



*Creating a Portfolio of*  
**GREAT**  
**HIGH SCHOOLS**





## America's high schools aren't making the grade. *It's time for a new approach.*

Most school systems feature one kind of high school: a large, comprehensive school with more than a thousand students and a course catalog as thick as a phone book. It's the kind of school that tries to be all things to all people. Unfortunately, many of these large schools simply don't work for most of their students.

Consider these troubling statistics: About 30 percent of today's eighth graders will not graduate from high school four years from now. Another third will graduate, but without the skills they need to do well in college or hold a family-wage job.

How did the American education system come to this? The large schools that many of these students attend were designed 50 years ago to educate young people by perceived ability, preparing one third for the professions and one third for the trades while letting the final third drop out sometime after eighth grade. It didn't make much sense

then, but today, it's an economic and civic disaster. No less than 80 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts.

To reverse these disturbing trends, we must begin to picture a new high school landscape—one where every student graduates ready for college. That will require a diverse set of small schools that engage young people more effectively. After all, students learn in different ways; their schools should *teach* in different ways. In this new landscape, schools may have different emphases, teaching approaches, or philosophies, but they will all prepare every student for college. In a system with a diverse portfolio of schools, no single school will fit every student. But every student will fit at least one school.

The high schools profiled in this brochure show the wide range of schools that communities can create—schools that give *every* student the best chance to succeed.

# What makes a great high school?

High schools come in many shapes and sizes. They may emphasize different subjects, follow different educational philosophies, or build different school cultures. Within this variety, though, we have found that all great high schools have three elements in common:

- They expect every student to graduate ready for college or a family-wage job.
- They engage all students in challenging course work that is relevant to their lives and their aspirations.
- They are likely to be small—most educating no more than 100 students per grade—so that students get personal attention in a safe, respectful environment.

There are perhaps hundreds of ways to create a mix of schools with these three elements, which can make creating a diverse portfolio of schools a bewildering task. What is the right mix for your community?

It may help to group schools into one of three general categories: traditional, theme-based, and student-centered. To some degree, these categories are artificial constructs—no actual school fits neatly into one category, and many excellent schools do not fit into any of them. To the extent practical, each community should aim to have at least one school from each of the three categories as options for parents and students.

The chart on the next page briefly describes the three types of schools. To learn more about each type, read the profiles on the following pages.

## Three types of great high schools:

	Description	Examples
Traditional	These schools teach traditional subjects, but focus on rigorously preparing every student for college or work.	LaGuardia Middle College – Early College High School, <i>New York, NY</i> ; Lionel Wilson College Preparatory Academy, <i>Oakland, CA</i> ; Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, <i>Chicago, IL</i> ; Frederick Douglass Academy, <i>Harlem, NY</i>
Theme-based	These schools organize coursework around a theme—such as the sciences, technology, or the arts—to engage students in a college-prep curriculum.	High Tech High, <i>San Diego, CA</i> ; Tacoma School of the Arts, <i>Tacoma, WA</i> ; Zoo School, <i>Minneapolis, MN</i> ; Boston Arts Academy, <i>Boston, MA</i> ; Expeditionary Learning Schools; Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, <i>Devon, MA</i> ; Fenway High School, <i>Boston, MA</i>
Student-centered	These schools create individualized plans for each student, often with students’ input, and may focus especially on dropouts or at-risk youth.	The Met, <i>Providence, RI</i> ; Minnesota New Country School, <i>Henderson, MN</i> ; Maya Angelou Public Charter School, <i>Washington, D.C.</i> ; Portland Community College, <i>Portland, OR</i>

## They only *seem* familiar.

At first glance, the high schools in this category may look familiar. They emphasize mastery of typical subject matter—mathematics, literature, science, history—and use traditional approaches to instruction. But the comparisons end there. Exemplary schools in this category are unrelenting in their efforts to ensure that all of their students, especially those poor and minority students who are frequently left behind in comprehensive high schools, are prepared for college. They adopt a “no excuses” attitude coupled with a support structure that virtually prevents students from failing.

