

August 2006

Commentary: The San Jose Story

Momentum continues to build in states to raise graduation requirements and make a rigorous college- and work-ready curriculum the 'default' for all high school students. Six states passed new requirements last year; another dozen are considering a similar move.

As policies like these are proposed, a variety of questions (and doubts) are raised by well-meaning legislators and educators -- questions about students' desire to take harder courses, teachers' capacity to teach them, potential spikes in dropout rates and more. Achieve recently launched a new [section](#) on our Web site with information designed to help answer these questions.

Sometimes the best way to respond to concerns is through examples of real places that have taken bold steps and demonstrated success. San Jose Unified School District in California is exhibit A. Every policymaker who is wrestling with the issue of raising graduation requirements should look at what San Jose has accomplished.

San Jose is a diverse district with historically low achievement and low college enrollment rates. Fifty percent of the students are Latino, and 40 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. In 1998, San Jose did what many states are now considering: It made the A-G curriculum required for admission to

News Clips

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

1. **Focusing in on math and science.** With nearly a third of new jobs in [Minnesota](#) projected to be based in the science, technology, engineering and math fields, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the state Legislature are working to improve student achievement in these subjects by measures such as pushing for more rigorous course requirements, increasing funding for International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs, and providing new induction and mentoring programs for teachers. In addition, state [business leaders](#) have provided critical financial support to allow Minnesota students to participate in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) next year. Minnesota is currently the only state that will be able to look at how its students perform on this test compared to their peers in the United States as a whole and in other participating countries.
2. **Plugging the leaky pipeline.** A team of researchers has identified the 15 percent of schools that produce half of the nation's high school dropouts. In these "dropout factories," student and teacher motivation is not the problem, according to a commentary by two of the researchers in [Education Week](#). The problem is a lack of the tools and techniques schools need to help at-risk students learn and succeed. The researchers recommend several interventions, including tighter connections between high school coursework and expectations. This recommendation is reinforced by a brief from [The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement](#), which cites evidence that raising expectations may improve graduation rates rather than lowering them. But solving the dropout

California's public colleges and universities the default curriculum for all San Jose high school students. Students were automatically enrolled in these courses and required to complete the whole sequence to graduate.

So far the strategy has been a huge success. The percentage of San Jose students taking the A-G curriculum and earning a C or better in all of the courses increased from 37 percent to 65 percent between 2001 and 2004. This more rigorous course-taking also had a positive effect on test scores and helped increase the college-ready rate for Latinos from 17 percent in 1998 to 45 percent just four years later. Enrollment for Latinos in Advanced Placement courses more than doubled.

Importantly, San Jose's success has *not* come at the cost of higher dropout rates, as some people feared. The district's four-year graduation rates actually *improved* slightly while the state average dropped.

How did they do it? Former superintendent Linda Murray, who launched these reforms, highlights several key strategies. **First**, she made academic supports a priority and was creative with school schedules to maximize time for instruction. Instead of continuing to define courses in a six-period day, the district lengthened the school day, provided principals with flexibility in how that time is used and built in extra time for struggling students to get help. For example, they created 'shadow' classes that would immediately follow rigorous classes like Algebra I and II, where students could go to have concepts reinforced. They also offered after-school tutoring and Saturday classes, and thanks to partnerships with the business community, they expanded

problem is not up to schools alone. Another [Education Week](#) commentary calls on business leaders to spearhead the drive to help students, particularly at-risk minorities, be better prepared for and able to afford postsecondary education.

3. "Why would I need algebra?"

Studies and polls show that many students who perform poorly in high school do not see how what they are learning in the classroom will be useful once they graduate. To help students understand the education and skills they will need for specific careers, [California and Michigan](#) have launched Web-based career guides.

summer school opportunities beyond what the district school budget would allow.

Second, Murray went to great lengths to build support among educators and the community. The district involved educators, parents, students, business and community leaders in a dialogue about why expectations needed to be raised and how to best get that done. She says the reforms would not have been successful without this.

