



WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

Reforming Secondary Education

LET'S START the school year positively by saying something nice about the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. It is one of the best conversation starters that public education has ever had. Despite (or maybe because of) its numerous flaws, people across the country — and not just educators — are talking as never before about schools, the quality of teaching, expectations, and accountability.

The problem is that this law, like most federal involvement in education, focuses on specific strategies. Consequently, the conversations we are having about education and about changing NCLB zero in on small pieces of the whole public education enterprise. How do we more fairly fit disabled children and those with limited ability in English into the testing system? What about schools that barely miss academic targets in only one subgroup? Is there a way for special education teachers who instruct across the curriculum to meet the high-quality teacher requirements without getting certified in each subject? Where are we going to get the capacity for gathering all the data we'll need?

Nitpicking, one might say, but unfortunately this is the level of conversation that NCLB fosters. Missing from this opportunity to engage the public in thinking and talking about the public schools are broader and deeper issues that go beyond the law. In the rush to form an agenda for changing NCLB, the conversations are ignoring fundamental questions, such as, What makes

a good school? How does a highly qualified teacher differ from others? What price do schools pay for minimizing the influence of communities? And what really engages students in learning?

Over the next few months, this column will try to interject into the conversations some attention to values and issues that, in the long run, will do a lot more to determine success under NCLB than will merely revising its technical details. The most current among the ideas that are being left behind is a better understanding about student motivation, especially among high school students.

As Marilyn Crawford and Eleanor Dougherty, the authors of *Updraft/Downdraft* (Scarecrow Press, 2003), point out, high schools offer a lot of incentives to students who already buy into the system and have a clear idea about what they want to do with their lives. Advanced courses, college counseling, better teachers, and a social support system all let these students float easily to the top. Students without the skills and the family and support network to take advantage of such incentives are on a constant "downdraft," subjected to remedial and punitive attention that keeps them down. Schools do not have an incentive system for them.

Some contend that more challenging and rigorous courses would create incentives for the vast majority of drifting students. Certainly, the most important discovery of the High Schools That Work network throughout the South and several other states is that vocational students who take a standard college-prep core curriculum do better academically than others in the vocational track. High school graduates with sounder academic backgrounds also fare better in terms of income several years after entering the work force, according to researchers at Cornell University. Many groups now consider that a college-ready curriculum in high schools should be the norm for all students.

A second tactic for engaging these stu-

dents puts more emphasis on personalized environments, such as those achieved by the small schools movement, and the building of stronger student/teacher relationships, such as those promoted by the Tripod Project.

The two approaches became running themes at a recent series of conferences and meetings on high school reform. The National High School Alliance summarized the calls for high school reform in an interesting report, *Crisis or Possibility? Conversations About the American High School*. The need for reform was taken as a given. One faction, however, framed the situation as a crisis, with an economic catastrophe looming if skills are not improved. This faction favors top-down, policy-oriented, and managerial solutions. The other response is more student-focused and sees greater hope in improving instructional practices and embracing locally developed solutions. The latter response is generally more upbeat.

While the report says that the conversations at the conferences were short on ideas for choosing between the two approaches, Pedro Noguera of New York University found that a melding rather than a choice might be the way to engage students and turn schools around. Studying 10 high schools in Boston, where reforms have been under way for some time, he found only two that were making real progress. These schools set high expectations from the start, put resources into improved teaching and learning, and had a student focus (more than 90% of the students said they could get personal support from an adult in the school and were encouraged to do so).

The Bush Administration made its choice — the crisis position — in its proposals for reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. The federal vocational education program is just about the only wedge available to federal officials who wish to transform high schools, and the Administration sought to make it into something like an extension of NCLB, with an emphasis on standards, testing, ac-

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countability, academic work, and postsecondary partnerships.

Congress modified the proposals somewhat, but everyone with a hand in developing policies for this program must have been frightened by the memories of the lopsided birdhouses they had made in woodshop during their school days. Surely they haven't seen what high-quality career education programs can accomplish. Also absent from the conversation about shaping the legislation were a sound understanding of why students like and benefit from applied learning and an understanding of students' positive response to a relevant curriculum. And we're not talking about cosmetology and car repair classes here, but about truly good career education that incorporates academics and the development

of technical skills while connecting students to postsecondary opportunities.

Few have dared to suggest that today's assessment developers ought to look at a broader range of aptitudes and consider ways for students to show what they know and can do other than through paper-and-pencil tests. In our society, "smart" can be defined in many ways, but you would never know that from the assessment systems being used almost everywhere.

And why are we so reluctant to talk about the success of extra-school programs that can grab students who drop out of traditional high schools and move them toward productive adulthood? Why are schools not learning about student engagement from YouthBuild and other community-based education programs?

The most provocative study I've seen recently came from researchers at Johns Hopkins University who were looking at high school dropout rates. Between 1993 and 2000, the number of high schools (with enrollments over 300) with the least success at promoting freshmen to seniors on time (which correlates with a high dropout rate) increased by 75%, while the total number of high schools rose by only 8%. How, one must ask, will the demand to pass even more traditional tests, which seems to be the prevailing policy strategy, motivate students to stay in school? When will our conversation turn to the qualities we want students who graduate from high school to possess? And when will achieving such goals become compelling that all students will see purpose in hard work and persistence?