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Alternative High School Initiative to Increase Support for At-Risk Students and Out-of-School Youth

\$4.5 Million Investment from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will Build Capacity of School Providers and Strengthen AHSI Network

PROVIDENCE — The Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) today announced a new project to deepen the capacity of its member organizations and enhance the quality of its network of high schools that serve struggling students, dropouts, and over-age students who want to complete their high school diplomas. The project will be supported by two grants, totaling \$4.5 million, from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the Big Picture Company and the National League of Cities.

Founded in 2003, the AHSI is a network of 12 youth development organizations supporting thousands of over-age and under-credited youth in over 250 schools nationwide. These small schools are typified by rigorous, relevant curriculum, project-based learning, close student-teacher relationships and strong leadership development.

“Over the past four years, AHSI has helped approximately 35,000 students and over 250 schools. But we have a lot of work left to do,” said Elliot Washor, co-founder and co-director of the Big Picture Company. “That is why we have set an ambitious goal of increasing the number of youth who obtain their high school diplomas and move on to postsecondary learning and work. The foundation’s support will help us continue to provide youth across the country with educational experiences that are academically rigorous, relevant to the real world and supported by meaningful relationships.”

The grant will assist AHSI’s two coordinating organizations—the Big Picture Company and the National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education, and Families—with several network initiatives, including training and support for principals, and an increased focus on building students’ proficiency in math and quantitative reasoning. Expansion into new communities and school districts across the country also will be supported by deeper collaboration among AHSI members and greater outreach to municipal leaders.

“This investment will allow us to strengthen learning and collaboration among our organizations, to form new partnerships with cities and schools, and to raise awareness of what high quality alternative schools offer, all aimed at creating more meaningful education opportunities for youth across the country,” said Talmira Hill, Director of AHSI.

In addition, AHSI will work with each of its schools to implement a system for supporting students before and after they graduate high school and proceed to postsecondary education—a critical juncture in a student’s life. This system will help students navigate challenges associated with college transition, such as financing a post-secondary education, mentorship and understanding college course options, so that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college.

Each year, about 1.2 million students drop out of American high schools, many of them over-age or behind in credits compared with grade level peers. And even those who do

remain in school are often bored and disengaged, struggling to learn and at risk of graduating unprepared for college or work.

“Clearly students learn differently, and communities need to offer a range of educational options and alternatives for students who struggle in traditional high schools,” said Clifford M. Johnson, executive director of the National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. “This investment will help city government leaders, school district officials, and program experts work together to strengthen and expand high-quality alternatives for high school. These schools have demonstrated remarkable results in keeping young people on the road to graduation, college, and career success.”

The National League of Cities will identify other locales that have a need for alternative education programs. They will work together with local leaders and AHSI partners to develop a strategy and build community support to promote these programs as an option for struggling and at-risk students.

“By deepening network collaboration and capacity in key areas, and by strengthening relationships with local leaders and school districts, the Alternative High School Initiative will provide its schools and its students with the support they need to succeed,” said Vicki Phillips, director of education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI)

Launched in 2003 as a response to the growing national trend of diminishing graduation rates, affecting this country’s low income, African American and Latino youth, the Alternative High School Initiative is a network of youth development organizations working with local communities to generate and sustain safe, top quality high schools for vulnerable youth. Together these 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.

National League of Cities (NLC)

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal governments throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute), a special entity within NLC, helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Patty Stonesifer and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.