

Preparing High School Students for College and Work

By Sunny Deyé

Many high school graduates are not prepared for college or the work force.

Too many high school graduates are not adequately prepared for postsecondary education or training, nor are they prepared to be competitive in the work force. In a February 2005 survey by Achieve Inc., college instructors estimated that more than 40 percent of high school graduates are not ready for college courses, and up to 30 percent of first-year postsecondary education students must take remedial courses. In the same survey, employers estimated that 45 percent of high school graduates lack the skills to advance beyond entry-level jobs.

A growing consensus among education experts indicates that the knowledge and skills high school graduates need to be successful in college are the same as those for a job that will pay enough to support a family above the poverty level, provide benefits, and offer clear pathways for career advancement through further education and training. Several states have recently attempted to improve high school students' preparation for college and work by aligning high school standards with the skills employers and colleges say are needed for success in their institutions.

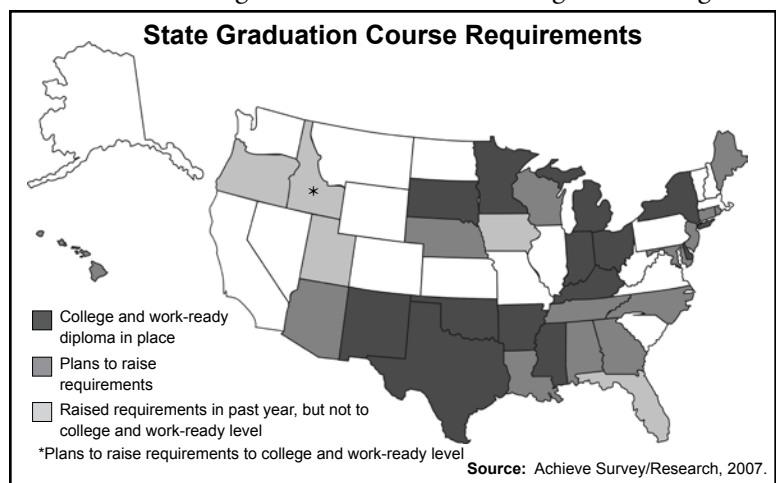
State Action

Studies indicate that the same skills are needed for success in college and careers.

Leaders in both education and economic policy agree that, in the coming years, all students will need some form of postsecondary education—technical certification, an associate's degree, a four-year degree, or beyond—to prepare for a well-paying, secure job. Recent studies from ACT and the American Diploma Project find that the same skills are needed to succeed in freshman-level courses in two- and four-year colleges and for living-wage, entry-level jobs and careers. To be successful, all high school graduates need advanced reading, writing, communications and mathematics skills equivalent to four years of grade-level or honors English and math classes through at least Algebra II.

High school graduation and college admission requirements often differ.

Many students and their parents are unaware that high school graduation requirements often differ from the requirements for admission to a four-year college or university. In addition, remediation rates among first-year students in both two- and four-year postsecondary institutions are high, suggesting



that existing state and local graduation requirements are not adequately aligned with postsecondary expectations.

The most common criterion for awarding a high school diploma continues to be course requirements. More states recently have attempted to set high school requirements to ensure that graduates are prepared for success in college and the workplace. According to Achieve's report, *Closing the Expectations Gap 2007*, 13 states have enacted policies requiring high school students to complete a college- and work-ready curriculum, 11 more than in 2005. Another 16 states plan to adopt such requirements.

In 2005, Indiana approved the Core 40 as the default high school curriculum for all students. It becomes the state high school graduation requirement for the class of 2011, and in the fall of 2011 the Core 40 diploma will become an admissions requirement for public four-year colleges and universities in Indiana. Also in 2005, Oklahoma mandated that students complete English, math, science, social studies and other (choice of foreign language or computer science) requirements aligned with admissions requirements for Oklahoma public colleges and universities, effective with the class of 2010.

Many states that require high school students to complete a college- and work-ready curriculum allow parents to remove children from the standard course of study if they sign a waiver acknowledging the risks of studying a less rigorous curriculum. This allows students to take less rigorous courses and still earn a diploma. Four states—Delaware, Minnesota, Mississippi and Ohio—have no such provision; the course requirements are mandatory for all students.

Thirteen states require a college- and work-ready high school curriculum.

Some states allow waivers for a less rigorous course of study.

Federal Action

To meet the growing need for improved math and science instruction, President Bush signed into law on Feb. 8, 2006, the Academic Competitiveness Grant Program, created by the Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005. The grant encourages students to take more challenging courses in high school—making success in college more likely, according to research—and to pursue college majors—such as science, mathematics, technology, engineering and critical foreign languages—that are in high demand in the global economy.

Students are eligible for an Academic Competitiveness Grant if they complete a high school course of study with at least four years of English; three years of math, including Algebra I and another higher level math course; three years of science, including two years of biology, chemistry or physics; three years of social studies; and one year of foreign language. Academic Competitiveness Grants are available to Pell Grant recipients for their first (\$750) and second (\$1,300) years of college.

Academic competitiveness grants are available to first- and second-year college students.

Selected References

- Achieve Inc. *Closing the Expectations Gap 2007: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Work*. Washington, D.C.: Achieve, 2007; http://www.achieve.org/files/50StateReport-Final_0.pdf.
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