

# EXPANDING OPTIONS

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## CITY ROLES IN CREATING HIGH SCHOOL ALTERNATIVES FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

A Report on the Helping Municipal Leaders Expand Options and  
Alternatives for High School Project

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) is a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC).

NLC is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal government throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance.

The YEF Institute helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers and other local leaders can play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

Through the YEF Institute, municipal officials and other community leaders have direct access to a broad array of strategies and tools, including:

- Action kits that offer a menu of practical steps officials can take to address key problems or challenges.
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# Introduction



## A National Challenge: Solving the Dropout Crisis

In his February 2009 State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama declared, “Dropping out of high school is no longer an option ... three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation ... this is a prescription for economic decline.”<sup>1</sup>

About one year later, in March 2010, Education Secretary Arne Duncan spoke to several thousand mayors, councilmembers and other municipal officials, emphasizing that at its core, education is a local matter, and that the Administration seeks to empower mayors and superintendents to turn around the country’s lowest performing schools.<sup>2</sup>

The Administration’s call to action bespeaks a justified urgency, given the costs that cities and the nation bear due to poor educational outcomes. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, each annual cohort of dropouts will cost the country more than \$200 billion in lost earnings and unrealized tax revenue throughout their lifetimes. A high school dropout is 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than a high school graduate. As a group, high school dropouts have shorter life expectancies than those with 13 or more years of education.<sup>3</sup>

The dire consequences of the dropout crisis, and continuing struggles to improve school performance mainly through a heavy emphasis on standards, have sparked bold proposals at the federal level. Many of these proposals — efforts to “turn around” specific schools, new portfolios of options that include an expanded number of charter schools, establishment of stronger pathways to postsecondary creden-

tials — will be more likely to succeed if they tap the knowledge, leadership and resources of mayors and other local officials. City leaders and their federal, state and school district counterparts must combine efforts to reinvent and overhaul the high school experience to better prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## A Local Response: Expanding High School Options for Struggling Students

Municipal leadership can make an enormous difference in expanding the range of high school options and ensuring that more students graduate prepared for work and life. This report draws upon lessons learned from a 2005-07 project on *Helping Municipal Leaders Expand Options and Alternatives for High School*, managed by the National League of Cities (NLC) Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to show how five competitively selected cities made significant strides toward changing and expanding the high school choices available to students and parents, particularly for struggling students and those who had already dropped out.

Hand in hand with school districts and community partners, mayors and other municipal leaders in Corpus Christi, Texas; Hartford, Conn.; Phoenix, Ariz.; San Antonio and San José, Calif., developed and pursued highly focused plans for expanding high school options, ranging from overhauls of existing schools to establishment of new college prep and alternative schools.

Most of the cities had felt the drumbeat of general education reform. Yet, at the outset of the project, few had engaged fully with pressing issues such as high dropout rates and the need to expand college access. Results of municipal officials' engagement ranged from the dramatic — millions of dollars raised and

funneled into new high schools — to the foundational, such as recognition by school districts of the important leadership roles that a mayor can play on education issues and new means of engaging parents and citizens. “Change is a process, not a destination,” commented one experienced city manager at the project's conclusion.

## Key Findings: Five Important City Roles

Grounded in the experience of municipal efforts to expand local high school options, this report identifies several “lessons learned” outlining how city leaders can make a powerful impact on their community's high schools. In particular, the report finds that mayors and other municipal officials can play at least five key roles in driving systemic change:

**1) Setting higher expectations:** City leadership can significantly raise expectations as to what high schools can offer and what the range of high schools can be in a given community. For instance, in tandem with a public engagement process led by the mayor, Corpus Christi officials first acknowledged the need for a community-wide solution to the local dropout problem, and then significantly broadened the city's plans for high school reform. To fulfill these heightened expectations, Corpus Christi took three important steps: 1) splitting a large comprehensive high school into five career-focused academies; 2) launching a new early college high school; and 3) beginning to lay the groundwork for a full-service community school at another high school.

**2) Scaling up public engagement efforts:** Cities can substantially increase public involvement in high school reform through targeted outreach and engagement strategies, including citywide summits focused on the dropout problem, school improvement, and/or parent engagement. Cities may lead these efforts on their own or jointly with school

districts and community partners. In San Antonio, then-Mayor Phil Hardberger and former Mayor Howard Peak worked together with city agencies and multiple school districts to convene an education and workforce summit and put follow-up mechanisms in place to keep efforts on track.

**3) *Increasing the mayor’s role in establishing a vision and promoting shared accountability:*** Expanded mayoral and city engagement on high school reform issues positions the mayor to help shape a citywide vision and serve as the responsible party for monitoring follow-up and accountability. In Hartford, former Mayor Eddie Perez named a Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education, which produced recommendations with far-reaching implications for city high schools. The mayor then played a key role in identifying a new superintendent well-suited to help the school district develop new high school options. Former San José Mayor Ron Gonzales developed and pursued a new plan with specific dropout reduction and college readiness goals called San José High Schools Achieve!

**4) *Marshalling new resources to expand high school options:*** Mayors and other municipal leaders can leverage new resources for a school district and thereby affect the long-term trajectory of school success and high school options. In the short term, this may take the form of influencing the creation of new curricular or structural models for local high schools. In the longer term, cities may help support new school development through bond financing. For instance, Mayor Gonzales of San José spurred the creation of the Downtown Prep charter. Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon included \$6.8 million in capital resources for the creation of small high schools in a larger city bond initiative that passed by an overwhelming margin.

