

THINGS ARE Falling Apart



CAN THE CENTER FIND A SOLUTION THAT WILL HOLD?

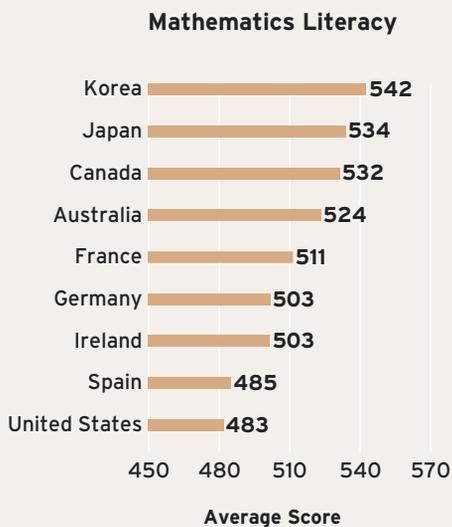
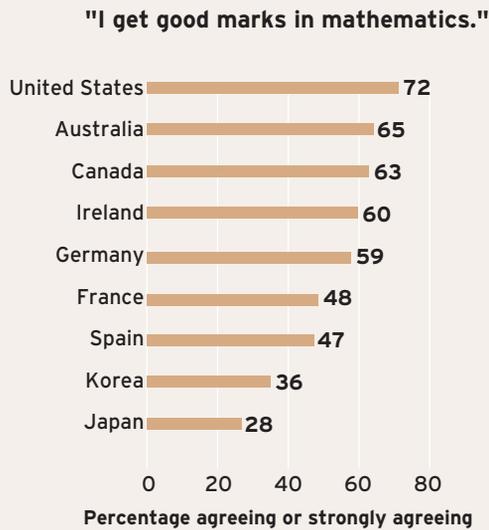
BY CHESTER E. FINN JR.

The year 2005 began with high schools taking center stage in Washington's continuing drama concerning education reform. President George W. Bush started things off in January, when he delivered a ringing address at a suburban D.C. high school about the urgency of reforming American high schools and offered a bold \$1.5 billion plan for doing so. A month after the presidential call to arms for high-school reform, 45 governors and a host of education leaders and CEOs met in a downtown Washington, D.C., hotel for a summit devoted to the subject.

In his keynote address to that gathering, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates pronounced current U.S. high schools "obsolete" and said, "Even when they are working as designed, they cannot teach all our students what they need to know today." At the same conclave, the new secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, declared that America "must make a high-school diploma a ticket to success in the 21st century." The summit concluded by adopting a five-part state "action agenda": restoring value to the diploma; redesigning the high school as an institution; strengthening the quality of high-school teachers and

Slow-Pitch Softball (Figure 1)

Although 15-year-olds from the United States scored near the bottom in mathematics on the recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, the American test-takers ranked number one on the test's self-esteem index.



Note: Scores were reported for 39 countries in PISA 2003. The above figures depict the United States, which ranked 27th in math, and a sample of eight countries with average mathematics literacy scores higher than those of the United States.

SOURCE: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Learning for Tomorrow's World—First Results from PISA 2003"

principals; holding high schools accountable for their results; and streamlining "education governance."

With all these powerful people talking high-school reform, it seemed that the planets had aligned to make high schools, the lost child of public education, the featured attraction on

the U.S. education-policy agenda. But the universe then began to shift and the planets were knocked out of alignment. First, House Education Committee chairman John Boehner, a Republican from Ohio and longtime proponent of education reform, expressed doubts about the federal government's role in leading the high-school reform effort. "The current system," Boehner remarked at a late-May committee hearing, "isn't getting the job done. But that doesn't necessarily mean the solution to the problem should be driven from Washington." Another senior member of that committee, former Delaware governor Michael Castle, also a Republican, was blunter. "Frankly," he said, "there's political opposition to it, and it's not just Democrats. It's within the Republican Party as well." And on the other side of the Capitol a spokesman for Senator Mike Enzi, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, noted, "Senator Enzi has made several other education issues the first priority."

