

Alternative High Schools Initiative

Alternative high schools have provided nurturing places for students who, for a variety of reasons or life circumstances, were not successful in large, impersonal secondary schools. Districts of more than 10,000 students with a large comprehensive high school often have an alternative high school. At worst, they have been a dumping ground for troubled youth and ineffective teachers. However, a growing number of quality alternative schools are small by design and provide an academically rigorous, socially and emotionally supportive personalized education that successfully prepares students for college, work and citizenship. They embody the same design characteristics as effective small schools—they combine rigor, relevance and relationship. These schools are creating a variety of structures and environments that facilitate progress and offer options for vulnerable youth (expelled, suspended, court-involved, foster care, welfare recipients, homeless and/or under performing academically) who need flexibility in systems and support.

In the environment where one test can determine your future, many students leave school prematurely and discouraged. Many overcrowded urban high schools have few incentives to address the variety of issues needed to retain and engage vulnerable students. Starting new and improving existing alternative high schools that serve young people who have left school by choice or through exclusionary policies, supports our dual strategy of transforming large schools while increasing the supply of effective small schools. The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) provides an opportunity to ensure that all youth have access to a high quality education and have their basic needs addressed. These schools will increase attendance, graduation and college attendance rates and reduce incidents of violence and dropout rates.

A Targeted Solution to a Big Problem

Based on the research of “disconnected youth” supported by the Hewlett Foundation and an associated white paper commissioned by the Kellogg foundation the findings detail the scope, depth, and complexity of the problem of young people that have fallen through the cracks, or are at risk of falling through the cracks, of a one-size-fits-few educational system.

In keeping with mission and strategy, we propose an initiative that will support the improvement of over 50 existing schools and the creation of over 50 new alternative schools through the work of six intermediary organizations. This work builds on the two highly successful models that we are currently replicating, the Met in Providence and New Country Schools in Minnesota. Together these intermediaries will provide over 150 high quality educational alternatives for young people that desperately need them.

The Alternative High School Initiative will target alternative high schools that focus solely on issuing diplomas. This includes replicating high quality schools, expanding and improving current schools, and converting current programs that offer GED’s into high school diploma-granting schools. AHSI will focus on schools designed to enroll and graduate vulnerable students and not on transitional schools that are designed to prepare students to re-enter their home schools or are merely warehousing students. AHSI will focus on schools in which students

attend by choice. Many alternative schools are designed to focus on discipline and aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend these schools but are sent for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met.

The AHSI strategy is designed to increase the number of alternative schools and improve instruction and programming of alternative high schools while aligning policy and systems issues. The cost of alternative high schools can vary from traditional high schools. Educationally, alternative schools are not necessarily more expensive but may appear to be because comprehensive support services are provided. This requires tapping into a variety of funding streams including child welfare, juvenile justice, housing, labor, and health care. The first round of grants is focused primarily on school models that have navigated the above-mentioned funding streams effectively. YouthBuild USA, Commonwealth Corporation/Diploma Plus, See Forever/Maya Angelou Charter School, National Association of Street Schools and Georgia’s Communities in Schools have submitted proposals for funding to replicate and improve their models (Appendix 1). The Black Alliance for Educational Options has submitted a proposal to replicated The Met and Minnesota New Country School models.

Portfolio Thinking

We encourage states and districts to provide a variety of options for young people—multiple pathways to college and work. Following is a summary of four options that should be available to all students and families:

Design/Focus	Example	Description/Consideration
Academic: discipline-based content	Frederick Douglas, Bard Early College HS, International Baccalaureate, the AP/honors track	Traditional higher education liberal arts structure. Effective for motivated students comfortable with conceptual learning, adequate enrichment activities and families with social capital.
Applied: student-as-worker	High Tech High, Tacoma Arts, Zoo School, career academies	Designed around an occupation, pedagogy, or theme that integrates student work, adult world connections. Students learn by doing and show what they know.
Alternative: student centered learning and support	Good Shepherd, YouthBuild, Diploma Plus, Maya Angelou, The Met, New Country Schools	Uses real life experiences, intensive relationships with adults, and individualized student plans to help students build and master skills. For students that have experienced substantial obstacles and early onset of adult responsibilities (substance abuse, foster care, incarceration, violent environment, parenting, need to earn income, homelessness, etc.). Programs have intentional strategies to motivate students, to develop work skills, to empower youth leadership, and provide intensive support services.
Affiliated: common worldview	Catholic Schools, other religious schools	A common worldview integrates instruction and the school community.

