

July 2006

## New from Achieve

**New Web site features advocacy tools and data.** To support state efforts to ensure that all students who graduate high school are college and work ready, Achieve has revamped its [Web site](#), including a new section with powerful data on the case for action and examples of places that are practicing these reforms and seeing results. This section also includes advocacy resources such as a database of communications tools and model public awareness campaign materials, PowerPoint presentations, fact sheets that address concerns around the ADP agenda, summaries of compelling poll data, and updated education pipeline and economic data.



## Commentary: Dropouts: Are High-Stakes Tests the Problem?

The long-running debate on the impact of high school graduation tests on high school dropout rates continues. All studies on this topic suffer from the poor quality of available data; many also are weakened by the predetermined views of the researcher. A new study\* to appear in the forthcoming issue of *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* makes a valiant effort to deal with the most serious methodological problems that limit the validity of previous studies. And since this study reaches a different conclusion than previous studies from the same author, it deserves to be taken seriously.

Looking over a 27-year period, the study attributes an increase in the dropout rate of up to 2 percent to high school graduation tests, with most of the increase due to what the authors refer to as the more “difficult” tests adopted by states in recent years.

## 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. **Raising course requirements to prepare graduates for success.** As part of its efforts to improve student preparation for college and the workplace, a panel in [Delaware](#) is recommending more rigorous high school graduation requirements, including four years of math, four years of English language arts and three years of lab science. The group further specifies that the math courses must include Algebra II and Geometry and that one math course must be taken senior year -- part of its recommendations to boost rigor in the senior year.
2. **Aligning postsecondary and K-12 expectations.** In [Colorado](#), colleges and universities have raised the bar on admissions requirements, which has pushed the state to review its high school expectations to ensure that students are ready for postsecondary education. A statewide study group appointed by the governor is considering extending academic

(Note that “difficult” is a decidedly relative term. Achieve’s [studies](#) of these tests demonstrate that they demand at best 8th and 9th grade skills to pass.)

If these findings stand up to further scrutiny, states need to take them seriously and ensure that students and schools have the extra support they need. Some states have a fine track record on this score; others can and should do much better.

That said, the debate about high-stakes tests and dropout rates diverts our attention from the much larger and more urgent problem. As the recent release of *Diplomas Count* shows, the dropout rate over the past 30 years has been a persistent 30 percent nationally and approaches 40 percent to 50 percent in many urban school systems. The problem predated exit exams, and it is just as prevalent in states without such exams. Instead of debating a potential 2 percent increase in dropout rates in states with high-stakes tests, we would be far better off getting serious about tackling the 30 percent problem that exists in every state.

Recent studies in cities such as Chicago, New York and Philadelphia are beginning to yield important lessons that can help. First and foremost, these studies teach us that dropouts are not a monolithic group. Second, they are identifying early warning signs of students who are academically behind or disengaged from school and consequently at risk of dropping out. Third, they provide a powerful reminder schools contribute to -- and therefore can help reduce -- dropout rates. What educators do matters.

Some dropouts are significantly behind academically, while others leave high school only a few credits short of earning

standards and testing to 11th and 12th grades and implementing statewide graduation requirements. The proposals come up for vote in the fall, but [Denver Public Schools](#) is not waiting. The district already has approved the most rigorous graduation requirements in the state -- requirements that are aligned with the four-year colleges and universities’ admissions standards.

3. **Making better math performance a national priority.** A recent spate of reports has focused on students’ poor math and science performance and the possible implications for America’s economic leadership. In response, President Bush has formed a new [National Mathematics Advisory Panel](#). The panel is tasked with identifying research and ‘evidence-based’ strategies for successful math instruction, particularly related to preparing students to take algebra and higher-level math. A preliminary report is expected in January 2007, with final recommendations by February 2008.
4. **Challenging low-performing students works.** To boost graduation rates and engage students who would not traditionally be bound for colleges, many schools are turning to [programs](#) that allow students to earn college credit even before they earn their high school diploma. These programs are not just for the best and brightest. Increasingly, students who do not consider themselves college material are rising to the challenge and earning up to two

a diploma. For the former group, academic performance is clearly a contributing factor to dropping out. The latter group is performing well academically; these students presumably drop out due to boredom or because they don't see the relevance of the school curriculum. There is also a population of students who are overage but undercredited -- 17- or 18-year-olds with fewer than 10 credits toward their diploma.

States, districts and schools need to identify these different populations and be equipped to target prevention, intervention and recovery programs according to each group's needs. Just as the population is not monolithic, the solutions and strategies cannot be. For some students, a key approach will be providing remediation and acceleration simultaneously. For others, there needs to be a more engaging and accessible pathway that uses academically rigorous career and technical education programs.

