

# Interventions That Support High School Graduation and Workforce Readiness

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## Background

The twenty-first-century economy necessitates, and rewards, higher education credentials and skill development.<sup>1</sup> Earning a high school diploma is a necessary step toward entering the workplace, a fact not lost on education leaders and policymakers. The national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, with 83.2 percent of the Class of 2015 graduating within four years.<sup>2</sup> However, only some 40 percent of these high school graduates are in any sense ready for a career or college.

Data shows that nearly half of all first-year college students require remediation in English, math, or both, with African American and Latino students comprising the bulk of remedial enrollment.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, nearly three-quarters (70 percent) of students who enroll in two-year community colleges, the basic barometer for college readiness, fail to complete a degree within three years.<sup>4</sup> At the six-year mark, completion rates for all two-year college students are still less than 40 percent.<sup>5</sup> Far too many students exit high school underprepared for basic, postsecondary-level work. While it is central to keep all students on a path to high school graduation, it is equally important to lead more students in all subgroups to graduate truly ready for college and a career.<sup>6</sup>

## A Meaningful High School Diploma

College-ready and career-ready, terms often used synonymously, require distinctly different modes to achieve postsecondary success. Students seeking to enter college need exposure to true college-preparatory curricula and course work in high school. Without this exposure and preparedness, students are more likely to enter college with weak academic skills<sup>7</sup> and needing noncredit-bearing remedial courses, which are time consuming and costly.<sup>8</sup> If achieving a postsecondary credential is the ultimate goal, then states' secondary education policies must include strengthening students' academic skills. In one successful example of this, first-generation college students from low-income families who completed Chicago Public Schools' International Baccalaureate programs were 40 percent more likely to attend a four-year college, 50 percent more likely to attend a selective four-year college,<sup>9</sup> and significantly more likely to persist in college than their matched peers outside the program.<sup>10</sup>

For those students seeking workforce entry or postsecondary credentialing outside the traditional college experience, however, the "College for All" culture permeating high schools often underserves their needs. This is evident in both the growing "skills gap" between young adults and higher-skilled (and higher-wage) employment, as well as in an overall decline in employment opportunities for young adults. For example, male students who participated in Career Academies, an intensive academic and vocational curriculum with a career theme relevant to local industry and economic needs, earned 11 percent (\$2,088) a year more than their non-Career Academy peers.<sup>11</sup> As this example illustrates, a lack of authentic career and industry preparedness can exacerbate already persistent wage and employability gaps.<sup>12</sup>

## The Path Forward

That said, secondary education need not be a zero-sum game. The high school experience can prepare students academically and also offer a full range of postsecondary education options to achieve true college and career/industry readiness.<sup>13</sup> In this marketplace, students with no credentials have no payoff; they waste scarce time and money incurring debt and pursuing credentials for which they have been prepared inadequately to achieve.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, "if all states improved their schools to the point where average student achievement<sup>15</sup> matched that of the top-performing states, the overall gains would be \$76 trillion, or more than four times the current GDP [gross domestic product]<sup>16</sup> of the United States."<sup>17</sup>

States and districts must look beyond traditional models of public education to incubate innovation and move the needle on educating their youngest citizens. School leaders, community organizations, and policymakers should consider not only thoughtful and intentional programmatic design but also long-term strategies, motivated by the high impact of successful implementation.

To aid in such decisions, the fact sheets contained in this packet focus in depth on instructional models and interventions proven

to move students toward high school graduation and college and career readiness. The fact sheets are grouped in the following categories:

- **The Rigor Connection:** Bringing high-caliber courses and programs that can improve academic preparedness, especially for first-generation college students from low-income families.
- **The Workplace Connection:** Investing in industry pathways and interventions that provide remedies for the aptitude-education mismatch as it relates to industry-readiness training.

- **The College Connection:** Replicating proven early college/ dual- and concurrent-enrollment programs.

Each fact sheet describes the intervention's scope; analyzes the research basis for the intervention; and includes a series of questions that leaders can use to (1) evaluate whether the intervention could meet local needs and (2) identify potential challenges to implementation.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> W. C. Symonds, R. Schwartz, and R. F. Ferguson, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 2011), <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4740480>.
- <sup>2</sup> V. Strauss, "U.S. High School Graduation Rate Is Up—But There's a Warning Label Attached," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/10/27/u-s-high-school-graduation-rate-is-up-but-theres-a-warning-label-attached/>.
- <sup>3</sup> L. Jimenez et al., *Remedial Education: The Cost of Catching Up* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2016/09/28/144000/remedial-education/>.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "United States Education Dashboard: Detail," <http://dashboard.ed.gov/statedetail.aspx?i=&id=0&wt=40> (accessed July 5, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> J. Juszkwicz, *Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2015* (Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges, 2015), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED557990>.
- <sup>6</sup> S. Kress, "Diplomas Must Recognize College and Career Readiness," *Education Next* 15, no. 1 (2015), <http://educationnext.org/diplomas-must-recognize-college-career-readiness/>.
- <sup>7</sup> R. Deil-Amen and S. DeLuca, "The Underserved Third: How Our Educational Structures Populate an Educational Underclass," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 15, no. 1–2 (April 20, 2010): 27–50.
- <sup>8</sup> Jimenez et al., *Remedial Education*.
- <sup>9</sup> The term "selective college" refers to a college or university with a low rate of acceptance. The lower the percentage of accepted students, the more selective the college or university is.
- <sup>10</sup> A. Berner and D. Steiner, "Chicago's Use of the International Baccalaureate: An Educational Success Story That Didn't Travel," *Commentary*, Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, (October 14, 2015), <http://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/?p=36>.
- <sup>11</sup> J. J. Kemple and C. J. Willner, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York, NY: MDRC, June 2008), [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full\\_50.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_50.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson, *Pathways to Prosperity*.
- <sup>13</sup> S. Siegel, "A Meaningful High School Diploma," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no. 10 (2009): 740–744.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Rosenbaum et al., *The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them* (New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation, January 2015).
- <sup>15</sup> "To estimate the achievement of workers born in the United States, [Hanushek, Ruhose, and Woessmann] use mathematics test scores on the NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] for 8th graders by birth state between 1990 and 2011. For workers born and educated outside of the United States, mathematics scores from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted between 1995 and 2011 are used." E. Hanushek, J. Ruhose, and L. Woessmann, "It Pays to Improve School Quality," *Education Next* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2016), <http://educationnext.org/pays-improve-school-quality-student-achievement-economic-gain/>.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, figure 6, "State Variation in Economic Impact."
- <sup>17</sup> Hanushek, Ruhose, and Wössmann, "It Pays to Improve School Quality."

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