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ABSTRACT

The perception of the senior year as a wasted year is a symptom of the disconnect between American public schools and what follows, whether postsecondary education or employment. Students may encounter four different sets of requirements to graduate from high school, to be admitted to college, to enroll in nonremedial college courses for credit, and to get a more than minimal job. The student who does not choose the college preparatory courses, starting with choices made as early as middle school, may be ill-prepared for both work and college. Courses requiring critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are particularly crucial. Problems that must be overcome include low expectations, lack of parental awareness of the consequences of course choices, tracking, lack of communication between one educational level and the next, overwhelmed and poorly prepared teachers and counselors, assessment unconnected to the standards of colleges and employers, and activities and scheduling limitations seen as purposeless and boring by the students. The most severe problem may be that high schools currently have little capacity to leverage change in teaching or learning. One suggestion is for 16-year-old students to have options such as applying directly to college, technical college, structured internships, or apprenticeship programs. Appendices list acknowledgements; meetings, guests and speakers; and nine papers and other materials prepared for the commission. (Contains 51 references.) (RKJ)

THE LOST OPPORTUNITY OF SENIOR YEAR: FINDING A BETTER WAY

Preliminary Report

National Commission on the High School Senior Year

January 2001

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National Commission on the High School Senior Year

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This is not a report about the failure of American schools, but about possibilities for a brighter, more productive high school senior year...National life and the economy are changing much faster than our schools... The nation faces a deeply troubling future unless we transform the lost opportunity of the senior year into an integral part of students' preparation for life, citizenship, work, and further education.

National Commission on the High School Senior Year

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Preface

In June 2000, the U.S. Department of Education, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation partnered to create the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. The sponsors charged the Commission with closely examining students' experiences in the last year of high school and recommending ways to improve them.

The Commission organized its work around four substantive questions. In brief, they can be stated as follows: To what extent is there a convergence in expectations for students going to college and those going directly into the workforce? What is the nature of the disconnect between K-12 (kindergarten through Grade 12) and postsecondary education that leads to large numbers of students needing remediation and not successfully completing postsecondary degrees? What is different about the disconnect for students entering the workplace (whether they begin working immediately out of high school or after finishing postsecondary education)? Could changes be made in how we structure the existing twelve years of schooling to increase achievement for all students at the end of their senior year?

To address these questions, the Commission supported the development of several major papers, reviewed relevant literature, conducted eight extensive focus groups with high school graduates, drew on a survey completed by one of the Commissioners, heard testimony from experts, and held two formal meetings to discuss the senior year.

The Commission intends to issue two reports. This first report presents our understanding of the problem and lays out some alternative strategies for discussion. It makes no recommendations. Before agreeing on how to proceed, the Commission wants the opportunity to explore the implications of its findings in conversations with educators, citizens, parents, and students nationwide. We want to get a sense of how the education community and the nation respond to them. Our second report, developed after we have held these public discussions, will make specific recommendations and suggestions about how to proceed. This report will be released in June 2001.

As this report makes clear, this Commission is not the first to examine the quality and structure of secondary education in the United States. Prior task forces and blue ribbon Commissions devoted to high school education have ranged from the Committee of Ten more than a century ago to the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the Secretary (of Labor's) Commission on the Essential Skills (SCANS) of recent decades. These groups have set very high standards for all who follow them.

This Commission is, however, the first to focus on the final high school year. Although the senior year cannot be considered in isolation from students' earlier and later experiences, it plays such a central role in students' transition from school to life, citizenship, work, and further learning that we are convinced concentrated attention on this critical year is well worth the effort.

We want to thank our colleagues on the Commission for their hard work. All of them, educators, parents, students, and public officials, demonstrated their commitment to our task over and over again. We look forward to working with them as we discuss these findings at regional meetings around the country in the weeks ahead.

Hon. Paul E Patton (Chairman)
Governor
Commonwealth of Kentucky

Jacquelyn M. Belcher (Vice-Chairwoman)
President
Georgia Perimeter College

Learning For A New Age And A Different World

This is a report about the possibilities for a brighter, more productive senior year for students in American high schools. But before we can prepare students for that year, and the future that lies ahead for them, we need a sense of where we are today. National life and the economy are changing much faster than our schools. Schools and communities need to respond by serving our students better. Our nation faces a deeply troubling future unless we transform the lost opportunity of the senior year into an integral part of students' preparation for life, citizenship, work, and further education.

If we go along as we have been, about half of our people, perhaps two-thirds, will flourish. Well-educated, comfortable with ambiguity, and possessed of the confidence that accompanies self-knowledge, they will be well-suited to participate in an increasingly global and multicultural world and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship. Reaping the benefits of economic growth grounded in a high-tech, service-based economy, they will enjoy the rewards of the Information Age. The other one-third to one-half of our people are more likely to flounder. Poorly educated, worried about their place in a rapidly changing world, they may look upon the complexities of an interdependent world as threatening and the demands of citizenship a burden. Lacking knowledge and skills, they will struggle to get by in dead-end, high-turnover jobs. The key difference between the two groups will be the level and quality of education available to them. The choices the nation faces about its future are that stark and that direct.

The Central Importance of Education

The people of the United States are living through changes every bit as unsettling as any encountered by previous generations of Americans. For the first time in living memory, the United States is the sole superpower on the world stage. Maintaining health amidst the physical processes of aging has become a preoccupation of the medical community, as well as of the public at large, as miracles of modern medicine and science prolong life expectancy to unprecedented levels. Economically, the nation and the world are picking the first fruits of the telecommunications and information ages. And, before the

children who are today enrolled in kindergarten enter retirement, the face of the United States will change irrevocably; demographers tell us that by the year 2040, white children will make up less than 50 percent of the school-age population. A new American and a new United States are being forged and tempered in the crucible of a new century.

The question facing the United States is how to prepare its people for changes of this magnitude. The answer is always the same: through schools, education, scholarship, and learning. American schools and colleges stand out as important public places in which the lives of individuals connect with their communities and the larger society and with cultures vastly different from their own. Or, as American philosopher Thomas Dewey put it, the central importance of education is that it instills some perspective on ourselves.

If democracy is to prosper in this new age, all Americans must possess the high levels of literacy and logic and the capacity to think critically that were once thought to be at the command of only a select few. All Americans will need to be comfortable with the scientific method, quantitative tools, and technology. All will need a sense of history (of both the United States and the world), an understanding of government and democratic values, and an appreciation for how the arts and literature explain the human condition and expand its possibilities. And, because they will be asked to decide complicated public questions (often with incomplete and conflicting information), all will need to be thoughtful observers of current events and be at ease with ambiguity. In the workplace, everyone will need a mind equipped to think.

If democracy is to prosper in this new age, all Americans must possess the high levels of literacy and logic and the capacity to think critically that were once thought to be at the command of only a select few.

As Albert Einstein once pointed out, students who are taught only skills or specialties may become “useful machines” but they will never become fully formed human beings, what Einstein called:

...harmoniously developed personalities...[able to] understand the motives of human beings, their illusions and their sufferings... These precious things are conveyed to the younger generation through personal contact with those who teach... It is this that primarily constitutes and preserves culture.

Einstein's observation remains true today, and will be true into the future as far as the eye can see: there is more to making a life than making a living. Preparing students to live full lives should be the purpose of schools, and the way to do that is to make learning exciting and compelling for its own sake—to inculcate in our young the will and the want to learn.

...it is striking that in the nation and the world that is emerging, knowledge and skills, schools and education are becoming to economic growth in the 21st century what steam, oil, mineral deposits, and manufacturing processes were to progress in previous times.

