

April/May 2007

## New from Achieve

### Using admissions and placement tests to assess college

**readiness.** As states work to ensure that their high school graduates are ready for college and work, many have contemplated incorporating college admissions and placement tests into their high school assessment systems. What do such tests actually measure? In its new study, Achieve analyzed more than 2,000 questions from these exams to determine how well they measure the college and workplace expectations in the American Diploma Project benchmarks. The report also includes recommendations for K-12 and higher education policymakers. Download a [PDF](#) of the report from the Achieve Web site or see articles in [Inside Higher Ed](#) and [Education Week](#) for more information.



**Common Algebra II test.** A consortium of nine states, led by Achieve, is working to develop a common Algebra II exam that will be administered to students in each participating state. This will allow, for the first time, consistent rigor and cross-state performance comparisons. To find out more, read articles in [U.S. News and World Report](#) and [Education Week](#) or an editorial from the [Cincinnati Enquirer](#).

## Commentary: States Speed Up the Pace of High School Reform

As our just-released report, [Closing the Expectations Gap 2007](#), found, states are moving more rapidly on high school reform now than at any time since *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983 and education reform became a national priority. Unlike K-8 reform, which has been heavily influenced by federal policy, high school reform has been led by states. Why? As the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools made clear, education reform is fundamentally important to future U.S. competitiveness. With fierce global competition for economic development and good jobs and with 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the United States requiring at least some postsecondary education, college-ready skills are a must for every high school graduate today.

Governors and other state leaders have stepped up, and the results are impressive. In just two years, [13 states](#), up from two in 2004, now require high school students to complete a college- and work-ready curriculum -- which includes four years of challenging mathematics at least through

## News Clips

Click on the links below to view articles of interest from the past two months. Some publications require free registration to read articles.

1. **Opening doors to algebra for 8th graders.** A [Washington Post](#) analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that more 8th graders nationwide are taking algebra. This is good news because students who take algebra in 8th grade are more likely to succeed in a rigorous high school curriculum.
2. **Raising requirements to decrease dropouts.** Seeking to address a statewide dropout crisis, [New Mexico](#) recently passed new course requirements for students to take more math and science classes to graduate. The bill also included a requirement for students to take online or

Algebra II and four years of rigorous English -- to earn a diploma. Sixteen additional states are taking steps to implement similar graduation requirements.

States also have made significant progress in making English and mathematics standards rigorous enough to accurately reflect real-world expectations. Twelve states report that their high school standards are aligned with college and workplace expectations, more than double the number from a year ago. Thirty-two more states are in the process of aligning standards or plan to do so.

And while just five states currently have P-16 longitudinal data systems capable of tracking student progress from kindergarten through college graduation, all but three plan to develop such systems.

Despite the progress in these areas, states have moved more slowly in developing complementary assessment systems and holding high schools accountable for the college readiness of their students. Just nine states administer high school assessments that also are used by higher education to place students in credit-bearing courses, and 21 others have plans to build such systems. In addition, only nine states now hold high schools accountable for the college readiness of their graduates and offer incentives for improving college-ready graduation rates, although eight more are planning to do so.

Significant progress has been made in a relatively short period of time, but there is much more to do. Those who are frustrated by the pace of reform or who believe that there are still too many students unprepared for college and work in the 21st century are right. What will it take to complete the job? As the past two years have demonstrated, gubernatorial leadership is key. The states that have made the most gains had governors leading the charge and using their bully pulpit to explain why high school reform matters. Business leaders also have proven to be important allies in making progress; they have the ability to explain to students, parents, educators and the public the demands of the economy and what students really need to know to succeed.

Although it is hard work and it takes time to reform high schools, time is not on our side.

advanced courses -- flexibility that the state hopes will entice students to stay in school. Simultaneously, New Mexico raised the dropout age to provide legal support for efforts to keep kids in school.

- 3. Marylanders support high school assessments.** [Maryland](#) residents showed strong support for high standards and assessments in a new poll by the University of Baltimore. Eighty-five percent support the idea that high school students must take and pass a series of assessments in key academic subjects to receive a high school diploma; more than 19 of 20 respondents also agree that high school students should be required to reach a minimum level of skill in core subjects before they can graduate. The State Board plans to review the Maryland High School Assessment next year before the tests become a graduation requirement.
- 4. Addressing the college readiness challenge at the postsecondary level.** Although progress has been made in some states -- and initiatives such as the ADP Network are helping others get started -- postsecondary education has been slow to do its part in making sure that high school students graduate prepared to succeed in college, argues David Spence, president of the Southern Regional Education Board. In a recently published [op-ed](#), he outlines five steps higher education needs to take and how to get consensus in defining the readiness challenge.

