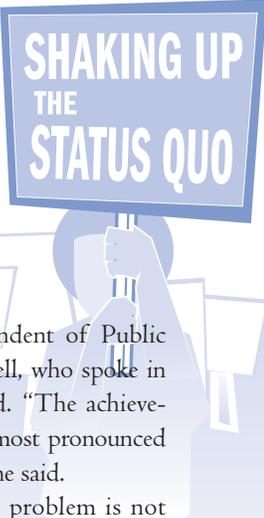


THE MOVEMENT TO TRANSFORM HIGH SCHOOL

EdSource Forum focuses on the new three R's:
rigor, relevance, and relationships



SHAKING UP
THE
STATUS QUO

Although society has changed enormously in the past 100 years, high schools have remained relatively static, according to Gerald Hayward, who moderated EdSource's 28th annual Forum: "Shaking Up the Status Quo: The Movement to Transform High School."

"If you were to walk into a hospital operating room or a dental office in 1900 or 1950 or 2000, you would be presented with three radically different pictures," said Hayward, a partner of Management Analysis & Planning, Inc. and former co-director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). "The typical high school classroom in those three eras has remained remarkably impervious to change."

The standards-based reform movement in California, which over the past several years has transformed a number of elementary schools, has made a less significant impact on high schools in the state, according to many of the Forum speakers.

High schools "are just hard to change," said keynote speaker Tom Vander Ark. "They're difficult; they're complicated; they're expensive." Vander Ark is executive director for education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a former superintendent in a large school district in the state of Washington. The foundation has been focusing on improving high school graduation rates, particularly for low-income and minority students.

During the day-long Forum—held in Manhattan Beach on March 17 and in Santa Clara on March 18—speakers focused on the need for change, painting a

somewhat grim picture of high schools in both California and the nation. But a number of speakers offered exciting examples of alternatives to the traditional high school as well as sometimes-conflicting views on the best way to implement change. All speakers seemed to agree with Vander Ark, who, borrowing a slogan from The Big Picture Company, said that the new three R's for high schools are "rigor, relevance, and relationships." As speakers focused on those three R's, a fourth R emerged: resources.

High schools are not meeting the needs of today's youth

High schools are "central to our individual development," Hayward said. "It's where we all become young adults." They are even more crucial in today's society, he added, because well-paying jobs require much better preparation. "I think high schools are actually better now," Hayward said. "But the significant differences between what high schools are expected to do today and what they actually can accomplish are truly formidable."

Although elementary schools in particular—and to a lesser extent middle schools—seem to be rising to the challenge of standards-based education, high schools are lagging behind.

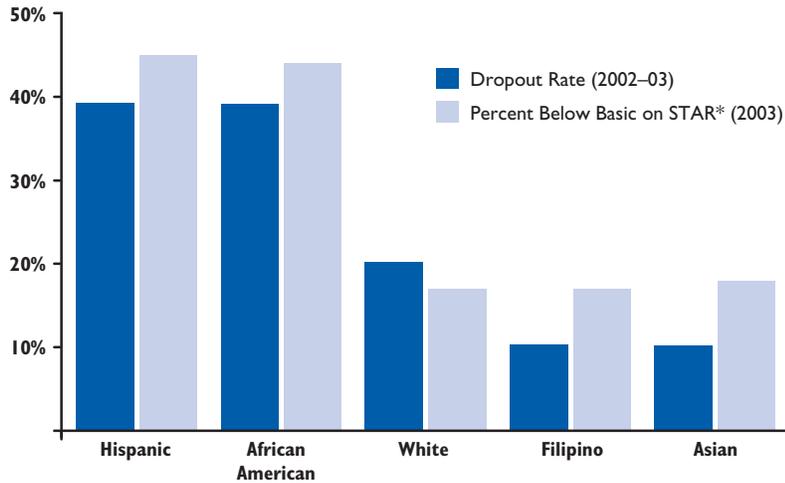
"A lower proportion of high schools meet the overall goal of 800 on the API [Academic Performance Index]," Hayward said. "And a lower proportion of high schools can show a pattern of sustained growth over time. The gap in performance by race and income is still unacceptably wide."

