

January 2006

## Commentary: Flying Blind

Readers of this column know that a growing number of states have embarked on ambitious reform agendas to raise expectations in high school so that more students graduate prepared for success in college and the workplace. In most cases, policymakers were motivated to act after looking at sobering data on high school course-taking, high school graduation rates, college remediation, and college persistence and completion rates. The irony is that the very data that have compelled so many governors, education officials and business leaders into action often are not collected and publicly reported by states. Simply put, there is a data void in our high schools.

Here is an example. While most states have acknowledged the importance of students' taking a rigorous curriculum in high school -- and a growing number of legislatures are ratcheting up course-taking requirements for graduation -- *only seven states currently collect data* from schools and districts on the courses individual students take, according to a recent survey by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA). How will states gauge the impact of their policies if they are unable to track how many students actually take Algebra I or Algebra II from year to year?

Another example is states' inability to provide information back to high schools on the performance of their graduates after they leave. Only 12 states have the ability

## News Clips

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1. **Business and higher education leaders call for more math and science.** Increasing national competitiveness by improving U.S. students' performance in math and science was a central part of the discussion among businesses and higher education leaders gathered for a [National Summit on U.S. Competitiveness](#). Much more emphasis is given to both subjects in countries such as China and India -- countries that could soon threaten our leadership in the global marketplace. [Texas](#) already is answering the call -- the state is spending \$71 million in public and private dollars to help build or retool 35 small schools to focus on math, science and engineering. Texas Gov. Rick Perry said the initiative is important to eliminate a "salary and opportunity gap for tomorrow's workers."
2. **Standards in Iowa?** [Iowa](#) may soon become the 50th state to have standards for what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level. The state is considering developing standards to help its education system meet the needs of the 21st century workforce. It also may require high schools to offer the ACT-recommended courses of study and state universities and colleges to admit students based on their proficiency in specific subjects.
3. **ADP states update.** In a historic move, the [Michigan](#) state board voted to adopt rigorous high school graduation requirements in several subjects -- including four years of math. Previously, the only statewide graduation requirement was a single civics

to match student records between the K-12 and postsecondary systems and are thus able to report back to high schools how many of their students needed remediation and how many persisted to their second year. This very valuable information is a key indicator of college readiness that high schools can use to improve curriculum and instruction. It is also information that education officials and policymakers need -- and the public deserves -- to ensure that high schools are adequately preparing students for successful futures.

Fortunately, a new national campaign is providing timely assistance to help states build the data systems they need. The Data Quality Campaign -- a collaborative effort of 10 national organizations led by NCEA -- was launched in November 2005 to provide better information to state leaders, including governors and legislators who often are far removed from the implementation of data systems but depend on the data to make decisions. Achieve is pleased to be part of this campaign.

The data campaign's first move was to release a list of [10 essential elements](#) that every state needs in its data system. The list includes a unique student identifier so that students' academic progress can be traced from grade to grade; student transcript information, including courses taken and grades earned; scores on college readiness tests; graduation and dropout data; and the ability to match student records between K-12 and postsecondary.

No state currently has all 10 elements in place. A few -- Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio, Texas and Utah -- have all but one or two. Most states have a much longer way to go.

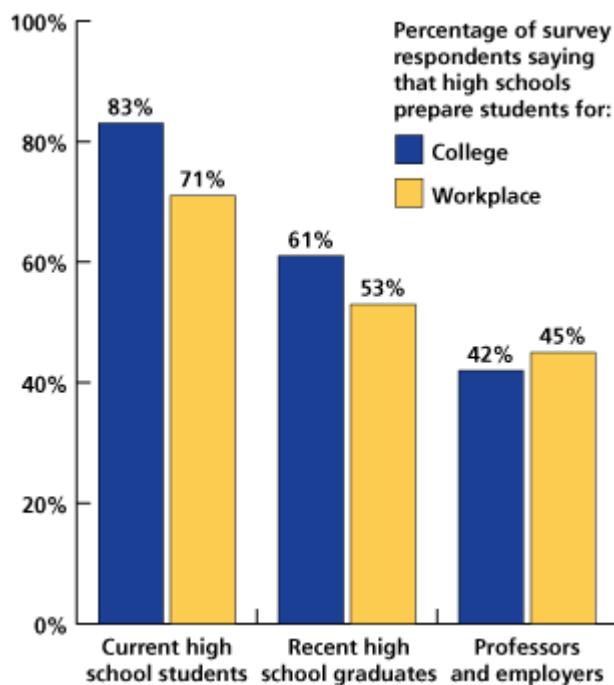
class. Lawmakers will give their thumbs-up or thumbs-down to the new requirements in March. Meanwhile, [Ohio](#) lawmakers have sent a bill to the governor that would align instruction in Ohio's college and university teaching programs to the state's K-12 standards. The law also would mandate that teacher candidates learn "value-added" analysis to track student progress. [Oregon](#) is considering doing away with its Certificate of Mastery degree. The superintendent hopes to replace it with more relevant performance-assessment methods.

### **Related Resources**

For more information on the 10 essential elements of a longitudinal data system and a look at what elements each state currently collects, visit the [Data Quality Campaign](#) Web site.

### **Did You Know?**

#### **High School Students Believe Schools Are Preparing Them Well; Graduates, Employers and Professors Say Otherwise**



Sources: *The State of Our Nation's Youth, 2005–2006*, Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, Inc., 2005; and Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? A Study of Recent High School Graduates, College Instructors, and Employers*, prepared for Achieve, Inc., 2005.

*More than eight in 10 high school students are confident that their schools are preparing them to succeed in college and seven in 10 believe they are being adequately prepared for work, according to a survey of current high school students conducted for the Horatio Alger Association. But once students graduate, far fewer credit their high schools with ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge they need. An Achieve survey of recent high school graduates found that only six in 10 believe their high schools did a good job of preparing them for college and barely more than half believe*

*that their high schools prepared them for the workplace. Professors and employers take a similarly dim view of the preparation high school students receive.*

#### New Resources

- In *Education Week*'s annual analysis of state education policies, researchers found that standards-based reform has a greater impact on raising student achievement than efforts to improve teacher quality or increase money do. *Quality Counts 2006* analyses of student scores from 1992 to 2005 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that the three elements of standards-based reform -- state standards, assessments and accountability -- have a positive impact on student performance in both reading and math. The report also provides its annual state-by-state snapshot of student achievement and progress in four key facets of state education systems: standards and accountability, efforts to improve teacher quality, school climate, and school resources and the equity of school finance systems.
- Why do some high schools produce unusually large growth among students who entered school significantly behind while other schools with similar demographics continue to struggle? A new report by The Education Trust, *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground*, examines seven public high schools to uncover the answers. Among the findings: High-impact schools focus on preparing students for college and careers, have higher expectations for students, encourage students to take on academic challenges, have early warning systems to identify students who need help and provide extra supports for students who are behind. A [companion report](#) provides a closer look at three high-impact schools with predominantly low-income or minority student populations.
- Alarm bells rang last year when the results of two international assessments -- the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Program for International Student Assessment -- seemed to show that although U.S. students compared favorably to their international peers in 4th and 8th grade math, their performance declined precipitously in high school. But a new study by the [American Institutes for Research](#) reveals that this is not so. When you look only at countries that participated in both assessments, U.S. students performed consistently near the middle or the bottom of the pack among industrialized nations in 4th grade, 8th grade and high school, reinforcing the need to improve student achievement at all levels to ensure U.S. competitiveness in the global economy.

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