



## The big ideas behind the Big Ideas

*How Portland Public Schools derived possible models for a high school system that better prepares all students for successful futures*

May 12, 2009 - Rather than pursuing campus-by-campus reforms, Portland Public Schools is engaged in a large-scale effort to examine and improve its high school system as a whole. Principals, teachers, students, families and the community have been tapped to help develop a system that better prepares all of our students for success. Yet the effort is grounded in research to understand the state of our current system, an analysis of what works best for students and the experiences of school districts nationwide.

To understand our current system's strengths and flaws, district staff used research — including analysis of our enrollment, graduation rates and other data; national comparisons; and a survey of students and of [parents, staff and other stakeholders](#). From this, we decided on four objectives for our high school work, based on key shortcomings identified in our current system:

- Increase student engagement so that more students are inspired and involved in their education
- Increase graduation rates/decrease dropout rates.
- Close the achievement gap so that race and ethnicity no longer predict success.
- Ensure that all schools are in high demand by students and staff.

Research and feedback from our stakeholders then helped us identify the essential elements required to reach these objectives in our high schools. Ultimately, this input helped us frame three potential approaches for distributing our high school programs, courses and school types across the district and assigning or enrolling students in these programs. **These approaches are our three “Big Ideas for Better High Schools.”**

### **Equity and a system out of alignment**

Equity — especially in access to high-quality essential courses at all high schools — has become a central organizing principle of our system design work.

Parents and community members have clearly told us they expect equity in their public school system — in resources, in opportunities and in outcomes for students.

Right now in PPS high schools, students' experiences and options vary based on where they live.

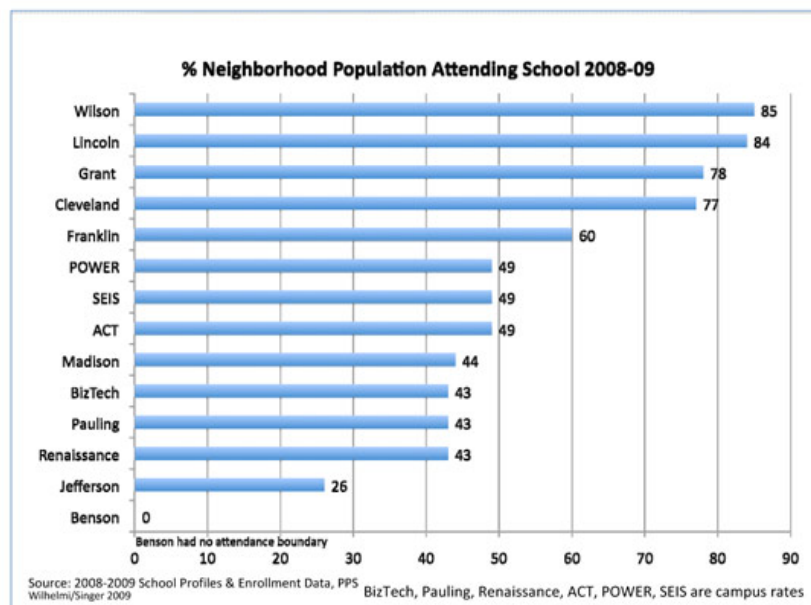
Our Portland high schools (with the exception of Benson Polytechnic) have traditionally been solidly neighborhood based: Schools have attendance boundaries, and students living in those boundaries default to enroll in their “neighborhood” school.

With neighborhood attendance boundaries, high school demographics have largely reflected residential patterns in the city, including Portland’s stratifications by wealth and race. There were (and are) high schools serving areas with fewer or more students of color, and from wealthier or lower-income homes.

The desegregation efforts in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to break down those differences, particularly by attracting more white students into predominantly African-American schools (with Jefferson’s dance program or early childhood education centers, for example) and by voluntarily busing African-American students into predominantly white areas. These efforts were supported by additional funding — which since has ended — and did not create a lasting or widespread integration.

At the same time Portland Public Schools’ high school enrollment has dropped drastically. As a result, the district has closed high schools — Adams, Jackson, Washington and Monroe — but not in the last 25 years, although enrollment has continued to drop, by another 2,000 in the last 13 years.

