

Meeting the Challenge of the Urban High School

Joyce Baldwin

As a high school biology teacher, Joyce Baldwin had an up-close view of a classroom; now she writes about education from a wider perspective. She also enjoys writing about health and medicine and is the author of *DNA Pioneer: James Watson and the Double Helix* (Walker Publishing Company, 1994).

If it takes a village to raise a child, it may also take the equivalent—teachers, parents, elected officials, business leaders and anyone else who cares about kids—to create a successful high school.

“Hi, teach!”

This snappy, disrespectful first line in *Up the Down Staircase* effectively sets the tone of Bel Kaufman’s portrayal of her experiences as a teacher in New York City high schools. Kaufman draws a deft portrait of a situation that is at once funny and sad, a story of how teachers and students try to cope with a system that simply doesn’t work for them. The book, which was a great success when published in 1964, sold more than six million copies and was made into a hit movie starring Sandy Dennis.

In a forward to a paperback edition issued in 1991, thirty years after she wrote the classic, Kaufman described her story as one of plunging “Sylvia Barrett, the young, inexperienced, idealistic teacher, into the maelstrom of an average city high school, where, inundated with trivia in triplicate, she had to cope with all that is frustrating and demeaning in the school system, while dealing with larger human issues.”

At the beginning of the new millennium, many educators and students view their own school situations as similar to that experienced by Sylvia Barrett. In a comment

about the current urban school crisis, Kaufman notes that “Everything described in my fiction is today reality. Only computers and condoms are new.” Her story now, she says, “seems more timely than ever, and more urgent.”

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Since Ms. Kaufman wrote that observation, the crisis in the nation’s schools has deepened, especially in large, impersonal urban schools. While there are high schools that do an excellent job of effectively educating students, in many cases schools are not really meeting the needs of today’s young people. Symptoms of this problem include students who are too often absent from school and too often drop out altogether. According to the National Education Association, in 1998 nearly 12 percent of 16-to-24-year-olds were without a high school credential; this included 29.5 percent of Hispanic youth; 13.8 percent of black, non-Hispanic youth; 7.7 percent of white, non-Hispanic youth; and 4.1 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander youth.

One reason for these troubling statistics is that the traditional high school has served as a sorting device, sending graduates off to college or to pursue a vocation or service work and sending students who did not graduate to unskilled jobs. Even though the changing workplace now requires many more people to think creatively rather than perform only manual labor or service work, too many high school students do not graduate, and many who do still do not meet the entrance requirements of colleges and universities. This is particularly true in urban areas where the high school graduation rate is much lower than the national rate.

The problem is compounded by the fact that few, if any, high schools teach reading even though many ninth grade

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Urban Academy As a Student Views It

Stephanie Perez is a senior at Urban Academy, one of the high schools that is part of the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City. Before Stephanie arrived at Urban Academy—or simply “Urban” as the students refer to it—Julia Richman had been transformed into a group of small schools remodeled from a large, impersonal school that was seriously being considered for closure, a school described in the press as “known...more for its shoplifting than for its scholars.”

Today, Stephanie can’t say enough positive things about her experience at Urban. And she should know. Before coming to this school, Stephanie attended a “traditional” high school where she felt she was “wasting my time, just memorizing things, taking a test and not really retaining anything.” Then Stephanie attended a small alternative school that she describes as “not challenging.” She says, “I just would sit in class and talk with friends, and no one noticed.”

At Urban, People Notice.

“The most critically important factor [about Urban] is its size—it’s small and personal, and I get the attention I need from teachers,” says Stephanie. “Since the school is small, the curriculum is both personalized and challenging. Before I came to Urban, I attended a large traditional high school. The work I do here is more rigorous, demanding, and definitely more interesting.”

Stephanie also cites the multicultural aspects of Urban as important to her learning. “I have the oppor-

tunity to get to know other students from different backgrounds very well,” she explains. “This gives students the chance to see different issues from different perspectives.” She says learning in a culturally diverse atmosphere “helps you with social interaction, it teaches you how to deal with people that you’ve never dealt with before and it helps with the class discussions, too.”

