

April 2006

## Commentary: How To Lower the Dropout Rate: Challenge Students

How often have we heard that we can't expect more from students or raise the bar for graduation because it will cause more students to drop out? As it turns out, a new survey by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation reveals that nearly 90 percent of high school dropouts interviewed report having passing grades, and 70 percent believe they could have graduated if they had stayed in school. The number one reason they left? They were bored, according to [The Silent Epidemic](#).

There are many reasons why students drop out of high school, and poor academic performance is surely one of them. But the factors most commonly cited by the dropouts themselves include classes that are not engaging, a pervasive culture of low expectations and a school environment that fails to inspire them.

The majority of high school dropouts said they would have worked harder if their schools and teachers had held them to higher expectations, and three-quarters regret their decision to leave high school early. These findings mirror results from Achieve's [2005 poll](#) of recent high school graduates, more than 80 percent of whom said that knowing what they know now, they would have worked harder in high school.

Lack of access to challenging courses is a big part of the problem. In [Progress](#)

## News Clips

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1. **Tougher classes mean better jobs.** A [commentary](#) in the *Detroit News* by Craig Barrett, chairman of the board for Intel Corporation and an Achieve board member, supports the state Legislature's move to increase high school graduation requirements by approving the governor's [Michigan Merit Curriculum](#). Barrett points out that in 2004, more cars were produced in Ontario, Canada, than in Michigan because Ontario residents are more likely to have finished four years of college. Michigan's governor recently held a high school education summit showcasing the curriculum. At the meeting, stakeholders heard how [New York and a dozen other states](#) have been motivated to move in this direction or are considering such policies.
2. **Lessons for states.** In this commentary in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), Stan Jones, Indiana's commissioner for higher education, encourages college faculty and administrators who complain about poorly prepared high school graduates to take action, as Indiana did when the state required all students to take the Core 40 college-prep curriculum. Jones argues that by pulling down the barriers between the K-12 and postsecondary systems and making a unified effort to improve the transition between high school and college, states will better ensure students are successful. He also provides recommendations to his colleagues in other states based on Indiana's experience.
3. **Taking high school up a notch.** [Florida](#) and [Arkansas](#) lawmakers are focused on making high schools more

[Toward Power](#), the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering found that minority students are very interested in taking advanced math classes, but too few have access to them. While 65 percent of minority boys want to take advanced math, less than half have access to such classes. For minority girls, the gap is even wider -- of the three-quarters that want to take such classes, only 45 percent have access. Interest in such classes also exceeds availability for white students.

A growing number of states are beginning to address this problem by raising course requirements for graduation. According to Achieve's [50-state report](#) released last month, eight states are requiring students to take a college- and work-ready curriculum to graduate -- up from two states one year ago -- and 12 more report that they are moving in this direction in the near future.

Indiana is one of these states. It began by encouraging schools to offer a rigorous college- and work-prep curriculum -- the Core 40 -- to more students, and now the state has made this the default curriculum for all students. Over the past 10 years, enrollment in Core 40 or a more rigorous course sequence has risen from 13 percent to 67 percent. During that same period, the state went from 40th in the nation in the percentage of students going to college to 10th. Although graduation rates have not necessarily improved, the higher expectations have not caused more students to drop out.

San Jose Unified School District also raised expectations for all of its students in 2001, requiring them to complete the rigorous A-G college prep curriculum to graduate. Three years of data show increases in the number of students taking

rigorous and relevant. Gov. Jeb Bush is pushing legislation that would better prepare middle and high school students for college or work by requiring them to take more classes in the four core subjects and encouraging older students to declare a major. Arkansas is aligning its K-12 curricula standards with the needs of colleges and employers.

4. **Strong backs and swift minds.** The landscape of [vocational education](#) has changed and so have the students in these programs. More and more career and technical education students are going on to college and are taking high-level courses, such as trigonometry. One [Michigan](#) program has seen great success by pairing core-subject teachers with vocational instructors to provide students with a more relevant and rigorous curriculum.
5. **More and more, ACT = required exam.** Since [Illinois and Colorado](#) started using the ACT for their high school graduation test, more minority and low-income students have gone to college, and fewer students need remediation. That is why [Kentucky](#) is considering the idea. [Michigan](#) chose to use the ACT, and now [Missouri and Kansas](#) also are thinking about making the college entrance test the statewide high school exam. But some in the [higher education community](#) caution states to ensure that the ACT is aligned with the standards and curriculum -- an alternative is

these courses, increases in both grades and test scores, and no increase in the dropout rate.

States like Indiana and districts like San Jose are proving that it is possible to raise standards for high school students without raising the dropout rate. Leaders there would be the first to admit that keeping the dropout rate steady is not the same thing as lowering it, and in every state policymakers and education leaders must move as aggressively to raise graduation rates as they are beginning to raise graduation standards. Accomplishing that will require investments in data systems, educator capacity and academic supports as well as curricular innovations that help students connect what they are learning in the classroom with the real world.

