The High School Diploma:
Making It More Than An Empty Promise

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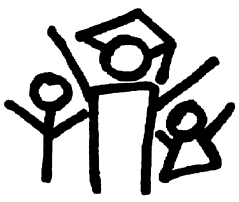


The Education Trust-West

Introduction

What's the point of high school?
When posed in this fashion, without context, this question seems rather lighthearted, perhaps a bit rhetorical. But it is not. The question is one of sober seriousness.

Let's be clear for a moment on the mission of our public high school system: to make sure that our students are prepared for postsecondary education, training and the workforce without the need for remediation. When stated this simply, it seems reasonable, practical and even noble. More than that, it seems obvious: of course, we want to prepare our kids to take the next step in their lives, whether that step is into college or into the workforce. Whatever their decisions, they need to be prepared and empowered to make the choice: we owe our students at least that much.

Yet we aren't making good on this obligation. Study after study show an increasing convergence between the skills necessary for success in the workplace and for success in college. Yet, the minimum curriculum in which most of our students are enrolled simply does not provide them with the skills and knowledge needed for life after high school. We aren't preparing our students for a technical, skill-driven workplace, and we clearly aren't preparing them for the rigors of a postsecondary education. Worse yet, most of our graduates are ineligible to even apply to the UC & CSU systems because they weren't enrolled in the college readiness curriculum, otherwise known as the A-G curriculum (See Figure 1). In today's economy, ready for work and ready for college mean the same thing. By failing to enroll all of our students in the A-G curriculum we are dooming most of them to lives on the margins. Period.

Instead of preparing our kids for the future they need, want and expect, we channel most of them–especially poor students and students of color–into a low-rigor curriculum. And in doing so, we turn a high school diploma into nothing more than an empty promise. By the time most of our students realize just how hollow that promise is, it's too late for them to do anything about it. Instead of a ticket to success in college or work, that diploma is a ticket to nowhere.

The following examines the expected impact of implementing a higher-rigor college readiness curriculum as the default curriculum on California's high schools and their students. Nationwide, students enrolled in higher-rigor curricula improve their skills, are better prepared for the workforce, test at higher levels, and show significantly greater persistence in postsecondary education. In Texas, a state that passed legislation requiring all students to be enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum unless they opt out with a parent's and school's consent, studies found that with a college readiness curriculum, assessment scores and skills improve. Further, among students enrolled in the high-rigor curriculum, college-going is higher, college G.P.A.s are higher, and college completion/graduation rates are higher. Finally, we will show how school districts here in California (most notably San Jose Unified) have implemented A-G as the default curriculum, with impressive results: scores have risen, achievement gaps have narrowed, college-going desire is up, and more students are graduating eligible to apply to UC & CSU.

So, as we delve into the details of this discussion, we ask that readers keep in mind the original question: "What is the point of high school?" And, as you confront the data presented below (sometimes surprising, sometimes all too predictable), ask yourself, "Is this inconsequential, or is it very serious, with profound–indeed ominous–consequences for our community, state and nation?"

Figure 1: The A-G Course Requirements

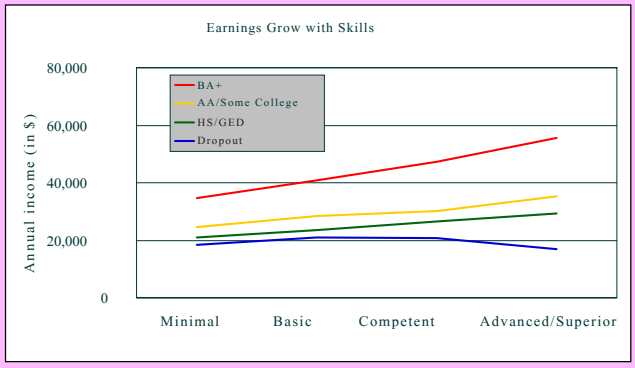
English	4 Years
Math	3 Years (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II)
Science	2 Years Required, 3 Years Recommended (2 of the courses must be Biology, Chemistry or Physics)
History/Social Science	2 Years (1 Year of World History, 1 Year of U.S. History or half year of U.S. History and half year of Civics
Foreign Language	2 Years (same language)
Arts	1 Year
College Prep Elective	1 Year

Our students want to go to college

For years, we have been trying to impress upon our young people the importance of pursuing and completing a high quality education. We've barraged them with posters, radio spots and television commercials in an effort to get them to take their education seriously, and we've appealed to them on many fronts. Among other things, we've appealed to their minds by telling them that "Knowledge is Power," and we've appealed to their sense of ambition by showing them the financial benefits of improving their skills and gaining degrees. As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, the difference in income is great between those who have a college degree and those who don't, but more than that, skill levels–apart from the degree–matter most.

