No Child Left Behind and Reforming the Nation's Lowest Performing High Schools: Help, Hindrance, or Unrealized Potential?

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About 2,000 high schools in the United States (12%) produce nearly half of the nation's dropouts. In these high schools, the number of seniors is routinely 60% or less than the number of freshmen four years earlier. This indicates that these high schools have weak promoting power and that half or less of their students are graduating in the standard number of years, if at all (national and state overviews of promoting power levels across high schools can be found in the appendix). Predominately poor and minority students attend high schools with weak promoting power and hence very low graduation rates. Over 600 of these high schools only educate minority students. Nearly half of the nation's African American and forty percent of the nation's Latino students attend one of these high schools (Balfanz and Legters 2004).

One of the core stated intentions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is to identify schools that are failing to serve poor and minority students and provide them with access to a high quality, standards-based education. At the high school level, NCLB aims to identify high schools in which students are not achieving proficient levels of academic skills and/or graduating with a regular high school diploma in the standard number of years. It then aims to instigate remedies for the schools and the students in the schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress towards these goals. In short, one of the aims of NCLB is to identify the nation's lowest performing high schools and significantly improve the educational opportunities of the students who attend them.

This paper explores two central questions with regards to NCLB and the nation's lowest performing high schools. First, is there evidence that high schools which produce half or more of the nation's dropouts are being identified as needing improvement and, more significantly, improving as a result of NCLB? Second, if this is not happening in part or full, why not? What factors are standing in the way of realizing NCLB's intentions? The paper then concludes by examining how NCLB might be improved so it can attain its stated goal of insuring that all high school students receive a quality education.

Part 1: How Many of the Nation's Lowest Performing High Schools are Making Adequate Yearly Progress? Does This Mean They Are Improving? And If Not, What Stands in the Way of NCLB Achieving its Intent?

In order to examine the impact of NCLB on the nation's lowest performing high schools, we drew a 10% random sample of the 2,030 high schools in 2003 whose three year average (2000-01 to 2002-03) for promoting power was 60% or less. This enables us to identify a set of schools that were clearly low performing at the outset of NCLB and examine to what extent they have been identified and improved by the NCLB accountability framework for high schools. Specifically state and districts report cards were examined for the 203 high schools in the sample to establish:

- If the high school made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in the most recent year data was available
- Achieved AYP directly or through the Safe Harbor provision
- The percent of students currently proficient in mathematics and reading/English
- The current graduation rate
- Progress made in the past year(s) in the percent of students proficient and the school's graduation rate

When it was available, data was also collected on the high school's attendance rate.

The Data Set and The Sample

The promoting power dataset includes all regular and vocational public high schools in the United States with at least 100 students in 2003 and three years of promoting power data. Promoting power is defined as the number of seniors enrolled divided by number of freshmen enrolled four years earlier (or three years prior in a 10-12 Senior High). The enrollment data, as well as the other school data analyzed (demographics, number of teachers, free and reduced lunch participation etc.) is from the Common Core of Date collected by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics.

The high schools in the 10% random sample, reflect the main characteristics of the nation's high schools with weak promoting power. They are predominately located in the cities of the northeast, industrial Midwest, and West, as well as throughout the South and Southwest. Included are high schools from the nation's largest urban school districts, as well as rural, single high school districts. The sample includes high schools from 35 different states and slightly more than half the high schools are located in ten southern states (109 of 203). Texas has the most high schools in the sample (22), followed by Florida (19),   New York (18), Georgia (15), and California (15). Thirteen of New York's high schools are located in New York City, the district with the most high schools in the sample.

What did we find?

Finding 1- Slightly More than One-Third of the Low Performing High Schools Made AYP.

Thirty-eight percent of the sampled low performing high schools made AYP in the most recent year data was available for. Sixty-two percent did not make AYP. There is some evidence that these numbers are affected by differences in state standards. One quarter of the low performing high schools which made AYP came from just four states (Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia) and in all these states 80% or more of the high schools in our sample made AYP. Further analysis is needed to determine if these states have particularly effective high school reform efforts or relatively low performance bars at this stage of NCLB implementation.

Finding 2-Low Performing High Schools that Made AYP Tended to be Better Resourced, Smaller, and Less Urban.

As seen in Table 1, the 203 low performing high schools in the sample share some common characteristics. They primarily educated poor and minority students. In addition, although most would qualify to be school-wide Title 1 schools, less than a third actually received Title 1 money.

There are three characteristics, however, which distinguish low performing high schools that made AYP from those that did not. First, high schools that made AYP appear to be considerably better resourced. On average, they have one teacher for every 14 students compared to one teacher for every 17 students in the low performing high schools which did not make AYP. This difference is considerable. In a school of 1500 students, it would amount to 19 additional teachers or a staffing increase of 22%. It is also potentially very significant as recent research has indicated that high schools with student-teacher ratios of 15 to 1 or less are much more likely to have the resources necessary to implement comprehensive, research based high school reforms than high schools with greater ratios (Balfanz 2005). It is important to note here that this is not a measure of class size, because among other things, it includes special education and ESL teachers. What it does provide is an indicator of how many skilled adults are in a high school and could be deployed to support reform efforts and, by implication, the general funding level of the high school because teacher salaries typically account for most of a school's budget. It is also worthy of note that part of the resource differential may be because a somewhat higher percentage of low performing high schools that made AYP received Title 1 funding (34% to 27%), even though both groups, served equal levels of free and reduced price lunch students.