**5) *Putting in place key supportive policy conditions:*** Municipal leadership in expanding high school alternatives can play out in

the policy sphere as well. For instance, several mayors pushed for a broader range of schools and the “open sector” — the combination of local policies and practices that permit the development and sustainability of a range of alternatives — needed to bring them about.<sup>4</sup> The mayors of all five cities supported stronger partnerships between schools and providers of wraparound services such as city agencies and community-based nonprofit organizations.

## A New Level of Mayoral Engagement

Efforts by the five project cities resulted in a significant broadening of high school options and deeper engagement of those cities’ mayors and the public in high school reform efforts. Building upon that engagement, mayors became increasingly comfortable talking about the need to improve high schools and lower the dropout rate, and explaining how taking these steps would help their cities reach key economic development, quality of life, and public safety goals. All of the mayors stepped up their use of the “bully pulpit” to bring visibility to the need for high school reform and dropout prevention measures and to insist on shared public accountability for their schools’ progress. When mayoral elections took place in three of the cities and new mayors transitioned into office, city-school collaboration remained a prominent priority for the new leadership.

The impact of their work continues to grow over time by informing the efforts of other communities. Cities as varied as Indianapolis; Louisville, Ky.; Nashville, Tenn.; Newark, N.J.; Omaha, Neb.; and San Bernardino, Calif., have sought deeper assistance with public engagement and new high school reform strategies sparked by conversations with and lessons learned by the project cities.

# The Helping Municipal Leaders Expand Options and Alternatives for High School Initiative

Through the *Helping Municipal Leaders Expand Options and Alternatives for High School* project, which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation from 2005-07, five cities received in-depth technical assistance and support from NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families, as well as numerous opportunities for cross-city peer learning. The project cities included Corpus Christi, Texas; Hartford, Conn.; Phoenix, Ariz.; San Antonio; and San José, Calif. NLC staff and consultants helped each city form a team of municipal, school district, and community-based organization leaders, and supported those teams in creating and fulfilling action plans for expanding high school options and alternatives during the two-year project.

Monthly conference calls provided a regular opportunity to discuss challenges and progress in the project cities. NLC also responded to cities' requests for information, referrals, or specific assistance on various topics, and connected team leaders to national or regional resources as appropriate. For instance, NLC staff linked San Antonio and Corpus Christi with the resources and expertise of the Texas High School Project, which supports high school reform and innovation initiatives across the state.

NLC staff also visited each of the cities at least once early in the project to confirm plans with mayors and gauge support among city councilmembers and school district collaborators. In several cases, staff made return visits to provide support on specific steps for

implementing local workplans. For instance, YEF Institute Program Director for Education and Afterschool Audrey M. Hutchinson joined leaders from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Texas High School Project in participating in a High School Small Learning Communities Initiative site visit and leadership luncheon event held in Corpus Christi.

Throughout the project, NLC brought site representatives together for cross-site conference calls to promote peer learning and exchange, and convened site representatives in person at the close of the project for further exchange of information and experiences.

The project helped cities and their partners take a closer look at the range, strengths, and weaknesses of existing high schools and build strategies retaining the best of the familiar while blending in effective new practices. These cities quickly came to understand and respond to the need for new high school structures, curricula, ways of supporting and designing the roles of teachers and administrators and linkages with postsecondary opportunities. City leaders helped spark the redesign or startup of schools through strategies such as engaging parents and the general public, establishing local infrastructures for city-school coordination and collaboration and assembling and targeting new resources.

*Note to the reader: If you are unfamiliar with high school reform issues, please see the definitions box on page 19 for a glossary of terms used frequently in this document.*

# Key Findings on Mayoral Engagement to Expand High School Options and Alternatives

This report documents five major roles that mayors and other city officials can play in leading efforts to expand options and alternatives for high school. These outcomes are often interrelated. For instance, in several cities, mayoral leadership in increasing public engagement has significantly raised the community's sights as to what high schools can offer. The following findings highlight the considerable influence that city leaders can have in expanding and reshaping the options available to local high school students.

## 1. Mayors can significantly raise expectations as to what high schools can offer, and what is possible to achieve educationally, through expanded high school options.

The experiences of the five project cities show that mayoral leadership and city involvement can significantly raise expectations among civic and school leaders, students, and parents as to what high schools can offer. This involvement helps broaden the community's conception of what the range of high school settings can be under a framework of consistently high expectations for students. More specifically, mayors can become a driving force and a partner for school districts in creating smaller, rigorous high schools, each with a clear "future focus" (post-graduation plans) for students.

For instance, Corpus Christi built on a legacy of successfully using public engagement forums spurred by then-Mayor Loyd Neal to frame issues and propose solutions.

Citizens for Educational Excellence (CEE), the city's local education fund, conducted the forums and produced reports. Mayor Neal, the superintendent of the central city school district and the leadership of CEE put in place a multi-sector community task force on high school reform. Mayor Neal and his successor, former Mayor Henry Garrett, then kept the city's focus on high school reform by discussing the issue in annual State of the City addresses and sponsoring subsequent forums.



The forums created a groundswell of interest in, and support for, launching new experiments, such as the piloting of small learning community efforts at Foy S. Moody High School in the form of five career-focused academies. Another high school adopted a full-service community school model to expand social services at school sites, and the local community college launched an early college high school. Soon thereafter, Corpus Christi’s plan for restructuring area high schools to reduce the dropout rate and broaden options, debated via the forums, embraced an expansion of all three designs. Of note, with multiple school districts educating Corpus Christi students, the plan needed to be and was broad enough to include the launch of new high school models in the center city district and others.

