

**FROM NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND TO NO TEACHER LEFT ALONE:
PUSHING POLICY TO IMPROVE PRACTICE**

James P. Connell, Ph.D.
Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE)

With excerpts from:
Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn

The organizers of this seminar have provided me the opportunity to elaborate on several recommendations made in our 2003 report “Engaging High Schools,” prepared for the National Research Council under the leadership of Deborah Stipek, Dean of Education at Stanford University. The perspective I brought to the committee that wrote that report – and to this conference – is that of a practitioner, of sorts. Our organization, IRRE, provides technical assistance and strategic consultation to districts, schools, foundations and government entities involved with improving secondary education for students in underperforming schools. As a practitioner (more accurately, a recovering academic researcher turned practitioner), my world of practice stands at the juncture of district, state and federal policies as they bear on what goes on in secondary schools – and, in particular, on changing secondary schools in ways that meet the needs of all students.

In working with one of our client districts, I had the opportunity to map what this juncture looks like from the perspective of a high school administrator. Bearing down on each of this district’s most underperforming high schools are more than a dozen different “programs” aimed at making them better. Each of these programs was spawned either at the district, state or federal level, and each carried compliance requirements (e.g., more testing of students affected by the program, reporting results for the program, site visits by outside teams representing the program) and intervention activities (e.g., pull out programs for students, changes in staffing configurations, facilities improvements, staff and leadership trainings). Granted, the district is quite large, and the high schools being described are among the more highly distressed in the district, even in the country. Still, the sheer number and diversity of expectations and interventions visited upon them boggles the mind. Then, there are the erratic timing and intensity with which these programs demand administrators’ attention – following no rational

sequence or order of importance. Typically, classroom teachers keep their heads down, their classroom doors closed and try to navigate around the wreckage.

We are not at this symposium to correct this situation, but rather to discuss and craft recommendations for using policy vehicles such as NCLB to make public school education more equitable and effective. But as we go about this work, we must keep in mind that our remedies better simplify rather than complicate the current situation on the ground.

The question I will focus on in this paper is, “How can federal policy (via state and district policy) pressure and support the scale-up of effective practices in the high schools most in need of these practices?” I have excerpted material from the 2003 National Research Council report, “Engaging High Schools,” and used those excerpts, presented in italics, to structure my comments.

Scaling up meaningful reform – going from one school to many – in a system as complex as public education requires confronting and addressing a significant set of challenges:

- *diversity within the system of schools and districts and the populations they serve;*
- *the multiple levels of financial and political influence on the system; and*
- *the “forces of inertia” – discrimination (by race and class), lack of accountability, and inadequate and outdated professional training –*

These conditions help keep in place the current resource inequities and demonstrably ineffective policies and practices. Going to scale with knowledge-based and meaningful high school reform will require additional resources, continuous learning about the necessary and sufficient conditions for what change needs to occur and how it happens, and time for the reforms to be implemented and studied. We can create the conditions to meet these needs only with additional public and political will and more cohesion within the field itself. We face peril on both fronts.

What is to be done? At the district, state, and federal levels, expectations and supports around several key issues need to be aligned and implemented.

First, to scale up high school reform, agreement is needed at the local, state, and federal levels on what change needs to occur. For example, at all levels there must be agreement that all students should leave high school above a well-defined and shared threshold level of academic performance, and that high schools in these communities will implement the features identified in this volume to get there.

As NCLB has played out in states and districts across the country, it is clear that the fundamental mission of high schools continues to vary by the geographic, economic and/or racial communities they intend to serve, even as these high schools are held accountable for bringing all of their students across what appear to be common thresholds of performance. In fact, different high schools (or programs within high schools) continue to whisper – or trumpet – wildly different expectations for their students. Some high schools quietly counsel struggling students out of college preparatory courses – or out of school – or don’t even offer these courses except as electives for the very few. Other high schools name and frame themselves as “college prep,” admitting and keeping only students who have certain levels of academic performance and whose parents know how to get them in and keep them in. Current federal and state policies don’t touch these inequities among schools and their programs; and they won’t until policies attend to the recommendations that follow.

Second, we need common indicators of what these reforms will look like when achieved in diverse settings and how good is good enough on these indicators. The indicators would need to include acceptable measures of student performance rather than the simplistic measures most states are now using, and there would need to be some assurance that students achieving these thresholds would have equitable access to quality employment and postsecondary education. Measures of how well and how broadly key features of engaging high schools are being implemented, and threshold levels of how good is good enough on these measures also would need to be developed and accepted at all levels.

This second recommendation calls for policies to incorporate performance standards that assure students opportunities for meaningful work and/or post-secondary education. Clearly, current high stakes assessments fall well short. It also speaks to the conditions that are most likely to get all of a district’s or school’s students across these new graduation thresholds.

Policy-makers must understand these conditions if they are to support them, and the public must understand them if all of us are to be realistic about what must happen to change student outcomes, not to mention how long it will take.

