



Best Practice by Design is an excerpt from *Rethinking High School: Best Practice in Teaching, Learning, and Leadership* by Harvey Daniels, Marilyn Bizar, and Steven Zemelman.

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# Chapter 1

## Best Practice by Design

### Reform comes to high school—at last

**A**bout six years ago, we did something crazy. The three of us started planning a new public high school. With some dear friends and colleagues, some smart elementary principals, and a few politically adept community groups, we drafted a proposal for our dream high school. Two years later, something even crazier happened. The Chicago Board of Education said, “OK. Go ahead.” The superintendent even came by to officially hand over a beautiful 1902 neoclassical building. He said a lot of hopeful words, and as he left he also said: “By the way, this better work.” We were stunned.

As a matter of fact, we are still stunned. But we have just graduated our first class—93 kids launched off to college, work, and the military from a school that didn’t even exist when they were eighth graders. Because it is so new, we’re not quite ready to say that our school “works.” But it is starting to work in some important ways, thanks mostly to a unique group of young people, our pioneers and guinea pigs, a group of teenagers who wanted something different.

Our school’s name says a lot, and sometimes it says the wrong things: Best Practice High School. When we picked the name, we weren’t really looking beyond the proposal-writing stage; we were just trying to infuse our long-shot application with credibility, one page at a time. Since Steve and Harvey had coauthored a book called *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* (1998), it seemed sensible to mention it in the proposal, early and often. Too bad we didn’t stop and think about how dumb a basketball uniform would look emblazoned with this name. Too bad we never foresaw our students having to explain the odd moniker to their friends who went to regular-sounding schools. And really too bad that people would someday assume we meant that our school *was* the best. What we meant to

mean was that this school would be guided by the principles of “best practice,” as embodied in our country’s emerging curriculum standards—a lofty goal that would take many years to reach.

Today, with a dedicated crew of 440 students, thirty staff, and some wonderful families and community partners, we continue to try to invent a high school that works better for kids. Every day, we are holding our own feet to the fire—and our feet get plenty hot. As our cofounder Tom Daniels always said: “This is the hardest work we have ever done.” As he also said: “We are flying this plane while we are building it.” And some days it feels as if all we have built is a wing and a prayer. We have a long way to go, and we will be at this job for many years to come.

## REFORMING AMERICA’S HIGH SCHOOLS

These days, it seems everyone is complaining about America’s high schools. Politicians, parents, blue-ribbon commissions, and editorial writers—every citizen seems to have strong opinions about high school, and few of them are flattering. But then, complaining has always been an ingredient of the high school scene. It is practically part of the teenage job description to continually remind grownups that school is boring, teachers are unfair, and the food in the cafeteria is bad. And sadly, these kid complaints have been entirely valid in too many high schools, for too many years.

But now the complaining is much louder and more ominous, and it’s coming from every direction. The emerging indictment of high schools in today’s media is both familiar and ubiquitous: achievement test scores are disappointing, dropout rates are soaring, misbehavior is rampant, racial disparities in achievement persist, and the widening gap between the official curriculum and the actual workings of our society is both costly and worrisome. The recent epidemic of school shootings has sent chills down the spines of every parent in America. And on top of all these troubles, many high schools are bursting at the seams with kids, as a new baby boom works its way through the school system.

Of course, for every worrisome problem afflicting high schools, there are upbeat interpretations and hopeful signs. Violence may be increasing on the streets, but most schools remain islands of safety in an increasingly dangerous world. While American teenagers may score poorly on international comparisons in science and mathematics, the Nobel prizes somehow keep rolling in, and U.S. dominance in technological innovation appears unchallenged. Adolescent drug use and crime are down, college attendance rates are up, and

community involvement by teens is at an all-time high. Yes, those students who drop out of high school do face crushing disadvantages, but fewer are actually leaving—graduation rates have been creeping steadily upward throughout this century.

Whatever the validity of all these complaints and exculpations, an undeniable turning point has been reached. Attention has been focused. After nearly two decades of school reform aimed mainly at the elementary level, it is now the high schools' turn. Everyone involved seems hungry for a change—teenagers, parents, teachers, school administrators, board members, communities, colleges, and employers. All the stakeholders in secondary education seem ready to retire the assembly-line high school, forged on factory floors nearly a century ago, and now at least a generation out of date.

Already, pioneering high schools across the county have started experimenting with new programs, schedules, courses, models, and structures. Some faculties are developing rich, problem-based, interdisciplinary courses that break down discipline barriers and integrate English, history, science, math, languages, music, and the arts. Others are “detracking” ability-grouped classes and moving toward more inclusive, democratic classrooms that embrace students with different thinking styles, cultural traditions, and learning needs. Some schools are striving to replace skewed and unfair standardized tests with more sensitive, local performance assessments. And in still other schools, teachers are being offered more voice in governance, more control over their own professional development, and more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and develop innovative programs.

Teams of educators, parents, and concerned citizens are experimenting with a wide variety of strategies to reinvent America's high schools. Some groups are trying to revitalize the curriculum and improve instruction within existing school structures. Others are trying to make oversized high schools feel and work smaller, dividing them into thematic units, programs, or houses. Still others are inventing brand-new schools—charter schools, independent schools, new public or private schools. This is a fertile, exciting time—and change is long overdue.