The research base to guide these efforts is still quite primitive, but enough is known to get started, and school districts should not delay. Achieve recently released a [white paper](#) that outlines strategies for building an early warning data system that can help districts take the first critical steps.

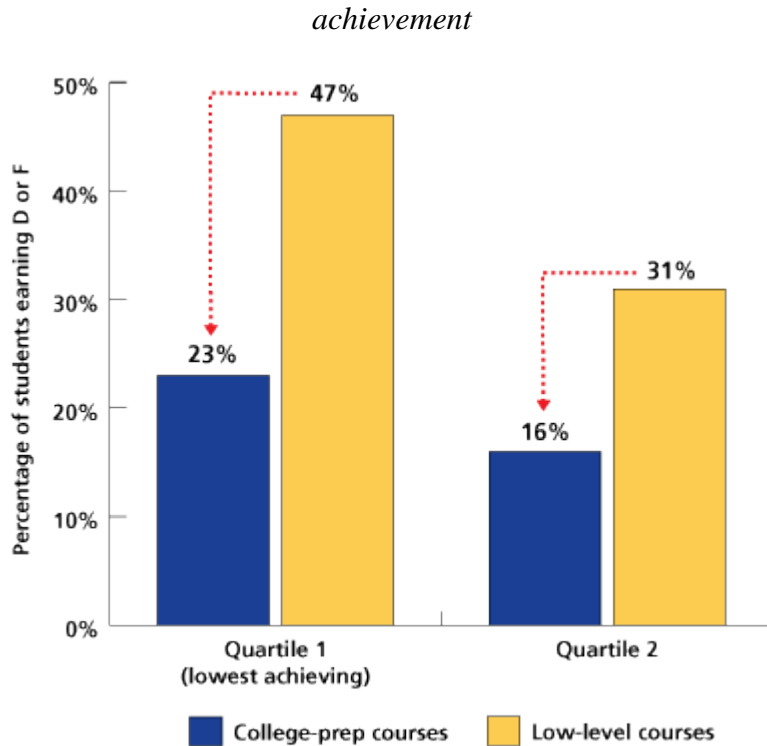
\*Warren, John Robert, Krista N. Jenkins, Rachel B. Kulick, "High School Exit Examinations and State-Level Completion and GED Rates, 1975 Through 2002," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 2, summer 2006.

years of college credit in high school -- a move that boosts self-confidence and makes college more affordable.

**Did You Know?**

**Low-Achieving Students Fail Less Often in Rigorous Courses**

*9th grade English performance, by 9th grade course and 8th grade reading*



Source: Cooney, Sondra and Gene Bottoms, Southern Regional Education Board, *Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link*, 2002, p. 9.

*When students are provided high-quality support and given the opportunity to take more rigorous courses, they rise to the challenge. A study by the Southern Regional Education Board shows that students -- even low-achieving students -- who have similar characteristics and 8th grade test scores succeed at far higher rates when they are placed in college-prep courses in 9th grade than their peers who are placed in lower-level courses.*

#### New Resources

- About 30 percent of the class of 2006 will not graduate high school, according to a new report by *Education Week's* Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. [Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policies and Rates](#) tracks graduation rates in every state and the 50 largest school districts as well as policies such as course and exit exam requirements, type and number of state high school credentials, and compulsory age for attending high school. The report also identifies large disparities in graduation rates across districts and between minority and white students. An online mapping resource available in July will allow users to see results for individual school districts, including comparisons to national and state data.
- A new poll by the [Educational Testing Service](#) reinforces the finding that most Americans believe that our nation's schools are coming up short or falling behind in teaching the basics, such as math, science and writing. Further, they believe that we will have to challenge students more if America is to maintain

its global economic edge. However, the poll also revealed a deep divide between public high school students, teachers and administrators, the majority of whom feel high school prepares them well for the workforce, and adults, college faculty and opinion leaders, who believe just the opposite.

- As states consider implementing exit exams to ensure that students have mastered the skills and knowledge they need to succeed after graduation, some worry that students who are not achieving at high levels, particularly low-income and minority students, will be forced to drop out. But a new poll from the [Partnership for Learning](#) shows widespread support for the exit exam in Washington state: 72 percent of Latino citizens and 62 percent of African American citizens believe that a diploma should be awarded only after passing the Washington Assessment of Student learning or an equally rigorous alternative. And support rose even higher (86 percent of Latinos and 80 percent of African Americans) when those polled learned about the supports that are in place to help students pass.
- In its latest poll of the attitudes of the American people, [Public Agenda](#) found widespread and continuing support for standards and testing. However, the issue no longer tops most people's education agenda, in part because most parents believe that schools are better and the material studied is harder than when they themselves went to school. At the same time, most of those polled also say updating classes to match the skills employers want would improve American high schools, and eight out of 10 students say that requiring students to meet higher standards for graduation and promotion is a good idea.

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*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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