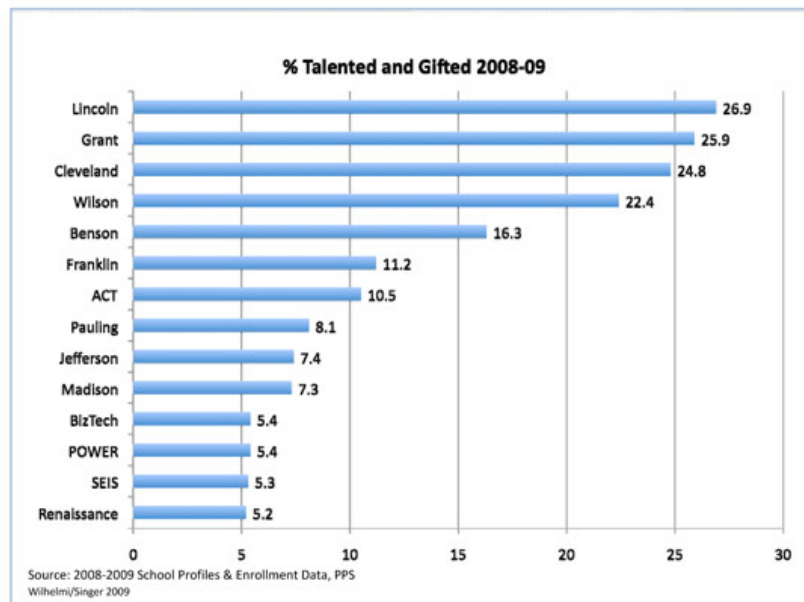
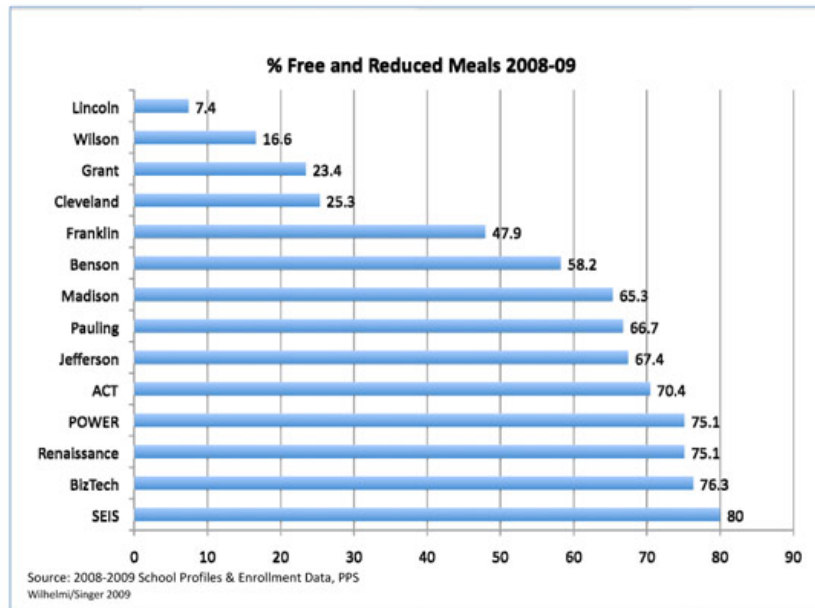
Under Portland Public Schools’ transfer system, some schools responded to their lower neighborhood enrollment by accepting more transfers. While each neighborhood PPS school has between 1,300 and 1,500 students living in its attendance area, the liberal transfer system allowed shifts that have created schools of vastly different sizes.