## STARTING A NEW HIGH SCHOOL

The three of us have been involved in public schools as teachers, parents, staff developers, and teacher educators since the early 1960s (and as students ourselves, during the late Cretaceous Period). When Chicago's ambitious, nationally watched school-reform movement was kicked off by state legislation in

1988, we were drawn into the maelstrom and have been swirling there ever since. With support from several local foundations, we built a network of fourteen elementary schools where, along with a growing team of skilled teacher-consultants, we offered workshops, summer institutes, and lots of in-classroom consulting on writing, reading, and curriculum integration. As our projects grew and new funders signed on, we established the Center for City Schools at National-Louis University as the headquarters for our efforts.

Around 1995, some of our network principals—especially Madeleine Maraldi from Washington Irving School—started asking us to create a new high school. They were worried about their eighth graders, who seemed to have no real alternative to enrolling at huge, impersonal, and often gang-dominated high schools, where many would be unknown, get lost, and eventually drop out. Knowing some of these kids from their classrooms, and having seen regular city high schools up close, we shared the principals' concerns. So did Tom and Kathy Daniels, old friends of ours (but not relatives of Harvey's), fellow Illinois Writing Project leaders and celebrated English teachers at Farragut High School. Tom and Kathy had been trying to create pockets of progressive teaching inside of big, tough high schools for twenty-five years, by leading workshops for colleagues, writing curriculum for the Board of Education, and supporting change through the local AFT chapter.

Just for fun, just to keep Madeleine happy, the five of us began playing with the idea. Like anyone who has ever taught school, we had all secretly entertained the fantasy of taking a few favorite colleagues off to a special place where, freed from red tape and evil administrators, we'd create an educational nirvana. Of course, we never acted on this universal teacher fantasy—it just comforted us when things got really stressful at school. After all, there hadn't been a new high school created in Chicago for twenty years, and the only really innovative one, Metropolitan High School, had just been disbanded. But still, what if we did it? What would a "best practice" high school look like?

As the vision grew, somewhere along the way we stopped fantasizing and started planning. Our emerging idea was to create a new, small, public high school, not a charter school, but a teacher-led "regular" school where the national standards of state-of-the-art instruction would guide the whole program. We would enroll a random assortment of Chicago's young people, not a hand-picked cohort of proven high scorers. There were already several elite high schools "creaming" the system, producing predictably stellar test scores. Instead, we wanted to show that progressive methods—call it best practice, or standards-based instruction, or just good teaching—would work with kids

from ordinary neighborhoods and elementary schools just as they do in magnet schools, wealthy suburbs, or the elite private schools perched in the high-rent districts.

Once we had developed a plan and a budget, we were in for a long wait. The proposal languished inside the CPS bureaucracy for a year. Finally, on November 22, 1995, a fax arrived from newly appointed CEO Paul Vallas: “The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is pleased to offer the Best Practice High School a space in Cregier to begin planning and recruitment activities in February 1996 and classes in September 1996!” Apparently, we were going to have a school. And we really liked the CEO’s exclamation point. But the fax also went on to warn: “As a new small high school opening its doors at a time when public high schools are under intense pressure to improve, Best Practice will be watched particularly closely.” This was getting very real.

Our first task was to find 140 freshmen who’d like to attend a high school they’d never heard of. In Chicago, all eighth graders may apply to any of the seventy-four high schools across the city, some of which (like our school-to-be) have open enrollment, while others have selective admissions. From the schools’ point of view, this means you have to compete for students in order to survive. We looked at the calendar: the recruiting season was already well underway. Yikes! On our first day of existence, we had already fallen behind all the other high schools in town.

We realized that we needed a brochure, quickly. So we borrowed some mature-looking eighth graders from Washington Irving School and photographed them in front of the nearby United Center, figuring that our proximity to the site of Michael Jordan’s exploits might be a selling point. Our vague but sincere brochure promised:

When students have finished four years at BPHS, they will be accomplished readers, writers, and thinkers. They will be skillful at setting goals, managing time, and organizing and assessing their own efforts. They will be ready to make important choices about their future: to make strong college applications and do well in the schools they choose; to seek good jobs and perform them well; and to pursue any other training they need to meet their life goals.

We pledged in “A Note to Parents” that the school would be caring and safe, prayed that we could make good on the latter promise, and printed up a thousand copies.

Then the five cofounders fanned out around the city, visiting the fourteen elementary schools in our “Best Practice Network,” now the prospective feeder system for the new high school. We talked to groups of eighth graders,

some of whom already knew us as helpers in their own classrooms, and shared the plan for a new high school. We explained that BPHS would include internships around the city every week, that the curriculum would be integrated, that we would be continuing some of the collaborative learning activities already happening in their middle school classes.

We also answered some tough questions: No, we wouldn't have a football team. No, there wouldn't be instrumental music. No, there wasn't a pool for swimming. Yes, there would be some "little kids" running around the building we were sharing with two elementary schools. As students peppered us with specific and thoughtful questions, we were constantly reminded of all the things we hadn't yet figured out—or even thought of. Our most recurrent answer in these Q and A sessions was, "We don't know—but if you come to BPHS, you can help us figure it out."

