

EDITOR'S NOTE



We all have our memories of high school: mine are stuck back in the late 1960s in a monstrously large urban school undergoing cataclysmic change. One of the oldest and biggest public secondary schools in Dade County, Miami Senior High drew a largely white, economically mixed student population

from the expensive high-rise condos on Biscayne Bay to the blue-collar neighborhoods on the fringes of downtown. While a small percentage of Miami High's "Stingarees" were headed for college, the majority would find their niche in the workforce, well-prepared by vocational courses offered at the school. What transcended social class and economic differences was devotion to the state-ranked football team and traditions that seemed as old as the Alhambra—the inspiration for the school's Moorish design.

Midway through my sophomore year, world politics flipped our world of pep rallies and Friday night dances upside down. A flood of refugees—some 3,600 a month—poured into Miami with the beginning of the Cuban airlift. Overnight, students who were strangers in a strange land filled the corridors, attending makeshift classes in hallways, custodial closets, and the auditorium. By the time I was a senior, almost 4,000 students jammed the school's three floors.

Today, Miami High's enrollment stands at more than 3,200 and its students are 90 percent Hispanic and 4 percent white. It earned a "D" grade in 2002 and 2003 from the Florida Department of Education based on statewide assessment tests. Though test scores are improving, only 42 percent of Miami High students scored at or above level three (on a five-point scale) in math, and just 20 percent reached that mark in reading. Graduation rates are a dismal 51 percent.

While Miami High's disappointing standings may be linked to unique circumstances, it's not an isolated case. In the 21 years since *A Nation at Risk* concluded that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a

rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people," we've struggled to make substantial strides in educational achievement, and have failed in high schools. As the National Association of Secondary School Principals points out in *Breaking Ranks II*, "With the exception of exit exams, high school policy has changed little over the last two decades, barely distinguishing high schools from other levels of schooling and continuing to track advantaged students into college and disadvantaged students into an uncertain future with few skills. As a result, although we've learned a great deal over the last couple of decades about reform in elementary schools, high school reform is still largely uncharted territory."

In this issue of *Northwest Education*, we explore some of the ways that our region is changing that territory: radically re-engineering large comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personalized academies and learning communities; encouraging all students—not just an elite few—to take Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses; tying curriculum to the world outside the classroom; using data to drive decisionmaking. It's not an easy journey. We hear the frustrations of administrators and the complaints of students. But, we also sense the exhilaration of being on the cutting edge of a movement seeking to change a model that's more than 100 years old.

It seems appropriate that in an issue centering on change, *Northwest Education* unveils some changes of its own. After nine years, we've adopted what we hope is a more reader-friendly design. You'll also find an array of new departments, including a "Research Brief" summarizing pertinent findings on our theme, some intriguing statistics in "Region at a Glance," and "Voices" that reflect what our different constituencies are thinking. Web exclusives at www.nwrel.org/nwedu/ will allow us to bring you even more information and resources. We welcome your comments about these new features, as well as your reflections on "Transforming High School."

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