outcomes.

The consensus policy framework of the past decade—focused on raising standards, aligning better assessments with higher standards, and improving data systems so that evidence can drive decision making and accountability—has been the critical groundwork for increased student success. The determination of the Obama Administration to use stimulus funds as an opportunity to drive further progress in these areas is welcome.

However, these system-level reforms, while necessary, are insufficient. Putting needed pressure on districts and schools to ratchet up expectations and performance, current policies provide no guidance to educators on *how* to change teaching and learning to engage students so that they stay in school or how to accelerate learning so that off-track students can reach high standards and be ready for college and career. For fundamental improvements in teaching and learning to occur, federal and state policymakers need to embrace and align the “other half” of the strategy: the promotion of innovation and expanded supply of quality learning environments.

## **What Can the Federal Government Do? A Convening to Identify and Articulate Supportive Policies**

The field of high school innovators is somewhat fragmented and has not addressed federal or state policymakers with a coordinated, strong set of messages. Charter supporters have focused on their agendas; district-level entrepreneurs have their priorities and concerns. Those working inside the system or working closely with particular districts have tended to emphasize different needs and interests than those building stand-alone schools or school networks.

The current reality—both the fragility of these efforts across the country and the new potential for federal support and promotion of innovation at the high school level—creates an opportunity and incentive for more coherence and clarity about how to sustain and grow the innovation sector. Now is the right time for a clear dialogue—among innovators in the field and between innovators and change agents in the federal government—about setting the conditions for innovation that will substantially raise graduation rates and college and career readiness.

As a step toward this dialogue, and to drive the expansion of quality learning options, Jobs for the Future convened a group of high school reformers who have been building new institutions and creating new mechanisms at the district, community, and state levels. On May 11-12, this working conference, *Meeting the Invention Challenge*, brought together a unique combination of:

- New school developers who have created and supported stand-alone or networks of excellent schools;
- District leaders who are building systems of schools and learning options that can reach different groups of off-track high school-age students;
- State officials working to promote high school innovation;
- Funders at the forefront of efforts to support new approaches; and
- Representatives of the Washington, DC, policy community.

These are individuals deeply committed to the success of the most educationally challenged segments of our population, individuals who have dedicated their careers to the educational success of students who need very different environments and supports than traditional high schools if they are to stay in school and learn at the level required for college and career success. They understand the obstacles to the proliferation of innovative solutions. They see the need for the invention of solutions that do not yet exist. And their collective call for policies to support innovation will help open the landscape to reforms that substantially raise graduation rates.

Specifically, the working group considered and refined a set of guiding principles for federal strategy and action. A planning group prior to the meeting took a first step in articulating principles they believe are necessary if innovation is to be sustained and reach the next level of scale:

**1. Expand what works but recognize and support efforts to invent new solutions for the most serious remaining challenges.**

Innovation funds should be used to reward and expand promising models that show evidence of dramatic improvements in student outcomes. At the same time, the federal government should promote innovation in areas and for students—such as English language learners, overage and undercredited young people—where success has been limited and the invention of new approaches is imperative.

**2. In defining what works, set standards of evidence appropriate to the stage of development of new models.**

To support and provide continuing space for innovation, the federal government will need ways to use data and evidence to determine the effectiveness and promise of models for investment. Newness should not mean exemption from careful assessment of student progress toward the same common high standards expected of all schools and students. However, the last administration's emphasis on research over development and on random assignment evaluation as the "gold standard" will need to be refined and broadened to support new and recent innovations.

New models may offer promising evidence of early success that makes them good candidates for further investment. Standards for demonstrating early progress need to be specified. Many school models, particularly those that start with a middle school cohort or that combine high school and postsecondary learning, have a long lead time before it is possible to analyze their college-readiness and graduation rates. The recent study of KIPP Academy's Bay Area middle schools demonstrates how new models can show important academic gains (e.g., accelerated learning for those who persist) while at that same time needing to improve performance in certain ways (significant attrition back to traditional schools). Balancing the public interest in rigorous assessment of results with the need to let new approaches and institutions continuously improve through their early years is complicated—and needs to be worked through without creating different sets of standards and expectations for new versus traditional institutions.

**3. Reward and promote autonomies within a framework of clear accountability.**

The federal government should use its innovation funding and other incentives to reward and promote school development models that provide teachers and leaders with the autonomies and freedom from constraints that are critical to successful teaching and learning for underprepared students. This support for local autonomy must be balanced with a high level of accountability for results. Growth measures will have to be an important component of any accountability system for high schools that target students

who are behind in grade level or have left school altogether. The federal government should help drive states and districts toward supporting the conditions for more widespread innovation rooted in school autonomies to deliver quality instruction. It should also carefully assess its accountability mechanisms so that they balance the goal of innovation with that of common, high standards and expectations.

#### **4. Create incentives for states and districts to reallocate resources and provide additional supports to innovators who provide quality solutions.**

Through the Race to the Top fund and other opportunities, the federal government can provide incentives for states to support more innovative efforts to expand the supply of quality learning environments. As a number of large districts have found, closing down low-performing schools should be coupled with strategies to reallocate resources to new school development and to teaching and learning strategies that can achieve better results.

At the same time, districts that close down low-performing schools find that the closure and reallocation strategy is insufficient: it is difficult to reallocate all the freed-up resources to new schools; an investment strategy to increase the supply of new options will still be needed. A fuller assessment of opportunities for federal incentives to shape state and district action is needed.

#### **5. Support the critical role of focused intermediaries that support innovative schools and service provision.**

Most effective new high schools, whether created by a free-standing entrepreneurial organization or developed inside a district, have relied upon the protection and support of a special purpose intermediary organization: a charter management organization like KIPP or Green Dot, a group like New Visions in New York City, or the New Schools Project in North Carolina. These entities play a critical role in helping schools set and maintain high expectations for teachers, students, and parents, even as political priorities or players change. Federal innovation investments should recognize and support these entities and help states and districts create and support and interact with them. This “inside-outside” partnership is critical to stability, focus, and sustainability. So is the expertise that these entities develop, which can help districts and networks of schools solve complex problems of human capital recruitment and development, instructional methods and materials, college/career counseling, and culture-building.

Building from this initial set of principles, participants in the working meeting will flesh out a more detailed and actionable set of priorities for the Department of Education and the federal government more broadly. The fruits of their grappling with difficult issues of design, incentive structures, finance, and accountability will be objectives and priorities to be discussed with administration and congressional officials at the end of the meeting. That back-and-forth dialogue will focus on how the federal government can use its authorities, resources, and bully pulpit to best advantage in support of what works, as well as to encourage and provide incentives for efforts to create new innovations that can dramatically improve outcomes for particular groups of students—all while

maintaining the pressure of systemic reforms to drive schools and districts toward higher attainment and achievement for all.

This is an exciting time. The federal government understands the need for innovative solutions rather than business as usual across its areas of responsibility, from health care to housing to education. At the same time, the federal government must fight powerful tendencies to inertia, one-size-fits-all solutions, and justified skepticism about fads and the unproven. How well will the federal government be able to support the growth of models that work and to seed experimentation with approaches that have yet to be perfected or even imagined? We do not know, but the opportunity exists for constructive dialogue between the field and federal leaders.

There is great urgency for making progress. The impressive efforts of the past decade, supported with private dollars and fitful policy action from different levels of the public sector, are fragile. Now is the time for more thoughtful and higher-leverage action so that this innovation sector survives and continues to grow and to improve—and so that the delicate combinations of culture, focus, and talent within schools where students succeed can become widespread and influential across our nation’s most troubled and needy communities.