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States Make Progress Closing High School “Expectations Gap” But More Needs To Be Done

Many But Not All States Are Raising Expectations To Better Prepare High School Graduates, Report Finds

WASHINGTON—February 22, 2006—Just one year after 45 of the nation’s governors joined leaders from education and business to make high school reform a national priority, many states are making progress closing the expectations gap between what is demanded of students in high school and the skills they need to be successful in college and careers, according to a report from the Washington, D.C.-based Achieve, Inc.

One year ago, only two states – Arkansas and Texas – required students to take the courses considered to represent a rigorous college- and work-ready curriculum in order to graduate. According to Achieve’s report, *Closing the Expectations Gap 2006*, six more states raised requirements to that level over the past year (Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Oklahoma, and South Dakota) and 12 more report plans to do so in the next few years. Seven additional states raised requirements within the last year, though not to the college- and work-ready level.

"I have not seen such a widespread response to concerns about America’s educational competitiveness since the release of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983," said Michael Cohen, president of Achieve. "It is encouraging that so many states have acted with a sense of urgency, but every state must close the gap between the requirements for earning a high school diploma and the real world demands of college and the workplace. The stakes for students and our country are higher than ever."

At February 2005’s National Education Summit on High Schools, co-sponsored by Achieve, participants were confronted with sobering statistics – one-third of students drop out of high school; of those that graduate and go to college, one-third need remedial courses; and nearly half of high school graduates entering the workforce find they are not prepared. Governors and education leaders acknowledged that very few states had anchored their academic standards – which have long driven testing and accountability reforms – in the skills required for postsecondary and workforce success.

But that is rapidly changing, according to Achieve’s report – the first in a series of annual reports tracking reform efforts in all 50 states. Achieve finds that 35 states are taking steps to align high school standards with college and workplace expectations. Five states – California, Indiana, Nebraska, New York, and Wyoming – report having completed this work; 30 others have or will soon have a similar process underway.

In many states this involves significant roles for the business and higher education communities, first in defining their expectations and then validating that if students meet the high school standards, they will be ready for college and good jobs.

States are also moving to expand their data systems and better coordinate information between high schools and colleges. Three states (Florida, Louisiana, and Texas) now have longitudinal data systems in place with the capacity to follow students from high school through postsecondary education. This allows them to trace student success and failure back to their high school experience and use that information to strengthen the preparation for the next class of students. According to Achieve, 31 additional states are connecting their K-12 and postsecondary data systems.

“It is clear that the states moving the farthest and the fastest are those that have effectively overcome the traditional barriers between the K-12 and postsecondary worlds,” said Matthew Gandal, executive vice president of Achieve. “Leaders from the K-12 community are working alongside leaders from higher education and business – in many cases for the first time ever – to align their expectations. This should result in better prepared students and a more meaningful high school diploma.”

Despite the progress, states still face considerable challenges in their reform efforts, including ensuring students receive the academic supports necessary to meet higher standards and building capacity to effectively teach more challenging courses. In some states, raising high school diploma requirements has been difficult given strong traditions of local control of schools.

While states have made the most progress in raising graduation requirements and aligning high school expectations with college and workplace demands, the report notes that fewer states have moved to develop complementary testing and accountability systems, in part because academic standards and course-taking requirements generally need to be in place before testing and accountability provisions can be successfully implemented.

Only six states – California, Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Missouri and Texas – report that statewide tests given to students in high school are used for college admissions or placement purposes. This is one of the best proxies for judging whether high school tests measure college readiness skills. Eight states told Achieve that they plan on using their high school tests for postsecondary purposes in the future. Meanwhile, few states currently have a system in place to hold high schools accountable for increasing the rate at which their incoming freshmen graduate ready for college and work.

In addition to the 50-state report, Achieve also released a set of plans from states in its American Diploma Project Network, a coalition of 22 states committed to significantly increasing expectations for high school students. The plans are public documents that outline how each state plans to implement its reform agenda over the next 36 months and beyond. The plans demonstrate considerable progress across the Network in aligning standards and raising curriculum requirements.

Closing the Expectations Gap 2006 is available online at www.achieve.org, along with copies of action plans from American Diploma Project Network states.

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Created by the nation's governors and business leaders, Achieve, Inc. is a bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Achieve was founded at the 1996 National Education Summit and has sponsored subsequent Summits in 1999, 2001 and 2005. At the 2005 Summit, Achieve launched the American Diploma Project Network, a coalition of 22 states committed to aligning high school expectations with the demands of college and the workplace. For more information, please visit www.achieve.org.