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High School Roundtable: NCEA's Jean Rutherford discusses America's high schools at ECS

Taking a Closer Look at High Schools

"It isn't that they can't see the solution. It is that they can't see the problem." GK Chesterton

Governors and state and local education officials assumed that raising student achievement in the elementary and middle grades would solve the problems with high schools—but it hasn't.[1] Why? Good information is the basis for successful improvement, and high school reform lacks accurate information about what students are to learn and about how many students are actually learning it.

We have not used the fundamental strategies in high schools that have proven successful in elementary and middle schools—a clear, specific, tightly aligned curriculum and the data to see if it has been mastered.

We've agreed… "All students will be college and work ready at high school graduation" and there is little difference between the two.[2] But, outside of Advanced Placement coursework, our academic goals for high school students now consist of course titles and credits earned—not specific knowledge and skills. "College and work-ready" must be defined in terms of clear curricular content, AND, once defined, connected to particular courses in the high school curriculum.

Our high school courses do not represent stated and known content.

While truth in labeling practices in the food industry ensure that orange drink cannot be labeled orange juice without legal ramifications, schools have no such safeguards in place. Algebra I can be placed on any child's transcript without any guarantee about the contents taught or learned. In Texas, for example, 57% of Hispanics, 65% of African Americans and 60% of low-income students who had credit on their transcripts for both Geometry and Algebra II failed the state test covering Algebra I. We have no monitoring or consequences for teaching Algebra II courses that don't cover Algebra II or for putting Algebra II on the transcripts of students who haven't learned it.

Given that there is no assurance about content, our high school curriculum is grossly unaligned and teacher dependent even though we know that learning is critically dependent on students' relevant prior knowledge. A systemic failure to teach all children the knowledge they need in order to understand what the next grade or

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[1] National Education Summit on High Schools, 2005

[2] (Large scale national research including the American Diploma Project has established that the academic skills required for work are comparable to those required for college. Unfortunately, studies by ACT and the Manhattan Institute predict that 1 in 3 9th graders will graduate with these skills)

subject has to offer is the major source of avoidable injustice in our schools. (E.D. Hirsch)

Alignment, the great equalizer in learning, is further disrupted by spuriously separating the high school curriculum from the K-12 learning experience.

High schools are restructuring and redesigning to become remedial schools for entering 9th graders. Early , grade-by-grade, intense diagnosis and intervention based on endpoint academic profiles provides the only possible hope for reaching high standards for all children. Our high schools are obsolete IF we expect them to attain very high academic goals for ALL students who come to them, but come unprepared to do high school work. This is NOT an excuse for high schools, but a requirement for learners. If we want all students to reach higher standards at high school graduation, then we must certainly be willing to become adamant about what specific knowledge and skills students must master grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject to reach them. High school reform cannot and must not be separated from K-12 reform. Currently, even the way conversations about high school reform occur perpetuate the disconnect from K-8 programming.

Aside from an unaligned curriculum and a failure to specify specific subject content, we don't have the data in high schools that provide the information for school improvement

An absolute dearth of good data focused on agreed-upon objectives makes informed decision-making next to impossible at the high school level.

Longitudinal data are unavailable or highly flawed and yet are the only data that will help us truly understand student and school performance needs and issues.

Reliable graduation rate data is still unavailable due to the failure of adults to create the systems needed to provide it.

Rigorous end-of-course exams are rare or nonexistent as are formative benchmark assessments throughout the year. Cumulative state assessments or exit exams provide little or no data that can be directly tied to curricular and/or instructional adjustments in a particular course or for a particular teacher. When everyone is responsible, no one takes direct responsibility.

In the absence of a clear and specific curriculum tied to courses and of data to inform us whether that curriculum has been mastered by grade and subject by student, we cannot ever determine the effectiveness of any given reform initiative….and, rather than first correcting the fundamental teaching and learning issues, we are spending huge amounts of time and money redesigning structures attempting to be effective without them.

What works: Research? Evidence?

"*The reformer is always right about what is wrong. He is generally wrong about what is right*." Chesterton, *ILN 10-28-22*

The short answer is that we have some evidence that employing the practices that helped move elementary and middle schools to higher performance has also begun to strengthen high schools.

NCEA Studies of School and District Practices

A rigorous methodology guides the high-performing school identification process NCEA uses across states. We study both average and high-performing schools to ensure our findings

represent what distinguishes high-performers from others. Common protocols, reviewed externally, guide our site visits. The study of approximately 500 school systems over the past five years using this methodology is the foundation for the information I share today. A brochure listing the 75 high schools in 10 states we have studied is available at the back of the room.