### LaGuardia Middle College – Early College High School *New York City, NY*

LaGuardia integrates grades 9 through 12 with what we might call grades 13 and 14, forming a coherent and accelerated course of study. Created by a partnership between the city’s board of education and the City University of New York (CUNY) system, LaGuardia seeks to foster academic success for those students for whom college would be considered out of reach. But with a steadfast belief in every student’s potential to succeed in high school and attend college, LaGuardia helps them master a challenging curriculum by using a range of instructional practices and support services—including student internships, peer counseling,

individual and group projects, and tutoring.

In their ninth- and tenth-grade years, students take high school courses. Beginning in the fall of their junior year, they take college-level courses, including history, sociology, literature, and introduction to computers. And the students are succeeding: LaGuardia students are passing more of their courses than their college counterparts.

*Exemplary schools in this category ensure that all their students, especially poor and minority students, are prepared for college.*

By the thirteenth year—a year after many students from their cohort will have graduated from high school—students at LaGuardia enroll in college courses of their choosing to fulfill the remaining requirements for an associate of arts degree. Although students no longer take high school courses, the school continues to support them.

While LaGuardia takes a traditional academic approach, there are excellent early college high schools in every category. No matter how they are designed, all early college high schools recognize the same basic fact: all students should go to college, but they will all find different ways to get there.

### Lionel Wilson College Preparatory Academy *Oakland, CA*

Founded in September 2002, Lionel Wilson Prep was Oakland’s first new high school in 40 years. It serves 420 students in sixth through twelfth grade, nearly all of them minority students from low-income families. But it doesn’t shy away from an academically rigorous, standards-focused program. Students study a standard curriculum that develops five qualities in every student: personal responsibility, social responsibility, critical and creative thinking, application of knowledge, and communication.

They are required to make public presentations in five areas, from math and science to Spanish and history. At the center of the student support system is a student advisor who works with students and their families throughout their time at Lionel Wilson Prep. Students meet with their advisor every day, and twice a year they lead a conference with their advisor and parents to discuss their goals and reflect on their progress. Lionel Wilson Prep boasts a 95 percent attendance rate.



## They spark students' unique interests.

Schools organized around a theme typically integrate that theme—for instance, the arts, math and science, or career—into all aspects of a standard college-prep education. In addition to offering theme-based courses (dance in a school for the arts, or artificial intelligence in a school focused on math and science), teachers of the more traditional subjects infuse their lessons with examples from the theme.

### High Tech High San Diego, CA

High Tech High was created in 2000 to address the shortage of qualified high-technology workers in San Diego and to create a rigorous educational environment. Technology and pre-engineering are integrated throughout the curriculum. Teachers guide students through a project-based approach to learning: making a film about Gettysburg, holding a public debate on evolution, writing a business plan for a biotech start-up. In their junior and senior years, students enter internships with local businesses that match their interests and skills, which links schoolwork to the working world.

The school's open floor plan, high ceilings, and low walls encourage the 400 students and their teachers to interact freely. There are no classrooms—only specialized labs—

and every student has access to a workstation with an Internet-ready computer. High Tech High sent 96 percent of its graduates to college in 2003, even though fewer than half had college-educated parents.

### Tacoma School of the Arts Tacoma, WA

The curriculum at Tacoma School of the Arts (or SOTA) is centered on fine art as a means of engaging students, creating a powerful school structure, and providing focus for students and teachers. Students are drawn to the school because they have an interest in the arts, but what they get is an academically rigorous, college-prep curriculum in a supportive atmosphere.

### *Schools integrate the theme into all aspects of a standard college-prep education.*

With a maximum of 350 students, the school is small and built on community partnerships with established arts and cultural organizations. Students attend 90-minute classes, and each year they have the opportunity to become deeply immersed in internships or a single course of study. Classes meet in many locations across Tacoma's downtown core: in renovated business spaces, in

cultural and arts facilities, and on a university's satellite campus.

In 2003 the school posted the state's highest scores on the tenth grade state standardized tests in reading and math, proving that students learn when they are engaged in their subject matter.



## They give every student intense personal attention.

All good schools, large or small, are built around the needs of their students. But some are even more focused, providing an individualized education for each student. In these schools, students frequently design their own course for learning with help from a teacher. Indeed, some schools eschew traditional administrators, leaving the management of the school to the teachers themselves.

