Perspective

News and Views from Achieve

Achieve, Inc.

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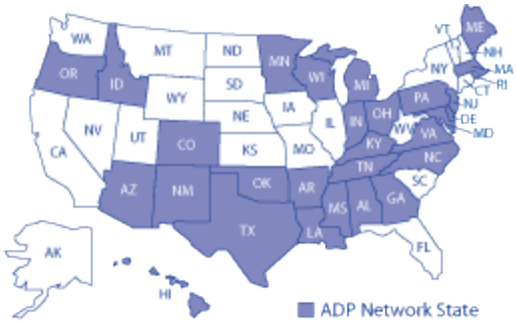
New from Achieve

ADP Network expands to 29 states. The American Diploma Project (ADP) Network has expanded to include three new states -- Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin. These states join 26 others that already have committed to bringing together K-12, business and postsecondary education leaders to align expectations and better prepare students for college and work.



Achieve report recommends policy actions for a world-class education system in Ohio. Faced with a decline in its traditional manufacturing base, Ohio is working to put in place a world-class education system to raise the skills of all young people entering Ohio's workforce and improve Ohioans' future standard of living. In a new report, Achieve and McKinsey & Company benchmark Ohio's system against high-performing education systems around the globe and make recommendations for key policy actions to continue to move Ohio's K-12 system forward.

Commentary: What's in a Course Name?

Results for the 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) came out last week, and the discouragingly low scores provide a clear reminder of why raising standards in high school is so important. More than one-third of high school seniors scored below basic in math, and only 23 percent were at or above proficient. In reading, more than a quarter of students was below basic, with only 35 percent at or above the proficient level.

Equally troubling, a high school transcript study released along with the NAEP results found that students are taking more rigorous courses and getting better grades. Obviously, the increase in grades and rigorous courses did not translate into better NAEP results, so what's going on? Is it a sign of grade and course title inflation?

To be accurate, we should point out that due to changes in the NAEP math exam, the National Assessment Governing Board was not able to report trend data in math. So although high school students are taking

News Clips

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1. **Same course, different expectations.** An editorial by *The Washington Post* argues that the recent NAEP scores and transcript study show that better grades and fancy course titles do not translate into a rigorous curriculum and that dumbing down material hurts poor and minority students the most. The editorial mentions that 29 states, through Achieve's ADP Network, are moving to overhaul high schools and stiffen standards. Another *Post* article illustrates this point. When the reporter recently visited two 9th grade English classes in different schools, he found that even though the classes had the same name, same textbook and same syllabus,

more challenging math courses, we have no way of knowing whether their math scores went up, went down or stayed the same.

We do know that the math scores in general are nothing to brag about. We also know that reading scores were flat over the past four years and declined over the past 10, so more challenging course-taking is not translating into more advanced reading skills. That should cause us to ask some hard questions about the quality of the high school English curriculum and the level of reading materials students are exposed to in other courses.

Although the evidence from NAEP may not definitively point to course title inflation, it does come at an important time. State leaders across the country are raising high school course-taking requirements to ensure that students are better prepared when they graduate. The NAEP results are a powerful reminder that course titles can be deceiving. It is not enough to require students to take courses such as Algebra II; states need strategies for ensuring that the course content and the instruction is up to standard as well.

Most states that have raised graduation requirements over the past couple of years recognize this challenge and are working on solutions. Many are getting serious about the alignment of standards, working with higher education and employers to ensure that high school standards reflect what students need to know to be successful in college and work. It is very important that states not stop with a set of end-of-high-school standards. They must take it a step further and define the core content that should be learned in each course so that districts and schools have clearer guidance about what fits under the course labels.

States also must build better assessments to measure whether students are learning the core content in their courses. The news from NAEP would suggest that having end-of-course exams to measure whether students are learning the right stuff in particular courses, especially those courses that are required for graduation, is vitally important -- and should reduce title inflation creep.

Standards and assessments are a key starting point, but they are not enough. As states encourage and/or require more students at the more affluent school were held to higher standards and expectations.

2. **College prep for all.** The **North Carolina** Board of Education recently proposed phasing out the state's current three-pronged system of high school curriculum programs -- career prep, college prep and college tech prep. Instead, starting in 2008-09, the state will require all students to take a college-prep curriculum, regardless of whether they plan to go on to postsecondary education. With this change, all students will have to take four years of math and two years of the same foreign language to graduate.

3. **Establishing a statewide graduation standard.** A state commission in **Pennsylvania** has recommended that all students be required to take one of two tests (either the statewide Pennsylvania test, PSSA, or end-of-course test) in subjects such as math, English, American history, economics and government to graduate high school, a bold move in a state known for local control of schools. Currently, all Pennsylvania students must show proficiency to graduate, but they can do so through scores on the statewide exam or local assessments, which the commission argues is not enough to ensure that all students are prepared for college and the workforce.

4. **Staying on course with graduation tests.** **Maryland** students starting with the class of 2009 will still be required to pass the high school graduation exams. However, after reviewing data on student performance, the state plans to delay the requirement for special education students and students with limited English

students to take challenging courses, the system will be strained, and if steps are not taken to increase capacity and provide supports, there will be pressure to lower the standards.

Middle school curricula need to be beefed up so all students are ready for high school. The transcript study shows very clearly that those students who arrive in 9th grade unprepared for algebra cannot make up enough ground to take a rigorous set of courses by 12th grade.

Adequate student supports also must be available so that as more students enter rigorous courses in high school, they have the additional time and help they need to be successful. Some students will not respond to traditional curricula and teaching approaches, so alternative strategies need to be in place to reach students who will otherwise disengage. Just as important, attention needs to be paid to increasing the capacity of teachers to teach the rigorous courses.