Table 1. Characteristics of Low Performing High Schools that Did and Did Not Make Adequate Yearly Progress.

	Black Students	Latino Students	Free Lunch Students	School Title 1	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Total Enrollment	City	Rural
Made AYP	34%	19%	54%	34%	14 to 1	872	36%	41%
Did Not Make AYP	39%	19%	55%	27%	17 to 1	1418	52%	27%

The second major difference between the low performing high schools which made AYP and those that did not, is that those that made AYP tended to be considerably smaller. Low performing high schools that made AYP, on average, had 546 fewer students. Finally, the low performing high schools that made AYP were more likely to be rural high schools and less likely to be central city high schools. We do not know if these factors, however, are causative. Rural high schools tend to be smaller and hence it may be one or the other factor that is important, or both may be linked to an unidentified third factor which is actually promoting the success of some high schools over others.

One possible unidentified factor is that smaller high schools may have fewer sub-groups of students that need to make AYP. States typical require anywhere from 30 to 50 students to be in a sub-group e.g. African American, Latino, Special Education, Economically Disadvantaged etc, for schools to have to show that this sub-group is making AYP. Large and diverse schools may need to make AYP in a dozen or more sub-categories, whereas smaller schools can have half as many or less. A 300 student high school, with 30 African American, 30 Latino, 30 Special Education, and 30 Economically Disadvantaged Students may only have to show AYP for the entire school population, whereas as high school of 900, with 90 students in each group would need each sub-group, as well as the school as a whole to make AYP. Thus the apparent advantage of smaller high schools in our sample may in part reflect the fact that, on average, they can face less subgroup accountability.

Forthcoming analysis will use statistical techniques to help sort this out, but for now all that can be said is that the low performing high schools that did make AYP tended to be smaller and less urban but we remain uncertain about why this is the case.

***Finding 3-Given How AYP is Measured for High Schools it is Impossible to Know If
and to What Extent the Nation's Lowest Performing High Schools are Getting Better***

At the high school level, AYP is determined based on achievement test data in
mathematics and English in at least one high school grade and the school's graduation
rate. State to state differences in the grade in which students are tested, how graduation
rates are measured, and where the initial baselines against which improvements in
academic achievement and graduation rates are set make it impossible to know the extent
to which the nation's low performing high schools are improving.

The current implementation of NCLB at the high school level leads to many
complications with regards to answering the most basic questions -are low performing
high schools getting better- but two practices in particular stand out.

First, a number of states give their achievement tests in the 11th or 12th grade and
have minimal graduation rate levels or gain goals. Twenty states in our sample, for
example, let any gain in graduation rates, however, minuscule satisfy their AYP
requirements. Thus in many states, high schools with very low graduation rates and
minimal or no improvement in them can make AYP by improving the achievement levels
of only the students that make it through to the 11th or 12th grade.

For example, a New York City High School made AYP in 2004-05 with
seemingly impressive proficiency levels of 72% in math and 80% in English on the 12th
grade test used in New York State. This, however, is paired with 58% graduation rate and
an 81% attendance rate. This indicates that only 58% of the entering freshmen graduated
and only 41% graduated proficient in mathematics and 46% in English. Yet for all
practical purposes, because this school made AYP, it is being sent the signal that it is
doing fine and that it should keep focusing its efforts on making students who survive to
the 12th grade proficient rather then focusing on the nearly 50% of students who are
dropping out with weak academic skills.

A school in Missouri is even a stronger example of how current implementations
of NCLB at the high school level can obscure more than they reveal. This school made
AYP with proficiency levels of 21% in mathematics and 25% in English, based on
modest gains of eight percentage points in mathematics and four percentage points in
English. Its graduation rate, however, *declined* twelve percentage points to 77%. The
school made AYP, however, because 77% is above the minimum required level to meet
AYP in Missouri in 2004-2005. The signal being sent to this school is that fewer
graduates is okay as long as proficiency levels keep rising on the state tests given in the
10th and 11th grades. This in turn provides a strong incentive to retain students in 9th grade
or push them out.

A second practice which plays a large role in making it nearly impossible to use
AYP results to determine if the nation's lowest performing high schools are improving is
that each state sets its own baseline from which high schools are suppose to progress over
12 years to reach 100% student proficiency on state achievement tests. A common

formula is used to establish state baselines but because there is wide variation in the difficulty of achievement tests states give and the number of students who pass them states have ended up with widely different baselines and initial growth targets for the percent of students who must be proficient for a high school to make AYP. Thus in 2004-05, AYP is achieved in California high schools if 22% of students are proficient in English and 21% in mathematics, in Pennsylvania, though proficiency rates of 54% in reading and 45% in mathematics are required, and in Ohio its 72% in reading and 60% in mathematics. In short, in the most recent year AYP was calculated more than twice as many students needed to be proficient in Pennsylvania and three times as many in Ohio than in California for a high school to make AYP.

Consider two high schools, from our sample, shown in Table 2. The California high school has proficiency levels in the 30 percent range and has seen a two year decline in it graduation rate. The Ohio high school has proficiency levels in mid 60's to upper 70's (and a gains of 19 and 9 percentage points) and has seen a two year gain in its graduation rates. Which one may AYP?-the high school in California.

