STATUS REPORT ON DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

March 12, 2002

Introductory Statement

This report discusses the status of district high school reform efforts.

Background

The urgency to reform our high schools emerges from the need to produce students who can meet rigorous graduation and UC/CSU “a-g” requirements, pass the California High School Exit Exam, and make a successful transition to postsecondary education or a career of their choice.

District efforts to reform high schools began with the adoption of the Blueprint for Student Success and the commitment to improve the achievement of all district students. This systemic reform effort included a comprehensive K-12 literacy reform initiative, a number of instructional supports, and the creation of an infrastructure for professional development. Examples of high school reform strategies outlined in the Blueprint include site literacy and mathematics administrators, smaller class size in literacy and mathematics classes, extended day learning experiences and a summer bridging program.

To assist us in expanding our high school reform efforts, in 2000-2001 the district applied for and received two planning grants: A Smaller Learning Communities Grant from the Department of Education and another from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. These grant awards, totaling approximately $500,000, were used to augment the supports in the Blueprint and allow stakeholder groups to conduct intensive research regarding the state of our high schools and develop a plan to expand the reform efforts.

During the 2000-2001 school year, a central planning team of key district staff and school site representatives met frequently to work out the details of the specific aspects of high school reform in the district. The planning work consisted of:

- Reviewing research
- Examining student data
- Developing an intellectual mission and vision statement
- Identifying an approach to reform
- Planning and conducting retreats and dialogues with key stakeholders (principals, counselors, teachers, students, community members)
Accomplishments of the planning year include defining a high level of expected academic achievement (see benchmarks, page 6 of this report); examining literacy, mathematics and science practices (course content/sequences) at Grade 9; updating the four-year planning guide and four-year planning process; reducing class size in literacy and mathematics classes; gaining a better understanding of how students perceive high school; providing support structures for teachers; and engaging teachers, principals and counselors in dialogue about high school reform.

The culmination of planning efforts was the receipt of the implementation grant from the Carnegie Corporation in the amount of $8 million, which the district received in partnership with UCSD’s Center for Research in Educational Equity, Assessment and Teaching Excellence (CREATE). This grant award is an acknowledgement that district high school reform strategies were carefully and thoughtfully developed through a collaborative and strategic planning process.

Discussion

What do we expect of our high schools?

We began the task of identifying and clearly defining expectations for high school reform by conducting discussions and focus groups with stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, counselors, community members and administrators). As a result of stakeholder discussions of expectations and common understandings, the following vision and mission statement for high schools emerged:

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<tr>
<th>Vision of the High School in San Diego City Schools</th>
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<td>“We believe that high schools are places where all students are learning how to think powerfully and independently by engaging the best creations of human civilization—mathematics, literature, science, history, the arts and world languages. What the best and most exclusive schools do for their students, we will accomplish for all students.”</td>
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<table>
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<th>Mission of the High School in San Diego City Schools</th>
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<td>We believe that the mission of high schools is to produce students who are able to:</td>
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<td>• Meet rigorous graduation requirements</td>
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<td>• Pass the high school exit exam (CAHSEE)</td>
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<td>• Meet UC/CSU “a-g” requirements</td>
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<td>• Make a successful transition to postsecondary education or a career of their choice</td>
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<td>• Become productive and contributing citizens</td>
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Why the need for reform?

We need to reform our high schools for the simple reason that we are not currently meeting student needs as outlined in the mission statement. Specifically:

- The district attrition rate shows that 31% of ninth graders leave the district before receiving their diploma, with 13.5% dropping out of high school.
- Of the district students who took the CAHSEE, only 42.0% were able to pass both the mathematics and English portions of the examination.
- Only 53% of students district-wide are scoring at or above the 50th percentile in mathematics on the SAT 9 assessment, and only 46% are scoring at or above the 50th percentile in reading. A look at the district’s English Language Learner population (one in every five students) shows a drop in these numbers of 29% and 14% respectively.
- Of district graduates in 2000, only 38% met the UC/CSU “a-g” requirements.
- Of the 8.6% of our students who enroll in a UC school, 32% require a remedial English course. Of the 11.3% that enroll in a CSU school, 53% require a remedial English course and 46% require a remedial Mathematics course.

How do we define high school reform?

High school reform must have at its core a strong vision committed to equity and excellence in teaching, recognition of the need to improve instruction and leadership through intensive professional development, and the personalization of the high school through the use of smaller learning community strategies. Through an extensive planning process that included research, discussion, and student and teacher input, a High School Reform Planning Team consisting of school site and central office personnel, identified three essential objectives and accompanying strategies for high school reform.

Objective 1. Academic Press: Academic Press is the degree to which various forces-school policies, practices, norms, expectations, and rewards-generated by both staff and students, constitute the academic “environment” experienced by students and press them to work hard and do well in school.