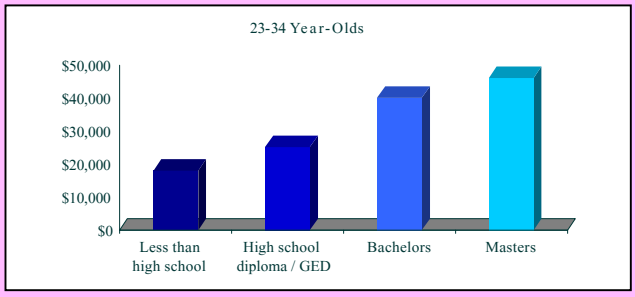
The good news is they get it! Today's high schoolers have heard, comprehended and internalized this message. By and large, they and their parents accept the importance of a high-quality education, and the overwhelming majority of the students expect to pursue postsecondary education after high school. Unfortunately, the adults that have the ability to quell or bolster a student's college-going dreams–teachers, administrators, policy makers–too often have much lower expectations of our students. As shown in Figure 4, 71% of high school students expect to attend a 4-year college, while teachers expect only 32% of their students to do so.

Figure 2: Skill Levels Count . . . Even Apart From Education Credentials



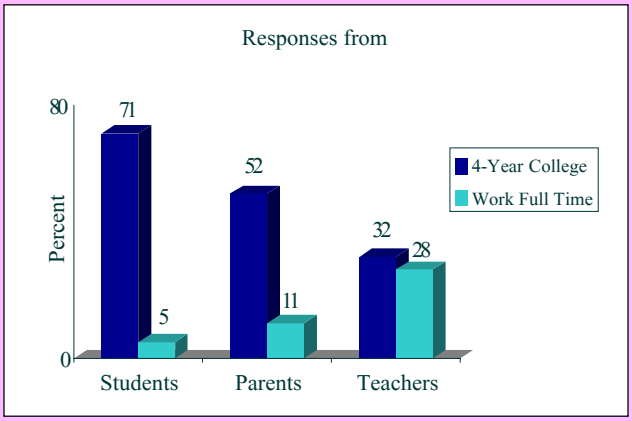
Source: ETS analysis of National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992. Data converted to 1998 dollars.

Figure 3: College Pays Off: Median Annual Earnings By Highest Educational Attainment, 1999



Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Outlook for College Graduates, 1998-2008, 2000, in Getting Ready Pays Off! US DOE, October 2000.

Figure 4: How Expectations Differ: Plans For Students After High School



Source: Metropolitan Life, Survey of the American Teacher 2000: Are We Preparing Students for the 21st Century? September 2000.

The data bear out that the students are right. Nationally, about two-thirds of our high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education in the fall following graduation. If we include those who decide to pursue postsecondary within two years of their high school graduation, this percentage rises to three-quarters (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Most High School Grads Go On To Postsecondary Within Two Years

Entered Two Year Colleges	26%
Entered Four Year Colleges	45%
Other Post Secondary	4%
Total	75%

Source: NELS: 88, Second (1992) and Third (1994) Follow up; in, USDOE, NCES, بAccess to Postsecondary Education for the 1992 High School Graduatesپ 1998, Table 2.

So, while the students have correctly calibrated their internal expectations and assumptions, the majority of teachers do not appear to have done the same. To cut through old attitudes, we simply cannot equivocate. Just as our schools retooled to meet the needs of the 20th century's industrial economy, so too must they adjust to meet the needs of the 21st century in a world where higher-level secondary skills and some postsecondary education or training are necessary for all.

ه However, weعe not preparing themه

While our kids expect to go to college, we are not doing our part to prepare them. The current secondary education system simply is not giving these students the tools they need to succeed in postsecondary education and an increasingly competitive workplace.

We are not teaching our students essential skills. It is clear that far too many of our high school students simply have not mastered absolutely essential skills. Far too few of our students can read and comprehend basic texts or perform more than simple calculations (see Figure 6). For example, only *1 out of 100* African American, *1 out of 50* Latino and *1 out of 12* white high school graduates have literacy skills sufficient to learn from specialized materials–the equivalent of reading and understanding the science section of a local newspaper.

