

November 2005

## Commentary: Districts Raising the Bar

Since the National Education Summit on High Schools in February, governors and policymakers in a number of states have moved to raise graduation requirements to bring them into closer alignment with the skills young people need to succeed in college and work. States such as Indiana and Oklahoma have been aggressive, setting the new requirements at the college and work readiness level. Other states -- for example, Illinois and Oregon -- have taken a more incremental approach.

In these states and others that have sought to raise the bar, policymakers have had to respond to an initial chorus of concerns -- is it fair to require poor and minority children to take tougher courses? Where will we get the qualified teachers? Will it cost more money, and can we afford it?

All of these questions are fair, but none should be a showstopper. Just look at big city districts such as Boston, Chicago, San Jose and Los Angeles. These school systems -- arguably among the largest, most diverse and most academically challenged in the nation -- have moved on their own to raise graduation requirements beyond where their states have set them.

In Los Angeles, more than 1,000 minority students and parents spent a year advocating for a more challenging curriculum. They held demonstrations and spoke at school board meetings, urging the board to make California's A-G college-prep curriculum a requirement for *all* students to graduate from high school. The A-G curriculum was created with the state's university system and includes four years of English, three years of math -- including Algebra I and II and Geometry -- and two years of lab science. In the end, the board voted for this measure.

## 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. **Success silences critics.** In **Virginia** and **Massachusetts**, more students are taking Advanced Placement courses, passing the state graduation tests and graduating high school. Both states have seen tremendous progress by sticking to reform plans.
2. **The future of higher education.** Spurred on by falling college graduation rates among industrialized nations and U.S. graduates' inability to compete for skilled jobs in the new economy, the U.S. Department of Education has created the [Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#) to address our education system's shortcomings and enhance its strengths. The panel's report is due next August.
3. **ADP Network states move forward.** **Colorado** is considering raising its graduation requirements, and **Michigan** is assessing a similar move, with backing from [business](#). Meanwhile, **Kentucky**'s business community issued a report recommending a seamless education system from prekindergarten through college and offering support for reforms.

In 2002, San Jose, CA, raised graduation requirements to the levels now being pursued in Los Angeles. Since then, high school reading and math scores have risen significantly and achievement gaps have closed dramatically, all while the graduation rate has remained steady.

In Massachusetts, the main statewide graduation requirement is passing the state's 10th grade exit exam, but in 2004 Boston Public Schools went one step further, establishing challenging course requirements that include passing at least four courses in the humanities that meet standards for English and U.S. history; three courses in math, including Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II; and three lab science courses, all to ensure that students are prepared for success after graduation.

Illinois raised its graduation requirements this summer for the first time in 21 years, but these new requirements are still not as challenging as those set forth by Chicago Public Schools in fall 1997. The district requires its graduates to take four years of English; three years of math, including Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II/Trigonometry; and three years of science with a lab component.

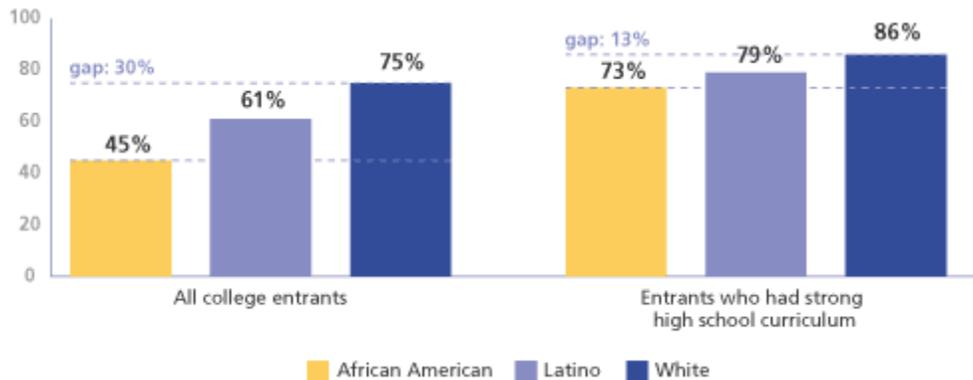
Leaders in these districts understand that they cannot raise the bar without providing supports. Each is pursuing aggressive strategies to support struggling students and provide tools and training for teachers.

Is there something special about San Jose, Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles? Not really, with one big exception -- their education and political leaders are willing to take responsibility for preparing students for the 21st century. They should provide inspiration to state policymakers around the country.

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### **Did You Know?**

**Strong High School Curriculum\* Improves  
College Completion, Narrows Gaps**



\*Completing at least Algebra II plus other courses.

Source: Adapted from Adelman, Clifford, U.S. Department of Education, *Answers in the Toolbox*, 1999.

*Among all college students, there is a 30 percentage point gap in college completion rates between white and African American students. However, that gap narrows significantly when students take a rigorous college-prep curriculum in high school. These data reinforce the importance of curricular intensity and quality, particularly for African American and Latino students.*

### New Resources

- Getting a college degree is priceless, according to the College Board's *Education Pays 2004* report and its [2005 update](#). But this message also underscores the high cost of obstacles to higher education for both individuals and society as a whole.
- On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, students' [math](#) scores improved in both 4th and 8th grades, but [reading](#) performance changed little in 4th grade and declined slightly in 8th grade. The good news is that African American and Latino students are narrowing the achievement gap with their white peers in both subjects. The state-by-state report also shows that Massachusetts, a state with a long history of standards-based reforms, is leading the nation in both subjects.
- Only three in 10 U.S. 8th graders are proficient readers, and the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress do not show any improvement. [Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy](#) provides five strategies for governors and state policymakers to improve teen literacy and achievement. Most literacy efforts to date have centered on younger children and end after 3rd grade, but this report puts the focus on teens. The appendices provide resources for adolescent literacy initiatives, contain examples of promising practices, and list contacts for information and potential funding sources.

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