

Preparing LAUSD High School Students for the 21st Century Economy: We have the way, but do we have the will?

A Special Report by:



The Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education is in the midst of debating what is perhaps the most important issue facing high school students today: What will they be prepared to do after high school? What choices will they have? College? Workforce? Military?

These are good questions, coming at the right time. Because the truth is, LAUSD, like many districts in California, prepares far too few of its students adequately for the future. Too many students graduate without the preparation to apply to the state's four-year public colleges and universities; to pass the placement exams at two-year or four-year colleges; or to succeed in a job that could support a family. Our public universities (UC/CSU) call it the A-G curriculum, meaning, most importantly, that students take math up through intermediate algebra, four years of English and at least two lab sciences — not a huge stretch in our minds, but a rigorous sequence of courses most LAUSD high school students unfortunately do not take and, therefore, are excluded from meaningful postsecondary opportunities.

While many think of the A-G curriculum as a “college prep” curriculum, it is quite clear that the skills that employers want in their employees are almost exactly the same as those required for college.¹ The A-G curriculum provides the skills and rich content knowledge that students need for their lives after high school, for whatever path they choose.

We've been analyzing and publishing data for several years that points to one conclusion: College readiness equals work readiness.² Young people today need to know more than their predecessors, especially because jobs are changing. Automotive mechanics today should know physics and at least algebra. Indeed to succeed in most blue collar jobs these days students need at least geometry.³ We now know that the A-G curriculum, once reserved for some students, is necessary for all. It isn't college prep anymore. It's life prep. Period.

Do We Have the Resources?

So if we know the A-G curriculum would benefit all students, why aren't we providing it to all? Some might argue that ensuring that every student has access to the A-G curriculum may be morally right but practically impossible. The reality of limited school budgets and teacher shortages (which are essentially the same thing given that teacher salaries typically make up 80 percent of a school's budget) tends to halt any conversations about reform. While it's true that California schools and districts could use more resources, the fact is that LAUSD's high schools already have nearly all of the teachers they need to teach the A-G curriculum to all students.

By our estimates, more than half of LAUSD's high schools (61 percent) either already have all the teachers they need or need two or fewer additional teachers in order to provide all students with the A-G curriculum. In our

analysis, we used California Department of Education data to determine how many additional teachers would be needed. We looked at the teaching staff of each high school and assumed that each teacher with appropriate subject-area credentials could teach a total of 5 A-G classes in their subject (or a percentage of that depending on their FTE) with 30 students in each class.⁴ We then looked at the enrollment of the school, determined how many A-G classes would be needed were the school to provide the A-G curriculum to all students and then determined how many, if any, additional teachers would be needed to have enough teachers to teach the A-G curriculum to all students.⁵

The total number of additional teachers needed across all of LAUSD’s high schools is 104 and 68 percent of this gap (71 teachers) is concentrated in foreign languages. Considering that LAUSD currently employs a total of 36,180 teachers, this additional 104 teachers is a small (less than 0.3 percent) fraction of the teaching force.



LAUSD has the vast majority of teachers they need to provide every student with the A-G curriculum, but they just aren’t teaching the right classes. Teachers who

are qualified to teach intermediate algebra and geometry are instead teaching pre-algebra and beginning algebra. This under-utilization of teachers wastes teacher talent as much as it wastes student talent.

Are Students Even Interested?

Another argument against providing the A-G curriculum to all students is that students don’t want it. To the contrary, student demand for this curriculum is great. Hundreds of LAUSD students, of all races and income levels, have demanded it in Sacramento, at the LAUSD Board of Education and in town hall meetings. Indeed, over 80 percent of California high school students surveyed in a recent study expect to go to college.⁶ Even students that aren’t on the “college track” — in other words, not on track to successfully complete the A-G/life prep curriculum — intend to go to college. A full 71 percent of those supposedly non-college bound 10th graders expect to attend college.⁷ Even about a third of the “non-college bound” 11th graders that failed the high school exit exam want to go to college.⁸ It is clear, though,

that student expectations are at odds with those of the adults who decide the curriculum they’ll get in high school.

In LAUSD, only 22 percent of all 9th graders graduate four years later having successfully completed the A-G curriculum. The picture looks far worse for some groups of students.



