



Students Speak Out:

Why the A-G Curriculum is Important to Students

As the debate continues on in Los Angeles Unified School District about whether high school students need the A-G curriculum¹, the escalating rhetoric about “these” kids not being able to succeed is becoming louder and louder, drowning out the voices of the students themselves.

Adults have said in the press and at LAUSD committee meetings that expecting more of LAUSD’s students ultimately hurts them because they simply can’t meet higher standards, even though the kids think they can. While “these” kids have been rallying for access to the A-G curriculum in Sacramento and at Board of Education meetings, still their voices are often trumped. But let’s step back from our fears about their limitations and listen to real students—low-income, English language learners, and students of color—that are succeeding in a district that provides the A-G curriculum to all students, instead of reserving it for just some.² Here’s what they have to say:

Expectations Matter

Teachers and administrators who believe that all students can succeed pass that mentality on to their students.

Cesar Lopez, Senior, Lincoln High: *“The adults at Lincoln expect you to have a plan for after graduation: whether it be higher education, a job or anything. They do offer you so many opportunities, and they do want you to take advantage of them: counselors, advanced courses, strict requirements. They expect you to be prepared to do whatever you want – not necessarily just pursuing a higher education, but whatever field you want to enter. If A-G requirements weren’t applied, some people would take an easier route. Personally, I didn’t see myself in college until my sophomore year. I had kept up in my school work, but I didn’t know what I would do after graduation. It was that persistence; that I had to keep doing well and the bar being raised so high that made me realize that I was college material.”*

Ana Castro, Senior, Pioneer High: *“The administration expects a lot from the students. I really appreciate how the administration in our school is pushing kids, taking them out of class and talking to them, and explaining to them what needs to get done in order to finish high school. They are expecting a lot of the kids. I think it’s a good thing because it gives them a little pressure to do*

better in high school especially when you are a minority such as at our school.”

Jose Santa Cruz, Senior, San José

High: *“She [Ms. Nicholson, the college counselor] sat me down and we talked about schools and what my options were. I was surprised when I talked to her because the schools she had in mind for me to apply to—I thought I had no chance to apply there. But hearing someone tell you that you can do it, it makes you think: ‘She thinks I can do it, I must be able to do it.’ Most adults here stress higher education and they push you to be better and to aim higher because they know you can do it.”*

Lucía González, Senior, San

José High: *“With the help of teachers and especially the GEAR UP counselors and the programs, since freshman year [everyone] really stressed ‘we want you to get to college.’ They*

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really motivated a lot of people like myself to get into a college, to aim higher than you had expected of yourself.”

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Joshua Herrera, Senior, Lincoln High: “[The counselors and teachers] know what we are capable of and they have a high standard that they want us to follow. They tell us they know we can do it; they are a big push in getting done what we need to leave.”

Edson Sanchez, Senior, San José High: “I don’t think [the high expectation] is only for those who are taking one or more IB classes, the ESL

classes as well are trying to put kids into college. Most of the teachers just look at you like: ‘you’re going to make it.’ They try to talk to you; they are always trying to help you out. They know you can make it. Even though there are [students] here that don’t care, like at any school, they don’t discriminate. They treat you the same. They have the same high expectations.”

Raising the Bar

Requiring students to do the minimum required by the UC/CSU systems has encouraged students to push themselves to perform in rigorous courses and develop a higher level of commitment to their schools.

Cesar: “What I really like about Lincoln, is that they really encourage you take [higher level courses] and they don’t hinder you from taking them.

They don’t think that just because you are a Latino or another ethnic group that you can’t do it. It’s back to the expectations, they don’t see color. It’s about individual achievements. It’s really easy to get things done and to do what you want to do.”

Jose: “Even though with the IB programme I knew I would have a lot of work, I still managed to put in some time for myself to enjoy my high school experience. I was in band even though I didn’t have to take it, and I was in cross country even though I didn’t have to take it. I don’t think [the A-G requirements] really stopped me from doing the things I wanted to do. It just inspired me to do more.”