In California, a full 71% of our 11th-graders scored below "Proficient" on the English/Language Arts Standards exam; 39% were below "Basic" level.[i]

Figure 6: Too Few 17 Year-Olds Demonstrate Strong Reading Skills

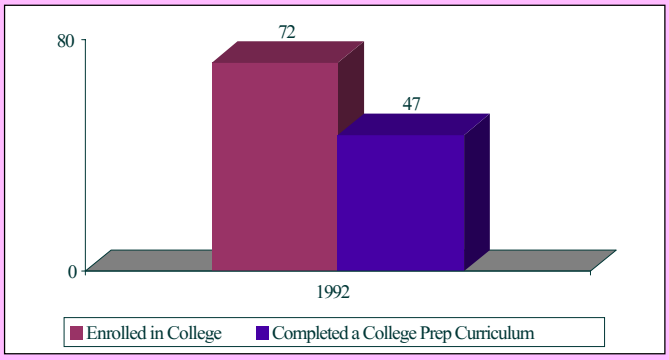
	African American	Latino	White
Make Generalizations	95%	97%	98%
Partial Skills	66	68	87
Understand Complicated Information	17	24	46
Learn from Specialized Materials	1	2	8

Source: USDOE, NCES, 1999 NAEP Summary Data Tables.

Too few students are enrolled in a high-rigor curriculum. More to the point, beyond basic skills, far too few of our students complete–or are even enrolled in–a high-rigor curriculum. Nationwide, only around 47% of our high school students complete a college preparatory curriculum (see Figure 7). The situation is far worse for African American and Latino students (see Figure 8), with about 26% of African Americans and 23% of Latinos enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum.

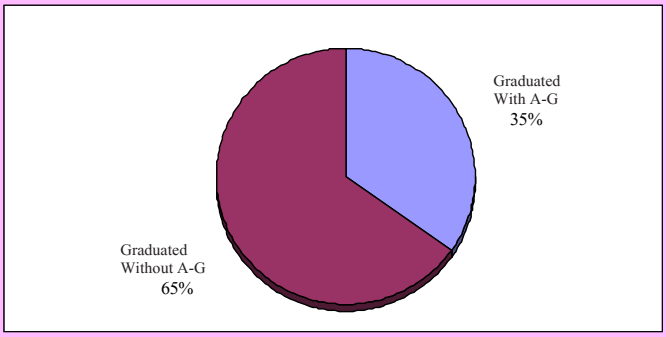
In California, only 35% of our students successfully complete the college readiness curriculum (see Figure 9). Think about this: even if we exclude high school dropouts, 65% of our California public high school *graduates* have not completed the curriculum necessary to even *apply* for admission to the UC/CSU systems. It gets worse (see Figure 10). Look closely: currently 3 out of 4 African American, and nearly 4 out of 5 Latino high school graduates are not eligible for the UC/CSU system, for lack of access to, and enrollment in, an appropriate high school curriculum.

Figure 7: Percentage of Students Who Entered College vs. Completed College Prep Curriculum



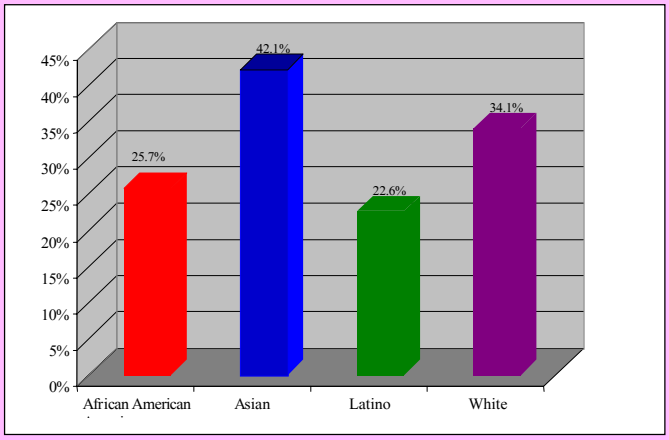
Source: NELS: 88, Second (1992) and Third (1994) Follow up; in, USDOE, NCES, Condition of Education 1997, Supplemental Table 9-1.