In Hartford, city involvement in high school reform increased shortly after Mayor Perez received a far-reaching report from a Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education that he had appointed. At the same time, the local workforce agency — again at the instigation of Mayor Perez — launched a “Future Workforce Investment System” (FWIS) with strong youth work, education, and training opportunities, particularly for those young people needing options outside the traditional high school system. Collaboration between FWIS and the public schools, and exposure to school models in New York City and elsewhere, later led to the development of Hartford’s first Opportunity High School for students needing rapid credit recovery options to have a chance of graduating almost on time. Throughout his tenure, the mayor

## Common Mayoral Roles Regardless of Form of City Government

Throughout this project, cities with a mix of strong mayor and council-manager forms of government took advantage of a remarkably similar range of opportunities for mayoral leadership. The cities exhibited only slight differences regarding local processes for proposing and advancing high school reform efforts and consulting and involving key stakeholders such as city councilmembers.

Of the five cities, only Hartford has a mayor who serves as chief executive officer. Notably, Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez extended his authority over the schools during the course of the project. He gained the ability to appoint the school board, appointed himself and was unanimously elected chairman. The council-

manager form of government, in use in most U.S. cities, is the current form of government in Corpus Christi and San Antonio. In each case, however, the mayor plays a lead role in proposing policies and priorities. San José, the nation’s 10<sup>th</sup> largest city, also operates with a council-manager form of government. There, the mayor has a preeminent role in recommending policy, program and budget priorities. Phoenix, the fifth largest city in the nation, likewise has a council-manager government in which the mayor and manager work together in formulating policies and programs. In contrast to Hartford, none of the other cities’ mayors or governments exercise authority over local school districts.

# San José, Calif.

## Rationale Excerpt San José High Schools Achieve! Collaborative Planning Document

San José views its role as an engaged partner in education. By positively affecting schools, we improve the lives of children, families, and businesses — all appropriate responsibilities of local government. When high school students cannot make it in the classroom, they will likely not succeed in society either. Poor results in high school mean dead-end jobs, a greater risk of a life of crime or victimization, and a terrible cost to our community and

our ability to compete. However, by better educating students, providing more educational alternatives, and improving schools, we are creating a better quality of life for all of our residents. San José’s high schools face the challenge of keeping students in school, improving graduation rates, and equipping young people with the skills needed in our dynamic Silicon Valley economy.

remained a key instigator and connector in generating higher aspirations for local high schools that would be promoted and fulfilled by the education and workforce systems.

In Phoenix, Mayor Gordon exercised strong leadership in launching a Small Schools Initiative. The Phoenix initiative adopted the viewpoint that “small school size is necessary, but not sufficient” to improve educational outcomes. Rather, the mayor propounded a broader vision of what it would take to raise aspirations *and* outcomes: bringing rigor into the schools via challenging courses; adding immediate relevance to careers in order to spark students’ interest and relate coursework to their lives; and promoting relationships in the form of strong connections with caring adults that would last throughout the high school years. Economic and workforce development efforts in the city provided the framework for the initiative. Specifically, Mayor Gordon and a Small Schools Committee that he helped form concluded that development of new small high schools

should prepare students to enter high-growth industries and fields such as nursing, teaching, and engineering. This direction laid the foundation for the city and multiple school districts serving Phoenix high school students to work together.

### 2. Targeted outreach and engagement strategies led by the city or jointly with school districts and community partners can yield a more involved public.

Mayoral efforts in San Antonio, San José and Corpus Christi show how city leaders can increase public engagement in high school reform efforts by convening large-scale public events and processes in cooperation with other partners. Mayors, their education advisors and municipal agency staff in these cities helped conceptualize, plan, launch, facilitate and develop recommendations for public engagement events, while linking the subjects of those events to broader city priorities, such as economic development, public safety and positive youth development. Key city partners



in these efforts may include school districts, a local education fund, civic organizations and business leaders. In the case of the two Texas cities, the United Ways of Texas joined local stakeholders, providing partial support for events through a statewide initiative supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In San Antonio, Mayor Hardberger announced his intention to hold a Mayor's Education and Workforce Summit in his 2006 State of the City address and asked Mayor Peak to chair a steering committee that would plan and implement the summit. After months of planning, and support for the steering committee provided by Mayor Hardberger's staff, hundreds gathered downtown to spend a Saturday under the banner of a community declaration: "We unite to ensure that members of our community enter school ready to learn, leave school prepared for careers and life, possess the skills required for the workplace, and have opportunities for lifelong learning."

Mayor Hardberger issued a call to action in his opening speech at the summit, which

was followed by intensive, three-hour work sessions in which groups of summit participants developed community statements of expectations and resources needed for three main topics: early childhood education; pre-kindergarten through college education; and ongoing workplace skills. The work session teams forged consensus statements on major strategies and goals for the city and region. Following the summit, Mayor Hardberger's staff prepared a report and shared summit recommendations with the San Antonio City Council.

At the time of the summit and for several months thereafter, the mayor's staff ensured transparency and ongoing discussion through development of a website containing full summit proceedings. This process sustained ongoing engagement of the topically-focused task forces and the broader public. Summit recommendations were implemented over time and resurfaced in the continuing prominent role of education as an issue debated in subsequent mayoral and council elections, and in the



heavy focus by current Mayor Julián Castro on college readiness, access and completion.

