

Finding Common Ground on NJ Secondary Reform

Date: March 26, 2007

To: Members of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee

From: Members of the Secondary Education Advisory Group:

Mary Bennett, Executive Director, Project GRAD, Newark, NJ

Wilhelmenia Holder, President, Secondary Parents Council, Newark, NJ

Dr. Michelle Fine, Graduate Center, City University of NY

Stan Karp, Director, Secondary Reform Project, Education Law Center

Dear Colleagues;

We write as members of the NJDOE's Secondary Advisory Group and as educators, parents, and advocates with many years of experience with secondary reform at the school, district, and state levels.

Over the past four years, we have invested significant time and energy in supporting the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) as it moved from design by a collaborative workgroup in response to Abbott mandates to the early stages of implementation. We have also watched with interest, and at times some concern, as the HS Redesign Steering Committee launched its series of public conversations in support of New Jersey's participation in the American Diploma Project.

We understand that having completed its initial round of public meetings, the Redesign Committee is preparing a "white paper" summarizing its assessment of the challenges facing NJ secondary schools and its recommendations for moving forward. Accordingly, it seems an opportune time to share our own recommendations for addressing the shared goals of improving educational opportunity and outcomes for all NJ students. We hope this will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about secondary reform in NJ and to building the broad constituency of stakeholders and civic leaders that will be needed to turn hopes for reform into plans for effective action.

Background and context

While we recognize that secondary schools in New Jersey face urgent challenges, we think it's important to begin any redesign effort by acknowledging the strong foundation NJ has established. NJ is a national leader in educational investment and in funding equity for poor urban schools. It has the highest high school graduation rate in the nation, and despite significant gaps across communities it has the highest graduation rates for students of color, as well as comparatively high levels of college participation and college graduation in four and six years.

There are problematic aspects to each of these achievements, but they are not small accomplishments. We cite them not to minimize the serious challenges our middle and high schools face, but to underscore the need to preserve and build on these strengths as we seek ways to raise expectations and opportunity for all students. We must craft policies that improve academic performance for all students while closing achievement gaps and sustaining our commitments to equity for our most vulnerable students and communities.

Currently, NJ has two major secondary reform initiatives underway, one led by the High School Redesign Steering Committee, another the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative. While these are not the only education initiatives relevant to secondary school improvement in NJ, they are presently the

two main frameworks for conversation and planning about secondary reform at the state level and in the majority of districts.

These two initiatives, HS Redesign and SEI, have both distinct and overlapping features. In considering the challenges facing each initiative, we give special attention to the issues these efforts raise for the Abbott districts and to suggestions for integrating both initiatives while promoting equity, rigor and high graduation rates across racial, ethnic and geographic groups.

HS Redesign is the NJ expression of the American Diploma Project, affiliated nationally with Achieve, Inc. The ADP network now includes 26 states, including NJ, whose participation was encouraged at the February 2005 National Summit on High School Reform, ratified by a NJ state summit on high schools in September, 2005, and endorsed by Governor Jon Corzine with the formation of the HS Redesign Steering Committee in August, 2006.

The American Diploma Project seeks “to restore value to the high school diploma by raising the rigor of the high school standards, assessments and curriculum and better aligning these expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and work.” ADP reflects growing concerns of business and higher education leaders about the readiness of high school graduates for success in college and careers. States in the ADP network commit to aligning graduation requirements, high school course work, and state assessments with the expectations of the workplace and the university. The primary instruments of this effort are benchmarked standards, course frameworks aligned with state standards, more rigorous assessments, and improved data systems to track student achievement and align expectations across the P-20 spectrum and the world of work.

The Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) grew out of NJ’s Abbott process which established State Constitutional standards for equity in school funding and educational opportunity. Specifically, SEI was developed in response to an Abbott X mediation agreement that required a new program of secondary reform to address gaps in student achievement and educational opportunity. SEI was designed by a collaborative workgroup of educators, DOE officials, academic experts, and community stakeholders. The SEI framework is currently part of Abbott regulations governing 31 of the state’s poorest urban districts. It requires that by Fall, 2008, all students in Abbott districts in grades 6-12 have access to college preparatory curriculum aligned with state standards, small learning environments including teacher teams paired with a cohort of students over multiple years, and a system of family/student advocacy to personalize school experience and provide increased academic and social supports for all students.

Both these initiatives face considerable challenges. They share a common commitment to raising academic expectations and to providing supports needed to reach those expectations. They differ in origins, emphasis and the specificity of the academic expectations and corresponding supports required to reach their goals. For example:

The HS Redesign/ADP effort seeks to close the “ever-widening gap between what students are learning and what they need to know to lead productive adult lives.” In curricula terms, this latter knowledge is defined as higher level math and science courses and more rigorous language arts courses aligned with more challenging standardized assessments (with potentially high stakes consequences for high school graduation, college admission and employment.)

SEI was designed to address a different gap: the achievement gap between NJ’s urban and suburban students as measured against existing state standards and tests. The workgroup that developed the SEI

framework gave particular attention to the large gaps in high school graduation rates (both reported and “hidden”) between Abbott and non-Abbott districts. Focusing on graduation rates, as opposed to test scores, provides a broader view of the urgent individual and social costs of secondary school failure and of the deeper changes that need to be made in curricula, instruction, professional practice, and school climate in order to help students move successfully from middle school through high school and on to graduation.

Both ADP and SEI share a commitment to higher standards and more rigorous curricula. SEI’s commitment is reflected in its requirement that all core courses for graduation credit be aligned with state standards and include rigorous, college preparatory content, and that remedial and substandard courses (eg. “consumer math” and “life science”) be replaced by more demanding ones (eg. Algebra and Biology.) At the same time, the SEI framework pairs these curricula improvements with small learning communities and family/student advocacy, which are short-hands for the changes in professional practice and school climate needed to support higher achievement. These changes include structural and instructional reforms and the kind of sustained, embedded professional development that is necessary if higher academic standards are to be realistic and attainable across NJ’s diverse districts.

Beyond these different frames, the higher standards and assessments called for by ADP pose an additional challenge to both the HS Redesign and SEI efforts: namely, How will secondary schools that are not meeting existing standards successfully meet tougher ones? If our goals include both excellence and equity, our reform plans must address such questions directly. Otherwise rhetoric about raising expectations for all will face quite reasonable concerns that something less is being proposed.

It remains to be seen whether either of these initiatives can live up to the challenges that gave them birth, or whether, like earlier rounds of secondary reform, they will float like helium balloons above the din of school reform rhetoric, leaving school communities, educational practice and student lives unchanged (or even worse, diminished). It is because we take seriously our responsibilities as advocates for students and school communities, and because the prospects of both these ambitious initiatives would be greatly strengthened by finding common ground that we offer the following ideas and recommendations for moving forward:

Recommendations:

1. NJ needs greater coherence and integration among related secondary reform initiatives. This includes dialogue between the stakeholders of overlapping but distinct initiatives like ADP and SEI. We believe the unique origins and regulatory status of SEI justify continuing the existing Advisory Group to support and monitor progress toward implementation. But we recommend regular dialogue and communication between the SEI Advisory Group and the HS Redesign Committee through occasional joint meetings, regularly shared updates, and, where appropriate, collaborative undertakings (eg. public engagement activities, overlapping “subcommittees,” statewide events or convenings.) Assistant Commissioner Doolan’s offer to circulate a draft of the Redesign Committee’s white paper to the SEI Advisory Group before it is finalized would be a good first step.
2. We also need better coordination between proposed changes in curriculum and assessment and the supports needed to improve teaching and learning. We need a balanced approach that pairs calls for “rigor” with the reforms and resources needed to produce and sustain it. We agree that challenging content standards and effective assessments can play an important role in