California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, who spoke in Manhattan Beach, agreed. "The achievement gap in our state is most pronounced at our high school level," he said.

Vander Ark said the problem is not limited to California. "We still have a pervasive tracking system in this country," he said. "It's very subtle. I didn't really understand it, even as an administrator, until my oldest daughter moved into seventh grade. I found out that she had done just well enough on her sixth grade math to get honors math in seventh, which set her up for algebra in eighth. And there are only 25% of American kids who get algebra in eighth grade, and it's typically kids like my daughter—affluent and white... If you don't get honors in seventh and get algebra in eighth, when you get to high school you're not on the right track."

"When I walk through high schools in my own district, this still goes on," he said. "I can walk down the hallway and look through the window and see white kids and know that's the advanced algebra course, and I see black and brown kids and know that's the consumer math course. And that's just wrong. This is not just a workforce issue. This is a civil rights issue. It's a social justice issue. It's a civic society issue."

Paul Warren, a principal analyst in the K-12 Division of the state Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), who spoke in Santa Clara, divided California high school students into three tracks: the college-

figure 1 | Dropouts and low performance go hand-in-hand

*Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, COURTESY OF PAUL WARREN, LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE (LAO)

bound, the general, and the dropouts. How well high school is working depends upon which track the student is on.

Focused, college-bound students are getting their needs met in most high schools, according to O'Connell. "We are seeing our high school students scoring better on most of our college-admission tests, and more students (number-wise) are qualifying for UC [University of California] and CSU [California State University]." He also said that there has been a 62% increase in the number of students taking advanced placement (AP) classes in the last seven years. (Students who score well on end-of-class AP exams often can earn college credit.)

But for most students in the other two tracks, high school isn't working, O'Connell admitted. "Far too many students are not adequately prepared for college. Too many of our high school students are not being adequately prepared for careers in the workforce today, and too many students, regrettably, are not being prepared to become effective citizens in our participatory democracy."

Warren is preparing a report on high schools for the LAO. Because the state has no way to track individual students, his

numbers are based on the best available data and may not be entirely accurate, he said. Based on his analysis, about 30% of California students drop out of high school. With this group, the achievement gap is pronounced. About 40% of African Americans and Latinos drop out compared to about 10% of Filipinos and Asians, he said. About 20% of white students drop out. (Native Americans have dropout rates similar to African Americans and Latinos.) The dropout rate tends to mirror the results on the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) exams. (See Figure 1 above.)

"We think it's important that we remember the dropouts," Warren said. "It's easy to forget about them because they're not there in the data. So a lot of people know that about a third of the kids who graduate have taken the "a-g" [course requirements for the UC and CSU systems]. That's true. But when you factor in dropouts, it's really only about a quarter of all high school students."

According to Warren, about 24% of students are on the university track, and with about 30% dropping out, that leaves approximately 46% in the general track. Because the state does not have data on

what happens to students when they graduate, Warren had to look at enrollment in four-year universities and community colleges to try to paint a picture. Most of the university-track students end up in four-year universities, he said. About half of the general track students go to community college. Warren assumes that the vast majority of dropouts don't go on to higher education.

Those who graduate but do not enter college often have trouble finding work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about a quarter of high school graduates are not employed six months after graduation, Warren said. "That's not a good transition. It's not that much different from high school dropouts. If you're in college, you're much more likely to be employed." (See Figure 2 on page 3.)

