

February 2006

Commentary: Thinking Globally and Acting Locally

The old slogan "think globally and act locally" has new meaning for states considering raising high school graduation requirements, particularly states that have heretofore left such decisions to local school boards. Local control has long been a hallmark of American education, but now, faced with a global economy that has no respect for local or even national borders, governors and other state policymakers are beginning to re-evaluate their roles.

Under the leadership of Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Michigan took a bold step this past year to establish the state's first-ever statewide graduation requirements -- and it set the bar high. With an economy historically based on heavy manufacturing, Michigan is feeling the pressure of global competition and the skills gap as much as any other state. In response, the State Board of Education passed a resolution calling for all students to complete a core college- and work-prep curriculum that includes four years of grade-level English language arts and four years of math through at least Algebra II. The state board's action now awaits final approval in the Michigan Legislature.

Officials in Rhode Island likewise recognized that the state must play more of a leadership role in setting graduation requirements, and they passed the first-ever statewide requirements that include four years of English and four years of

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. **ADP states focus on college and work readiness.** Ohio Gov. Bob Taft is moving forward with an ambitious plan unveiled in his [state-of-the-state address](#) called the [Ohio Core](#). The rigorous high school curriculum meant to prepare students for college or work would be required for the class of 2011. Taking it a step further, Taft wants to make completing the Ohio Core a requirement for admission into the state's university system. At a recent meeting of [Colorado's](#) Education Alignment Council -- a 30-member panel of education and business leaders appointed by Gov. Bill Owens to study how high schools can better prepare students for college or the workplace -- the message was simple: The high school curriculum is not challenging enough.
2. **Feds tie financial aid to rigorous courses.** [Congress](#) recently passed legislation to provide grant money to low-income college freshmen and sophomores who have completed a "rigorous secondary school program of study" and earned a 3.0 average or above in college. Even larger sums will be provided to upperclassmen who choose to major in math and science. This incentive plan requires the federal government to review state diploma programs and determine which ones are "rigorous." [Achieve](#) has conducted considerable research in this area -- while most states do provide an optional degree that requires high school students to take higher-level courses, the standard diploma generally is much less demanding and does not adequately prepare students for college or the workplace.
3. **WASL debate heats up.** As the deadline approached for the

math. These requirements provide some local flexibility by not specifying which courses students should take; however, districts are required to ensure that the course selections align with the state standards, which in turn are being anchored in college and work expectations.

Pennsylvania, another strong local control state, has chosen so far to challenge districts to adopt more rigorous graduation requirements rather than mandate them. Through an initiative called Project 720, the state is helping a set of districts voluntarily implement more rigorous curricula and graduation requirements, hoping they will serve as models for the rest of the state. Nearly 20 percent of Pennsylvania school districts participate, including some of the largest districts in the state.

The debate in these states suggests that the tradition of local control over graduation requirements may have made more sense in the past. It depended heavily on the relationship between high schools and the local economy. As long as graduates remained close to home and worked for nearby employers facing little national and no overseas competition, state requirements were not necessary.

Now, as businesses and high school graduates find themselves competing in an increasingly global economy, the skill demands for graduates have gone up, and they no longer vary from community to community. All students will need to meet standards traditionally reserved for the college bound if they are going to have a chance at a career that pays a living wage and allows for upward mobility.

In an era where competition is global, not

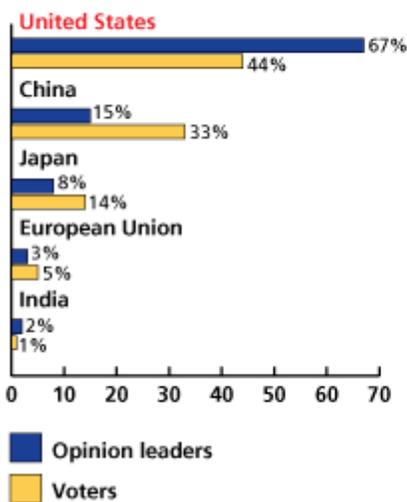
WASL to count for graduation, **Washington** state lawmakers found themselves in the throes of debate over the exam, producing bills that would allow for alternatives -- even stop it from being a graduation requirement. The Senate has passed a compromise bill that would keep the test as a graduation requirement but calls for a [two-year study](#) of the students who struggle to pass as well as a comparison of the WASL to other college- or work-ready tests. An analysis by [Achieve](#) found that the WASL does not present unreasonable expectations for high school graduates; on the contrary, the tests cover material that most students study early in high school. A [coalition](#) of business and education groups has been campaigning to convince lawmakers to keep the test. In addition, [editorial page](#) writers and commentators have joined in the chorus, urging the state to stay the course. One cheeky commentator proposed an [AG \(Almost Graduate\) diploma](#) for students who continually fail the exam. Let's see how well students succeed with that diploma.

local, the question policymakers and education officials ought to be asking themselves is, Can we afford to wait for each local school board to decide on its own that its students need to meet higher expectations to compete?