The City of San José took two complementary steps to foster public engagement. As a response to reported low parent involvement with their children’s high schools, Mayor Gonzales convened the Mayor’s High School Parent Summit. This event brought more than 400 parents, students and representatives of school districts and nonprofit organizations to the new downtown City Hall for a day of discussion and information sharing. The summit agenda provided parents and students with opportunities to rotate through workshops on three topics: truancy and gang awareness; college and career opportunities; and school and parent relationships. At the outset, Mayor Gonzales framed the event as

an opportunity for parents to become aware of high school *and* postsecondary opportunities for their children. The summit set a precedent and offered a useful model for sharing information, leading the city and its partners to consider making the summit a regular event.

San José also approached public outreach from an innovative “virtual” angle as an outgrowth of the city’s role as the “Capital of Silicon Valley.” In this case, the city and the newly formed citywide San José Education Foundation<sup>5</sup> provided in-kind assistance to the local United Way and Alternative Education Collaborative (a group that developed a strategic assessment of the opportunities and barriers to education for dropouts and struggling students in the city) to launch the [www.getbacktoschool.org](http://www.getbacktoschool.org) website. This user-friendly and frequently

## Corpus Christi, Texas

Through a series of three public forums carried out over a nine-month period under the banner, “Even One Dropout is Too Many,” the mayor and other leaders in Corpus Christi had framed several strategies to address a dropout rate believed by some to be as high as 45 percent. A challenge from the mayor to the schools and community, and the subsequent forum discussions, led to Corpus Christi’s request for technical assistance from NLC.

As the project began, Foy S. Moody High School in Corpus Christi reorganized into five small learning communities, each a career-focused academy: industrial trades and technology management; arts and humanities; business and professional management; pre-engineering, mathematics, and science; and health sciences. Corpus Christi sought to build on its early experience at Moody to develop a citywide plan for high school reform.

By late 2006, Moody High School:

- Had the highest number of students enrolled in dual credit courses of any Corpus Christi Independent School District schools;
- Worked with more than 40 business partners in the implementation of its academy programs;
- Awarded more than 25 academy-specific scholarships, provided by business partners to graduating seniors during the 2005-06 school year; and
- Saw enrollment increase to nearly 2,000 students.

source: [www.edexcellence.org](http://www.edexcellence.org)

accessed site makes it easy for students and parents to conduct an online search, by ZIP code or type of school, to learn about local alternative schools and options to re-enroll in and graduate from secondary school.

Corpus Christi demonstrated the benefits of using public forums of varying scales to consult with and inform stakeholders on high school issues and solutions. Notably, members of the business community and other private sector civic leaders were prominent among involved stakeholders. Their involvement ensured the presence of a workforce development perspective in discussions. Working together, the city, schools and local education fund tailored public engagement opportunities to follow up on recommendations from an earlier set of “One Dropout is Too Many” forums. These forums introduced school design concepts such as small learning communities, early college high schools, and full-service community schools for discussion. A large-scale High School Transformation Forum hosted by the key partners provided an opportunity for small- and large-group discussions for teams from all 11 area high schools in the five local school districts. By the close of this forum, teams consisting of teachers, parents, administrators, and students had developed school-specific action steps in five areas:

- Rigorous and relevant curriculum;
- What to “take off the plate” and what to focus on across schools;
- Ways to make reading a priority;
- Ways to address eighth and ninth grade transitions; and
- How best to frame and pursue a comprehensive high school transformation plan.

At the Transformation Forum, business and civic leaders developed their own complementary lists of action steps. The city and CEE helped compile and organize the informa-

tion for future action, continued to convene topical task forces and committees, and provided follow-up support to schools and districts as needed. Furthermore, the forum set the stage for the hiring of the former director of CEE as the superintendent of the central city school district. His tenure to date has included continuing implementation of recommendations developed at this and earlier forums.

### 3. Mayors can serve as a source of long-term vision, follow-up and accountability.

In addition to raising expectations of what high schools can offer and getting the public more involved with local high schools, mayors can significantly expand their roles as sources of long-term vision for high school options and quality. In this expanded role, the mayor takes responsibility for ensuring follow-up and accountability for progress in pursuing a shared vision. Specifically, the mayor becomes a force and partner for setting goals, guiding the implementation of citywide plans, and tracking progress.

Mayor Perez, in taking action based on the report of the Hartford Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education, exemplified the expanded mayoral role in goal-setting and accountability. Setting an overall goal of greatly increasing college-going and college success rates among Hartford’s young people, the mayor framed and promoted three desired outcomes as part of a longer-term vision: 1) Increase by 25 percent the number of Hartford students who attend four-year colleges; 2) Increase the graduation rate of Hartford residents attending four-year colleges; and 3) Attract more four-year college graduates to live and work in Hartford. By insisting on accountability mechanisms, Mayor Perez, his team and the public learned that the focus on these specific goals was producing results.



Early results from the mayor's efforts to focus the community's attention on these goals and monitor progress showed that more students applied to and were accepted at four-year colleges and that there was a small increase in the number of students taking math course sequences associated with college readiness. As part of the drive to build college aspirations and readiness as well as identify areas for improvement, 28 percent more 11<sup>th</sup> graders took the PSAT within two years of the Blue Ribbon Commission report, and for the first time 65 percent of eligible 10<sup>th</sup> graders took the PSAT. Trends continued positive as the mayor and a newly hired superintendent worked together to continue these efforts and began implementing even more thoroughgoing reforms, including the creation of the Opportunity High School.

