

If you make high schools tougher with more rigorous math and English classes, fewer students will drop out and more will graduate and go on to college.

Can this be true?

It is in Indiana where a rigorous core curriculum has been getting results for more than a decade.

The state's Core 40 program, developed with input from business and higher education leaders, prepares students for college and careers by making sure they take the right classes in English, math, science and social studies. Since 1994, participation in the Core 40 has been voluntary, but in 2005 legislators voted to require it for all students. Core 40 becomes Indiana's required high school curriculum in the fall of 2007. To opt out requires parental consent.

Core 40 includes academically rigorous courses in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, physical education/health and wellness, and electives including world



**REPRESENTATIVE
GREG PORTER
INDIANA**

languages, technical and fine arts. In addition, students can earn Core 40 with Academic Honors and Core 40 with Technical Honors diplomas.

"With the loss of manufacturing jobs in Indiana, students must be ready to go on to college or prepared to enter the workforce with better skills for success," says Representative Greg Porter.

The percentage of students earning a Core 40 or more rigorous Academic Honors diploma rose from 13 percent in the 1993-94 academic year to 65 percent in 2003-04. Since the 1980s, when this work began, Indiana has moved from 40th to 10th in the nation in the percentage of high school graduates going to college.

Indiana also is aggressively fighting its dropout problem. Until 2005, the state had

Sunny Deye tracks high school requirements and graduation rates for NCSL.

A+ for Rigor

States are learning that students not only do better when they are challenged in school, but also stay to graduate.

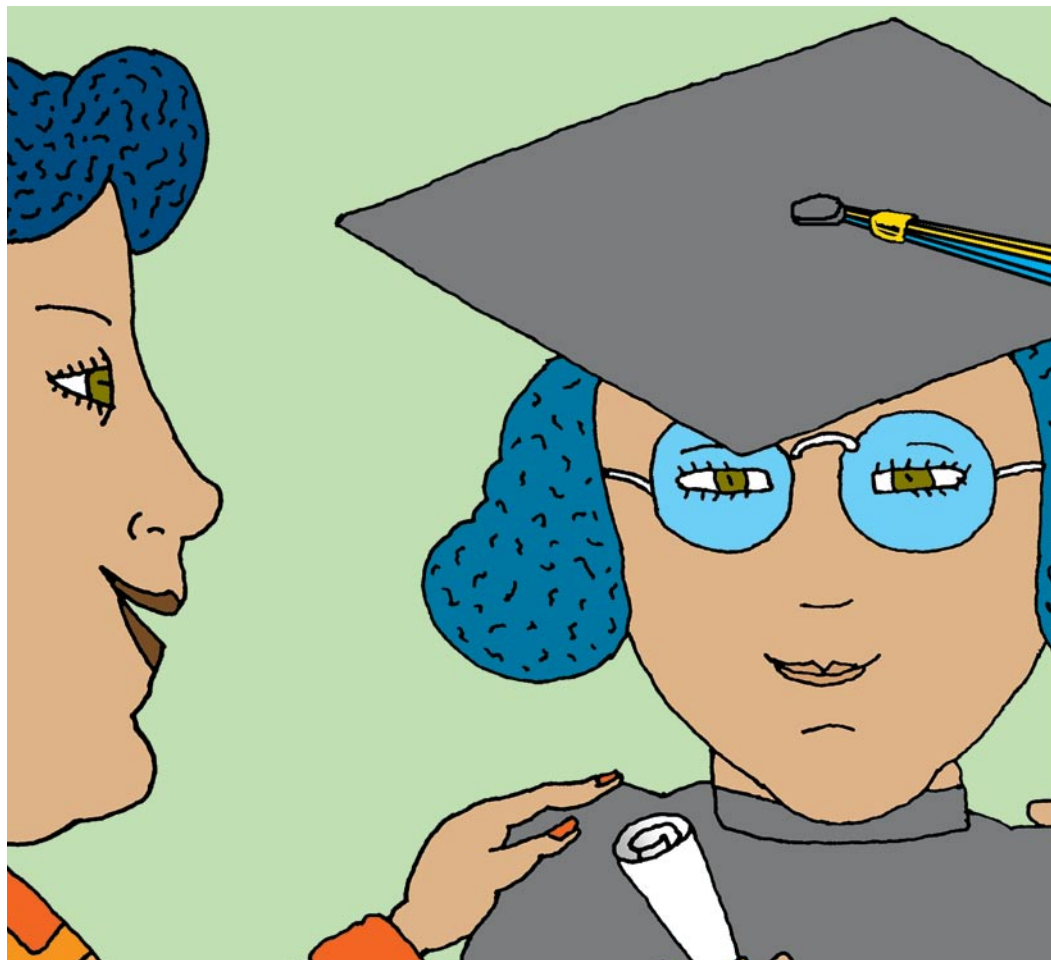
reported a graduation rate of approximately 90 percent, a figure that didn't include students who dropped out between school years. Researchers estimated that the state's actual graduation rate was closer to 72 percent.