Five themes contain the practices that differentiate high-performing school systems from others in our findings.

1. Curriculum and Academic Goals
2. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
3. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
4. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
5. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

This list is as significant for what it does NOT contain as for what it does, for example, resource allocation, parental and community involvement.

As significantly, we found that how the actual practices within these themes are distributed and managed across the school system is equally important. The role of each school level—district, school, and classroom—must be clearly defined in each theme area.

The five themes at three school levels form the grid for the ***NCEA Best Practice Framework***. *[See NCEA's Best Practice Framework: A Platform to Examine School and System Practices]*

Sample Study Findings

Within the given timeframe, I am unable to share the depth of our findings, but they are detailed within the above framework by practice and school at our website (**www.just4kids.org)**. I hope examples from a number of our state studies will tempt you to study the findings in greater detail.

For example, in high-performing high schools in the area of curriculum and academic goals we found that curriculum expectations are tightly aligned K-12 and are anchored to advanced courses and graduation profiles. The district curriculum adds great clarity to the state standards and is more comprehensive than the objectives tested on the state assessment.

Continually aligning the **Boston Public Schools** district curriculum between grades is critical according to a district administrator. The district, four time ***The Broad Prize for Urban Education*** district finalist, cannot simply hope that each school will figure out how to reach high standards that will prepare all students for success or that they can independently coordinate a coherent curriculum across the district to address movement of students from school-to-school with as little disruption as possible. Educators at **Brighton High School** explained that they have noted tremendous improvement since the district systemic alignment began to take effect. 80% of students in their Ninth Grade Academy, created in 1999, entered at Level 1 on the state assessment. In 2003, 75-80% of the students entered at Level 2 or above[i] in mathematics, English or both. Tenth-grade teachers told us they were "blown away" by the change in skills of entering students on the ELA writing prompt.

Florida researchers noted that staff in high-performing schools evidenced a greater respect and deeper understanding of student performance competencies as measured by the state's assessment. The attention to these competencies was not seen as a digression for

the "real" curriculum but as a very important component of it. The average-performing schools viewed the attention needed to address the state competencies as a regrettable diversion from traditional priorities of the school's past. High performers pursued rigor across a broader range of academic levels, made more aggressive efforts to enroll borderline students in advanced classes, and provided regular students more frequent access to the school's top teachers. College-prep was the default curriculum with the belief that it was much better to struggle in a high-level class than excel in an average. However, they noted that systemic supports were carefully constructed for those students attempting to master higher level courses and not just support for remedial or regular students.

Educators in **Aldine ISD** in Texas stated that a tightly aligned curriculum continually reviewed and analyzed in K-12 vertical teams is one of the most important factors in making them one of the highest performing urban districts in the nation. Interestingly, they also demonstrate a development that we have heard mentioned in a number of high-performing districts we have visited—elementary and middle school principals are moving to the high school. At the opening of this school year, Nancy Blackwell, longtime principal of **Hambrick Middle School**—one of the most challenged yet highest-performing middle schools in the state-- will move to the principalship of **MacArthur High School** in the district and Holly Fisackerly, outstanding principal of **Oleson Elementary** will become principal of the middle school.

In the theme area of Monitoring, we found high-performing high schools made powerful use of formative assessments and, when the state did not provide them, common semester or course-level examinations.

Long Beach Unified (*2003 Broad Prize for Urban Education Winner*) superintendent Chris Steinhauser discussed the powerful district data monitoring system that had been developed. In district-developed formative assessments correlations between district-constructed assessment items and state items are provided. This information was provided when teachers expressed concern that the district items were too difficult. Linked to grading practices, these assessments and correlations now ensure that course grades reflect understanding of content.

At **Maury High School** in Norfolk, teachers administer common, collaboratively designed tests to serve as interim benchmarks. Therefore, consistency across classes at **Maury** is addressed with common formative school assessments, while consistency across high schools in the district is addressed with state end-of-course exams.

California researchers noted that teachers, department chairs, and school leaders in average-performing schools showed great hesitation or even unwillingness to open their grade books, while high-performers had extensive data and grade discussions including the relationship of grades to common assessments. They also noted that in high-performing schools low scores were explained by referring to the lack of the right strategy or educator intervention, while in average-performing schools, low scores were almost exclusively explained by referring to students, their families, or their communities.

Specific findings for each of our state studies as well as *Broad Prize District Finalists* are available at our website by theme and school level practice.