In San José, Mayor Gonzales convened an expansive group of stakeholders over a nine-month period, including leadership of the four high school districts serving San José residents, to secure support for the San José High Schools Achieve! plan, which was endorsed by the relevant city council committee and named specific targets for high school improvement. Overall, the document provided a platform and stated a clear vision that "all San José children will achieve by entering school ready to learn and leaving school ready to be productive and engaged citizens of our community." The document also identifies three key goals: 1) Reduce the number of dropouts; 2) Raise high school graduation rates; and 3) Ensure

that high school graduates are ready to enter college or the workforce. Mayor Gonzales and stakeholder groups rounded out the report with objectives, timelines and lists of specific partners to involve for each goal area. Specific objectives included creating more alternative high schools, and encouraging comprehensive high schools to operate as smaller learning communities that focus on rigor, relevance, and relationships. Following issuance of the San José High Schools Achieve! plan, Mayor Gonzales and his staff continued to bring stakeholders together regularly to assess progress.

In San Antonio and Corpus Christi, as well as in San José, the large-scale public engagement events described above provided a platform for each mayor to proclaim publicly his vision for education and high schools. At the San Antonio education and workforce summit, Mayor Hardberger issued a call to action, requesting that through the summit and follow up steps, business, government, education, and community groups unite behind a plan and ensure that it be carried out for years to come. In Corpus Christi, as he launched the High School Transformation Forum, Mayor Garrett framed the conversation in terms of local economic development. He recounted a lesson learned while police chief: that most companies considering relocation to Corpus Christi (or other cities) touch base with the school superintendent in order to be assured of school quality. His message echoed throughout the planning and deliberations of school and district teams during the forum and beyond. Further, the City of Corpus Christi's ongoing partnership with CEE has provided a means for business and community leaders to remain engaged in supporting the high school transformation plan.

#### 4. Mayors can marshal new resources and build local capacity to expand high school options.

When mayors and city governments put their "shoulders to the wheel," they help build the community's capacity to start and sustain new

# Comparison: National Policy Discussions vs. the High School Reform Experience of Five Cities

The five cities highlighted in this report are among many grappling with high dropout rates, low graduation rates, the challenges of high school reform and a seemingly ever-increasing focus on school accountability. At a time when the federal government has embarked on new efforts to spark innovation, and discussions about national standards and high school turnaround and transformation abound, the experiences of these cities in striving to expand high school options serve as a reality check for broader policy discussions. In particular, these cities' experiences hold the following lessons and implications for relevant discussions and policy trends:

***Fulfilling a “dual agenda” of high standards and high graduation rates implies use of multiple pathways to graduation:*** Jobs for the Future, a national workforce and education policy and practice organization, has described a desirable “dual agenda” of high standards *as well as* higher graduation rates. Pursuing this dual agenda means that communities must develop multiple pathways to graduation in order to have a realistic prospect of reducing dropout rates and thereby increasing graduation rates. It is rarely sufficient to put all efforts toward reforming existing schools, as even the most effective reform strategies will take time to have full effect. Most dropouts from previous years need new settings in which to complete high school. Many current students will also benefit from new settings that offer a new mix of rigor, relevance and relationships, even as other

current students find that mix in reconstituted high schools or career-focused academies.

***High dropout rates and high school reform are community issues, not solely school district issues:*** Understanding the dropout crisis and the need for alternatives as a community-wide issue, not just a school district issue, paves the way for a broader discussion and allows for increased city involvement, leadership and partnership with school districts. Referring to dropout rates as a school district issue feeds into an unproductive cycle of recrimination. Leaving out the voices of community and city government leaders — who can direct new supports toward students and share a commitment to students' well-being — risks under-resourcing an effort that should be expansive.

***The workforce development and citizen preparation roles of high schools are closely linked to mayors' top concerns:*** Mayoral leadership on education is particularly relevant at the secondary school level, because it complements the typical “job one” concerns of mayors, such as economic development and public safety. In high school, young people prepare to or actually enter the workforce or lay the groundwork for postsecondary steps that will lead toward full participation in the workforce. As increasingly independent actors, high school age students face and make choices about moral and ethical issues, including whether to live within the law. Some young people become parents while of high school age, bringing likely high-need children into the

community. Given these realities and mayors' primary ongoing concerns, it makes sense for mayors to play a role in shaping the local mix of secondary education options. In addition, mayors may quickly come to grasp the price of inaction if they or others remain silent about the need to improve high school options.

***Adopting a broader view of alternatives to traditional comprehensive high schools opens new possibilities:*** In many communities, speaking of an “alternative high school” calls to mind settings created for young people who have been suspended or expelled, have dropped out, or are involved with the juvenile justice system. The efforts of cities to expand high school options and alternatives show that a broader view of alternatives is possible.