By the end of this crash recruitment drive, 137 kids had agreed to become part of our first class. Were they truly a random assortment of Chicago teens? Based on standardized test scores and racial demographics, yes. But personality-wise, the distribution was probably skewed toward adventure and risk taking. After all, these kids had chosen to attend a non-existent school, one that needed to be created from scratch. These were our precious pioneers (of course we never called them this to their faces), the young people who would invent this school with us, create its culture, establish its traditions, and forge its character.

Here are a few of those young people, with a few words about how we met them and what they were doing when we said goodbye four years later.

When **Maricela Zapian** first enrolled as a freshman, her advisor, Tom Daniels, was concerned about her shyness and lack of confidence as a student. Four years later, she stood at the podium in front of a thousand people—parents, families, faculty, and students—to address the crowd as BPHS's first valedictorian. "We must continue to do what this school has taught us," Maricela said, "to go beyond the books and the guidelines and find ourselves and our destiny." After interning with a computer consultant during her freshman and sophomore years, Marcie is now seeking her own destiny at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she is a pre-engineering student.

In 1995, **Candace Walker** was gravely wounded in an attack that took her mother's life. Lynnette Emmons, Candace's eighth-grade teacher at Nettelhorst School, encouraged Candace to attend BPHS, where she'd be both safe and prized, and where her many emerging talents would be nurtured.

Over her time with us, Candace was a leader, a scholar, and a conscience. She's goaded us to give blood, mediated disputes between fellow students, and won a shelf of awards and recognitions. Today, she is a premed student at Northwestern University.

**Jamal Leki** came from Waters School on the north side, where his father was chair of the Local School Council, and a dedicated school reformer himself. Jamal was academically talented and highly creative, a divergent thinker, a skeptic who saw clearly through the flaws in his teachers' efforts. BPHS wasn't resourceful or flexible enough to meet Jamal's needs, and he left us early, to study music and Japanese at a local community college and to earn his high school diploma through a GED. Today, Jamal is playing a lot of piano and has embarked on a self-guided exploration of classical music.

**Carlton Jackson** and **Ed Redd** were actually pretty easy to recruit—they were both attending Nia School, an Afrocentric, entrepreneurship-oriented middle school that was already occupying the building that BPHS would share. We simply had to convince Ed and CJ to move “upstairs.” In high school, Ed was an immediate basketball star and emerging mathematical whiz. After taking a special summer course in accounting and working at a part-time job designing math computer games, Ed was a catch for Marquette University in Milwaukee. Carlton's steadfast interest in art was stranded through his high school career, and his series of internships in video production earned him part-time jobs with the Museum of Broadcast Communications and the Community Television Network. Carlton is now enrolled at Chicago State University and hopes to eventually study at Grambling State University.

**Lilia Moreno** came with a group of her friends from Ruiz Elementary School, twenty blocks south of Best Practice. After a year, her friends transferred to another school, but Lilia hung on with us, becoming a dedicated and solid student. Nothing was going to make Lilia miss a step toward her dream of going to college—including marriage, pregnancy, and the raising of the beautiful Natalie, whom our faculty and office staff doted upon extravagantly. Today Lilia is at National-Louis University, studying to be a respiratory therapist.

**John Yates** came to us from Jenner school. John was a quiet boy, an average student, with plenty of friends, a wide and ready smile. We used John's picture on the cover of our second-year brochure—his extraordinarily handsome, youthful face seemed to be the perfect reflection of our school's

vitality and energy. Over a February weekend in 1998, John was killed in a neighborhood shooting.

These and one hundred thirty-two other young people joined us on our opening day, August 23, 1996, in the sweltering auditorium of our new school, as we embarked on the adventure of creating a new school together. Four years later, on June 5, 2000, ninety-two of these young people received their diplomas. Eleven of the original freshman had fallen back to junior status, having failed to earn enough credits to graduate. Twenty-two transferred to other high schools. Twelve dropped out of school altogether, some working full-time and others running with gangs. Since 1996, we've seen four marriages, seven babies, three deaths.

Other outcomes were similarly complex and mixed. On standardized tests, our students outperformed expectations in some important areas. Despite our nonselective enrollment policy, state of Illinois science examinations placed us eighth out of seventy-four high schools in the city. In social studies, we ranked twelfth, with 88 percent of our kids meeting or exceeding state goals. Throughout the first four years, our reading and math scores on the Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP) consistently ranked in the top third citywide, though this still meant our kids were well below national averages. During the 1999–2000 school year, our TAP reading scores rose 47 percent, and math went up 37 percent. Of our senior class, two-thirds went directly to college, 10 percent into the military, and several into full-time jobs. There was also a small group of “undecided” students, who gave the faculty and the counselors real concern as graduation approached.

