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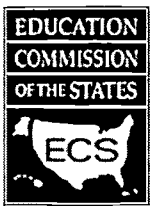
ABSTRACT

Today's educational systems work as separate parts with little coordination between academic levels or long-range planning. The transition from elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college is disjointed and often traumatic, producing unneeded anxiety and stress on top of the need to adapt to new environments. Exit achievements from one level commonly do not meet entrance requirements of the next level. Individual learning styles are not addressed, and the practice of tracking wastes human resources. Efforts should be made to align curricula across all levels of education, creating smooth transitions from one level to the next. Giving specific additional assistance to students who are lagging and more challenges to those who are advanced is a positive alternative to tracking. Better communication and coordination between educational levels can lead to students' being prepared to enter the next level. A seamless assessment can begin in high school that includes students, parents, and school staff to address students' deficiencies more effectively, enabling them to enter college universally better prepared. Legislators can adopt a comprehensive plan for a P-16 system, and fund and require reduced class size in grades 1-3 of 20 students or less. (Contains 12 references.) (RT)



Sewing a Seamless Education System

By Robert H. McCabe

Part of a Series of Essays Supported by the Metropolitan Life Foundation Change in Education Initiative

Preschool Through Postsecondary

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The world our children inhabit is different, radically so, than the one that we inherited. An increasingly open global economy requires – absolutely requires – that all of us be better educated, more skilled, more adaptable and more capable of working collaboratively. These economic considerations alone mean that we must change the way we teach and learn…

We must not forget that no nation can remain great without a truly well-educated people. No nation can remain good without transmitting the fundamental values of a civil society to each new generation. No nation can remain strong unless it puts its young people at the forefront of its concerns.

America is falling short on each of these counts. It has much to do.

– William E. Brock, *An American Imperative*

In his inaugural address, President George W. Bush stated that the grandest of this nation's ideals is the promise that "...everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born." His words articulated a core American ideal that every human has value and deserves to develop his or her talents fully. Beyond the politics and poetry of the moment, the nation has failed to realize its promise. Children begin their lives with endless possibilities, only to find doors closed and opportunities limited. When they start school, they experience overcrowded classrooms and antiquated theories, and they enter a disjointed education system that is ill-equipped to meet the needs of the new century.

The Global Marketplace

America is in a period of amazing change. We enjoy unprecedented affluence and wondrous technology. Yet this progress coexists with remarkable challenges. The nation struggles to remain competitive in a global economy. The workplace requires complex skills and higher competencies, and it is forecast that 80% of new jobs will call for some postsecondary education (Day). Sustaining America's prosperity depends on building a broadly based, highly skilled, more productive workforce.

Despite 20 years of school reform efforts, however, our school system has not met this task. While businesses in the current "Information Age" complain of unqualified job applicants and underskilled employees, schools have simply not kept pace with rapid changes in the nature of work. Economist Anthony Carnevale points out that "simple jobs are becoming high performance," and that such jobs are thus "requiring workers to reason through complex processes rather than follow rote behavioral instructions for how to complete discrete steps of a larger process." Congress has even changed immigration laws, allowing 300,000 highly skilled foreign workers to fill jobs for which Americans are not prepared. In the face of such rapid change, our schools are failing to adapt appropriately and as a result are failing America's children and communities.

America's Changing Face

If the global marketplace and information age provide enormous challenges, then the nation's demographic realities make the job ahead even more daunting. All of America's growth populations are minorities and immigrants. By 2020, half of our youth will be either non-Anglo or foreign born. In growing numbers, children come to our classrooms with different diets, different religions, different individual and group loyalties, different music and different languages. In many cases, schools are more like a patchwork of cultures than a common community. Los Angeles' Hollywood High, for example, provides a snapshot of America's changing schools. Once a school of well-off, white, non-Hispanic students, today it houses a student body that speaks 57 languages. Ninety-two percent count English as their second language. How do children learn and how do faculty effectively teach, without a common culture or language?

