

**The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year:  
Finding a Better Way**

**Summary of Findings**

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR YEAR

January 2001

# The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way

## Summary of Findings

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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

**I**n 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 questions: 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 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?

This, a summary of findings from the Commission's first report, presents the Commission's understanding of the problem and lays out some alternative topics for discussion. It makes no recommendations. The Commission will issue its recommendations after it has had the opportunity to explore the implications of its findings in conversations with educators, citizens, parents, and students nationwide.

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**A high school diploma, earned by taking non-college-preparatory classes, will leave too many graduates trapped in low-paying jobs with unpromising futures.**

**K**nowledge and skills, schools and education are becoming to economic growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century what steam, oil, mineral deposits, and manufacturing processes were to progress in previous times. Schools are not keeping up. 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.

American high schools need to be reoriented to take these changes into account. In the early 1900s, 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 work 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). 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 days – and those jobs – are gone.

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. These conditions of modern life demand that all students graduate from a rigorous academic program that equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in *both* postsecondary education and careers.

The Commission also made a point of noting that education serves purposes other than making a living. For democracy to flourish in this new age, all Americans must possess high levels of literacy and logic and the capacity to think critically. This means that everyone will need to be comfortable with the scientific method, quantitative tools, and technology. Similarly, everyone 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 Americans will need to be thoughtful observers of current events and be at ease with ambiguity. In short, 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.

**2** The tyranny of low expectations devastates life chances for many students.

**W**hat U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley has termed "the tyranny of low expectations" and President 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 system just expects less of some students...those who receive algebra without equations, science without labs, and literature without reading. The effects are measurable. NAEP results indicate 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.

Listening to the tales of graduates who entered the workforce right after high school, the Commission was struck by 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. What comes through clearly from these students is that the important students in their schools were those who were able to demonstrate their prowess either academically, on the sports field, or in music. Everyone else faded into a blur, with no teacher, counselor, or other adult knowing him or her well. The signals are subtle but 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 many. While the system holds extremely high expectations for some students, and for these students it works reasonably well, it simply passes over others.

High schools can no longer act as sorting machines, preparing some students for postsecondary education and some for the world of work. With the demands of today's economy, parents and students, as well as educators, need to be made aware of the amount of knowledge and the level of skill required to succeed in both postsecondary education and careers.

**3** Each part of the education system seems to operate in isolation from every other part – elementary, middle, and secondary school rarely communicate with one another about educational goals and purposes, and K-12 rarely collaborates with either postsecondary education or with the world of work.

**K**-16 schools collaborate insufficiently with each other to align curriculum and academic content, admissions procedures, and expectations for students. The same is true for K-12 schools and the world of work. One consequence is that students are ill prepared for either college or work. Remediation in postsecondary schools has become common, usually in the basics of reading, writing, and high school mathematics. 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. Students who require remediation range from a low of 13 percent at private four-year colleges to a high of 41 percent at public two-year institutions. Meanwhile, freshly minted high school graduates are equally unprepared for the literacy,

computation, and problem-solving demands of the modern high-performance workplace.

The alignment strategy that Federal, state, and local policymakers have pursued to make K-12 education more coherent has typically tried to pull together features of different external systems--standards, assessment, curriculum, teacher preparation and the like. The truth is, however, that different parts of the same system--elementary schools, middle schools, and secondary schools--rarely communicate with each other about educational goals and purposes. The majority of high school teachers in a recent survey by the Southern Regional Educational Board reported that they 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 thought that getting their students ready for high school college-preparatory classes was "very important."

The same condition extends to relationships between K-12 and postsecondary systems. These systems operate independently of each other, each with its own governance and finance mechanisms, its own politics, goals and objectives, and even institutional culture. In many states, leaders of the two systems rarely, if ever, meet and may even have incentives not to do so because their interests in such matters as public funding, often conflict. While recent indications are that some higher education leaders are beginning to now speak openly about improving the way in which they train teachers and administrators and are beginning to think about reform systematically, others still remain less ready to seek partnerships with secondary schools.

The separation of K-12 from higher education worked when only 20 percent of students went on to postsecondary education. But today, with over 70 percent of high school graduates going on to postsecondary ed, alignment – particularly of curriculum – becomes more critical. The Commission looked for any coordinated reviews of high school and early college curricula, but could find none that had been conducted. We need to connect all levels of education to smooth students' passage into a fulfilling adulthood.