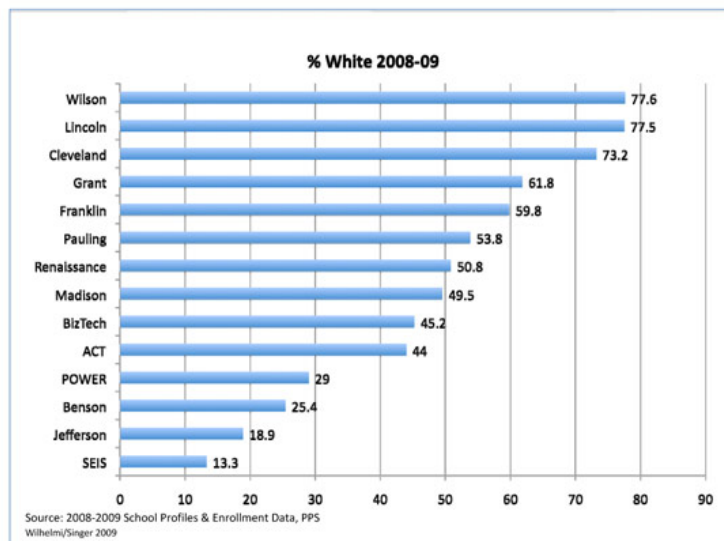
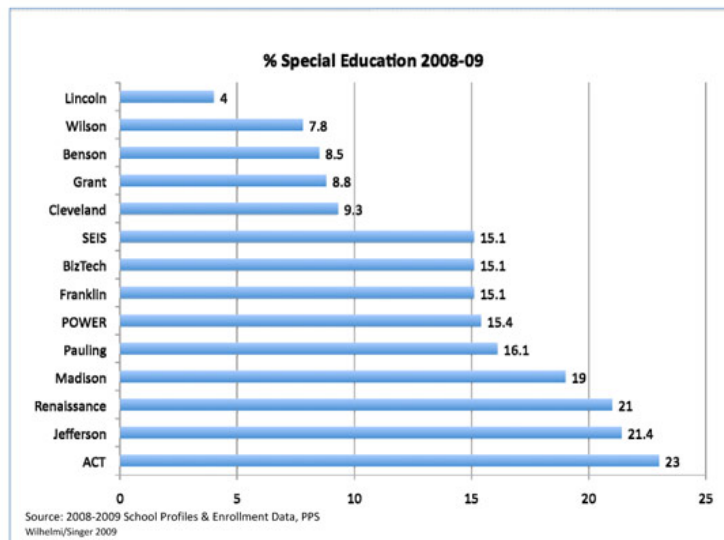
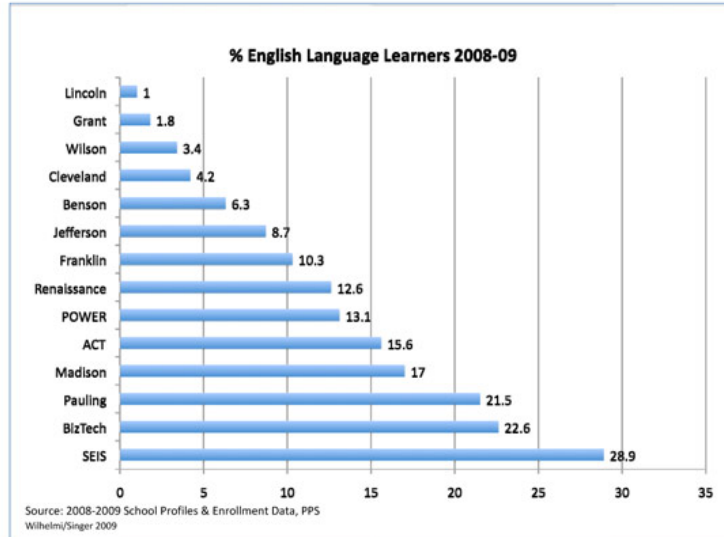


Our data analysis shows us that between 1996 and 2008, enrollment at Wilson, Cleveland, Grant and Lincoln increased by 665 students. Meanwhile, the six other high schools — Marshall, Madison, Roosevelt, Franklin, Jefferson and Benson — decreased in enrollment by 2,724 students.

Portland Public Schools distributes staffing based on the number of students enrolled (although there are additional federal and PPS dollars for schools with low-income students). Thus, as schools shrank, they lost teaching positions. With fewer teachers, they were less able to offer a range of courses beyond the basics required for graduation. Many families and students have said the limited course offerings make the schools less appealing — hastening the decline.

The effects of the neighborhood assignment combined with the school choice policy further skewed the demographics at many schools. Research has shown that those who take advantage of the option to transfer are disproportionately well-off and higher achieving students.





Rather than add to the diversity of the neighborhood system by mixing up the students, the transfer system in most cases creates greater concentrations of poverty, less racial diversity and greater proportions of students with academic needs.

