

Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) Network Distinguishers

The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) is a network of youth development organizations committed to creating educational opportunities for young people for whom traditional school settings have not been successful. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supports AHSI as a response to the growing national trend of diminishing graduation rates, affecting this country's low income, African American and Latino youth. AHSI supports the collaboration of organizations working with local communities to generate and sustain safe, top quality high schools for vulnerable youth. These are student-centered small schools that strive to have youth voice, project-based learning and leadership development drive the learning process.

The Alternative High School Initiative has adopted a set of universal distinguishers that will be evident in the design of all AHSI schools. These distinguishers provide a common design framework for development and assessment of our schools. Overall success of the Initiative will also be evaluated by monitoring the number of schools started, the effectiveness of the schools in meeting student achievement and attainment goals, and the sustainability of the schools across the entire Initiative.

AHSI is committed to providing educational experiences characterized by learning that is academically rigorous, relevant to the real world, and supported by meaningful relationships.

Definitions:

Distinguisher: A distinguisher is an essential design principle that is seen across all AHSI schools. Each distinguisher is supported by a range of alternative strategies which vary according to the unique school design prescribed by each of the six intermediaries. It is AHSI's shared commitment to these distinguishers, coupled with a collaborative approach to creating a network of alternative high schools, that defines our work.

Distinguisher Objective: Distinguisher Objectives emphasize the rigor, relevance, and relationships in the small school activities that fall under each distinguisher. They inform the ideal behind each educational strategy and practice.

Range of Strategies: Each intermediary identifies and supports a range of strategies for how schools can implement the distinguishers. Specific strategies will evolve in response to evaluation and assessment data.

Required Supports: Required supports are the resources necessary to fully implement the distinguishers. Documenting the necessary supports will allow us to identify and exchange resources and best practices across the AHSI Initiative.

Evaluation: Evaluation provides indicators of school and student progress. Intermediaries are responsible for and to each of their sites.

AHSI Network Distinguisher Categories	
1	Authentic Learning, Teaching and Performance Assessment
2	Personalized School Culture
3	Shared Leadership and Responsibility
4	Supportive Partnerships
5	Future Focus

Distinguisher 1: *Authentic Learning, Teaching and Performance Assessment*

AHSI students learn across a wide range of interrelated experiences. Learning is centered on students' personal passions, interests, styles and needs and is deepened through relevant and real world experiences. Each of these opportunities is structured around clearly defined learning goals and objectives that meet state learning standards. Authentic rigorous learning experiences promote analysis, reasoning, application and knowledge development. Students develop learning strategies that work for them. They make connections among their community, nation, global and ethnic perspectives. Each student feels connected to an adult, who has high expectations and the ability to monitor student academic progress and the commitment to help that student navigate the most rigorous track through high school, college and on to a meaningful life of learning.

Implementation Components

Distinguisher Objectives	Range of Strategies	Required Support	Evaluation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish learning goals that stipulate high expectations for academic rigor and social development and that communicate clear and measurable achievement benchmarks 2. Espouse an inclusive approach (consideration for cultural and gender identity) 3. Teach communication, teamwork, research, problem solving, mathematics, science and technology skills across the curriculum 4. Develop intellectual identities and foster the desire for lifelong learning and discovery 5. Make learning visible with practical applications to the real world 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Industry internships, mentorships, job shadowing, work experience and service learning opportunities 2. Portfolios of work 3. Student exhibitions, presentations, demonstrations 4. Individual and group projects 5. Regular access and exposure to technologies to prepare, revise and present work, and to communicate 6. "Just in Time" seminars to identify and aggressively address learning gaps 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategies for English Language Learners 2. Professional, postsecondary, and community partnerships 3. Standards clarification informed by district liaison 4. Ongoing staff training and group work in project-based teaching and differentiated instruction 5. Strategies and tools for building learning connections to the real world 6. Teacher training and supervision on "range of assessment" techniques and strategies 7. Technical assistance and teacher training on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Portfolio review 2. Competencies/standards achieved 3. Credits earned 4. Number of students in internships, etc. 5. Evidence of connection of "real world" learning opportunities to academics 6. Number of student exhibitions, presentations, demonstrations that meet standards 7. Alignment of syllabi and assignments with state standards 8. Percentage of real world sites reporting that students make a visible and valued contribution in real world settings

