

July 2005

Commentary: Informed Advice = Student Success

We are all familiar with the data. Although a majority of high school graduates go on to college, nearly one-third end up in remedial courses, and most of those students drop out without earning a degree. A [recent survey](#) from ACT, Inc., sheds light on one cause of the problem -- students are not getting good advice on the courses they should take in high school to be ready for credit-bearing courses in college.

According to ACT, more than eight in 10 middle and early high school students say they plan to attend college -- 77 percent plan to attend a four-year college, and 5 percent are aiming for a two-year program. Remarkably few expect to receive no postsecondary training whatsoever.

The ACT survey also reveals that large numbers of students are not taking the courses necessary for their college aspirations to be realized. Only 60 percent describe the curriculum they are taking as "college preparatory." And that is *their* description. The actual number taking a college-prep math curriculum is closer to 40 percent, according to data from the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Who is advising these young people on how to make their college dreams come true? According to the ACT survey, parents are the #1 influence. Teens cited mothers (67 percent) and fathers (50 percent) as the people they turn to most for advice on high school course taking and other college planning. While 43 percent named teachers, only 24 percent named counselors, and 8 percent singled out principals.

Collectively, we must find better ways to inform teens, their parents and their teachers about what it takes to be ready for college and productive careers. They need to

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. **Beyond the MCAS.** A recent *Boston Globe* [study](#) and [editorial](#) publicized findings that show that the number of public high school graduates taking remedial courses during their first year in college has not gone down significantly since passing the MCAS became a graduation requirement. The newspaper is rightly asking whether passing the MCAS test is enough to prepare students for college. K-12 and postsecondary leaders in the state are the first to admit that it is not. Passing the 10th grade exit exam is necessary but not sufficient, they say, particularly if the goal is to prepare students for success in college. That is one of the reasons Massachusetts joined 17 other states in the American Diploma Project Network to develop a system that will ensure college and work readiness among graduates.
2. **Building momentum.** In June, **Oklahoma** Gov. Brad Henry signed a bill raising the standards for earning a high school diploma. The state will add end-of-course graduation assessments and require that all high school students take a college- and work-ready curriculum unless their parents sign an opt-out form. With this measure, the state joins at least half a dozen others that have made significant policy moves to strengthen course requirements

understand which courses will get them there and which will not. And outreach must start in middle school or earlier. Waiting until high school is too late.

Part of the challenge is to help parents understand how dramatically expectations have risen since they went to school. How often have we seen raised eyebrows when we tell them that their children need to take four years of rigorous math to be successful? The message is a hard one to deliver, but until it sinks in, we won't close the gap.

The ACT study reminds us that the problem is not young people's aspirations -- they want to go on to postsecondary education. It's the advice they are getting from their most trusted messengers that needs our attention.

Related Resources

Download a PDF of the ACT survey, [College Readiness Begins in Middle School](#).

View examples of some current outreach efforts aimed at parents and teens:

- [LearnMoreIndiana](#)
- [Maryland Business Roundtable for Education's "Be What I Want to Be"](#)
- [Partnership for Learning \(Michigan\)](#)

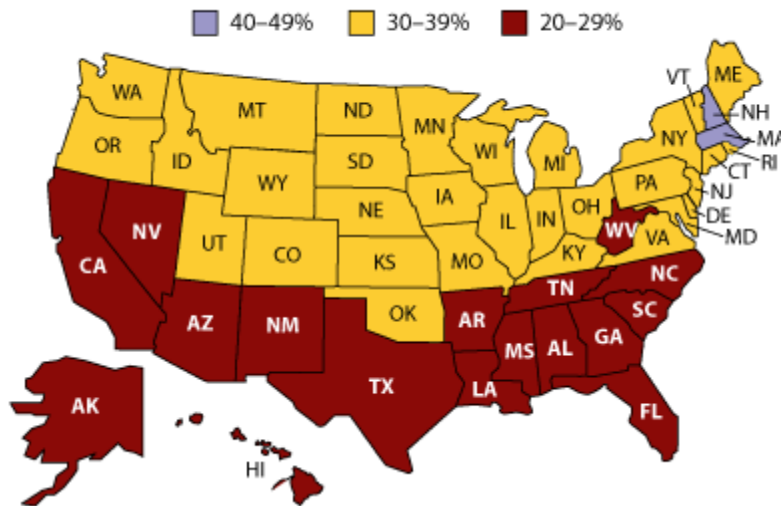
and better prepare high school graduates since February's National Education Summit on High Schools, according to an [Education Week](#) article.

3. **Scaling up success.** As states move forward with high school reform, [Tom Vander Ark](#) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation reflects on lessons learned during the foundation's past five years of high school redesign work.

Did You Know?

In Every State, Fewer Than Half of 8th Graders Read Proficiently

Percentage of 8th graders who score proficient on the NAEP 8th grade reading assessment



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *State Profiles*, U.S. Department of Education, 2004.

Although much attention is rightly focused on high schools' role in better preparing students for college or a career, high schools cannot do it alone. There are many students who enter 9th grade without the skills they need to succeed in a rigorous high school curriculum. In reading, for example, results on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress show that fewer than half of 8th graders in every state are performing at proficient levels. In 17 states, only three in 10 8th graders are proficient in reading.

New Resources

- According to a new survey by the Educational Testing Service, [Ready for the Real World? Americans Speak on High School Reform](#), many Americans believe that unless we overhaul schools now, the United States will be less competitive in 25 years. Only 9 percent of those surveyed think that high schools currently set high academic expectations for students, and only 5 percent believe that high schools are working "very" or "pretty" well. Achieve's [poll](#) of recent high school graduates confirms these findings -- only 24 percent of those surveyed said that they had been significantly challenged in high school.
- ACT's new policy report, [Courses Count: Preparing Students for Postsecondary Success](#), seeks to answer the question of why many high school graduates are not ready to succeed in postsecondary programs without remedial help. The report's three major findings include:
 - Taking a specific sequence of courses in English, math, science and a foreign language improves the likelihood that students will succeed in college-level English composition, algebra and biology.
 - Less than half of all students take the courses they need to be prepared in college-level mathematics and science.
 - Readiness is related to not only courses but also the rigor of those courses, including more in-depth focus on key content areas and better alignment between high school and college curricula.
- A new Education Trust analysis of state graduation rate reporting, [Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose](#), finds that the majority of states are not collecting and publishing accurate graduation and dropout rates -- many states are overstating the number who graduate. Most states are not

using cohort methods to determine graduation rates, others do not count dropouts, some are not disaggregating the data and some have not provided any data at all. Ed Trust was equally disturbed by what they termed "appallingly low graduation rate goals" that states have set in response to the No Child Left Behind law. Researchers examined the 2002-03 graduation data that states provided to the U.S. Department of Education in January.

New from Achieve

- **Tools you can use.** As part of our continuing commitment to providing tools to aid states' school improvement and advocacy efforts, we have created a [PowerPoint presentation](#) that incorporates data from our American Diploma Project research to show how the nation is doing and why reform is so vital. States also can use our [state performance profiles](#) to customize the presentation with information about how they individually are doing on moving students through the education pipeline.

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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