The solution may be the three R's: rigor, relevance, and relationships

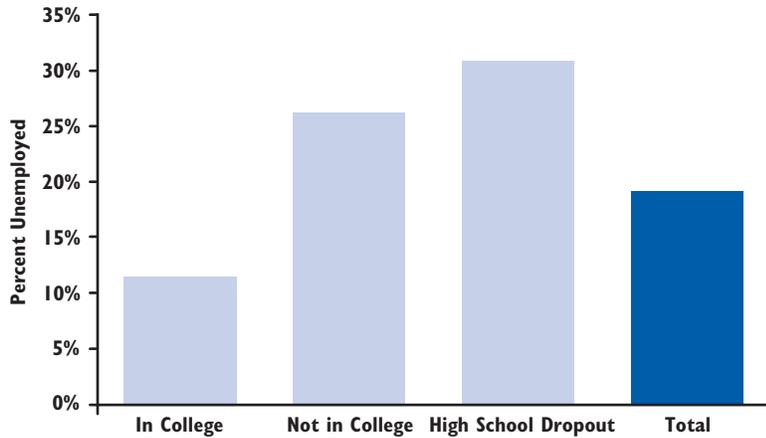
Many high school students—even the college-bound—find school boring. Vander Ark said he asks his 16-year-old daughter: "Was the boredom or drama worse today?" He is referring to the boredom in her classroom and the drama in the hallway.

"If you work or spend a lot of time in high schools like I do, you're struck by the incredible energy that exists in the hallway and how quickly that energy level goes into sleep mode in the classroom," Vander Ark said. "So how do we create a challenging and engaging curriculum so that students are able to connect their studies with their lives and their futures?"

"In addition to being challenging and interesting, we have to build really strong support systems—powerful, sustained adult relationships. We see these three R's—rigor, relevance, and relationships—in every good school that we visit."

Good schools, he added, have a clear, common focus. "The great schools are not afraid for the adults to take responsibility and to create a coherent design, a

figure 2 National unemployment data six months after graduation in 2003 show that college students are the least likely to be unemployed



DATA: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, OCTOBER 2003, COURTESY OF PAUL WARREN, LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE (LAO)

scope and sequence, with well-supported structures behind it.”

Rigor

Speaker Linda Murray, superintendent in residence with The Education Trust–West, introduced rigor into the curriculum when she was superintendent at San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD), which has a large population of Latino students. For students to receive a regular diploma from SJUSD, they must take all the “a–g” college-prep course requirements for the UC/CSU systems. (Less than 10% of SJUSD students graduate without the full “a–g” sequence because they have severe learning handicaps and are under an Individual Education Program or because they are in an alternative school program, Murray said.)

Murray believes this emphasis on rigor must come from the top down. She worked for a number of years to get her school board and top administrators to buy into her vision, which she implemented in 1998.

Before 1998, Murray said, “we were just like every other urban district. Less than one out of five of our Latino graduates had taken the ‘a–g’ curriculum or were ready, in any way you want to look at it, to go on to higher ed. Today, it’s almost one out of two who have taken the full ‘a–g’ curriculum

because they must in order to graduate, and they’ve attained the grades and the GPA to move on directly to college if they so choose. To me, that’s the most compelling argument for moving and pushing all public school districts in California toward a much more rigorous high school curriculum. We can make a difference with the kids who need us most.”

However, pointed out speaker Robert Schwartz, despite these impressive gains, half the Latino students in SJUSD still are not eligible to go to a four-year university. Schwartz, a faculty member at Harvard Graduate School of Education, is a former president of Achieve, a national nonprofit established by governors and corporate leaders to help states strengthen academic performance. For those students, Schwartz said, it might have been better to offer more choices rather than the rigidity of the “a–g,” which includes 15 one-year courses that must be taken in addition to other state-required courses, such as two years of physical education. (See the box at right.) “Such a curriculum limits the time left to pursue internships or other forms of field-based learning,” he said. With limited resources and the push for college for all, districts across the nation have also reduced the number and quality of vocational courses, he added.

UC/CSU admission and state graduation requirements differ

Courses required by the state to graduate from high school are different from those required for undergraduate admission to the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) systems. Each public school district develops its own graduation requirements, which must include the minimum state requirements but do not necessarily need to encompass the UC/CSU college-prep courses.