High school alternatives can refer to schools that mainly enroll young people for disciplinary or dropout recovery reasons — keeping in mind that these schools can still be highly focused on achieving graduation and postsecondary education goals and can benefit

from being redesigned around principles of student-centered learning. However, the most inclusive use of the “alternatives” term can also refer in part to efforts to break down large comprehensive high schools into smaller units, as well as to the creation of high-quality options launched to serve broad groups of students, particularly those who are unlikely to reach maximum success in a traditional comprehensive high school. Often, the new options are smaller schools that incorporate features such as project-based learning, opportunities to earn credits quickly for those who have fallen behind and dual enrollment in college courses. Ultimately, the broad use of the word “alternative” refers to the students — those who will benefit from a substantially different high school setting; to different modes of teaching, learning and school organization; and to the retention of an orientation toward achievement, graduation, attainment of postsecondary credentials and future success for all students.

high school options. All five cities present a variety of examples of this growth in capacity. Of note, all of the sites also linked discussions of high school reform with raising the bar around college access and matriculation.

Specifically, the cities of Hartford, Phoenix, San Antonio and Corpus Christi identified and targeted new funding to support high school alternatives, and San José directed existing funding toward spending priorities related to expanded options. Sometimes, the results from the new funding and increase in capacity were immediate. In other cases, city involvement positively affected the longer-term trajectory toward expanded options.

The City of Phoenix pursued an innovative course toward expanding capacity by becom-

ing involved in school finance — usually the province of school districts — and aligning that involvement with city economic development goals. In a precedent-setting move, a 2006 bond issue spearheaded by Mayor Gordon went before the voters to provide support for a variety of capital projects, including construction of university health sciences buildings in downtown Phoenix. Whereas the main focus of the bond issue was on postsecondary facilities, it also included \$6.8 million in funds to build small high schools, which would become available during the 2008-09 fiscal year. Voters passed the measure by an overwhelming margin, and the city began consulting with the eight districts educating Phoenix high school students about how best to allocate the funds.

Shortly thereafter, the city established criteria for use of the bond funds, stipulating that new small school development must proceed in partnership with a college or university and must relate closely to the city's economic development priorities — for instance, by providing career-focused education in nursing, teaching and engineering fields. Criteria also limited use of the funds to classroom space, equipment and other capital needs of the school. By mid-2008, the Phoenix City Council awarded small schools capital grants totaling \$5.7 million to the Phoenix Union High School District and Paradise Valley Unified School District. Phoenix Union received \$2.4 million for a Medical Sciences School in partnership with several hospitals and postsecondary institutions. Paradise Valley received \$3.3 million for the Center for Rigor, Relevance and Relationships in Engineering, Science and Technology in partnership with local employers and health care facilities, and the school is scheduled to open in the fall of 2010 with a freshman class of 125 students.<sup>6</sup>

Hartford's approach to building capacity tracked closely with the overall priority of Mayor Perez and the Hartford Consortium on Higher Education — a group of colleges and

universities — to expand economic opportunities for Hartford residents by increasing the number of Hartford youth obtaining a bachelor's degree. The city and its partners joined forces in several ways: bringing additional technical support resources to 10 schools newly affiliated with the Foundation for Excellent Schools (since renamed College for Every Student — a nonprofit organization committed to raising the academic aspirations and performance of underserved youth); obtaining \$12 million in scholarship commitments, primarily from colleges; and organizing more than 300 business community volunteers to participate in early college awareness programs. With \$400,000 in support raised from local businesses, the consortium replicated Hartford High School's successful College and Career Support Center as a built-in feature in two other comprehensive high schools and underwrote the salaries for college support specialists at each.

While in office in San José, Mayor Gonzales built and sustained local capacity by persuading the City Council to direct city revenue toward sustaining critical existing programs and investing in a new approach of providing support and options for local students. As San José continued to emerge from the bursting of

## San Antonio

### Mayor Hardberger's Call to Action for the June 2006 Workforce and Education Summit

"This community must come together and embrace strategies to address this issue. The problem is everyone's problem, as it will affect every aspect of this community for generations to come. No one group or agency is respon-

sible. No one group or agency can solve this problem. Business, government, education and community groups must unite behind a plan and ensure that it is carried out for years to come."

the “dot-com bubble” — which resulted in a steep decline in local tax revenues — Mayor Gonzales convinced the City Council to fulfill a budget pledge to preserve funding for truancy prevention programming at a higher level. Moving in a new direction, the mayor also ensured that the city became a lead investor in creating the San José Education Foundation. This foundation serves as a vehicle for routing private support for public education across San José’s many school districts and for highlighting issues and possible solutions. The foundation has since expanded and assumed a stronger policy leadership role as the Silicon Valley Education Foundation.

The cities of Corpus Christi and San Antonio built capacity by tapping into funding and professional development resources available through the Texas High School Project (THSP), a public-private partnership focused on increasing graduation and college enrollment rates in every Texas community. Teams of city and school district representatives participated in professional development sessions conducted by THSP and have since applied for school startup grants. Corpus Christi, for instance, received more than \$1.1 million in THSP grants to launch a new Early College High School at Del Mar College and to create Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) schools.

## Checklist of Key Steps for Mayors to Develop High School Options and Alternatives

- ✓ Use the “bully pulpit” to draw attention to the complex issues surrounding high schools, dropout rates, public safety and local economic development; set higher expectations for what high schools can offer; and promote a vision of a portfolio of high school options and alternatives that provide parents and students with a broader range of choices.
- ✓ Use the mayor’s convening power to launch and sustain public engagement processes and to foster closer working relationships between city agencies and school districts.
- ✓ Develop a mechanism for ensuring shared accountability among key stakeholders in carrying out a common citywide vision for high school reform.
- ✓ Identify and establish working relationships with key state and national organizations to build capacity, undergird quality improvement efforts and stay abreast of the latest trends and best practices.
- ✓ Identify and tap the city’s fiscal levers and draw upon other public and private resources to aid the expansion of high school options and alternatives.
- ✓ Build support for the key policy conditions that support high school alternatives in achieving large-scale success.