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**The high school senior year too often represents a lost opportunity to link students with either postsecondary studies or work.**

**F**or a variety of reasons, student motivation drops in the senior year. Short of a miserable failure in the senior year, practically every college-bound student knows that what they have accomplished through Grade 11 will largely determine whether or not they attend college, and if so, which college. As a result, serious preparation for college ends at Grade 11. The focus switches to college admissions processes. Some students who have already been accepted to college routinely ignore the high school's academic standards. The same is true for students entering the world of work directly after high school graduation. Bored and unable to see what work in the classroom has to do with work after high school, they view academics as pointless and spend their time daydreaming about the freedom they will have after graduation and the purchasing power of their new jobs. Those who have struggled academically recognize that senior year is too late to turn things around.

The amount of time students spend at work, particularly in the senior year, is a uniquely American phenomenon. More than half of US twelfth graders (55 percent) report working three or more hours daily at a paid job, three times the international average. No other advanced country expects students to work, or permits them to work long hours at low-skill jobs just to earn spending money.

Examining how American high schools use time is another issue that merits attention. 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?

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.

At the heart of student motivation is, of course, the need to make learning for its own sake exciting and compelling. The excitement of deep and rigorous learning is something that most students have experienced at one time or another. The challenge is to make that

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**Students receive little guidance about opportunities and requirements for continued study or work.**

excitement a universal experience for every high school senior as much of the time as possible.

**T**he lack of guidance and counseling is a recurring theme in the relationship between high schools and students and their families. The problem becomes manifest early on. Every year, hundreds of thousands of ninth graders make a decision (or have the decision made for them) that sorts them for years. They choose not to take Algebra I. This decision, made at the age of thirteen and fourteen, lowers their chances of attending college. 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.

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. Even so, the problem will not be solved simply by adding more counselors. Teachers, parents, and students also need to know more about the amount and kinds of knowledge required in postsecondary education. All must understand what the curriculum looks like from grade 10 to grade 14.

Middle and secondary school students need strong connections with adults, preferably many of them, to guide them as they explore options for school, postsecondary education, and work. Beginning in the middle school years, students and adults might develop a "learning plan," a formal but flexible outline of what the student hopes to accomplish in young adulthood. Written into this plan would be education, work, and service experiences that can best help the student to attain those goals. Also included would be ways to signal trouble ahead and timelines for taking "dry runs" of college and employment placement tests so that students could identify their strengths and weaknesses and work to strengthen the latter before taking the tests for real.

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**Assessment systems are often ill-timed.**

**V**irtually 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. The timing of assessments, however, is often contradictory and ill timed. For example, 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 experts the Commission consulted. This, then, defines the standard. Once students have passed their final assessment, they have little incentive to continue to take schoolwork seriously. As noted earlier, this situation becomes even more acute after the eleventh grade.

Moreover, it turns out that successfully navigating the first hurdle, high school graduation, is no guarantee of getting into college, qualifying for first-year college-level courses in English or mathematics, or finding 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. College placement and job selection examinations come later even and, in the case of placement examinations, 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 discover that they are unqualified for college-level courses or for work.

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**Improving the professional lives of teachers is a prime consideration in improving the transition from high school to work and postsecondary education.**

**A** central tenet of this Commission is that none of the conditions of the high school or the senior year that have been described here will change until secondary schools develop the capacity to change teaching and learning. In truly outstanding secondary schools, teachers know their subjects, engage with material they care about, are intellectually energized, and possess the teaching tools they need to bring material alive. Schools that treat teachers as professionals and encourage high-quality professional development are more likely to develop good teachers.

Every student in the United States deserves to be taught by competent teachers. Yet, a number of factors mitigate against this. One is that, despite today's emphasis on improving student achievement, many teachers, particularly in low-income urban and rural areas, teach "out of field." There is evidence that between 18 and 28 percent of teachers in core academic areas do not have the equivalent of even a college minor in those areas. Another is that unlike university professors, high school teachers have little time or opportunity to keep abreast of new knowledge or to interact with their colleagues. With the exception of tuition assistance for teachers for additional college work, schools, by and large, have little capacity, internally or externally, to leverage change in teaching, learning, or instructional practice.

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.

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## In Conclusion

**I**ndividually each one of these problems--shifting economies, low expectations, poor alignment, lack of motivation, inadequate counseling, ill-timed assessments, and insufficient professional development for teachers--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.