Although this Commission anticipates many more changes to resonate throughout the social and cultural fabric of the United States and the world, it can already see some of the effects in the nation's economic life. For example, it is striking that in the nation and the world that is emerging, knowledge and skills, schools and education are becoming to economic growth in the 21st century what steam, oil, mineral deposits, and manufacturing processes were to progress in previous times.

The Changing Face of American Work

In 1900, a majority of young men left school after eighth grade and went to work on the family farm. Today, only about 2 percent of the American workforce works on a farm; yet that small fraction of the workforce feeds the nation and much of the world. A similar process is at work in manufacturing. About 50 years ago, some 20 percent of the jobs in the United States were professional (requiring a college or professional degree), about 20 percent were skilled (requiring a high school diploma and some college or a degree), and 60 percent were unskilled (and could be performed by high school graduates or dropouts). Today, the proportion of professional jobs is about the same, but the proportion of skilled jobs has nearly tripled. The proportion of unskilled jobs has fallen by a factor of three.

Across the United States, local reports bear the same news. Communities expect to create more highly-skilled jobs. Yet they cannot find the people to fill them. One report from the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research projected that 385,000 jobs demanding high levels of skill would be created by 2010 and that the existing workforce probably could not do them. In Ohio's Cuyahoga County, manufacturing employment has been cut in half while service employment has almost doubled since 1972. Seattle's economy has for decades been defined by shipping, manufacturing and the needs of its largest employer, Boeing Corporation. In 1999, however, its high-technology payroll for the first time exceeded that of manufacturing.

A Knowledge-Based Economy

Until 1960, more than one-third of all the production jobs in the United States were held by high school dropouts. As late as 1973, in fact, education and employment were only loosely related. In that era, students with or without high school diplomas, particularly males, could get fairly decent jobs in the manufacturing economy. Widely available blue-collar jobs paid attractive wages and benefits (often with union support), supported families, bought vacation homes, and put the children of working men and women through college. Those jobs are gone. And those days are gone too.

Maintaining the sort of lifestyle that Midwestern autoworkers took for granted in the 1960s now requires not just one worker but frequently two. And it requires not simply a high school diploma, but probably two years of college. At root, these changes have been driven by the development of an information and knowledge-based economy. In this new, high-end economy, both high-wage service and technical workers require higher levels of education.

The Occupational and Earnings Hierarchy

According to data from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), there has been a substantial increase since 1979 in the proportion of workers with some college education or a college degree, accompanied by a marked decline in the proportion of workers with only a high school diploma or who dropped out of high school (see Figure 1). The ETS analysis also indicates that more than two-thirds of workers in the high-paying occupations that have grown since 1959 have attended college. These are people in high-technology jobs (which nearly doubled from about 4 percent of employment to about 7.5 percent), education and health care (which swelled from about 10 percent of all jobs to 15 percent), and "office jobs." White collar managerial and financial management jobs have grown from employing around 30 percent of the workforce to nearly 40 percent. All of these jobs require some college attendance; all of them pay reasonably well; and all of them have been booming.

Figure 1
Proportions of Workers by Education, 1979 and 1998

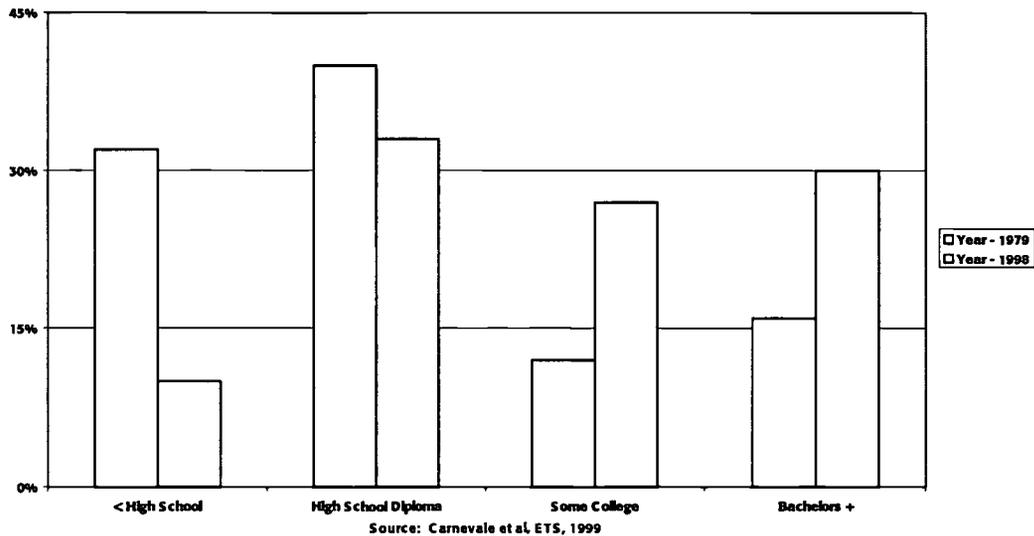


Figure 1 reads: In 1979, 32 percent of workers had less than a high school diploma.

By contrast, roughly two-thirds of the workers in declining or low-paying occupations have a high school diploma or less. Low-skilled service jobs (in stores and fast food restaurants) have remained stagnant. These jobs employed about 20 percent of the workforce in 1959 and about 21 percent in 1997. Although hiring volume in these jobs has led many to believe they represent the lion's share of the new service economy, in fact, that volume is a function of high turnover and the part-time nature of many of these jobs.

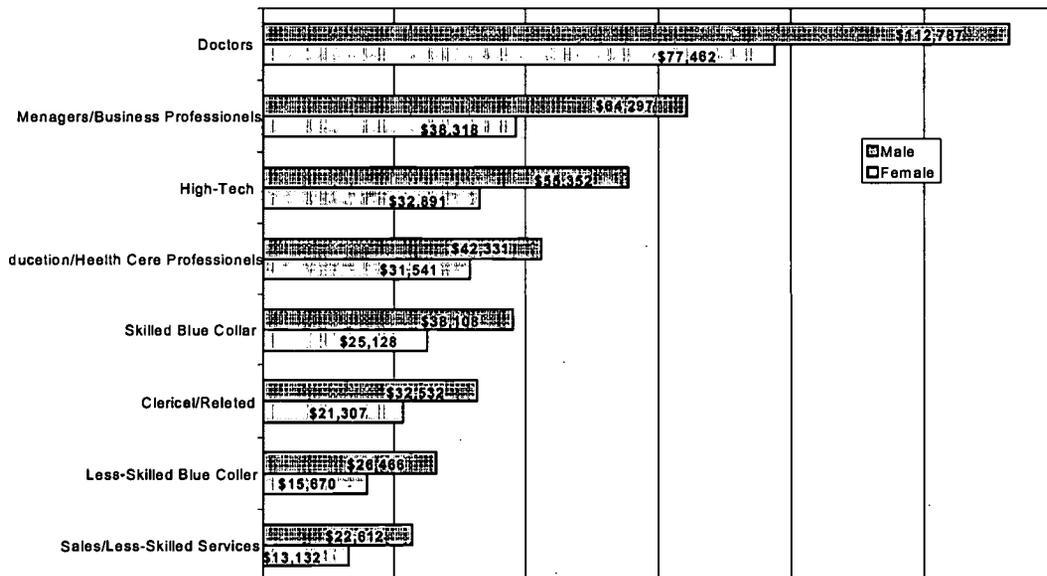
Factory and farm jobs for high school graduates and dropouts have dropped substantially in this time period. Factory jobs, many of which require high levels of skill today, have declined from about 31 percent of the employment base in 1959 to about 18 percent today. The use of technology and more highly-skilled workers have combined to permit manufacturers to produce more with fewer people—often increasing output while eliminating 40 to 60 percent of the jobs once required on the factory floor. Farm employment, only at about 4 percent a generation ago, was about 2 percent in 1997.

