

Published in the Los Angeles Daily News, May 24, 2005

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College-bound or not, kids need tough classes

Russlynn Ali, Guest Columnist

Tuesday, May 24, 2005 - Today, the Los Angeles Unified School District will consider adopting the so-called "A-G" or college-prep curriculum for all high school students. It may seem counterintuitive, given recent reports of the LAUSD's high dropout rates, to have every student take on an extra year of math and two years of a foreign language, as required by the University of California and California State University systems. But it's actually common sense, and it's the right thing to do.

Naysayers, pointing out that not every child is college-bound, like to say the A-G curriculum shoves square pegs into round, college-prep holes. Not so. Today's work force demands are such that the courses required to get into college are the same ones needed to prepare young people for skilled jobs. Ready-for-work and ready-for-college mean the same thing in the 21st century economy.

In fact, we should stop characterizing A-G as college preparation and start calling it what it really is: life preparation.

Ask any business professionals, whether they're in high-tech fields or plumbing, and they'll tell you that to succeed in today's demanding economy, you need to have the same level of preparation that you would have for college - the same skills, the same courses taught with the same rigor. Sheet-metal workers today need to have algebra and geometry under their belts. And to master hydraulics, friction and electrical circuits, auto technicians better have their physics down.

Right now, not even one-fourth of all ninth-graders in the LAUSD have successfully completed the A-G curriculum. This low rate is primarily a problem of access, not ability. Student demand for these courses is enormous, according to hundreds of testimonials from young people of all races and income levels.

When we raise the bar for underperforming students, they rise to the challenge. When given the chance, even students who started out far behind the pack pass college-prep classes at the same rate they passed remedial classes, studies show. Freed from the dead weight of dumbed-downed curricula and lowered expectations, these students thrive.

Take San Jose Unified School District.

Seven years ago, this district, which has high percentages of low-income and minority students, began requiring high-school students to complete the A-G curriculum to earn a diploma. The result: Students' reading and math scores improved at rates higher than the state average. The achievement gap between Latino and white students narrowed significantly. And the graduation rate actually went up - not down.

San Jose's success story is being replicated at schools throughout California, including right here in Los Angeles. King/Drew Medical Magnet High School and Locke Senior High School are perfect examples.

The schools share similar demographics, with poverty rates above 60 percent and with nearly universal African-American and Latino student populations. Even though King/Drew serves only half as many students as Locke Senior High, it offers many more intermediate algebra, trigonometry and chemistry classes. In 2003, 99 percent of King/Drew graduates successfully completed A-G requirements, compared with only percent of Locke graduates.

High-school students are taking their life-prep schooling and running with it. Seventy-five percent of African-American college freshmen who complete an A-G or similar sequence of courses go on to graduate, compared with 45 percent for African-Americans overall. Similar findings hold true for Latino students.

There's a large segment of our society that believes poverty and race are destiny in education. But, as these success stories show, low achievement is not inscribed on the DNA of poor and minority children. The A-G curriculum is the single-most powerful way to banish the cycle of lowered expectations as self-fulfilling prophecies for our kids.

Los Angeles Unified should adopt the A-G curriculum because we owe every child - not just the ones who live in white, affluent neighborhoods - the opportunity to meet a standard that will offer the most choices in life.

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