Looking back to the original planning of the school, we realize that we had no idea what we were getting into. Rereading our dewy-eyed original proposal, with its vision of a perfect, seamless implementation of our dream, our planning process seems about as sophisticated as one of those old Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland movies: “Hey! Let's get a barn and put on a school!” We have since been humbled by the staggering difficulty of creating a high school that works better for kids. We have been educated by the hard knocks of attempting change inside a big, complex school district. It is tough to focus on curriculum innovation when you are constantly fighting bureaucratic rearguard actions just to get basic supplies and services. It's hard to sustain educational momentum while worrying about your students' safety in the streets. And, while trying to do something new, you always have to resist the seductive siren song of predictability, of old habits, of going back to the “regular” way. As we've steered down this bumpy, winding road of starting a new

school, we feel that we have hit every single pothole. Indeed, our original and only half-ironic working title for this book was “How *Not* to Start a High School: The Hundred Biggest Mistakes We Made and How You Can Avoid Them.”

So what have we learned? Our lessons are woven through every chapter of this book. Some things we think we have done pretty well, and we may even encourage you to follow our example. At other times, though, we’ve made mistakes, sometimes big ones. Indeed, some of our warts have grown warts. We’ll try our best to steer you away from our mistakes toward better models and smarter experts.

But there’s the one thing we have learned that we can share right at the outset. We are now much, much slower to judge or criticize anyone else who works in a high school. As three college professors who enjoy the luxury of assembling fulfilling lives for ourselves out of a mixture of teaching, writing, research, and consulting, we stand in awe of people who get up every day, get in their cars, and go teach five classes of teenagers, one hundred fifty complicated souls a day, twenty or thirty years in a row, who keep believing, trusting, and laughing. Teaching adolescents is not a job for the faint of heart. This is among the hardest work in the world, and these teachers, these veterans, the ones who have stayed in touch with their idealism, who have kept reading and learning themselves, who never give up on a struggling student, these are some of the finest people in the world.

But even the best of these teachers are mostly trapped in a system that is not designed well for kids—or for teachers either. That is the problem this book tries to address. Over the next eleven chapters, we are asking: What are the structures, the procedures, the design features, that can create high schools that work for young people? How can we devise warm and caring places that support teenagers’ risk taking, that provide the scaffolding for constructing identities, that offer just the right balance of security and challenge to stretch young minds?

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Decades of critiques have left us with a pretty good idea of what’s wrong with our high schools. We know what traditions need to be questioned, which procedures and practices we should reexamine, what old habits might need to be broken. And while every teacher, school, district, and community will need to find its own answers, there are common questions that we must all address.

This book aims to support that rethinking process, to help guide the inquiry of people who want to make high schools better—the schools where they teach, or administer, or serve on the school board, or send their own sons and daughters to be educated. Among our readers will surely be many concerned individual teachers trying to make a difference in their classrooms. But we also hope that the book will be used by teams of people who are trying to think systematically about high school change: teacher groups, school boards, parent committees, curriculum study groups, academic departments, or teams of school people and external partners. We want to help groups like these to plan their own changes, including:

- reforming an existing high school
- starting new programs within a larger school
- breaking a big school into smaller ones
- creating a new public, charter, or independent high school
- just starting to think about what these choices might mean in your school or district.

For the people engaged in this difficult and urgently important work, this book aims to assist your reflection, discussion, and planning.

The book is organized around eleven key ingredients of good high schools. We think that anyone who is thinking about improving secondary education, whether in their own individual classroom or across a whole district, must eventually address these eleven issues, assertions, or principles.

1. *Size.* The high school is small—or feels small.
2. *Climate.* Every student is known, appreciated, and included in a diverse, collaborative community.
3. *Voice and leadership.* Both students and teachers exercise choice and make decisions in all elements of school life.
4. *Teaching.* Teachers collaborate with students to explore and employ a growing repertoire of instructional strategies.
5. *Curriculum.* With their teachers, young people engage in challenging inquiry into topics that matter.
6. *Community experiences.* Young people are engaged in the life of the community and the world of work.
7. *Scheduling.* The school day and calendar provide flexible and variable blocks of learning time.

8. *Technology and materials.* Contemporary technology and rich materials support students as thinkers, researchers, and authors.
9. *Assessment.* Teachers help students to monitor, evaluate, and guide their own thinking.
10. *Professional development.* Teachers are students of instruction, with many opportunities to learn and grow.
11. *Relationships.* The school works closely with parents, community organizations, and educational institutions.

Where did this list come from? These eleven topics and their accompanying assertions come from several sources. First, we looked at the national curriculum standards developed over the past two decades by twenty subject-area organizations and national research centers. These authoritative reports define the nature of excellent teaching and powerful learning across the curriculum. Next, we reviewed the educational research, asking, What is known about “what works” in secondary education? What are the mainstream, consensus findings about the structures, procedures, and conditions that support the growth and learning of teenagers? We also studied a variety of pathfinding, high-performing schools all around the country, trying to understand how they provide “value added” for students. In their stories of invention, struggle, and change, we have found not just new ways of doing high school, but guidance about what questions need to be asked.

