



## Alternative High School Initiative Overview October 2008

### What is the Alternative High School Initiative?

The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) is a network of youth development organizations with over 258 sites nationwide committed to creating educational opportunities for young people for whom traditional school settings have not been successful. AHSI was launched in 2003 with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a response to the growing national trend of diminishing high school graduation rates affecting this country's youth. Composed of twelve intermediaries with innovative program models and two conveners, AHSI collaborates with local communities to sustain safe, top quality high schools for vulnerable youth (See Section I). Important information about AHSI is available at <http://www.ahsi.info> which also has links to each AHSI organization's website. The young adults involved in AHSI have formed Organized Youth for Educational Alternatives (OYEA), and their website is located at <http://www.oyea.info>.

### What Distinguishes AHSI Schools & Programs from Other High Schools?

Alternatives for high school are defined as new alternative secondary school initiatives that prepare young people through programs characterized by rigor, relevance, and relationships, to graduate from high school and achieve college success. Progress is evident in quality alternatives for high school based on such indicators as increases in high school graduation rates among students participating in these programs, decreases in dropout rates, higher rates of college entry, and preliminary indications that young people will succeed in and complete postsecondary education. Together AHSI organizations present families, districts, and policy stakeholders with a portfolio of small, alternative high school options. The schools are student-centered and strive to have youth voice, project-based learning and leadership development drive the learning process. These principles are reflected in a set of universal distinguishers evident in the design of all AHSI schools:

- authentic learning, teaching, and performance assessment;
- personalized school culture;
- shared leadership and responsibility;
- supportive partnerships; and
- future focus for students.

### What is the AHSI Policy Perspective?

Over the past two years, the AHSI network has made strides in understanding how existing policies at the federal, state, and local levels affect alternatives for high school. Based on this understanding, the AHSI network has charted key policy conditions that merit attention if alternatives for high school are to reach large-scale, nationwide success. At present, AHSI is well-positioned to use the collectively-developed policy framework to implement a set of policy strategies together in one or a few places. The purpose of this overview is to provide interested colleagues in the youth field with a brief synopsis of the AHSI policy perspective in hopes of fostering dialogue and broad, community-wide discussion of the potential for working together with a range of partners in places interested in expanding alternatives for high school.

A centerpiece of the AHSI policy perspective is a framework consisting of seven key themes and conditions which the network has identified as essential for alternatives for high school to achieve large scale success. These seven policy themes include five conditions proposed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as necessary for large scale K-12 education reform and two additional conditions which are particularly relevant for alternatives for high school. These seven key policy conditions are defined in Figure 1.

*Figure 1.* **Executive Summary of Policy Themes & Issues Affecting Alternatives for High School**

<b>7 Policy Conditions for Large Scale Success</b>	<b>What They Mean</b>
1. Increased College Access	AHSI program models enable students to complete high school by earning a regular diploma or an equivalent credential, and they prepare young people to pursue postsecondary education.
2. Need-based, Adequacy Approach to Funding	Adequate funding at levels <u>above</u> per pupil funding allotments for traditional high school programs is essential if alternatives for high school are to reach sustainable nationwide scale.
3. Rigorous, Reasonable Academic Standards and Assessments	Alternatives for high school are committed to ensuring that students meet or exceed academic standards and competencies for high school completion and readiness for entry into postsecondary education. AHSI models seek to measure student learning along a continuum that includes state tests and requirements as well as authentic assessments of performance through tasks, projects, and portfolios.
4. Strong Accountability	Alternatives for high school are dedicated to being held accountable for students' academic achievement. Students who have not fulfilled their academic potential in traditional K-12 settings often require additional supports. An alternative model's accountability must be aligned with access to the necessary resources and flexibility for innovation in programming that will enable students to succeed.
5. Expanded Options for Parents and Students	Parents and students would benefit from a wider range of alternatives for high school, preferably with the ability to choose a learning environment likely to be effective at enabling a young person to achieve success.
6. Open Sector, Readiness to Open Alternative High Schools	Launching and expanding alternatives for high school requires a healthy "open sector" in education that is receptive to education programs that expand, enhance, and recalibrate the premises and structure of the existing public school system.
7. Coordination with City and Other Public Agencies and Community Organizations	Alternatives for high school recognize the need to offer students supports and services that are beyond the purview of the school system to provide. To do this, many alternatives for high school coordinate with other public agencies and with community organizations to create options for students to tap into a range of appropriate resources.