Tomorrow's students will be problematic for an even more profound reason – lack of academic skill. Minorities and immigrants are disproportionately academically underprepared. They have poor English language skills and a lack of educational attainment. While only 7.6% of white students drop out of school, the dropout rate for African Americans is 13.4% and for Hispanics, 25.4% (National Center for

Educational Statistics). As the demographics shift, teachers will see more and more struggling students in their classrooms. To make matters worse, teachers often confront such challenges in an ill-conceived, inflexible education bureaucracy.

Reinventing Our Education System

Today's education system works as separate parts with little coordination between academic levels

Today's education system works as separate parts with little coordination between academic levels or long-range planning. To meet today's challenges, America must create a radically different system. Such a system must be seamless from kindergarten (preferably preschool) through postsecondary education. The goal should be a P-16 system where students develop at different rates with different competencies and learning styles. Educators should design programs that hold high expectations for every student but that also have the elasticity to correspond to individual developmental patterns.

Currently, the system functions as a uniform linear progression. The only adjustments are to hold back students who are falling behind to repeat what already has proved unsuccessful or to move advanced students to institutions for which they are often unready socially. That need not be the case. The nation has the capacity to customize learning both for those that are trailing and those with exceptional abilities. Developments in information technology continue to expand these capabilities. If a student lags in basic skills, then schools should increase their time and support on those deficiencies. Similarly, if a student excels, then schools must provide additional academic opportunities. The student who is behind cannot wait for another term to repeat the same work, and the advanced student should not have to wait for future semesters to be challenged. In the learning system, calendar time should be viewed as a horizontal axis in conjunction with an expandable vertical axis of needed increased effort and attention. This fundamental shift in the student flow model is in our children's best interest.

"It Takes a Village"

Children's academic experiences are not a separate component of their lives. They do not attend school in a vacuum. Their success in school is linked to their surroundings.

We must broaden community involvement in educating our children. Improving the system is not simply the job of schools. The old African proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child," is squarely on target. Children's academic experiences are not a separate component of their lives. Their success in school is linked with their surroundings, and they develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually at differing rates. Those who receive inadequate health care and poor nutrition and live in disastrous circumstances often struggle in school. To be effective, an education plan must be interdependent with all aspects of a child's development. It must be a community plan. Educators, politicians and community leaders must ensure adequate financial support for schools and work toward improving a student's total environment.

Parents play a key role in building their child's outside world. Studies consistently show that students make important educational gains when their parents are involved. Parents can offer much more than simply help with an academic subject. Nothing contributes more to school performance than a positive attitude toward learning – and that begins at home. A good school involves parents and keeps them fully informed about their child's work. Cutting-edge schools make training available to help parents learn how to participate effectively in their child's education development.

The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Achievement provides an inspiring example of what can happen when an entire community commits to improvement of education. Working together, educators, business leaders, political leaders and parents transformed the philosophical and structural foundation of their schools. According to reporter Duchesne Paul Drew, "The collaborative's driving force has been a commitment to ensuring the academic success of all students – from kindergarten through the university level." While the collaborative's schools had substantial enrollments of low-income, at-risk students, 1994 to 1998 passing scores on the Texas basic skill assessment rose remarkably from 53.9 to 86.8%. This improvement demonstrates what can be achieved when a community gets involved. Reinvigorating our schools is everyone's business and everyone has a role to play.

The Sooner the Better

A child's initial experience in school also often shapes future academic success or failure.

Accomplishing this revitalization requires starting at the beginning. Recent research suggests that schools may want to consider offering early learning opportunities to 3- and 4-year-olds. Until that happens, the first three years of school will remain the most important. Between the ages of 5 and 7, a child's cognitive and social development changes dramatically. During these years, learning is remarkably rapid and children move from preoperational to operational intelligence and begin to think abstractly. For many, these years also mark the child's first experience away from family and their first experience with being evaluated on a comparative basis with other children.

In the primary years, children also build relationships with key adults – parents and teachers – and often those adults exert a greater influence than peers. Accordingly, teachers must be high-quality, well-prepared individuals who give personal attention to each child. In addition, primary grade student-teacher ratios must be low. Fifteen students to one teacher is ideal and especially necessary in schools with high percentages of low-income or diverse students. It is at this level where America can make its most important educational investment.