Figure 9: Percentage of California High School Graduates Completing A-G, 2000



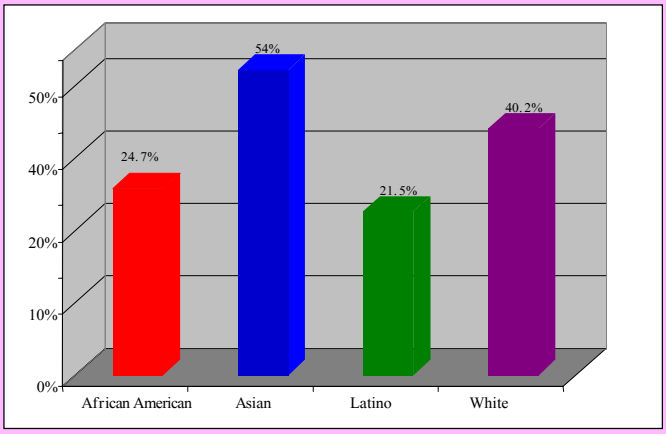
Source: California Department of Education, 2002

Figure 8: National College Prep Curriculum Enrollment, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1998, "First Follow-Up Student Study."

Figure 10: Percentage Of California Graduates Completing A-G, by Race/Ethnicity

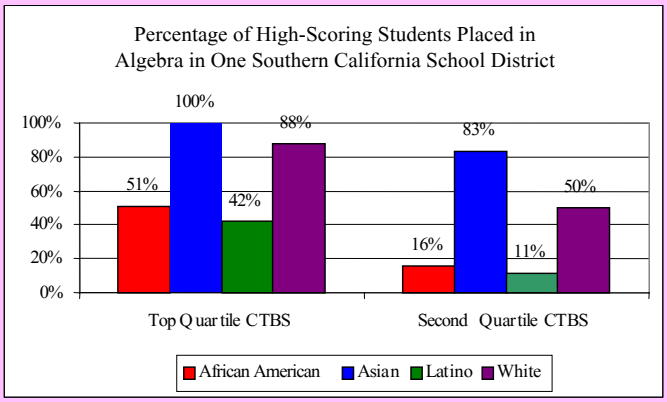


Source: California Department of Education, CBEDS, 2001.

And let's look deeper. All too often, poor students and students of color are channeled into less demanding courses, even when they perform in the top quartile on objective assessments (see Figure 11). Decisions regarding which students are granted access to high-rigor curricula are made not just on the basis of student achievement levels, but something more. Why would we continue to channel students into low-level curricula, especially when their performance ability suggests the potential for much more?

The decision not to enroll in a higher-rigor curriculum must be left to the student and parent. Certainly, when given several options, not all students will choose a higher-rigor college readiness curriculum. Nevertheless, the choice is theirs to make.

Figure 11: High-Performing Students Are Often Excluded From Higher-Level Courses



Source: The Achievement Council and the Education Trust West analysis of unpublished CA district data, 2001.

What are the consequences of a low-level curriculum?

Lack of high-level skills makes young adults less employable. Without high-level skills, our young people entering the workforce are less and less employable.

Nationally, according to regular surveys conducted by the American Management Association, more than 40% of employers test literacy and mathematics skills, and too many of those tested are not passing.[ii]

Failure rates on these exams have climbed from 18.9% in 1996 to 35.5% in 1998. Interestingly, these failure rates are rising, not because applicant skills are going down, but because job requirements (especially in the manufacturing, wholesale and retail segments of the economy) continue to get more advanced.[iii]

Finally, the number of companies providing remedial programs has declined from 24% in 1993 to 14.5% in 1999, highlighting the importance of improving and ensuring the skills applicants bring with them.[iv]

Unprepared students are severely disadvantaged in the college admission process. Students without a college readiness curriculum are often denied the opportunity to enter college. Furthermore, even at colleges with less stringent application requirements, students who took low-rigor courses are at a severe competitive disadvantage, compared to those who were enrolled in a college readiness curriculum. They are, in effect, competitively ineligible.

Remediation[1] is far too necessary and too frequent. Despite the obvious difficulties of gaining admission to a postsecondary educational institution without the proper preparation, large numbers of students do just that. Upon matriculation, however, their lack of preparation all too often catches up with them. As we force colleges and universities to try to rectify the deficiencies of many students' high school education, the prevalence of remedial education among entering first-year students is shockingly common (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: National Remediation at 4 Year-Colleges

	Percent of All Students Taking
Any remedial reading	10.2
No remedial reading, but >2 other remedial courses	18.7
No remedial reading, but 1 or 2 other remedial courses	20.4
No remedial coursework	50.7

Source: Adelman, Clifford. Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment. US DOE, OERI, June 1999.

[1] In most states, there is no statewide definition of college-ready. Colleges admit whom they please. Then, after admission, they administer placement tests–usually in reading, writing and math–to distinguish between students who are ready for credit-bearing study and those who need "remedial" work. But each college uses a different test and/or a different cut score.