The schools that have lost enrollment therefore must devote more of their limited staff and resources to courses designed to support those students, rather than accelerated classes.

## **Equity and the student experience**

The impact on students at the less sought after high schools is clear: Talented students and struggling students alike are not well served in these schools by the lack of enrollment-driven resources and programs and the concentration of higher needs students.

As a Roosevelt High School student said at one of the recent community meetings on high school redesign: “It’s not fair that the rich people get better things at their school.”

Yet a question arises: What about the students at the popular, better-resourced high schools? How do they and their families benefit from a more equitable high school system?

The answer is that the health of Portland’s overall high school system affects the quality of education at every school, even at the “better” schools.

Too many of our graduates, even from our best-performing schools, do not complete college. Only 51.2 percent of Lincoln High School graduates complete college after six years. For Wilson graduates, it’s 43.5 percent; Grant is 33 percent, and Cleveland is 26.4 percent. We also need to engage students more effectively and improve attendance. More than a third (38 percent) of our high school students are chronically absent, a group that includes students from every high school in the district.

Moreover, district resources have become heavily focused on shoring up our struggling high schools, straining resources for the rest.

In addition, while we have little control over funding from the state, we must do all we can to capture and serve the young people in our district for the benefit of all. Our high school work aims for stabilization in part by keeping more students engaged and in school with program improvements that serve low and high-achieving students alike.

Finally, students in the more sought after schools tend to be white and more affluent, impeding the understanding and sharing of class and cultural differences and the life skills that come from real-world diversity as well as potentially isolating non-majority students to the detriment of their educations.

## **Essential elements and the research behind them**

Our need for stability and equity led us to identify essential elements that would help us reach our four objectives of increasing student engagement and graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all schools are in high demand by students and staff.

The following elements became the building blocks for our three high school system models.

**Every student has access to high quality, essential courses, programs and school structures. Every student has access to art, music, an upper-level world language, calculus or statistics.**

### **Research**

It is well established that high-quality essential courses, such as those found in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and other college credit-bearing programs at the high school level, successfully challenge and prepare accelerated students for college and a promising future. But for at-risk students, the assumption has become that they can't handle such challenging courses or expectations. In many school districts, they are instead tracked into grade-level or remedial courses.

Yet research suggests that all students can potentially benefit from challenging coursework. [A recent report](#) by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices reports that high quality college-credit bearing programs are a “particularly effective way to increase the postsecondary success of underrepresented students and those who may not appear bound for college.”

For example, Florida's college-credit bearing programs have increased enrollment in state's colleges by 7.7 percent for all students while improving postsecondary persistence and completion. <sup>i</sup>

In choosing the types of courses to emphasize, PPS included art, music and upper level world language in response to the value students and parents consistently placed in these offerings and because such courses engage students and contribute to a well-rounded education. Research shows that students who are engaged are less likely to drop out. <sup>ii</sup>

**Every school effectively helps students explore careers: every school has at least one high quality “career pathways” program that gives all students more practical information on career options and hands-on opportunities to develop work and life skills, including community service.**

### **Research**

Research suggests that providing in-depth programs especially those connected to careers may decrease the dropout rate. For example, a 2004 study conducted by Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization, found that “career academies significantly cut dropout rates and increase attendance rates, credits earned toward graduation, and preparation for postsecondary education.” The career academy group’s dropout rate was reduced by one-third from the rate for the non-academy group.<sup>iii</sup>

Focus groups of dropouts age 16-24 conducted for a recent national report, “[The Silent Epidemic](#),” found that the most common reason students said they dropped out of high school is because classes were not interesting. Sixty-nine percent of those surveyed said they did not feel motivated. Students consistently noted how they felt that school did not seem relevant. As one student said, “They make you take classes in school that you’re never going to use in life<sup>iv</sup>”

PPS research indicated that 54 percent of students surveyed said that having more hands-on learning opportunities was a high or urgent priority. It’s important to note that it was not just students in danger of dropping out who said they wanted more hands-on experiences. It was students across the spectrum of academics and aspirations. Indeed, real-world experiences, from service learning to career exploration programs and courses give college bound students an edge on their applications or can be a clincher for landing competitive internships.

