SAN DIEGO CITY SCHOOLS
Office of Instructional Support

DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL RENEWAL:
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION THROUGH BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS

March 2, 2004

Introductory Statement

As part of its comprehensive high school reform process, the San Diego Unified School District is considering the development of new small high schools to meet the needs of students currently enrolled in district alternative schools. Alternative education is a specialized education program tailored to meet the needs of at-risk secondary school students who are credit deficient and/or whose grade point average (GPA) would prevent them from graduating; several alternative schools offer special facilities for pregnant and parenting students.

One option under consideration for reform of the district’s alternative schools is the development of several Big Picture Company schools to provide the personalized education needed by at-risk students. This report provides background on the Big Picture Company, its school model and core educational principles, academic outcomes, and network of schools. The report requests Board of Education approval to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (See Attachment 1) with the Big Picture Company to develop one or more Big Picture schools within the San Diego Unified School District, with the first 9th grade class starting in fall 2004. The first Big Picture School in San Diego will be named the San Diego Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical High School.

Background

SDCS has begun implementing a high school reform program that features five components, as detailed in the Status Report presented to the Board of Education on September 9, 2003. In addition to ensuring that all students have access to a comprehensive, high-quality instructional program aligned with state academic standards, schools grouped into each of the five components of the district’s high school reform plan will work to address the following student, school, and community needs:

- **Redesign Schools**, which have identified a need to enhance student engagement to improve student achievement. The schools participating in this component include Crawford, Kearny, Morse and San Diego High.

- **Community Engagement High Schools**, which have identified retaining neighborhood students as their key need. The schools participating in this component include Clairemont, Mission Bay and Madison High.
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- **Challenge High Schools**, which are working to meet the needs of all students who attend their schools. The schools participating in this component include Henry, Mira Mesa, San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts, Scripps Ranch, Serra, Point Loma, and University City.

- **New, Freestanding Small High Schools**. Schools participating in this component include the new schools at the Lincoln High site and other new small schools under development.

- **Alternative Schools**, which are developing long-term plans to address issues of academic rigor, applied learning, and monitoring individual student progress. Schools participating in this component include Twain and Garfield.

Each component of the high school reform program shares a common focus on student engagement, academic achievement, and accountability for results. Students at all district high schools will be engaged in an ambitious and rigorous course of study developed by teachers and staff dedicated to helping students meet state and local standards and leave school prepared for success in work and further education.

SDCS is considering partnering with the Big Picture Company to develop small alternative high schools that meet the needs of low-income, underserved urban high school students.

**The Big Picture Company Background.** While serving as senior fellows at Brown University’s Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Dr. Dennis Littky and Dr. Elliot Washor formed the Big Picture Company, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to education reform. They collaborated with Rhode Island policy-makers to design a new high school that would integrate academic and applied learning in a student-centered setting. The result was the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (known as the Met) in Providence.

The school opened its doors to 52 students in September 1996, and in 1999 moved into a new facility (built with state bond funding) with a total of 220 students at two campuses. In 2003 the Big Picture Company inaugurated a new campus of four small schools located in south Providence, Rhode Island. The Met now enrolls 440 students in its six Providence schools. By 2005 the Met is expected to reach its maximum capacity of 630 students, approximately 10% of the Providence high school population. The student body is ethnically diverse (41% White, 38% Latino, 18% African-American, and 3% Asian-American), English is the second language in 42% of the students’ homes, and over half qualify for free lunch.

Student outcomes are impressive: In the 2002-2003 school year, student attendance was 94%, and 99% of the seniors graduated. Compared to other Providence high schools, the Met has one-third the dropout rate, one-third the absentee rate, and one-eighteenth the rate of disciplinary suspensions. Of its four senior classes to date (2000 – 2003), 97% of students applied to college and 100% were admitted. Although 75% of these students are the first in their families to attend college, 82% of them are still enrolled, an exceptional retention record.
The Big Picture Company has received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to establish additional schools across the country. In addition to the Met in Providence, Big Picture schools now operate in Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Federal Way (Washington State), and in Oakland, Sacramento and El Dorado, California. The Big Picture Company also is working with the Gates Foundation to provide guidance and assistance to five youth development organizations creating alternative schools for students at risk of dropping out of school.