In California, we've reached consensus on the courses necessary to be college ready: the A-G curriculum. In the UC system, incoming students are tested only in English. In the CSU system, every non-exempt, regularly admitted student must take the English Placement Test (EPT) and the Entry Level Mathematics (ELM) tests prior to enrolling in classes. The math exam consists of 65 multiple-choice questions, of which 60 are scored. A score of 35-39 is required to pass. Subject matters include algebra (60%), geometry (20%) and data interpretation, counting, probability and statistics (20%). Those who fail either test are then required to enroll in the necessary remedial "activity" to address the deficiency during the first semester of attendance, and are required to satisfy any deficiencies within the first year or be subject to disenrollment from the university.

. . . It gets worse in California.

Generally speaking, college has been ruled out as an option for most of our students. For those who do manage to gain admission to a postsecondary institution, another challenge awaits: they are ill-prepared for college level work

California State University system. Of the regularly admitted first-year students in the California State University system, 46% require remedial education in English in order to continue college-level work. In addition, 46% of these regularly admitted first-year students require remedial education in mathematics. The average high school G.P.A. of these students was a B+. Furthermore, if we examine these figures by race, it is clear that while all students need better high school preparation, students of color are most ill-prepared (see Figures 13 and 14).

- 64% of African American freshmen need remediation in English, as do 65% of Latinos and 63% of Asians.

- 75% of African American freshmen need remediation in math, as do 65% of Latinos.

University of California system. Across the UC system, 36% of the regularly admitted first-year students required remedial education in English (see Figure 15). The UC does not test for mathematics preparedness.

California Community Colleges. A survey conducted by the Academic Senate concluded that "system-wide, [CCCs] direct more than half of [their] students to Basic Skills [remedial] courses." 12 of the surveyed colleges could not determine how many students were sent to Basic Skills classes. In addition, 18 of 56 respondents directed 50 percent or more of their students to basic skills courses.[v]

If even our best high school graduates aren't learning enough in high school to perform college-level work, don't we need a more rigorous high school

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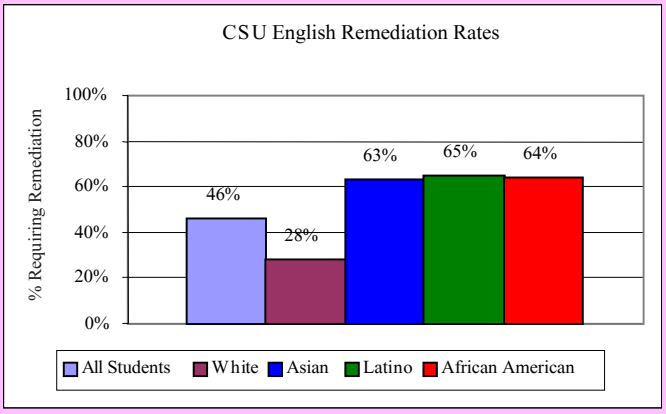
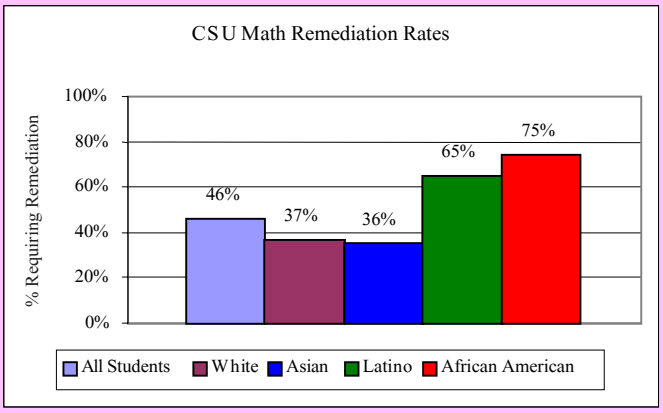
Figure 13: CSU Remediation Rates: English



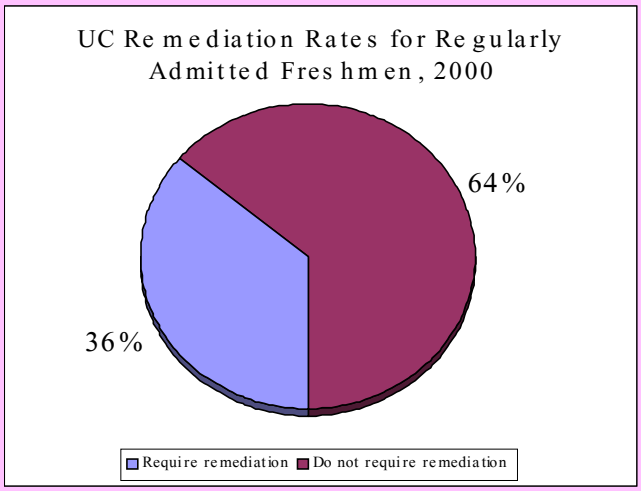
Source: California State University, 2001 data.