Technology has been the leavening that has caused this new and bigger economic cake to rise. It is not that this cake creates a lot of high tech jobs, or even requires high tech skills, as economist Anthony Carnevale, former Chairman of the President's National Commission on Employment Policy, told the Commission. It is that technology has empowered people with managerial discretion to work with suppliers, clients, and customers in complex, often world-wide networks of people and institutions. If the old economy was a layer cake of structure and hierarchy, the new one is marbled throughout with technology.

The Education Connection

Why is this significant and what does it have to do with education? The significance is that the United States is a society in which education correlates with earnings. More schooling is almost always associated with higher incomes. As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is hierarchy of occupations and earnings. The higher up the occupational food chain one advances, the more attractive the rewards. This is true for both men and women, although at every stage the economic benefits of being a man far outstrip the financial rewards of education to women. On average, for example, a highly-skilled male blue-collar worker earns about the same as a female manager or business professional.

Figure 2
1998 Average Earnings of Workers



Source: Carnevale et al., ETS, 1999

Figure 2 reads: The average male doctor earned \$112,787 in 1998 while the average female doctor earned \$77,462.

While exceptions exist, lower status on the occupational and earnings hierarchy is usually associated with lower levels of education. Higher status, by contrast, is almost always associated with higher levels of education. High school dropouts are likely to be concentrated in lower skilled services (e.g., janitors, cleaners, groundskeepers); high school graduates are probably to be found in more attractive jobs, either relatively unskilled blue-collar jobs (cashiers, truck drivers, nursing and health aids) or clerical help. As the hierarchy moves into more highly skilled positions (education and health professionals and high-technology employees), the economy begins to demand college-level skills (either

two- or four-year), a demand that intensifies in business or medicine, where graduate and professional degrees are the norm.

Earnings follow a similar pattern, with one notable exception. According to ETS data, since 1959, women at every level have continued to earn more with more education. Since about 1979, however, only men with a bachelor's degrees have continued up the earnings ladder. Men who drop out or finish high school (and even those who complete some college work) are today making less money in constant dollars than they were in 1979 (see Figure 3).

According to ETS data, since 1959, women at every level have continued to earn more with more education. Since about 1979, however, only men with a bachelor's degree have continued up the earnings ladder.

The connection to education is important for another reason as well. Our analysis has concentrated on people who are employed. People without jobs are in even more trouble. The unemployed are usually also people who don't have social supports like health care and retirement savings. While they may have a home, most are unlikely to own it. Individuals in the United States who cannot find work (or who drift in and out of periods of unemployment) are less likely to have stable families, to contribute to community life, or to participate in the nation's political processes. In the worst cases, the under-educated may create alternative cultures and economies, frequently finding themselves enmeshed with the criminal justice system. It is no coincidence that two-thirds of the nation's prisoners are functionally illiterate.

Figure 3
Increased Earning of White Males with Four-Year Degrees
(Constant 1996 Dollars)

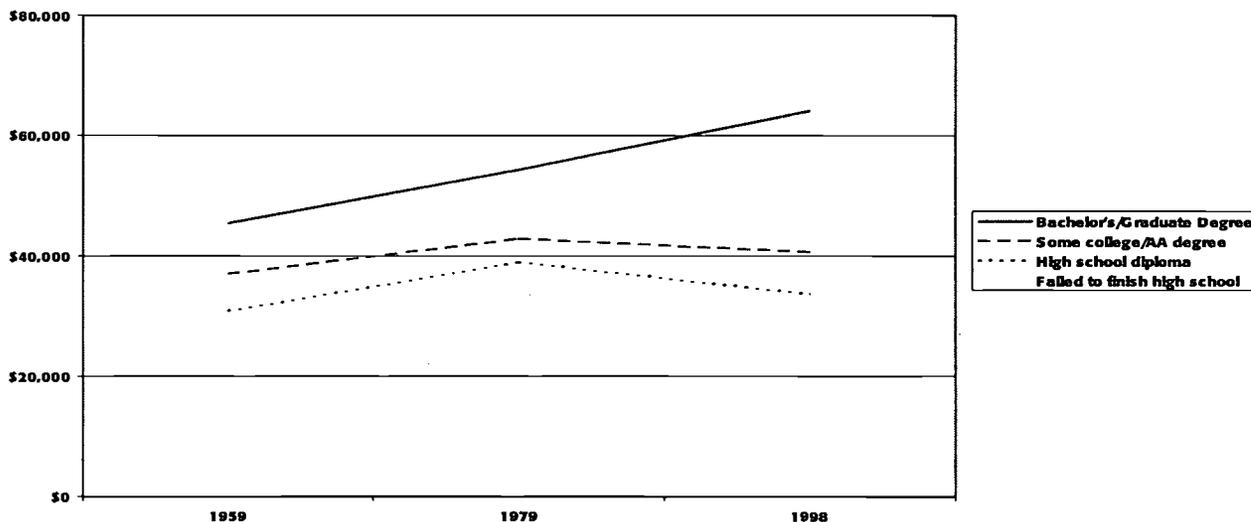


Figure 3 reads: Since 1959, the earnings of white males with four-year degrees have increased from \$45,468 to \$64,117.

The High School as a Sorting Machine

Yet in the face of these dramatic changes, American schools, families, and communities operate with an archaic view of the purposes of secondary education and with a structure that began to set and harden as early as one-hundred years ago.

By the 1950s, American secondary schools had already become well established as sorting machines, labeling teenagers as college-bound, run-of-the mill, or low achievers. Those schools sent strong signals about who was on top, who was in the middle, and who belonged at the bottom of the pile.

Today, secondary schools are still sorting machines. The signals are modestly more subtle but still effective. One of them lies in whether or not students enroll in "college prep," "vocational," or "general" programs. Another is the privilege of taking "advanced placement" courses, an option never put before very many. These are the students for whom the system holds extremely high expectations, and for whom it works reasonably well. Many other students are simply passed over. Some are cast aside as dropouts. Low-income and minority students, in particular, frequently suffer what has been called a "tyranny of low expectations." Whether exercised out of the best motives and in the most sympathetic way, or patronizingly and with the worst motives, the tyranny of low expectations can devastate students' life chances.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of ninth-graders make a decision (or have the decision made for them) that sorts them for years. They decide not to take Algebra I. This decision, made at the age of thirteen or fourteen, lowers their chances of attending college and raises their risk of forfeiting the future. Schools permit them to do this. Parents allow them to do it. The community stands by and does nothing. They clearly do not understand the implications of this mundane, lightly-made decision.

The Senior Year

Against this backdrop is a new reality where all high school graduates must plan on developing college-level skills so that they can live life fully, strengthen their communities, participate in national life, and support their families. In this reality, several facts about American high schools stand out:

- One-third to one-half of high school students are under-educated or mis-educated.
- Many students graduate ill-prepared for either work or college.
- Many students never graduate at all. Graduation rates for low-income and minority students lag behind those of middle and upper-income students and, in large cities, up to 40 percent of high school students drop out.
- The senior year is often a lost opportunity, during which many students let one-quarter of their high school learning time slip through their fingers.

...where all high school graduates must plan on developing college-level skills so that they can live life fully, strengthen their communities, participate in national life, and support their families.

The High School Muddle

The curriculum we find in the comprehensive high school today consists of several distinct strands stretching back a century or more. One strand promises to prepare adolescents for college. It was designed in 1893 by a group known as the Committee of Ten dominated by five university presidents and led by Charles W. Eliot of Harvard. Developed to define college admissions requirements at a time when about 10 percent of all adolescents enrolled in high school and perhaps one percent went on to college, this curriculum is sorely in need of attention.