As if that weren't trouble enough, the president's \$1.5 billion plan entailed shifting to his high-school reform plan funds traditionally spent on vocational education, a move that riled many members of Congress since "voc ed" remains popular back home.

What happened? Has the White House initiative been stopped at the starting gate? Is high-school reform a dead issue?

The Need Is Great, the Political Will Weak

As nearly everyone in education knows, something is wrong with our high schools. And, for the most part, the Bush administration's proposal seemed built on that consensus, much the same accord that brought us No Child Left Behind and the determination that schools need a regimen of standards, testing, and accountability.

"Out of a hundred 9th graders in our public schools," said Mr. Bush in his January speech, "only 68 will complete high school on time. Now, we live in a competitive world, and a 68 percent graduation rate for 9th graders is not good enough to be able to compete in this competitive world. In math and science, the problem is especially urgent. A recent study showed that American 15-year-olds ranked 27th out of 39 countries in math literacy. I don't know about you, but I want to be ranked first in the world, not 27th." (See Figure 1.)

The president proposed a series of programs to help high-school students graduate with "skills necessary to succeed." The plan included money to identify at-risk 8th graders and intervene in their academic lives "before it's too late." But the centerpiece was a call for tests in reading and math in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. "Testing at high-school levels will help us to become more competitive as the years go by," said Bush. "Testing in high schools will make sure that our children are employable for the jobs of the

21st century. Testing will allow teachers to improve their classes. Testing will enable schools to track. Testing will make sure that a diploma is not merely a sign of endurance, but the mark of a young person ready to succeed.”

The plan seemed sensible enough. And it is possible, of course, that parts of the president’s plan could reemerge when No Child Left Behind is reauthorized. At present, though, Congress seems to think it has done plenty to make over K–12 education and is loath to extend NCLB’s scope at the very time that the ambitious statute is facing so many implementation challenges as well as so much opposition from states and districts. Indeed, the controversies surrounding NCLB have at least delayed, if not doomed, both the administration’s version of high-school reform and any other bold federal entry into that territory.

Maximum Feasible Myopia

The real question, then, though perhaps born of necessity, is whether it’s such a bad thing that responsibility for revitalizing U.S. high schools has been thrust back on states and districts, private funders, and diverse reform architects. Could the federal government’s failure to mount a political consensus open the way to useful experimentation with various potential solutions?

Indeed, much experimenting is already under way across the land. And remembering the warning of the French political commentator George Bernanos may enhance the chances of finding useful solutions: “The worst, the most corrupting of lies, are problems poorly stated.” In other words, if a problem is misrepresented or its definition is disputed, any given solution is unlikely to solve it to everyone’s satisfaction.

A vivid American example of this policy perplexity was embodied in a famous 1969 book, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, by the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The title was a play on a key phrase in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (which launched LBJ’s “war on poverty”) calling for the “maximum feasible participation” of residents and groups affected by the legislation’s centerpiece Community Action Program. Moynihan’s point was that the program’s architects didn’t actually agree on what the problem



was, so the legislation they created fell apart when the time came for its implementation. It was, if you will, a modern public-policy rendition of the tale of the blind men and the elephant, wherein each sightless man had a different notion of the essential nature of this beast depending on which part he was touching. Moynihan contended that the Community Action Program was doomed because the rush to legislate had led people to reach superficial agreement on the definition of the policy problem.

As America embarks on high-school reform, it runs a similar risk. The nation is awash in different solutions to the high-school problem. But mostly we are still grappling with trying to define the problem. Sure, from 30,000 feet we can reach broad agreement as to what’s wrong. Nearly everyone shares the concern of the president and the governors that U.S. high-school students are not learning enough; that they’re being surpassed by their peers in other lands; that too many are bored to death; that too many drop out; that few of those who graduate are well prepared for college and employment. And so on. From six miles up, we know we have a problem and can even reach a meeting of minds as to its most vivid manifestations.

