The quality of a K-12 education has never mattered more. The era of abundantly available middle-class jobs for unskilled workers is over. The future, indeed the present, demands that our young people be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind to succeed.
Twenty Years of Driving Student Success

How Achieve Changed Expectations in K-12 Classrooms Across America

Nearly all careers require at least some postsecondary education or training, which means that all high school graduates need more knowledge and skills than ever before to be ready for the world they will enter after high school. For too long, and for too many, we have not held — nor supported — high enough expectations.

The problem goes well beyond economics. A quality education gives individuals and their families more options and opportunities. It benefits not just individuals, but also communities, and is the backbone of informed citizenry.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education raised concerns about the state of education with its seminal report: “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.” The report initiated numerous efforts to fix America’s education system. Two groups that have always been attuned to education issues took notice: governors and business leaders.

Governors, keenly aware of the impact that an unprepared workforce has on state and local economies, have long struggled with the challenge of improving K-12 education and graduation rates. And business leaders, who rely on institutions of learning to prepare the workforce, routinely face a shortage of qualified candidates for jobs they need to fill.

In the years following that 1983 report, these two groups did their best to address the problem by focusing mostly on their own backyards. But in 1996, after many attempts at education reform by individual states, and more than a decade after the urgent call to action, governors and leaders in education and business sought to expand on their individual states’ efforts. That year, business leaders, led by Lou Gerstner, chairman and CEO of IBM Corporation, and the National Governors Association (NGA) organized a National Education Summit to identify new solutions.

Only a year before, Gerstner had thrown down the gauntlet during a keynote address to the NGA. He challenged them to take up the cause and find a way to fix the broken education system: “We could debate ideas for days and weeks,” said Gerstner. “Instead, let’s act. Let’s take risks. Let’s start to make change happen. There has to be a starting point for change, and here it is.”

Gerstner’s call to action made it clear to the many participants of that 1996 National Education Summit that if reform were to occur on a meaningful scale, states would have to look beyond their borders and join together.
Building a Firm Foundation
ENSURING HIGH QUALITY STANDARDS THROUGH BENCHMARKING & EVALUATION

“We’ve accomplished a great deal, but there is so much more to do,” says Mike Cohen, Achieve’s president, reflecting on the organization’s history. Achieve has toiled unwaveringly over the past two decades to contribute to a system-wide upgrade of education in the United States, starting with building a strong foundation of high expectations for all students. That work is beginning to pay off.

Still, the future belongs to the educated, and for many students in the United States, that future remains at risk. “Nearly every state has raised its standards, but the quality of education still varies significantly from state to state, district to district, and even school to school due to policy incoherence and uneven implementation,” says Cohen. “While the specifics of our work have shifted over the years, our overarching goal remains the same: to set expectations higher and then deliver on those expectations so that all students receive a quality education.”

In 1998, Achieve began its Academic Standards and Assessments Benchmarking Pilot Project. States needed help from an accurate and independent evaluation of education standards and assessments. By benchmarking standards to state, national and international measures associated with high student achievement, Achieve sought to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing standards. Via this pilot project, Achieve tested educational standards and assessments for two states: Michigan and North Carolina.

Other states soon sought out Achieve for evaluation of their standards, and the experience that Achieve acquired doing that work would lead to its next big initiative – a strengthened focus on the value and meaning of a high school diploma.

“From the start, what was exciting about Achieve’s mission was that we were being asked by states to focus our efforts on raising expectations and improving the quality of education for all students,” says Sandra Boyd, Achieve’s chief operating officer. “For the last 20 years, our work has been aimed at setting the bar higher for all.”
Reaching High
SAFEGUARDING THE VALUE OF A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

Achieve has focused its work on improving the quality of mathematics and English language arts (ELA)/literacy standards, since quantitative and literacy skills are the foundation for further learning in all subjects and critical to success in college and career. These are also the subjects where two- and four-year colleges often require placement exams to qualify for credit-bearing classes. Achieve also has long focused on the quality of science standards, given the overriding importance of science literacy in college, careers, and citizenship in the 21st century.

