

November 2004

Commentary: No More Mixed Messages

What was once a slight gap between what recent high school graduates need to know and what they actually do know is now a gulf. Two recent publications report that an alarming number of students in California and nationwide are not prepared for freshman coursework. What's worse is that most students who hope to go to college do not even realize they are not ready until it is too late.

[California State University](#) (CSU) officials worked with schools to test the state's high school juniors. They found that only 22 percent are ready for college-level English, and just 45 percent could handle math. Unfortunately, it isn't just California students who are not ready — nearly 80 percent of the 1.2 million students who take the ACT college admissions test are not prepared for college-level English, algebra or biology.

The results brought California and [ACT researchers](#) to the same conclusion: Students are not taking the kind of rigorous courses that will make them ready for college. The findings caused ACT to reconsider its 20-year-old recommended high school core curriculum, which needs to be more challenging if students are going to be prepared.

How can states let students know sooner if they are on a trajectory to be academically ready for college? **California's** Department of Education took the first step by teaming with CSU to test high school juniors — adding 30 college-level questions to the state's 11th grade assessment. Armed with the results, the state will better align high school academics with college expectations, and high school teachers will provide extra help to students. By 2007, university officials plan to reduce the number of students needing remediation from nearly 50 percent to 10 percent. That is exactly the kind of integrated K–16 approach our American Diploma Project advocates.

A handful of other states also are better aligning

News Clips

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1. **Requiring a college- and work-ready curriculum.** Alarmed that half of [Texas](#) high school graduates need to take remedial courses in college, the state is beefing up graduation requirements. This makes sense given the results of the ACT report. [Indiana's](#) Education Roundtable has approved a plan that will require *all* students to take the Core 40 — a college-prep curriculum — unless they choose to opt out.
2. **Rising to the challenge.** [New Jersey's](#) education commissioner wants to significantly reduce the number of students graduating from high school without passing the state's exit exam. For an example of a state where the bar has been kept high, look at [Virginia](#), where students have been given support to master the standards and the dropout rate has not increased despite the state's exit exam requirement.
3. **On the cutting edge.** All eyes should be on [Wyoming](#) as it attempts to use a statewide test for both accountability and diagnostic purposes. Just as interesting, [Colorado](#) is preparing to hold the state's universities accountable for student performance —

expectations between K–12 and college. **Texas** added a college readiness element to its high school assessment, which state postsecondary institutions will use for placement decisions. And the **City University of New York**, on its own initiative, requires students to score 75 on the state Regents exam to qualify for entrance.

something previously done only with K–12. Soon, public colleges will have to address grade inflation, make the core curriculum more rigorous and increase graduation rates, especially for underserved populations.

These trailblazers are leading the way to end the mixed messages implicit in two sets of standards — one to graduate from high school and another to be admitted to college and succeed. If a high school diploma doesn't mean students are ready, what value does it have?

Quotable

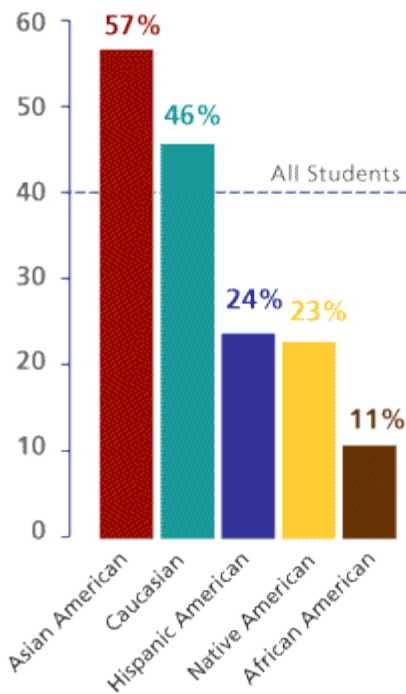
“Attention Wal-Mart shoppers: The Chinese and the Indians are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top. ... Good jobs are being outsourced to them not simply because they'll work for less, but because they are better educated in the math and science skills required for 21st-century work.”

— Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2004

Did You Know?

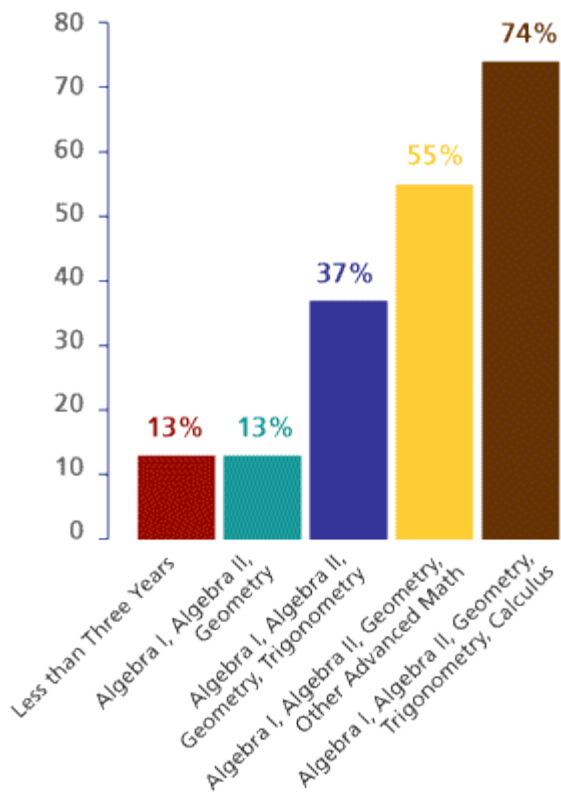
Wide Gaps in College Math Preparation

Percentage of Students Ready for College Math



Taking More Rigorous Courses Increases Chance of College Success

Percentage of Students Ready for College Math Based on Course-Taking



Source: ACT, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work*, October 2004.

Students who score a 22 on the ACT Mathematics Assessment are considered ready for

credit-bearing, college-level math. Only 40 percent of students who took the ACT in 2004 achieved at that level, and the results were worse for minority students. Students who take a more advanced set of math courses in high school are far more likely to be successful in college.

News from Achieve

- **2005 National Education Summit on High Schools.** Achieve and the National Governors Association are hosting the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools Feb. 26–27 in Washington, DC. The Summit will bring together the nation's governors, top business executives, and prominent K–12 and higher education leaders to address the urgent need to improve America's high schools and better prepare graduates for success. Participants will focus in particular on restoring value to the high school diploma; helping students build bridges between high school and college or work; and balancing accountability with increased academic support and learning opportunities.
- **Reality check on NAEP.** The National Assessment Governing Board has asked for Achieve's advice on how the 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress English and math tests can be restructured to better measure whether students are prepared for college or the workplace. Stay tuned for more information as this work progresses.
- **Is the WASL too hard?** Washington state is engaged in a healthy debate, as are many other states, about the difficulty of graduation exams. Achieve recently completed a [report](#) for Washington state officials that compared the WASL to six other states' exit exams, and some were surprised by the findings.

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