Only 16 percent of Latino 9th graders graduate having mastered the curriculum.⁹ Recent data from the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Education Trust-West show that disturbingly high percentages of Latino and African-American students drop out of school.¹⁰ Even among those Latino students who did graduate from LAUSD last year, a full 69 percent will not have access to either the California State or University of California systems, and they won’t satisfy the prerequisites for most jobs that pay a living wage.¹¹

Is it the Students’ Fault?

Even when students clearly want the A-G curriculum, they are often unable to get into the classes they need. Some people criticize the students for this. They say students aren’t taking responsibility for their own education. This argument, however, ignores the very real systemic



inequities that limit access to the A-G curriculum for many students. The fact is that LAUSD’s high schools don’t equally offer the courses students will need — a pattern that can be seen across the state.

Using a measure we created called the “A-G Opportunity Index” that looks at the extent to which a school or district is providing enough A-G courses for all its students, we

“Life Prep” Opportunity: A Tale of Two Los Angeles Schools

Granada Hills
 3922 students
 27% poverty
 32% African American and Latino
 58% of graduates successfully completed A-G in 2004

Garfield
 4844 students
 98% poverty
 99% Latino
 33% of graduates successfully completed A-G in 2004

Beginning algebra part 1 (non-A-G)	9 classes	32 classes
Beginning algebra part 2 (A-G)	14 classes	26 classes
Intermediate algebra (A-G)	20 classes	10 classes
Trigonometry (A-G)	7 classes	4 classes
Chemistry (A-G)	17 classes	15 classes
Automotive mechanics	5 classes	12 classes
Special education day classes	33 classes	77 classes
Military science	0 classes	14 classes

found that only 9 percent of the “most disadvantaged” districts provide enough classes for all students to take the A-G curriculum, and LAUSD is not one of them.¹² In LAUSD, poor and minority students tend to be offered fewer of the A-G courses they need compared to their more affluent, white and Asian counterparts across town.

Take a look at the two schools above. Garfield High School, serving mostly low-income, Latino and African-American young people offers far fewer opportunities for students to take A-G courses than Granada Hills, a school serving a far greater number of affluent and white students. For example, Garfield offers half as many intermediate algebra courses as Granada Hills, yet it has twice as many automotive mechanics courses, and 14 military science courses, of which Granada Hills offers none.

The truth is that access to the A-G courses isn’t equal, between schools or even within schools. Student after student in LAUSD tell of unfulfilled attempts to get into A-G classes, learning too late about the courses required for college admission, being unable to get into the overcrowded courses they need, and being told outright (and prematurely) that they are not “college material.”¹³

An examination of the courses offered in LAUSD’s high

schools makes it clear that course enrollment is not only a matter of student choice, it’s also a matter of opportunity and how students are counseled into — or away from — the courses that will prepare them for college and work.

Believing LAUSD’s Students Can Achieve

Can students succeed in the A-G curriculum? It is true that far too many LAUSD high school students are performing below grade level. But the truth is, when we raise the bar for underperforming students, they rise to the challenge. As many high-poverty, high-minority, high-performing schools demonstrate, ability is neither fixed nor is it solely determined by background. Performance is linked inextricably with expectations. Research shows that when given the chance, even students who started out far behind learn more — and fail less often — when placed in challenging courses.¹⁴



San Jose Unified is one of the few districts in the state that has made the A-G curriculum the default curriculum. Seven years ago, this district, which has high percentages of low-income and minority students, began requiring high school students to complete the A-G

curriculum to earn a diploma. Since their implementation of A-G for all, the achievement gap between Latino and white students narrowed significantly. Matched scores for students in grades 3-9 in San Jose Unified from 1998 to 2004 show a decrease of 55 percent in the achievement gap between white and Latino students in reading and a decrease of 43 percent in math. The pass rates for Latino students in A-G courses increased. Students did not drop out, as some people feared. In fact, the graduation rate actually went up — not down — from 73 percent in 1999 to 79 percent in 2003.¹⁵

The bottom line is students can and do succeed in the A-G curriculum. All students need it, they want it, and LAUSD has the teaching force to teach it. But not enough classes are offered. It's time to stop viewing high school as a pathway for some and a gatekeeper for others. It's



time we capitalize on the abilities of both teachers and students and better prepare every student for life, whether it is for work or college. We have the know-how. The real question is whether we have the will.

