

SECONDARY SCHOOLS SUMMIT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

APRIL 26, 2005

The Secondary Schools Summit was funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education

SUMMIT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

On April 26, 2005 the Delaware State Board of Education and its partners, the Department of Education, the Delaware Association of School Administrators, The Delaware Principals Academy, and the State Action for Education Leadership Project presented a Secondary Schools Summit entitled *Challenges and Opportunities*. The guiding principals of secondary school redesign for the Summit included:

- Change will be student based to reflect the needs of the student, not the system;
- Change will be sustainable and systemic;
- Change will be inclusive in that everyone has a role to play and a contribution to make;
- Change will be comprehensive to minimize unintended negative consequences; and
- Change will be non-punitive, there is no blame game.

The Summit registered more than 260 individuals including parents, middle and high school teachers and administrators as well as the district level administrators, local school board members, State Board of Education members, Department of Education officials, higher education officials, legislators, and members of the Education Consortium.

Governor Ruth Ann Minner opened the Summit and underscored the importance of the work ahead on high school re-design and higher expectations for all students so that they are well prepared for additional education and training following their high school graduation..

The day allowed for large and small group presentations as well as an afternoon forum for open discussion.

The following is a summary of the information that was provided and discussed in the course of the program.

A bibliography can be found at the end of the report that will provide additional resources to the reader.

Secondary School Redesign: Summit Keynote

Joe DiMartino, Director of Secondary School Redesign at the Education Alliance at Brown University, keynoted the Summit. He stated that in this new era of accountability: schools are being held to new standards, principals are expected to be instructional leaders, and teachers are required to reach all students.

He stressed the importance of personalizing learning as an instructional model that allows schools to take into account the individual student characteristics. The teacher is coach and advisor, the culture is collegial and interactive, and the assessment is authentic.

Too many students think school is boring; and nationally, some 30% of American 9th graders will not earn a high school diploma. The numbers are even worse for minority groups. That is unacceptable. Students need to be connected to school, need to be successful, and need to graduate with the skills that will enable them to go to college or enter the work force in a decent paying position.

Mr. DiMartino continued to offer a formula to move toward success. It included graduation requirements that contained four years of English, three years of math, three years of science and three years of social studies as a minimum for all students.

He further noted the work that has been done in this area through *Breaking Ranks II: strategies for leading high school reform*, a publication from the National Association of School Administrators. It talks about the need for a more student-centered high school that has collaborative leadership and professional learning communities; personalization of the school environment; and curriculum, instruction and assessment as the cornerstones of reform.

The National High School Alliance has also issued its Call to Action aimed at ensuring all high school-aged students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation. They have six core principals that include:

- Personalized learning environments
- Academic engagement of all students
- Empowered educators
- Accountable leaders
- Engaged community and youth
- Integrated systems of high standards, curriculum instruction, assessments and supports.

Following the keynote address, registrants had a series of topic strands to choose from for the remainder of the morning. Summaries of those strands are included.

Strand 1: Increasing Rigor

Increasing Rigor in Delaware's high schools addresses the need for challenging and rich learning experiences for all students. The first panel, consisting of Dr. Robert Smith, Superintendent of the Milford School District; Dr. Joseph Crossen, Assistant Superintendent of the POLYTECH School District; and Dr. Joseph Wise, Superintendent of the Christina School District, discussed the methods and implications of fostering rigor in every classroom from a district-level perspective.

Dr. Robert Smith, Superintendent of the Milford School District, began the discussion with the definition of school rigor. He explored the differences between increased rigor and more difficult work. He states, "If we simply make more work for students and that work more difficult, we will never truly achieve academic rigor or significant improvement in student achievement." Smith advocated active engagement with the students and invites them to become partners in the education process.

Reduced class sizes and practices such as looping (remaining with the same group of students for multiple years) have had success at both the elementary and middle school levels. Also, programs like Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Math have continuously challenged students at their individual performance levels and helped them build their capacity and knowledge. At the high school level, the Milford School District has imposed greater graduation requirements than the state and developed a system that maintains rigor throughout the senior year to better prepare students for the increased demands of college or work. Milford is also beginning to use technology to formulate an instructional student database that should allow for more individualization of instruction.

The second group session on increasing rigor focused on serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds and helped explain some exemplary models of pre-Advanced Placement (AP) and AP programs throughout the state.