Yes, there’s a problem, several problems, in fact, and the rationale for high-school reform would seem compelling. But as we get closer to the ground, the picture loses focus. Is the problem with high school that it is not engaging students or that it is not academically challenging enough? Can we *simultaneously* reduce dropouts and beef up academic achievement? Will stiffer graduation requirements and more high-stakes testing cause even more young people to quit? Are these complementary goals, or are they trade-offs? Are these even the right questions?

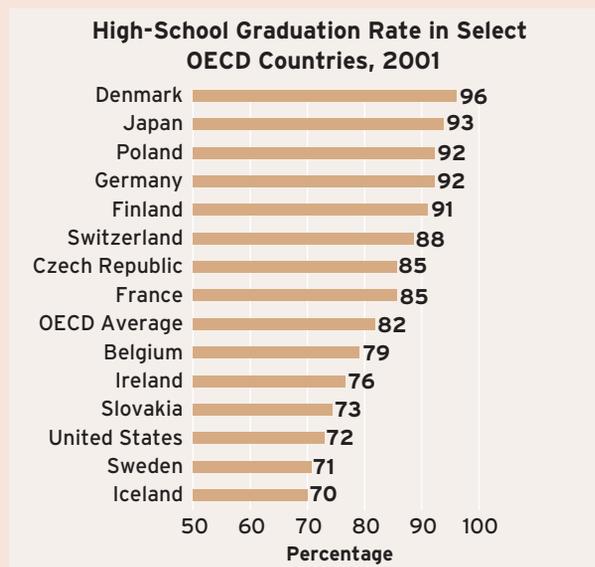
One thing we do know is that if we get the answers wrong, we invite a new maximum feasible misunderstanding, and high-school reform will be declared a failure. Thus I sense that it’s just as well Uncle Sam is not rushing in with a predetermined, nationwide strategy and that we’re giving states, communities, and private organizations some leeway to work out different approaches. If we monitor and evaluate their efforts, we stand to learn more about what works for whom in what circumstances.

Remember the warning of the French political commentator, George Bernanos:

“The worst, the most corrupting of lies, are problems poorly stated.”

Falling Behind (Figure 2)

The U.S. high-school graduation rate is well below that of most other developed countries.



SOURCE: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Education at a Glance 2003"

Knowing What's Wrong

How many options are there, really? Allowing for mixing and matching, I can identify at least six versions of the problem, each giving rise to different theories of action and strategies for solving it. The now-dormant White House proposals tapped into several of these, as did the summit communiqué released by the National Governors Association. At the end of the day, we will likely conclude that the high-school problem is actually a tangle of problems in need of a multipart solution. Well and good. First, though, all the blind men should come to understand the many-faceted nature of this particular beast.

Problem 1:

Achievement is too low.

Solution: Extend standards-based reform to high schools by making them accountable for their students' achievement and completion rates. A number of states have begun to do this, and the Bush proposal is focused here, bringing high schools under the NCLB umbrella, primarily via testing and public accountability. This is a familiar, government-driven, top-down, standards-based, institution-centered approach, already fairly well established in the primary and middle schools.

Problem 2:

Students aren't working hard enough, taking the right courses, or learning enough.

Solution: Since all they need to do to get a diploma is go through the motions and rack up the course credits, no real reward follows from studying hard (save for the small fraction seeking entry to competitive colleges), and no unpleasantness results from taking it easy. We thus need to establish high-stakes graduation tests that students must pass to earn their diplomas. This, too, is a behaviorist, top-down, results-based, accountability-driven system, but this version bears down primarily on the kids rather than on their schools. About half the states have already put into place some form of statewide graduation test. Some also supply carrots along with the sticks via positive inducements such as college scholarships for those with B averages. The Bush administration suggested fatter Pell grants for those who complete a challenging curriculum.

Problem 3:

High school is a lockstep bore, and consequently too many kids turn off, tune out, and quit (see Figure 2). If they don't stick around (or come back), there's no way they'll learn.