A final note: We do acknowledge that knowing what high-performing schools do does not necessarily translate into DOING what high-performers do—bridging that knowing/doing gap will be the subject of one of our next segments and of the tools we are developing at NCEA.

Implications for High School Reformers

"Fallacies do not cease to be fallacies because they become fashions." Chesterton

First and foremost, remember that the high school is part of a K-12 system. The elementary, middle and high school represent very distinct entities for adults (and consequently for students) but they are simply arbitrary divisions in a single chronological learning continuum for a student. As a result, we treat structural problems as student developmental learning issues. In 7-9 school structures, for example, we do not find a transition problem between Grades 8 and 9, but as would be expected, between Grades 9 and 10. This, of course, speaks to alignment, not developmental causes.

We must insist that we know exactly what it is we want students to learn or to learn to do and make sure appropriate and varied checks are in place to see that they do. In the absence of this fundamental information, it is and will be impossible to determine if any reform is effective.

We must insist that reform efforts be based on the most rigorous research information available. We must start with the research and move to reform, not with the reform and then to supporting research.

Finally, we must be cautious about reform efforts that emphasize structural changes over changes that are deeply connected to the teaching-learning process. Alignment issues must be addressed before we start dealing with process and structural interventions that are necessary to deal with our lack of alignment. The most engaged student learning and the most collaborative teacher planning I observed in the past three years was at **Wilson High School in Long Beach USD**. **Wilson's** enrollment was 4300 when I visited. In an observed teacher planning session, ten Algebra I teachers collaborated--pouring over student results on common assessments they had administered. They studied student responses to each item and queried why students made any given error in a particular classroom. They determined by objective in which classroom students had been most successful….and then, the most exciting part, the teacher of the students who had demonstrated the strongest performance re-taught their lesson as the other nine teachers observed the next day in the one algebra class that had been scheduled during the teacher's common collaborative planning period. Students placed in that particular algebra course had been identified as needing additional assistance. The students with the greatest need received the powerful combined "best teaching" of the department as other teachers learned also.

The assumption that changing the organizational structure or processes of high schools is the only way to have a major impact on how students learn and perform must be continually examined.

State Role and State Policy

Without the ability to collect or link individual student records over time, states provide only a snapshot picture of student performance at a moment in time. This deprives educators and policymakers of most of the usefulness of the data: to assess student growth over time; to follow students through the educational pipeline and identify where they first succeed or fail; to identify when students are "on track" to later success; to evaluate the effectiveness of schools and programs; and to study which educational practices work best with well-prepared and with less-well-prepared students. To realize these benefits from a more complete data system, states need longitudinal student information systems that can integrate with district systems that use multiple measures to assess student performance. Currently, only 23 (and that number is self-reported and probably inflated) states have a statewide student identifier that is the key to matching student records over time, and only a handful of those states are currently collecting all

of the information they need to follow students through the educational pipeline.

Add as much clarity to state standards as possible.

- Eliminate grade span objectives, i.e., objectives that read identically for Grades 3-5—and provide grade-by-grade objectives
- Although the TIMMS reports have been reminding us for years that the US curriculum is too wide and not deep enough, many state standards deeply violate the "less is more" principle. Ronald Wolk indicated that many state standards are written in language that is "absurd" and contains such quantity that it would take a 10-hour teaching day to cover the material in them (1998). They have been created as a result of political not pedagogical decisions. These types of documents force educators to focus on the test rather than the curriculum. Place hard but practical limits on the number and nature of standards in state documents.
- Make certain that state assessments are tightly aligned to clear, intelligible standards
- Create end-of-course exams for all high school assessment.

About NCEA

The National Center for Educational Accountability is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose founding organizations include Just for the Kids, The University of Texas at Austin and the Education Commission of the States.

NCEA Goals

NCEA works to raise academic standards and raise student achievement by:

- Promoting the improvement of state data collection and the creation of statewide longitudinal student information systems to improve decision making;
- Using data to create *Just for the Kids* websites that focus public school communities on the improvement potential of every school;
- Conducting research using longitudinal student data to strengthen the knowledge base of what works to raise student achievement;
- Identifying consistently high-performing schools and school systems;
- Identifying and promoting the practices that distinguish consistently high-performing schools from other schools;
- Implementing services that help educators close the achievement and practices gaps between their own schools and consistently high-performing schools.

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[i] MCAS tests are scored by level: Level 1 (Warning/Failing), Level 2 (Needs Improvement), Level 3 (Proficient), Level 4 (Advanced). To "pass," a student must score at Level 2 or higher.