**The Big Picture Company’s School Model.** Big Picture Schools are defined by their commitment to educate “One Student at a Time.” Each school is based upon the recognition that each child has unique interests, needs, and abilities that the educational program must take into account. The key to achievement lies in fostering students’ individual interests, encouraging their active participation in the learning process, and developing their ability to apply knowledge and skills to real life experience and challenges.

The Big Picture Company’s core educational principles include:

- **Small school size:** no more than 150 students, with a student-to-teacher ratio of no more than 17:1.

- **Advisory structure:** An advisor (teacher) meets daily with an advisory group of 12-17 students that is the core learning community and center of accountability for its member students. Each advisor stays with the same group of students for 2-4 years.

- **Personalized education:** Each student has a comprehensive, individualized learning plan that the student crafts with the guidance of the advisor, parent or guardian, and the internship mentor. The learning plan identifies learning goals – including communication, social reasoning, empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and personal qualities – and describes authentic project work that will meet these goals. The learning plan is reviewed and updated quarterly.

- **Real world learning:** Each student spends two days a week engaged in meaningful project work in an internship outside the school building, under the direction of a mentor. Project work is designed to foster broad learning rather than development of specific vocational skills. Advisors ensure that the internship work is integrated with the student’s learning goals and school-based study.

- **Authentic assessment:** In addition to state-mandated assessments, schools rigorously evaluate student learning and development through a variety of performances, including a portfolio of work and quarterly exhibitions. Advisors provide written, in-depth assessments of each student’s progress.

- **Focus on community:** Each in-house school day begins with an all-school gathering that offers opportunities for students to showcase their work and for guests from the community to give performances and presentations. Whole community events for staff, students, families and mentors are scheduled throughout the year.
• **Family engagement:** The school enrolls whole families. It empowers parents to play an active role in their child’s education and in the school community. Parents/guardians participate in quarterly learning plan meetings, and are expected to attend an orientation for new families and a number of school functions throughout the school year.

• **Eye on the Big Picture:** Schools are networked to one another to share best practices. Staff members from all Big Picture Schools attend an annual conference/retreat in the summer.

### Instructional Implications

The Big Picture Schools hold high standards for students. The learning assessment system is based on five school-wide Learning Goals and each student’s own personal list of goals. The five school-wide Learning Goals are based on the belief that high school graduates must know how to reason, problem-solve and be cooperative members of the community, and include:

1. **Empirical reasoning:** to use empirical evidence and a logical process to make decisions and evaluate hypotheses.

2. **Quantitative reasoning:** to understanding numbers, to analyze uncertainty, to comprehend the properties of shapes, and to study how things change over time.

3. **Communication:** to understand one’s audience, to write, read, speak and listen well, to use technology and artistic expression to communicate, and to be exposed to another language.

4. **Social reasoning:** to see diverse perspectives, to understand social issues, to explore ethics, and to look at issues historically.

5. **Personal qualities:** to demonstrate respect, responsibility, organization, and leadership.

The Big Picture School’s advisors look at the big picture of each student’s learning and challenge the student to do academically rigorous project work that incorporates the Learning Goals and is focused around his or her personal interests. Students attending the Big Picture Schools spend two days per week off-site at an internship. The remainder of their week is spent in project-based learning.

