



Alliance for Excellent Education Third Annual High School Policy Conference

Taking the Next Step—Defining a Shared Federal Agenda for High School Reform
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How Can Alignment and Rigor Raise the Bar?

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Basic issues

Research by Achieve and other organizations has identified a common set of knowledge and skills in math and English that are necessary for success in postsecondary education and for jobs that pay well and hold opportunities for career advancement. Related research has also documented that upwards of 40 percent of high school graduates lack those skills—judging by postsecondary remediation rates, opinions of employers and college faculty, and of recent high school graduates themselves. Additional research has documented an “expectations gap” between the knowledge and skills essential for success, and the standards, courses, and tests that define high school graduation requirements.

At least half the states in the country are working to close this gap by aligning high school standards, curriculum, graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability with the demands of college and career. These steps will increase expectations for student learning in nearly every state, create seamless transitions from high school to college and career, and help empower high school graduates to make choices about their futures. The primary beneficiaries will be low-income and minority youth. At present they are often steered into the least rigorous courses of study—programs that meet low graduation requirements but leave them academically unprepared to succeed in postsecondary education, or to get good jobs on the first rung of a career.

Ideally, high school standards that are aligned with the demands of college and the workplace will form the basis for adopting or revising a number of policies and tools, including the courses students must take to earn a high school diploma, descriptions of course content, and end of course exams or other high school assessments. High school assessments that are sufficiently rigorous and aligned with college readiness standards could be used so that postsecondary institutions could use the results of those tests to inform high school students about their preparedness for college-level work, or to identify skill deficiencies that students can make up while still in high school. At the postsecondary level, these same standards would inform any revisions in policies and assessments used to place students in remedial versus credit-bearing courses, as well as in course requirements for admission to four-year institutions.

Alignment was the subject of significant attention at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools. There, governors, chief state school officers, and higher education and business leaders in thirteen states committed to work together to address this agenda. Since then, many more states have committed to work toward aligning high school standards to the skills required after graduation. States are beginning to act in large numbers:

- Thirty states are working to align high school standards with the demands of postsecondary education and work; five have done so already.
- Ten states have raised high school graduation requirements to the levels recommended in the American Diploma Project (ADP) research; an additional ten are developing new requirements.
- Half a dozen states now administer high school assessments that postsecondary institutions can use to place students into credit-bearing courses; nine states are working to develop a common end-of-course exam in Algebra II that can be used for these purposes.
- Thirty-one states are putting in place the data systems, based on individual student records, needed to follow students from K–12 and into postsecondary education; only three states have such a data system in place already. Together with improved standards and assessments, these data systems will provide the foundation for holding high schools accountable for increasing graduation rates, and for ensuring that their graduates are well-prepared to enter postsecondary education and the workforce.

Areas of Agreement and Disagreement:

Judging by the rapid spread of this policy agenda, there is considerable consensus among education leaders—including governors, K–12, higher education, and business leaders—on the need for change. However, states are just beginning to work on these issues. While there are many areas of broad agreement, many tough policy issues lie ahead. In some cases, the outlines of disagreement are becoming clear; in other cases the policy development work is neither sufficiently advanced nor sufficiently clear to surface disagreements. Several issues illustrate the nature of current challenges:

Preparation for Work. Research by Achieve and by ACT has focused on defining the knowledge and skills needed for success in careers, particularly in rapidly growing fields. These jobs pay well, provide opportunities for advancement, and often require some kind of postsecondary education such as technical training, an apprenticeship, or an AA degree, though not necessarily four years of college. However, many high school graduates will aim for low-skill jobs. What is the role of high schools in preparing young people for such jobs?

Mandated Curriculum vs. Default Option. Of the states that require students to take a core “college- and career-prep” curriculum, nearly all have made this core curriculum the default option, rather than an inflexible mandate. Students are automatically placed into the college- and career-prep course sequence, and are permitted to pursue a less rigorous program of study only after a meeting between the student, his or her parents, and school officials. This default option stands in sharp contrast to current arrangements, where low-income or minority youth must talk their way into a college-prep curriculum, fighting lower expectations and the view that they are “not college material.” Those who favor the default option believe it provides a pathway for students who either can’t reach college-ready standards or don’t aspire to. Those who favor graduation requirements without the safety valve provided by the default option are most concerned that the opt-out provisions will be used to continue to deny low-income and minority students access to the rigorous preparation they deserve.

High School Accountability. The major challenge here is that there has been insufficient attention to the design of high school accountability models that support the dual agenda of raising high school graduation *standards* and graduation *rates* at the same time. What little attention high school accountability has received has largely been an extension of approaches used at the elementary level—

a focus on achievement in the grades in which students are tested, with little attention to other indicators. Most state tests are administered in tenth or eleventh grade and often cover content taught in earlier grades, so the knowledge and skills that are necessary for postsecondary preparation are rarely addressed. And graduation rates typically play a minimal role, if any, in state accountability models.

To promote the broader policy agenda, new models of accountability for high school must be developed. These models must provide incentives for schools to focus on dropout prevention and recovery (even if it takes some students more than four years to graduate). They must provide incentives for high schools to produce graduates that are college-ready and career-ready by paying attention not only to test scores, but also to course-taking patterns, credit accumulation, and dropout and graduation rates.

Implications for Federal Policy

High school reform is newer and far more complicated than other education improvement projects, especially efforts over the past several decades to improve teaching and learning in reading and math in the elementary grades. The schools themselves are more complex institutions, and the students are more complex individuals. They have more varied academic backgrounds and more diverse postsecondary plans. Effective high school reform must deal not only with the high school, its staff, and its students, but with the relationships between high schools and other systems that receive its graduates. It is difficult for the federal government to play a strong role when the basic design features of the new systems to be created are not yet well defined. In this context, the federal government's role should be focused and highly strategic. Some key questions to consider follow:

How can the federal government provide incentives for states to align K–12, postsecondary education, and the workplace?

- Should the federal government provide grants to states to help them build the standards, assessments, curriculum, and data systems?
- Should the federal government link these new standards and assessments to an accountability system, as in the No Child Left Behind Act?

How can the federal government insist that states quickly intervene in dropout factories and persistently low-performing high schools?

- Is it time to design an accountability system that provides states, high school staff, and students with the right incentives?
- Does the federal government have enough information to accurately identify schools with the weakest holding power and lowest achievement levels?
- How can the federal government insist that states take immediate action to turn these schools around, and provide support to help them do so?

How can the federal government support capacity building?

- What research and development is needed to develop instructional tools, professional development, and state and local data systems to provide a foundation for continuous improvement?

- To what extent should the federal government invest directly in states and districts to help them build the capacity to effectively use these tools?
- What should be the federal government's role in supporting efforts to help recruit and retain talented and well-prepared individuals to teach math, science, and other subjects facing shortages, particularly in high-poverty schools?
- What should be the federal government's role in providing resources to high schools with large numbers of students arriving well behind in reading and math skills, and with high dropout rates?

These are the central questions when considering the federal role in aligning high school standards and curricula with the demands of college and the workplace.