A child's initial experience in school also often shapes future academic success or failure. As researchers such as Nancy A. Madden point out, "Clearly, the time to provide additional help to children who are at risk of school failure is early on, when they are still motivated and confident and when any learning deficits are relatively small and remediable." Virtually all children enter 1st grade enthusiastic, motivated and expecting to succeed. By the end of 1st grade, however, students who struggle begin to form negative self-images, become unmotivated and do not participate in the very activities that they need most. These children develop attitudinal handicaps that lead to a pattern of continued academic frustration and are at high risk to fail throughout their education. After the 3rd grade, academic-achievement levels appear to remain remarkably stable throughout the school years. These findings make it imperative that schools do whatever is necessary so that students stay at pace in the primary grades.

Recognizing the importance of the early years, schools tend to focus on primary students' basic skills – especially reading. Educators have created a benchmark that students should read at grade level by the time they reach 4th grade. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, however, reports that less than one third of the nation's 4th graders are proficient in reading. When students fall behind in the first three grades, schools often hold them back. In some inner-city schools, as many as one-fourth of the primary children repeat a grade. This process shows limited benefits, the student's attitude often worsens and skills do not improve. The plan for struggling primary students should be proactive instead of punitive, and schools should intervene early to expand support for slow learners, especially in reading.

Authors Sharon and Craig Ramey offer some guidelines to create such a proactive education system. They identify ways to promote cognitive development and positive attitudes toward learning in the primary grades. According to the two, schools must offer:

- Encouragement of exploration
  - Children need to be encouraged by caring adults to explore and gather information about their environment.
  - Mentoring in basic skills.
  - Children need to be mentored by trusted adults in basic cognitive skills, such as labeling, sorting, sequencing, comparing and noting the relationship between means and ends.
- Celebration of development advances
  - Children need to have their developmental accomplishments celebrated and reinforced by others — especially adults with whom they spend a lot of time.

- Guided rehearsal and extension of new skills
  - Children need to have responsible adults help them rehearse and then elaborate on (extend) their newly acquired skills.
- Protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment
  - Children need to be spared the negative experiences associated with adults' disapproval, teasing or punishment for behaviors that are necessary in children's trial-and-error learning about their environment (e.g., mistakes in trying out a new skill or unintended consequences of exploration or information seeking). This does not mean that constructive criticism and negative consequences cannot be used for behaviors that children have the ability to understand are socially unacceptable.
- Rich, responsive language environment.
  - Children need to have adults provide a predictable and comprehensible communication environment, in which language is used to convey information, provide social rewards, and encourage learning of new materials and skills.

Navigating Through Turmoil

While the Rameys focus their attention on creating an ideal primary school, educators also recognize the importance of the transition to middle school. For youngsters, it is a time of turmoil. They are beginning puberty, often with psychological maturity lagging behind physiological development. As they become more independent outside of school, their world and interests expand, peers become more influential and social acceptance becomes more critical. At this age, students experience increased levels of self-consciousness and often a decline in self-esteem.

Added to this emotional mix is a major education transition. Students are moving from a self-contained, protective elementary school to an often much-larger middle school. The new facility also is usually organized differently. Children are now the little kids in the new school, not the "big dogs" in elementary school. Parents spend less time at a middle school and are less aware of what goes on there (Weldy). With many different teachers, subjects and a completely new social world, students tend to become less focused.

Against this backdrop of upheaval, middle schools need to be exceptional education institutions. Many researchers believe, however, that they are completely out of sync with the needs of their students. Eric Anderman states, "The transition from elementary to middle school is often a traumatic time for students. Research suggests that the environment provided by typical middle grade schools may be developmentally inappropriate and may adversely affect motivation during early adolescence."

For new students, the early days of middle school are often the most important. They hold many misgivings about their new environment. They worry about where everything is, how the lockers work and how they will make it to class on time. They agonize over "mean" teachers, bullying older students and changing peer dynamics. But schools can address their concerns. They can arrange pre-transfer contact between students and the new facility. They can offer substantial orientation and visits by middle school student "ambassadors" to the elementary school.