At Urban, classes are about an hour long, allowing sufficient time for students to read an assignment and then discuss it or, in science classes, to get involved in laboratory work. On Wednesdays, students are in class only half the day and spend the rest of the day in field work. The school’s success is reflected in the fact that, in 2000, 100 percent of Urban’s graduates were accepted to college.

“One of the things Urban taught me was how to use the city as a resource for my research,” says Stephanie. “I’ve learned how to use city libraries, museums and other cultural institutions more to my advantage. While most of my assignments and projects are started at school, a lot of my work and research are done outside of the traditional classroom setting and my education feels more hands on.”

Students who attended Julia Richman before it was revamped probably wouldn’t recognize their school as the one Stephanie describes. But for Stephanie and other students like her, the school is the best.

students do not have the basic skills to pass required courses and advance to the next grade. In large urban schools, which have never graduated more than half of their students or prepared more than two-in-five students for postsecondary education, there is a significant schism between students who achieve at a high academic level and those who do not.

A “shopping mall” approach to secondary education allows students to take only the courses they want and does not place too many demands on students except those in a high-pressure, high-achievement group. This relaxed approach to education coupled with the fact that high schools often do not demonstrate how education and the world of work are connected prompts too few students to take challenging courses. Although some students tackle rigorous academic work, they represent only a small minority of high school students, and there is an appalling lack of scientific literacy or interest in mathematics, according to Charles J. Sykes who cites a “legacy of dumbness” in his book *Dumbing Down Our Kids* (St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

Even kids making every effort to get the most they can out of their school day face situations that their best intentions cannot resolve, such as violence. U.S. Department of Education data show that, in 1996, more than one-quarter million students, ages 12 through 18, were also victims of nonfatal serious violent crime at school and that in a four-year period more than 1.5 million teachers were victims of crimes. Drug and alcohol abuse are problems for teens, too, and contribute to low achievement rates in school.

A DISCONNECTED SOCIETY

The urgency of the situation in our schools must be viewed in the context of larger changes that have taken place in our society. In *Bowling Alone* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), Robert D. Putnam cites data attesting to the fact that people tend to live more and more in isolation, not reaching out to connect with others. At home, families too often do not interact, spending less and less time vacationing together,

attending religious services together, or just talking together. These features of modern life affect parents and children alike; everyone has a busy schedule and many families even find it difficult to gather for a meal on a regular basis. One study showed that, since 1980, the one-time family ritual of eating dinner together declined by a third, dropping from the 50 percent range to 34 percent. Teenagers may also spend many hours watching television or surfing the Internet, unsupervised and not in close association with another adult.

Students who attend large urban schools report feelings of anonymity, of being just one person among thousands of other youth without an adult in their lives to help negotiate problems and provide support. Many students do not have a relationship in their schools with even one caring adult who knows them personally and participates significantly in their development. Yet in many ways, young people do signal how important it is to them to have strong social and civic connections: across the country, they are becoming involved in volunteer and community service activities in unprecedented numbers.

Our new knowledge-based economy with its emphasis on problem-solving and the ability to cope with change makes it imperative that high school graduates attend college. Yet too many students are unable to meet college entrance requirements and those who do often find postsecondary education to be highly challenging. Many students have difficulty transitioning to college not only because of educational deficits but because their high schools have not provided opportunities for them to interact socially in ways that will help prepare them to live and study in a college or university environment.

LOOKING BACK

How have we reached this crossroads? The history of the American high school began in 1821 when the English Classical School of Boston (later renamed English High School), was established as the first public high school in the country. In the 1880s Calvin M. Woodward and other educational leaders sparked an interest in vocational training with the first manual training high school opening in Baltimore in 1884. Other such schools soon followed with the purpose of training youngsters to become employable plumbers, bricklayers or other manual workers.

Early in the 20th century, John Dewey sparked an interest in educating the whole child so that youngsters would be able to take on the mature responsibilities of participation in a democracy and enjoy meaningful work and economic success. Educators today find themes in Dewey's concepts that are relevant to current school redesign efforts.

In the middle of the last century, the launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik, the world's first satellite, caused the

United States to rethink its school system, and in a 1959 Carnegie Corporation-sponsored report, James Conant urged that mathematics, science and foreign language curricula be strengthened.