Because the bulk of the NRC report lays out the learning conditions needed to help students across meaningful thresholds, I won't attempt to summarize them here. However, in preparing for a recent Wingspread conference for education journalists, my organization was asked to prepare six questions for a journalist to pursue in finding out whether a high school was meeting the needs of its students (See Table 1). These questions help operationalize three conditions that the report found produce student commitment and learning:

- high and clear academic and behavioral standards (for all students),
- meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum, and
- personalization of school experience.

Some would claim that both the conditions necessary for learning and measures of their presence are not yet well enough understood or sufficiently supported by rigorous science to even begin incorporating them into policy. Clearly work needs to be done to convince all audiences of what these conditions are and how to measure them. However, our experience during the NCLB Version 1.0 years from 2001-2006 tells us we cannot wait much longer to get clear about what practices will move student achievement, what those practices look like when we see them, and how bad is bad enough to attract meaningful intervention to get these conditions in place. If we continue waiting for full consensus, we'll be lucky to replicate the minute progress in high school achievement we've seen over these first five years of NCLB.

Third, a clear conception of how change is to be implemented is needed. This conception of the process of change will need to have multiple levels and include school, district, state, and federal mechanisms for motivating and initiating reform, for getting through planning and initial implementation, and for sustaining and deepening implementation.

While there is a convergence of theory and empirical research around the learning conditions needed to improve student outcomes, it falls apart when the policy maker asks: "And

what do we know about how to get these conditions implemented in all the schools where they are seriously absent?” Theories abound about how to initiate and sustain change from existing learning conditions to more optimal ones in schools and districts. Some of these “theories of change” are highly articulated and specific; others are not. They vary widely in their philosophical approaches and their mechanics. Nonetheless, they are being tried out, willy nilly, on thousands of underperforming American high schools as we speak. In my view, any reconsideration of policy intended to produce change in practices in this many schools should support and watch carefully well-designed road tests of the more promising theories of change.

Fourth, this conception of the change process needs to specify what resources (human, economic, and political) are needed to implement changes and how those resources will be provided.

Proposed theories of change also need “price tags”– how much money, what kinds of expertise and what political cover it will take for states, districts and schools to change their policies and practices in ways that will move important student outcomes? Calculating and aggregating these price tags happens only after we achieve greater clarity around what all schools and districts are being asked to do (see recommendations #1 and #2) and how they’re expected to do it (see recommendation #3).

Fifth, a timeline is needed that includes the scale-up gradient and specifies which schools, how many, and when. The timeline also should spell out when interim and long-term outcomes are expected for each school, district and state as well as across the nation.

The current version of NCLB puts all districts and schools on the same basic timeline. By 2014, all students are expected to be proficient in reading and math; yet we know schools and districts have very different stretches of ground to cover over the next 8 - 9 years. We also know states define different rates of progress as acceptable. Some states expect the same progress each year; others expect no progress for some years and rapid progress in others. We know “proficiency in reading and math” means very different things state by state -- by simply looking at the tests themselves and according to recent comparisons of state assessments to national ones.

Our five years of experience working with schools and districts trying to beat the same NCLB clock tells us something further. Even when all or most of these variables in starting points and in NCLB's implementation are constant, schools still show dramatically different results. Why? Because these schools and their districts use different theories of change and can access disparate amounts and types of resources to support their work.

If federal policy is going to benefit practice in these schools in any pervasive or equitable way, that policy has to bring with it more consistency and clarity, as discussed in the previous recommendations. With greater consistency and clarity, timelines and scale-up gradients can and should be articulated. Timelines should include the dates when schools facing large gaps between current and expected rates of progress will receive resources; how long it should take for these resources to change learning conditions; and when change in these conditions should yield meaningful change in outcomes. Scale-up gradients include the numbers and types of schools (and districts) that can be expected to receive the required supports and therefore be put on the timelines just discussed.

Sixth, a public and highly visible accountability plan needs to be tied to this resource map and timeline. It should specify who is responsible for reallocating and providing those resources and for achieving these interim and long-term outcomes, and it should explain the consequences of not doing so for all involved.

Seventh, there need to be mechanisms for examining progress on the indicators of change, and results should be made public to promote accountability. Indicators should also be used to fine-tune implementation strategies along the way.

The multitude of education "scorecards" published by federal, state and local entities bring information to the public about how schools and districts are doing on the bottom-line NCLB outcomes, i.e., improvements in test scores in reading and math for some grade levels. However, the vast majority of these report cards do not tell taxpayers and other important constituencies why these measures matter to their children's educational futures. They do not address whether these tests are challenging students to think or simply asking them to regurgitate facts. They don't reveal improvement or decline in the learning conditions that affect student performance; and they don't hold district, state and federal agencies accountable by telling us

whether they have made relevant, sufficient and timely resources available to put these conditions in place. Persistent “failing grades” on these report cards do embarrass teachers, administrators and students associated with these schools. But with many schools in their fifth or sixth year of failing grades, we have no empirical evidence that embarrassment is galvanizing schools into meaningful improvement or that the formal interventions and sanctions resulting from these failing grades are making much difference, particularly in high schools. If the recommendations from the National Research Council’s report were adopted, reports to the public would include a thicker bottom line (recommendation #1) and clear and compelling information on what was and wasn’t happening to move that bottom line (recommendations #2-4). The intended effect – to mobilize the public to pressure and support public schools to improve – would be more likely to follow. With more and more states making these tests high stakes for individual students – denying promotion and/or graduation to those who perform poorly – policy assurances that schools, districts and states will be held accountable for holding up their end by providing all students with relevant, sufficient and timely supports become even more urgent.

