# Many Sizes Fit All

## Considering multiple pathways to higher learning

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The need to dramatically increase the number of young people who gain the credentials and skills necessary to succeed in 21st century America has never been clearer. One of the most promising ideas for achieving this goal is to establish "multiple pathways" for learners that lead to a variety of high-quality postsecondary options.

As New England examines recent trends and indicators in postsecondary education, it is an appropriate time to take stock of the prospects for the multiple pathways approach and consider the issues that arise as policymakers, educational institutions and communities look at ways to broaden educational opportunities for learners.

The underlying premise of the multiple pathways idea is that by offering a wider variety of high-quality learning options—in settings that include colleges, community organizations and workplaces—we will see an increase in the number of students, especially those from low-income families, who are prepared for careers, citizenship and continued learning.

Various estimates have placed the national high school graduation rate as low as 68%. The prospects are worse for students from traditionally underserved populations: high school students from families with income in the bottom 20% dropped out of school at six times the rate of those from higher brackets. In recognition of these problems, there has been a great deal of interest nationally in defining and implementing multiple pathways.

Current proposals to create multiple pathways fall into three main categories, representing three overlapping approaches.

The first approach can be described as "High Standards, Defined Pathways." According to the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (and its staff director Marc Tucker), the "first step" is for states to create board-qualifying examinations. The New Commission's report, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, proposes that upon passing the exams, students would proceed to one of two pathways, determined by which of two passing scores they receive. Students who attain the first passing score would go directly to a community or technical college. Students who achieve the second passing score would have the option of continuing in an academically demanding upper-secondary program that would include, for example, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Robert Schwartz, academic dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has proposed a somewhat different version. He suggests that states design exit assessments around the American Diploma Project benchmarks in reading, writing and math as high school graduation standards. These are considered more rigorous and focused than many state standards. Although all students would need to pass the state exit exams, Schwartz proposes four new pathways that communities could construct as alternatives to the traditional high school-to-college route to prepare students for the exams and to provide continued learning and work opportunities after graduation. These would include a blended-institutions pathway modeled on early college and dual-enrollment programs; a "2+2" model based on nationally recognized and funded Tech Prep programs that leads to a credential in a technical area; a work-based model (employer- or union-led) in which the learning takes place primarily in workplaces; and a service model that includes military service or AmeriCorps service.

Despite their differences, the New Commission's and Schwartz's proposals share a common emphasis on requiring all students to meet some version of high standards and in creating a limited number of defined pathways.

The second approach to multiple pathways has been developed by Jeannie Oakes and other California scholars in a project based at UCLA called "Multiple Perspectives on Multiple Pathways." The project recommends creating a variety of theme-based schools and career pathways to improve education in California. Themes could include career-related areas such as health and law as well as non-occupational themes like the environment or the performing arts. There would be three essential components for each theme-based pathway: a college preparatory academic core; a professional/technical core based on real-world standards; and field-based learning opportunities.

The third approach also emphasizes creating more small schools and programs as a way of giving students a varied mix of options. Proponents of this approach, which we call "Alternative Schools and Programs," suggest that in creating new small schools, communities should include so-called "alternative" or "transfer" schools specifically designed for students who are not succeeding in traditional environments. Successful alternative schools typically integrate strong youth development strategies into teaching and learning and all aspects of the school and make social services readily available, often within the building itself. The National Youth Employment Coalition and the American Youth Policy

Forum, among others, have published reports describing this concept, and New York City has created an Office of Multiple Pathways to implement many components of this model.

All three approaches share the idea that the traditional high school, as currently structured, is not meeting the needs of many students and thus will need to be reconfigured to create multiple pathways systems. In a report prepared for the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we reviewed six options that are likely to be considered in any comprehensive multiple pathways initiative. (See Table 1.) These options serve as potential building blocks that can be combined to create additional learning options for students.