So, in 2001, Achieve partnered with the Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the National Alliance of Business, and educators from K-12 and postsecondary education in five states to launch the American Diploma Project (ADP), an effort to identify the literacy and mathematics skills that American high school graduates would need to master to succeed in college and in the workplace.

The project made its first public mark with a groundbreaking 2004 report:

“Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts.” The report, which Education Week recognized as one of the ten most influential education reports of the decade, suggested that the requirements to obtain many high school diplomas were inadequate to prepare students for the intellectual demands of adult life. “For years we struggled to articulate expectations and standards to help all students achieve their full potential,” said Paul Lingenfelter, president of State Higher Education Executive Officers at the time.

“In particular, we struggled to align student learning at the end of high school with the demands of college-level work, beginning with core areas, such as mathematics and language arts. It was evident that we would have to set clear learning goals for these fundamental skills to give students and teachers a better roadmap.”

The following year, Achieve and NGA co-sponsored the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools. Achieve made its case to governors and leaders in business and education that to improve education, stakeholders had to set higher expectations for high school graduates to ensure that they were truly prepared for college and career. It was essential to take what had been learned during Achieve’s work on ADP and share it with those who were in a position to make changes on the ground.

It was time to close the expectations gap.

In response to this call to action, 13 states joined with Achieve to create the American Diploma Project Network – a partnership of states committed to aligning high school standards, assessments, graduation requirement, and accountability systems with the demands of college and the workplace. Another 22 states would eventually join the network. The participating states, which collectively educated more than 85 percent of U.S. public school students, worked together on various projects to improve their education systems, including revising existing standards, implementing new standards, boosting their graduation requirements to college- and career-ready levels, adopting more rigorous high school assessments, and adding measures that valued
college and career readiness within their accountability systems.

The ground was beginning to shift.

In 2005, nine ADP Network states reached out to Achieve for help on their Algebra assessments. They ultimately joined together to create a common end-of-course exam for Algebra II, whose results would indicate whether a student was ready to take and succeed in a college-level mathematics course—a breakthrough moment. Another six states would eventually join this partnership, which developed specifications for the exam with support from Achieve. Work on this initiative eventually led states to also develop an end-of-course exam for Algebra I. The experience that Achieve gained during work on these exams would prove invaluable in its future work on assessments.

Achieve released its first annual report tracking state progress on this new college- and career-ready agenda in 2006: “Closing the Expectations Gap: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Work.” Publication of this report quickly earned Achieve a reputation for leveling with states on how far they had come—and how much farther they needed to go.

While there is far to go to ensure that a high school diploma has value, the concept that every U.S. high school graduate should be ready for college and career has been firmly established. All states eventually adopted end-of-high school college- and career-ready expectations for graduates.

Changing the Focus
THE SHIFT TO GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS FOR K-12 STUDENTS

In 2008, NGA, the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve released another seminal report: “Benchmarking for Success.” One of its recommendations called for common, internationally benchmarked K-12 standards in mathematics and ELA/literacy so that all students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive.

Soon thereafter, Achieve released “Out of Many, One: Toward Rigorous Common Core Standards from the Ground Up,” which found that individual state efforts to set college- and career-ready standards for high school graduates had in fact led to a remarkable degree of consistency in ELA/literacy and mathematics requirements.

Taken together, these reports led governors, chief state school officers, and others to consider how they might develop a common set of standards for tailored use across the states. It was clear to all involved that the key to realizing that goal would be a commitment to developing not just end-of-high school expectations but a set of grade-by-grade standards from kindergarten through 12th grade that would lead to a high school diploma that left graduates college and career ready. Achieve’s ADP benchmarks played a foundational role for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) project, led by NGA and CCSSO. This development met with broad approval: eventually most states adopted rigorous mathematics and ELA/literacy standards influenced by the CCSS.

“Common education standards are essential for producing the educated workforce America needs to remain globally competitive,” said Craig Barrett, Achieve board member and former CEO of Intel Corporation. “This voluntary state-led effort will help ensure that all students can receive the college- and career-ready, world-class education they deserve, no matter where they live.”
Measuring Results

MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENTS FOR COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

“The development of rigorous college- and career-ready K-12 standards—no matter what states call them—is perhaps the most significant accomplishment in education reform over the last two decades,” says Mark B. Grier, vice chairman of Prudential Financial, Inc., who chairs the Achieve board.