**Every school better reflects the diversity of the broader community: Students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds and educational status (ELL, special education, talented and gifted) are more equitably integrated across all campuses, unless the mission of a program is designed to provide targeted supports to a particular student population.**

## **Research**

In 1966, a groundbreaking report informally known as the “Coleman Report” documented that after the socioeconomic status of a child’s family, the biggest predictor of academic achievement is the socioeconomic status of the school he or she attends (even more so than per pupil spending). This research suggested that socioeconomically disadvantaged students profited in classrooms more balanced across socioeconomic status.<sup>v</sup>

In the last 40 years, Coleman’s findings have been confirmed again and again. Most recently, a 2006 University of Wisconsin [study](#) found that when more than half the students were low-income, only 1.1 percent of schools consistently performed at a “high” level. By contrast, 24.2 percent of schools that were majority middle-class met the high level standard.<sup>vi</sup>

Other researchers have shown that students entering schools with a high number of at-risk students (defined by poverty, low test scores and low grades) are more likely to drop out.<sup>vii</sup>

At PPS, we know that at risk kids are concentrated in certain schools. In 2008, for example, 70 percent of Marshall’s incoming ninth-grade students were identified as “academic priority students” because they had low or very low scores on two of the three subjects on the eighth- grade state assessment. In contrast, only 24 percent of Lincoln’s students were so identified.

Recognizing this research, about 40 school districts across the country are taking steps to better balance their schools. In [Wake County \(Raleigh\), N.C.](#), for example, the school board adopted a policy in 2000 that at no school should more than 40 percent of the students be eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Today in Wake County, low-income and minority students are outperforming similar students in other large North Carolina districts that have not addressed concentrations of poverty. <sup>viii</sup>

Unlike the old compulsory-busing programs of the 1970s, most districts pursuing socioeconomic integration today use public school choice and incentives (like magnet schools) to create integrated schooling.

**Every school focuses on really knowing our students: school policy and facilities encourage strong relationships between faculty and students, especially for those students at risk of dropping out.**

## **Research**

Researchers have found that, other things being equal, the large size of many high schools is correlated with lower levels of student achievement, engagement and graduation rates, particularly among poor and minority students. <sup>ix</sup>

However, the small school reform movement that followed this research in such cities as Portland, Boston, New York, San Diego and Chicago, has shown mixed results. The Gates Foundation’s 2009 Annual Letter — after the foundation invested millions in converting large, comprehensive high schools into small schools — said those small schools did not improve students’ achievement in any significant way. Those that did were almost all charter schools that had significantly longer school days. The foundation noted that it had less success trying to change an existing school than helping to create a new school.

Jefferson, Madison, Marshall and Roosevelt, the Portland high schools that moved toward a small school model, whether into fully autonomous small schools (at Marshall and Roosevelt next year) or trying to create smaller “academies” within a school — were all attempts to convert a large, existing school with poor performance into more successful small schools. However, those campuses are still posting some of the higher dropout and absentee rates in the district, and many still are showing some of the lowest scores on Oregon assessment tests. In addition, community members say students do not have access to essential courses and electives.

However, the growth data tells a different story: Most of the schools are making significant progress is getting more students to benchmark, and individual students with low scores in eighth grade are making great gains by the 10th-grade assessments, even if they still might not meet benchmark. Our small schools have demonstrated the highest academic growth rates in both reading and math for four straight years. The Spanish-English International School on the Roosevelt Campus doubled its graduation rate between 2004 and 2008, and last year bested the district average. This school also has claimed the highest academic growth rate on state assessments in reading for three straight years.

Interestingly, the Metropolitan Learning Center (MLC), a PPS alternative school, has only 35 students per grade in high school, and led the district in graduation and attendance rates. MLC is doing a great deal to engage students, and the teachers and principals say its small size is a large part of its success. Also of note: The school does not have an attendance boundary, and all students attending are their by choice, after completing an application process.

The take-away about small schools is the personal attention they afford students — the environment that allows teachers to connect to students and work in teams to expand what they can offer them and to hold each other accountable. And creating that more personal experience for students is not only about small schools. Other methods, such as career academies organized around a curricular theme and ninth-grade academies that build community between smaller groups of ninth-graders and a handful of core teachers and staff have shown promise.