Finally, we’ve drawn on our firsthand experience at Best Practice High School. Over the past several years, while designing, opening, and running a new school, we have grappled very directly with these eleven issues, working to shape a personal and localized response to each one. So, while we are happy to tell our own stories, we are *not* offering our school as a model to be emulated. We are very young, and we don’t have the right answers for anyone else—or even ourselves half the time, since we are constantly tinkering with our own program.

So this book is built around eleven assertions, and in the following chapters we will take them one at a time. For each, we’ll first show how the issue—size, curriculum, community participation—affects students, often with a real-life story from BPHS. Then we will review the relevant research, trying to answer the question, What do we know about this ingredient of secondary education? What works and what doesn’t? We will introduce key people who have developed models, pioneered variations, or investigated results. We will visit different schools and programs where this particular ingredient has been adapted, translated, or modified in different ways. We’ll also talk about how

we have addressed each element at our own high school, both during the planning and now in the living-it-out stage. Toward the end of each chapter, in a section called Finding Your Next Steps, we offer some specific and concrete ways for readers to engage with the ideas in that section.



Another important part of this book is its accompanying website, [rethinkingschool.com](http://rethinkingschool.com): Any time you see this web icon in the left-hand margin, it means that the website has additional material that expands or extends that section of the book. There, you'll find samples of student work, more details about specific projects, or step-by-step plans for programs or lessons. But we want the website to be more than an electronic appendix. We hope it will be a place where people engaged in rethinking high schools can connect for conversation, sharing, and support. We invite readers from around the country to post their own high school renewal plans, curriculum units, programs, designs, stories, statistics, or samples of student work. The site is set up to facilitate discussion among colleagues and to connect educators to the best resources for restructuring secondary schools. Doing this work on the web, elaborating on a book, and trying to support a movement at the same time is an experiment for all of us. But revitalizing America's high schools in the spirit of progressive practice will be a long and complex undertaking. We are going to need all the ideas, friends, and solace we can get. So please join us on-line.

While this book is partly the story of one school, we think it can also serve as a broader guide for people inquiring into the nature of high school reform. While we do recommend some destinations in the following pages, we won't tell you which route to take to get there. It is one thing to say that a high school should be or feel small. But how? There are dozens of ways to make schools feel smaller to students, and no single one of them is right. That's a choice that has to be made in every locality, every classroom and school, by the people who are closest to the kids. So we don't claim to have the specific answer for any one school, but we do offer to help you find your own answer in the research, in the stories, and in the school profiles in this book.

## DEFINING BEST PRACTICE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

How do we know what "best educational practices" look like in the high school setting? What models do we have to follow? Which pathfinders have been out there experimenting and testing new ideas? Luckily for us all, while some national school reformers have been preoccupied with indicting and

blaming, others have focused more on what works for high school kids. Our national curriculum research centers, twenty subject-matter professional associations, scores of capable individual researchers, and thousands of on-the-line classroom teachers have been struggling to define clearly “best educational practice” in every important content area.

As a result, we now have national curriculum standards, meta-analysis of instructional research, reports from pilot classrooms, and landmark sets of professional recommendations in every teaching field. Some of these reports were produced with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, while others were financed by professional organizations. Taken together, this family of authoritative documents provides a strong consensus definition of state-of-the-art teaching in every critical field. We have summarized these documents in our earlier book, *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* by Steve, Harvey, and colleague Arthur Hyde.

One might expect that when experts and practitioners from such disparate fields as art, science, mathematics, writing, and social science sit down to define their own field's best practices, the results would be some very different visions of the ideal classroom, contradictory ways of organizing subject matter, and divergent models of what good teachers do. But, in fact, such polarities do *not* characterize these reports. Whether the recommendations come from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Writing Project, the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of English, or the International Reading Association, the fundamental insights into teaching and learning are remarkably congruent. Indeed, on many key issues, the recommendations from these diverse organizations are unanimous.

Of course each of these groups has some very particular, finely detailed suggestions for its own practitioners. But there is also a clear and deep consensus across these documents. Behind the thousands of subject-specific recommendations, the reports consistently prescribe a similar kind of learning environment. Regardless of discipline or grade level, the national curriculum standards recurrently call for classrooms that are:

*Student-centered.* Schooling should start with young people's real interests; all across the curriculum, investigating students' own questions should take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected content.

*Experiential.* Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.

*Holistic.* Young people learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.

*Authentic.* Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.

*Expressive.* To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media—speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and the visual arts.

*Reflective.* Balancing the immersion in experience and expression must be opportunities for learners to look back, to reflect, to debrief, to abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned.

*Social.* Learning is always socially constructed and often interactional; teachers need to create classroom interactions that “scaffold” learning.

*Collaborative.* Cooperative group activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.

*Democratic.* The classroom is a model community; students learn what they live as citizens of the school.

*Cognitive.* The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.

*Developmental.* Human beings grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.

*Constructivist.* Learners do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they re-create and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.

*Challenging.* Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning.