- Improving Instruction. Professional development plans have been developed in the core areas of literacy, mathematics and science. The literacy, mathematics and science departments have worked with principals and teachers to review and revise course of studies, course sequencing, and curriculum. Professional development plans, course of study reviews, and course sequencing in social studies, visual and performing arts, and world languages are under review this year.
Another key piece to improving instruction is the evaluation of the effectiveness of current programs and strategies. This spring, focus groups consisting of teachers and peer coaches will be convened to discuss the effectiveness of Blueprint and high school reform strategies in literacy and mathematics. This intensive involvement will impact the design and development of future curriculum and reform strategies as well as inform refinements on current strategies.

- **Assessment.** An integral part of the process of increasing the rigor of high school courses involves developing integrated assessments to guide instruction and using end-of-course assessments to evaluate student progress. This year teachers across our district are piloting end-of-course exams that are aligned to the CAHSEE in mathematics and literacy. In science the end-of-course exam includes questions aligned to the California Science Standards. These assessments are designed to provide data on the effectiveness of our programs and student progress.

- **Providing Student Learning Opportunities and Supports.** The basic premise of high school reform in San Diego is that all students are capable of achieving at high levels. There is a need to address the differences among students in preparation for and experience with a rigorous curriculum. The answer is not to reduce what is expected of students who are performing below grade level, but rather to provide these students with additional learning opportunities and supports to enable them to meet grade level standards.

- **Summer Bridging Program.** Every student who is performing below and significantly below grade level at the end of eighth grade is expected to attend the Summer Bridging Program. The program provides summer academic preparation for students who will be entering high school in the fall. It also gives them a head start on high school and allows them to become familiar with the high school campus and the teachers at the high school they will be attending. This year, as a result of site principal and teacher input, modifications are being made to the program to include more flexibility and variety in course offerings.

**Objective 2. Leadership:** Effective school leaders guide and direct instructional improvement, enhance the skills and knowledge of school staffs, create a common culture of expectations around the use of enhanced skills and knowledge, unite faculty members in a productive relationship with each other, and hold individuals accountable for the collective result.

The expectation for school leaders is to promote the success of all students by focusing schools on the centrality of student learning and instruction; promoting the collaborative nature of school leadership within the school community (parents, teachers, students); and ensuring the effective management of the school as an organization for learning.

- **High School Principals/Instructional Leadership.** The professional development plan for high school principals responds to the needs expressed by principals at the high school reform retreats that were held during the planning process. The emphasis is on building a learning community around high school leadership, working toward the vision of high school reform, and building the capacity of principals to understand and support powerful instruction.
Secondary Site Administrators and Subject Departments. An important part of the professional development for secondary teachers will be the site-based learning and support provided by subject area site administrators, who will replace the current department chairs. This transformation of roles is part of the larger transformation of the function of the subject department into a learning community that pays consistent and serious attention to the improvement of instructional practice.

Science Lead Teachers. Until the site administrators for science are hired, science lead teachers will provide the necessary on-site support for effective implementation of new curriculum materials and instructional practices in science.

Counselors. The role of high school counselors will be transformed to tie their work more closely to the academic achievement of students.

Objective 3. Personalization: Personalization involves the development of a school climate and organization that produces strong, personal support for each student and a feeling on the part of the student that the adults in the schools believe that the student can and will succeed.

Smaller Learning Communities and Personalization. As part of its Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) initiative, the U.S. Department of Education has identified several strategies that can be used to create smaller learning communities. These include schools-within-a-school, career academies, or houses; mentoring strategies such as personal adult advocates or teacher-advisory systems; magnet schools; flexible scheduling or lengthening the school year or day; and other innovations designed to create a more personalized high school experience. The benefits of these structures include individualized attention for students, increased student participation and engagement, and reduced instances of classroom disruption. The over-riding benefit is higher student achievement.

Focus group sessions conducted by San Diego Dialogue with district students has shown that many students find their classes “boring” and “not really intellectually stimulating.” They do not feel connected to their school or the adults in the school. They want “inspiring” instruction and to feel as if they belong. Creating smaller learning environments with engaging and supporting adults on their campuses is one way to create a sense of belonging and connection.

The goal in creating smaller schools is to know, include, attend to, keep track of, challenge and care about each student. Recent research states that school size impacts outcomes such as academic achievement, attendance and graduation rates, drop out rates, and successful school-to-work transitions. Another summary, compiled by the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago found that small schools have value for students who have not been well served by traditional school structures, such as “at-risk”, “gifted”, and “disadvantaged” students.

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1 See Appendix 1 for student focus group report.
• **Whole School Reform Strategies.** Whole school reform may be defined as comprehensive high school reform that combines the cross-disciplinary efforts of all stakeholders at a school site, the parents, the teachers, students, administration, community and district in the intellectual development and personal nurturing of all students. These efforts are demanding on the resources of the school and district and thus need to be undertaken in small increments.