Figure 14: CSU Remediation Rates: Mathematics



Source: California State University, 2001 data.

Figure 15: UC Remediation Rates, 2000



Source: Improving Academic Preparation for Higher Education, Legislative Analyst Office, 2000 data.

Remediation often leads to lack of completion. The data show that remediation often serves as a very serious hurdle–indeed, a prohibitive bar–to college graduation. Students find themselves not only significantly behind other students, but also forced to pay full price for classes that earn them no credit. (Lest anyone jump to the conclusion that the universities may be using these courses as a "cash cow," we note that CSU alone is spending millions of dollars annually to provide this remedial education to its students.) Nationally, only 45% of those students required to take just one remedial education class receive a B.A.; more than two remedial classes and a student's chances of receiving a BA drop to only 18%; and of those students required to take more than two remedial courses in reading, only 9% graduate (see Figure 16).

The other lesson from remediation is that students *can* learn; in many cases, colleges are able to bring these students up to speed within a year. Why not get it right the first time?

Figure 16: Students Requiring Extensive Remediation Graduate at Lower Rates

	Earned BA
No Remedial Courses	54%
One Remedial Course	45%
Three Remedial Courses	18%
More than Two Semesters of Reading	9%

Source: Adelman, Cliff in Crosstalk. Vol 6 No.3, Summer 1998.

Disinterest, disillusionment, disengagement and disdain. For those students not enrolled in a college readiness curriculum, the quality of the education is often disappointing. There are myriad examples of the qualitative deficiencies of a low-level curriculum: "dumbed-down" subject matter, defensive teaching, simplified textbooks, dull and unchallenging assignments and negotiated results. These realities all too often lead to student disinterest in, disillusionment with, disengagement from, and disdain for the education system.

Indications of this anger, frustration, and resentment are not difficult to find. A recent article in the Los Angeles Times focused on the problem of students who were denied access to high-level courses, and instead were channeled into low-rigor or vocational education classes. The article presented the example of Leticia Paniagua, who "hopes to attend [college] and become a brain surgeon," yet had been shunted from her original choice, a spot in a higher-level elective, and was instead placed into a *manicuring class*. She was one of many. Summing up her disgust, the student said:

"They think kids from South-Central are not going to go to…college. They want us to do the manicures for the kids who are going to USC."

Is she right?

What are the benefits of implementing a college readiness curriculum?

The data make it clear that a less rigorous curriculum fails to prepare students for the challenges they face; it is equally clear that students enrolled in a more challenging curriculum learn more, perform better on assessments and pass the higher-rigor classes at higher rates.

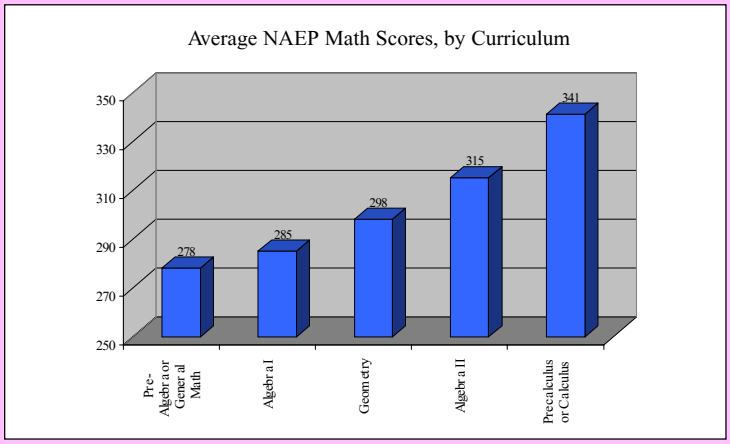
Educational culture shifts towards achievement. Before we discuss the quantifiable improvements, it is incredibly important to note a qualitative one: a change in the educational culture. Implementation of a college readiness curriculum sends a powerful message to everyone that we expect, and will foster, high achievement in each and every one of our students in each and every one of our communities.

A college readiness curriculum improves achievement levels of all children. The data show that students in high-rigor courses will perform significantly better than those languishing in low-level courses.