To smooth the transition, schools need to coordinate the elementary and middle school curriculums. Faculty and staffs of both institutions need to understand the expectations and organization of both schools, and information concerning the special needs of each student, particularly those at risk, should be provided to the middle school staff.

The Middle School Curriculum

The traditional structure of the middle school curriculum is an obstacle to its success. The schools separate students into different paths with different expectations. Low-achieving students track into an academically watered-down path, while middle schools offer higher-achieving students opportunities that are more scholastic but still not as challenging as they should be. Often, these life-shaping decisions are made based on attitudes, appearance, poor adjustment to the new environment and limited academic preparation. It is insidious to set a student on a predetermined course to inadequate education.

The middle school program should not be lock step – a single linear set of experiences. All students should have a common core program with high expectations and clearly articulated learning outcomes. For those progressing beyond core requirements, schools can and should offer more challenges. Educators also must raise the expectations for at-risk students. Struggling learners often experience the most difficult transition to middle school. At the most critical point in personal development, they are coping with academic problems and multiple life stresses. They, particularly, need personal attention from faculty and staff.

To reinvent middle schools, education systems must incorporate what is known about students' psychological development with building academic skills. They should start developing a knowledge-based student record, expressed in demonstrated achievement of competencies. It could become the basis for designing an individualized learning program – a unique roadmap of the student's educational development. The record clearly would show the student's skills and competencies and, most important, the record could follow students as they plan their high school programs. It would be used by faculty at all levels, counselors, parents and the students in making the transition truly seamless.

The Faculty

Even if educators create an ideal transition, middle schools still need a talented faculty to be successful. Personnel who work with students are more important than program arrangements, administrative designs or education philosophies. It has been difficult, however, to attract quality individuals to middle school teaching careers. The job can be exhausting, stressful and even at times distressing. Colleges of education often poorly prepare their students for such challenges. Dramatic improvement is needed, but school systems cannot wait for colleges to improve their programs. Instead, school systems should provide and require substantial inservice teacher education, with an emphasis on the teacher-student interpersonal relationships that are so critical to youngsters of this age group.

The need for experienced faculty warrants attention, too. Often, after several years in a middle school, teachers become disheartened and dissatisfied with their jobs. They believe many of their students cannot succeed, and this pessimism breeds student failure, as well as a sense of personal failure in the faculty. School systems should pay close attention to faculty needs and organize efforts to promote morale. Effective teachers find great fulfillment in their work and inspire students to high achievement and positive attitudes toward school.

Entering High School

The same ideas which can help students transition between the primary and middle school levels also apply to the transition to high school. High schools need to coordinate their education programs with the middle school. The two institutions should create a common base of knowledge and competencies and an expected format for progression to each new level. Staffs should meet frequently and be knowledgeable about both institutions. The middle school should provide the high school with maximum information about each student, including a competency- and knowledge-based learning profile. As the high school curriculum becomes more complex, with more choices and more decisions, this profile could be used to counsel students. A well-planned, long-range approach, including in-depth advising that involves parents, can place students on the path to success in school.

From a student's perspective, the link with middle schools makes high school a less intimidating place. When asked by a number of researchers how the transition could have been easier, students in their first year of high school consistently responded that in addition to receiving more challenging and independent work in the middle grades, they needed more exposure to high school at an earlier time. To help provide such exposure before entering high school, 8th graders could "shadow" their older peers to gain insight about the expectations of the next level.

The High School Curriculum

> *The tracking system that is so ingrained in high schools in unfair, discriminatory and wastes human resources.*

For high schools to be truly successful, a seamless transition needs to be coupled with a strong academic program. To match the requirements of a 21st-century workforce, high schools should graduate at least 80% of their students with the necessary competencies to begin standard college work. This would match the 80% of jobs that will require some postsecondary education. Today, high schools are far from achieving that goal. Only 64% of students earn a standard high school diploma, and only 42% are prepared for college-level academic work. With the demographic changes that are expected to occur, that figure would drop to 33%, less than half of what is needed.