Academic schools without strong support systems are selective—either on the front end with an entrance exam or the back end when kids drop out. Many effective schools blur these boundaries. For example, Urban Academy is technically a ‘transfer school’ in New York City—typically the last option for students. With a traditional academic structure, it is also a highly supportive alternative school. High Tech High values applied learning in a technology rich environment, but is really a good liberal art school in disguise.

College credit acceleration strategies, such as dual enrollment or early college, can and are being used with all four of these options.

Why an Initiative?

An initiative is simply a collection of grants, in this case a network of networks, launched simultaneously for three reasons:

- ❑ It’s grant making as advocacy—an opportunity to garner substantially more attention to the work of our grantees by launching a \$50M multi-partner initiative rather than a series of \$5M grants. It provides us the opportunity to highlight pressing problems (e.g., drop out rates of Black and Hispanic students) and points to a promising solution set.
- ❑ This is a needed and timely solution to the collision of federal legislation and state budget shortfalls. A serious commitment to “no child left behind” requires high quality supportive alternative educational opportunities in every community. This supply problem will not be addressed, at least not at this scale, without our intervention.
- ❑ An initiative allows us to build a system of mutual support. Grantees can coordinate school location targeting states of interest to the foundation. They can learn from each other and benefit from the tools and practices that others have created.

Initiative Support

To support the replication of these school models, The Big Picture Company (which is replicating the Met in Providence) has submitted a proposal to function as the lead intermediary by providing technical assistance for leadership development, personalized curriculum, student work, learning through internships, and facilities. In addition, National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEFI) has submitted a proposal to work with city governments in addressing the policy issues to generate more demand for effective alternative high schools.

We have invited The Annie E. Casey Foundation (currently funds Maya Angelou School), The Mott Foundation (currently funds Commonwealth and YouthBuild and is considering a grant to YEFI), The Kellogg Foundation (currently funds National Association of Street Schools and Youthbuild), The Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and The Hewlett Foundation to join us in our effort to increase the educational opportunities for vulnerable youth to graduate from high school prepared for college, work and citizenship. They have all made investments in this space, but it is unclear to what extent they will co-sponsor this initiative or make parallel investments.

Appendix 1

Maya Angelou Public Charter School/See Forever Foundation

The school serves 85 students in Washington DC, manages two nonprofit businesses that support the students and the community. It focuses on educating at-risk students who are court involved and have had academic trouble in traditional settings. Through integrating the world of work into the traditional academic setting students take responsibility for operating a catering restaurant and a community technology-training center.

Proposing expansion in Washington, DC area.

Diploma Plus/Commonwealth Corporation

Diploma Plus helps young people, primarily in Massachusetts, who are behind in school or have had a difficult high school experience to recommit to school, achieve academically and make the transition to college and the workplace. Diploma Plus has two stages, the presentation level where students complete assignments and projects that are mapped to explicit academic standards and benchmarks and the plus phase where students enroll in college classes, participate in internships and undertake major community-oriented projects.

Proposing expansion on East Coast and in California.

YouthBuild USA

YouthBuild is known as an alternative school, a youth and community development program, job training program, a community service program and a leadership development program. Students spend half a day in class and half a day building housing for the homeless and low-income community and learning job and construction skills.

Proposing expansion and improvement of existing sites.

National Association of Street Schools (NASS)

NASS is a network of schools that serve at-risk youth (court involved, welfare recipients, homelessness, street kids, etc.) by providing a personalized education, a moral code, and tools for self-sufficiency. Schools are faith based and committed to holistic student development.

Proposing expansion and improvement of existing sites.

Communities in Schools of Georgia

Communities in Schools of Georgia has established Performance Learning Centers to address the needs of vulnerable youth in danger of dropping out. Students are engaged in personalized, technology supported learning, community internships and service projects and supported through transitions to college and careers.

Proposing expansion and improvement of existing sites.

The Black Alliance for Educational Options

The Black Alliance for Educational Options is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase educational options for black children.

Proposing network of schools that replicate The Met and Minnesota New Country Schools model.