UC/CSU “a–g” courses

UC and CSU require students to take 15 college-prep courses, known as the “a–g” course requirements:

- two years of history/social science—one year on the United States and one on the world;
- four years of English language arts;
- three years of math through at least Algebra II or Integrated Math III;
- two years of laboratory science in two disciplines (for UC, choose from biology, chemistry, or physics; for CSU, choose one biological and one physical science);
- two years of the same foreign language (American Sign Language accepted);
- one year of visual or performing arts; and
- one year of an elective from one of the above.

California minimum course requirements

The state requires a somewhat different set of courses:

- three years of social science that includes both the United States and the world; a semester in American government and civics; and a semester in economics);
- three years of English;
- two years of math (including Algebra I);
- two years of science—typically one biological and one physical;
- one year of visual or performing arts or foreign language (including American Sign Language);
- two years of physical education unless exempted.

In addition, Schwartz said, being eligible for college does not necessarily translate into a four-year, or even a two-year, degree. Nationally only one young person in two who starts college completes it. For Latino and African American youth, the numbers are even lower, he said. “We’ve got a [higher education] system that is serving about one in three, to be generous about it, in terms of even getting some college.” (See Figure 3 on page 5.)

“What is a realistic or reasonable definition of college readiness?” Schwartz asked. “For me, the nonnegotiable requirement for a high school diploma ought to focus on making sure that all kids have a strong, solid set of reading skills, writing skills, and quantitative reasoning skills.”

“We ought to hold fast on reading and writing and mathematics, and if anything, raise the bar in terms of our expectations,” he said. “But for virtually everything else, I believe we ought to move toward a more flexible system, a system that allows many more curricular options and promotes a whole, diverse set of high school options for kids.”

But speaker Richard Owen, an independent consultant focusing on high school reform, warned that multiple pathways could become a euphemism for tracking, particularly for low-income, Latino, Native American, and African American students. Owen spent five years as the associate superintendent for high schools in the Sacramento City Unified School District and was responsible for spearheading the district’s high school reform effort. He, too, implemented the “a–g” curriculum.

“These multiple pathways, in my view, represent a big dangerous pathway and are more akin to how we currently do business,” he said. “Based on the data that I’ve seen, particularly as it relates to the dropouts and who’s dropping out and what color they are and what language they speak, who do you suppose is going to end up in all these alternative pathways? Are we O.K. with setting up some semblance of an educational apartheid system here?”

“My suspicion,” Owen said, “is that people who currently go to college will continue to go to college at high rates, and the ones who don’t go to college right now will decline even further.” And, he added, “the skills required to go to college and the skills required to go to work are almost the same now. The economy and marketplace have changed. This is now an information-based economy. So what, actually, are we preparing kids for?”

Relevance

But, Owen admitted, there is some merit to the multiple pathways if they are implemented in the way that many European countries do. “Many countries have developed youth-preparation systems that successfully integrate work-based learning with school-based learning so that they are systematically reinforcing youth transitions to adulthood.”

“The difference in Europe, however, is that they have in many countries almost 99% literacy,” Owen added. “They have a primary education system that is uncompromising and gives students high levels of knowledge. More importantly, the vocational systems in Europe are pretty much the equivalent of our so-called college-preparatory programs...So I think if we were to think about multiple pathways, I would need a lot more protection, a lot more safeguards, in the system.”

Schwartz agrees that there is a danger that multiple pathways could degenerate into the old method of tracking. But, he said, his “top priority is to provide a reason for all kids to stick through high school and emerge with a set of higher-level reading, writing, and math skills than we currently expect of them.”

“I think there’s a direct collision course between mandating a college-prep curriculum for all kids and effectively targeting the half of the population that is either not in school or nowhere near college ready,” he added.

Relationships and relevance: The small school approach

Some educators have turned to small schools—either small charter schools or

small learning communities within a larger high school—to address the issues of both relevance and relationships.