Alejandra Alvarez, Senior, San José

High: “My brother went to high school [in another district]. He told me you have to take a test to get into those AP classes [at his school]. [At San José High School] they give you the opportunity for you to decide whether you can do it because not everyone does well on tests. I have learned a lot in my IB English class. I know that if I had to take an IB test to get in, I probably would have failed it, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity. [Here] they don’t give you a test; they don’t scare you away. [At my brother’s school] they are not allowing you to just take it and find out for yourself. They have to find out if you’re capable of doing it.”

Lucía: “With the A-G [requirement], you are strongly encouraged to take [A-G] courses to graduate. There is a goal you have to reach. If I had gone to another high school without the A-G requirements, I don’t know how motivated I would have been to take the extra courses. I would have cheated myself of this opportunity to take the courses that I did.”

“Having to do the A-G requirements to graduate makes you think I have gone this far, why not just go to college. In high schools that don’t have that, kids might not take the classes they are supposed to. When they find out all about college and want to go, they have to take all these other courses that they didn’t take in the past years because they didn’t know about the A-G requirements... it all piles up in their senior year and they just give up. People [at San José High] have finished their requirements because they need it to graduate. They have that extra push to go to college. So they don’t say ‘Oh I have to do this and this, so I will just give up.’ It motivates more people to go to college than a high school that doesn’t have A-G requirements.”

— Lorena Loera, Senior, San José High

A-G Requirements

Instituting the A-G requirements as the base graduation requirement provides all students, not just the most motivated or informed students, with the opportunity to choose between college, work, or other pursuits after high school graduation.

Ana: “Since I didn’t know a lot about college and what the requirements were, I was planning to take classes like woodshop, art and choir. I didn’t know I had to take all the English, math and science. I was planning to make my life really easy in high school and just enjoy it and learn English. As I look back, I think: ‘What was I thinking?’ [In another district] I would not have done anything that I have done so far through my senior year. I think it has helped me a lot just to get to



where I want to be and who I want to be. The A-G requirements are great; they are hard, but they are great. They help you, they build you, and they make you who you are until now.”

Cesar: “Personally, if I didn’t come to Lincoln, and I didn’t have the A-G requirements I am not sure I’d be ready to go to college. Even though my parents have always said that I should, I am sure I would be tempted to take the easy way out. Even if you are the most motivated person,

there is always a time in your life when you just want to take the easy way. Luckily here at SJUSD those [students] that take the easy way out are still ready to go to college if that’s what you want to do. If you raise the bar, like San José Unified has, there are still going to be people who will try to go over the

bar. There are many people who have gotten over the bar. I know for a fact that if I hadn’t been at Lincoln I wouldn’t have gotten in to Harvard because I wouldn’t have gone over the bar. That’s how A-G helped me. It’s especially important if you don’t know what to do or if you don’t have guidance or structure at home. Then it’s really important. I guess what’s keeping people around the state from raising the graduation requirements is that they fear that Latinos and minorities are the ones that can’t live up to the requirements. If you raise the requirements, those are the kids you are going to benefit the most because their parents won’t be able to help them. But the requirements will help them like they did for me.”

Alejandra: “Since the 9th grade you’re in diploma prep. They are introducing that to you in the beginning. For me it worked. I felt like it was steps. It all added up. If I would have gone to [my brother’s high school], I wouldn’t have [taken AP courses]. I would be the average student. I wouldn’t be as marketable to colleges.”

Easing the Transition

Giving students the structure of the A-G requirements has allowed students with limited resources to consider college. Students describe the support they received in navigating the college application process.

Rosemarie Molina, Senior, Lincoln High: “I’m a first generation college student, and the structure at Lincoln High School has helped me very much. I would not

have known about the requirements I need to go to college. I really didn’t know a lot about college or UC’s when I came here. I had counselors and administrators that really cared and explained the program.”

Angel López, Senior, San José High: “If I would have gone to a different high school, I think I would have been lost in the college process. The A-G requirements meet the UC entrance require-

ments which makes it easier for a student to be college bound versus another high school where the A-G requirements aren’t enforced. I would have to look up the requirements for the University of California and the classes that I have may not meet the requirements. It’s a much more efficient program. It allows for a better and easier transition to [the] university.”