Distinguisher 2: *Personalized School Culture*

Personalization is a critical component to all aspects of school culture. At every level – student, teacher, principal, school, intermediary – individual uniqueness is honored, engaged and respected. Teachers are responsive to students’ cognitive, emotional, and physical needs. Student learning is challenging, meaningful and personalized and a commitment to lifelong learning and inquiry is fostered. Each student’s work reflects the individual student’s interests, talents and needs. Educators have the capacity to tailor and pace curriculum according to students’ individual needs. High adult expectations conveyed in a non-threatening manner drive quality work that demonstrates students’ social and academic growth. Respect fosters pride and motivation.

Implementation Components

Distinguisher Objectives	Range of Strategies	Required Support	Evaluation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engage student voice to engender a democratic learning process (negotiation, diplomacy, conflict mediation skills) 2. Identify and provide access to wrap-around support services that help students become healthy, self-sufficient adults 3. Guarantee a physically and psychologically safe work environment for students, staff and families 4. Ensure that every element of the school experience is visibly connected to mission 5. Provide strong and productive interpersonal relationships at all levels in a small school setting 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intentional recruitment of vulnerable youth/ students 2. Clear definition of “small size” at school and class level 3. Intake assessment of students’ learning and development needs (child care, housing, mental/physical health, transportation, musical/artistic talents, recreation, college prep, special education) 4. Individual student learning plans developed with parents and students (plans are culturally and developmentally relevant) 5. Morning, afterschool and evening programs 6. Summer programs 7. Advisory structure 8. Intentional culture building (community meetings) 9. Student led conferences 10. Celebrations 11. Multiple approaches for addressing variations in student learning styles 12. Performance narratives 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parent training in support of student learning 2. Principal and teacher training in advisory best practices 3. Teacher training in engaging and communicating with families 4. Teacher training in implementing individualized learning plans 5. Teacher training in differentiated instruction and use of multiple instructional approaches 6. Community and business partnerships – wrap-around supports – to provide counseling, health care, wellness, daycare, summer programs, tutoring, etc. 7. Funding to support small school/small class structure (teacher to student ratio, etc.) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AIR/SRI student survey 2. Student perception of adult support 3. Number/percent of students using an individualized learning plan 4. Grade to grade student retention rate 5. Rate of student progress/ acceleration

Distinguisher 3: *Shared Leadership and Responsibility*

School leadership is shared by the intermediary, district representatives, school staff, students, families, and relevant community partners. The school mission, vision, and goals are clearly defined and understood by all. Stakeholders participate regularly in data-driven decision making focused on improving support for student achievement and attainment. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined with support and accountability systems in place to ensure effectiveness. Leadership capacity is groomed and supported at all levels: students, parents, mentors, instructors and principals.

Implementation Components

Distinguisher Objectives	Range of Strategies	Required Support	Evaluation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Youth voice is an active and integral part of the form and function of the school 2. School mission, vision, and goals are clearly stated and understood by all staff, students, families and community partners 3. Teachers are encouraged to develop innovative approaches to teaching and embrace responsibility and ownership of school vision 4. Principals foster a collaborative climate 5. Systems are in place to ensure accountability at every level 6. Intermediary and school principal share authority 7. Intermediary supports school quality, scale and sustainability 8. Intermediary provides liaisons to enhance school capacity and performance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Youth caucus/board 2. Scheduled whole school town meetings 3. Advisory board comprised of school, student, family, community, postsecondary and industry partners 4. Liaison to community and industry resources, and postsecondary options and opportunities 5. Systems for selection and training of new principals 6. Ongoing support through coaching 7. Frequent professional development around best practices at all levels 8. Personalized development plans for all principals, educators and staff 9. Transparency in both practice and performance assessment 10. Framework for performance appraisal 11. Scheduled and structured staff feedback 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training to develop, facilitate and incorporate youth voice in decision making processes 2. Regular whole-school leadership meetings to ensure goals and resources are focused around results (data driven) 3. Mission and vision building sessions with all stakeholders 4. Regular coaching on best practices in learning and teaching 5. Systematic approach to culture building and staff training 6. Embedded time for teacher collaboration 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff and educator evaluations 2. School self assessment