In 2005, the General Assembly passed a bill that required calculating dropouts by using the number of incoming freshman and comparing that to the number of seniors graduating four years later. Now, graduation rates are reported at a little better than 70 percent.

"We needed to get a true handle on how

many young people were dropping out of the system," says Representative Luke Messer. "As in most states, our graduation rate was vastly over-reported."

Indiana's dropout rates are similar to the national graduation rates reported by the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center for the 2002-03 school year. EPE finds that approximately 70 percent of all students in the nation graduate from high school with a regular diploma, with large disparities across racial and ethnic groups.

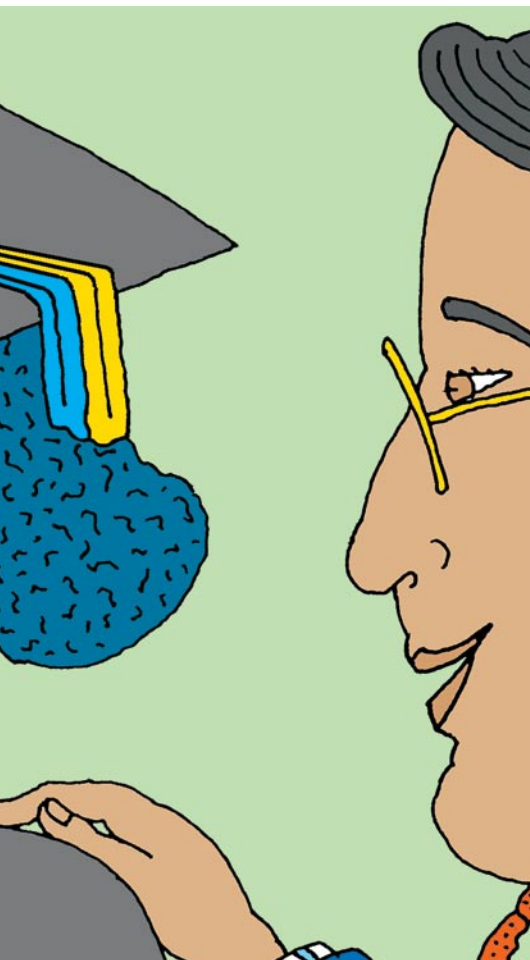




REPRESENTATIVE
LUKE MESSER
INDIANA

One solution in Indiana was to raise the dropout age from 16 to 18, and tighten restrictions on reasons students can leave school.

“The 16-year-old dropout age was based on a set of assumptions that are out of date,” Messer says. “Maybe 30 years ago you could still get a manufacturing job and make enough money to live and raise a family. But today, high school dropouts are much more likely to be on public assistance. Over their lifetime, they each cost the state about a half million dollars,” he says. “We felt it was important to say to the community that outside of certain extreme exceptions, every



student should be in school until age 18.”

Indiana now requires potential dropouts to go through an exit interview. Students and parents must talk with the principal about the economic consequences of dropping out. Students who drop out without the permission of their parents and principal can lose their driver’s licenses and work permits. Messer says the requirement also makes principals more accountable for dropout rates.

