Why We Need a New Secondary School System: An Agenda for State Leaders

By Hilary Pennington

"Implementing the kinds of changes that will make our education pipeline work as we need it to will be very hard, especially given the budget crises in the states today," noted JFF CEO Hilary Pennington in this address to "The American High School Crisis and State Policy Solutions," a Washington, DC, forum for educators, policymakers, scholars, and business leaders. Nevertheless, she continued, "this very environment will force us to create more 'out of the box' solutions than we might consider in better times. Certainly, it will require leaders with the vision and courage to take on entrenched interests."

Pennington laid out six steps that state leaders can take to improve postsecondary attainment rates. As she noted, "Many states have some of these policies, but none have put them all together as part of coherent, high-priority strategy." Held in September 2003, the forum was convened by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the National Center for Education and the Economy.

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here with you for this important conference about high school reform and to share some thoughts to get us started. You have just heard a very thoughtful and challenging presentation by Dane Linn of the many issues facing American high schools—leaving you with a long, complex list of changes to consider. At the risk of overwhelming you, I want to ask you to stretch your minds at this early hour in order to turn the lens a slightly different way. I have two propositions:

- First, if you agree with Dane that we must dramatically increase the number of students prepared for and completing education beyond high school, then we must treat high school reform as part of a pipeline to postsecondary learning, not an end it itself;

- Second, we *can* achieve this improvement if we design our interventions backwards from the highest level of education we expect our young people to reach. We know how to do this, but it won't happen without the commitment of people like you.

Why this emphasis on postsecondary attainment in a conversation about high school reform?

Some kind of postsecondary education is the *minimum* requirement for success today. By this, I don't mean all students need a BA degree, but a range of postsecondary credentials that will boost them into jobs that can support a family—such as technical training, industry certification, and apprenticeships, as well as two- and four-year college degrees. Nobody—not an auto mechanic,

machinist, or officer worker—can make a decent wage with anything less. You know the statistics, but they bear repeating: high school graduates in America today earn on average 70 percent less than college graduates. Even one year of postsecondary education boosts lifetime earnings. To paraphrase Tony Carnevale, the only more expensive decision for an American than going to college is *not* going to college.

Now, I can hear some of you wondering: but would the economy be able to absorb more people with postsecondary credentials? Can everyone go to college? There are several ways to answer that question. The first is personal: if you're convinced that *your* child needs to go to college, you can be sure every parent feels that way—and should. The second answer is more substantive.

About one out of three jobs today requires formal higher education. While we currently have a surplus of workers with the necessary education to obtain these jobs, over the next decades the retiring baby boom generation will turn this surplus into a shortage. By some estimates, we will need 14 million more workers with some college education than our educational systems have produced. Our economy can absorb significantly more people with some postsecondary education.

Education beyond high school pays other dividends as well: college graduates vote in much higher proportions than high school graduates do, a civic engagement our democracy needs. Every time in our history that we have expanded access to higher education—like with the GI Bill and land grant colleges—we have experienced increased prosperity and economic growth.

This brings me to my first point: Those of us working to improve high schools must focus not only on improving the performance of the nation's secondary schools but also on getting more students to—and through—*postsecondary* programs. Our goal at JFF is that every young American will achieve a first postsecondary credential by age 26.

We will not be able to achieve this unless we address some fundamental problems in the pipeline from high school to college. According to one study, for every 100 students who enter the ninth grade, only 67 graduate from high school, 38 enter college, 26 are still enrolled in college after their sophomore year, and 18 graduate with either an Associate's degree or a Baccalaureate within *six* years of graduating from high school. The numbers are even worse for low-income students and for black and Hispanic Americans, the fastest growing proportion of the youth cohort.

Now, there are lots of ways to calculate this, and other studies using different methodologies put the numbers somewhat higher—with as many as 40 percent of Americans *eventually* achieving some kind of postsecondary certificate or degree. But eventually is not good enough. By any measure, we can do better.

Current reform efforts will help narrow this gap, but they will not close it. For example, our efforts to raise academic standards, institute high school exit exams, and create new, smaller high schools should mean more students graduate prepared for careers or college-level work. And expanding awareness of the importance of college among families that don't have a tradition of college-going and increasing financial aid would also help. But these strategies alone won't increase the numbers of students who complete postsecondary education. Only if we improve the *pipeline* linking our high school, postsecondary, and second-chance education systems can we be truly successful in that task.

This is not just semantics. How we define the problems we are trying to solve has an enormous impact on what the outcomes will be. Take, for example, two serious blind spots of current reform efforts. First, they focus on "high school reform" as a standalone endeavor rather than part of a pipeline to postsecondary learning. Second, by and large, they ignore young people who have dropped out. Our accountability systems don't even count them.

As a result, we are likely to implement what systems-thinking experts would call "fixes that backfire." In other words, by focusing on high school as a "standalone," we have spent millions of dollars and substantial political capital building high school exit exams that ignore the next part of the pipeline: the performance standards required for entrance into career jobs or credit-bearing courses at the college level.