Improved skills and assessment scores. Nationally, students who completed a college preparatory curriculum in mathematics perform at a much higher level on NAEP exams than those who take only the low level math courses (see Figure 17). To put this chart in perspective, a gain of ten points on this test translates to roughly one grade level or one year of learning. Look at it this way: those students enrolled in the highest-rigor classes are performing around *6 years* ahead of those in the lowest-rigor courses.
While in some cases, it may be difficult to quantify an improvement in skills, it is clear that, in California, assessment scores are significantly higher in counties with the highest A-G completion rates than in those with the lowest A-G completion rates (see Figure 18). This is no accident.

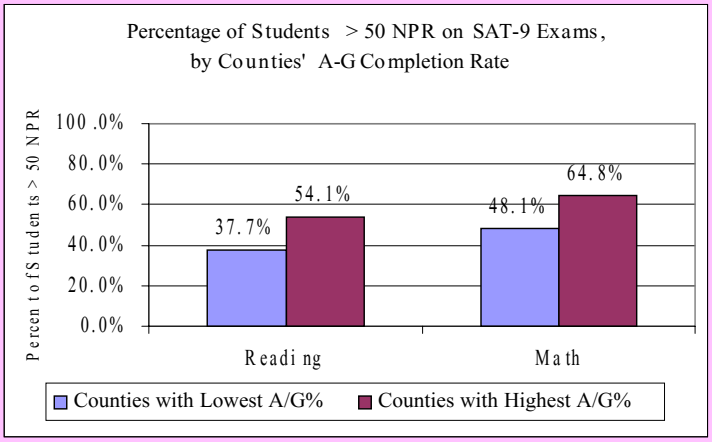
Achievement gaps narrow. As we will see below, the implementation of A-G as the default curriculum has resulted in increased learning for all students and the narrowing of achievement gaps, with respect to both assessment scores and curricular enrollment.

Figure 17: A Rigorous Math Curriculum Improves Achievement



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. NAEP, 1999 Trends in Academic Progress (p 113). Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2000.

Figure 18: A-G Completion Goes Hand-In-Hand with Higher Assessment Scores

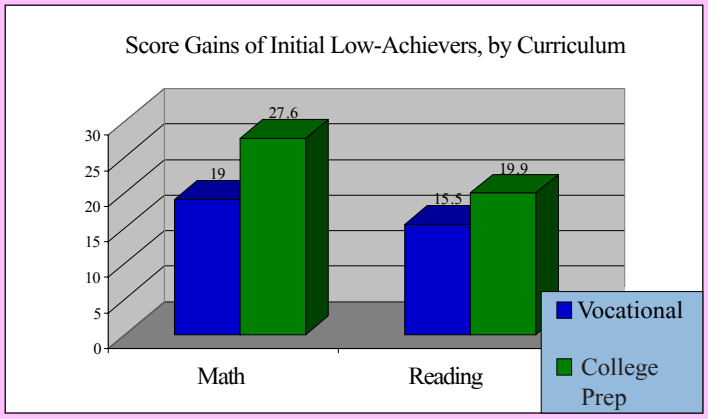


Source: The Education Trust-West analysis of California Department of Education data, 2002.

Vocational education students and initial low-achievers also thrive with a higher-rigor curriculum. Although often unspoken, there is a commonly-held misconception about some of our students: *that there exist entire groups of kids incapable of learning a high-rigor curriculum, and enrolling them in a college readiness curriculum constitutes a form of cruelty because somehow we're setting them up for failure.* This misconception could not be more wrong!

A high-rigor curriculum helps all children to achieve their potential. Indeed, research indicates that even those students who are initially low-achievers thrive when enrolled in a more challenging curriculum, as do work-bound or vocational education students. For example, as Figure 19 demonstrates, low performing eighth-graders who were enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum showed greater gains in both reading and math than did their counterparts enrolled in a vocational curriculum. Moreover, students previously enrolled in a vocational track score higher on assessments when they enrolled in high-level core classes (see Figure 20).

Figure 19: Grade 8-12 Test Score Gains by Bottom Quartile Students by Curriculum Track



Source: US DOE, NCES, Vocational Education in the United States: Toward the Year 2000, in Issue Brief: Students Who Prepare for College and a Vocation.

Figure 20: Vocational Students Taking High-Level English Courses Score Higher

	% Taking High Level English	NAEP Reading Scores
1996	28	283
1998	43	292

Source: Bottoms, Gene. Report of the SREB High Schools That Work, 1998.