improving academic performance (especially when the educators responsible for implementing the standards and assessments have a role in their creation). But we do not believe that higher levels of academic achievement can be attained solely, or even primarily, through the use of standards and tests, (and we are concerned that the HS Redesign/ADP standards process seems to be top-down, with the standards endorsed by business and university bodies and the NJDOE before K-12 educators are even brought into the process). Particularly in the over-tested, under-resourced era of NCLB, we see a danger that a reform strategy narrowly focused on top-down, higher standards and harder tests (including high stakes end-of-course exams) will amount to “NCLB on steroids” and be more likely to generate new forms of tracking and educational inequality rather than improvements in educational outcomes across all student groups and communities.

As Michael Cohen, former assistant U.S. secretary of education, and Adria Steinberg, president of Jobs for the Future, wrote in *Education Week* (3/13/02), “the crisis in urban high schools can’t be solved simply by setting high standards and then trying to push a larger number of students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them. The problem is that by the time young people reach high school, growing numbers of them are so alienated and disengaged from school that higher expectations and more challenging curricula—the primary tools of standards-based reform—are necessary but far from sufficient to engage or motivate them. In fact, some recent evidence on dropout rates points to the possibility that these strategies may cause more students to give up on school altogether.”

3. For such reasons, we believe the high school redesign piece is as at least as important as curricula and assessment reform. Yet we are concerned that the “redesign” piece of the ADP framework is weak and that, to date, the implementation effort of SEI has been thin and under-resourced. To move either agenda will require creating much greater capacity to support deep reform at the school, district, and state levels. Toward that end we recommend:
 - a. Expansion of NJDOE’s capacity to provide technical assistance for secondary reform to schools and districts, including formation of dedicated support teams within the Department.
 - b. Making SEI the default “restructuring” framework for all secondary schools in CAPA review, including the growing number of schools likely to be sanctioned under NCLB in the next few years.
 - c. Facilitation and funding to promote partnerships between districts and successful reform developers. (One lesson from NJ’s uneven experience with “whole school reform” is that technical assistance is most effective when it is targeted, specific, and well-integrated into other district and state objectives. The SEI framework presents such an opportunity. Research-based, experienced professional development assistance, properly applied and evaluated, is a necessary complement to (though not a substitute for) district and school-based reform leadership. This would be an especially useful topic for joint exploration by the HS Redesign Committee and the SEI Advisory Group.
 - d. Creation of an innovation fund that provides incentives and supports for districtwide plans that reflect the SEI and/or ADP framework and goals, possibly including an RFP process to promote public/private and university/school partnerships to support secondary reform.