Table 2: Comparison of Two High Schools in California and Ohio

State	Reading Proficiency	Math Proficiency	Graduation Rate	Two Year Change in Graduation Rate	AYP Status 2004-2005
California High School	33%	35%	83%	-12	Made AYP
Ohio High School	80%	65%	88%	+11	Din Not Make AYP

The Ohio high school failed to make AYP because its economic disadvantaged sub-group had a 70% proficiency rate in reading, two percentage points shy of the state proficiency target of 72%. In the California high school, its largest sub-group Latino students, had proficiency levels in the mid-20's nearly ten points below the school average but the school still made AYP because these levels were above California's proficiency targets of 20 and 21%.

A high school in our sample from Pennsylvania demonstrates another problematic outcome of states having widely different initial baselines or early proficiency levels. In 2001-02 only 15% of this high schools' students were proficient in math and 6% in English. Over the pass three years it has been able to increase its proficiency levels more than any other non-selective high school in its districts and has seen a 29 percentage point increase in reading proficiency and 20 percentage point increase in mathematics proficiency during this time period. Yet it is currently in Corrective Action 2, one year away from possibly being turned into a charter or seeing its faculty replaced, because despite these gains it has not reached the minimum baseline set by the state (and has not consistently met safe harbor provisions each year in each AYP student demographic category). If this school were located in California it would likely

be receiving accolades for meeting and then greatly surpassing required proficiency levels.

The same is true for graduation rates. In Georgia , for example, a high school could make AYP in 2004-05 with a 60% graduation rate. In our sample eight Georgia high schools made AYP in 2004-05 and seven did not. Four of the high schools that made AYP, however, had graduation rates of around 60%, one actually had a rate in the 50's but made AYP through a confidence interval and another saw its graduation rate decline from 67 to 60%. Georgia is far from alone. The Education Trust in recent report (Hall 2005) reports that no less than 34 states had AYP goals for high schools that were lower than the states reported graduation rate. There are, however, a dozen states or so with more ambitious graduation rate baselines and growth targets. Thus a high school with a 61% graduation rate could make AYP in Georgia but fall far short in one of these states.

In sum, there is an Alice in Wonderland character to current implementations of the NCLB accountability framework: for high schools, up is down, and down is up. Some high schools which are making AYP and by implication being told they are doing fine have low achievement levels and declining graduation rates. Other high schools are making significant improvements in both achievement proficiency levels and graduation rates and are currently facing the most extreme NCLB sanction levels because their initial starting points were so far below the baselines established by their state. As a result, it is not possible to use the AYP indicator to determine how many or to what extent the nation's lowest performing high schools are improving. This is deeply problematic because it means NCLB is not achieving one of its core missions.

Finding 4-Unclear Measures of AYP Can Trigger Responses Counter-Productive to the Intent of NCLB in Low Performing High Schools

Problems with the current implementation of the NCLB accountability framework for high schools are not limited to making it impossible for the public at large to know if low performing high schools are improving. Even more problematically they encourage teachers and administrators in low performing schools to act in ways that are counter-productive to the intent of the law. This can be seen most clearly in the undermining of the purpose of the Safe Harbor provisions, misalignment between the interests of students and their schools, and in recruiting and keeping skilled teachers.

Safe Harbor-The intent of the Safe Harbor provision was to provide a means to acknowledge substantial improvement which falls short of yearly achievement goals. Reducing the percent of students who are not proficient by 10 percentage points can hold a school harmless from the sanctions associated with not making AYP. The rationale being that if a school makes substantial improvement but falls a little short of ambitious improvement goals, it should not penalized.

In low performing high schools, with existing proficiency levels a great distance from their states' AYP achievement level, like the 25% of high schools in our sample

with mathematics proficiency levels of 20% or less, reaching safe harbor becomes the only feasible yearly achievement goal. When this is combined with the fact that high school students are typically only tested in one grade for AYP, the perverse situation occurs in which the most logical course for the low performing high school is to focus all its available resources and reform efforts on a very small number of students- those students who are close to proficient in the tested grade.

Consider the following illustrative example. In one high school in our sample from Pennsylvania, only 5% of the students are proficient in mathematics. The current state achievement target is 45%. In order to reach this target the school would need to make nearly an order of magnitude improvement in one year (the equivalent of learning how to run 60 miles per hour rather then 6). But to make Safe Harbor it only needs to see a ten percentage point reduction in the number of 11th graders who are not proficient. This schools has a nearly 50% dropout rate and as a result many fewer 11th and 12th graders than 9th and 10th graders. There are 1500 students in the school, but only 250 11th graders. Thus to achieve a ten percentage point reduction in the number of students who are not proficient the academic skills of twenty-four additional 11th graders need to be brought to a proficient level. As a result, in this particular application NCLB is not prodding the school to improve the education of its 1500 students but rather to focus all its efforts on twenty-four 11th graders. In the authors experience the school and others like it are open about their efforts. They call these students the "Safe Harbor" kids.