Another strand promises to prepare students for “life.” Championed most eloquently by philosopher John Dewey and by a 1918 group called the Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, it aims to produce well-rounded, literate citizens, able and ready to advance the cause of democracy and education.

The third strand was developed in response to concerns about job preparation for the non-college bound. This strand was embodied in federal legislation following World War I and matured into what came to be known as vocational education, primarily attuned to preparing young people for work in a manufacturing economy. In this view, espoused by the 1991 reports of the Secretary (of Labor’s) Commission on the Essential Skills (SCANS), schools are primarily economic institutions and their mission is to prepare students for employment in a competitive world.

Aware that such conflicting signals and directions confuse educators and place students on distinct tracks, policymakers have in recent years sought more common ground. Intent on creating schools that have a more integrated sense of self, they have pushed for schools dedicated (in the words of the National Education Goals) to preparing *all students* for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment.

Educators clearly understand that their work involves the multiple goals of learning, citizenship, and work (see Table 1). A survey of more than 26,000 high school teachers in 12 Southern states in 1998, for example, demonstrates that about half of all teachers consider such goals as helping students achieve their plans, prepare for both employment and further learning, and get along with others to be “very important.” By implication, the same survey indicates that about half of all high school teachers do not find these goals to be very important. And, it reveals somewhat less support for other important purposes. Only 45.6 percent of these teachers consider developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills among students to be “very important.” And teachers express considerably less enthusiasm for the concept that helping all students prepare for college is very important (just 38%).

Table 1
High School Teachers View of “Very Important” Schooling Goals*

Help students pursue a program of high school studies that will enable them to achieve their plans.	51.1%
Help students complete a program that prepares them for both employment and further learning.	50.2%
Help students make realistic plans for what they will do after graduation.	48.9%
Help students in their social development by stressing the ability to get along with and understand all people	47.6%
Develop students’ abilities to solve problems and think critically.	45.6%
Help all high school students master the essential content taught in college preparatory language arts, mathematics, and science courses.	38.0%

* Teachers were permitted to select more than one goal.

Source: Southern Regional Education Board, 1998.

When the Commission spoke with graduates who entered the workforce right after high school about their school experiences, there emerged several disturbing insights into the “class structure” of school. Students who have not experienced much school success view life from the bottom of the social pyramid. They are convinced that the school system pays more attention to “smarter” students while passing over the rest. As one young man said:

I think the reason why I messed up in high school was because of all the teachers. I felt like they would help the advanced people, or superior people, but below that, it was kind of like, “Whatever.”

Kyle, October 2000

Another graduate complained bitterly about his treatment in high school, apparently feeling that even if he had wanted to succeed, the assistance he needed to do so was not available:

It’s just messed up... They want you to learn. They cram all this work onto you, but they won’t help you with it if you really need help. It’s just not right about the way they treat their students.

Merle, October 2000

What comes through clearly from these students is that the important students in their schools were those who stood out—either academically, on the sports field, or in music. Everyone else faded into a blur, probably not known well, if at all, by teachers, counselors, or other adults. “You were either singing, you were in the band, or you were in sports—or you were nobody,” concluded one, bitterly.

Students Ill-prepared for College or for Work

Given these attitudes, it should come as no surprise that many young people arrive on college campuses poorly prepared for the academic demands about to be made on them. But the extent to which incoming students on college campuses need remediation astounds:

- Remediation takes place in all community colleges, in four out of five public four-year universities, and in more than six out of ten private four-year institutions.
- Large numbers and proportions of students require remediation on these campuses. The proportion ranges from a low of 13 percent at private four-year colleges to a high of 41 percent at public two-year institutions.
- Well over one-quarter of all students (29 percent) require remediation in one or more subjects; 24 percent are required to take remedial mathematics courses, while 13 percent and 17 percent, respectively, are required to enroll in remedial reading and writing courses.
- The cost of remediation has been estimated to be between \$260 million and \$1 billion, annually.

Were remediation restricted to deficiencies in high school preparation for college-level foreign language or science, it might be more readily understood. However, most remediation is in the basics of reading, writing, and high school mathematics. Something has gone terribly wrong with the system preparing young people for college and with the transition from one level to the next.

Others Unprepared for Work. Meanwhile, most freshly-minted high school graduates are equally unprepared for the demands of the modern high-performance workplace. In a 1998 review of hiring practices at a major insurance company and two automobile manufacturing plants, Richard J. Murnane (Harvard University) and Frank Levy (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) concluded that major corporations exhibited a common set of hiring standards—the “new basic skills” if you will. The new basics include the ability to read at relatively high levels, do at least elementary algebra, use personal computers for straightforward tasks such as word processing, solve semi-structured problems where hypotheses must be formed and tested (i.e., to think conceptually and rigorously in ways encouraged by a broad education in the liberal arts), communicate effectively (orally and in writing), and work in groups with persons of various backgrounds.

Murnane and Levy also compared job-selection examination at the two automobile manufacturing plants with the mathematics and reading tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). They reached the sobering conclusion that nearly one-half of all 17-year olds in these plants cannot read or compute at the ninth-grade level. Clearly, these students are ill-prepared for both college and the workplace.

High School Dropouts

The challenge facing the nation's educators multiplies many times over with the knowledge that by the time 17-year-olds take these assessments, many of the student experiencing the greatest difficulty in school have already dropped out. Ninety percent of white and 94 percent of Asian 18-24 year-olds have a high school diploma, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, but only 81 percent of African Americans and 63 percent of Latinos. The Education Trust informed the Commission that in a typical year, school systems lose about one in thirty white Americans, one in twenty African Americans, and one in ten Latinos. In some cities, up to 40 percent of the students who started ninth grade are not on the graduation platform four years later.

Senior Year a Lost Opportunity

Perhaps nowhere are the deficiencies more pronounced than during the senior year of high school. Some students who have already been accepted to college routinely ignore the high school's academic demands. "Senioritis" sets in. Senior year becomes party-time rather than a time to prepare for one of their most important life transitions. Students are bored and studying becomes irrelevant.

WHAT DO GRADUATES MAKE OF THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

To find out, the commission drew on telephone focus groups conducted on its behalf by Fleishman-Hillard Research, and a Baltimore County survey of high school graduates. Here is what recent graduates had to say about their high school experience:

POOR PREPARATION FOR LIFE

Students report that what they learned in high school left them ill-equipped for the challenges of college, work, and the adult world.

"I didn't even consider it until right at the end of school... When it came down to it and I started looking at jobs, I'm like, I'm in a dead-end hole here." (*Donald*)

"Teachers and parents often bend the rules in terms of deadlines and quality of work so that a student has every opportunity to succeed. In the workplace or college, students are thrown into a world where they alone are responsible for how they work and if they succeed." (*Lauren*)

"High school does not adequately teach students anything but how to think for college. Then you go to college and, unless you are an A student, have no clue what is going on... This, in turn, screws you over for the real world." (*Jonathan*)

"So many students need to take remedial work in college because most of the skills and material are taught in a way that can easily be forgotten in a short period of time. Also, the material being taught to us in school is not related to a lot of real-life..." (*Kimberly*)

"High school is too padded so that we don't hurt ourselves – we are not all ready for the real world." (*Steph*)

Adjusting the demands of school to the demands of part-time jobs becomes the norm.

The amount of time spent at work, particularly in the senior year, is one of the notable characteristics of American students. Only in the United States is working during high school commonplace, particularly among those bound for university studies. No other advanced country expects students to work, or permits them to work long hours just to have spending money.