Implementing an ambitious multiple pathways strategy requires a mix of favorable federal, state and local conditions. Currently, there are a number of potential barriers to the idea of multiple pathways. Tracking student progress toward graduation based on four-year cohorts, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law, and the continuing disconnect between high school graduation and college entrance requirements, are two significant examples.

**Table 1: Pathway Options at a Glance**

| Category | Exemplars |
|---|---|
| **Small Learning Communities (SLCs)**<br>• Break large high schools into smaller units within existing buildings based on themes such as social justice or specific occupations<br>• Typically strive to increase rigor, relationships and relevance by establishing more intimate connections | Talent Development High School (national)<br>Career Academies (national) |
| **Small Schools (general population)**<br>• More autonomous than SLCs<br>• Standalone buildings or separate schools within larger buildings | University Park Campus School (Worcester, Mass.) |
| **Alternative Small Schools**<br>• Cater to students who have left the K-12 system or transferred from a more traditional high school where they did not succeed<br>• Many students have fallen one or more years behind their graduating class and are statistically at risk of dropping out<br>• Tend to place greater emphasis on youth development principles and provide more "wraparound"—or social support—services than other small schools | Diploma Plus (national) |
| **High School/College Blends**<br>• Blur the line between high school and postsecondary education and training<br>• Students earn a significant number of college credits while still in the program with the goal of earning a two-year or four-year college degree | Gates Foundation's Early College High Schools (national)<br>Middle College High School at LaGuardia Community College (Queens, New York)<br>College and Career Transition Initiative (national)<br>Tech Prep (national)<br>Gateway to College Program (national) |
| **GED/Adult Basic Education**<br>• Help students ages 16 and older, no longer in traditional high school, improve their academic and career skills, earn a high school diploma or GED, and transition into postsecondary education/training and work | Adult Career Development Center (Richmond, Va.)<br>GED Plus (generic design adopted by the U.S. Labor Department) |
| **Experiential/Work-Based**<br>• Emphasize applied learning and youth development strategies<br>• Typically operates outside the traditional K-12 system<br>• The first three examples help young people earn high school diplomas or GEDs and explore and develop skills in specific occupations while the last two generally serve youth who have already earned a high school credential and are interested in developing specific career/technical skills or pursue service that might lead to a career<br>• An occupationally focused program that helps students ages 16 and older, no longer in traditional high school, earn GED or in some cases a high school diploma | Los Angeles Conservation Corps<br>YouthBuild (national)<br>Manchester Craftsman Guild (Pittsburgh)<br>Jobs Corps (national)<br>Year-Up (national)<br>City Year (Boston) |

State policy will also influence where and how multiple pathway systems flourish. In New England, Rhode Island is currently implementing nontraditional ways of assessing student work, and New Hampshire is working with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to help redefine high school through the Expanded Learning Opportunities initiative, which allows students to earn credit for work done outside the classroom.

Communities interested in developing multiple pathways would be well-served by creating institutions like the "community education boards" that Paul Hill and colleagues propose in their book, *It Takes a City*. These boards would function as new community authorities overseeing and aligning all a community's resources, not just schools, to ensure that all children's needs are met to help them progress toward a productive adulthood. Hill and colleagues envision the boards as broadly representative, including elected or appointed public members and *ex officio* representatives of community institutions, including major private charities, public libraries, museums and faith-based and community-based organizations.

Financing such a system would require blending funding streams, including public school funds and local public social service monies for children's programs. Just as the board would oversee the equitable use of education funds, it would also allocate public human service funds based on local priorities.

The notion of multiple pathways is at a relatively early stage, and there are not yet well-developed models to study and emulate. We have seen over the past few decades, however, that piecemeal reform efforts bring piecemeal results. We must begin to acknowledge the fact that people learn in a variety of ways, in a variety of settings and at various rates. The approaches and strategies we've described take those notions into account and make a compelling case for establishing multiple pathways to a variety of high-quality postsecondary options, each with appropriate and recognized standards. By bringing together the gamut of organizational, political and community resources, we can profoundly improve public education across New England and beyond.

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