The traditional progression of reforming standards, assessments, curriculum and accountability measures in sequence makes sense. But as the global economy continues to ratchet up expectations, states must find ways to move forward on these policies simultaneously to keep pace.

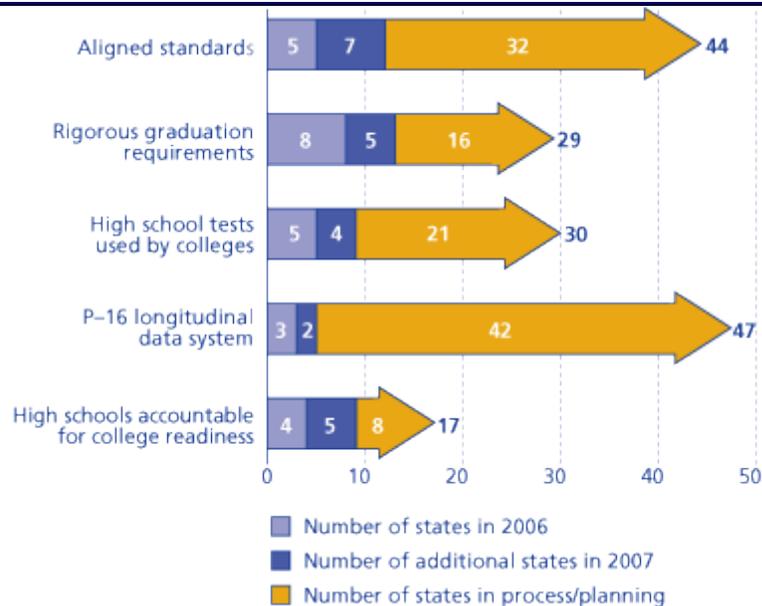
Moreover, if high school students are going to be successful, states must take greater responsibility for providing teacher and student supports. Students need to be prepared for a college- and work-ready curriculum when they enter high school, and they need to be supported throughout their education. Teachers must be qualified -- and must have the support they need -- to teach more rigorous courses. States should not leave these challenges to districts to figure out but should instead create partnerships to address these challenging issues. Finally, states have much to learn from each other. Increased networking among the states, all of which face remarkably similar issues, as well as more formal partnerships -- such as the recently announced multistate American Diploma Project Algebra II exam -- will quicken the pace of reform and lead to more consistent policies and expectations nationwide.

Although *Closing the Expectations Gap 2007* shows that progress in the states over the past two years has been impressive, it's not yet time to celebrate. As long as students graduate from U.S. high schools unprepared for the world in which they find themselves, we all have much more work to do.

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### **Did You Know?**

**A Growing Number of States Have Policies To Help Ensure that High School Graduates Are College and Work Ready**



Source: Achieve Survey/Research, 2007.

### New Resources

- The United States once led the world in percentage of students who complete a college degree, but our international ranking has slipped -- creating a degree gap that could have a significant impact on our economy. Closing the gap will require the United States to increase degree production by 37 percent annually, according to a new [report](#) from the **Making Opportunity Affordable** initiative. The report poses several solutions, including strategies to better align K-12 and postsecondary education expectations and smooth the transition between high school and college.
- Increasingly, policymakers, educators and the public are calling for high-quality data that follow the progress of individual students throughout their education, accounting for transitions between systems and student mobility. To answer this need, many states are putting in place student unit record systems that link individual student information from the K-12 to the postsecondary data systems. States have made considerable progress in developing their own systems over the past five years, according to a [review](#) by the **National Center for Higher Education Management Systems**, but little progress has been made in being able to link systems across state lines.
- A new [report](#) by the **Center on Education Policy** takes a close look at how exit exams have affected curriculum and instruction at the district level in Jackson, MS, and Austin, TX -- both of which have well-established tests. Among the report's findings: Instructional time on tested content has increased. This intense focus has helped make instruction more consistent across the district but also may lead to decreased time for electives and other subjects. The report also finds that colleges pay little or no attention to exit exam results when making admissions decisions but rely on other measures, such as Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment coursework, to signal college readiness.
- U.S. taxpayers save \$127,000 for each additional student who graduates from high school instead of dropping out, concludes a new [report](#) from Columbia University's **Teachers College**. Furthermore, eliminating the high school dropout problem entirely by achieving a 100 percent graduation rate would potentially save taxpayers a total of \$45 billion annually. Researchers reached these conclusions by performing

a cost-benefit analysis on five interventions that are proven to increase the number of students who graduate high school. The five interventions are the Perry Preschool model, the Chicago Child-Parent Center program, class size reduction (specifically Project STAR), First Things First and a teacher salary increase of 10 percent for all K-12 educators.

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*Perspective* is sent to you 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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