Analyst Laurence Steinberg believes:

American students manage their academic schedules to fit into their work and play schedules, rather than vice versa. Given the large amounts of time American teenagers devote to their after-school jobs (on average, 15 to 20 hours per week), socializing (another 20 to 25 hours), extracurricular activities (about 15 hours), and watching television (about 15 hours), it is a wonder that they have any time for studying at all.

Beyond the Classroom,
1997

One reason for the nation's achievement problems, suggests Steinberg, is that teenagers spend a disproportionate amount of their free time engaged in activities that not only fail to support learning but may actually undermine it.

The extent to which students have turned their back on the school by the senior year came through strikingly in focus groups conducted for the Commission. Many students reported "ditching" senior classes because the atmosphere encouraged them to consider the senior year a farewell tour of

WHAT DO GRADUATES MAKE OF THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

SENIOR YEAR – WASTED

Many students report that for them, the Senior year was a waste of time.

"One of the things that I see about our senior year.. we call it the slack-off year. You could do whatever you want." (Terry)

"It seems like the senior year is full of 'take up space' classes." (Megan)

"If you're a senior, then I'm sorry: senioritis. Everybody knows about it. You don't want to do any work... You don't want to bother anymore.... I did my work but I didn't do anywhere near as much work as I did my other years.... I kind of just let it go. Because I just didn't want to be there anymore." (Christina)

"By the senior year I was done with math. I was done with history. I was done with all the other classes. I was just taking a bunch of other classes that I didn't need... I'd rather be going to work and doing something else than this." (Eunice)

"Your senior year is associated with partying. You don't take any classes worthwhile, and I think it makes you lax just long enough that when you actually end up in college you are used to the senior lah-di-dah of it all." (Camille)

"They tell you these are how many credits you have to have, and that's what you need to graduate. Well, once you get what you need to graduate, then a lot of people feel what's the point in being here?" (Christine)

"It should be your most important year. It should be your most focused... but instead I think a lot of it gets looked at as, oh, my last year. I have my credits, or whatever... Then when you are in what they call the real world, things hit people like a ton of bricks." (Jim)

adolescence and school. Particularly among young graduates who did not go on to college, the attitude that senior year represents “party time” was very strong. As one young woman put it:

Your senior year is associated with partying. You don't take any classes that are worthwhile....Live it up and do whatever you want!

Camille, October 2000

Although one young woman reported working harder in her senior year than in earlier years, another spoke for more students when she said:

Senior year? You're ready to leave. You don't want to be there anymore. You've been stuck in that school for how long...? Senior year...I just didn't want to be there anymore...For my senior class...every day was a senior skip day for most of them.

Christina, October 2000

Said another:

I only had to take two classes because we only had to have 18 credits...So my senior year was a waste of time.

Elvia, October 2000

Despite long-standing complaints about the situation, the very transition to work or college discourages continuity of effort or experience. Even if students must pass a competency test to obtain a high school diploma, most of these tests cover content drawn from the ninth or tenth grade curriculum, according to the experts the Commission consulted. Most graduation tests promise students two or three bites at the assessment apple, starting perhaps in tenth grade. Since ninth- or tenth-grade material defines the standard, once students have passed the assessment, they have little incentive to continue to take school work seriously.

This dynamic is not limited to students who are struggling academically. In fact, it may be even more pervasive among the “best and the brightest.” Practically every college-bound student is aware that serious preparation for college ends at Grade 11 because admissions processes begin early in the senior year and continue right through to spring. Really serious students will start focusing on college preparation in eighth grade; most begin to pay attention in the ninth. But all of them know that, short of a miserable failure in the senior year, what they have accomplished through Grade 11 will largely determine whether or not they attend college, and if so, which college.

All of this may help explain several interesting findings outlined in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) on how American students compare to students in other countries enrolled in the final year of high school:

- Most 17-year-old students in the countries that participated in TIMSS are still studying mathematics. Fully one-third of seniors in the United States are not.
- Nearly two-thirds of final-year students in other countries that participated in TIMSS are studying science; only one-third of American students are.
- In fact, the proportion of graduating Americans taking mathematics is lower than the average of all countries participating in the assessment (and the same is true of science).
- U.S. seniors report spending fewer hours on homework than the international average for final year students.
- More than half of U.S. twelfth graders (55 percent) report working three or more hours daily at a paid job, three times the international average.

WHAT DO GRADUATES MAKE OF THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

BORING

A number of students report that, far from being challenged by their high school curriculum, they find high school to be pointless and boring.

“High School is boring. . . . People who graduate from high school generally spend half of their high school career asleep or dreaming. So there’s no wonder when high school graduates go to college or directly to work they know next to nothing.” (*Terry*)

“I think part of teaching is finding a way to bring the subject matter alive, to make it so that people are even interested in it. Because there’s some things you learn in high school, you’re like, ‘this is totally stupid.’” (*Christina*)

“Most (teachers) were concerned about doing the lessons and getting through the book instead of if you were learning at all.” (*Steve*)

SOCIALIZING TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER ACADEMICS

Many viewed High School as primarily a social venue.

“High school is not for learning. High School is for socializing and figuring out how to get away from the teachers long enough to smoke a cigarette.” (*Joe*)

“I’m just walking around the halls, and it’s like what is the point of being here. I’m not learning any more than I had last year. All it is is a social club, and I’ve never really been that social, so it was just pointless.” (*Elvia*)

School is important, say American students. More of them report liking mathematics “a lot” than the international average. And more American students than the international average say they like science “a lot.” But when push comes to shove, low-skilled, part-time jobs that earn students spending money appear to be far more important than school. Although students say they like math and science a lot, they apparently do not like them well enough to study them.

Where to Start?

Continuing to graduate students who don't have the knowledge they need in the modern world is indefensible. And, it is increasingly hard to justify permitting students to waste their senior year rather than preparing for college, careers, and adulthood.

It is time to ask whether American society considers the senior year to be an extended farewell to adolescence or an integral part of preparation for life. Answering that question requires understanding the school context in which the senior year plays such a critical part. For it is clear that the final year of high school is simply the culmination of a number of trends and pressures building at least from the middle school years on. The question becomes: In trying to fix the problems of the senior year, where do we start?

The Context for the Senior Year

The senior year cannot be “fixed” in isolation. It is highly unlikely that educators and policymakers will be able to correct all of the problems identified in this report by concentrating on the final year of thirteen years of education. Everything that precedes the senior year contributes to the situation described here. And everything that follows it in the formal education system contributes as well.

The context for the senior year is shaped by three significant factors:

- High schools generally are in trouble. The academic failures that become evident in the senior year are the sum of problems that seem to accumulate from middle school on.
- American secondary schools are afflicted with a variety of pervasive and troubling internal problems.
- The K-12 system is poorly aligned and has not established reliable lines of communication with postsecondary education and the world of work.

High Schools in Trouble

American secondary schools appear to have been largely impervious to the reform energy of recent decades. Despite the efforts of many, the organization and structure of most comprehensive high schools look very similar to those of high schools of generations ago. High schools have stood still amidst a maelstrom of educational and economic change swirling around them.

In recent years, new international analyses have indicated that the performance of American elementary school students looks relatively strong, the performance of American middle school students appears to be about average, and the performance of American high school students ranks near the bottom. At both the third- and fourth-grade levels, the United States joins Japan, Austria, and Australia among the top countries in student science achievement, according to TIMSS in 1997. In reading,

likewise, American fourth graders outperformed students from all other nations except Finland and Sweden, reported the International Assessment of Reading Literacy.

By the middle school years, American students' relative performance begins to look decidedly average. In reading, American ninth graders are closely grouped with students from 15 other nations. The United States is the only one of 12 countries that performed above the international average in mathematics at fourth grade that fell below it by eighth grade, according to TIMSS analyses. Nevertheless, even in mathematics, results for American students still place them in the international mainstream. In science, also, American students, highly ranked at fourth grade, fell to the middle of the pack by Grade 8.