The students themselves are telling us loud and clear that they want to be held to high expectations and they want help to reach them. The adults who make decisions about educational standards in states and districts need to listen to them.

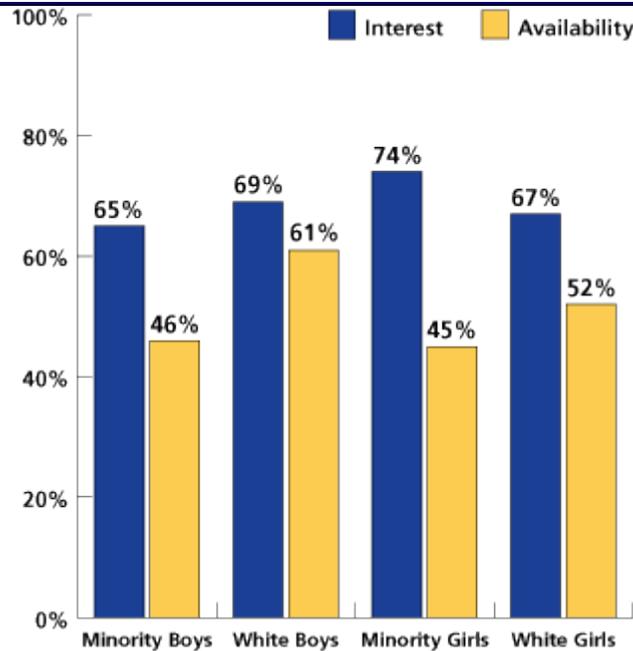
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**Did You Know?**

**Minority Interest Far Exceeds Availability of Advanced Math Classes**

end-of-course tests. [Arkansas](#) is one state that is working with colleges and focusing on subject tests in high school.

6. **Graduation counts.** States are turning their attention to creating data systems that will more accurately track graduation rates from high school and college. [Virginia and Maryland](#) are part of a [national effort](#) to adopt a common formula for calculating high school graduation rates that involves tracking the progress of individual students.



Source: National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, *Progress Toward Power: A Follow-Up Survey of Children's and Parents' Attitudes about Math and Science*. Research Letter, October 2001. Survey conducted by Harris Interactive, 1999.

*Although minority students are just as motivated to take rigorous courses as white students, far too many do not even have the opportunity to take advanced classes in subjects such as mathematics. Closing the achievement gap between white and minority students will mean, at least in part, ensuring that all students have access to the same high-level curriculum.*

#### New Resources

- American Diploma Project and other research shows that most good jobs today require some form of postsecondary education or training, focusing attention on the importance of a seamless K-16 education. In its new supplement, [\*SCHOOL & COLLEGE\*](#), *The Chronicle of Higher Education* takes a broad look at issues affecting the education pipeline from kindergarten through college and brings together the thinking from postsecondary and K-12 educators; policymakers; and leaders of community organizations, foundations and think tanks to cultivate solutions.
- Through its Challenge to Lead initiative, the Southern Regional Education Board promotes education reforms to help all students complete high school ready for lifelong learning. The latest report in the series, [\*Getting Students Ready for College and Careers\*](#), focuses in particular on the importance of high school and postsecondary systems' working together to define and align expectations for high school graduates, align curricula and assessments to those expectations, and provide support to students who are behind.
- To stem the flow of dropouts at transition points in the education pipeline and

better align high school and postsecondary education with the workforce, some states are beginning to establish career pathways. These pathways ensure that students meet state academic standards while also learning the technical knowledge and skills they need to succeed in specific careers. [Strengthening Transitions by Encouraging Career Pathways](#) takes a look at current policies and practices that could serve as models for other states considering similar measures.

- Governors across the country are focusing their efforts on improving high school and preschool, according to a summary of state education policy agendas published by [Education Week](#). The report reviews the progress states made at the policy level in 2005 and provides a preview of what governors plan to work on in 2006.
- As states work to increase high school rigor and better prepare students for college and the workplace, they also need to ensure that students enter high school with a solid foundation for learning. A new report from the [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#) outlines specific strategies for middle school administrators to improve academic achievement and better prepare students for high school, including establishing rigorous academic standards that are aligned with high school expectations.

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#### New from Achieve

**Implementing Academic Competitiveness Grants.** The new federal Academic Competitiveness Grants are aimed at encouraging more high-achieving, low-income students to take a rigorous high school curriculum that better prepares them for college and the workplace. In a [joint statement](#), Achieve, the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute applaud the goals of the program and provide a series of recommendations for implementation.

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*Perspective* is sent to you monthly by Achieve, a bipartisan, non-profit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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