*How do we measure our success?*

The urgent needs in San Diego City Schools require drastically improving the achievement of our high school students. To measure improvement, planning teams consisting of school site principals and central office staff have worked to define the following benchmarks for 2001-2002:

**By August, 2002**

♦ At least two-thirds of our freshman will have earned at least 10 credits and have a GPA of 2.0 or higher.

♦ The ninth grade one-year drop out rate will not exceed the 2000-2001 baseline.

♦ At least two-thirds of the freshmen will have successfully completed “a-g” courses that put them on track to meet the entrance requirements for a UC/CSU school.

♦ We will have piloted end-of-course exams in English 1,2, Algebra Explorations and Physics 1,2.

♦ We will have completed course descriptions for a ninth grade course of study in the areas of literacy, mathematics and science.

♦ Beginning with the freshman class of 2001-02, and continuing each year thereafter, students who are below or significantly below grade level, have not passed the CAHSEE, are credit-deficient, and/or have a GPA below 2.0, will:
  • Have a learning contract that is developed collaboratively by the teacher(s), counselor, parent/guardian, and student;
  • Be placed in appropriate support courses (e.g., literacy block, Algebra Explorations);
  • Be assigned to and participate in extended learning opportunities (e.g., extended-day reading program, summer school);
  • Be assessed to monitor progress and diagnose learning needs;
  • Have their academic progress, attendance, and participation in extended learning programs monitored regularly by the counselor.
Instructional Program Implications

Many of the strategies for high school reform that are included in Phase 2 of the Blueprint impact each high school across all grade levels (i.e., literacy and mathematics administrators). However, the majority of the instructional and curricular strategies have a focus on grade nine (Block Algebra Explorations classes, Active Physics, professional development, CAHSEE intervention strategies). For this reason, the focus for the 2001-2002 school year is on grade nine. Strategies at other grade levels will be phased in over subsequent years.

This year the district began planning its “whole school” high school reform efforts with a group of six schools: Clairemont, Crawford, Kearny, Mission Bay, Patrick Henry and San Diego high schools. Five of these schools were selected due to their status as lower performing schools involved in intervention programs (IIUSP). A higher performing school was added because of its stable administrative team, its diversity and its strong ties to its community. It is expected that the reform efforts will unfold differently at each site. In fact, site leadership teams including teachers and counselors have been actively encouraged to be creative in the development of their own implementation processes to meet the needs of their individual student populations.

A proposal will be submitted to the Board of Education to establish a school-within-a-school with a focus on architecture, construction and engineering at Kearny High School effective in the fall of 2002.

The Lincoln/Gompers Redevelopment Committee and the Educational Specifications Task Force are working to define the new Lincoln High School that will open in the fall of 2006. Now in the design phase, a structure under serious discussion consists of four comprehensive schools within a school, each housing approximately 675 students, their size remaining consistent with that recommended in the smaller schools research.

Facilities Implications

There are no known facilities implications at this time.

Budget Implications

Funding to support high school reform strategies is provided through funds allocated within the Blueprint for Student Success and the Carnegie Corporation grant award.

Last month the Board of Education approved the submission of a grant application for the Smaller Learning Communities Initiative from the Department of Education on behalf of the six schools noted above. If awarded, these funds will be used to create smaller learning environments at the six sites.
Public Support and Engagement

Students, parents, teachers and community members have been engaged in conversation over the issues of high school reform from the beginning. Community vehicles include town council meetings, Superintendent meetings, high school reform study groups, a teacher dialogue and a public forum on high school reform. (For details, please see Appendix 2). In addition, some high schools have established site leadership teams that include teachers and other stakeholders, as well as other site-based forums for staff engagement.

Beginning this year our goal is for every district high school to annually convene five student focus groups and two parent focus groups. The data these focus groups yield will be used to deepen understanding of students’ and parents’ experiences at each respective school site. Centrally this data will be used as feedback to make adjustments to the high school reform efforts. Faculty from UCSD/CREATE will conduct all focus groups.

In addition, facilitators from UCSD/CREATE will work with San Diego Dialogue staff to convene two community focus groups in March 2002. These focus groups will provide a community perspective regarding the district’s ongoing reform efforts. The first representative group will consist of agencies and private sector firms with a stake in the future development of San Diego’s workforce. The second meeting will consist of representatives from community-based organizations in San Diego that are engaged in programs that serve our high school youth population.

Board Policy Implications

There are no known board policy implications at this time.

Policy Recommendations

There are no policy recommendations included in this status report.

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Appendix:

1) Student Focus Group Comments
2) Public Engagement Strategies
3) SDCS Student and Parent Focus Groups

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3 See Appendix 3 on SDCS Student and Parent Focus Groups