

Rethinking High School: Profiles of Five Innovative Sites

Executive Summary

Introduction

According to recent studies, only 68% of high school students graduate. The statistics among Black and Hispanic students are substantially worse, with only about 50% earning a diploma. Furthermore, only 20% of Black students and 16% of Hispanic students graduate prepared for college. Many of those working to solve this crisis in our nation's high schools have begun creating smaller, rigorous, more personalized schools to better prepare all students for the demands of college, work, and citizenship.

WestEd, a nonprofit education and human development research and service agency, was asked by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to conduct an initial study of five model high schools — representing a larger network of more than 135 schools nationwide — to gain understanding of what these schools look like in their initial years of implementation, who their students are, and how their students are doing. The following provides important insights into the movement to create high schools in which all students graduate prepared for education beyond the high school classroom.

Methodology

This report provides a snapshot in advance of more in-depth, long-term evaluations of the progress that has been made. It is based on interviews with school leaders and available student data, and it seeks to answer the following three questions:

- What is happening at these select schools?
- Who are these schools educating?
- How are the students in these schools doing?

Findings

This study resulted in six key findings from the model schools studied:

- The schools serve ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students — and, in doing so, reach students who have not succeeded in a traditional education setting. The student population at the five schools is primarily Black or Hispanic, ranging from 53-83% (Black) and 43-86% (Hispanic). A large percentage of students lives below the poverty level, ranging across the schools from 35-85%.
- The schools are highly sought after by students of all abilities, although many of the students enter performing below grade level; each school has a waiting list of approximately 200 students.
- Students engage in rigorous and engaging curricula and enroll in advanced placement classes.

- Schools develop and maintain supportive learning environments.
- Attendance rates at all model sites are higher than the district average.
- Students are achieving academic success, including increased scores on state academic achievement tests, high graduation rates, and high college admission rates.

Based on interviews with principals, this study identifies a number of elements they consider essential to school success:

- high-quality teachers and staff;
- an innovative, clear plan designed to provide personalized and rigorous learning;
- a focus on providing a strong curriculum; and
- flexibility in school governance with autonomy from outside control.

This report recommends further study in the following areas:

- the key conditions that allow these schools to help students achieve;
- the role the district plays in supporting these schools;
- the role of school leaders in sustaining efforts over time;
- how curricular strategies impact school climate, teacher satisfaction, and student achievement; and
- how graduates of these schools are doing in college.

School Profiles

Each school profile provides background information on the school, including why it was founded, its student population, its key attributes, student performance data, and interview testimony.

TechBoston Academy

Part of the Pilot Schools network established in 1994 to meet the needs of underserved students, TechBoston was created in 2001 to provide students with a technology-based, college-preparatory curriculum. It prepares its 243 students, 50% of whom are Black and 85% of whom live in poverty, for work in the high-tech industry by offering industry certifications in IT essentials, as well as access to advanced technology courses.

- In one year on the preparation exam for the state standardized test, the school's ninth graders went from 25% scoring at grade level in reading and 12% scoring at grade level in math to 63% scoring at grade level in reading and 25% scoring at grade level in math. Of these same students, 93% passed the state standardized test in English language arts and 95% passed in math.

- TechBoston prepares all of its students for the PSAT and SAT college entrance exams, and this year hired a college coach.

Dayton Early College Academy

Opened in 2003, Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) is one of the nation's 50 early college high schools, an academic model that allows students to earn up to two years of college credit while still in high school. By tying its rigorous curriculum to Ohio standards and University of Dayton entry requirements, DECA's predominantly Black, low-income students are well-positioned to attain a postsecondary degree.

- On the Terra Nova, a state-mandated achievement test, DECA students outperformed their Dayton Public School District (DPS) counterparts in all five components (reading, language, math, science, and social studies).
- More than 70% of DECA students scored above the 50th percentile in reading compared to 37% of DPS students.

Chicago International Charter School - Northtown Academy Campus (Northtown Academy)

Northtown Academy was founded in 2003 on the principles of Civitas, which uses a college-prep education that relates key cognitive skills to academic content. Northtown's 450 students are diverse — 43% Hispanic, 34% White, 12% Black, and 11% Asian/Pacific Islander/Filipino. This charter school's rigorous curriculum, strict behavioral policies, and strong faculty and staff have led to high achievement among students.

- Freshman test scores on the Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS) PLAN test in 2004 were the highest of any charter school in Chicago.
- Juniors did better on the ACT than the junior classes of all other open-admission schools in Chicago.
- One hundred percent of seniors applied to college, 83% were accepted, and 11% received merit-based scholarships.

Arrupe Jesuit High School

Opened in 2003, Arrupe Jesuit High School is part of the Cristo Rey Network, a group of schools offering a Catholic, college-prep education to low-income students. A central part of Arrupe is its Corporate Work-Study Program, which requires students to work one day a week in an entry-level corporate job, allowing them to earn 70% of tuition expenses and gain experience in the work world. Arrupe's 60 students, 86% of whom are Hispanic and 80% of whom are living in poverty, also receive tuition assistance from the school, foundations, and organizations.

- Arrupe has a 93% attendance rate, compared to 87% for the Denver City Public School District.
- The suspension rate is 3%, compared to 17% for the district.
- Employers ranked 70% of student work as "outstanding" or "very good."

High Tech High School

High Tech High School in San Diego was created in 2000 to prepare students for work in the high-tech industry and is the model for 10 other technology-oriented schools in the nation. Students study in labs instead of classrooms, have access to workstations with Internet-ready computers, and work on long-term projects that promote in-depth learning. Internships for juniors and seniors allow them to apply their studies to the real world and gain valuable work experience. After only four years, High Tech High is in the top 10% of all California public schools based on Academic Performance Index scores.

- One hundred percent of its 2004 seniors applied to college and all were accepted; 80% of these students enrolled in four-year institutions.
- High Tech High students outperformed their counterparts in the San Diego Unified School District on both the ACT (23.9 versus 20.8 out of a possible score of 36) and the SAT (85 points higher on the verbal SAT and 54 points higher on the math SAT).