<u>Student and School Interests are Not Aligned</u>-The intent of NCLB is to galvanize schools into providing all its students with a quality standards based education. However because in many states NCLB accountability was over laid onto existing state accountability frameworks situations arise in which strategies that can help schools make AYP can work against the larger goals of NCLB. The state of Maryland, like a number of states, has been moving towards a series of end of course high school exams which students will need to pass to graduate. It has decided to use its Algebra and English Exams, which in the state accountability framework were designed to test the most basic skills a high school graduate should have, as its NCLB accountability measures.

At one level this aligns student and school interests. Students need to do well on the test to graduate and schools need students to do well on the test to make AYP. Where student and school interests become unaligned is in low performing high schools where the majority of students enter high school without sufficient prior preparation to pass the Algebra test in large numbers in 9th grade. For example, in the two Maryland high schools in our sample only 9% and 14% of students were proficient in mathematics in 2004-2005, while the state achievement goal is 40%. Here the temptation will be to move Algebra to later grades so students will have more time to develop their pre-requisite skills or in reality when many of the students with the weakest skills will have dropped out (the two Maryland schools in the sample have graduation rates of 76% and 84%). Thus in these low performing high schools what the state initial conceived as the floor-the most basic mathematics skills a high school student needs- could quickly become the ceiling. If students are delayed from taking the Algebra test until the 10th or

11th grade, it will be difficult for them to complete a college preparatory sequence of mathematics and their high school years will be spent learning basic not advanced skills.

Teacher/Administrator Quality- A core component of NCLB is that every student will be taught be a qualified teacher. For accountability purposes this is typically rather narrowly defined by each state as some combination of existing certifications, college major, and test scores. But the intent of NCLB is that every student should have a good teacher because skilled teachers and administrators are central to any effort to raise student achievement levels and graduation rates. NCLB also recognizes that in the past there have been great inequities in teacher skill levels across schools, often tightly correlated with a school's poverty level.

Many of the ways AYP accountability measures are playing out in practice in low performing high schools, as described above however, actively discourage skilled teachers and administrators from working at or staying in these schools. When principals and faculty work hard and effectively to make significant improvements in low performing schools but come up short in terms of AYP because the schools initial baseline was very far from the states initial baseline a clear signal is sent that skilled and ambitious people should not work in low performing schools because even beat the odds efforts and success can still result in the school, its staff, and its leaders facing loss of resources, sanctions, and even their jobs. Or when teachers committed to improve the education of high poverty students see resources being diverted from school-wide efforts to be concentrated on a few students in order to achieve safe harbor they see that the school is not in a position to engaged in sustained comprehensive reform and look for schools that can.

Summary of Part 1

Our analyses uncover major shortcomings in AYP as an indicator of improvement, or persistent failure, in our nation's low performing high schools. We found that a third of the nation's low performing high schools made AYP and that those that made AYP tended to be better resourced, smaller, and less urban than those that did not make AYP. More fine-grained analyses, however, reveal that whether a particular school makes AYP depends on baselines or improvement targets for both achievement and graduation rates that vary dramatically from state to state. Examples illustrate how low baseline requirements or minimal improvement targets for graduation rates may offer incentives for schools to improve achievement scores and reach AYP by pushing students out in ninth or tenth grades. They also show how low performing schools that are making meaningful improvements in both achievement and graduation measures can fail to make AYP (and invite sanctions) while similar schools that demonstrate far less improvement make AYP in other states. Equally troubling is the incentive produced through the Safe Harbor provision to target only a small number of students for instructional improvement, enabling schools with high concentrations of needy students to avoid more comprehensive reforms that could reach all students. Finally, AYP measures that are not aligned with standards for college preparation can create a

disincentive for low performing high schools to make a college preparatory curriculum available to all students.

Part II: How Can NCLB Realize its Potential in Low Performing High Schools?

NCLB's desire to bring focused and sustained attention to low performing high schools and provide them with incentives to improve is a good thing. Transforming the nation's dropout factories into powerful engines of human capital would have a tremendous impact on the nation's economic and social well-being. As the prior discussion has illuminated, however, it is unlikely that the NCLB accountability framework, as currently implemented, will have this impact on the nation's lowest performing high schools.

Four Key Background Facts

In order, to better understand, how to shape a more effective NCLB approach to low performing high school it is first necessary to briefly examine what we know about why some high schools have very high dropout rates and low achievement levels, where they are located, and what it will take to dramatically improve them. Here there are four key points.

There Are Three Tiers of High Schools in the United States- Broadly speaking, as indicated by the national distribution of promoting power (Figure 1 in the appendix) there are three tiers of high schools in the United States. Somewhere between 10- 20% seem to function quite well. In these schools nearly every student graduates and many take and succeed in advance placement courses. Nor are they limited to affluent suburbs. They also include schools like Baltimore Polytechnic, Central High School in Philadelphia, and the Bronx High School of Science which are primarily attended by minority students.   In the middle the majority of high schools function well to average for some students but not for others. Then there are the 12-15% of high schools that are the focus of this paper and do not work well for anyone and produce about half of the nation's dropouts. Every state has high schools in all three tiers, but the percent in each tier varies considerably across states. At the low end of the spectrum there are a few states with only a handful of low performing high schools, at the other end 30-40% of high schools in the some state are low performing (see the state summary table in the appendix for details).