“Broad implementation of these standards has been critical to ensuring that America remains among the most competitive nations in the global economy by making more students in the United States prepared for both college and careers,” Grier continued.

The Next Frontier

UPDATING SCIENCE EDUCATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Achieve’s prior work in reviewing existing state standards and assessments in science made it the ideal organization to support states in the development of new science standards.

In 2011, Achieve began managing the development of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), a multi-state effort to create K-12 standards for science education based on the National Research Council’s Framework for K-12 Science Education.

Twenty-six states, the National Science Teachers Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Research Council, and Achieve teamed up to take on the mission. The final draft of the standards was released in April 2013.

“The Next Generation Science Standards pull together content, inquiry, and practice along with integrating engineering,” says Ellen Ebert, Washington State Director of Science for Teaching and Learning. “This is a real opportunity to help students see the potential of science in their lives.”
But setting higher standards was just part of what required action. Perhaps more difficult was figuring out how to measure student performance against those standards—and commit to moving students ever closer to meeting them. Once again, Achieve was up to the task.

Given its experience developing Algebra exams for states, Achieve was asked to lend its expertise and serve as project manager for a new consortium of states working together to create and implement standard K-12 assessments in mathematics and English based on CCSS. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) began developing assessments in 2010. It has since become fully independent.

Given its extensive expertise regarding college and career readiness, Achieve has often been called upon to provide support to education leaders and policymakers who are working to implement college- and career-ready reform efforts within their states. Achieve has successfully sustained these efforts by providing guidance on grassroots advocacy, strategic communication, and coalition building.

Achieve has leveraged its consensus-building culture to spread that tried-and-true approach to educational progress across the country.

In 2013, Achieve launched the Coalition Support Network with three goals in mind: to provide aid and support to grassroots supporters of standards-based reform; to link these allies across states with one another to share ideas, tactics, and strategies; and to serve as a proof-point that a collective, well-supported, integrated network of advocates could have a positive impact on advancing the agenda both within their states and across the nation.

Achieve-supported coalitions in 11 states from Alabama to Washington have since advanced the case for standards-based reform and have provided beneficial information and guidance to a broad range of stakeholders from educators and local employers to policy leaders and parents. These coalitions are now critical partners in the development of states’ plans to implement new federal education law.
Achieve Stands Ready

DRIVING SUCCESS FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS

Since its inception, Achieve has been at the center of education problem solving in the United States, working to promote standards-based learning, accurate assessment of student performance, and accountability systems that promote college and career readiness. Time and time again, Achieve has demonstrated a willingness to take on the difficult work of reform — and delivered success for students.

Its staff of experts has developed a broad and deep expertise in K-12 education. The Achieve team regularly provides a wide array of support services to partners in states and across the nation. These services include:

- Research, design, implementation, and evaluation of education standards, assessments, graduation requirements, and performance indicators;
- Coalition building and advocacy to support smart education policy;
- Development of high-quality instructional materials for classroom use;
- Workshops and in-service teacher training with content experts in ELA literacy, mathematics and science; and
- Convening stakeholders to solve challenges.

Due to its vast experience in managing educational initiatives and bringing stakeholders together to build a consensus, Achieve has earned a unique position among college- and career-ready advocates. Achievers are regularly called upon by education leaders and policymakers to address their most difficult challenges. Each project is a reminder of how important the work is, how much work still needs to be done, and how high the stakes are.

“America’s prospects depend on its capacity to give young people the quality education they’ll need to succeed in the 21st century,” says former Michigan governor John Engler, who witnessed the birth of Achieve as a leading proponent of education reform during the 1996 National Education Summit. “What we’ve accomplished over the last two decades has resulted in raising academic expectations for all children, ensuring that they will be prepared for the challenges they’ll face in the world of tomorrow.”

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To learn more about Achieve and the work it does to improve the quality of education for all students, visit us at www.achieve.org

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