

January 2007

Commentary: NCLB and High Schools

As the new Congress begins its work and President Bush enters the final two years of his term, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) will be back on the table for reauthorization. One of the issues that is sure to surface is whether the law should extend beyond K-8 and focus more aggressively on high school reform.

Most agree that NCLB has not had much impact on high schools so far. The law focuses more heavily on the elementary and middle grades, and the requirements that do stretch into high school stop well short of emphasizing college and work readiness.

Should NCLB be expanded to require more rigorous measures and bolster accountability in high school? There is no question that states should have more rigorous assessments and more sophisticated data systems in place to measure college and work readiness and that over time schools should be held accountable for improvement on those measures. Determining the appropriate federal role is more complicated.

There is significant work under way in states right now to raise expectations in high school. States' participation in the American Diploma Project and similar initiatives is testament to this. More than half the states in the nation are working voluntarily to align academic standards in high school with postsecondary expectations. A dozen states have raised graduation course requirements, and more have plans to do so. In addition, a growing number of states have recognized that they need more rigorous assessments in high school that are capable of indicating readiness for postsecondary education.

The challenge for the federal government is to find ways to support and encourage the good work already under way while providing incentives for states that have not yet acted

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1. **Setting the standard in Ohio.**

The [Ohio](#) Legislature recently passed measures that will make the state's high school graduation requirements among the most rigorous in the nation. The Ohio Core will require students, starting with the class of 2014, to pass four years of math, including Algebra II; three years of lab science; and five electives. A requirement for foreign language also is being reviewed.

2. **Better preparing students.** Like Ohio and many other states, [Arizona](#) is considering measures to increase the rigor of its high school graduation requirements. Specifically, an advisory panel to the governor is recommending that by 2012 all students be required to take four years of math. An [op-ed](#) in a state paper provides the rationale and support for the move. At the same time, [Arizona](#) is taking steps to make the senior year of high school more relevant. Possible measures include increasing the minimum number of credits required to graduate, adding college-credit classes or more internships, and increasing the number of hours students must be in school each day.

3. **WASL requirement delayed.**

Faced with a looming deadline for the state math assessment to become a graduation requirement,

to do so. The goal should be to help accelerate reform and sustain momentum without imposing requirements that restrict states' abilities to innovate or that turn reform into an exercise in compliance. Part of what makes high school reform so powerful right now is that states are taking it on voluntarily. Governors and other leaders have made it their signature issue, and federal officials need to find ways to honor and promote this leadership.

Here are some ways the federal government could help build on current efforts:

- provide incentives for aligning high school standards and graduation requirements with college and workplace expectations;
- provide resources for states to build more advanced high school assessments capable of measuring college readiness;
- fund consortia of states interested in building common high school assessments;
- continue to fund state longitudinal data systems that enable information to be shared between K-12 and postsecondary systems; and
- encourage states to innovate with high school accountability models that place greater value on graduating students ready for college and work.

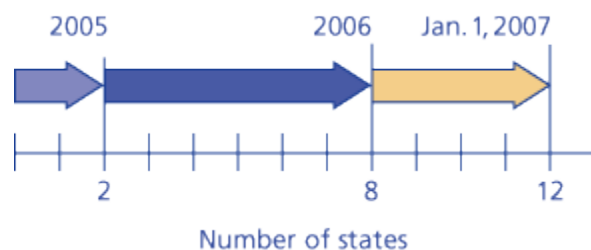
Perhaps the most important thing federal officials -- from the president to Secretary Spellings to key members of Congress -- can do is to use the bully pulpit to remind the American public why higher standards in our schools are so important and to position education reform as a critical component of our economic competitiveness strategy. Our ability to graduate all students from high school ready for college and careers will directly affect our competitive position in the global economy and ensure greater opportunities for our nation's young people as they transition into adulthood. The public needs to understand this and support public officials who are taking aggressive action in the states.

Did You Know?

[Washington](#) Gov. Christine Gregoire recently proposed delaying the new requirement. However, she quickly followed that up with a proposal to put more math and science teachers in the classroom and provide additional support for struggling students. She also recommends revising the state assessment to ensure that it better balances students' ability to answer a question with their ability to explain how they arrived at the answer.

4. **Pushing an innovation agenda.** The [National Governors Association](#), under the leadership of Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona, is launching a new initiative focused on ensuring that the United States can maintain its edge in the global economy through innovation in science and technology in K-12 and higher education as well as the workforce. The initiative will provide practical advice and a toolbox of things governors can do to help teachers inspire innovation and entrepreneurship among students.

More States Pass College- and Work-Ready Graduation Requirements



Source: Achieve research.

Momentum is building among states for ensuring that their students graduate ready for college and the 21st-century workplace. In 2005, only two states had graduation course requirements that met American Diploma Project benchmarks. As of the beginning of 2007, 12 states had passed legislation to ensure that high school students graduate college and work ready.

New Resources

- Who is shaping education policy? A new report from the [Editorial Projects in Education Research Center](#) looks at the people, organizations, information sources and studies that have had the most influence on education policies and practices over the last decade. Achieve was listed as one of the top 10 influential organizations, along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and federal entities such as the U.S. Congress and Department of Education. The American Diploma Project's *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (2004) was listed as one of the most influential reports.
- For its annual state-by-state look at prominent issues in education, [Education Week's](#) 2007 *Quality Counts* report has developed a Chance-for-Success Index that reveals which states provide the best opportunities for young people to succeed in school and the workforce. The index tracks state efforts to connect education from preschool through postsecondary education and training. The report also includes a special focus on states' K-12 performance through a new State Achievement Index that ranks each state based on whether its students are significantly above or below the national average or are making progress on 15 indicators.
- To help states close the achievement gaps that separate poor and minority students from their more affluent peers, [The Education Trust](#) has released state-by-state summaries of student achievement and the condition of education. The summaries include data on student performance on state and national tests, high school and college graduation rates, teacher qualifications, and funding. The reports also look at where gaps are smallest, where they are largest and which states are making the biggest gains so that state leaders can learn more about what policies and practices have worked -- and not worked -- in other states.
- Business leaders and policymakers have been very vocal about the need for improved math and science education to ensure U.S. leadership in the global economy, and a new survey conducted for the [American Council on Education](#) shows that almost three-quarters of the public agree that math and science skills are very important to U.S. global competitiveness. The survey also found strong support for policies intended to make America competitive through the cultivation of talent in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.
- [The New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce's](#) report, *Tough*

Choices or Tough Times, outlines a series of recommendations for fundamentally redesigning the U.S. education system to better prepare workers for the global economy. The recommendations include authorizing school districts to pay independent contractors to run their schools and allowing students who pass a test in 10th grade to go directly to community college or stay in high school for two more years to prepare for a selective four-year college. It also recommends developing standards, assessments and curriculum that go beyond subject matter knowledge to ensure that students have other skills and qualities they need, such as creativity and innovation, the ability to work in teams, and the ability to manage their own work.

New from Achieve

Improving graduation rates in Indiana. Achieve and Jobs for the Future recently released a report titled [Moving Indiana Forward: High Standards and High Graduation Rates](#). The report provided a strategic assessment for Indiana policymakers on how they can use standards and support-based high school reform strategies to improve both achievement and graduation rates for struggling youth. The recommendations include counting and accounting for all students, while keeping in mind the goal of college and career readiness; identifying the high schools that are losing the most youth and targeting those schools for immediate and significant intervention; and analyzing the supply of high-quality options and creating new pathways to high school graduation for struggling youth.

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.

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