Endnotes

¹ “The American Diploma Project Workplace Study,” National Alliance for Business for the American Diploma Project, unpublished report, 2002. For more information see <http://www.achieve.org/achieve.nsf/ADP-Workplace-Intro>.

² For example, see *Are California High Schools Ready for the 21st Century?* The Education Trust-West, June 2004 and *Understanding and Implementing the A-G Rigorous Curriculum in Los Angeles High Schools*, The Education Trust-West, 2005.

³ Carnevale, A. & Desrochers, D., “Connecting Education Standards and Employment: Course-taking Patterns of Young Workers,” American Diploma Project, 2002.

⁴ If a teacher had subject-area credentials for more than one A-G area, we split their FTE between the two (or more) subject areas.

⁵ To calculate how many A-G classes in each subject area a school needs to provide in order to enable all students to complete an A-G curriculum, we assumed that each A-G class could serve 30 students, and determined how many classes would need to be offered to satisfy the UC/CSU A-G subject area curriculum requirements. We call the ratio between the number of A-G spaces provided and the number needed the “A-G Opportunity Index”.

⁶ Venezia, A., Kirst, M. & Antonio, A., *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*, Stanford University’s Bridge Project, Stanford University, CA, March 2003

⁷ Hill, E., *Improving High School: A Strategic Approach*, California Legislative Analyst’s Office, May 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Are California High Schools Ready for the 21st Century?* LAUSD District Summary, The Education Trust-West, June 2004

¹⁰ See *Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis in California*, Harvard Civil Rights Project, March 2005. Using the Urban Institute’s Cumulative Promotion Index, the Harvard Civil Rights Project report estimates that in LAUSD, African-American students graduated at a rate of 46.5% and Latino students graduated at a rate of 39.1%. See also *Are California High Schools Ready for the 21st Century?* LAUSD District Summary, The Education Trust-West, June 2004. Using the Manhattan Institute methodology, this report estimates the 2003 graduation rates in LAUSD to be 56% for African-American students and 44% for Latino students.

¹¹ California Department of Education

¹² *Are California High Schools Ready for the 21st Century?* The Education Trust-West, June 2004

¹³ See *In Their Own Words: Voices from the Field*, The Education Trust-West, February 2005 – “They [students in LAUSD] wait to see a counselor for weeks after the semester has started, so they can somehow beat the other hundreds of fellow classmates out of that one seat left for the completion of their A-G coursework. Only to be told there’s not enough classes or spaces. Imagine how that feels as a high school senior”, “The college counselors aren’t teaching high school students that you need four years of English, three years of math, two years of science, two years of foreign language.” See also “A New Core Curriculum for All: Aiming High for Other People’s Children”, *Thinking K-16*, The Education Trust, 2003 – “...this year I tried to get into Spanish 2, so again, I could meet the requirements [to apply to UC]. My counselor told me Spanish 2 was only for students who were going to college, automatically assuming that I wasn’t going to college. It made me mad. I got kind of discouraged, but I told her I am going to college and I want this class. Then I did not get into the class anyway, because the class was overcrowded.” See also Los Angeles City Beat, April 7, 2005, which tells the story of one LAUSD student, who although she was a National Honor Society scholar, “didn’t know how there are certain classes that I needed to graduate and go to college.” See also *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2002, which describes one student, who although she hopes to attend USC, was placed in cosmetology. In describing her counselors, she said, “They don’t take the time for those who do want to learn. They think kids from South-Central are not going to USC, we’re not going to college. They want us to do the manicures for the kids who are going to USC.”

¹⁴ Cooney, S. & Bottoms, G., “Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link”, Southern Regional Education Board, 2002 and USDOE, NCES, “Vocational Education in the United States: Toward the Year 2000,” in *Issue Brief: Students Who Prepare for College and Vocation*.

¹⁵ *The A-G Curriculum: College-Prep? Work-Prep? Life Prep*. The Education Trust-West, 2004 and unpublished data from San Jose Unified School District.