Many Low Performing High Schools Face an Incredibly High Degree of Educational Difficulty-Close to half the nation's low performing high schools are concentrated in about 50 of its central cities. This is not an accident. Central cities often combine neighborhoods with concentrated and intergenerational poverty with a two tier system of high schools. In these cities, students with at or above grade level academic skills obtain access to the city's selective high schools or high school programs. Almost

by definition this means that students who attend the city's neighborhood high schools, predominately located in its poorest neighborhoods have below grade level skills. Many also have loosening attachments to schooling and worsening attendance problems. Thus it is common for neighborhood high schools in central cities to be attended almost exclusively by students who have multiple risk factors for low achievement and failing to graduate. For example, in one of the schools in our sample, only 15% of the 9th graders are first time ninth graders, on age (i.e. have not been held back in prior grades), not in special education, and no more than two grade levels behind in mathematics or reading skills. This means that 85% of the schools 500 9th graders need intensive academic and social supports to succeed. Similar profiles are found in the other 14 high poverty, neighborhood high schools in its school district (Nield and Balfanz, 2005).

In Low Performing High Schools Many Students Fall off the Path to Graduation in An Entirely Predictable Manner -In high schools in which the majority or near majority of students do not graduate, there is a clear sequence that most students who do not graduate follow (Allensworth & Eaton 2005, Neild & Farley 2004). They enter ninth grade with academic skills typically two to four years below grade level. A considerable number are already over-age for the grade which means legally they are only a year or two away from being able to drop out in many states. They also have weakening attendance habits and will miss a month or more of the 9th grade. Twenty to thirty percent might miss ten of the first 30 days of school. Sporadic attendance combined with poor prior preparation leads to first semester course failure. The typical grade in the school may well be a D. Discouraged by their first semester outcome some students conclude they will not pass 9th grade this year and begin to attend even less. Others will try harder but not raise their grades enough to earn promotion to the 10th grade. Perhaps 30 to 40% of the 9th grade class will be retained.

Most will attempt to repeat 9th grade the following year, but, absent major interventions to improve their attendance and academic skills, they will do no better than the first time and soon enter a rapid path towards dropping out. They may try transferring to another school or even attending an alternative school before they do drop out but by this point their ultimate fate is fairly set. In short, although poverty and issues requiring social service attention are powerful contributors and often the underlying reason for some of the students' behaviors, the direct reason most students fail to graduate is that they do not acquire enough credits to earn promotion to the 10th or 11th grade, or to ultimately graduate. And the main reason they do not earn enough credits is that they do not attend school often enough and do not have the reading and mathematics skills to pass their courses (Balfanz 2005b).

Improving a Low Performing High School Requires Comprehensive Reforms that are Neither Fast, Easy, nor Cheap-Enough is known about transforming low-performing, high-poverty high schools to effect substantial improvements in many of them. Working models, success stories, and independent rigorous evaluations exist (e.g. Legters, et. al, 2002; Kemple, et al, 2005; Quint et al 2005). The challenge is to develop the capacity, know-how and will to implement what is known to work in all the high

schools in need. First and foremost, it needs to be recognized that truly comprehensive reform is required. A dominant focus on one or even several levers of improvement is not enough to address the degree of educational challenge that currently exists in low performing high schools. Increased personalization and student outreach, high standards, intensive instructional programs to close achievement gaps, improved teacher quality, professional development and teacher supports, engaging school programs, and strengthened connections between high schools and colleges and employers are all needed in large, sustained, coordinated measures.

Patience, commitment and resources also are required. Some critical factors can be improved quickly within the one or two year time span allowed by the current NCLB accountability framework. In low performing high schools it is possible to achieve significant one year improvements in student attendance, reductions in suspensions, course passing rates, and promotion between grade levels (Kemple el al 2005). Significantly raising student achievement, however, typically takes more time. First, it requires coordinated improvements in at least four areas, student attendance, engagement, and effort, the instructional program (often both the course sequence students take and the instructional materials used in courses), the extra-help opportunities available to students with below grade level skills, and finally teacher and administrator effectiveness and support (Legters et al. 2002). In addition, based on our experience working with over 50 high school engaged in comprehensive reforms, between 10 to 25% of the students may need improved social services supports, as well. If effort, focus, or skill falters in anyone of these areas or factors outside of the schools control draw resources and energy away from a coordinated, comprehensive reform effort or a high school lacks sufficient resources to mount simultaneous reforms in all these areas then progress towards significant achievement gains can be stalled or muted.

Second, these coordinated efforts need to occur in every grade. If a student enters high school with reading and mathematics skills at the 5th grade level-strong and coordinated reform efforts may be able to bring up this students' skills to a 7th or even 8th grade level by the end of 9th grade (Balfanz, Legters & Jordan 2004). This student, however, despite making significant achievement gains still may not have the prerequisite skills needed to pass a end of course Algebra test in 9th grade or succeed in Geometry in 10th grade. Sustained efforts will be needed throughout high school to bring this student up to grade level by 11th or 12th grade. Thus, given our current state of knowledge it can take four years to enable the students who typically enroll in low performing high schools to reach NCLB proficiency levels.