Students at a Big Picture School do not meet in traditional classes. Therefore, to accommodate the internship structure and the non-traditional academic program, the Big Picture schools will utilize the Work Experience Education and Regional Occupational Program (ROP) structures and Long-Term Independent Study, individualized alternative education designed to teach the knowledge and skills of the core curriculum, in accordance with District Administrative Procedure No. 4317.
A written long-term independent study agreement will be executed each semester for each participating student. Each agreement will require at least the equivalent of a minimum school day for every school day covered, and will include a statement that long-term independent study is an optional alternative in which no student may be required to participate. The written agreements will include the duration of the independent study agreement, including the beginning and end dates of the student’s participation under the agreement. They also will include the objectives and methods of the course of study covered by the agreement, a statement of the maximum length of time allowed between the assignment and the completion of the student's assigned work (as determined by Board policy), the specific resources that will be made available to the student in order to attain the objectives, the deadlines for submitting assignments and for reporting progress, the method used to evaluate the student's work, and the number of course credits or other measures of academic accomplishment to be earned by the student upon completion. Each agreement will be signed by the student, parent or guardian, and supervising teacher/advisor.

The only item that will count for long-term independent study attendance credit is evaluated work that is completed and submitted by the due dates established in the written agreement.

Facilities Implications

The Big Picture Company uses innovative architectural designs to enhance student learning. Big Picture facilities strive to integrate physically with the community, blending in with the scale and style of surrounding neighborhood buildings. Inside Big Picture Schools, spaces are designed to support the students’ real-world work outside of school. Instead of the traditional long corridors of isolated rooms, Big Picture Schools provide a choice of work environments that accommodate different types of projects and learning styles. Flexibility and autonomy are built directly into the facility by utilizing floor-to-ceiling movable walls and modular furniture.

Under a proposed (See Attachment 1)with the Big Picture Company, the district will be responsible for providing a facility for each school. The Big Picture Company generally locates schools in or near the business community to facilitate student internships and prefers a location on or near a community college or university campus (easy access via the trolley would be acceptable). The goal is to provide students with the opportunity to graduate with both a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree.

District staff members have explored various locations for a San Diego Big Picture School, including the existing Y.O.U. and the City as School locations that the Board voted to close on February 10, 2004. However, these properties are not the correct size, and they do not have the flexible layout needed for a Big Picture School.

Because the San Diego Big Picture School will incorporate a Regional Occupational Program (ROP), SDCS may lease space to house the program. Under Section 17285 of the California Education Code, the building owner will provide a report from a structural engineer certifying
that substantial structural hazards do not exist, that the building complies with all applicable local building standards and all applicable local health and safety standards in the community in which it is located, and that the facilities conform to the seismic safety standards set forth in Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations.

Although the location has not been finalized, we plan to locate somewhere in the City Heights area in a commercial or other similar building. Our initial investigation reveals that we can expect to spend approximately $1.90 per square foot on lease and other costs.

The San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council has suggested that the district consider locating the school at the City Heights Center at 4305 University Avenue. Part of the Urban Village developed by Price Charities, the City Heights Center is envisioned as a one-stop service center for City Heights residents. The facility offers 24-hour on-site security, attached parking, on-site property management, a large conference center and meeting room, and state of the art telecommunications systems. The Center has access to a variety of Urban Village facilities, including the San Diego Community College District’s Mid-City Continuing Education Center, the Weingart City Heights Library, the Urban Village community pool, and the Urban Village Performance Annex.

District staff members have met with representatives of Price Charities to discuss the possibility of locating a Big Picture School at their City Heights Center. Price Charities has offered a competitive lease agreement that includes a tenant improvement allowance to prepare the new building for use as a school. Price Charities will provide a structural engineer’s report certifying that the building meets the structural requirements for a Regional Occupational Program (as specified in California Education Code, section 17285).

**Budget Implications**

Big Picture schools operate on a public school budget. Under a (See Attachment 1)with the Big Picture Company, the district will be expected to commit the funding amount for each school as determined through the district’s budget formula and will provide all district office services to each school. The Big Picture Company will provide professional development through their Gates Foundation grant during the planning year.

Big Picture Schools have found that students who already have experienced a traditional, structured high school experience have great difficulty adapting to the less structured yet more demanding academic program. They have found that successful implementation of the Big Picture Schools model requires that the school open with just a ninth grade class in its first year, with an additional grade added each year until the school is fully enrolled with approximately 140 students in grades 9-12. This expansion process allows the students to become acclimated to the non-traditional school structure.