Dr. James H. VanSciver, Director of Secondary Education in the Seaford School District, began the session with a presentation relating student schedules to closing the achievement gap. The Seaford School District has had great success implementing a plan that encourages rigor and prepares more students for Advanced Placement courses. The plan involves a combination of meetings with both students and their parents, an expansion in the number of advanced and summer classes offered, and a comprehensive monitoring system to track student achievement across grades and levels. More students are taking advantage of the Algebra I and II courses offered over the summer, and enrollment in AP classes has risen since the program's inception.

Similarly, representatives from the Christina School District presented their Advanced Program Incentive Program. Christina's program presents three goals: to design and implement professional development programs, to provide awareness programs for minority and low income community parents, and to establish support groups and tutoring for minority and low-income students. Through this program, the Christina School District is supporting the statewide effort to reduce the achievement gap by maintaining high expectations and equitable opportunity of access for pre-AP and AP classes.

The session ended with a discussion of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. Like the previous methods, AVID advocates placing students in a rigorous curriculum and giving them enough support to achieve. Support takes the form of both positive-peer reinforcement and guidance from teachers. Currently, Kirk Middle School in the Christina School District is using this method and is reporting favorable results.

Strand 2: Distributed Leadership

The Distributed Leadership strand was designed to emphasize that not all education reform needs to take place at the student level. Great strides towards higher quality of teaching and learning in school can be made at the administrative level.

Donna Hall, Principal of Sussex Central High School in the Indian River School District (IRSD), shared what progress has been made on “The Leadership Institute”, the district’s two-year plan to distribute leadership at the middle and high school levels. The IRSD Leadership Institute was designed to provide district administrators with strategies for recognizing, understanding, and creating professional and learning communities in schools. Through professional development and “research-based” classroom practices, the program seeks to increase growth and student achievement. These activities generally consist of 30 additional development hours in the form of a research project, serving on an education-related committee, or participating in a study group. This format has given the teachers and administrators the opportunity to hone their leadership skills, which translate into increased learning for students.

Todd Harvey, Principal from Glasgow High School in the Christina School District, and Amy Levitz, Principal from Gauger-Cobbs Middle School in the Christina School District, led their discussion on distributed leadership with a presentation that emphasized the role effective leadership plays in secondary schools. The central message of the discussion was that distributed leadership centers on blurred lines between followers and leaders. Having teachers organize and implement initiatives, lead professional development, and collaborate on activities increases student achievement and teacher quality. Paths that both Glasgow and Gauger Cobbs have taken to achieve these goals include Differentiated Instruction (DI), Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), and Positive Behavior Support (PBS).

Harvey and Levitz complemented their presentation with activities to engage the participants on the topic. These activities included reactions to quotes about leadership from all areas of study to a reading and discussion of the University of Delaware’s Policy Brief on leadership.

In conclusion, both presenters emphasized that distributed leadership is a framework, not an initiative, which may already appear in various forms within the schools, and that the need to review other practices and structures within the school will emerge as the distributed leadership model expands.

Strand 3: Personalizing Learning

Personalizing learning is an instructional model that allows schools to take into account the individual student characteristics and needs to build flexible instructional practices in the learning environment. The teacher is coach and advisor, the culture is collegial and interactive, and the assessment is authentic. This session engaged groups to explore the ways to personalize high schools to meet the needs of students and teachers.

Speakers Tom Evans and Joe DiMartino guided groups at both morning sessions through an introduction to personalized learning, its impact, and effects on the overall school community. First, Evans defined personalization as,

“A learning process in which schools help students assess their own talents and aspirations, plan a pathway toward their own purposes, work cooperatively with others on challenging tasks, maintain a record of their exploitations, and demonstrate their learning against clear standards in a wide variety of media, all with close support of adult mentors and guides”

After a discussion of the core ideas presented by this definition, the discussion moved to implementation of personalized learning into the school environment. An emphasis needs to be placed on structures that allow teachers to know the strengths, weaknesses, interests, abilities, and level of progress of each student. Students should not be allowed to remain anonymous for four years. Simultaneously, an effort needs to be taken to reach out to parents, families, and community members to get involved in the students' education.

The sessions concluded with two activities involving a personal needs chart and exercises from the “Breaking Ranks II” report. First, all participants broke into small groups and discussed the relationship between personal needs and school practices. Concepts like recognition, acceptance, and trust were used to link student desires to school practices. Lastly, just before breaking, the participants were asked to rank typical school activities according to their importance and level of practice in their schools. The activities included, “High schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished” and “Every high school student will have a Personal Adult Advocate to help him or her personalize the education experience”. These activities identified aspects of personalized learning that are already in place in high schools, formed a checklist for schools to work from in the future, and estimated the difference each would make in improving the learning environment.