- e. A statewide conference on secondary reform for educators that makes recent national and regional reform experience available to policymakers and practitioners and that highlights model reform efforts in NJ.
 - f. Sustained public engagement and constituency-building efforts that extend the Redesign Committee's public conversation strategy to other groups and locations, and that address both the ADP and SEI frameworks. (This could include active participation by parent, community, civic, and business groups in developing the family/student advocacy elements of SEI. For additional public engagement ideas see the SEI workgroup documents: "*Capacity-Building/Professional Development in Abbott Districts*" and the "*Roll Out Action Plan*")
 - g. Development of a research and evaluation component of the reform (as called for in the Abbott regulations: 6A:10A-3.2 (5)) This includes collection of baseline data, formulation of implementation standards and benchmarks for desired outcomes. (Student/Youth Participatory Action Research Projects, such as those underway at Orange and Snyder HS, could also be developed as part of this effort.)
 - h. Creation of educator networks across districts, linked to university and college educators and resources, to promote content area curriculum work, and address other reform challenges.
 - i. Provision of appropriate professional development resources to address multicultural perspectives and other culturally relevant issues raised by secondary reform (eg, preparation and support for family/student advocacy, culturally responsive pedagogy)
 - j. Integration of facilities planning and support for conversion efforts to create small learning environments in large comprehensive high schools and middle schools.
4. The plans to eliminate the SRA as an alternate route to a diploma should be revisited. Currently over 13,000 students, more than a third of Abbott graduates and 20% of all NJ graduates receive their diplomas through the SRA. Eliminating the SRA before significant and demonstrable improvements are made in secondary programs and supports would be punitive to students and have disparate impact on immigrant youth and youth of color. It would also negatively affect the climate for reform. The existing lack of coordination and alignment between HS Redesign/ADP, SEI, and proposed changes in SRA increases the prospects that fragmented policy initiatives will raise dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately affect students of color. This would, almost by definition, constitute bad public policy.
5. At a minimum, plans to revise the SRA should be aligned with the timeline for phasing in SEI in the Abbott districts. The August, 2005 NJ State Board Education "resolution of intent" proposes phasing out the SRA beginning with the entering freshman class in 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in 2007 for math. (Final action on this timeline awaits agreement on an alternative process to replace the SRA which is still pending.) Yet current Abbott regulations set a target of fall, 2008 for implementing SEI's key elements: college prep curriculum, small learning environments and improved family/student supports. Not only would it be unfair for students to face a single high-stakes graduation requirement before having access to improved programs, it would also significantly distort the perceived and actual impact of SEI if the SRA is phased out, with predictable impact on dropout and graduation rates, just as the reforms are being put into place.

Closing thoughts

Our own experience with secondary reform has taught us clearly that one size will not fit all. It is not a matter of having lower expectations for some groups and higher expectations for others. On the contrary, it is a matter of addressing honestly the differential conditions that our society and our schools have presented to different groups of students. All students deserve access to high quality curricula and instruction, but the reality is not all students have it. All students deserve science labs, computers and modern educational facilities. But not all have them. All students deserve well-prepared, fully-qualified teachers, but not all schools are able to provide them. Given these very real situations, what works successfully to raise expectations and achievement levels in one setting may not work in another. Identical treatment for very different conditions is not equity.

The ADP framework posits increased high school rigor as necessary preparation for college level academics and ever-more demanding levels of skills required in the workplace. However, our society has never sent more than a third of its students on to higher education, and, in recent years, both college participation rates and affordability have declined significantly. Reversing these trends will require much more than challenging high school courses. Similarly, ADP brochures cite rising needs for “advanced knowledge” and “additional education” to fill “more than two thirds of new jobs,” adding that “the number will be even higher” in the future. Yet other sources paint a quite different picture. Of the 20 fastest growing occupations in the US Dept. of Labor’s forecasts, only six require a college degree. One study projects that over 75% of the new jobs created over the next ten years will pay less than \$26,000 a year and require only on the job training.

We don’t cite these alternate, and unsettling, forecasts to argue against college level preparation for all students. We support that goal, and consider it part of the overlapping common ground between ADP and SEI. But we do question the credibility and motivational power of approaches that tie school reforms too tightly to uncertain labor market projections or rely too heavily on appeals to individual self-interest in a post-secondary job market. Especially in communities where we are losing thousands of our young people to the unemployment lines, the streets, and the prisons, we will need much broader visions of community renewal, social justice, collective well-being and hope to carry the changes we need.

School reform in general, and high school reform in particular, raise complex issues about how public education should respond to changing economic conditions, technological developments, and to the needs of many different constituencies. Business and industry leaders and parents and educators may all have compelling, but differing, priorities. Public policy must serve civic, social and democratic interests that, at times, can compete with, as well as complement, economic ones. While common ground is always to be sought, it is not always easily found, especially where significant inequalities of power and access exist.

NJ’s two major secondary reform initiatives present some of these competing priorities in particularly compelling form. The challenge is to find common ground between them that will serve all our children well. We hope this paper contributes toward that end and look forward to continuing such dialogue in the future.

CC SEI Advisory Group
Janellen Duffy, Office of the Governor