



# GREAT AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

REFORMING THE NATION'S REMAINING  
LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS

A REPORT BY: Civic Enterprises  
Everyone Graduates Center  
at Johns Hopkins University

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# Executive Summary

## Two Educational Nations

Students in America live in two educational nations. In the vast majority of high schools with 300 or more students, the average graduation rate is already at the national goal of 90 percent or more and dropping out is a rarity. In the remaining high schools, the average graduation rate is 49 percent and on-time graduation for students is only a 50-50 proposition. In the land of opportunity, young adult success is too dependent on where they live and what school they attend. This has significant consequences for their communities and the nation. It is time to change that by drawing on the lessons in recent years and new learnings to redesign the nation's remaining low-performing high schools.

## The Nation's Low-Performing High Schools

After more than a decade of progress in significantly reducing the number of low-performing high schools, there remain about 1,300 traditional high schools in need of serious improvement and redesign. All of these low-performing high schools are overwhelmingly located in distressed neighborhoods and school districts concentrated in 18 states. Most of these states need to see substantial improvement in their graduation rates in order for the nation to achieve a 90 percent high school graduation rate for all students, and 11 of those states currently have among the lowest graduation rates in the nation.

The remaining low-performing high schools sit at the fault lines of race, class, and inequality in America and many are located in areas of the country that are disconnected from the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. As such, they serve as engines of what could be a persistent, geographically bound, underclass.

Yet, many also have a storied history that exemplify the pride of the local community and continue to generate a shared sense of attachment among their residents. This provides a community connection upon which to build.

The remaining low-performing high schools range in size from 300 to roughly 4,500 students and can be organized into broad archetypes. About one-third of the nation's remaining low-performing high schools are found in the 50 largest school districts. About another 30 percent are located in small to mid-sized urban and suburban school districts that have only one to three high schools. The remaining low-performing high schools are found in rural areas, principally in the South and Pacific Northwest, and modestly sized, formerly industrial cities of the north and Midwest.

In a country committed to equality of opportunity regardless of background, nagging equity gaps based on race, ethnicity, and income persist. Most of the remaining low-performing high schools are majority-minority schools, primarily attended by low-income Black and Hispanic students. Nearly three-fourths of the students in the typical low-graduation-rate high school are minority students, compared to 37 percent in the high schools with higher graduation rates. Low-performing high schools are located in districts where, on average, 29 percent of students live in poverty, compared to an 18 percent average for other high schools. These schools also tend to have higher than average numbers of students with disabilities, English learners, and homeless students.

Within the typical low-graduation-rate high school, student disengagement is profound. Compared to other traditional high schools, the graduation rate in low-graduation-rate high schools is, on average, 41 percentage points lower; the chronic absenteeism rate is 100 percent higher; the suspension rate is 110 percent higher; and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade retention rate is 160 percent greater. More than one in three students are chronically absent and one in six is suspended each year. At these levels, negative academic and social-emotional impacts are experienced not only by the students who are absent or being suspended, but also by their classmates as well. It is time for the nation to perform a second act of high school improvement to reform these low-performing schools.

## **A Path Forward: A Great American High School Campaign**

The human capital and community resources available to reform high schools differ wildly among large urban centers, suburbs that have seen rapid changes in their student population, smaller cities and towns that have seen the backbone of their economy erode, and isolated rural districts. To successfully redesign low-performing traditional high schools, it is imperative that improvement strategies reflect and address the unique needs of their locales. Such redesign efforts will also require the involvement of the entire community, support and technical assistance from organizations positioned to provide it, and public and private investment guided by local decision-making.