Solution: Prevent dropouts and maximize completions by making the high-school experience more appealing; individualize it, let students move at their own pace. This was the thrust of a recent task force report in Ohio titled "High-Quality High Schools"; it was the point of the president's proposed \$200 million Performance Plan Fund (part of the \$1.5 billion initiative); and it's the essence of any number of private-sector initiatives. With it, sometimes, comes the idea of creating new education options for out-of-school youth and dropout recovery programs for those who have fallen by the wayside. (Indeed, we could identify seven reform strategies rather than six by bisecting this one and distinguishing between prevention and retrieval schemes.) The underlying theory of action is that, if young people like school more (and, presumably, succeed at it), they'll hang in there. Well-conceived specialty schools and programs can reengage young people who have already had it with formal education.

Problem 4:

The circa-1950s, one-size-fits-all, comprehensive high school is itself dysfunctional, an inefficient, out-moded vehicle for teaching young people what they need to learn.

Solution: Devise new institutional forms for delivering secondary education, using technology, modern organization theory, and outsourcing. Give young people choices among the

formats: early-college high schools; smaller schools; schools within schools; charter schools; KIPP schools; high-tech high schools; virtual high schools; and more. Much has been tried on this front, and the innovations take many shapes, as do the schemes whereby young people and their parents can access the version that works best for them.

Problem 5:

The courses are too easy, pointless, and ill matched to the demands of the real world.

Solution: Beef up the curriculum. Broaden access to Advanced Placement courses and propagate the International Baccalaureate. Strengthen state standards. Revise the textbooks. Team up with colleges to create K–16 programs. Make college-prep the default curriculum. Blend higher-education’s expectations with those of modern jobs, à la the American Diploma Project, and work backward through the K–12 grades.

Problem 6:

Academic work and intellectual activity are no way to the adolescent heart.

Solution: Since teenagers are animated by things with tangible rewards and sleeves-rolled-up engagement, we need to get practical. Focus on tech-prep programs, ventures that join high schools to community colleges, work-study, schedules that blend school with jobs, voluntarism and community service, and kindred ways of tapping into the “affective,” pecuniary, and social sides of young people.

High School Is Different

To be sure, we could slice these strategies differently and combine them in any number of packages. And yes, with a bit of effort they can be loosely grouped under the two familiar headings that we know as standards-based and choice-based reform. But that may not be the most useful way to frame them. Indeed, it may invite people to slip into familiar ideological postures rather than to think closely about high schools.

The fact is that high schools pose challenges distinct from those of K–8. Their students don’t really have to be there. Even where state compulsory attendance laws extend to age 17 or 18, our sky-high dropout rate (see Figure 2) proves those statutes are unenforceable. High schools are larger than elementary schools and there are fewer of them, which makes choice-based strategies harder. For every person who believes that the high school’s mission is to supply all students with a solid liberal arts education, someone else is convinced that young people’s differing tastes and aspirations should preclude uniformity of academic standards and curriculum. On a major national survey conducted in April 2005, for example,

76 percent of Americans opposed making college prep the universal high-school curriculum and instead favored “career/technical education to equip students who don’t go to college with real-world skills.” (Hence the continuing appeal of vocation.) By the high-school years, moreover, achievement levels range widely: some students still need basic reading and arithmetic, while others crave university-level coursework and Intel science competitions.

Adolescents also have much on their minds besides school: money, sports, and socializing, for starters. More than a few have tangled with such adult-world problems as drugs, crime, and pregnancy. And many have scant use for authority (or even advice) proffered by grown-ups—their parents, teachers, or anybody else.

As if that did not present a sufficiently daunting picture for would-be reformers, lots of Americans don’t really see a big problem with high schools in their present form, at least not with the schools they know best. Parents typically give high marks to their own children’s high schools, institutions that also anchor many communities, provide Friday-night football games, and seem to be doing an adequate job of turning out graduates who go on to college, even if some must take remedial courses when they get there. The dropout rate means that the high schools’ most acute failures largely vanish from sight. At the top, honors students fret not about boredom or weak achievement, but about the stress that attends all that cramming and homework as they compete for entry into high-status universities. And just about everyone who sticks it out can at least attend the local community college, join the military, or find an entry-level job of some sort. “What, exactly, is the problem with our high school?” ask the residents of River City, U.S.A.