Our national curriculum standards, no matter how you summarize them, still seem a bit abstract. But these abstractions can and do coalesce in powerful, amazing classrooms. University of Wisconsin researcher Fred Newmann

has shown that when “best practice” teaching is the standard, achievement is higher—much higher. In a study conducted in Chicago, Newmann found that students who were offered what he labeled an “authentic” curriculum, similar to the one mandated by the national curriculum standards, achieved at levels two to three times higher than students in traditional, skill-oriented classrooms with low “authenticity” (1998). In both writing and mathematics, students learned far more when teachers invited them to go deeply into subject matter, engage in deep conversation about the topics at hand, and make explicit connections between classroom subject matter and their lives outside of school. But, people wondered: What about standardized test scores? Newman’s study had used specially constructed tests of content knowledge to determine how well kids had learned. But what about the mandated city and state assessments? How would kids with high-challenge teaching perform on the do-or-die assessments, the ones that really count? Two years later, working with Tony Bryk and Junko Nagaoka, Newman investigated just that correlation. The result? Students doing authentic and challenging work in their classrooms scored significantly higher on both the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Illinois Goals Assessment Program, across grade levels and regardless of socioeconomic status (2000). Newmann’s research came as a shock to many educators in Chicago, since it implied that, for all the talk of higher standards and “raising the bar,” most students were still not being significantly challenged or intellectually supported.

## SUCCESSFUL SECONDARY REFORM MODELS

While inertia and resistance have characterized much of the high school world in recent years, several important national institutions have bucked the hand-wringing trend: the middle school model, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the newly emerging small schools movement.

In the early 1970s, the idea began to take root that young people between ten and fourteen needed a special and different kind of schooling. This new view of early adolescence eventually sparked the reorganization of more than 10,000 junior high schools into places designed to work better for kids. Among the key tenets of genuine middle schools are students grouped into small “houses,” a personalized learning environment, intensive teacher teaming, curriculum integration, daily advisory, and genuine student responsibility and choice in the everyday experience of school.

When it is implemented faithfully, middle level education has much to teach high schools, and in planning BPHS, as well as in our previous writings

(1998), we have tried to borrow, transplant, and adapt everything we could. We are especially indebted to our colleague James Beane, whose books form the intellectual core of the middle school movement (1991, 1995a, 1995b, 1997). Jim’s practical model of negotiated curriculum has shown educators all over the nation exactly how to develop worthwhile and challenging curriculum from kids’ own questions about themselves and their world. Fortunately for those of us who work in school systems saddled with curriculum mandates, state tests, and district benchmarks, Jim also showed us how to “backmap” our student-driven units, proving to all the inspectors and authorities how it’s possible to teach required lists of content and skills while giving students a real voice along the way.

At the high school level, the Coalition of Essential Schools has been the nation’s leading model of comprehensive renewal, and a vital partner in our own thinking. Started in 1980 by Ted Sizer, author of several important books on secondary school reform (1992, 1994, 1996), the Coalition has now grown to include more than 1,000 schools across the country. Indeed, the CES has gotten so big that it recently had to restructure its organization, decentralizing into two dozen regional centers that provide coaching and technical assistance to nearby member schools.

The Coalition was built around ten key principles:

- The central goal of schooling is intellectual development.
- Students should study a few essential areas deeply.
- High expectations should be held for everyone.
- Learning environments should be personalized.
- Students should be constructing meaning rather than being filled up with information.
- Teachers should act as coaches and guides.
- The key outcome is not test scores but what students can actually do.
- Families should be central to school life.
- Faculty should teach kids first and subjects second.
- Schools should operate as model democracies.
- Schools with these goals may cost more or need to omit some of the wide-ranging functions performed by modern high schools.

The overlap between the Coalition principles and the recommendations of the national curriculum standards, of course, is noteworthy and immediately apparent.

Among other achievements, the Coalition has seeded some of America's most important model schools. One of the first of these, arguably the single most influential model high school in the country, is Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in New York, a charter member of the Coalition and a prototype of its principles in action. The history of the school is told in former principal Deborah Meier's book *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (1996), one of the most important guides to the deep principles and the practical realities of starting and running a truly different kind of high school.

When we were planning to create our own high school, we visited countless sites around the country, but we kept coming back to CPESS, and we ended up shamelessly imitating many of its ideas, structures, and procedures. While we felt a little guilty about aping another school so slavishly, we were also comforted by the fact that CPESS has been experimenting, growing, and refining its program for more than twenty-five years. When you are running a school just over four years old, contemplating how far you still have to go, it is reassuring to know how long it takes to become great.

As harmonious as we felt with Coalition values, the vision we had for our own high school was different in a few important respects, so we didn't seek membership in the Coalition, officially adopt its ten principles, or copy every structure we saw at CPESS. We were uncomfortable with the Coalition's description of the "student as worker." While we understood the point of the mantra—that kids should be active meaning makers, not recipients of information—we liked the idea of "students as citizens" better. While the Coalition's focus on smallness and personalization resonated with us, we felt that decentralized forms of instruction were just as important as smaller class sizes and teacher loads. And as much as we admired the Coalition's signature graduation-by-exhibition model, the seniors we met in some schools seemed overwhelmed with completing their monumental portfolios, many times involving ten or twelve large projects, some of which seemed mechanical and uninspiring. We hoped to devise a senior experience that was more narrowly focused on students' interests. We also had some different ideas about how the teachers would govern themselves, which we discuss in Chapter 4. Looking back on these judgments five years later, we do still differ philosophically and operationally with CPESS on a few matters—while on others we clearly might have been better off to borrow even more of their hard-earned ideas.