Nancy Hoffman, vice president for youth transitions and director of the Early College Initiative at Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit policy organization, said that high school students need new structures that don’t bore them, real help from adults, and better and stronger supports for learning. Schools need to create relationships with both parents and the community. Perhaps most important, Hoffman said, is to challenge students. “Remediation only makes them feel worse about their prospects and slows them down,” she added.

Hoffman said her staff asks a lot of kids who aren’t attending high school if they have dropped out. Their response often is: “No, I just don’t go.”

“If you think about it, there’s a hope there that they really haven’t disengaged,” she said. “These young people, in a sense, are saying to adults: ‘If you can provide the support that we need, we’ll come there. We don’t want to consider ourselves dropouts.’”

Hoffman moderated a morning panel at the Forum that featured Granger Ward—state director of AVID, an academic program that supports underserved students (see page 7)—and principals from three small schools that have pretty much solved the dropout problem:

- Beth Kay, principal of The Met Sacramento, a Big Picture design charter school in Sacramento City Unified School District;
- Ref Rodriguez, the co-CEO of the charter management organization Partnerships to Uplift Communities and founder of the California Academy for Liberal Studies (CALs) Middle School and CALs Early College High School;
- Mattie Adams-Robertson, principal at Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The academy operates on the campus of Los Angeles Harbor College in Wilmington.

Kay, principal of The Met Sacramento, said her school provides relevance by developing individualized pathways for students. “We believe that students are unique in what they are interested in, good at, and challenged by, and that they are so unique they need a completely individualized curriculum for four years,” she said. To provide relevance, Kay added, curriculum must be tied into real-world learning or learning through internship.

The Met Sacramento students spend every Tuesday and Thursday in the field in a one-on-one mentorship with a working adult in the city of Sacramento who shares their area of interest.

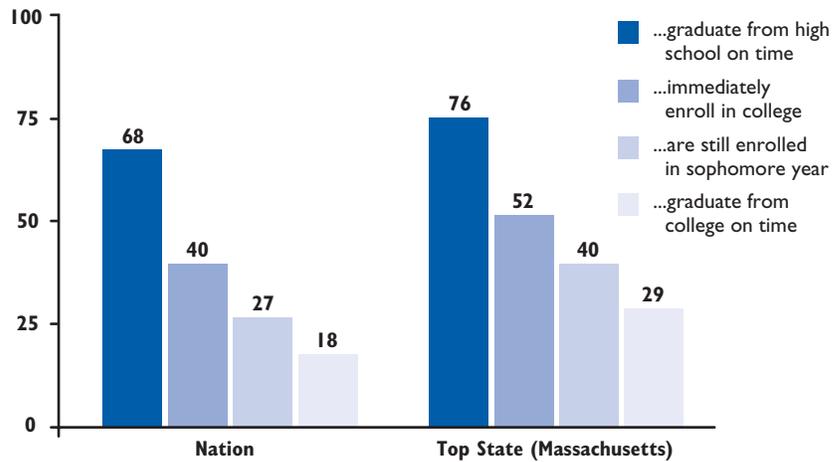
The Met also believes in “authentic projects,” which involve rigor as well as relevance. “We connect all of that real-world learning that we feel is essential and that as teachers we know really drives and motivates kids back to all of that academic content and skills that kids might not see as relevant but we know are.”

Ref Rodriguez, co-CEO of Partnerships to Uplift Communities, has a different angle on relevance. In the Partnerships schools, students enroll in both high school and community college courses, taking the college-level courses twice a week. When students graduate from high school, they not only have completed the “a–g” curriculum, but also have learned a trade.

“My kids use vocational education as a jumping off point,” Rodriguez said. “Vocational ed is important because my kids will be plumbers, they will be culinary artists, while they are putting themselves through school. My kids can’t afford college. They need to work after they graduate from high school to pay for college. So vocational ed is very important, but for a very different reason than it was 10, 15, 20 years ago.”