Other changes in the latter part of the century stemmed from the Vietnam War and its accompanying student protests, which resulted in the addition of electives that students sought as relevant to their lives.

Toward the close of the 20th century, the Internet and other changes in global technology further exacerbated the need for redesign of obsolete urban schools.

LEARNING FROM HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN EFFORTS

Educators have made progress in revamping failing middle schools, and there are examples of dramatic changes in urban high school redesign, situations in which schools on the brink of being closed have been rescued at the last minute, transformed in a way that captures the mind as well as the heart. Whole new schools have also been created, based on new approaches to teaching and learning. These isolated efforts provide information about what works and what does not.

One tenet of urban high school change is the creation of smaller schools, learning communities where teenagers are known as individuals by one, and hopefully more than one, adult. Small schools provide settings where the hopes and dreams of youth can be nurtured, where teenagers can be nudged and prompted to learn, and where a teacher can help rescue a student before he or she slides behind or passively lets the studying pile up until it is unmanageable.

Some educators hope to break the cycle of failure in part by addressing the need to help students successfully negotiate the transition from the middle school to the high school. The Talent Development High School Model, which was created by educators and researchers at Johns Hopkins University features a Ninth Grade Success Academy, a self-contained school-within-a-school that includes programs designed to help all students meet with success in college preparatory algebra and language arts courses. To bolster social and study skills, a Talent Development High School includes a freshman seminar tailored to help students develop computer and study skills as well as understand the connection between their high school studies and college and career.

This model also provides block scheduling that includes increased time for learning, a core requirement of college preparatory courses for all students, Career Academies for grades 10, 11 and 12, and strategic reading, transition to advanced mathematics and freshman seminar courses as well as alternative after-hours programs for those students with serious attendance problems.

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Bel Air High School *As a Teacher Views It*

It was like a dark tunnel, with no end, no results,” says Genny Galindo describing how she felt a few years back about her teaching job. “You would like to see results at the end of a hard days’ work, to see your students be successful.”

But at Bel Air High School in El Paso, Texas, the students were simply not interested. “They just kept doing the same old thing over and over and coming up with the same results, and it was [thought to be] all the students’ fault.”

The school, which is in a low socioeconomic-level community, was on the brink of being closed. Only about five percent of students even thought about applying to college.

But then six years ago, things changed radically. A new principal, Vernon Butler, took over; one of the first things Butler asked was that all staff members write a letter to reapply for their jobs.

“We wrote about what we believed in as educators, what we had done for the school, for our students, about our teaching methods and strategies, our contributions to the community,” says Galindo. “He wanted to know what we would be willing to do for Bel Air and were we going to take the challenge.”

Galindo says she found the new approach appealed to her integrity as a teacher.

“Hey! We’re not here just to collect a check,” she says softly. “Are we helping our country with the training of minds? Are we doing our part?”

Only 57 of the 132 teachers remained at Bel Air. The teachers who stayed took up Butler’s challenge and transformed the school. “I started looking at new [teaching] strategies,” she says. “We learned new ways to convey the information to our students; we also became very high-tech with computers. I found a new me.”

Galindo says Butler provided the “vision that we needed.” The school now has high academic expectations for all students and, she explains, Butler models compassion and supportive behavior with teachers that transfers to the students.

“He believed that this group could do it, that the parents and the students of the community could rise to the challenge regardless of their background,” Galindo says. Now she proudly reports that some of her students from this border town in Texas have gone on to be successful at leading colleges including Georgetown, Notre Dame and Yale.

Bel Air High School still has room for improvement, as indicated in part by its overall low SAT scores. In a letter to parents and the community, Butler said, “We still have much to do to help our students accomplish their goals.” But in May 2000 Bel Air was named a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education. That recognition was Galindo’s biggest reward.

“We were crying, we were laughing, we were hugging; we wanted to tell the whole world,” she says. “The community deserved it. All the changes and all the hard work had paid off.”

These and other schools, including those in the Annenburg Rural Challenge program, help students make the link between what they learn in school and work by providing field internships. For example, pupils in Rural Challenge schools study the history of their towns, publish newspapers, work at a local library or a nearby museum and find other opportunities to complement their studies.