The question remains, though, how do we achieve this goal? Identifying the problem is easy, finding a solution is more complicated. In this Information Age, the communication and computational competencies that industry wants in workers and that colleges want for entering students are remarkably similar. High schools must incorporate these requirements in the goals for all students. Like the elementary and middle schools, the structure of today's high school handicaps its students. The tracking system that is so ingrained in high schools is unfair, discriminatory and wastes human resources. It places substantial numbers of students in useless programs, often based on appearance, life circumstances or lack of parental involvement or knowledge of the system. It assigns self-fulfilling low expectations to students and effectively discards them as valueless. This oppressive practice is damaging to the nation's future, is contrary to fundamental American values and must be terminated. A high school's primary responsibility is to see that every student learns essential core competencies and skills. Pulling students out of an academic path because they struggle misses the point. High schools instead should expand their core program to include all learners.

Schools also must revamp their student record systems to recognize new learning pathways. Traditional systems award Carnegie units based on seat time and course titles. High schools should continue the competency- and knowledge-based recording system proposed to begin in middle school. This approach clearly would show the specific additional assistance needed by students who are lagging and point to enrichment possibilities for advanced students. In our mobile society, there needs to be a nationally recognized system of learning values. The new record system should assign credits in numeric values based on demonstrated learning. It would be the basis on which high schools award diplomas and colleges award certificates and advanced credits. This would serve as nationally recognized portable currency, in the same way that Carnegie units do today.

The Bridge to Adulthood

When students graduate high school, their education world dramatically changes. For the first time, they are free to choose a particular path. Many enter college and do so with excitement and high expectations. Students now function independently. The responsibility for learning shifts to them. The majority will commute to an institution and juggle their academics with work responsibilities. A fortunate minority will be able to become students in residence at a college. Their options will be varied – limited only by cost or admission requirements.

Preparing Students for College

The commuting student and resident student present the same problem. How can our education system adequately prepare them for this next stage? More than two-thirds of high school graduates eventually enter college and, despite school reform efforts, 29% are academically underprepared. Former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt Jr. describes the current failure well saying, "The chasm between schools and colleges is an indication of dysfunction, a phenomenon that is increasingly recognized as a major impediment to the successful education of all students." High schools and colleges must function as components of one system. The curriculum and standards fundamentally must change so that the goals of high school match the entry/placement requirements of colleges. Currently, graduating seniors can satisfy their high school requirements, but still be unprepared for college-level work. At the very least, staffs should work together so that high school course preparation links with college expectations. The groups must connect with each other to communicate both requirements and goals.

Colleges also need to reach back to local schools through the assessment process. Most states mandate some form of assessments of student progress during secondary school. Most colleges test students in basic skills at admission and place or advise underprepared students into developmental courses. Why do these steps have to begin at college? A seamless assessment can start in high school. Beginning in 9th grade, students, parents and staff should know how a student is progressing not only toward high

school graduation, but also against college-placement standards. And, most critically, deficiencies can and should be addressed at the high school level. The result would be an entering college student body universally better prepared.

It is not just the struggling students who need coordinated programs between high school and college. Schools have the capacity to provide enriching programs, and advances in information technology continue to expand capabilities to challenge the brightest students. In this age group, most students benefit from staying with their peers while concurrently working in an advanced curriculum. For those few who are mature enough, early college entry should be available. Colleges need to organize programs that grant credit to high school students based on demonstrated learning, regardless of how it was achieved. Options for high school students include: honors courses, Advanced Placement courses, college courses offered on high school campuses, part-time enrollment at a local college, "2 plus 2" occupational programs, special college summer school programs and an amazing array of computer-based, distance education courses.

Putting College Students First

Colleges and universities notoriously are infected with the "not-invented-here syndrome."