### What are the Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) Organizations?

**The Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA)** ([www.aamainc.us/index.asp](http://www.aamainc.us/index.asp)): AAMA operates two pioneering high schools for students otherwise left behind. Serving more than 700 students at campuses in Houston and San Antonio, George I. Sanchez Charter Schools offer a unique educational alternative for at-risk students who have not been able to succeed in traditional large high schools.

**Big Picture Learning** ([www.bigpicture.org](http://www.bigpicture.org)): A rigorous, highly personalized curriculum combines demanding academic work with real-world experiential and inquiry-driven learning.

**Black Alliance for Educational Options** ([www.baeo.org](http://www.baeo.org)): Educational options that enrich the academic, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of healthy black children...

implementing the Big Picture design and the EdVisions Coop model, both of which feature project-based learning.

**Communities in Schools Georgia** ([www.cisga.org](http://www.cisga.org)) and **Communities in Schools National** ([www.cisnet.org](http://www.cisnet.org)): Performance Learning Centers offer self-paced, student driven courses that encourage project and community based learning with practical applications through workplace experiences.

**Commonwealth Corporation / Diploma Plus** ([www.commcorp.org/diplomaplus](http://www.commcorp.org/diplomaplus)): Diploma Plus combines a competency-based approach (in which students progress at their own pace), a small, personalized learning environment, and numerous opportunities to make connections between what is learned in school and the world outside.

**EdVisions Schools** ([www.edvisions.coop](http://www.edvisions.coop)): The EdVisions model focuses on highly personalized learning in a strong advisory-based democratic learning community. Students meet state standards and earn graduation credits through rigorous, engaging projects that are driven by student interest and connect to the real world. Teachers organize as an “educational professional practice” with real control over decisions that affect learning outcomes.

**Gateway to College** ([www.gatewaytocollege.org](http://www.gatewaytocollege.org)): Students complete a high school diploma while simultaneously earning college credits, progressing toward an associate’s degree or certificate. Beginning in a small learning community on a college campus and quickly transitioning to classes with adult learners, students receive intensive support from faculty and counselors, learning how to succeed in college.

**Good Shepherd Services** ([www.goodshepherds.org](http://www.goodshepherds.org)): Quality education that will prepare students for post-secondary education, meaningful employment, healthy personal and family relationships and participation in the life of their communities.

**See Forever Foundation and Maya Angelou Public Charter School** ([www.seeforever.org](http://www.seeforever.org)): At Maya Angelou Public Charter School and other See Forever schools, students develop the academic, social, and employment skills that they need to build rewarding lives and promote positive change in their communities.

**Street School Network** ([www.streetschools.com](http://www.streetschools.com)): Each faith-based school is independently operated but espouses the core values and basic tenets of all NASS member schools: personalized academic development, social skills development, career development and spiritual development.

**YouthBuild USA** ([www.youthbuild.org](http://www.youthbuild.org)): Students engage in competency based, personalized learning while they acquire job skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people. Additionally, leadership development, college readiness, community service, career development, and positive youth adult relationships are emphasized.

### AHSI Conveners

**Big Picture Learning** ([www.bigpicture.org](http://www.bigpicture.org)): The Big Picture Company coordinates activities of the Alternative High School Initiative and is lead convener of the AHSI network in collaboration with the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families.

**National League of Cities (NLC) Institute for Youth, Education, & Families** ([www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef)): NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, & Families helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the Institute in January 2000 to recognize the influential and unique roles that mayors, city council members, and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth. NLC collaborates with the Big Picture Company to convene the AHSI network and to facilitate the policy component of the AHSI network’s efforts.