District staff members have developed a budget for the San Diego Big Picture Schools. This budget is based on the per-pupil funding, building lease and parking costs allocated to the Y.O.U. and City as School programs, which are slated to close in June 2003. Furniture,
equipment, books and supplies will be shifted from the Y.O.U. locations to the new Big Picture School.

The draft Big Picture School budget also assumes that the district will open at least two Big Picture Schools. In the first year of the program, two 9th grade classes will be enrolled and will be located in the same facility. In year two (2005-2006), one of these classes will move to a second facility, allowing the two schools to grow to their full enrollment of approximately 140 students each in separate locations. This year-by-year expansion process, however, does create additional expense, since school staff serve fewer than the full enrollment of students in the first three years. Price Charities has indicated an interest in helping the district fund the developmental phase of the school program and has invited submission of a proposal for up to $1 million dollars to cover additional expenses to the Price/Weingart Fund at the San Diego Foundation. This proposal will be submitted pending Board approval of this report. Irrespective of this funding, using the per pupil allocation, the schools will be self sustaining by year four of operation when all four grades are enrolled (140 students at each of two schools).

The draft budget for the proposed Big Picture Schools is presented in Attachment 2.

**Public Support and Engagement Implications**

The Big Picture Schools will create opportunities for multiple stakeholders to be involved in and provide input to the small school design process. Parents, students and community stakeholders will be invited to participate in the school design meetings and workshops, and information will be shared and questions answered at the schools’ Open House meetings. Parents and students will participate as members of the school facility design team. The Big Picture Company will hold parent nights (in multiple languages) to provide information and answer questions about the new school. School staff will make presentations to local Parent, Teacher and Student Associations (PTSA) and local community organizations.

A prime objective of the school design is to develop more adult and community engagement in the school. More involvement by parents can be fostered with more direct communication to the home, more access to teachers who know the child, and for parents to know who to call with questions and concerns about the child. The Big Picture Company’s professional development services will support this area.

Each Big Picture School will be open to students at all levels of academic performance, abilities, interests, aspirations, and socio-economic backgrounds. Students will be recruited throughout the district and selected by a lottery system to reflect the demographics of the community as a whole. Although open to students from throughout the district, the schools will emphasize serving the needs of the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Big Picture School staff also will work with the business community to support workplace-learning experiences for students in the areas of their interests. Workplace learning activities provided by supportive business and community organizations could include internships, service
learning opportunities, speakers, workplace mentors, job shadowing opportunities, and company tours.

In years one and two (2004-2005 and 2005-2006), when the Big Picture Schools will enroll only ninth and tenth grade students, the school’s Regional Occupational Program classes will be geared to the needs of the parents and community members. This is due to the sixteen year old age requirement for enrollment in ROP programs. Beginning in year three, the ROP program will be an integral part of the educational program for all 11th and 12th grade students in the Big Picture Schools.

The first Big Picture School in San Diego will be named the San Diego Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical High School. This name was unanimously approved by the School Names Committee at its February 25, 2004 meeting.

Policy Implications

This report is consistent with Board Policy F-1010. This policy indicates the Board of Education's support for school restructuring that is aimed at a "fundamental change in school organization and construction that will prepare all students for the future." It further states that "the purposes of school restructuring are to improve the quality of instruction and student achievement." The design of the Big Picture School is precisely to create a fundamental, necessary change to improve the quality of instruction and student achievement for all students who choose to attend these schools. This report does not require any immediate revision of Administrative Procedures, but district staff will review all district procedures to ensure that changes are made to be consistent with the implementation of this program.

Recommendations

The Superintendent recommends that the Board of Education:

- Direct district staff to implement the Big Picture Schools with the first to be named the San Diego Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical High School utilizing the Regional Occupational Program model.

- Direct district staff to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (See Attachment 1) with the Big Picture Company.

- Direct district staff to identify a suitable location and facility for the Big Picture School and to negotiate a lease agreement for Board approval not to exceed $1.90 per square foot.

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