By the final year of high school, however, the relative performance of American students deteriorates dramatically. In both mathematics and science, according to the TIMSS data, American 17-year-olds outperform students in only 2 of the 21 nations that participated in the final-year-of-school assessment. (See Figure 4 for the typical pattern of comparative decline, a summary of the change in the relative status of American students in mathematics performance over their school careers.)

Figure 4:
US Average Math Performance Compared to Other Nations

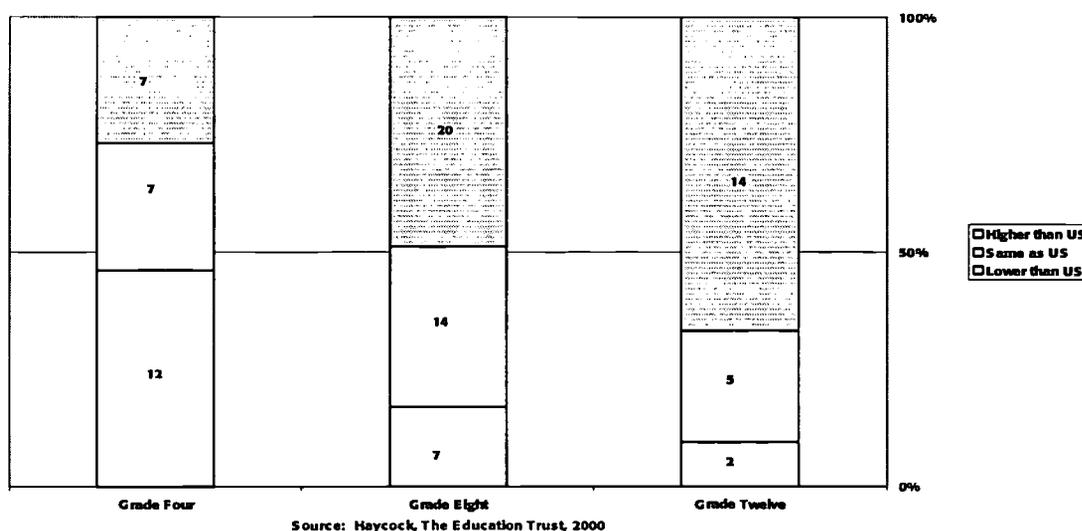


Figure 4 reads: Fourth-grade students in seven nations performed higher than U.S. fourth graders in mathematics. U.S. fourth graders did just as well as fourth graders from six other nations. Fourth graders from 12 nations performed less well than U.S. fourth graders in mathematics.

Unfortunately, international comparisons of reading and literacy for 17-year-old students are not available. This is in large measure because of the difficulty of creating comparable examinations in different languages at advanced levels of reading. (Which play or sonnet of William Shakespeare in

English is comparable in difficulty to which texts in French or Russian from Victor Hugo or Fyodor Dostoyevsky?)

There is a mistaken belief that our best students (i.e., those who complete calculus and physics in high school) outperform the best everywhere else. In fact, the performance of U.S. advanced science and mathematics students is among the lowest of the 16 countries that administered the physics and advanced mathematics assessments.

What seems apparent is that major improvements in American education depend on significant changes in secondary schools.

Pervasive Internal Problems

These changes must also take into account several pervasive internal dynamics in contemporary high schools. Since the reform movement in American schools picked up in earnest about two decades ago, the difficulty of fundamentally changing high schools has become widely apparent. High schools are complicated institutions beset with a complex interplay of expectations that can hamper reform. Among the most obvious: little institutional capacity to change, lack of qualified teachers and counselors, the “tyranny of low expectations,” widespread student tracking, inadequate assessment systems, and a sense that learning needs to be confined to 180 six-hour days each year.

Little Institutional Capacity. If society is moving into a period in which intellectual resources far outweigh physical and material ones, it is not enough to insist that schools perform at a higher level. They must also pay attention to issues of institutional capacity and student motivation. The real cure for many of these problems, of course, is to make learning for its own sake exciting and compelling. Books, as George Orwell once observed, have a difficult time competing with the attractions of the racetrack and the pub. Nevertheless, although rigorous academic work may never be as interesting as sports events to many young people (or adults), the excitement of deep and rigorous learning is something that most students have experienced at one time or another. The institutional challenge is to make that excitement a universal experience, for every student, as much of the time as possible.

American high schools need help meeting that challenge. On university campuses, curriculum grows and evolves as knowledge accumulates. Experts tell us that 75 percent or more of mathematical and scientific knowledge has been created in the last 50 years – and accompanied by even more massive change in theory. Because part of professors’ academic lives bids them to develop new knowledge and keep current with change, they are able to bring these new perspectives to their teaching. High school teachers, by contrast, have little time or opportunity to keep abreast of new knowledge or interact with

their colleagues. With the exception of tuition assistance for teachers for additional college work, schools, by and large, have very little capacity, internally or externally, to leverage change in teaching, learning, or instructional practice.

Another way to increase student motivation for learning is to encourage young people to guide their own learning. Studies tell us that students see purposeful work as one of things that is missing from their lives—in the classroom, in the community, on the job, and in the social organization of the school itself. Many high school students work a lot of hours at minimum wage jobs that teach them little. Many others engage in volunteer and paid activities that give them real learning opportunities on the student newspaper, in hospitals, in youth centers, in courtrooms, and in other community agencies.

Policy must be developed to infuse schools with the intellectual capacity to change and adapt as knowledge changes. And if many students consider much of what they are asked to do boring or meaningless, a response that insists they work harder and perform better is surely inadequate. Skilled teachers need to get at the roots of this lack of motivation.

Teaching and Counseling. A central tenet of this Commission is that none of the conditions of the high school or the senior year that we have described here will change until secondary schools develop the capacity to change teaching and learning. In the best secondary schools, teachers know their subjects, engage with material they care about, are intellectually alive, and possess the teaching tools they need to bring material alive for their students. Yet, all too often, teachers, particularly in low-income urban and rural areas, are forced to teach “out of field.” Despite today's emphasis on improving student achievement, between 18 and 28 percent of teachers in core academic areas do not have the equivalent of even a college minor in those areas. Similarly, teachers, even those with sufficient academic training, may be poorly prepared to withstand the pressures of instructing and managing large (often unruly) classes of students.

Every student in the United States deserves to be taught by competent teachers. Yet too often, as the 1990s Commission on Teaching and America's Future pointed out, policymakers blame teachers for school failure while ignoring low-quality teacher education programs that do not partner with disciplinary departments on campus. Policymakers also condone school hiring practices that place unqualified teachers in classrooms. Every year, more than 50,000 people with insufficient training enter teaching with emergency or substandard licenses.

The damage is greatest in schools with the highest minority enrollments: Students in some of those schools have less than a 50-50 chance of their science or mathematics teachers holding a license and a degree in those fields of instruction. In the poorest, frequently minority, schools, the results are educationally disastrous. Hundreds of thousands of children are taught by a parade of poorly-prepared

teachers with little subject-matter competence and inexperienced beginners and short-term "subs" who are shoved in front of classrooms in a desperate effort to cope with constant staff turnover.

Another institutional challenge for high schools is to improve student counseling and guidance. At the middle and secondary school levels, all students need strong connections with adults, preferably many of them, as they explore options for school, postsecondary education, and work. In most schools, guidance counselors are overburdened and overloaded. The latest data that the Commission was able to obtain indicate that the average guidance counselor in the United States is responsible for providing career, academic, and often, personal advice to about 500 students. It stretches credulity to believe that a single counselor can advise more than a small fraction of this caseload. The result is that many parents and students, particularly those in poor and minority communities, are unaware of the amount of knowledge and level of skill required to succeed in these postsecondary pursuits.