Although small schools can provide the leverage needed for change, experts say that creating a “small” setting in which students and teachers can interact merely provides the foundation for helping students achieve and that schools must work on many issues including the need to have high standards for all students.

“Comprehensive high schools are trying to be everything to all students and are probably little to most,” says Judy B. Coddling, a co-author of *The New American High School* (Corwin Press, 1998).

Coddling, who was principal of Pasadena High School for five years beginning in 1988, says academic rigor is the bedrock of school redesign. “The purpose of a high school is to prepare all students for college without the need for remediation,” she explains. “That doesn’t mean that all kids need to go to a four-year college, but they do need to have the knowledge and skills to live productive lives. If teens don’t have that, they will be assigned to a life of poverty.”

The reality, however, is that expectations for students do vary. “Our (Philadelphia) data and other data nationally show that in the large urban schools we simply are not offering students the courses, the rigorous learning that they need,” says Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, senior program director of the Philadelphia Education Fund. “We generally have a different set of expectations for students of color and poor students enrolled in the comprehensive (or non-magnet) high schools, even though we have the rhetoric of high standards for all students.”

Whole-District School Reform

In June 2000, Carnegie Corporation awarded 15-month planning grants to ten urban school district-community partnerships nationwide. These grants are the first phase of the Schools for a New Society initiative launched by the Corporation in an effort to provide long-term support for the revamping of large comprehensive urban schools.

“Every student in America is entitled to attend a good high school in order to be prepared for the world of the 21st century,” says Vartan Gregorian, president of Carnegie Corporation of New York. “They are owed a high-performance education where much is offered and much is expected. We don’t expect instant success in turning around every low-achieving high school in each of the ten cities, but we are determined to help build the will that believes no student can be written off. To do less would be to abdicate the Corporation’s role as a leader in education reform.”

Although the participating districts have been actively seeking to redesign their schools, revamping efforts have been more successful in the elementary and middle schools. The challenge at the high school level is much greater, requiring new leadership strategies and a new and dynamic vision of the high school. A key component of this initiative is the partnership teams composed of school officials, teachers, parents and students as well as community stakeholders who are crucial to the success of a high school reform effort. These stakeholders include unions, college personnel, elected officials, business leaders, and leaders of community-based and youth development organizations.

“With this initiative, Carnegie Corporation will encourage and support the development of high schools for all students where there is effective teaching and learning, where students are invested in their own education and support their peers to achieve, and where there are clear pathways to higher education, careers and community participation,” says Michele Cahill, a nationally recognized youth development expert and educator who created the initiative and who will lead the Corporation’s long-term effort.

The ten district-community partnerships that received Carnegie Corporation planning grants are: Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools Foundation, The Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Education Fund, Houston Annenberg Challenge, Indianapolis Public Schools Education Foundation, Inc., New Futures for Youth Inc. (Little Rock), Portland Public

Schools Foundation (Oregon), Health and Education Leadership for Providence, Linking Education and Economic Development in Sacramento, San Diego Foundation, and Clark University (Worcester).

Upon completion of blueprints for effective secondary schools, five of the ten partnerships will be invited into the second phase of the initiative that will fund implementation of the plans. Beginning in the fall of 2001, when the second phase is launched, Carnegie Corporation anticipates committing \$40 million over five years in direct grants, which will require a one-to-one match from public or private funds.

In December 2000, Carnegie Corporation, along with Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, announced another initiative—this one a partnership with New York City’s public schools—aimed at redesigning some of the city’s large comprehensive high schools that serve approximately 76,000 students across the city. The three foundations will make a five-year, \$30 million investment in the initiative, known as the New Century High Schools Consortium for New York City, which aspires to help create effective high schools for all students and the implementation of small-school designs.

The consortium is targeting the lowest performing academic comprehensive high schools that serve students from low income neighborhoods and will back plans for both largeschool redesign and development of small schools. The consortium expects to choose approximately ten largescale high school redesigns and sponsor the creation of a number of new secondary schools serving grades 7 through 12.