We propose an initial focus on the approximately 800 traditional high schools that will be identified as graduating 67 percent or fewer of their students under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and hence, in need of comprehensive support and intervention. This is not to suggest that all other low-performing schools should be forgotten; rather, narrowing down the total list of low-performing high schools in this way provides a strategic leverage point by using a more targeted approach that aligns with the work states are required under ESSA to do to improve their lowest-performing high schools. We are already receiving significant demand from the states and their chief state school officers to support this work. In the report, we propose a framework for a campaign to redesign these schools with their communities in mind, understanding that the circumstances of each school may call for plans to be altered accordingly. A condensed outline of that framework, based on what has been learned from the past successes and failures of previous high school reform, is as follows:

### **Make it about the community's future, not past school failures**

There is little hope for success if reform of the remaining low-graduation-rate high schools is cast in a negative or punitive light. Reforms should be cast in hope, optimism, and purpose. One way to do this is to make the case that these high schools need to be redesigned to provide all students with a pathway to adult success in this century by fully developing the

community's young people academically, socially, and emotionally. Its goal is not just enabling all students to graduate, but to graduate prepared for postsecondary schooling and training, and provided with the supported pathways to succeed once there.

### **Tightly align with state ESSA plans for low-performing high schools**

States are beginning to implement their ESSA plans. Central to the campaign's success will be alignment with the process states will use to support high schools identified as in need of comprehensive reform. Tight policy-to-practice coordination will enable high school redesign efforts to be viewed through the same lens at the school, district, and state levels, which is essential to ensuring strong implementation. Strong alignment will help avoid or mitigate the all too common reform phenomenon of schools receiving conflicting messages from different levels about what they should and should not be doing.

### **Acknowledge the obstacles – and design the campaign to address them**

For this campaign to be successful, the obstacles to reforming and redesigning high schools must be acknowledged and addressed. Nearly all of the remaining low-performing high schools have been attempting, or required to engage in, reforms for the past decade or more. This leads to reform burnout and inertia, making reform a ritual, rather than the intentional, thoughtful, dynamic, and passionate work it needs to be.

### **Get the needs assessment right**

For high schools and their communities to successfully position themselves for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they need an accurate and shared understanding of the challenges they face and the foundations, both good and bad, from which they are starting. ESSA requires school districts to conduct a needs assessment of their high schools requiring comprehensive reform, but provides limited guidance as to what this assessment should examine. States and districts need to use best practices in conducting their needs assessments and allow for customization based on a school's history, locale, student needs, capacity, and other factors that get at the type and intensity of reforms necessary.

### **Attract authentic community input on high school outcomes for the 21st Century**

Many of the remaining low-graduation rate high schools are the only public high school in their community, or one of just two or three. It is not uncommon for the high school to bear the name of both the school district and the city or town in which it was founded, demonstrating the vital role it has played in the community's past. Thus, it is important to go beyond the school in doing the needs assessments. If high schools are to serve as engines of economic development and social integration for their communities, it is essential to know what the community values and to provide them with an authentic means to participate in setting the vision for the redesign of their high school.

### **Follow the evidence to provide a foundation for local innovation and customization**

We have learned much in the past 25 years about how to reform high schools and the evidence base continues to grow at an accelerating rate. ESSA requires schools in need of comprehensive improvement to use evidence-based strategies and practices to meet identified needs. Thus, high schools engaged in redesign should use the evidence base to build a solid foundation upon which they can innovate and customize to build successful high schools not only in the present, but for the future as well.

### **Build networks to reduce social isolation, develop capacity & spread know-how**

Many of the most successful whole school design, improvement, or transformation efforts leverage the power of networks to accelerate success and sustain impact. The ability to connect schools facing similar challenges and undertaking similar reforms helps break down the isolation that typically characterizes low-performing schools. They are often cut off by reputation from some of the formal and informal learning networks in their districts, may be passed over by national networks looking for examples of success, and based on real or perceived lack of time, energy, and resources, do not seek out networks on their own. Well-functioning networks not only enable schools to learn from and share their know-how with peers, but also provide network-wide supports, keep their schools

abreast of recent developments in the field, and provide professional growth opportunities. Networks also help overcome inertia to reform by highlighting principals and other leaders who are succeeding with their reforms. These examples can play a key role in keeping reforms going in the event of shifts in school leadership by providing the new leaders with rapid opportunities to see the reforms working well in similar schools. Well-functioning networks also have the ability to respond quickly when schools struggle with implementation issues or face new challenges.