Students at Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy get a jump on college in another way. Mattie Adams-Robertson said the goal is for her students to simultaneously have graduated from high school and have earned an associate’s degree from Harbor College. Students then are guaranteed acceptance into nearby Cal State University Dominguez Hills.

figure 3 Missed opportunities (2002): Of every 100 ninth graders, the number who...



Out of 100 California ninth graders, 70 graduate from high school. Of those who graduate, 37 immediately go to college and 25 are still enrolled in their sophomore year. Of the college entrants, 19 complete an associate’s degree within three years or a bachelor’s degree within six years.

DATA: NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION, *Policy Alert*, APRIL 2004.
DATA ARE ESTIMATES OF PIPELINE PROGRESS RATHER THAN ACTUAL COHORT. PREPARED BY ROBERT SCHWARTZ.

“What we’ve done is taken the curricula of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Los Angeles Harbor College, and Cal State Dominguez and aligned them to develop an educational plan that all our students follow so they’ll be prepared to enter Cal State Dominguez as juniors.”

The academy’s slogan is “students are the center,” Adams-Robertson said. “We established a culture of high expectations.” The school has an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 835, she said, which places it in the top 10% of high schools in the state.

“As I opened the school, I’ve had my teachers with me every step of the way,” she said. “We all sat down and planned from the beginning.” For example, they agreed on implementing block scheduling and AVID from the start. Adams-Robertson added that the school has an “authentic, rigorous curriculum” and that “teachers pool their intellectual resources to create many schoolwide programs.”

The academy staff members also look at ways to focus on the positive if students run into trouble. At first they required detention when students did not turn in

their homework. But then they changed their approach and now have a homework workshop after school. “If students are not completing their homework, instead of getting a 0 or a fail, they take assignments to this homework workshop and complete them or work on projects,” Adams-Robertson said. “They might even retake an exam.”

“We’ve come up with a lot of positive means, as a staff, to build our students’ concept of who they are,” she said.

Small school solutions for big schools

Speakers from small schools emphasized that many of their effective practices could be duplicated in a large comprehensive high school. Before heading up Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy, Adams-Robertson took part in Tech Prep and Small Partnership Academy, which are programs within larger schools in LAUSD.

“What we’re sharing with you today can very easily be adapted into any large, urban high school using the small learning community model,” she told the Forum audience.

Kay said that large high schools needed to be wary of addressing only one of the

K-12 schools and community colleges need to talk

Many high school students do not understand the relevance of the standards-based coursework they are being required to do and, therefore, do not take their schoolwork seriously. Michael Kirst, professor of education at Stanford University and co-director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), thinks that colleges and universities can play a role in improving that situation.

K-12 schools cannot make needed improvements in student performance alone, Kirst told the audience at the EdSource Forum in Santa Clara. They need help from higher education, particularly community colleges. But surprisingly, he said, in general “there is little contact between California high schools and their local community colleges.”

About 80% of the minority students who go on to college will go to a community college, Kirst said, adding that the vast majority of low-income students also choose two-year institutions. “The game in California will largely be won or lost for low-income and minority students in how successful we are with the community college transition,” he said.

This lack of coordination between K-12 and community colleges means that many high school students do not understand the rigor required at community college, Kirst said. They see the two-year institutions with no admission requirements as “souped-up high schools.” Then they take placement tests and end up doing remedial courses because they have not taken high school seriously. “In some community colleges, 70% of the students who come from high school are in remediation,” he said. Researchers have found that students who start college by having to take remedial classes are more likely to drop out and never complete a degree.

Speaker Martha Kanter, chancellor of the Foothill-DeAnza Community College District, agreed. At the EdSource Forum in Manhattan Beach she told the audience that “we need to start as early as junior high if we can, or even earlier, to let kids know what those expectations are going to be for entering as a freshman.”

Kanter also supports streamlining the transition between K-12 and community colleges, including using the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program test results to determine placement for freshmen.