The available research suggests that ninth-grade academies can improve the transition to high school and students' progress through high school *when bolstered by strong and well-defined instructional and curricular supports*, including catch up courses tailored to address students' academic weaknesses.<sup>x</sup>

**System offers different options for different student needs, from strong schools close to home to specialized ones with a particular focus, such as environmental studies and the arts.**

## **Research**

Much of the research showing the [power of student choice](#) in their education comes from studies of dropouts. Such studies show that students leave school for a variety of reasons and are best able to reconnect to school if they have a variety of programs to choose from, just as students who remain in school also have a wide variety of needs and interests and can benefit from choice.<sup>xi</sup>

Flexible scheduling and year-round learning are common features of successful dropout recovery schools and programs. Many programs include a half-day of hands-on field work, such as skill-building through home construction, computer repair, or conservation work. Others are half-day academic programs, with a choice of early, midday, or evening classes.<sup>xii</sup>

The use of computer-assisted technology, from learning software to the Internet, and the opportunity to take courses at nearby colleges are all part of the flexibility that gives students different routes to thrive.<sup>xiii</sup>

Portland's diverse array of alternative schools continues to draw praise nationally and in 2007-08 were able to re-engage 2,009 students who at one time had dropped out of school. Of those students, PPS community-based alternatives were able to retain 78.2 percent over the course of the year, helping lower the district's dropout rate.

## **Every school has connections to the community to boost student achievement.**

### **Research**

Service to others and to the community is a key element of many dropout recovery efforts. Successful dropout reconnection depends on more than just success in academic education and employment training, augmented by a broad range of sensitively targeted and accessible support services. Preparing troubled young people for roles as responsible, engaged citizens is an integral, nearly universal characteristic of the successful recovery efforts we studied.<sup>xiv</sup>

Research also suggests that students need support services, such as those related to health and physical well being, to thrive in school. Above all, young people need — and want — caring adults who counsel, mentor and guide them.

Many students also benefit from opportunities for employment in their communities, related where possible to their educational program and interests.<sup>xv</sup>

## **The Big Ideas: Three approaches incorporating essential elements**

After identifying the essential elements of high schools that help meet our objectives, we constructed ultimately three models, or big ideas, that could deliver these elements to our students.

### **Big Idea #1: Special focus campuses**

Ninth- and 10th-graders would attend small academies on their neighborhood campus that are personal, nurturing and familiar. Students would move as a group, sharing three classes with the same teachers. In 11th and 12th grades, students would choose from at least three career/interest pathways on their neighborhood campus.

This Big Idea is based on approaches in other districts, including:

- Forest Grove High School pairs first-year students with faculty advisers whom they keep all four years and with an older student who serves as a mentor. All students are assigned to teams their first two years, building close ties with

teachers and a smaller group of students. As juniors and seniors, they select from six career pathways to prepare them for school and/or work after graduation.

This approach incorporates findings that:

- More personal relationships correlate with success.
- An academy approach in early high school years has shown promise.
- Courses relevant to the larger world of work and life help engage students and keep them from dropping out.
- Choice in coursework allows students to tailor school to their interests, also increasing engagement.

To address equity and diversity:

- Students would be guaranteed enrollment in their neighborhood campus and the strength of the programs system wide would help promote and maintain the commitment to neighborhood schools, helping them more closely reflect the diversity of the neighborhood.
- Boundary changes could be considered to further increase diversity.

## **Big Idea #2: Neighborhood high schools and flagship magnets**

Students would attend their neighborhood school while having access to a wide range of courses and activities to deepen engagement. This collection of larger neighborhood high schools would also include a few flagship magnet schools open to all students in the school district. All high schools would offer a wide cross-section of similar courses and programs, but the magnets would appeal to students looking for a deeper focus in a specialty area.

This Big Idea is based on approaches in other districts, including:

- Beaverton School District offers large comprehensive neighborhood schools with strong community identities. Magnet schools then offer students a chance to go deep into a particular area, such as arts and communications, health and science, and science and technology.