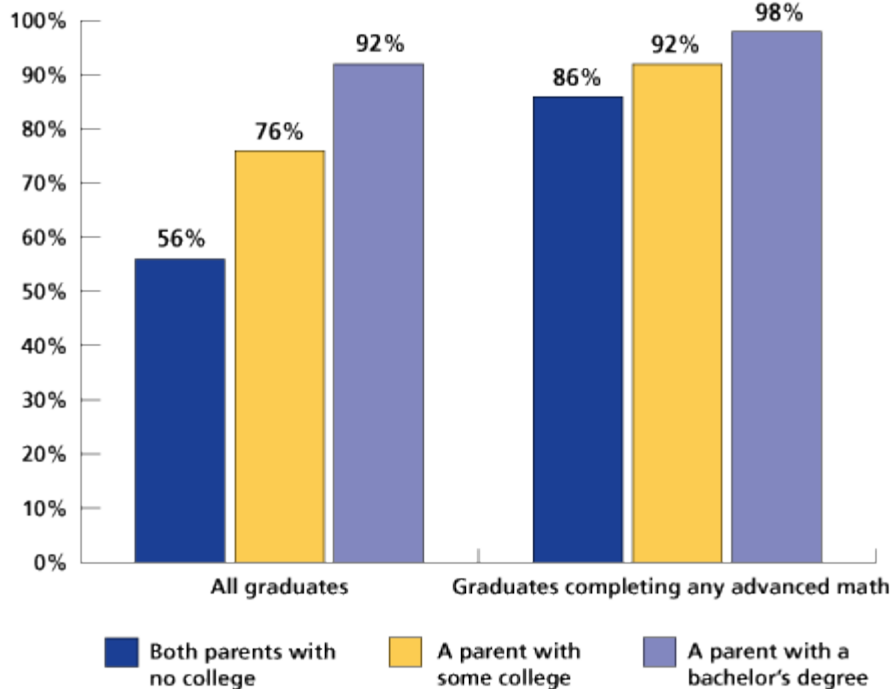
Third, she took teacher support and recruitment very seriously. In addition to relying on the traditional path, the district went out to the business community, particularly the high-tech industry, to find people with math and science expertise who were interested in becoming certified teachers. They also changed the way teacher professional development was done, driving it down to the school site and providing subject-specific coaches and mentors for new and struggling teachers. The support and commitment of the professional educational community was critical to implementing a policy that expects all students to be college and work ready.

For more information on San Jose's strategies for success, see articles in the Alliance for Excellent Education's [Profiles in Leadership](#) and [Education Week](#) or view a [PowerPoint presentation](#) created by Achieve.

Did You Know?

First-Generation Students Are More Likely To Enroll in College if They Have Had a Strong Curriculum

High school graduates enrolling in higher education



Source: Horn, L. and Nuñez, A.M. *Mapping the Road to College: First-Generation Students' Math Track, Planning Strategies, and Context of Support*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.

Parents' level of education often is considered a factor in students' educational attainment. More than four out of 10 students whose parents did not earn a college degree fail to complete postsecondary education -- putting these students at a disadvantage when they seek good jobs that pay well and offer opportunities for advancement. But when first-generation students are challenged with a strong curriculum, a far higher percentage ultimately graduate college.

New Resources

- A new [American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT) report claims that many states' assessments are not aligned to their standards -- a mismatch that makes it difficult to determine whether students are mastering the content they need to be prepared for success. To perform this analysis, researchers looked at test blueprints available on state education agency Web sites, asking a series of questions about their precision and clarity. The AFT did not, however, review the state tests themselves. See an article in [Education Week](#) for more on the report.
- In a 20-state study of almost 200 schools that were outperforming others with similar demographics, the [National Center for Educational Accountability](#) looked for similarities in the schools' methods to improve student achievement. Among the findings, high-performing schools had rigorous course content and high expectations for all students, even those who are performing below average, and made aggressive efforts to enroll borderline students in advanced

classes.

- Accurate graduation rates are an important step in diagnosing and treating the nation's epidemic of high school dropouts. In [Who's Counted? Who's Counting? Understanding High School Graduation Rates](#), the Alliance for Excellent Education helps explain the recent history and methodology behind the highly publicized statistics and recommends several policy actions, including implementing statewide longitudinal data systems and holding high schools accountable for improving graduation rates and better preparing students for success.
- In [Transforming High School Teaching and Learning: A District-wide Design](#), the Aspen Institute details six aspects of school design that can be used to improve school instruction and raise student performance. The components include a new vision of teacher professionalism that supports instructional improvement; a comprehensive strategy to attract and retain highly effective high school teachers; clear expectations for high school instructional practices; anchor standards and aligned assessments that support effective instruction; core curriculum, common lessons and tools based on the anchor standards and assessments; and a system to build teacher capacity.
- A good preschool experience is crucial for helping students begin to build the skills and knowledge they need to succeed later in life, and most states have created some form of early learning opportunity for their youngest students. But the quality and standards for these programs vary widely, and often the neediest children are not enrolled. The [Committee for Economic Development](#) looks at the economic, demographic and fiscal challenges that states face.

New from Achieve

Measuring Up in Hawaii. A new report, [How Does the Hawaii High School Assessment Measure Up?](#), shows the results of Achieve's recent analysis of Hawaii's 10th grade state assessment, conducted at the request of the state superintendent and the state board of education. In the report, Achieve compares the state's test, which is not required for graduation, to exit exams from six other states to determine how high a bar it sets.

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