

**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND
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The Role of Nonprofit Organizations in State and Local High School Reform Efforts

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In 2001, Carnegie Corporation of New York, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched Schools for a New Society (SNS), a five-year, \$60 million urban high school reform effort, matched with local funds, aimed at promoting systemic and district-wide reform in seven cities. The reform effort encourages partnership and collaboration with the community, including school officials and teachers, parents and students, and “community stakeholders” such as teacher organizations, business leaders, elected officials, and higher education leaders. Initially, the Corporation invited twenty school districts to submit high school reform plans. After in-depth reviews by leading educators and scholars the school districts chosen to participate in Schools for a New Society were: Boston, Chattanooga, Houston, Providence, Sacramento, San Diego, and Worcester.

Key to this effort is promoting reform of school district policies and practices that help to shape teaching and learning in high schools. Through its grantmaking, the Corporation provides resources to community organizations with a substantial history of working to improve student achievement and workforce preparedness, enabling these organizations to lead and manage a school and district renewal process. Critical components of the initiative include:

- Holding all schools accountable for helping every student to meet high standards and to be prepared for participation in higher education, in the workforce, and in confronting the challenges and opportunities of 21st century society.
- Raising graduation requirements to ensure that all students take rigorous courses and succeed in them so they are prepared to accomplish their goals in postsecondary education, the workforce and life.
- Transforming large, impersonal high schools into small learning communities or small schools to personalize the student learning experience.

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- Improving teaching by providing intensive professional development and giving teachers time to work as teams to help all students succeed.

One of the most valuable findings in the very first year of the initiative was the fact that almost half of the students entering 9th grade were reading several years below grade level (deLeon, 2002). It was clear at that point that no matter what kinds of outcomes we wanted to achieve from this initiative—higher graduation rates, more students going on to college, more students taking Advanced Placement courses—it was going to be difficult to reach our goals because of students’ low literacy levels.

When we looked at data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—also known as our Nation’s Report Card—it became clear to us that adolescent literacy was a national problem. It turns out that 70% of entering ninth graders in the United States can be considered as reading below grade level (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). This is a shocking percentage of young people who are not understanding or engaging with text and represents a substantial proportion of students who are dropping out of our high schools.

For most kids in their senior year of high school June can be an extremely exciting time of new opportunities. For some it is even the start of a new life. Young people are excited about graduation and their high school proms, but approximately 30% of them may never experience this wonderful rite of passage. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, 3,000 youngsters disappear from their classrooms every day, and at the end of this school year alone, over 540,000 students will have dropped out of high school, many because of poor literacy skills.¹ Of those who do manage to get a diploma, half will be unprepared for the demands of higher education and the workforce. According to national data, 53% of freshman in college are receiving remediation to improve their reading and writing. In a related finding, employers were recently asked whether high schools were giving young people appropriate job related skills; 41% responded that they were “somewhat” to “very dissatisfied” with how young people “read and understood complicated material.” (Hart Research, 2005).

What is expected in academic achievement for middle and high school students has substantially increased, yet it is clear that the way in which students are taught to read,

¹ According to a report by Educational Testing Service, *Help Wanted...College Required*, students in the lowest quartile of reading achievement are three and a half times more likely to dropout of school than students in the next highest quartile of achievement. They are twenty times more likely to dropout than top-performing students (Carnevale, 2001).

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comprehend and write about subject matter has not kept pace with the demands of schooling. The severity of the literacy problem reported by NAEP data are underscored when compared to international studies. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (Programme for International Student Assessment), American 15-year-olds barely attain the standards of international literacy for youngsters their age.

In view of the dire data on adolescent literacy, Carnegie Corporation of New York established the Advancing Literacy Program in 2003, an initiative that focuses intensively on improving the literacy of students in grades 4-12. Through a thorough analysis of the research, we concluded that educators have pretty well figured out how to teach young children to LEARN TO READ, which has resulted in a strong K-3 policy for early reading. On the other end of the spectrum, there has been a focus on adult literacy programs.

In between the two extremes of learning to read as children or developing reading skills as adults is the forgotten middle. That chasm includes the estimated eight million students in grades 4-12 who need support for READING TO LEARN (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2002). Indeed, the roots of high school success depend heavily on how we develop the pipeline of students who are entering secondary schools. With that understanding, Carnegie Corporation's high school reform efforts include an emphasis on initiatives that help schools to "ramp up" the 9th grader who is significantly behind in reading, but we also know that one way of significantly advancing high school reform is to ensure students are reading better by the time they get into the ninth grade.

The process by which students learn to read and then transition to read to learn is complex. While there is some evidence from our Nation's Report Card that students are making some gains in early elementary school (K-3), students continue to have a more difficult time with comprehension of text. When they enter fourth grade many students hit a wall, experiencing what some reading experts call the "the fourth grade slump," which eventually turns into an "eighth grade cliff," falling further behind right before high school. This happens for a number of reasons that have little to do with students' abilities to decode text such as: a) students are confronted with more complex expository text than they encountered in the past; b) teachers prefer teaching their subject matter and will argue that they are not reading teachers; c) we stop teaching reading in the third grade and there is little instruction on reading comprehension.

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It is important to note that these problems are exacerbated by poverty and are particularly prevalent in poorer urban districts. However, the comprehension problem is also common in middle class suburbs, exurbs and rural areas throughout our country. For example, fourth grade and eighth grade proficiency rates on the 2003 NAEP reading assessment only ranged from 10 to 43 percent across states and the overall average proficiency rate for eighth graders was only 32 percent (McCombs, 2005). Clearly, there are struggling readers at every level of our socioeconomic strata.

In the course of our work on the issue of improving the literacy levels of students in grades 4 through 12, the Corporation has been able to draw on the recommendations of preeminent experts on literacy for older children from around the nation. Although everyone recognizes that we have much more to learn, we are convinced that we know enough already to begin making a real difference to the students currently in our later elementary grades, our middle schools, and our high schools. A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, published last year by the Alliance for Excellent Education, lays out fifteen elements of effective adolescent literacy programs that practitioners can—and are—using to improve student achievement in schools across the nation.

There has been some federal response to the crisis. The \$25 million appropriated by Congress for the Striving Readers Initiative for this fiscal year was an important first step in helping to make effective literacy intervention programs available to the children who are most in need of them. Teachers, parents and reading researchers eagerly await the results of these demonstration projects.

Carnegie Corporation's president Vartan Gregorian is fond of reminding his colleagues that foundations can be the best incubators of ideas, and they can work with nonprofit organizations to put effective educational models in place that can not only demonstrate success but also provide a road map for how it can be replicated.

Given the Corporation's long history of advancing educational opportunities, we are committed to revitalizing America's high schools by focusing on district reform. We believe that in order to prepare all of today's high school students to succeed in our complex, knowledge-based economy, we can't provide them with one or two good high schools but must have in place an entire system of excellent schools. I would like to conclude with a quote from Dr. Gregorian: "... we will do what it takes to insure that the spectacle of

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American students shutting down and dropping out of high school at the appalling rate of 3,000 a day quickly becomes one of those shameful memories in American history that we are all eager to forget. What does America's magnificent legacy of free, universal public elementary and secondary education mean if we fail to provide every American child with the reading and writing skills they need to succeed in higher education and the workplace and to become productive citizens—and, dare I say it, happiness?"

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