Three Proposals to Help NCLB Realize its Intent with Low Performing High Schools

***Proposal 1-NCLB Reporting Requirements for High Schools Should be Made Much
Tougher and More Uniform than they Currently Are***

Bottom line what we want to know about every high school in the United States is
what percent of its students are graduating educated to the standard of the day. What the
standard of the day is can be debated at the state and national level and will evolve over
time. But, it should include multiple measures, and not be based on a single test score,
because it is clear from the current debates that the nation is looking for its high schools
to do more than just make sure its students can read, write, and calculate. Thus, being
educated to the standards of the day might include being college ready, workplace ready,
and ready for participation in civic life. So, the multiple measures could include a
measure of college readiness. Michigan, for example, has recently decided to make its
state and accountability test the ACT. In addition, they could include a measure of
workplace readiness, and a measure of civic readiness which might be student selected
from a short list which could include evidence of leadership skills, creative skills,
entrepreneurship skills, or community service.

To provide the information each school's community would want to know, the
reporting measure would need to be based on each high school's entering cohort of
students. In other words, tell us what percent of the school's entering freshmen ultimately
graduate educated to the standards of the day. The reporting data would also need to be
disaggregated by all pertinent sub-groups (e.g. race/ethnicity, poverty status, special
education etc.) so it would be possible to see that all students are meeting the standards.
This would eliminate much of the current confusion and non-comparability surrounding
current NCLB high school measures, as each school would be reporting on the outcomes
of the same set of students. The recent agreement among most of the nation's governors
on how to measure graduation rates, based on the entering cohort of freshmen, could be
used as an interim model of how to deal with transfer students until states adopt
individual identifiers that enable tracking the educational progress of students who move
between schools and states.

***Proposal 2-Re-conceptualize Safe Harbor so it Focuses Low Performing High Schools
on the Key Points Where Student Fall of the Graduation Path and Encourages them to
Implement Strategic School-wide Reforms***

At its core, the NCLB accountability framework is an ambitious attempt to use
incentives and sanctions to change behavior. But as any economist or parent will tell you,
getting the signals right is very tricky business. Carrots and sticks can work but they
need to be the right ones for the situation and involve a shared understanding of the
desired outcome between the two parties involved.

Safe Harbor are it is currently conceptualized is sending the wrong the signals. It
is encouraging low performing high schools to focus their reform efforts on a very few
students rather than on improving the whole school. Moreover, improvements in
academic achievement and graduation rates do not, in practice, tend to happen in steady
even yearly increments. Nor should we really want them to in low performing high

schools. In a high school, where currently less then 10% of students are proficient in mathematics and reading and less then 50% are graduating do we really want to spend five years establishing that it needs a major transformation or longer if it manages to make incremental improvements in a few of those years?

An alternative might be to base Safe Harbor around significant yearly improvements in the percent of students earning promotion from one grade to the next and taking a rigorous sequence of high schools courses. The high school course sequence promoted by the US Department of Educations State Scholars program, might be a good starting point, along with giving students the option to include a coherent sequence of high quality career and technical education-CTE-courses in the mix. Chris Swanson's (2004) Cumulative Promotion Index might provide one model of how progress from grade to grade could be measured using existing enrollment data already collected by the US Department of Education. Basing Safe Harbor on significant increases in the percent of students earning on-time promotion from grade to grade and taking a rigorous sequence of high school courses would focus low performing schools on improving the education of every student in every grade. It would also direct their reform efforts towards two of the major school-level variables which impact both graduation rates and achievement levels (Allensworth & Eaton 2005).

Proposal 3-Use NCLB reform as an Opportunity to solve the Conundrum of Title 1 Funding for High Schools and Acknowledge that Different High Schools face Greatly Different Degrees of Educational Difficulty

NCLB aims to both provide sanctions and supports. Yet to date, the supports have been under-developed and largely focused on governance issues, as opposed to the comprehensive organizational, instructional, and professional development/teacher support reforms which many low performing high schools need. Equally significant is the fact that NCLB sanctions and supports are supposed to be directed at schools which receive Title 1 funding. Yet most of the nation's lowest performing high schools do not receive Title 1 funds, even though they educate primarily high poverty students. In our random sample of low performing high schools, for example, only 33% were receiving Title 1 funding even though on average 55% of their students received free or reduced price lunches. This means that currently *the* federal program for providing supplemental support to schools which face the challenge of educating students impacted by the ill effects of poverty is not reaching many of the nation's high schools with the greatest need for additional support.

One way to resolve both problems would be to establish a separate stream of Title 1 funding for high poverty high schools. Then create funding formulas which factor in both the poverty rate and the degree of educational difficulty faced by the high school, with educational difficulty defined in part by the number of entering students with below grade level skills, weak attendance habits, over-age for grade, and needing special education services (since the inclusion model for special education has resource implications for the entire school). Finally, make continuation of the funding contingent on the high school implementing comprehensive, evidence-based, reforms which address

student attendance, behavior, and engagement, provide intensive and sustained extra help to students with below grade level skills, increase available social supports, and enable teachers and students to develop and use the skills needed to teach and learn rigorous academic material.

Conclusion

There are about 2,000 high schools in the United States where graduation is not the norm. These are high schools in which the senior class routinely shrinks to 60% or less, often much less, of the freshman class that entered four years earlier. High schools with weak promoting power are the engines driving the low national graduation rate for minority students, and the growing number of dispossessed young adults who are neither employed nor in school. These high schools must be specifically targeted for reform if the American High School is to fulfill its pivotal role as the means by which children who grow up in poverty can become adults who lead the nation. Transforming the nation's dropout factories into high schools that prepare all their students for post-secondary schooling or training and successful adulthood should thus be an urgent national priority.

