High Schools with High Expectations for All

Despite a great deal of effort over the past 20 years, academic achievement among high school students continues to lag. To ensure that no high school student is left behind, schools need:

1. High expectations for all high school students; and

2. A rigorous core curriculum to match those expectations.

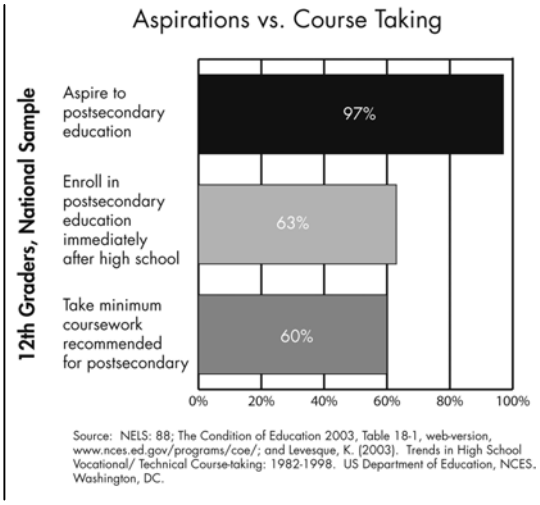
The American education system made strides in the 1990s in adopting academic standards for high schools in at least some subjects: *all* states (and, in Iowa, districts) have adopted standards in at least some subjects, including mathematics, English, science and social studies. Twenty-two have standards in all four subjects.[1] Now states need to translate those standards into *expectations* that ensure high schools actually adopt the standards, teachers are held to them, and students master them. The *No Child Left Behind Act* offers a rare opportunity for states and educators to address the issues of high expectations and academic rigor for all American high school students. A number of organizations have taken the lead and may offer promising approaches for states and schools.

The Challenge

American high school students are not adequately prepared for their futures. Increasingly the economy demands workers with postsecondary education and training. Students seem to understand this, but there is a serious disconnect between aspirations and preparation. More than 97 percent of youth say they aspire to participate in some sort of postsecondary education, and 63 percent enroll.[2] Yet, little more than half actually take a mix of academic classes in high school that will prepare them for success either in college or today's workplace. The courses they do take often fail to maintain their interest in school at all.

The results are high dropout rates and "drift-outs" - college students who do not return for a second year of college. A large number of these students stumble at the starting line, requiring remediation in math, reading and writing, and other basic subjects before they can enroll in college-level courses. More than one-quarter of the freshmen at 4-year colleges – and nearly half of those at 2-year colleges – do not advance to their second year.

In the meantime, employers continue to bemoan the lack of needed academic skills among workers and the shortage of qualified applicants for jobs that require advanced education and training. Skills shortages accompany high unemployment in part because high school students have not been prepared to meet the academic challenges of the 21st Century.



Source: NELS: 88; The Condition of Education 2003, Table 18-1, web-version, www.nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/; and Levesque, K. (2003). Trends in High School Vocational/ Technical Course-taking: 1982-1998. US Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC.

Content Counts

Twenty years ago the report *A Nation at Risk* called for more academic course-taking among high school students. In it, the National Commission on Excellence in Education defined the "New Basics": four years of English, three years math, three years science and, in the language of the time, one-half credit of computer science (plus two years of foreign language for the "college-bound").

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In response, most states upgraded their graduation requirements to more closely match the Commission's recommendations. But national data indicate that academic achievement in high school reading, math and science has been mostly stagnant for decades.[3] Why might this be so?

We now know that the issue is not solely how many credits of a subject with a fixed title (e.g., one-half credit "computer science") a student takes, but the content and rigor of courses students take as well. A rigorous core academic curriculum built on high standards is key to increasing expectations for all students.

Students of all abilities learn more in academically rigorous courses. There are several documented benefits for students who take challenging academic classes in high school, especially for those students considered "at risk" of failing:[4]

- Those who enter high school with test scores in the lowest quartile learn more in academically rigorous courses than they do in either the low-level vocational or general courses in which they are traditionally enrolled.[5]
- Students are more likely to pass high-level courses than low-level courses. Thus, the research suggests that increasing access by all students to advanced academic course work will improve student academic achievement.[6]
- Students expected to master more demanding curricula are more likely to persist in school, achieve at higher levels, and be better prepared for the workforce after their formal education ends.[7]

Yet the progress of the last 20 years has not been sufficient to that end.

Too few students are taking rigorous courses. Too few students are taking the kind of courses they need to succeed in - or even be admitted to - college. Students from low-income families, those whose parents did not earn a postsecondary credential, and those who attended high schools in which a large proportion of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, are less likely to have completed a rigorous high school academic curriculum than their more advantaged counterparts.[8]

Students take less demanding academic courses for a number of reasons:

- Their high school does not offer a sufficient number of rigorous academic courses.
- They do not receive clear guidance from counselors or teachers about the courses they need to complete to prepare for postsecondary education.
- They are not aware that they are compromising their future success in life by taking low-level courses.
- In many states, high school graduation requirements are not aligned with the minimum requirements public 4-year and "open enrollment" community colleges and universities set for placement in college-level courses.[9]

Postsecondary education or training is for virtually everyone. Certainly not every youth need attend a traditional 4-year college. But virtually every youth will need some sort of postsecondary education and training. The economic and moral challenge we face is to make sure each student is adequately prepared with an academic foundation to take advantage of whatever future education and training he or she chooses. A strong set of academic skills and the habits and attitudes that accompany success in school also will help students entering meaningful employment immediately after high school.