Finally, schools and districts need resources to make the kinds of comprehensive changes that will result in real improvements in student engagement and learning. Money alone is not the answer, but low-budget efforts to improve schools have taught us that, to some degree, you get what you pay for. Schools and districts need support for both start-up costs and for sustaining constructive changes (see King, 1994).

Recommendation #4 spoke to the need to attach price tags to strategies that would improve learning conditions and outcomes in schools showing inadequate progress. This final recommendation serves as truth in advertising for the entire set of recommendations; acting on them will cost more than we are currently spending to implement NCLB Version 1.0. In my view, the benefits for student outcomes will justify the costs. The recommendations are consistent with our experience and that of others living at the intersection of policy and the day-to-day work of improving struggling districts and schools (Connell, Legters, Klem, & West 2006). They will bring greater clarity and accountability at all levels to how money is being spent; more realism to the policy’s ambitions; and new learning as to what is and isn’t working

and why. I will close my comments with a final excerpt from the NRC report that I find is still timely and apt:

This is an ambitious list of recommendations, and it is probably not complete. But if good high schools are to become the rule rather than the exception in economically disadvantaged communities, the American public and policy makers at the district, state and federal level must tackle this challenge comprehensively and with the kind of seriousness this list of recommendations indicates.

Table 1
**TAKING STOCK OF HIGH SCHOOL QUALITY:
LEARNING CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT
STUDENT COMMITMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT**

Visit a school. Ask to be allowed to go into five classes of your choice. Be prepared to spend 10 or 15 minutes in each. Make sure you see at least four core content classes (English, Math, Social Studies, and Science) and at least a couple of freshman classes.

Find out what the class subject is, whether the class is required for all students, elective and whether it's open to all students and, if not, how students do get enrolled.

1. Upon entering and watching a few minutes of classroom activity in the class, what percentage of students appear to be doing what the task that is expected: reading, paying attention to the teacher, talking to their peers about the work, making something, writing something, looking something up related to the task?
2. Picking randomly five students and asking them the following questions privately, how many can provide a cogent response to the following questions:
What are you working on?
What are you trying to learn by doing this?
3. In these same classrooms, if there's not graded student work displayed, as to see a piece of student work that has been given the highest grade possible and ask yourself, yes or no, "if that was your son's or daughter's work in that course, would you say that it deserved this high a grade"; OR
If you have trouble being objective about your children's performance, say you were an admission's officer at a competitive four-year college or university, would you say that this school is grading their students using appropriate standards?
4. Stay long enough in the classroom to see the teacher ask the students in the class a question or two about the material being covered in the class observe: how many students

had to answer the question (versus listening to someone else answer it or getting the answer from the teacher) before the teacher moved on to the next topic?

5. Find out how many and what math courses are required for graduation from this school and how many and what math courses are required for admission to the state university and to a reputable community college in the area. Do the required courses at the school meet or exceed the requirements at the state university, yes or no?
At the community college, yes or no?
6. If you're there after at least a month of school, ask five randomly selected students (either in your classroom visits, or in another setting):

How many teachers do you have this term/year/semester and what are their names?

How many of those teachers know your name?

How many of those teachers know something else important about you?

References

1. Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn (2004). *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, Washington, DC, The National Academies Press.
Committee Members:
Deborah Stipek (*Chair*), School of Education, Stanford University
Carole Ames, College of Education, Michigan State University
Thomas J. Berndt, Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University
Emily Cole, Principal Emeritus, Jefferson avis High School, Houston Independent School District
James Comer, Yale University School of Medicine Child Study Center
James Connell, Institute for Research and Reform in Education, Tom River, New Jersey
Michelle Fine, Department of Psychology, City University of New York
Ruth T. Gross, Professor Emeritus, Department of Pediatrics, Stanford University School of Medicine
W. Norton Grubb, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley
Rochelle Gutierrez, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Carol Lee, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University
Edward L. McDill, Department of Sociology and Center for the Social Organization of Schools, The Johns Hopkins University
Russell Rumberger, School of Education, University of California at Santa Barbara
Carmen Varela Russo, Baltimore Public School System, Baltimore City Public Schools
Lisbeth B. Schorr, Project on Effective Interventions, Harvard University
Timothy Ready, *Study Director* (until September 2002)
Elizabeth Townsend, *Senior Project Assistant* (from July 2002)
Meredith Madden, *Senior Project Assistant* (until June 2002)
2. Connell, J., Klem, A., Legters, N., & West, T (2005). Getting Ready, Willing and Able: Critical Steps toward Successful Implementation of Small Learning Communities in Large High Schools. Paper prepared for the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.