“Small-school designs have a proven track record of helping all students achieve,” says Patty Stonesifer, president and co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. “A number of New York City high schools have successfully implemented small-school models and this partnership will help bring these innovations to scale by supporting both new small high schools and the redesign of large high schools.” Adds Gara LaMarche, director of U.S. Programs for OSI, “Far too many failing high schools crush the aspirations of poor students of color, and serve as conveyor belts for the criminal justice system, not for the opportunity that is their birthright. The good news is that we know how to do better, and in this New York City partnership, we will.”

EXPECTATIONS FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

The kinds of skills, knowledge, support and expertise that teachers need are an important aspect of school redesign. “My attention is focused on the teachers, and the expectations for them and support for them that will then in turn help them be more effective with the students,” Nichols-Solomon says.

Her sentiments are echoed by Steve Leonard, principal of Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Leonard has been instrumental in turning the school from a failing institution where few of the more than 1,000 students (most either African American or of African descent) even considered higher education into one where almost 100 percent of seniors are applying to college. “The key to improving students’ academic performance,” he says, “is to improve teachers’ instructional performance. One cannot happen without the other.”

Faculty commitment is key to the success of High Schools That Work (HSTW), a large-scale effort of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) that aims “to improve the way all high school students are prepared for work and further education.”

“You must engage the faculty in a dialogue. You must do that,” says Gene Bottoms, director of High Schools That Work and senior vice president of SREB. “We have good teachers in America; they are committed, and they work very hard. But they are in a system that no longer functions very well when we have to raise standards significantly with the rising workplace requirement.”

“Unlocking from that system is the biggest challenge we have,” Bottoms says. “That system is built on the ability model that says some students can learn complicated material but most students can’t, so you dumb down the curriculum for the rest of the students. What we say is that you can teach the rest what you’ve been teaching to the best, but you will have to teach it differently. To get faculty to really begin to believe and shift from the old ability model to an effort-based model you have to change your language, mindset and teaching techniques.”

The HSTW program bolsters learning in part by advocating a solid academic core curriculum and by enrolling grade nine youth who lag behind in an 18-week program geared to help them catch up so they will be as prepared as their peers to take the more rigorous algebra and language arts classes. Results so far have been promising. Some examples: At Loganville High in Georgia, where the HSTW principles have been implemented, 86 percent of students pursue education after graduation (up from 62 percent before HSTW); chronic absences are down and the dropout rate has gone from nine percent to less than four percent. In 1998, in Oklahoma schools participating in the pro-

gram, students averaged above 50 percent in math, science and reading for the first time.

Engaging Parents and Youth

Parental involvement is another element that can affect a student’s success. Schools can reach out to involve parents by keeping them informed and by organizing volunteer activities and providing parent education programs.

“There’s no way we’re going to raise the achievement level of students unless we engage parents on behalf of their kids,” says Coddling. When Coddling saw that only a small fraction of parents attended a back-to-school program at Pasadena High School, she set up a structure that reached out to parents with telephone calls and mailings to inform them about their teenagers’ school programs including the names of students’ advisors, advocates and head teachers. “The line of communication became clear to parents,” Coddling explained.

Youth, too, must be heard. Students clearly, often plaintively, describe their world, providing information central to successfully redesign urban high schools. “We know the way to effect change is to have that change be based in reality, to be data-based,” says Michele Cahill, senior program officer in the Education Division of Carnegie Corporation. “Quantitative data are becoming more available, but there are also incredibly important qualitative data—narratives that convey the experiences of young people in school. This youth voice has been missing in the past, yet a key part of changing the high schools is seeing young people as assets and seeing them as active learners. We recognize the need to hear the youth voice because we get new information from that about what needs to be changed and what might work that we can’t get from any other source.”

A CLARION CALL

Overarching themes echoed by urban educators are the need to personalize education and to tailor rigorous education to reach all high school students, not just some of the students. This requires a revamping of the system, not just a minor alteration, and a commitment from all members of the school community as well as members of the larger community. High school redesign is one of the greatest challenges facing our nation at the start of this new millennium: the challenge to create a vision of the American urban high school that will provide the best education possible for each and every student.

“It’s not too late,” says Nichols-Solomon. “Older students can be engaged. I’ve seen ninth grade students running to beat the clock to get into school. They can get energized.”