Large numbers of students in Indiana and nationally drop out because of boredom in class, inability to see the relevance of school work to life after high school, and low expectations from teachers and school administrators.

Now high schools must report suspensions and the number of freshmen not earning enough credits to become sophomores. Students most at risk of dropping out will get yearly reviews of their credits and help catching up if they are not on target. The new law also allows students to earn credit toward associate’s degrees while still in high school, at no charge to low-income students. It sets up high school completion programs at community college so dropouts can earn regular high school diplomas instead of GEDs.

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Indiana involved the business community in designing the Core 40 program because lawmakers believe that high school students planning to enter the workforce should know as much as students going on to college.

“The knowledge and skills necessary for high school graduates to enter and succeed in college courses, especially with regard to English, language arts and math, are very similar to the skills necessary to hold jobs that pay a decent wage and have potential for promotion and advancement,” says Mike Cohen, president of Achieve Inc., a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability.

“We want high schools to equip young people with the ability to make choices and control their own destiny and to reach a high level after they leave high school,” he says.

The social and economic costs of dropping out of high school are staggering. The American Youth Policy Forum’s report, “Whatever it Takes,” reports that the earning power of dropouts has been in almost contin-

Why Students Drop Out

A national poll of 16- to 25-year-olds about why they dropped out of high school uncovered some surprises.

WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT?

- Classes aren’t interesting or relevant to future: 47%
- Missed too many days of school and couldn’t catch up: 43%
- Too much freedom and not enough rules: 38%
- Was failing in school: 35%
- Wanted a job to make money: 32%

WHAT WAS HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE LIKE FOR DROPOUTS?

- Had passing grades: 88%
- Could have graduated if they had put forth the necessary effort: 70%
- Not motivated or inspired to work hard: 69%
- Would have worked harder if their high school had demanded more: 66%

WHAT DO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS BELIEVE WOULD KEEP KIDS IN SCHOOL?

- Opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning, etc.): 81%
- Teachers who keep classes interesting: 81%
- Smaller classes with more individual instruction: 75%
- Better communication between parents and school: 71%
- Increased supervision at school to ensure students attend classes: 70%

HOW DO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS FEEL ABOUT THEIR CHOICE TODAY?

- Believe graduating from high school is important to success in life: 81%
- Would have stayed in school: 74%
- Hard to find a job without a diploma: 47%

Source: “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006. (www.gatesfoundation.org)

Defining the Problem



uous decline over the past three decades. In 1971, male dropouts earned \$35,087 (in 2002 dollars), but this had fallen to \$23,903 in 2002. Earnings for female dropouts fell from \$19,888 to \$17,114. High school dropouts, on average, earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates, according to the report “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts.” In addition, dropouts are much more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, or be in prison.

Although more than 70 percent of high school graduates enter two- and four-year colleges, 28 percent need remedial help and fewer than half get a degree. For Latino and African-American students, the college preparation rate is even lower—only 16 percent of Latino and 20 percent of African-American students leave high school prepared for college.

Six states—Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota and Pennsylvania—had no state requirement in the 2005-06 school year for the number of total credits required

for high school graduation, leaving those decisions to local school districts. Minnesota passed legislation this session that requires a minimum of 21.5 credits for the class of 2008. Iowa and Michigan plan to phase in a minimum number of required credits for the class of 2011. Iowa will require 13 credits and Michigan, 16 (jumping to 18 for 2016). Other state graduation requirements range from a low of 13 credits required in California, Wisconsin and Wyoming to a high of 24 credits in Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and West Virginia.

A year ago, only Arkansas and Texas had graduation requirements for all students at the level of rigor that Achieve considers college and work ready—four years of rigorous English and four years of math through at least Algebra II. This year, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Oklahoma and South Dakota joined the list. Most of these states allow parents to opt their children out of the college- and work-ready courses by signing a waiver acknowledging the risks. This approach puts the responsibility on students and parents and allows states to monitor and evaluate the reasons students choose

In high schools across the country, graduation rates are based on an estimate of the number of students who have dropped out—an equation only as accurate as each school’s ability and willingness to track dropouts. The No Child Left Behind Act established loose guidelines for determining who graduates, but no standard formula or definitions. With each state defining and counting graduation rates using a different standard, it’s difficult if not impossible to accurately compare dropout rates nationally.