Other schools in this category seek to reengage students who have dropped out of high school or are at serious risk of doing so. These dropout recovery schools typically keep class sizes very small (with as few as five students per teacher), work intensively with students to build basic skills, use a variety of student assessments (presentations and journals, for example, in addition to standardized tests), allow or require students to live on campus, and offer a range of support services, including counseling, internships, job placement, mentoring, and lessons in money management.

### Minnesota New Country School *Henderson, MN*

Local teachers formed Minnesota New Country School in 1994 with the hopes of creating a collaborative, rigorous, nontraditional learning

environment. Other than a daily reading period, there is no set curriculum for the school. Teachers help students complete independent and group projects during the school year, ranging from boat building to research on the deformities of local frogs. The school's 120 students spend most of their time in a single large, open room that includes student and teacher workstations. In addition, New Country has a science classroom, a greenhouse, a library room, and a woodworking and auto shop. Three-quarters of the graduating class go to college, a significantly higher proportion than rural schools with comparable student populations.

### Maya Angelou Public Charter School *Washington, D.C.*

Part school and part youth development program, the Maya Angelou Public Charter School serves 85 students, many of whom have been through the juvenile justice system.

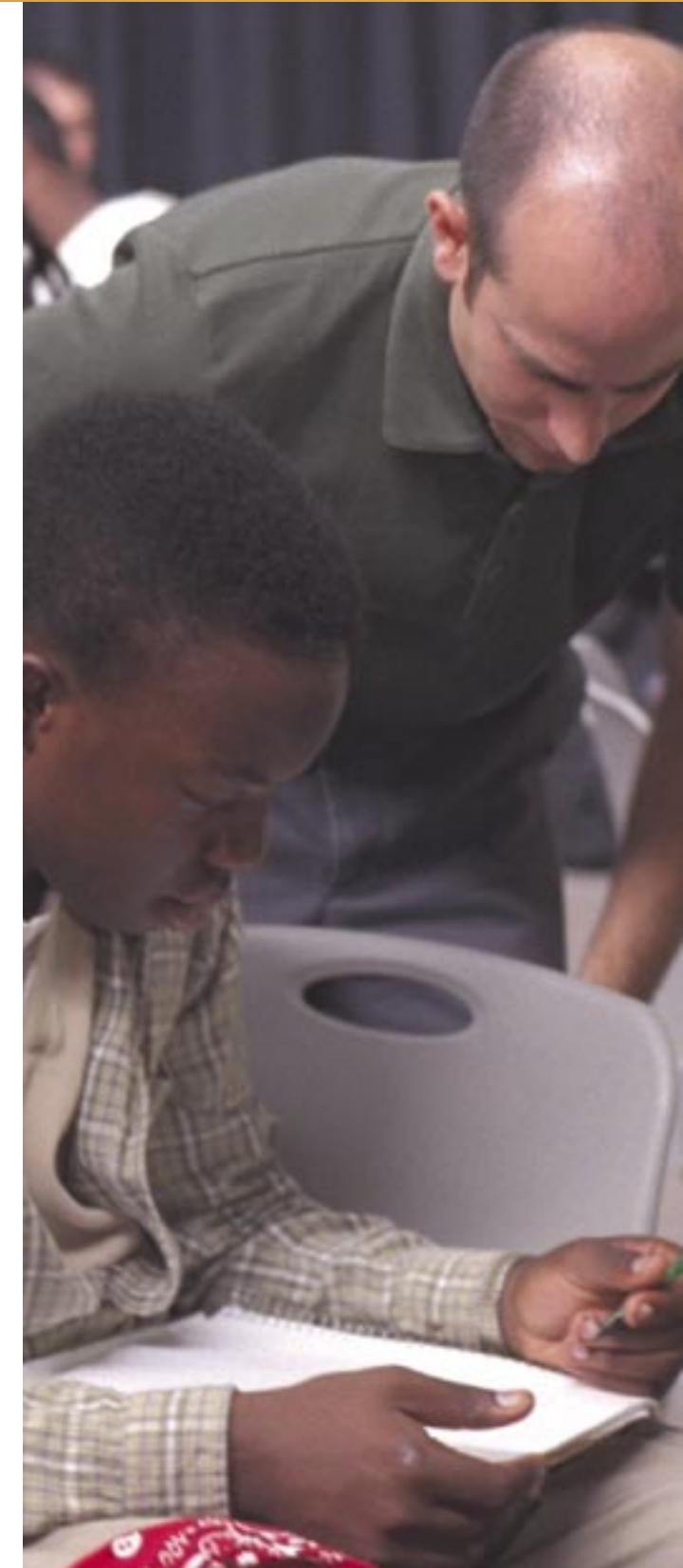
They spend their first year studying social issues—such as the ways in which people are shaped by communities, including their local traditions, values, and expectations. Students conclude the term with a community history project that