## 5 City leadership can help put in place key policy conditions that will facilitate the spread of high school alternatives.

In addition to making a difference in highly practical areas such as resource development and capacity building, goal setting and accountability, and public engagement, municipal officials can play leadership roles in supporting policies to promote the expansion of high school alternatives. Their leadership and involvement confirms the importance of all seven of the “policy conditions” for success of alternatives identified and categorized by NLC in consultation with its school developer partners in what is now the Association for High School Innovation (AHSI).<sup>7</sup> Among the seven conditions, the experiences of the project cities highlight a particular emphasis on city roles in fostering the development of two policy conditions:

1. Localities must provide a healthy “open sector” in education that is receptive to schools and programs that expand, enhance, and recalibrate the premises and structure of the existing public school system; and
2. Schools and programs benefit from close coordination with city and other public agencies and community organizations in order to offer students a full range of services, supports and resources.

For instance, Mayor Gordon’s strategic effort to direct city government capital resources toward high schools provided a tangible contribution to the open sector in education in Phoenix. Identifying and steering a portion of city bond funds toward construction of career-focused small high schools significantly extended what school districts could do on their own. The requirements the city placed on applicants for capital financing, which could have had a narrowing effect, instead broadened the group of partners involved in launching each school.

With regard to providing students with a full range of needed supports and services, community forums in Corpus Christi, San Antonio and San José provided a venue for identification of city and community resources for schools and students to tap. Corpus Christi explored and began to implement the full-service community school concept for one of its high schools and “feeder” middle and elementary schools. This step will co-locate supports and services at school sites, and these services will be accessible during the school day and beyond. In the broad preschool-to-workforce purview of the San Antonio mayor’s summit, connecting students with wraparound services was an ongoing topic of conversation. San José’s parent summit, organized by the city, created a “marketplace” of support service providers with which parents could connect.





# Conclusion: City Leadership Toward a Continued Range of High School Alternatives

The findings and lessons learned detailed above provide a sense of the continuing challenges and areas for growth in municipal leadership in education and high school reform. The experience of the five cities points to continued technical assistance roles for national and statewide organizations that can provide structure and support to local processes, broker connections to experts and peers and identify and disseminate promising practices. Perhaps most important, the experience provides grounds for hope, through numerous glimpses of local momentum and progress.

Key challenges that the five cities confronted are likely to reappear as other communities seek to broaden high school options and alternatives. For example, turnover among mayors, their staff and other leadership positions in school districts, local education funds and other key city partners risks slowing or halting progress. Priorities may shift; learning curves may be formidable. The relatively brief time frame of a project such as this technical assistance initiative highlights a need to plan for and monitor the sustainability of efforts over the longer term. Also, where multiple districts operate in a city, mayors and their partners may have to strike a balance between the desire for citywide impact and opportunities to focus on pilot efforts implemented one district at a time.

On the national stage, as struggles continue over priorities for education reform and accountability, several challenging conditions apply. The current local policy environment features a complex interplay between high

dropout and truancy rates, ongoing reform efforts and state and federal mandates. Many rally behind the goal of raising college-going and college-completion rates as “the next frontier,” yet it remains essential to ensure that the high school experience adequately prepares students to approach that frontier. In particular, students need extensive support services as the limitations of narrow test-based performance accountability in improving student success become clear. The current era also remains one in which many call mayors’ intentions into question. Is the mayor taking a leadership role, as described above, or does he or she really want to take over and fully control the schools? In the face of the latter challenge, the need to make distinctions between *leadership* and *control* is omnipresent. Taken as a whole, nationally and locally, all of these challenges will require further exploration and gathering of experience and evidence.

At least four grounds for hope stand out from municipal efforts to expand high school options and alternatives in the five cities:

1. Mayoral leadership brought about rapid change, leading to new options and improved results. This was especially notable given the pre-existing prominence of high school reform discussions in the education community.
2. Straightforward formulas for more successful high schools — such as the “new three Rs” of rigor, relevance and relationships — found resonance and inspired commitment among municipal leaders, educators, and the general public.

3. School districts and other stakeholders cooperated readily with efforts launched from a city government platform. Whether due to a sense of relief or the potential for stronger partnerships, the notion that the dropout crisis and high school reform are community issues — requiring broad community solutions — took hold in the project cities' school districts and among other partners.
4. New approaches relying on a high level of mayoral engagement, and a concomitant desire for creative solutions, appear to be sparking interest among municipal leaders in promising strategies to expand high school options and alternatives. In part by watching and learning from the five project cities, local officials in other communities have since declared related priorities and launched initiatives of their own.

By focusing their attention on students who struggle in traditional high school settings, mayors and other municipal leaders are redefining the role of city government in shaping local high school reform efforts. The experiences of the five project cities show that municipal leaders have the power to engage the community, articulate a vision, raise expectations for what high schools can offer, promote shared accountability, marshal resources and foster a policy environment in which high school options and alternatives can thrive. Working together with their school districts and other key partners, cities can make a tremendous impact in driving educational system change and providing students with a flexible range of new options that prepare them for life after high school.