Providing all students with access to a high quality, standards-based education is the primary intent of No Child Left Behind. We fully embrace the spirit of NCLB, yet our research shows that this landmark legislation is falling short of its intentions at the high school level. This is largely due to weaknesses in NCLB's core accountability measure--AYP, substantial variation in baseline and benchmark targets across states, and efforts to apply one-size fits all targets for a diverse range of schools within states. Rather than effectively and consistently identifying low performing high schools, AYP has created a confusing landscape in which improving low performing high schools are sanctioned while similar schools showing less improvement are not. As currently implemented, AYP can work against the spirit of NCLB by creating pressure and incentive for low performing high schools to push out students and forgo costly, but ultimately more effective comprehensive reforms in favor of test preparation for a targeted few.

We offer several proposals to address these shortcomings—tougher, more uniform graduation standards across the board, re-conceptualizing Safe Harbor for high schools so it focuses low performing high schools on strategic school-wide reforms, and a hard look at Title I funding for low performing high schools. These proposals attempt to strike a balance between the need for uniform standards designed to ensure all students graduate from high school prepared for success in college, career and civic life and the high degree of education challenge currently faced by low performing high schools. Such changes would increase the effectiveness of NCLB and more closely align implementation of the law with its stated purpose of ensuring equal access to a high standards education for all.

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Appendix

Figure 1.

Number of High Schools Nationally by Different Levels of Promoting Power

- 59% or less: 2,209
- 60-69%: 2,057
- 70-79%: 2,848
- 80-89%: 3,520
- 90% or more: 4,157

Class of 2003 Promoting Power
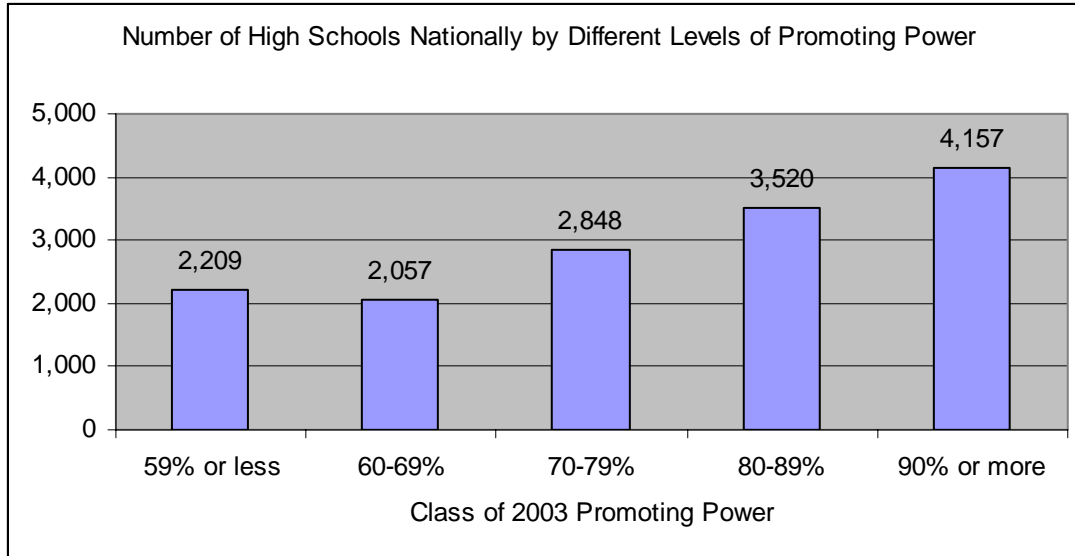
Percent of High Schools by Different Levels of Promoting Power