The loosely organized "small schools movement," which we'll discuss at length in Chapter 2, has spawned the growth of smaller, more personalized high schools (and elementary schools) around the country, and has begun to

document significant changes in student achievement in these special learning environments. Students do better both academically and personally in schools (including clearly defined schools-within-schools) that are small—fewer than 500 students. But limited enrollment isn't the only ingredient of truly successful small schools. According to the Small Schools Workshop, a Chicago-based national clearinghouse, the best small schools have a clear mission or theme, open admissions, deep parent involvement, and strong professional community among teachers. The evidence that smallness works is mounting so dramatically that recent federal funding for high school reform is being targeted at efforts to help oversized high schools feel smaller and work smaller for students. In some ways, the small schools movement seems to be at the same level of development today that middle schools were perhaps twenty years back—at the beginning of an effort that, over the long term, shows genuine promise of changing the paradigm of high schools across the country.

There are many other groups, movements, and documents that have helped shape this emerging consensus. As far back as 1990, a highly influential U.S. Labor Department report titled *The Secretary's Commission on Achieving the Necessary Skills (SCANS)* outlined what high school graduates should know and be able to do as effective citizens, workers, and parents. In a surprise to many who work inside public education, the report listed eight key outcomes, only one of which involved the “basic academic skills” taught and tested by the standard U.S. curriculum. Just as important to life success, according to SCANS, were skills like working effectively on a team, managing time and resources, using technology, and operating in a multicultural society. The SCANS report dovetailed powerfully with the research of Fred Newmann and his colleagues who documented the need for schoolwork to become more authentic, genuine, and applicable to real-world problems and activities.

*Breaking Ranks*, a 1996 report from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, looked as though school administrators had been studying the SCANS report right along with the national curriculum standards. The principals sounded six themes of change, including personalization, coherency, time, technology, professional development, and leadership. The report acknowledged that American high schools had a long history of clinging to outmoded and counterproductive practices, and called for high schools to “be much more student-centered and above all much more personalized in programs, support, services, and intellectual rigor.” Coming from principals, who work inside the system, these recommendations carried special weight—and their congruence with the view of other reformers helped to sharpen the emerging picture of a better kind of high school.

The United States Department of Education (USDE) has recently begun promoting its own broad vision of high school reform, called the New American High Schools (NAHS—the same name is also being used by the quite different initiative of the National Center for Education and the Economy, a private group). The NAHS is primarily a recognition program that locates and honors schools that are working well and offers them as models to be studied and adapted by others. The designated NAHS schools are demographically divergent: they include small and large schools, rural and urban locations, and both open admissions and selective entry policies. The diversity is intentional. As a 1999 USDE report explains, “Although each New American High School is committed to rigorous academic standards that prepare all students for college and careers, each uses different methods for reaching this goal. Each school has undertaken the challenge of reform in its own way.”

## SCHOOL REFORM COMES TO HIGH SCHOOL—AT LAST

The fractious debate over “just how bad are our high schools?” has now been raging for over fifteen years. There have been plenty of bright spots in secondary education, as we noted earlier in this chapter. But the bigger picture is undeniably troubling. Most high schools have shown little or no progress during the recent reform era, especially compared with the improvements in the lower grades. In Chicago, where the percentage of elementary schools on probation has dropped from 20 percent to 7 percent in recent years, more than half of our seventy-four high schools remain on academic probation, because fewer than 20 percent of their students can read at national norms. This pattern is reflected across the country. Even elite high schools, those with significant numbers of high-performing students, often cater to a few star students at the expense of the wider student body, leaving “regular” kids unknown, unchallenged, and psychologically discarded.

Indeed, most American high schools still look pretty much the way they did when the milestone *A Nation at Risk* report was released in 1983 and, for that matter, how they looked in 1923. Even acknowledging that promising innovations are afoot here and there, and factoring in a healthy skepticism about perennial gloom-and-doom scenarios, the conclusion is inescapable: American high schools are far from becoming the vibrant incubators of intelligence, creativity, and citizenship that reform envisioned.

As institutions, high schools are profoundly, frustratingly intractable. They seem to shrug off all criticism, squirm out from under all indictments, and repel all change. In order to document any significant improvement in

American high schools at all, we are forced to look back across many decades. From this longer perspective, we can identify some patterns of permanent growth: at the start of this century, females were just starting to be grudgingly included in public high school programs, and ritualized corporal punishment was still a routine part of school life. Now, with the turn of the millennium, girls are apparently here to stay, and caning is on the wane. But what a slow system!

Change in high schools seems to unfold in geologic time, more resembling plate tectonics than social engineering. Indeed, geology may be the proper metaphor for talking about high school reform in America. We know, for example, that the earth's continental plates do not move at a steady, gradual pace, but rather in sudden fits and starts—short bursts of change followed by long periods of stasis. Well, we've had about eighty years of stasis in American high schools; and we could really use an earthquake.