### **Pair each network with a technical assistance provider aligned with the school's needs and community redesign vision**

School improvement literature demonstrates that it is very hard for a low-performing high school that serves a high needs population to reform and maintain its improvement on its own. There is too much turnover of the adults in the building and too much on-going stress and scarcity to create the conditions under which significant school redesign can happen, much less be maintained. For this reason, it will be essential to not only create networks for the high schools redesigning themselves to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also to pair those networks with experienced technical assistance providers, aligned with the redesign vision, who can provide the schools with in-school support and guidance as they work to implement and institutionalize their new designs.

### **Use a common set of on-track-to-success indicators for improvement metrics**

Under ESSA, each state will have its own accountability system with an aligned set of metrics that the redesigning high schools will need to meet. In addition, it will be important to have a common set of on-track-to-success indicators across all participating schools. This will enable rapid response when a school is not on pace to meet improvement goals and will facilitate cross-network learning by identifying what is working where. Some common metrics to consider include the ABCs (attendance, behavior and effort, and course performance), coursework quality, quality of relationships, and equitable access to and participation in postsecondary success opportunities.

## **Fund core school-level improvement work with ESSA School Improvement Funds**

School redesign requires resources. The effort to redesign high schools to promote adult success in the economically- and socially-isolated locales that time has left behind will require public and private, as well as local, state, and national, efforts to obtain the resources needed. On the federal side, ESSA provides these resources: seven percent of Title I Funds has been set aside to support the schools in need of comprehensive and targeted reforms. These funds can support the school-based planning, training, technical assistance, and implementation costs of the school redesign. To help support the redesigned high schools to be engines of economic development and social integration for their communities, states and districts can help the schools access federal Perkins funding that supports career and technical education. Communities can also work with mayors and governors to access available federal workforce development and retraining funds. To provide the additional student supports that will be needed, local businesses and philanthropies can step forward to support non-profit youth service providers during and after school. Local businesses can also work with these high school and community colleges to build pathways to careers with growing employment prospects and provide internships or apprenticeships, job shadowing experiences, and summer jobs linked to them. To help sustain the reforms, states, districts, and schools can work together to promote the use of social impact bonds and pay for success opportunities. National philanthropy can support the network, organizational, training, state, and district capacity building, mobilization efforts, communications, and knowledge sharing, as well as capture costs of the cross-state effort.

## **Provide campaign-wide supports**

For this effort to succeed, it will need a central hub that supports the cross-state effort and campaign to design 21<sup>st</sup> century high schools in economically- and socially-isolated communities. The hub has two critical

roles to play. First, it must be a driver and coordinator of the school redesign work. It needs to be a design center for the most difficult challenges and to disseminate existing know-how about school design and evidence-based practices for high school. The hub needs to work with states to establish and define the common processes they will use and help them vet and recruit the technical assistance providers who will support each network. It also needs to serve as the overall progress monitor, by collecting, analyzing, and reporting on the common on-track-to-success metrics all the schools will be using. Finally, it needs to capture and share all the learning, successes, and challenges the schools involved in the effort are having.

A second core function is building the larger campaign around the effort. This includes: connecting with governors and mayors to gain their support and insights; helping to recruit and enable the participation of national non-profits to provide a continuum of care to the high-needs students in the schools; working to establish the policies and underlying supports like social impact bonds and pay for success that will help sustain the redesign efforts; linking the high school redesign to other related and supportive efforts, from commissions on social and emotional skills to campaigns to support out-of-school youth, to efforts to spread early warning and intervention systems.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last decade, America embraced its high school dropout challenge and reformed many of the nation's low-performing schools. Lessons were learned, infrastructure was built and now, with ESSA, there is an historic opportunity to finish the job to redesign and reform the nation's remaining low-performing schools. We have learned much over the years on what it will take to redesign high schools from the ground up, and now we must come together to ensure that all communities – particularly those that are economically and socially isolated – have the tools and support they need to ensure all students have an equal chance to fulfill their dreams.



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