Concerned that graduation rates were widely overstated in her state, Maryland Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez sponsored legislation to provide a more accurate count of how many students earn diplomas four years after they enter high school.

“My hope is that accurate reporting will make it impossible to hide the truth,” says Gutierrez. “Once the public knows that only 50 percent to 60 percent of African-American and Latino kids are graduating, perhaps parents and communities will react with a level of outrage that will bring outside pressure for changes in the system.”

Maryland’s law requires that information on graduating rates be widely distributed to the public. The state is at the forefront of a national effort to adopt a common formula for determining graduation rates. The formula requires schools to divide the number of on-time graduates by the number of students who started the ninth grade four years earlier, with very strict accountability for counting students who transfer in or out.

Delegate Gutierrez says that providing accurate information about who graduates from high school will be controversial. “Not all communities will applaud this. The more you can get rid of the kids who aren’t making it, the better it is for those kids whose families are getting all the attention, AP courses and other supports. It’s a fight over the pie, especially when resources are limited. However, we can no longer ignore the problem. Good information about who graduates will allow us to provide interventions and enrichment for those kids, rather than wait three years for them to not graduate, or two years for them to be so far behind that they are encouraged to drop out.”

Who Graduates?

National Graduation Rates,
by Race and Gender, 2002-03

Race/Ethnicity	Female	Male
American Indian	47.5%	42.7%
Asian	79.6	73.1
Black	57.8	44.3
Hispanic	59.9	50.1
White	77.9	72.4
All	72.7%	65.2%

Source: EPE Research Center, 2006.



SENATOR
WAYNE KUIPERS
MICHIGAN

not to take the core curriculum.

Michigan's move to raise graduation requirements is especially noteworthy because of its strong tradition of local control and its higher than average dropout rate. In 2002-03, Michigan reported a graduation rate of

85 percent, but the EPE Research Center put the figure at 66 percent. Until last year, the only state requirement was one unit of civics. Michigan's new requirements will start with ninth graders entering high school next fall.

"We wanted to make sure that students were better prepared for jobs in the 21st century," says Senator Wayne Kuipers, who sponsored the Michigan Merit Core legislation. "We did extensive focus groups and found consistently that people thought more was needed, especially the business community. We heard time and again about the skills our high school graduates did not have."

According to the senator, Michigan honored its tradition of local control by leaving much of the decision-making up to schools and districts, holding them accountable for the ultimate success of the students. "We tried to leave it as open-ended as we could, by saying here's what we want the kids to learn, now you figure out how to get them there."

TOUGH PAYS OFF

Regardless of the method, adding rigor and relevance to the high school experience is gain-

ing momentum in the nation's statehouses.

"You don't do any good for a child by cutting slack as far as curriculum. When they get into the work place, no one will cut them slack," says Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and the president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. "A mechanic working on a modern vehicle needs computer skills, high level math and high language comprehension skills. It's a technical field—just pick up a car repair manual, and you realize that college-readiness and readiness for the modern work world are one and the same."

It's not only lawmakers and educators who are concerned about how well-prepared students are to compete in the global marketplace. The American public is concerned too, according to a 2005 poll commissioned by the Alliance for Excellent Education. "Today, people feel this right in their gut," Wise says. "People equate the high school diploma to economic success and they understand that the high school diploma means a quality education behind it."

"We have to be asking more of our students and our teachers."



NCSL 2006 FALL FORUM

NEW
**FACES,
ISSUES,
CHALLENGES**

**SAN ANTONIO
TEXAS**

DECEMBER

5 | THRU | 8

STANDING COMMITTEES, WORKSHOPS AND POLICY SEMINARS



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES
The Forum for America's Ideas

REGISTER TODAY!
ONLINE AT WWW.NCSL.ORG/FORUM
OR CALL (303) 364.7700 EXT.1430



THIS IS A TEXAS-SIZED MEETING YOU WANT TO ATTEND!