

Policy Brief: Rigorous Curriculum

A rigorous curriculum is the best preparation for postsecondary success, for all students. Low income and minority students are less likely to complete a rigorous curriculum than their affluent and non-minority peers, leaving many under-prepared for both college and the workforce. Unless we provide all students nationwide with access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum, gaps will persist and rates of college enrollment and completion will remain low, threatening our future competitiveness in the global economy.

The Research-Based Case for Rigorous Curriculum

Large numbers of students are lost along various points of the educational pipeline every year. Of every 100 ninth graders in the United States, 69 graduate from high school on time, 38 enter college immediately following high school, 28 remain enrolled after their second year, and only 20 go on to graduate from college within six years (Lumina, 2010).

Students who take a rigorous curriculum while in high school are significantly more likely to succeed once in college. In the second of the prominent Toolbox studies produced by the Department of Education, author Clifford Adelman found that “the academic intensity of the student’s high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in pre-collegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor’s degree” (2006). High school curriculum has repeatedly been found to be a more significant predictor of college success than family background, parents’ education level, test scores, class rank, and GPA (Jobs for the Future, 2008).

The strength of a student’s high school curriculum is a major factor in college admission. Strength of curriculum is consistently rated a factor of considerable importance by the majority of admissions officers. In 2009, 71 percent of surveyed NACAC members attributed considerable importance to strength of curriculum, compared to only 58 percent attributing that level of importance to admission test scores and 16 percent attributing that level of importance to class rank (NACAC, 2010).

Students who enter college unprepared must take remedial coursework, thereby delaying their enrollment in credit-bearing courses, reducing their chances of graduating, and costing schools and tax-payers significant amounts of money. College students who take remedial coursework, particularly remedial reading, are significantly less likely to graduate (Department of Education, 2006). It has been estimated that, for each year of remediation, public universities spend 1 to 2 billion dollars, costing the U.S. 16 billion dollars annually in remediation and decreased productivity (ACT, 2010).

A majority of states do not include a sufficiently rigorous curriculum in their graduation requirements or track the success of their high school graduates in postsecondary institutions. In 2010, only 20 states and the District of Columbia required all students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum to earn a high school diploma. Despite the fact that all fifty states and the District of Columbia are currently working to link K-12 and postsecondary student-level data, only 16 states had begun to implement such a longitudinal data system by 2010 (Achieve, 2010).

High school graduates, employers, and professors all agree that there is a need for more rigorous curriculum. In 2005, thirty-nine percent of recent high school graduates, whether in college or the workforce, reported that there were gaps in their high school preparation. Similarly, employers estimated that 39 percent of high school graduates who entered the workforce were unprepared for the demands of entry-level work. Among college professors, only 18 percent described their students as either “extremely” or “very well” prepared. Fifty-six percent said their students were “somewhat” well prepared and a quarter of professors said that their students were either “not too well” prepared or not at all prepared for college coursework. Sixty-two percent of graduates who enrolled in college and 72 percent of graduates who entered the workforce said that, if they had the chance to go back to high school, they would take higher-level or more challenging courses (Achieve, 2005).

Low-income students attend significantly lower-performing schools, as measured by state exams, and the cost of housing near higher-performing schools is often prohibitively expensive. On average, low-income students attended schools that scored at the 42nd percentile on state exams, compared to the 61st percentile score at the schools attended by middle- and high-income students. High school test-score gaps in large metropolitan areas are in part the result of significant gaps in the cost of housing and the resulting economic segregation of schools: home values are \$205,000 higher in neighborhoods served by high-scoring schools (Brookings Institute, 2012).

Disadvantaged and traditionally underserved high school students complete a rigorous curriculum and graduate from high school prepared for college at lower rates than their white and affluent peers. Despite the fact that black students account for 14.6 percent of the total student population, they represent only 8.6 percent of Advanced Placement (AP) test takers and a mere 3.9 percent of successful examinees (those who score a 3 or better) (College Board, 2011). A 2003 study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that only 28 percent of low-income students were enrolled in a college-preparatory curriculum, compared to 49 percent of middle-income and 65 percent of high-income students (Pathways to College Network, 2004). Similarly, a 2007 study based on NELS data found that only 21 percent of students in the lowest SES quintile graduated high school prepared for college, compared to 54 percent of those in the third, fourth and fifth quintiles (Jobs for the Future, 2008).

Patterns of racial and economic inequality hold true even when considering only students who have demonstrated their postsecondary aspirations. Among high school graduates who took the ACT in 2009, only 64 percent of black graduates and 67 percent of Hispanic graduates took a core curriculum, compared to 73 percent of white graduates. Only 62 percent of graduates from families earning less than \$30,000 completed a core curriculum, compared to 82 percent of graduates from families earning more than \$100,000 (ACT, 2010).

Policy Recommendations

Ensure that all students have access to a rigorous curriculum in high school. Target funds to the neediest high schools for staff and resources to make a rigorous curriculum available to all students. Broaden the allowable uses of ESEA funds to permit schools to develop innovative approaches to improving curriculum, including the addition of dual enrollment or early college programs in partnership with two- and four-year colleges, which studies suggest may benefit at-risk and struggling students who do not believe themselves capable of succeeding in AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. Support the Fast Track to College Act (113th Congress: HR 551/S 286), which would authorize \$140,000,000 for competitive 6-year grants to develop and expand early college

Help states align high school curriculum requirements and accountability measures with widely recognized and well defined college- and career-readiness standards. Provide incentives and technical support for states working to align curriculum standards with those outlined by the Core Curriculum State Standards Initiative of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. Identify best practices and encourage collaboration in the development of P-20 longitudinal data systems, which allow states to track the success of their high school graduates in postsecondary institutions and promote more comprehensive accountability measures.

Federal incentives to assist states in reconstructing financing for K-12 education could yield substantial results in educational achievement, since providing a rigorous curriculum for all students requires a financial commitment that exceeds the federal government's capacity.

Fund and expand the reach of Advanced Placement (AP) incentive and test fee waiver programs. Low-income students often face financial barriers to accessing college-preparatory curriculum and earning college credit based on their performance on AP and IB exams. In order to increase national attainment rates, these barriers must be removed by

providing widespread access to college preparatory coursework and assessments.

Help states make K-12 funding more equitable. Federal incentives to assist states in reconstructing financing for K-12 education could yield substantial results in educational achievement, since providing a rigorous curriculum for all students requires a financial commitment that exceeds the federal government's capacity. Reducing reliance on local property taxes is an essential element of successful school funding reform initiatives, and is often accomplished by shifting more of the responsibility for supporting schools to the states

Reform the Title I funding formula to ensure the equitable distribution of federal resources. Support the Fiscal Fairness Act (1113th Congress: HR 1294), which would close the loophole in the comparability provision of ESEA which allows school districts to ignore differences in teacher salaries when distributing Title I funds among schools. Improve the method for calculating the distribution of Title I funds to states by adjusting for regional cost differences and the cost of operating hard-to-staff schools in addition to the measures of past expenditure patterns that are currently used.

State Data

For more information on issues facing your state, look to the following state report cards on postsecondary preparation:

- AP Report to the Nation (<http://apreport.collegeboard.org/>)
- Achieve State Profiles (<http://www.achieve.org/states>)
- Alliance for Excellent Education State Cards (<http://all4ed.org/state-data/national/>)
- Measuring Up National Report Card on Higher Education (<http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/states/index.php>)

Education Week Quality Counts State Report Cards
(<http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2012/16src.h31.html>)