Distinguisher 4: *Supportive Partnerships*

The school is seen as an asset to the local community and community members are engaged with the school and with individual students. Community businesses contribute to student development by providing real world relationships, relevant learning opportunities and rigorous expectations. Such community resources as daycare, afterschool and other expanded-day programs, physical health, mental health and social services and opportunities for employment are partnered with the school. The intermediary supports the school in identifying and connecting with community partners. Intentional cooperative relationships are built between the school and the local district as well as postsecondary institutions to ensure student learning opportunity and success.

Implementation Components

Distinguisher Objectives	Range of Strategies	Required Support	Evaluation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students feel connected and responsible to a larger national/global community 2. Wrap-around support services are in place 3. Schools use community as resource for learning 4. District relationships are sound 5. Mutually productive connections and exchanges are forged among schools, families, and community and industry partners 6. Post-secondary access is ensured through intentional college and university ties 	<p><i>School Level</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open house 2. Community access to school resources (e.g. facilities open at night) 3. Student learning projects that help real-life community issues <p><i>Community Level</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advisory board comprised of school, student, family, and community, postsecondary and industry partners 2. Liaison to community organizations 3. Liaison to postsecondary institutions 4. Mentors, tutors, guest speakers, internships, job shadows, employment opportunities, apprenticeships 5. Teacher learning opportunities with community partners (e.g. training in technology, industry needs, etc.) 6. Corporate sponsorship and/or endorsement of school <p><i>Intermediary Level</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inhouse coaching and liaisons to network and/or outside consultants to enhance school capacity and performance 2. Liaisons to community and industry resources, and postsecondary options and opportunities 3. Framework for school performance appraisal <p><i>District Level</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clearly identified school district liaison 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student training and support for success in real world applications 2. Community asset scan 3. Orientations and training for mentors and volunteers 4. MOUs that clearly define roles and responsibilities of all partners 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of community service projects that enhance community assets in a real way 2. Number of partnerships 3. Performance on partnerships' stated goals and objectives (internships, volunteers, mentor relationships) 4. Partners' assessment of relationship benefits

Distinguisher 5: *Future Focus*

AHSI schools foster students' intellectual development, empowered sense of self, critical thinking skills, civic participation, improved life chances, and a commitment to lifelong learning in order to facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. Upon entering an AHSI school, every individual becomes intentionally aware that college is a viable option. All AHSI graduates will leave high school ready to access and achieve in postsecondary learning options. The intermediary organizations, the schools and the community partners will work to maximize and facilitate postsecondary opportunities and attainment for students.

Implementation Components

Distinguisher Objectives	Range of Strategies	Required Support	Evaluation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students are exposed to four-year, technical and community colleges 2. Students attain skills and competencies needed to access and succeed in college 3. Students are supported in completing college applications, attaining financial aid, scholarships, etc. 4. Students understand a range of career possibilities 5. Students are eligible and prepared for participation in college level courses 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student placement in prep and college-going programs (mentoring, academic and cultural support, work-study and/or part-time paid opportunities) 2. College courses, credits 3. Structured and accountable relationships with postsecondary institutions 4. Student transition plans beginning in the 9th grade and following students through graduation onto postsecondary pathways 5. System for communicating with students beyond graduation 6. Post graduation learning plans 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SAT fee waivers 2. College application fee waivers 3. Test taking support 4. Partnerships with postsecondary institutions 5. Partnerships with community organizations and businesses 6. Student transition plans 7. Rigorous academics and high expectations 8. Teacher training 9. Translated transcripts (i.e. project based learning experiences) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of students enrolled 2. High school course offerings 3. Percentage beginning college without remediation 4. Percentage matriculated after first year of college 5. Number enrolled in post-secondary certification programs 6. Number of college graduates as compared with number of college entrants 7. Number of college applicants 8. Number of students taking SATs/ACTs