“One of the biggest things we need to do is to make sure that entry-level college standards are closely aligned with what it takes to graduate from high school,” she said.

three R’s without the other two. One concept from her small-school experience—“advisories”—combines all three R’s and would be a good place to start, she said. At The Met Sacramento, each student has time in an advisory with one teacher every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. During this period, students learn project design and development, reflective skills and techniques, organization and time management—“all of those things we just expect kids to show up with in high school. We know they don’t really have them.” One teacher is responsible for 15 to 18 students over four years, giving the teacher time to get to know students, including what moti-

vates them. The advisory teacher is also responsible for ensuring that the students are progressing as planned.

“Advisory is not just about building nice relationships,” Kay said. “It’s about really knowing how the kids are doing academically. That improves the rigor, or the performance, of your students. And it makes it more relevant to kids.”

Rodriguez said that his school’s approach to teachers, parents, and students could be used in large high schools.

“Teachers control the curriculum, the instruction, and the pedagogy that goes on in our classrooms,” he says. They must be highly qualified but not necessarily in the

strict interpretation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which emphasizes content knowledge. He said he gives priority to the ability to teach students well, preferring faculty who have a multiple-subject teaching credential and a strong background in content knowledge. “I look at those teachers [with the multiple-subject teaching credential] as being the ones who know how to teach students,” he said. “Beyond that, it’s how well they know their content.”

Instead of trying to get parents engaged in the school, Rodriguez said his school becomes engaged with the parent and family life. When students come into the middle school program, he explained, the parents are put in an advisory group of nine parents. “We get these parents to meet regularly over the course of seven years and in the process we get to know them very well and they get to know each other well. Right now, there is a group of parents who I’m calling the ‘Ya no sé que hacer’ group—that’s ‘I don’t know what else to do’ with my kid—who get together on a regular basis and strategize with us on how to reach their children.” Parents also go to each others’ homes and have “relational meetings” about their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for their kids.

Rodriguez relies on students to give him feedback on how well the school is working. “We hold focus groups with our kids regularly throughout the school year,” he said. “How is the homework? Is it too much? Is it rigorous? Is it relevant? Is it important to you? How are your teachers? What could they do better? Talk to the kids—they’ll tell it to you straight out.”

If a student is failing, Rodriguez said, they work with that student one-on-one, often changing their approach to teaching or assessment. He gave the example of Freddy, “one of our cases that we’ve been studying for a long time.”

“Here’s a student who doesn’t have a good GPA, isn’t doing well on the standardized testing, but give him a project that he has to defend in front of his peers and adults and he shines! So modifying a lot of our assessment to be very much in line with

what Freddy is good at has been our answer for that particular student.”

Through individualized programs, large schools can also reach students

Large schools can also take advantage of education programs, such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), an academic program found in schools in a number of countries and states, including California. AVID focuses on students in the academic middle who have been underserved. Schools that have an AVID program offer an elective course within the student’s school day, middle school through high school, said speaker Granger Ward. Any middle or high school can participate in the program.

Two days a week AVID staff members focus on writing, inquiry (which is higher-order thinking skills), collaboration (working on a team with peers), and reading. Students spend another two days with college-aged tutors who work with small groups of students to help them gain an in-depth understanding of the curriculum. These tutors, who often look like the students, are also good role models, Ward said. On the fifth day, AVID staff members bring in speakers who talk about the importance of going to college or they take the students on college tours. “Many of the students have not been on a college campus,” he said.

AVID “studies students’ schedules so that they are on target to complete the ‘a–g’ [college-prep courses],” Ward said. “That’s the relationship piece of a teacher saying, ‘I’m with you. You will succeed.’”

When the AVID program begins at a school, Ward said, teachers take note. “They see the Cornell note-taking. They see a kid who was one of ‘those kids’ actually outperforming other kids. ... There’s a tipping point. We’ve seen school cultures and teachers’ expectations shift.”