This approach incorporates findings that:

- All students can benefit from access to high quality classes and larger neighborhood schools allow for a bigger staff and more class offerings.
- Really knowing students is about personal relationships at school yet is also about a sense of belonging in and identification with a neighborhood.
- Sports and extracurricular activities increase engagement and are a foundational piece of neighborhood schools, building student, family and community investment and involvement in the school.
- Students want and benefit from the choice that magnets offer and being able to tailor their education to their needs and interests.
- Magnet schools linked to career options help school stay relevant for many students.

To address equity and diversity:

- Students would be guaranteed enrollment in their neighborhood campus and the strength of the programs system wide would help promote and maintain the commitment to neighborhood schools, helping them more closely reflect the diversity of the neighborhood.
- Boundary changes could be considered to further increase diversity.
- Magnet schools would invite diversity by drawing from neighborhoods district wide. (Key challenge would be keeping the magnets from draining the neighborhood schools.)

### **Big Idea #3: Regional flex network of schools**

Each region would have different types of schools, including a large school with a variety of core and elective courses, small schools with specific themes, and an alternative program. Schedules would be structured so students would have the option of traveling within their home region to maximize learning opportunities and take the courses they want and need. Online courses and credit by proficiency options are just some of the more flexible choices.

This Big Idea is based on approaches in other districts including:

- The Center for Advanced Learning, a public charter school serving students in Centennial, Reynolds, Gresham-Barlow and Corbett school districts. CAL students are dual-enrolled, alternating their days between their home high school and CAL. At CAL, students choose between 3 career areas: Medical/Health Sciences, Information Technology and Engineering/Advanced Manufacturing.

This approach incorporates findings that:

- Students' ability to make choices and tailor their education to their needs and interests improves engagement and decreases the desire to drop out.
- Flexibility increases the ability to meet more students' needs.
- Small schools — each region would have several — can offer a more personal approach that helps students feel connected and thrive.

To address the need for equity and diversity:

- Students would be required to choose an option within their region.
- Region boundaries could be drawn to attract a mix of students.

### **End notes**

---

<sup>i</sup> Melinda Merchur Karp et al. *The Postsecondary Achievement of Participants in Dual Enrollment: An Analysis of Student Outcomes in Two States* (St Paul, Minn.: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> C. Hammond, J. Smink and S. Drew. *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report*. (Communities in Schools and National Dropout Prevention Center. Alexandria, VA, May 2007) C. Inc. See pg 6, 12-14, 27-28, 38.

---

.[http://www.dropoutprevention.org/resource/major\\_reports/communities\\_in\\_schools/Dropout%20Risk%20Factors%20and%20Exemplary%20Programs%20FINAL%205-16-07.pdf](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/resource/major_reports/communities_in_schools/Dropout%20Risk%20Factors%20and%20Exemplary%20Programs%20FINAL%205-16-07.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> James Kemple, *Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Initial Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Employment* (New York, U.S., Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2001).

<sup>iv</sup> John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio and Karen Burke Morison. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. (Washington D.C., U.S, Civic Enterprises, March 2006).

<sup>v</sup> James S Coleman. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, (Washington DC, US, US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966)

<sup>vi</sup> Harris, Douglas. *High Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage, and the Logic of NCLB*. (Florida State University. May 2007).

<sup>vii</sup> P. Goldschmidt J. Wang, *When can schools affect dropout behavior? A longitudinal multilevel analysis*. (American Educational Research Journal, 36(4)p715-738 1999)

<sup>viii</sup> Bazelon, Emily. *The Next Kind of Integration*. (New York Times. July 20, 2008).

<sup>ix</sup> Lee, V. and Smith, J. *High school size: which works best and for whom?* (Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 19 (3): 205-227, 1997)

<sup>x</sup> Horwitz, Amanda and Jason Snipes. *Supporting Successful Transitions to High School*. (The Council of the Great City Schools Research Brief, Spring 2008.)

<sup>xi</sup> Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin. *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. (American Youth Policy Forum. 2006).

<sup>xii</sup> Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin. *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. (American Youth Policy Forum. 2006).

<sup>xiii</sup> Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin. *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. (American Youth Policy Forum. 2006).

<sup>xiv</sup> Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin. *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. (American Youth Policy Forum. 2006).

<sup>xv</sup> Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin. *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. American Youth Policy Forum. 2006.