Strategies

Implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* provides an excellent opportunity for states and educators everywhere to prepare strategies to address the expectations issue. Each state is required to establish minimum levels of high school proficiency in reading and mathematics that every high school student is expected to reach by 2013-2014, create definitions of "proficiency," and, along with the school districts themselves, report adequate yearly progress.

The Act will cause educators and policymakers to rethink expectations, organization, administration, curriculum, instruction, and support services needed to meet required levels of proficiency. These definitions of proficiency certainly should indicate a readiness for the world of further education and meaningful employment.

Steps to success. Of course it is easier to argue for a more demanding curriculum than it is to implement one. Given the mismatch between state graduation requirements, state assessments, and college admission and placement test specifications, states need to bring both college and K-12 educators together with policymakers and the business community to iron out these differences. Since most advanced courses require successful completion of certain prerequisites, policymakers, school districts, and schools need to work to create opportunities for all students to take and succeed in these prerequisites.

Students may need extra support in order to prepare themselves for advanced study. Schools can offer summer school courses to help students get back "in step" with certain course prerequisites. And, to ensure that students will not decline to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes because of the cost, the U.S. Department of Education, some states and many districts are subsidizing AP exam fees for all AP students.

Teachers' attitudes and instructional skills are also important. Once students are taking high-level courses, they need knowledgeable teachers who can provide instruction equal to the quality of the content. Given the lack of highly qualified teachers in many core academic fields and the limited experiences of others teaching advanced courses, states, districts and schools need to implement teacher preparation and in-service professional development strategies that are aimed squarely at this challenge.

Students may need incentives to encourage them to enroll in advanced courses. Part of the answer here is making students aware of the time and increased ease of college transition that can accrue to students who get high scores on AP exams.

By carefully charting student course-enrollment data, disaggregating it by race/ethnicity, first language and socioeconomic status, schools will be able to ensure that not only are they providing the courses for students to complete the recommended curriculum but also that all students are taking advantage of the courses available in the school.

A rich and deep curriculum. A rich and deep curriculum is at least as important as the *number* of academic courses students encounter. This requires more than assigning all students to "college prep" courses. Existing advanced courses generally demand greater effort and pose greater intellectual challenges for students; however, even advanced courses must be marked by innovation that keeps the curriculum relevant to an ever-changing world. And requiring more rigor does not mean that all students need approach such subject matter in exactly the same way.

The choice is not between rigor and innovation, or avoiding rigor altogether but—a better option—creating multiple pathways that correspond to *differences* in student interests, aspirations, and talents to meet the *common* goal of proficiency needed to advance in the worlds of education and employment.

Promising Models for Increasing Access to Rigorous Core Academic Curriculum

There are a number of specific programs currently attempting to increase the rigor of high school academic offerings for all students. These may serve as models, in whole or part, for policymakers and educators in developing and promoting their own strategies:

- **The State Scholars Initiative** is a federally-funded program that funds business and education partnerships to promote to students the benefits of following a core academic curriculum: four years of English; three years of math including Algebra 1 and 2 and geometry; biology, chemistry and physics; three and one-half years of social studies including economics; and two years of a foreign language. http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/factsh/ssi.doc.

- **High Schools That Work** is a network of over 1,000 high schools throughout the eastern United States that helps schools develop, among other components, a curriculum similar to the State Scholars Initiative as well as four courses in a planned career/technical concentration for most students. www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/hstwindex.asp

- **First Things First** and **Talent Development High Schools** are two reform networks designed to promote specific interventions in reading, mathematics and other subjects within ninth-grade academies, schools-within-schools, career

academies and other environments to encourage development of higher expectations. www.irre.org/ftf www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs

- **The International Baccalaureate (IB) program** is an advanced, internationally recognized curriculum that offers 11th and 12th grade students an opportunity to earn the IB Diploma. Students complete and test in six IB subjects; write an extended essay based on independent research; complete 150 hours of creative and service activity (for example, arts, sports, community service); and participate in a critical thinking course. The program is offered in over 1,425 public and private secondary schools in more than 115 countries around the world. http://www.ibo.org/

- **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** works to ensure that all students complete a rigorous college-preparatory path and increase enrollment in 4-year colleges. Students typically enter the program in middle school and take an elective AVID class that focuses on writing and inquiry. Other activities focus on motivation, study skills and preparation for college entrance and placement examinations. AVID, which began in California, now reaches over 70,000 middle and high school students in more than 1,500 schools in 21 states and 15 countries. http://www.avidonline.org

Conclusion

High schools must let go of long-held myths and perceptions about who can learn and who cannot so that all youth can reach high academic standards. Unfortunately, some of the biggest skeptics are those whose job it is to believe in students; secondary educators who believe that certain social groups or students are slower to learn and react by lowering the bar for performance, robbing those groups of opportunities to grow intellectually and achieve their dreams. Yet the fact that there are thousands of teachers who are producing promising results offers hope that not only *can* high schools raise expectations, but that they also can help all students meet them. The urgency is for the **majority** of schools to learn from their example.

Endnotes

[1] "Quality Counts 2003." *Education Week.* February 5, 2003. Available www.edweek. org/sreports/qc03.
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This paper is one of a series produced in conjunction with the U.S. Secretary of Education's ***High School Leadership Summit***. For more information about the U.S. Department of Education's work on high schools, visit http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/index.html.