

By most accounts, the typical American high school is failing its students in both excellence and equity. Although a recent poll of parents, students, and community leaders found that almost half gave their local school an A or B, academic testing reveals that lackluster student performance is widespread. And roughly a quarter of the nation's high school students fail to graduate each year. Poor urban (and to some extent rural) high schools represent especially troubling pockets of students at risk of school failure.

Why Should We Care About High Schools?

Even among students who graduate, many are leaving high school with insufficient skills for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Over the past twenty-five years the technological revolution and globalization have heightened competition in the workplace, leading employers to demand ever more sophisticated skills of their workers. And the nation's high schools have yet to step up to the task of preparing young people adequately for the new world of work. Many schools struggle to find the resources to meet the educational needs of their students. Faced, as well, with an increasingly diverse student body, escalating staffing difficulties, and increasing calls for more accountability for their efforts, many high school administrators and policymakers are stumped as to what to do next. Fortunately high school reform has finally arrived near the top of the U.S. education policy agenda.

Focus of the Volume

Our purpose in this volume is to take stock of the challenges facing U.S. high schools and to consider what researchers and policymakers now know about high school reform—what works and what does not. We focus in particular on the low-performing schools whose limited capacity often places large numbers of their students at high risk of failure.

The challenges fall under the following six headings:

- helping students make the transition to high school in the ninth grade,
- keeping students from dropping out,
- reforming the structure of high schools, using such models as comprehensive school reform, charter schools, and smaller learning communities,
- upgrading the rigor and relevance of the curriculum,
- promoting better instructional strategies, and
- preparing students for postsecondary education and the world of work.

Improving Outcomes for High School Students

The newly heightened policy prominence of high school reform, especially the challenges facing low-performing schools, has reinvigorated debate about the role of high schools today and offers policymakers, practitioners, and researchers several unique opportunities.

Invest in Innovative Interventions. Recognizing the importance of innovative and systematic interventions to help high schools better prepare their students for college and work, districts, states, the federal government, and the private sector seem ready to increase investments in high schools. Building on a platform of structural school reform and accountability, these investments must tackle the instructional core of high school as well as supplemental academic and social support services, guidance and postsecondary transition counseling, and teacher quality.

Develop National Minimum Graduation Requirements. Developing nationally recognized minimum requirements would help high schools focus on the skills students need to succeed in today’s workforce. Although it is not necessary for every state to adopt exactly the same minimum standards for graduation, it is essential to recognize the vast differences in existing standards between states. Students who meet graduation requirements early in their high school careers could move on and develop higher-level skills that qualify them for more rigorous and relevant opportunities in postsecondary education and the workforce.

Reexamine the Goals of a High School Education. More broadly, the nation needs a dialogue on the goals of high school in the twenty-first century. Clearly preparation for the workforce must continue to be foremost among these goals, and as the skill demands of the workforce continue to evolve, high schools must be nimble in their efforts to prepare students to meet those demands. The real question, though, given the technology revolution and globalization, is whether a high school education should be considered sufficient for today’s young adults, or whether high school should be viewed as the new “middle school,” with K-14 or even Pre-K-16, rather than K-12, as the standard. If postsecondary education is a key goal for high schools, it will be necessary to develop measurement and data systems to keep track of how well high schools are achieving this goal.

Commit to Rigorous Research on Reforms. Although states and districts are to be applauded for embarking on renewed efforts to increase investments in high schools, those efforts will come to naught unless they are accompanied by a commensurate investment in building rigorous evidence about which reforms worked—and for whom and under what circumstances—and which did not work. Over the past century, U.S. education policymaking has gone through periods of intense focus on high-profile problems, during which the nation has made large investments in creative approaches to addressing these problems. Too often, however, the investments on promising reforms were not complemented by investments in knowledge-building. Education policymakers and researchers should seize the opportunity now to leave a legacy of rigorous research so that the nation will not find itself in a similar situation with the next generation of high school students.