Strand 4: Creating Learning Communities

Learning Communities reflect the education leaders' search beyond the usual structures of the conventional classroom for open-ended, community-based, collaborative programs that support lifelong learning.

Susan Bunting, from Indian River School District, and Debbie Zych, from NCC Vo-Tech School District, conducted their discussion about learning communities from an administrator's standpoint. The presentation began by identifying instructional strategies that affect student achievement. "Identifying similarities and differences" and "summarizing and note taking" are reported to have the largest impact followed closely by "reinforcing effort and providing recognition" and "cooperative learning".

The focus then moved to an educational leadership strategy called walkthroughs, in which the school administrator makes brief and unscheduled appearances in a few classrooms throughout the day. These visits help foster a school culture of collaborative learning and dialogue, and give teachers an opportunity to receive welcome feedback and discussion. According to the authors, walkthroughs benefit administrators, teachers, and students in purveying a sense of community throughout the school.

- Administrators become more familiar with the school's curriculum and teachers' instructional practices
- A team atmosphere develops as teachers and administrators examine instruction and student motivations and achievement together
- Students see that both administrators and teachers value instruction and learning.

In conducting these walkthroughs, it is important that administrators observe the entire classroom and observe both the teacher and the student. The observer should seek to answer the following questions from each visit:

- 1) Is there a clear focus?
- 2) What is the level of student engagement?
- 3) What is the environment of the classroom and does it facilitate pleasant and innovative learning?
- 4) How well do the students understand the assignment?

Walkthroughs help the classroom environment and complement other forms of professional development. If done effectively and consistently, walkthroughs can provide structure and dialogue between a school's learning communities and a basis for achieving the school's greater goals.

Strand 5: Connecting with Parents and Communities

On issues surrounding high school reform, there is a persistent disconnect between schools, parents, and communities that must be repaired if students are to successfully navigate the world of learning and thus be empowered to be productive and prosperous. In the first morning session, parent leaders led a discussion about their perspective on high school reform and their role as advocates, counselors, and teachers.

The parent discussion panel began with a presentation on challenges that exist in Delaware's secondary schools and opportunities parents have to meet them. The panel

identified three areas of improvement, including Home/School Communication, Parent Liaisons, and Educational Guidance that could help bridge the communication gap between parents and schools.

Communication between home and school should be done in a consistent and timely manner that addresses both general information as well as individual student progress. To achieve this goal, parents and the school community need to take conscious action in a number of areas in order to effectively respond to academic or behavioral issues. First, consistent communication patterns need to be established between grades and instructional teams. These will help parents maintain their relationship with the school and broaden their opportunities to participate. Second, both parents and schools must use existing technology to track student performance. Email, voicemail, and a homework hotline are all quick ways of communicating that can increase parent interest and involvement. Finally, both parents and students should be included in transitional plans between middle and high school. Expectations of the organizational skills, school concepts, and work requirements allow parents to provide more guidance for their children away from the school setting.

A way of ensuring parent and school communication is to establish parent liaisons whose sole purpose is to provide access between parents and the school community. By having an up-to-date parent resource center and allowing for flexible schedules to meet the needs of the school community, parent liaisons can raise the level of involvement beyond the parent and teachers associations and parent/teacher conferences.

Within the school community, individual educational guidance has proven to be effective as a means of creating student opportunity. For this role, the traditional guidance counselor position should be restored to provide strength/weakness assessment, course selection assistance, and college-prep/planning guidance.

To provide a teachers' perspective on the topic, faculty members from Glasgow High School and Sussex Central High School led a panel discussion on effective changes that would improve student learning. In their presentation, they identified three core areas for improvement: stronger curriculum, school climate change, and parental engagement.

In order for schools to prepare students for work and college, the teachers need tools to push students toward success. To help this process, the schools need to implement a strong and effective curriculum that involves state standards, additional indicators, student readiness, and individual learning styles. Steps to achieve these goals include providing students with greater access to stronger courses, incorporating a differentiated curriculum, and promoting vertical integration between grades.

On a broader scale, Delaware's secondary schools need to consider a school climate change. Currently, high schools are not providing the resources and services that both students and teachers need to be successful. The school climate should foster the opportunity for students to succeed, regardless of outside pressures, and schools need to be places where students feel safe and have ownership of their education. To improve this situation, schools should provide more student-focused services and effective teacher training and retention techniques.