# Glossary

## *Alternative High School*

A broad range of emerging interventions that are characterized by high levels of student achievement and personal success. Alternative high schools are distinguished by their authentic learning, teaching, and performance assessment; personalized school culture; shared leadership and responsibility; supportive partnerships; and focus on the future for students.

## *Comprehensive High School*

Most public high schools in the U.S. are comprehensive high schools. They gather all youth into a single institution that aims to educate and prepare students for various roles in workplaces, civic life and higher education.

## *Early College High School*

Early college high schools combine high school and college curricula in a rigorous and supportive framework, decreasing the time necessary for students to earn a high school diploma and the first two years of college credit.

## *Full-Service Community School*

A community school is both a physical school building and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. With an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement, a community school promotes student learning, engages families and builds cohesive communities. Community schools are designed to serve as centers of the community and are open to residents beyond the hours of the traditional school day and week.

## *Future Focus*

A philosophy that fosters students' intellectual development, empowered sense of self, critical thinking skills, civic participation, improved life chances and a commitment to lifelong learning in order to facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. With the goal of ensuring that all graduates exit high school ready for postsecondary achievement, a future focus approach maximizes and facilitates access to postsecondary opportunities and attainment of postsecondary degrees or credentials.

## *High School (Career-Focused) Academies*

Career academies in high schools focus on ensuring that students graduate while preparing them for postsecondary education and the world of work. A high school career academy is typically organized as a small, supportive and personalized learning community, combining both academic and career and technical curricula around a career-focused theme to enrich teaching and learning. Career academies rely on partnerships with local employers to provide career awareness, experience and employment-based learning opportunities for students in high-growth industries.

## *High School Models*

A term that refers to the combination of elements that result in a particular high school design or approach. Elements could include curriculum, modes of instruction, use of internships, use of project-based and work-based learning, and presence of career-focused academies. Examples of models include comprehensive and early college high schools.

### *Open Sector*

An open educational sector, which encourages the opening of alternative high schools, welcomes new “entrants” — schools started from scratch by teachers, parents, community organizations and multi-school networks; is open to new authorizers or sponsors (i.e., entities other than school districts that oversee schools); is open to new learning programs and new ways of governing and managing schools; and, as part of the public education system, is open to all students who choose to attend schools in the sector.

# Selected Resources

## Alliance for Excellent Education – Personalized High School Experience

[www.all4ed.org/about\\_the\\_solution/high\\_school\\_exper](http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_solution/high_school_exper)

## Association for High School Innovation (AHSI)

[www.ahsi.org](http://www.ahsi.org)

## Alternative High School Policy Database

<http://ahsi.nlc.org>

## A Broader, BOLDER Approach to Education

[www.boldapproach.org](http://www.boldapproach.org)

## America’s Promise Alliance – Dropout Prevention

[www.americaspromise.org/our-work/dropout-prevention.aspx](http://www.americaspromise.org/our-work/dropout-prevention.aspx)

## Citizens for Educational Excellence (Corpus Christi)

[www.edexcellence.org](http://www.edexcellence.org)

## City of Hartford Office of the Mayor

[www.hartford.gov/government/mayor/education.asp](http://www.hartford.gov/government/mayor/education.asp)

## City of Phoenix Youth & Education Office

<http://phoenix.gov/education/yec.html>

## City of San Antonio Office of the Mayor

[www.sanantonio.gov/mayor/initiatives.aspx](http://www.sanantonio.gov/mayor/initiatives.aspx)

## City of San José Office of the Mayor

[www.sanjoseca.gov/mayor/goals/education/education.asp](http://www.sanjoseca.gov/mayor/goals/education/education.asp)

## Everyone Graduates Center

<http://every1graduates.org>

## Jobs for the Future – Connected by 25

<http://jff.org/projects/current/education/connected-25/59>

## National Dropout Prevention Center/ Network

[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)

## National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families

[www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef)

## San Antonio Education Partnership

[www.saedpartnership.org](http://www.saedpartnership.org)

## Silicon Valley Education Foundation

[www.svefoundation.org](http://www.svefoundation.org)

## Texas High School Project

[www.thsp.org](http://www.thsp.org)

## Endnotes

- 1 Remarks of President Barack Obama, Address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/)
- 2 Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, National League of Cities, 2010 Congressional City Conference. March 15, 2010. <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/03/03152010.html>
- 3 National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, Economic Impacts of Dropouts, accessed July 22, 2010. [http://www.dropoutprevention.org/stats/quick\\_facts/economic\\_impacts.htm](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/stats/quick_facts/economic_impacts.htm)
- 4 For a description of the seven key policy conditions necessary for alternatives for high school to achieve large-scale success, see *Setting the Stage for New High Schools: Municipal Leadership for High School Alternatives*, Talmira Hill, Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2007.
- 5 Later merged into the Silicon Valley Education Foundation.
- 6 Center for Research in Engineering, Science and Technology (CREST), Paradise Valley Unified School District, Phoenix, Ariz., accessed July 22, 2010, <http://cmweb.pvschools.net/pvhscrestweb/faqs.html>
- 7 See *Setting the Stage for New High Schools: Municipal Leadership for High School Alternatives*, Talmira Hill, Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2007. This policy paper describes city and state-level policies that promote or impede the development of alternative high school options. The paper also includes brief case studies of some of the cities that received technical assistance on expanding high schools options and alternatives. In addition to the policy conditions mentioned above, others include: increased college access; need-based, adequacy approach to funding; rigorous, reasonable academic standards and assessments; strong accountability; and expanded options for parents and students.





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