The challenges are enormous, but the stakes are high. If policymakers and the public find 12th grade NAEP results unacceptable, they will need to redouble their efforts and support states in developing a first-rate education system that truly ensures that students are college and work ready.

Related Resources

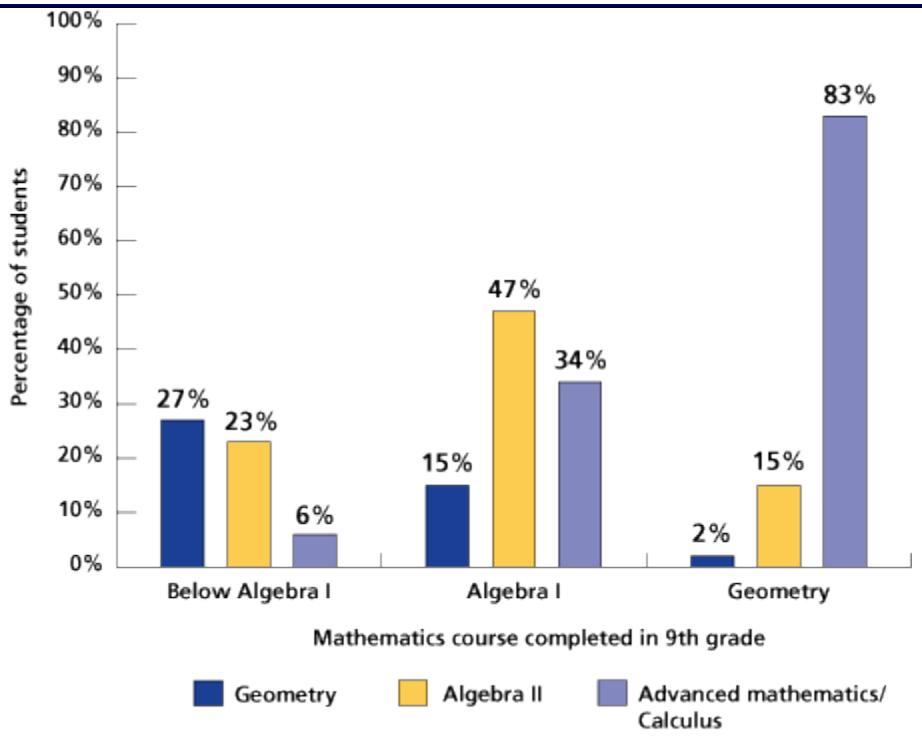
- Results for the 12th grade NAEP
- Results of the high school transcript study (PDF)

proficiency, who continue to struggle with the tests. This decision comes as part of a comprehensive review of the Maryland High School Assessments.

Did You Know?

9th Graders Who Complete at Least Algebra I Are More Likely to Take Advanced Math Courses in High School

Highest level of high school mathematics course, by mathematics course taken in 9th grade



Note: Advanced mathematics includes courses, other than Calculus, that are generally taken after Algebra II (e.g., Advanced Placement Statistics and Precalculus). Graduates completing more than one mathematics course in 9th grade are classified by the highest level of the courses completed.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Transcript Study (HSTS), 2005.

The math courses that students take in 9th grade are a strong predictor of the highest level of math they will take in high school, according to the 2005 NAEP high school transcript study. Ninth graders who complete Algebra I or Geometry are far more likely to take Algebra II or more advanced math, such as Calculus, in high school -- subjects that generally cover content and skills that professors and employers say are needed for college and work. These results reinforce the importance of strong preparation in middle school to ensure that students are ready for a rigorous high school curriculum.

New Resources

- As Congress prepares to review the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act this year, a new report by the bipartisan **Commission on No Child Left Behind** provides specific recommendations for improving the law to meet the goal of high achievement for all students. The recommendations include creating voluntary national standards and tests in reading, mathematics and science; requiring all states to design and implement a high-quality longitudinal data system within four years; and including achievement growth in adequate yearly progress calculations so that schools receive credit if students are on the right track.

- A progress report by the **National Governors Association (NGA)** shows that halfway through their two-year grants to redesign high schools, NGA Honor States have made considerable progress. Many of the states have put in place more rigorous high school graduation requirements, expanded opportunities for high school students to take college-level courses, and begun to build data systems that bridge high school and postsecondary education systems. However, the report also

shows that many challenges remain, including building the capacity of state education agencies to help schools and districts through the redesign process and defining and assessing college readiness.

- America is in the middle of a perfect storm that will lead to greater gaps in wealth and increasing social and political polarization unless we change our present policies, concludes a new report by the **Educational Testing Service**. The forces creating this storm include the continuing gap in English and math skills across racial and ethnic groups, the demands of the increasingly global and knowledge-driven economy, and demographic trends. If overall levels of learning and skills are not increased and the existing gaps are not narrowed, argues the report, there is little chance that economic opportunities will improve among key segments of the U.S. population.

- Underperforming high schools are contributing to our national dropout epidemic, which is costly for both individuals and the nation, according to a new brief from the **Alliance for Excellent Education.** The average annual income for a high school dropout in 2004 was $16,485, compared to $26,156 for a high school graduate. And if the students who dropped out of the class of 2006 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional $309 billion in income over their lifetimes. Students cite a number of reasons for dropping out, but one of the primary reasons is that they felt their classes were boring and that what they were learning had no relevance in the real world.

- With dropout rates unacceptably high nationwide, the **Center for American Progress** and **Jobs for the Future** have issued a new report that encourages Congress to pass the Graduation Promise Act of 2007, which would establish a federal commitment to partner with states, districts and schools to raise graduation rates without compromising academic standards. The report highlights strategies and solutions that have proven track records of success, such as more intensive focus on core courses of English and math in 9th grade to ensure that students have the knowledge and skills they need for rigorous high school coursework.

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.

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