Of course, all this resistance to change is neither accidental nor perverse. In a sense, schools are *designed* to be conservative institutions. One of the main functions of education is to transmit the core traditions of a culture to its children. With this as one of their missions, we shouldn't really expect public schools to be hotbeds of social experimentation or cutting-edge innovation. On the other hand, high schools are also supposed to equip students to function as adults in the "real world" outside their doors. Depending upon the moment in history, high schools may be more or less closely attuned to that world. Back in the 1920s, when high schools were systematically redesigned to mimic factory models of organization, they were arguably preparing kids for the manufacturing-oriented economy of that era.

But today, American high schools seem more out of synch with society than at any other time in our national history. High schools aren't just lagging a bit behind the times—they have become an anachronism. In spite of a few mid-course corrections, they remain wedded to the archaic, eighty-year-old manufacturing model, where the students substitute for widgets flowing down an assembly line. Our high schools are better suited to making Model Ts than programming computers, more attuned to 1920 than to Y2K. Even the field from which the factory model was borrowed—assembly line manufacturing—has long since moved on to more effective patterns of organization.

Our outdated high school model also carries with it the harsh and retrograde social attitudes of the factories in which it grew: the authoritarianism, the class stratification, the treatment of human beings as machines, and the pillaging of resources. Clearly, these are not the values we should embrace in the schools of the new millennium. Instead of training docile workers for

smokestack industries, we should be mentoring young citizens. As George Wood has so eloquently put it:

High school is democracy's finishing school—the last shared experience that all Americans will enjoy, the place where the skills and dispositions that citizens in a democracy need should be secured and nurtured in all of our youth. Our children leave high school as fully enfranchised citizens, not only able to take a job or go to college, but also to vote, to engage in discussion over public issues, to buy the house next door, to become our neighbors. To live up to this task, the place we call high school should . . . teach each student, through example, what it means to be part of a democratic community. (38)

Since the three of us are parents as well as educators, we also look at the crisis in American high schools in personal terms. As we have raised seven high school graduates among us (with one still in the pipeline), we have repeatedly been reminded, viscerally reminded, of the way high school *feels*. Some of our children were welcomed and reasonably well served by their schools, others had mixed or indifferent experiences, and some were ignored, misunderstood, or injured.

When we put our family experiences together with our professional concerns, we feel that the most urgent problem with American high schools is not their long-term statistics or their ranking in international tests, but how they are treating millions of real, live kids *today*. High school is personal. It stands at the center of the complicated and challenging stage of life that is adolescence. How young people are treated in these places during these years has profound impact on their present as well as their future.

High schools are the places where our society officially gathers its young people during adolescence. As an institution, high school can either make this time better—more supportive, more helpful, more constructive—or it can make it worse. Far too often, high school makes things worse. Young people who are yearning for connection are silenced and marched through compulsory exercises, programmed into endless, disconnected days of involuntary activities, and overseen by adults who cannot know them and do not have the opportunity to care. Thus, in the seams and on the fringes of this unhelpful institution, young people are left to struggle on their own, often heroically, to find links with the larger world and to forge identities.

Any consideration of secondary education in America must address the recent outbreak of student shootings in our schools. In the wake of these chilling events, critics have laid the blame on ineffective parents, or dysfunctional

communities, or video games, or unchecked bullying, or on the schools themselves. Indeed, a 2000 report on school violence by the FBI named overall school climate as one factor that can prevent or increase the risk of school shootings. The FBI warned against “a static, unyielding and insensitive” school culture, inequitable discipline rules, and a “pecking order” in which some groups of students are considered more prestigious than others (Dorning, 2000). But as James Garbarino points out in *Lost Boys* (1999), his searing book about youth violence, when all the analyzing and blaming are done, one inescapable fact remains: for a variety of reasons, most American high schools are likely to enroll some young people who are dangerously close to the edge. And the experience they have in school can either pull them back or push them over.

To summarize: From the unromantic standpoint of efficiency and economics, America’s high schools are badly out of tune with the times. Ethically and politically, they are a telling contradiction of our national ideals and espousals of democracy. From the kid’s-eye view, looked at as a place where a young person might grow and develop, they are usually boring, frequently a waste of time—and sometimes a danger. We are brought to the sad but inevitable conclusion: America’s high schools are failing all of our kids some of the time and some of our kids all the time.

But we can do better. And in many places around the country, we are. Teachers, kids, principals, parents, community members, and local employers are joining together to make their high schools better for young people—more challenging, more authentic, and more collaborative.

In popular culture, adolescence is routinely depicted as a wholly negative time, a stretch of misery, a struggle and a curse. Those of us who work with teenagers every day reject this toxic stereotype. Of course, these years can be hard, damn hard, even heartbreaking at times. But adolescence is also suffused with amazing, joyful, exhilarating possibilities: deep friendship, powerful emotion, reaching toward the new, trying on and discarding possible identities, coming into possession of your powers as a physical body and a thinking person. And let’s not forget music and laughter and dancing and, maybe, falling in love a time or two.

Today, too many of these exciting, crucial, transforming, and joyful moments of adolescent life happen outside of school—or in spite of school. Is that how we want it?