Sharing best practices can help both large and small schools

All the speakers also emphasized sharing. Kay said her school staff and district staff

State leaders form two advisory groups on education reform

In April both Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Superintendent for Public Instruction Jack O’Connell set up statewide groups to tackle education issues:

- Schwarzenegger formed the nonpartisan Governor’s Advisory Committee on Education Excellence, a 16-member committee that will focus on education funding adequacy and equity, governance structures, teacher recruitment and training, and the preparation and retention of school administrators.
- O’Connell created the P-16 Council, a 45-member statewide council that will look into a number of education issues, such as developing a seamless system of education from preschool through university (P-16), improving student achievement, and ensuring student access to quality teachers. The group will focus first on high schools.

For information on both groups, including a list of members, see: www.edsource.org/news_042505.cfm

share what works best so they can learn from each other. Adams-Robertson said her school is serving as a model and keeps its doors open for teacher field trips. “In addition, I have to attend local principal and senior high principal meetings for the entire district, so we’re able to share,” she said. “I’m a very active participant in those meetings.”

Resources are needed to effect change

Changing the structure of a high school so it can incorporate the new three R’s requires additional resources, many speakers said.

Vander Ark, of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said high schools need funds for transition and capital costs as well as a simpler, ongoing, operating funding system.

“Middle and high schools are much more difficult to dramatically improve [compared to elementary schools],” he said. “It takes significant, multiyear resources to do that.

“It’s our sense that, state by state, we’re going to have to build public-private partnerships that will provide the sort of assistance that high schools will need over several years’ time to begin to change,” he added.

Superintendent O’Connell emphasized the need for more investment in professional development in high schools. He called the funding “woefully inadequate even during better budget times.” Regrettably, he added,

that’s where many of the cuts have been made to help balance the budget.

O’Connell also called on schools to make their case to the business community to gain support. “We need to make sure that they understand the nexus between a well-trained, problem-solving workforce and their success,” he said.

O’Connell added that business has been supportive of recent bond measures for schools as has the public, which typically supports both local and state school bonds. “We passed the two largest school bonds in the history of the country,” O’Connell said. “The public is ahead of many of our policy leaders when it comes to commitment to education.”

Educators should build on that public support, said Julio Daniel, a senior at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles Unified School District. He told the Forum audience members at Manhattan Beach that they needed to work with community-based organizations. “It has to start by communication,” he said. “We need to make connections, build bridges, go out on a limb and look for these organizations. Look for people who are working together for better schools, people who actually have this intent to get up every day and work toward that goal.”

The time is ripe

All the bad news about high schools offers a challenge, Forum moderator Hayward said. "We need to be very serious about educating the public about the nature of the problem, agree upon a broad range of focused strategies, allow a lot of flexibility in how to do it, but hold schools accountable for results."

However, he added, "one of the things that I'm not getting is the sense of urgency. I think it's growing, but it hasn't come to the point that would cause us to say: 'We just can't tolerate this level of support and this level of performance any longer.'"

The LAO's Warren said that simplification of the funding system, equalization, and funding adequacy are issues that are simmering in the background in Sacramento. "The governor has pledged to look at this issue but hasn't pledged to do anything with the answer," Warren said.

On April 8, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced a 16-member Governor's Advisory Committee on Education Excellence, a nonpartisan group charged with

examining K–12 education in California and recommending steps to improve the performance of public schools. One week later, state Superintendent for Public Instruction Jack O'Connell appointed 45 members to a P–16 Council to examine public education from preschool through university. O'Connell asked the committee to begin with high schools. (See the box on page 7 about the two groups.)

Hayward said that the time is ripe to develop a sense of urgency, considering that President George W. Bush, Schwarzenegger, and O'Connell have all placed high schools at the top of their policy agendas.

"The attention span of our policymakers is incredibly short. Long range is six months," he said. "We must take this opportunity to build on current interest. It's important that they get a message about how to fill that agenda out."  

For more information about the Forum and high school reform, go to:

www.edsource.org/forum05pro.cfm



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