Considering all the impediments to wholesale high-school reform and the absence of true consensus as to the nature and urgency of the problem, I conclude that diversity and experimentation are a reasonable way to proceed in mid-decade, rather than pressing for elusive agreement about a single national strategy. That doesn’t mean I’m complacent about today’s high schools. They are not, in fact, getting us where we need to go as a country. But neither are they going to be turned around from Washington, which lacks the political will to make this problem its own. Instead, let us welcome the mixing of strategies and matching of solutions, the combining of ideas and refining of programs. Let us try all six (or five or seven) of the aforementioned reform notions and any number of permutations and combinations of them and seek to determine what works best for whom in which circumstances. High-school reform may resemble welfare reform, where it was important that states had the freedom and incentive to try various approaches before the time was ripe for a national strategy.

Let us acknowledge, though, that a decentralized, piecemeal approach invites its own messy confusion, the more so if we

have no common metrics by which to gauge progress, compare results, or define success from one place to another.

Multiple reform strategies cast the greatest light when they at least share measures of performance. For which purpose, let us return to 30,000 feet and suggest that the two essential sets of data for tracking America's progress or lack thereof in revitalizing the high school are objective test scores and graduation rates.

Neither, alas, is easy to come by nor itself the object of wide consensus.

Twelfth-grade scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), aka the nation's report card, are not even reported by state, though 4th- and 8th-grade results are, and have long been shadowed by doubts as to their accuracy, considering that many high-school seniors don't take the exams seriously. They do not, after all, "count" for anything in the student's own life. Other national tests used for college entrance—SATs, ACTs, Advanced Placement—are taken only by a subset of juniors and seniors. And of course none is taken by the horde of young people who don't complete high school.

Though many states have instigated graduation tests, these often have low passing levels and, in any case, are not readily compared from one jurisdiction to the next.

International tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are valuable for purposes of comparing U.S. student performance with their overseas counterparts, but these do not occur on a predictable cycle.

As for graduation and dropout rates, the National Center for Education Statistics has multiple definitions and measures; the Census Bureau counts "high-school equivalency" certificates along with actual, on-time graduates; and several independent analysts insist that the true graduation rate is far lower than federal data suggest, very different from state to state, often even different from what states think it is. (Fortunately, this may change over the next few years, as all but a handful of governors, declining to wait for Uncle Sam, announced in July 2005 that they would collaborate on a single, simplified graduation gauge.)



Thus it will be no small challenge even to monitor and evaluate U.S. high-school reform initiatives if we don't have measures that people agree on. And that's without resolving the policy paradox of whether achievement scores and graduation rates can realistically be raised at the same time, along with the level of student engagement, or whether those worthy goals tend to cancel one another.

At day's end, the multifaceted challenge of high-school reform seems to be a problem that needs to ripen before any comprehensive solution can drop from the policy tree. Americans hold disparate goals for high schools, conflicting priorities for strengthening them, and dissimilar yardsticks for tracking progress.

This is not to say the problem doesn't cry for a solution or that complacency rules the day.

In a survey of high-school students released by the National Governors Association in July 2005, more than a third of respondents said their school had not done a good job of challenging them academically or preparing them for college; almost two-thirds said they would work harder if the courses were more demanding or interesting. A month earlier, the Educational Testing Service

released a survey indicating that 51 percent of the general public think U.S. high schools need either "major changes" or a "complete overhaul," even if there's considerable dissonance as to what those changes should be. Furthermore, the imperative to make any changes may not extend to their own community high school.

That more and more people are discontented with today's high schools and their results is surely a good thing. This issue deserves to be on the national stage. But first it has to play in the provinces, in summer stock, and in off-off Broadway theaters, where actors, directors, investors, critics, and audiences alike can come to understand it.

Chester E. Finn Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and senior editor of Education Next.

More and more people

are discontented with today's high schools.

This issue deserves to be

on the national stage. But first

it has to play in the provinces,

in summer stock, and in off-off

Broadway theaters.