Change also must come from within the colleges and universities themselves. Society supports higher education at a level of well over $100 billion a year. While that commitment is made for students' education, colleges are organized more for administrative and faculty convenience. Schedules fit faculty desires often without considering student needs. Advisement is inadequate and students register without long-range planning. Ineffective teachers are tolerated and for better or worse, professors teach in the lecture/discussion mode that ignores current knowledge of how adult students most effectively learn.

Colleges and universities notoriously are infected with the "not-invented-here syndrome." They tend to recognize only work done in their institutions. Some even limit college credits earned in high school or stipulate a minimum age to receive it. This inflexibility disregards student trends. Today, students drop in and out of school, take coursework from multiple colleges and even use distance-learning courses for their education. Colleges need to respect a multi-dimensional approach to a student's education. Institutions should endorse specific certifiable learning and configure such learning into student certificates or degrees.

Student Pathways to the Workplace

To truly change the way students perform, policymakers and educators must do more, however, than create a seamless education system from primary school through the college years. Regardless of the program, every student should have a core program to develop the competencies to live effectively as an active participant in this democratic society. Schools must work closely with business and industry to make sure students can enter the workplace prepared. In the Information Age, the greatest percentage of jobs will require up to two years of postsecondary education. While programs should be structured to leave open the opportunity to achieve a bachelor's degree, many students will choose a shorter avenue.

Regardless of the length of time in school, students will need to be competent with technology. Many students will achieve occupational certificates, occupational associate degrees and what could be called customized curricula – a collection of courses chosen by a student based on knowledge of specific job requirements. Students should be able to choose courses that prepare them to enter the job market. Over a lifetime, most will return to college to retain or upgrade their skills or move to a new career. To make the country's education system truly seamless, colleges should work closely with business and industry to ensure that course offerings correspond to employment needs.

What Can Legislators Do?

School policy is made at the state level. It is the responsibility of state legislatures to establish a policy framework that shapes an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century, based upon high expectations and measurable results. Such a system must recognize the immensity of the task facing schools by providing adequate resources, and it must be structured to enable school-based innovations and initiatives. The following are some specific actions legislators can consider:

- Adopt a comprehensive plan for a P-16 system and ensure that all new legislation is consistent with that plan.
- Establish outcome measures and reporting systems at each school transition point.
- Fund and require reduction of class size in grades 1-3 to 20 students or less.
- Require the establishment of regional councils with representation of all public education institutions to develop, monitor and report on interinstitutional curriculum plans.
- Require that every secondary school student be enrolled in a common core academic curriculum.
- Direct education system leaders to investigate the feasibility of developing a knowledge/competency-based student record from middle school to college entry.
- Reward schools that demonstrate improvement in learning, with emphasis on the performance of students from low-income families.
- Fund and require continued faculty participation within inservice education programs.
- Require that secondary school assessment and college-placement programs be combined into an integrated program to ensure that high school students know how they are progressing toward college entry.
- Require mandatory college-entry testing and placement.
- Consider development of a college common course numbering system.

Summary

Our greatest failure has been that schools and colleges do not work together in a seamless system that functions in the best interests of students. At the bridges between institutions, staffs at both sides must work together to smooth any seams. High expectations must be set and continuously monitored for all students. The system should not be viewed as linear, with calendar time the only variable. Each student's learning program should be customized, with effort and attention made expandable as needed. The goal must be never to let students fall behind and to add enriched opportunities to challenge advanced students.

The education system is integral to the larger society, and the advancement in student growth depends on a total community effort. It is especially important for parents to be well-informed and actively involved in their children's education. The school's role is to facilitate the human growth and development of all children. Academic achievement is only one facet of that development. Students develop psychologically, emotionally, physically and intellectually, and the education system must consider all aspects of such development to achieve learning excellence.

America's schools have had a pivotal role in the evolution of this democratic society, and now more than ever America's future depends on their superior performance. Although a long way from reaching that level of performance, this nation has a remarkable history of achieving seemingly unattainable goals when efforts are focused properly. The breadth and vitality of school reform efforts are encouraging signs of the will and determination to confront modern education issues. Drawing upon the strength of this determination, America has the opportunity to create a high-performance, Information Age education system.

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