Similarly, as cities like Houston and New York are finding, by focusing our reform efforts primarily on high schools, we have ignored the substantial numbers of young people who drop out of them—over 50 percent of those who start high school in some places. As people begin to look more closely at the school practices and policies that produce such tragic outcomes, they are starting to call these young people "push-outs" rather than "drop-outs." *The New York Times* put it this way in July: "Many schools are trying to get rid of those who may tarnish the schools' statistics by failing to graduate on time. Even though state law gives students the right to stay in high school until they are 21, many students are being counseled, or even forced, to leave long before then."

So, to my second point: in defining the goal for high school reform as getting more young people through some postsecondary education, what do we know about what works—especially for the kinds of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, children of color and low-income children?

We know a lot.

Let's look at the experience of some schools that are beating the odds for these students by beginning to bridge the secondary/postsecondary chasm on their own. Take for example, University Park Campus School in Worchester, Massachusetts— a grade 7-12 school in partnership with Clark University that enrolls almost entirely low-income English language learners—over half of whom

start seventh grade with reading levels of fourth grade and below. Every student takes an honors-level college preparatory curriculum. University Park ranks in the top 12 Massachusetts high schools in its tenth-grade MCAS scores. All its students passed the MCAS on their first try and all its graduates are going to college, with free tuition if they attend Clark.

University Park and other schools like it—research by JFF, Pathways to College, and others has found—make it their mission to get their students to complete postsecondary credentials, and they organize themselves accordingly. What do they do that works? They blend the best of what Michele Cahill would call cognitive challenge and youth development. They align their expectations, curricula, and assessments with those of postsecondary institutions. They place low-achieving students in advanced courses and give them the help they need to succeed—tutors, advisory systems, and longer blocks of time for core courses—in sharp contrast to the traditional high school practice of watering down the curriculum for struggling students. These schools help connect students to the world beyond the high school walls by internships, community service, and work experience. And they set up data systems to track students over time—gathering information on how their students do after graduation that they use to improve their instruction and advisory systems.

A number of schools have done something even more radical: they have eliminated the boundaries between high school and college. So-called early college high schools, middle college high schools, and drop-out recovery programs at community colleges, each involving students in grades 11 through 14, permit students to accelerate their route to postsecondary education. They create more flexible learning environments for struggling students by locating high schools on college campuses, introducing college-level curricula and expectations to high-school age students, encouraging the accelerated accumulation of college credits, and providing students with greater respect and independence than they generally encounter in high school.

Portland Community College's College Bound program for out-of-school youth is a good example. The program has multiple entry points that allow students with as low as third-grade-level reading and math skills to enroll in non-credit and developmental education courses that link directly to credit-based career education programs. Eighty percent of the out-of-school youth who enter PCC's high school completion program earn a diploma or a GED and continue their education at the postsecondary level or obtain employment while simultaneously gaining college credits.

Now what about states? Let me leave you with six important steps state leaders can take to improve postsecondary attainment rates and encourage more schools like these:

- First: Set a concrete goal for increasing the numbers of your students who finish high school and complete a recognized postsecondary

credential by age 26—and for reducing the unacceptable discrepancies we have by race and income. Track progress towards these goals and report it publicly.

- Second: Establish rigorous high school exit standards limited to the gateway skills of numeracy and literacy—standards that are calibrated to the requirements of credit-bearing postsecondary courses and high-skill occupations.

- Third. Dramatically increase the supply of secondary-school options like University Park and PCC Prep that build bridges among high schools, colleges, and your second-chance education system. This should include allowing postsecondary institutions to issue high school diplomas.

- Fourth. Link students' movement up the educational ladder to their academic performance rather than to how many courses they have taken, and encourage the transferability of credits between institutions.

- Fifth. Develop financial and other sorts of incentives that will reward secondary schools and postsecondary institutions for students' successful progression *to and through* college.

- Sixth. Hold postsecondary, as well as secondary, institutions accountable for how well they do at helping students complete a recognized postsecondary credential by age 26. This will require data systems that track students' progress over time.

Today, many states have some of these policies, but none have put them all together as part of coherent, high-priority strategy. For example, North Carolina has established a seed fund for the development of new kinds of high schools. Wisconsin and Minnesota allow state money to follow "at risk" youth who leave high school and choose to enter other educational environments. In Milwaukee, fully 20 percent of high school students now graduate from such alternatives.

Utah's New Century scholarship program offers a 75 percent scholarship to a four-year state college or university for students who graduate from high school with enough credits for an Associate's degree. These are important innovations, but state policy in this arena is still very undeveloped and unsystematic.

In conclusion: Implementing the kinds of changes that will make our education pipeline work as we need it to will be very hard, especially given the budget crises in the states today. But maybe this very environment will force us to create more "out of the box" solutions than we might consider in better times. Certainly, it will require leaders with the vision and courage to take on entrenched interests. And it will require changing our mental models: of what we mean by the words "high school" and "college" and the connections between them. Hard as it is, I hope you will keep these perspectives in mind today, and stretch yourselves to

talk about “high school reform” not as an end in itself but in relation to improving the pipeline to postsecondary learning for all students—which will require significant redesign along the lines I have described.

Because, as difficult as the vision here will be to achieve, there are few things states can do that would pay them greater economic and civic dividends. Thank you.