		Average Promoting Power for the Classes of 2002, 2001, and 2000				Average Promoting Power of 60% or less Number of schools						
State	Total number of schools	Percent of schools 90% or more	Percent of schools 80% or more	Percent of schools 70% or more	Percent of schools less than 60%	Total number of schools	20% or more free lunch	40% or more free lunch	School-wide title I 2001-02	Total number of students	Percent minority students	Percent of all minority students
Alabama	360	5.3%	20.8%	51.1%	20.3%	73	68	51	17	54,824	52.2%	33.4%
Alaska	64	14.1%	45.3%	64.1%	18.8%	12	4	3	2	6,846	41.1%	21.3%
Arizona	224	20.5%	38.4%	56.7%	29.5%	67	0	0	0	55,395	70.9%	38.9%
Arkansas	309	15.9%	52.8%	85.8%	2.9%	9	9	9	2	5,577	71.0%	12.4%
California	885	14.2%	40.7%	70.1%	16.2%	143	126	95	51	313,817	84.0%	27.4%
Colorado	246	22.4%	50.8%	72.0%	16.7%	41	31	14	2	38,181	53.3%	37.7%
Connecticut	158	38.6%	65.2%	81.0%	8.9%	14	0	0	2	17,835	77.4%	32.6%
Delaware	29	0.0%	17.2%	44.8%	20.7%	6	6	1	0	7,781	46.1%	29.4%
Florida	433	7.6%	14.1%	32.6%	47.1%	205	158	71	19	297,090	51.2%	50.9%
Georgia	302	3.0%	9.9%	22.5%	50.7%	153	149	92	25	179,214	59.6%	63.7%
Hawaii	39	5.1%	15.4%	38.5%	28.2%	11	9	6	4	16,280	82.7%	32.0%
Idaho	127	28.3%	68.5%	92.9%	1.6%	2	1	1	0	392	19.1%	0.9%
Illinois	621	32.4%	69.2%	82.0%	12.4%	77	74	64	45	103,754	83.8%	45.6%
Indiana	346	26.3%	63.6%	83.8%	6.4%	22	22	16	2	26,597	51.1%	32.3%
Iowa	360	69.4%	92.8%	97.8%	0.8%	3	3	3	0	4,049	34.9%	11.6%
Kansas	336	45.8%	79.8%	92.0%	3.6%	12	10	9	0	12,724	52.5%	24.9%
Kentucky	231	2.6%	16.5%	53.7%	18.6%	43	41	35	13	34,465	19.4%	35.3%
Louisiana	303	2.6%	13.5%	41.6%	25.7%	78	78	64	23	61,019	61.1%	38.5%
Maine	116	21.6%	55.2%	78.4%	4.3%	5	5	2	0	1,793	2.3%	2.0%
Maryland	175	26.9%	52.6%	76.6%	8.6%	15	12	8	0	22,629	81.1%	17.3%
Massachusetts	299	36.5%	61.5%	81.9%	6.7%	20	16	10	8	19,737	51.2%	16.1%
Michigan	625	23.0%	52.5%	71.4%	15.0%	94	78	54	30	88,826	63.3%	52.9%
Minnesota	374	61.8%	90.1%	96.5%	1.9%	7	6	6	2	8,048	68.8%	14.7%
Mississippi	239	0.0%	7.5%	36.4%	27.6%	66	66	61	31	44,552	58.2%	33.4%
Missouri	485	24.1%	58.8%	84.1%	4.7%	23	21	17	0	21,647	68.2%	30.7%
Montana	129	38.0%	72.1%	90.7%	3.9%	5	5	5	5	1,393	87.9%	21.5%
Nebraska	258	67.4%	91.1%	94.2%	2.3%	6	6	5	1	2,335	60.3%	11.0%
Nevada	62	12.9%	40.3%	71.0%	11.3%	7	4	2	2	8,978	61.5%	19.2%
New Hampshire	77	16.9%	45.5%	80.5%	5.2%	4	3	1	0	1,206	0.7%	0.4%
New Jersey	293	54.3%	80.5%	90.1%	5.8%	17	16	13	1	25,027	95.7%	19.6%
New Mexico	102	2.0%	12.7%	41.2%	26.5%	28	25	19	5	32,845	72.8%	44.1%
New York	830	31.2%	59.3%	73.7%	18.3%	152	141	113	32	238,997	85.0%	64.8%
North Carolina	322	0.6%	4.7%	25.8%	33.9%	109	85	34	3	110,121	50.5%	45.2%
North Dakota	128	68.8%	91.4%	93.8%	3.1%	4	4	4	2	549	85.2%	13.6%
Ohio	718	36.9%	67.4%	82.7%	10.4%	75	62	39	12	72,928	60.5%	48.3%
Okalahoma	421	25.2%	63.4%	87.6%	4.8%	20	20	19	5	14,858	60.7%	17.8%
Oregon	210	23.3%	58.6%	84.8%	5.7%	12	12	7	0	9,455	35.4%	11.8%
Pennsylvania	592	37.7%	74.7%	87.8%	8.1%	48	43	36	26	66,244	79.0%	50.7%
Rhode Island	41	24.4%	58.5%	73.2%	19.5%	8	5	4	0	9,124	51.5%	47.9%
South Carolina	182	0.5%	3.3%	13.2%	59.3%	108	102	72	15	97,278	52.6%	65.7%
South Dakota	148	64.9%	85.1%	93.2%	2.7%	4	4	3	2	2,816	33.8%	26.9%
Tennessee	282	6.4%	22.0%	52.8%	20.9%	59	0	0	0	48,651	–	–
Texas	1149	7.4%	27.2%	55.0%	22.3%	256	247	181	130	355,056	76.9%	49.8%
Utah	103	45.6%	86.4%	92.2%	1.9%	2	2	2	1	534	91.8%	3.4%
Vermont	65	23.1%	61.5%	87.7%	4.6%	3	2	0	0	1,465	1.9%	1.8%
Virginia	289	17.3%	46.0%	76.5%	8.0%	23	20	11	3	26,789	64.6%	15.3%
Washington	311	26.4%	54.3%	76.5%	8.7%	27	20	8	4	21,665	43.8%	14.4%
West Virginia	124	15.3%	54.0%	79.0%	0.8%	1	1	1	0	265	7.2%	0.5%
Wisconsin	433	63.5%	83.1%	89.4%	6.5%	28	16	15	12	25,361	71.5%	42.7%
Wyoming	59	18.6%	72.9%	91.5%	3.4%	2	0	0	1	1,178	20.5%	10.4%
Total	15,032	26.2%	51.8%	71.6%	14.7%	2,212	1,841	1,289	540	2,618,190	66.1%	38.7%

Note: Includes only schools that had 50 or more students and a 10-12th grade span during the 2001-02 school year.