Finally, the teacher panel emphasized the importance of parental engagement. Teachers and parents need to work together to ensure student success in all aspects of their education. As the parent panel mentioned, there is an information gap between

school and home that prevents parent and teacher collaboration. This situation is especially prevalent in secondary school where students and parents may not communicate at all about school situations. The school can ease these occurrences by improving information dissemination and creating more opportunities for parent and teacher communication. Opening these pathways will expand student participation at home and in school.

Strand 6: Leaving No Child Behind

The final strand recognized that high expectations, high standards, and effective accountability are critical components to closing achievement gaps and moving all students forward. Low-skill jobs are disappearing and jobs requiring greater technical skill are emerging. All students need to be prepared to take their place in the world and have decent, well-paying jobs that allow them to support themselves as well as a family.

To present Delaware's current economic picture and future job outlooks, Ed Simon, Director of Occupational and Labor Market Information, from the Delaware Department of Labor, discussed Delaware labor market trends.

After a brief presentation on unemployment and job growth in Delaware, Simon led a discussion on the barriers to employment. These concerns include a lack of training, child care cost issues, and most importantly, a lack of education. When hiring for the decent, well-paying jobs that all students strive for, employers are looking for skills that high schools should address in their curricula. Abilities such as written and verbal communication, leadership, effective problem solving, and teamwork are all necessary components of success in most jobs.

Simon went on to analyze the labor market by education level, growth, and wages. He emphasized that most jobs do not require a college degree, but that the jobs with the most potential for growth often entail more training. Simon's presentation also included a detailed account of job openings and their respective education and pay levels. He concluded with a ten-year projection of Delaware's job market. By 2012, over 160,000 jobs from a combined growth and replacement will be necessary to maintain the economy. In order to supply these openings with trained and qualified personnel, education standards and skills will need to be increased.

Arthur Boswell, Executive Director of Neighborhood House, Inc focused on the work of the Wilmington Neighborhood Schools Committee as a vehicle for leaving no child behind. The Committee recommendations reflect the factors that create quality learning for all children. Those factors include high quality teachers, small schools, smaller classes, closer relationships between adults and children, and early literacy.

The importance of paying attention to all children and their learning was underscored. With proper supports and expectations, students who have struggled in the past can begin to be successful.

Given today's economy and the need for a more skilled workforce, schools need to do a better job of preparing their students to enter the work force able to pursue high wage jobs or enter college.

Taking Stock: An Analysis of Delaware's High School Standards and Course Requirements

Luncheon Speaker

Michael Cohen, President of Achieve, Inc., reviewed the state of graduation requirements across the country. He also reviewed the surveys that Achieve, Inc. has conducted on skill-level needs at both the college and work place settings through its American Diploma Project. The entry-level requirement, in terms of skills and knowledge, was essentially the same for either direction. Few unskilled jobs will be available in the future yet we are still graduating far too many students who do not have the skill levels to enter the post-secondary education setting or to qualify for entry to a high wage job. In addition, the state of minority students is particularly bleak. High schools must change. They must do a better job of preparing all of its students to perform at high levels.

Mr. Cohen presented the recent report compiled for Delaware on its high school standards and graduation requirements.

He noted that Delaware's standards, state-of-the-art when adopted, are due for revisions to take them to the next level of detail. Delaware standards need to ensure rigor, be more specific, and extend beyond grade ten.

Delaware's graduation requirements do not translate well to the entrance requirements for its public community college or its two public universities. In almost all cases, Delaware high school graduates should have four years of rigorous math including Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II and data analysis and statistics. The four years of English should specifically include literature, writing, reasoning, logic, and communication skills.

Achieve has published its findings, *Taking Stock: An Analysis of Delaware's High School Standards and Course Requirements*. The report is available on the Department of Education web site <http://www.doe.k12.de.us> or through Achieve, Inc at its website, <http://www.achieve.org>.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the day was to provoke thought and discussion, not to provide definitive answers. The Summit provided a setting for the beginning of the journey for secondary school redesign.

It is the intent of the Summit partners to continue the conversation and the planning over the next several years in a variety of formats. Professional development through the Principals Academy, the Delaware Association of School Administrators and the Department of Education will be designed to support secondary school redesign; Department of Education and State Board of Education policies will support secondary school needs; and the State Action for Education Leadership Project will provide support to administrators to initiate secondary school reform through distributed leadership and succession planning strategies. In addition, the P-20 Council will be heavily involved with activities to provide better transitions between middle school and high school and high school to college or work.

Our work will be revisited and reevaluated as we continue to move forward to provide the best possible educational opportunities for our students and better prepare them for the world that they will enter as productive adults.

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