Ana: “I’m a first generation college student, when I went to high school I didn’t speak English well and I wasn’t aware of the advanced placement and advanced courses that were provided at our school. [The A-G requirements] showed what I can do and what I am capable of doing in my life. It has shown what I am good at. I know that I can go for it because they have prepared me with all the classes. It was a great experience.”

“Lincoln [High School] has prepared me because of its unique graduation requirements—they line up exactly with the CSU/UC entrance requirements, so that makes it very easy. For people like myself who are first generation college students without some kind of guidance or structure I wouldn’t know what classes to take or what to do to be prepared academically to pursue a higher education. Lincoln has offered me that structure that I needed to succeed and have more options open. It also helped me to be more focused on what it is I really enjoy doing because it requires you to take classes in everything: math, science, performing and visual arts. By being able to experience every aspect I have been able to choose what I really want to do.”

-- Cesar Lopez, Senior, Lincoln High

“The [A-G] requirements are good. They are the first steps on the path to college. They set you up and they are the building blocks to get you prepared for college. I am surprised that not everybody offers that. I am glad I came to Lincoln; I’m glad they do it here. I think they should do it in all high schools.”



Cesar: “I think that the thing that students need most is to have opportunities available to realize their dreams so they can do whatever it is to do what they want to do. They need the opportunities and the tools to get that done. I am very grateful that I have received those tools and opportunities. They have come in the form of the GEAR UP counselors, the A-G requirements, and very, very dedicated teachers.”

Rigor = Achievement

Offering students a rigorous curriculum gives them not only the raw material in content and instruction, it

allows students to challenge themselves personally and academically.

“You need a door or a window. The A-G curriculum gives you that opportunity. I can’t imagine not having it. Students will find the motivation (to do well in classes), they only need the opportunity.”

to go beyond and analyze and synthesize and not just regurgitate facts.”

Lorena: “I got accepted [to college] and that’s just the beginning of the meaning of my being college material. Being able to go through college means a lot to me.”

Edson: “[Teachers told me]: ‘You gotta work and you’re going to have to go to summer school and you’re going to have to talk to your teachers and get promoted

and jump classes.’ So I began to do my work. I have been taking seven classes since freshman year, seven classes straight, I’ve been going to summer school. It’s the environment; being surrounded by people that actually try to go to college who are telling you ‘Hey you are pretty good.’ It’s motivating. I think I am college material. I don’t know if I’ll do good or not, but like all my friends, you just try your best and if you don’t try, you’ll never know.”

Alejandra: “It took me a while to realize what college material really meant. I have often felt that I wasn’t. There would be times when I was struggling, and I would think this isn’t half as much as I am going to do in college. I got through the struggles, and I feel that I am college material.”

Providing the Pathway

Students in the San Jose Unified School District are living proof of the benefits that the A-G requirements afford to our schools. They demonstrate the need to bring the A-G requirements to LAUSD.

Joshua: “The [A-G] requirements are good. They are the first steps on the path to college. They set you up and they are the building blocks to get you prepared for college. I am surprised that not everybody offers that. I am glad I came to Lincoln; I’m glad they do it here. I think they should do it in all high schools.”

Cesar: “You need a door or a window. The A-G curriculum gives you that opportunity. I can’t imagine not having it. Students will find the motivation [to do well in classes], they only need the opportunity.”

Endnotes:

¹ The A-G curriculum consists of courses that most people would consider to be core high school courses, including three years of math up through intermediate algebra, four years of English, and two years of lab science. These are the minimum course requirements needed for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems and are also the courses that will help students pass placement exams at two-year colleges and will prepare them for jobs—all opportunities that are currently unavailable to many LAUSD graduates.

² In 1998 San José Unified School District launched an A-G for All Initiative. This year they will successfully graduate their fourth class under the new rigorous requirements. For more information on SJUSD’s success, please see www.edtrustwest.org.

The Education Trust—West is the West Coast presence of the national policy organization the Education Trust. We work for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, we concentrate on the institutions most often left behind—those serving low-income, Latino, African American, or Native American students. The Education Trust—West works alongside policymakers, parents, education professionals and business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California, who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. For more information please visit our website at www.edtrustwest.org.