A related problem is that even the best counselors may not know enough about the world of work. Most of their information is about postsecondary education options. They have little up-to-date knowledge of the world of work, much less what employers are looking for in new employees.

Low Expectations. It is abundantly clear that what U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley has termed "the tyranny of low expectations" and President-elect Bush has called the "soft bigotry of low expectations" hinder many minority students and many poor students from all ethnic backgrounds. Expectations are often established on a child's first day in kindergarten and continue throughout his or her school experience. The longer students stay in school, according to several analyses, the greater the difference in expectations. Schools seem to spend as much time sorting and distinguishing between students on the basis of appearance, language, and dress as they do on focusing on how to prepare more students for literature, algebra, and a demanding college preparatory curriculum.

Some students are exposed to different and lower standards. The system just expects less of them... These are the students who receive algebra without equations, science without labs, and literature without reading.

As Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust told the Commission:

Some students are exposed to different and lower standards. The system just expects less of them. A stunning amount of time is spent on coloring assignments, instead of reading and writing, even in high school. Teachers believe these students are too poor to be challenged. These are the students who receive algebra without equations, science without labs, and literature without reading.

Teachers (and parents, administrators, and communities) often justify this by blaming the system's failures on the students. Yet, we find 50 percent or more of teachers agree that students do not have the background they need to succeed in school. It is little wonder that as many teachers think it's as important to help students think "realistically" about what they will do after graduation as think it is important to prepare them for college. No one should be surprised when "realism" turns into unskilled employment, possibly a lifetime devoted to low-wage, unstable work.

Tracking. Tracking is the first cousin of low expectations. Students in weaker tracks learn less. NAEP results indicate clearly that members of the high school class of 1994 who were in the less rigorous high school general track scored 24 points lower on the reading portion of the assessment than students in the college prep track. Students in the vocational track ran into even more trouble, scoring 38 points lower than college-preparatory students.

In poorer communities, states, and regions, the problem is severe. In the 13 states that are members of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), for example, the percent of students finishing a college-preparatory curriculum ranges from 21 to 42 percent. Many of the young people who do not complete a college-preparatory program will slide through four years of busywork.

These students will learn they have trouble earning a living. In October 2000, amidst a roaring economy with the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, students from general and vocational tracks who entered the workforce directly after high school told the Commission what had happened to them:

Well, they just don't call me back.

Lawrence, October 2000

And I passed my classes and everything, but I didn't try to take no foreign languages or anything like that...I'm in a dead-end hole here.

Donald, October 2000

You stay at the McDonald's, the Wendy's, or the part-time, meaningless jobs. I don't think high school prepares you at all to enter the work force.

Camille, October 2000

I probably should have done so many things different.

Kyle, October 2000

Assume that families, communities, and employers share an obligation to counsel young people on the demands of the working world. Assign some share of responsibility to these young people for not taking advantage of everything available to them. Taking all of that into account, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the educational system did not meet the needs of these young people when they needed help the most.

Assessment. Assessment may turn out to be the Achilles' heel of the reform movement. Virtually every suggestion for reform of American elementary and secondary schools expresses the need for a new kind of assessment system. The purpose of this system should be to establish reliably that students have mastered essential knowledge and skills, primarily to gauge their strengths and weaknesses.

Young people should not have to wait until they have a high school diploma in hand to learn that they are unqualified for college-level courses or for work.

It is also important that assessment systems eliminate their contradictory and misplaced timing. Students may easily encounter four different sets of requirements governing what they need to do to graduate from high school, be admitted to college, be permitted to enroll in credit-bearing college courses, or get a job. It turns out that successfully navigating the first hurdle (graduating) is no guarantee of getting into college, qualifying for first-year college-level courses in English or mathematics, or finding work. College placement and job selection examinations come later and, in the case of placement exams, are not given until students appear on campus.

Young people should not have to wait until they have a high school diploma in hand to learn that they are unqualified for college-level courses or for work. They should not be allowed to put themselves (and their parents) in a position where they learn toward the end of their high school career that they should have taken college-preparatory courses from the very beginning. It should not be beyond the capabilities of the educational system to create appropriate structures and guidance plans for students in cooperation with their families. Such a learning plan would be a formal but flexible outline of what the student hopes to accomplish in young adulthood and which education, work, and service experiences can best help him or her attain those goals. It should lay out the educational and skills students should pursue, signal trouble, and offer students "dry runs" of college and employment placement tests to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses. Anything short of that amounts to an educational Catch-22. Students and their parents think that students' progress is adequate, only to learn too late that it had always been borderline.

Time. The final internal issue to which the Commission points is the use of time. "Learning in America is a prisoner of time," said a well-known report issued in the mid-1990s. The report, from the National Commission on Time and Learning, argued that schools have held time constant and permitted learning to vary. It suggested mounting a variety of experiments to restructure the school day and the school year. Several of these experiments promise to make high school in general, and the senior year in particular, more appealing to students and teachers, offering the possibility of well-structured work-study programs, options for co-enrollment in college classes, and block scheduling to permit students to study

off campus with experts (while possibly freeing up teachers for collegial professional development opportunities as well).

Education advocates of various kinds are beginning to seriously question the manner in which American schools have used time. Why does everyone have to go to high school for four years? If students need more time, should it not be available? If they can master the material in less time, why not let them move on? Some of these ideas might require a period of probing, but in the long run, could add variation to a structure that currently permits hardly none.

Some of this time, several advocates argue, could be used in novel ways. “Middle College High Schools” illustrate one approach. Under this approach, secondary school students, having completed a core curriculum by age 16, would attend the final two years of high school on a college campus. Another possibility would be to provide students with a completely restructured secondary school experience. At the age of 16, students could choose from a variety of options: apply to college immediately; engage in “advanced secondary education” at a technical college; or enroll in structured internships or apprenticeship programs specifically designed to prepare students for careers.

System Out of Kilter and Lines of Communication Strained

For much of the past decade, policymakers at the Federal, state, and local levels have pursued an “alignment” strategy to make K-12 education more coherent. For the most part, they have focused on observable features of the external system—standards, assessment, curriculum, teacher preparation and the like often proceeded without reference to each other. The truth is that different parts of the same system—elementary, middle, and secondary—often do not communicate with each other about educational goals and purposes.

The SREB survey of high school teachers reveals a dynamic that is rarely discussed. A majority of high school teachers never interact with their peers from elementary and middle schools about the crucial issue of curricular alignment. Equally startling, only a minority of middle school teachers consider preparing their students for high school college-preparatory classes to be “very important.” According to SREB, only 37 percent of middle school teachers agreed that it is “very important” to prepare their middle school students for high school college preparatory courses.

What emerges from these findings is a sense that each part of the system operates in isolation from the others. These findings also confirm that “fixing” the problem of the high school senior year cannot be left to Grade 12. It seems highly likely that the foundation for poor academic performance at

the high school level (and in the senior year) is already well on its way to being established in the middle school years.

A school system in which different parts of the system rarely speak with the other is like a car with its tires out of alignment. It looks functional and can even move forward pretty impressively, but soon the strains on the wheels and ball joints begin to show. The strains on the curriculum and the joints of the nation's educational system are beginning to show as well. Unfortunately, many of our students find themselves veering off the educational road by their senior year.

Communication Between K-12 and Postsecondary Education. A related problem is that the postsecondary education and K-12 systems operate independently of each other, each with its own systems of governance and finance, its own politics, goals and objectives, and even institutional culture. What's more, the Commission could find no evidence of a coordinated and critical review and reform of high school and early college curricula.

