

Are California High Schools Ready for the 21st Century?

SUMMARY

A more detailed 12-page report is available at www.edtrustwest.org.

Getting and keeping a good job in the 21st century requires a 21st-century education. But most California high schools are not adequately preparing students for success in the new economy.

To uncover the whole story, we examine three indicators: graduation rates, the courses students take and how well students master the skills they need. The picture is bleak overall, and it is worse for low-income and minority students. But these students do not fare poorly across the board. We also look at districts throughout California that serve the greatest percentages of Latino, African American and low-income students *and* are the highest performing in the state on the key indicators. If schools can succeed for all students in *some* communities, is there any reason to expect less from *every* community?

Too Few High Schools Make Sure Students Graduate

The absolute minimum credential for young adults today is a high school diploma. California reports an 87% graduation rate to the federal government. A more honest calculation, however, shows that only 70% of California's ninth graders graduate four years later. Latino, African American and low-income students complete high school at even lower rates than their peers.*

But it doesn't have to be this way, and it isn't this way everywhere. Districts such as North Monterey County Unified, Bassett Unified and Garden Grove Unified are serving very high percentages of low-income, African American and Latino students, and they also have some of the state's highest graduation rates.

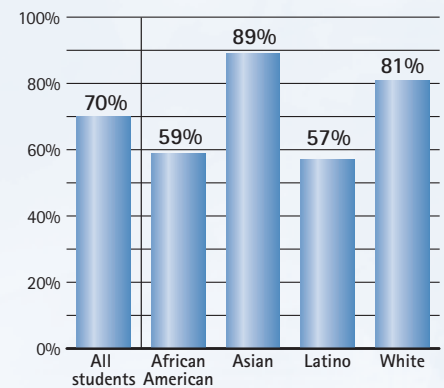
Too Few High Schools Make Sure Students Take and Succeed in the Right Courses

For students to have real choices after high school, schools must make sure students take the courses that will prepare them to meet the English, math, science and language demands of the new economy. Students can do that, be exposed to the arts and other useful skills, and meet the course-entry requirements of California's four-year public colleges and universities if they take 15 courses known as the "A-G" curriculum.

But only one in six (17%) California school districts provide enough high-level courses for all of their students to enroll in the A-G sequence (www.edtrustwest.org, "Curriculum Opportunity Index"). Moreover, students in the most-

Large graduation gaps between ethnic groups.

9th graders who graduated four years later, class of 2003



Source: Education Trust-West analysis of California Department of Education data, using the Manhattan Institute methodology.

A special report by

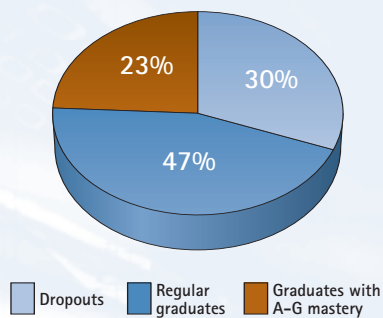


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*See the full report at www.edtrustwest.org for a description of the Manhattan Institute methodology used for these calculations.

Fewer than a quarter of students are prepared.

Performance of class of 2003

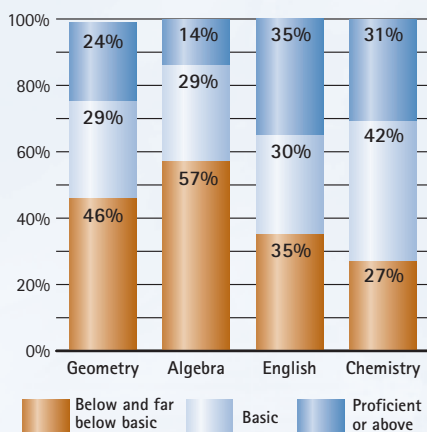


Note: A-G mastery indicates that students have completed the full A-G course sequence with a "C" or better in each class.

Source: Education Trust—West analysis of California Department of Education data, using the Manhattan Institute methodology.

A far cry from proficiency in the core subjects.

Performance of students in grades 9–11 on California standards test, 2003



Source: Education Trust—West analysis of California Department of Education data.

A more detailed 12-page report is available at www.edtrustwest.org. The Web site also features our "Raising the Roof" data tool, which allows you to explore data on achievement, teacher qualifications and curriculum for all K–12 public schools in California. You also can find schools in your community that are proving that all students can learn at the highest levels when taught at the highest levels.

advantaged districts are four times more likely to have access to these challenging courses than students in the most-disadvantaged districts.

Success is not just about having an opportunity to take high-level courses. Students must *master* the content of the curriculum. But fewer than one in four (23%) of California's ninth graders graduate four years later having successfully completed the A-G course sequence that most likely will help them prepare for success after high school. And over the past five years, these numbers have remained virtually flat. California's Latino and African American students are three times less likely to graduate with these essential skills.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In San Jose Unified, where about half the 32,000 students are Latino and almost one-third come to school with limited English proficiency, all students must complete California's A-G course sequence to earn a diploma. San Jose's high school students have improved at rates much higher than the state average in reading and math. And the district's commitment to "A-G for all" is producing great results for elementary, middle and early high school students, too. Achievement gaps are closing at staggering rates. And the dropout rate has not increased.

Too Few High Schools Make Sure That Students Actually Learn the Key Skills

California high schools are not successfully teaching students even the most basic skills. Up to a third of California's seniors would not receive a high school diploma this year based on the exit exam alone if the state had not postponed making the exam a requirement until 2006. And that test measures only eighth-through 10th-grade skills.

The standards measured on the high school exit exam are too low for what students really need to know to succeed in the workplace or in col-

lege. But fewer than one in four students score proficient or above on the state's Geometry and Algebra tests. And some groups of students are years behind. Latino and African American 11th graders have only been taught to the level of White seventh graders on the California Achievement Test (CAT/6).

The truth is, California is still giving out 20th century diplomas in a 21st-century economy.

Three Priorities for Improvement

Improve teacher training and distribution.

Teacher quality matters most in student learning. Still, students in California's poorest and lowest-performing high schools are three times more likely to have a teacher without a major or minor in mathematics. To close this gap, we must:

- Expand programs to recruit, train and retain more effective teachers.
- Focus professional development and supports on the teachers who need the most help.
- Provide incentives for the most-effective teachers to work with students who need them the most.
- Reallocate school and classroom time to give teachers more chances to learn together.
- Use benchmark assessments to target and focus professional development and instruction.

Provide the right courses.

- Make A-G the default curriculum for all students.

Provide students with the right materials and supports.

- Make sure high school instructional materials are aligned to California's standards.
- Use different instructional methods and provide additional time for students who are behind.
- Use benchmark assessments both to help teachers assess their own strengths and weaknesses and to pinpoint their students' needs.



To find out about a particular school or district, explore the data in our "Raising the Roof" online tool at www.edtrustwest.org.