integrates interviews and oral histories, art, photography, and their own writing about the places in which they live. In subsequent years, students turn to more traditional subjects, such as American literature, geography, and math. They also take at least two terms of technology and computer classes.

Because many of the school's students benefit from a carefully structured day, they remain in the building until 8 p.m. four days a week. These extended hours include dinner, one-on-one counseling, and 70-minute tutoring sessions in addition to classes.

### *Intensive, one-on-one instruction helps students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out.*

The school year runs 11 months, and many students live full-time in the school's dormitory. Each one works four to six hours per week at a paying job during the academic term. They also work part- or full-time periodically throughout the year. It is estimated that 50 to 70 percent of Maya Angelou Public Charter School graduates go on to college, and the rest will move directly into the workplace.





## What makes a successful school system?

The categories of schools in this brochure are intended as a guide to leaders interested in developing a portfolio of high school options. There are many combinations of high schools that could meet the needs of a community. To be effective, however, districts should develop policies for supporting these diverse schools that include:

- **Quality assurance.** School system and municipal leaders must hold every high school in a portfolio accountable for meeting one goal: preparing all students for college, careers, and citizenship. When schools do not meet this goal, leaders must take appropriate action—which starts with providing the training and information schools need to improve, and may ultimately end with an academic intervention.
- **Options with equity.** Left completely unregulated, a system of choice is likely to reflect, rather than reduce, economic inequities: the best schools will gravitate to the neighborhoods with the most influence. Instead, leaders must carefully plan their schools'

locations and curricula, target low-income students appropriately, and communicate with all stakeholders.

- **Communication.** Creating options for all students is based on the premise that all students and parents have absolute access to information. For this approach to work effectively, school system and municipal leaders must work hard to reach out to those families who are least likely to understand their options.
- **School formation.** Systems must be able to develop new schools when the need or interest arises. New schools do not necessarily require new buildings; there are many examples of schools sharing space with a community center or other organization or taking over an entire vacant building.
- **Learning networks.** No school should work in isolation. Through networks of schools, educators can share best practices and help each other improve their schools.

## Where to go from here

Creating a great portfolio of high school options won't happen overnight. So where should school and community leaders begin?

### Visit great schools.

You don't have to start from scratch. Civic and education leaders alike can benefit from seeing innovative solutions firsthand, brainstorming, and sharing resources with others who are achieving results. They should travel outside their districts and visit other great schools that have developed innovative solutions to common problems, such as those profiled in this brochure. And they should encourage every member of their community—parents, teachers, students, business leaders—to do the same.

### Determine which types of schools will work best for the community.

Civic and education leaders, parents, students, and businesses should work together to decide which kinds of schools they want.

A few questions to consider:

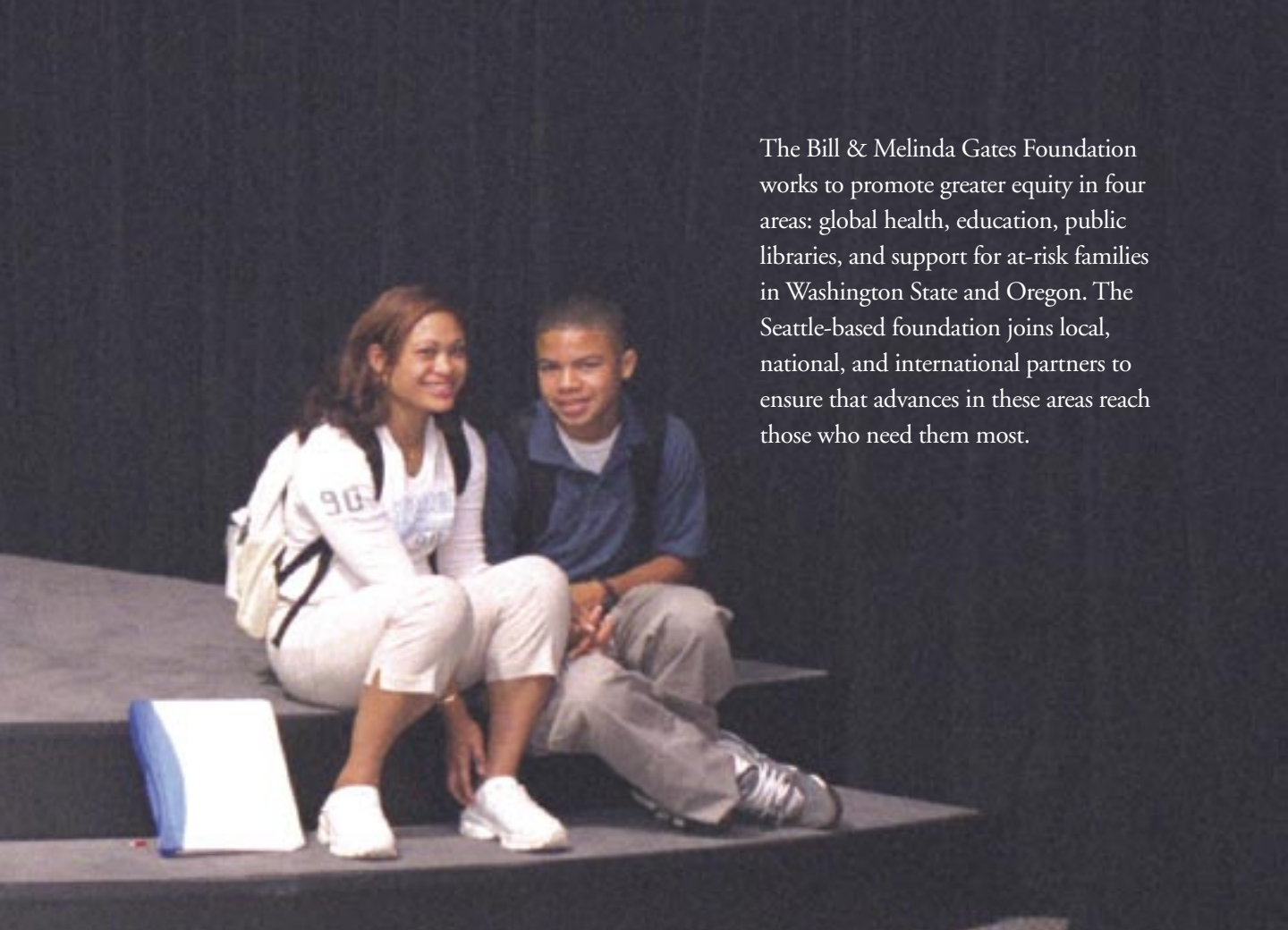
- What types of high school options do students currently have? Do high-income students have better options than low-income students?
- What do students and parents want?
- What do community members and local businesses need? Is there an unmet demand for workers with certain skills?
- What resources and partners can the community draw on?

### Start a new school.

A few good schools here and there are not enough. We need to provide 10,000 great high schools in the next 10 years to meet the needs of this country's children. Lead the drive to start one in your community.

For more information on new school models and assistance on starting new schools, visit [www.gatesfoundation.org/education](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/education).





The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to promote greater equity in four areas: global health, education, public libraries, and support for at-risk families in Washington State and Oregon. The Seattle-based foundation joins local, national, and international partners to ensure that advances in these areas reach those who need them most.

BILL & MELINDA  
GATES *foundation*

P.O. Box 23350  
Seattle, WA 98102-0650  
U.S.A.  
V 206.709.3100  
F 206.709.3180  
[www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)

© 2004 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. All rights reserved.