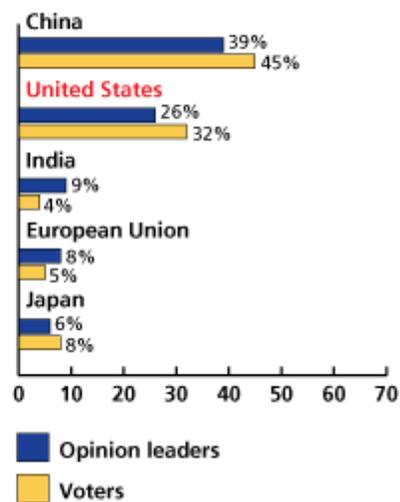
Did You Know?

Americans See United States as Top Economic Power Now but Expect To Lose Competitive Advantage in Future

Strongest economic power today



Strongest economic power in 20–30 years



Source: The Winston Group and Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *U.S. Innovation and Competitiveness: Addressing the Talent Gap*, prepared for Business Roundtable, 2006.

Americans feel confident in the strength of our economic leadership today, but they believe China will surpass us in the next 20 to 30 years, according to a [survey](#) of government, business and nonprofit leaders and voters published by Business Roundtable. At least in part, this anxiety is due to the belief among most U.S. voters that public high schools are not adequately preparing graduates to meet the demands they will face in college and the work world, reinforcing the findings of Achieve's 2005 [survey](#). Furthermore, the survey found that most Americans (76 percent of opinion leaders and 51 percent of voters) feel that improving math and science education is the solution to maintaining our economic advantage.

New Resources

- American Diploma Project research has found that jobs that pay well and support a middle-class lifestyle generally require at least some postsecondary education and training. But far too many students are dropping out of the education pipeline before college and even fewer go on to earn a postsecondary degree. In a new survey, [Jobs for the Future](#) reviews states' plans for setting and publicizing clear, numerical goals for plugging the leaks in the pipeline and expanding postsecondary access and success. The results show that states are focusing attention on this issue, but to date fewer than half of the states have specified measurable goals, including time frames, and few provide explicit rationales for why they set the targets where they did. However, the report highlights Texas and Kentucky, which have put in place comprehensive strategies that could provide valuable lessons for other states.
- Although high-quality tests serve an important role in ensuring that students are mastering the content outlined in state standards, the testing industry cannot keep up with mounting pressures and surging demand brought on by increased testing requirements, according to a report by the newly launched [Education Sector](#). The report provides several recommendations, including enhancing federal leadership on testing issues, creating an independent national oversight body, giving states incentives to collaborate on test development and developing voluntary national assessments.
- In today's workplaces, being literate means more than just being able to read and write. Employees also need to be able to analyze news stories and other prose, understand documents, and have the basic math skills needed to balance checkbooks or calculate restaurant tips. But a new study by the [American Institutes for Research](#) (AIR) shows that 20 percent of U.S. college students completing four-year degrees -- and 30 percent of students earning two-year degrees -- have only basic quantitative literacy skills, meaning they are unable to estimate if their car has enough gasoline to get to the next gas station or calculate the total cost of ordering office supplies.

New from Achieve

Coming soon: Report on momentum from the 2005 Summit. In February 2005, governors from 45 states, business leaders and educators gathered at the National Education Summit on High Schools to address a critical and growing problem in the American education system: Many high schools are not preparing their students to enter higher education and a more demanding workforce. On the anniversary of the Summit, Achieve will release a new report that looks at the progress states have made in putting in place policies to better prepare high school graduates.

Job opportunities. To support the work of the ADP Network, Achieve is seeking to fill several new positions in its Leadership and Outreach and its Content and Policy units. Openings include vice president for leadership and outreach, advocacy director, policy analyst, and project associate. For more information, visit the [Achieve Web site](#).

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.

If you received this e-mail from a friend and would like to subscribe, [click here](#).

If you would like to unsubscribe, [click here](#).

If you would like to comment, [click here](#).

Copyright © 2006 Achieve, Inc.

Achieve, Inc. * 1775 Eye Street, NW * Suite 410 * Washington, DC 20006 *

www.achieve.org