Current governance structures impede meaningful collaboration between K-12 and higher education. In many states, leaders of the two systems rarely (if ever) meet. Many leaders on each side feel they have little in common. They receive little encouragement to collaborate and may even have incentives not to because their interests, in such matters as public funding, often conflict.

Recent indications are that higher education leaders are slowly responding to some dimensions of the K-12 reform agenda. In particular, some of them now speak openly about improving the way in which they train teachers and administrators and are beginning to think about reform as a K-16 reform at least in terms of the processes and procedures underlying admission and the transition from high school to college. Donald N. Langenberg, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland, recently wrote:

It is increasingly clear that our role must extend far beyond simply helping out embattled K-12 colleagues with "their" problems.

It is increasingly clear that our role must extend far beyond simply helping out embattled K-12 colleagues with "their" problems. We need to deal with our own, including the way we educate and train teachers and administrators of the K-12 schools, as well as the process by which high school graduates become college student and graduates.

Many higher education leaders, however, remain much less ready to seek partnerships with secondary schools. These leaders understand that comprehensive K-12 reform cannot succeed without higher education, but have been slower to accept that fact that elementary and secondary schools have a contribution to make to the reform of colleges and universities.

Clarifying the Muddle

Individually each one of these problems—the weakness of the high school, the pervasive challenges of institutional capacity, the need to professionalize teaching and counseling, low expectations, tracking, time usage, and the breakdown in communications throughout the system—could easily throw students off track. In combination, they create a formidable barrier to students' successful transition from high school into the world of college, employment, and adulthood.

The United States desperately needs to seize the lost opportunity of the senior year. The need is immediate. The goal is important. The time to act has arrived.

The Commission's Summary Findings

When the Commission was launched, it framed its work around four major questions.

Summarized, they are (Sidebar D states the issues more fully):

- To what extent is there a convergence in expectations for students going to college and those going directly into the workforce?
- What is the nature of the disconnect between K-12 and postsecondary education that leads to large numbers of students needing remediation and not successfully completing their degrees?
- What is different about the disconnect for students entering the workplace (whether they begin working immediately out of high school or after finishing postsecondary education)?
- Could changes be made in how we structure the existing twelve years of schooling to increase achievement for all students at the end of their senior year?

FOUR FRAMING QUESTIONS

- I. To what extent is there a convergence in expectations for students going to college and those going directly into the workforce? To succeed economically and as citizens, do all students need to complete high school prepared for success in postsecondary education whether they go directly into postsecondary institutions or not?
- II. What is the nature of the disconnect between K-12 and postsecondary education that leads to large numbers of students needing remediation and not successfully completing their degrees?
- III. What is different about the disconnect for students entering the workplace without the skills needed by their employers whether they begin working immediately after their senior year or after they have finished their postsecondary education programs?
- IV. Could changes be made in how we structure the existing twelve years of schooling to increase achievement for all students at the end of their senior year? For example, if students entered the 12-year span of elementary and secondary school earlier and ended their 12-year experience earlier, would this result in significant gains in learning at the end of their 12th year in school? What implications would this have for postsecondary education and the workplace?

Here we summarize our findings with regard to the first three of these questions and then lay out

several alternative strategies for responding to the challenges implicit in the fourth.

The Findings

- A high school diploma is no longer a guarantee of success in either postsecondary education or the world of work.
- The goal of the American high school needs to be reoriented from preparing some students for college and others for work. High school needs to prepare all students to live and prosper in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, one in which they can continue to grow, change, and learn throughout their lives.
- The conditions of modern life require that *all students* graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in both postsecondary education and careers.
- Many parents and students, particularly those in poor and minority communities, are unaware of the amount of knowledge and the level of skill required to succeed in postsecondary education.
- What U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley has termed “the tyranny of low expectations” and President-elect Bush has called the “soft bigotry of low expectations” hinder many minority students and many poor students from all ethnic backgrounds.
- Ideally, beginning in the middle school years, every student would have a “learning plan,” a formal but flexible outline of what the student hopes to accomplish in young adulthood and which education, work, and service experiences can best help him or her to attain those goals.
- At the middle and secondary school levels, every student needs strong connections with adults, preferably many of them, as they explore options for school, postsecondary education, and work.
- The K-12 system is poorly aligned and has not established reliable lines of communication with postsecondary education and the world of work.
- Students may easily encounter four different sets of requirements governing what they need to do to graduate from high school, be admitted to college, be permitted to enroll in credit-bearing college courses, or get a job.

- In recent years, new international analyses have indicated that the performance of American elementary school students looks relatively strong, the performance of American middle school students appears to be about average, and the performance of American high school students ranks near the bottom.
- Improving the professional lives of teachers is a prime consideration in improving the transition from high school to work and postsecondary education. High schools that treat teachers as professionals and encourage high-quality professional development are more likely to develop good teachers. Schools of education that create alliances with academic departments on campus and emphasize that all students can learn to a high level are also likely to do a better job of preparing prospective teachers.
- Attention must be given to structuring work experience in school to improve student learning. Research indicates that all students can benefit from quality, structured, “work-based learning” (including community service and internships). Good work experience can help students understand why literature and physics are important in high school; equally clearly, too many hours working in low-level service jobs can complicate learning.
- Institutions of higher education and K-12 schools collaborate insufficiently with each other to align academic content, admissions procedures, and expectations for students.
- There has been no coordinated and critical review and reform of high school and early college curricula.
- A new social compact needs to be developed around the American secondary school, a grand alliance of all those whose interests converge around the twelfth grade -- parents, students, school leaders, institutions of postsecondary education, employers (public and private) and the military – to agree on how to proceed and allocate responsibilities for improvement. Since all have had a hand in contributing to the situation, all will be required to play a part in resolving it.

Alternative Strategies

The final question the Commission asked itself was: Could changes be made in how we structure the existing twelve years of schooling to increase achievement for all students at the end of their senior year?

The Commission wants to discuss these issues with American educators, parents, students, and leaders before answering that question. What it hopes to do in the next weeks and months is hold conversations around the country on a set of alternatives that cluster into three distinct categories:

- A. ***Short Term.*** These are very straightforward strategies focused exclusively on what can be done immediately to improve the transition from high school to postsecondary education and work. They will largely address the senior year.
- B. ***Intermediate.*** The Commission hopes to discuss some more complicated strategies that respond to the argument that these challenges cannot be met in the senior year alone and school programs require earlier adjustments.
- C. ***Long Term.*** The Commission also hopes to address more complicated, long-term strategies which recognize that educators, parents, employers, and institutions of postsecondary education all have a stake in these issues and that alliances among these groups will be required.

Appendices

- A. Acknowledgments
- B. Meetings, Guests, and Speakers
- C. Papers and Other Materials Prepared for Commission
- D. Bibliography

Appendix A

Acknowledgments

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Appendix B
Meetings, Guests, and Speakers

Date(s)	Location	Guests and Speakers
September 11, 2000	Washington, D.C.	<p>Ted Sanders President Education Commission of the States</p> <p>David Zeiger Director and Producer <i>Senior Year</i></p> <p>Rochelle Nichols Solomon Senior Program Director Philadelphia Education Fund</p> <p>Anthony P. Carnevale Vice President for Public Leadership Educational Testing Service</p> <p>Honorable Richard W. Riley Secretary of Education U.S. Department of Education</p>
October 30, 2000	Washington, D.C.	<p>Kati Haycock Director The Education Trust</p> <p>Robert Steen Vice President Fleishman-Hillard Research</p>

Appendix C
Papers and Other Materials Prepared for the Commission

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