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Fact Sheet



Risk Reversal?

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarm about the state of education in the United States and our future ability to compete on the world stage. Declining SAT scores and poor student performance on international comparisons reinforced an already growing sense that the country's future economic dominance was at risk and that schools were failing to meet the nation's current and future needs.

Fast forward 25 years. The "world is flat," and the ability to compete against the highest performing nations is more pressing than ever. Instead of 1983 concerns about Japan and Germany, in 2008 it is the rise of developing countries and other new economic powerhouses. The communications and technological revolution of the past 25 years, increased worker productivity and a shifting U.S. and global economy have further raised the bar in ways that the *A Nation at Risk* commission would have been unable to predict. As the 25th anniversary approaches, there will be those who bemoan the lack of progress, while others worry about whether *A Nation at Risk* identified the right problems and solutions, especially in 2008.

No matter where you stand on the debate, the anniversary of *A Nation at Risk* comes at an important moment in time for the education reform movement because, for the first time in 25 years of fits and starts, Achieve believes that there is more consensus, momentum and urgency now than at any time since *A Nation at Risk* was released; consensus that will ultimately improve student achievement, prepare high school graduates for success in college, career and life and keep America competitive. Critical areas of consensus include:

State Leadership is Closing the Expectations Gap

Governors and state policy leaders in 33 states, educating nearly 80 percent of all public school students in the United States, have committed to an aggressive high school reform agenda. These 33 states have joined Achieve's American Diploma Project (ADP) Network and have committed to a four-pronged agenda with the goal of raising standards and graduation requirements to a college and career ready level and having assessments and accountability systems that reflect those goals.

The Dual Agenda Matters: Increasing Graduation Rates AND the Value of a High School Diploma is Paramount

While it took far too long, there is at long last a common definition of graduation rates. This more valid and consistent measure, signed off on by all 50 governors as the NGA Graduation Rate Compact, and built upon in proposed regulations by the U.S. Department of Education, ensures that all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time. No longer will it be possible to hide behind murky, misleading data.

While graduation rates of about 75 percent are common in suburban schools, many urban districts graduate as few as 25 to 35 percent of students on time. Only half of African American and Hispanic students graduate on time. This is a tragedy for the individuals and their families to be sure, but also an enormous loss of potential talent for our country.

What used to be viewed as the “silent epidemic” is silent no more. America’s Promise Alliance has launched the largest-ever action agenda on increasing graduation rates with a college and career ready diploma. This 50-state, multiple city, cross-sector effort has the widespread support that it needs to finally solve the persistent drop out problem.

College Ready IS Career Ready

Achieve’s 2004 seminal report, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (2004), asked employers and higher education faculty what high school graduates need to know in the core academic subjects of mathematics and English to be prepared and succeed in good jobs and first year college courses and found that college readiness and work readiness are the same. This growing convergence that all graduates need a rigorous high school curriculum to succeed, no matter their postsecondary plans, includes four years of grade level English and four years of mathematics, through the content typically taught in Algebra II and beyond. These results have been supported by other research such as ACT’s *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?* (2006).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, at least two-thirds of all new jobs and virtually all high paying jobs will require at least some postsecondary education. Even if students do not seek postsecondary education immediately after graduation, the odds are that they will at some point. To not be prepared for this eventuality is to close the door on many attractive, growing, family-sustaining jobs.

All Students Need a College and Career Ready High School Diploma

In 2005, when Achieve founded the ADP Network, only two states required their graduates to complete a college and career ready curriculum. Just three years later, 18 states plus the District of Columbia require such a diploma. This curriculum includes four years of English and four years of mathematics, through and beyond Algebra II, in addition to science, history and other requirements.

In addition to raising graduation requirements, states have also achieved significant progress in raising academic standards in English and mathematics that reflect the expectations of postsecondary institutions and employers. Nineteen states now have end of high school, college and career ready standards, and another 26 states are in the process of doing so.

Disappearing quickly is the notion of “tracking,” so that only some students receive a college ready education, while others receive something less. While there may be many different pathways—including more applied avenues such as those offered by career and technical education—all students need the same, rigorous level of knowledge and skills in order to succeed.

Multi-state Testing Collaborations will Improve Current Assessments—and Lead to Improved Student Achievement

While still in their infancy, there are promising multi-state assessment initiatives that promise to improve current assessments and achievement. In addition to the economies of scale, these multi-state common assessments are working to improve test quality, allow for cross state result reporting and ultimately lead to instructional improvements as states work together on strategies to improve student achievement.

There are currently two major multi-state efforts underway. The first is the **New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP)**, developed by three states (New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont). The program tests all students in grades 3-8 and 11 in reading, writing and mathematics. The second, and largest effort to date, is Achieve's **ADP Algebra II end of course exam**. This 14-state effort has developed a rigorous exam meant to signal not only mastery of Algebra II content, but readiness for credit-bearing, college level mathematics courses. The first administration of the test, with more than 100,000 test takers across the participating states, will take place from May to mid-June 2008.

Conclusion

While many of the challenges and concerns identified in the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report might still be present, there is more momentum and action now than ever before towards reversing the risk facing our nation. States, and their partners, are leading the way on meeting the common goal of high school graduation, with a college and career ready diploma, for all. The advancements are strong and encouraging.

America's education system is now at a tipping point. At no time has there been more consensus, momentum and urgency since *A Nation at Risk* was released. We must capitalize on this extraordinary progress. Achieve will continue to lead the way to ensure all high school graduates are prepared for success in college, career and life.

ABOUT ACHIEVE

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, careers and citizenship. Achieve has helped more than half the states benchmark their academic standards, tests and accountability systems against the best examples in the United States and around the world. Achieve also serves as a significant national voice for quality in standards-based education reform and regularly convenes governors, CEOs and other influential leaders at National Education Summits to sustain support for higher standards and achievement for all of America's schoolchildren.

In 2005, Achieve co-sponsored the National Education Summit on High Schools. Forty-five governors attended the Summit along with corporate CEOs and K-12 and postsecondary leaders. The Summit was successful in making the case to the governors and business and education

leaders that our schools are not adequately preparing students for college and 21st-century jobs and that aggressive action will be needed to address the preparation gap. As a result of the Summit, 33 states joined with Achieve to form the American Diploma Project Network — a coalition of states committed to aligning high school standards, assessments, graduation requirements and accountability systems with the demands of college and the workplace.