All students will learn at high levels when taught at high levels. Cruelty lies not in attempting to teach them, but in expecting and allowing them to fail.

What are the longer-term rewards of a college readiness curriculum?

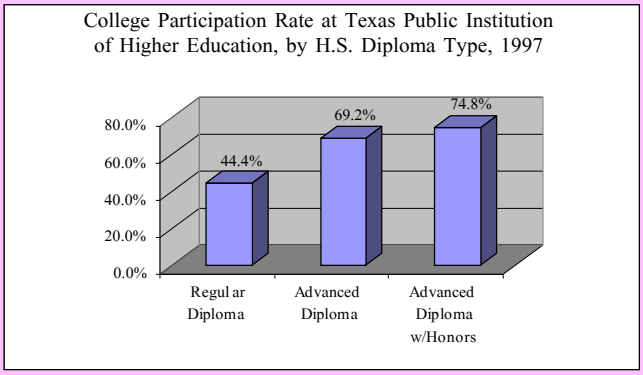
Beyond improved skill levels and assessment scores, it is important to understand that implementing a default high-level curriculum fundamentally improves the longer-term futures of these students: a college readiness curriculum leads to postsecondary success. First, we can look at those students nationally who are enrolled in a college-prep curriculum. Second, we examine Texas' educational reform efforts and see what happens when an entire state chooses to implement a more rigorous curriculum. Finally, we look at the experience of San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD), which beginning with this year's graduating class already has implemented A-G as its standard curriculum. Looking at the data, the following benefits emerge:

A college readiness curriculum prepares students for a more technical workplace. We again stress that *all* students would benefit from a more academically rigorous high school curriculum. In today's economy, young people without at least some postsecondary training have almost no chance of finding jobs paying sufficient wages to support a family. Raising the academic bar at the high school level helps those that expect to pursue postsecondary education or training and those that will immediately compete in the employment marketplace.

- 70% of the 30 fastest-growing jobs will require an education beyond high school.[vii]
- 40% of all new jobs will require at least an associate's degree.[viii]
- Despite the surge in college going, college-level job openings between 1999-2008 will nearly equal college-educated entrants to the workforce.[ix]
- A variety of trade apprenticeship programs suggest higher-level math and science skills. As an indication, the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation states that because of the increasing complexity of automobiles, a solid grounding in *"science, especially physics, is necessary to understand force, friction, hydraulics, and electrical circuits."*[x]

A high-rigor curriculum also increases postsecondary admission and enrollment. A college readiness high school curriculum prepares students to gain entrance to college. Indeed, as is the case in California, having completed a college prep curriculum is often a prerequisite for application. In Texas, the data show that students enrolled in a college readiness curriculum enroll in postsecondary education at a much higher rate than those in a low-rigor program (see Figure 21).

Figure 21: More Rigorous High School Curriculum Leads To Higher College-Going Rates



Source: Lopez, Dr. Omar S., The Relationship of the Texas High School Curriculum to College Readiness: An Update, December 2000.

Better high school preparation leads to early collegiate success. In addition to higher rates of postsecondary enrollment, research has clearly shown that preparing students better in high school leads directly to academic success later on. This is true both nationally (see Figure 22, next page), and in the case of Texas (see Figure 23, next page).

Increased persistence and perseverance. Students who have completed a college readiness high school curriculum are more likely to persist, persevere and prevail in their postsecondary education. Fueled by the knowledge that they are prepared, and emboldened by their early successes, these students show greater persistence at the college level.

Stated differently, they "stick with it" more. This holds true for both freshman and sophomore year persistence figures, all the way through graduation. In Texas, for example, the data are impressive. Students with a college readiness curriculum returned for their sophomore years at a rate of 86%, compared to only 64% of those with a low-rigor curriculum; nearly 80% returned for their junior year, compared to only 52%.

This is true for both first-generation college students as well as those students whose parents went to college. A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that "providing first-generation students the opportunity to take rigorous coursework in high school will increase their chances of succeeding in college."

Better-prepared students graduate more often, with narrower achievement gaps. Finally, if we look at attainment levels, better-prepared high school students go on to graduate from college at much higher rates than those without a college readiness curriculum. This difference is particularly striking, when we look at the data disaggregated by race: while all students benefit, African American and Latino students show extraordinary increases in college completion when enrolled in a strong high school curriculum (see Figure 24): African American students have a 75% chance of graduating if they had a strong high school curriculum, compared to a 45% chance of graduating overall.

Figure 22: More Rigorous Curricula Lead To Higher College G.P.A.s Nationally

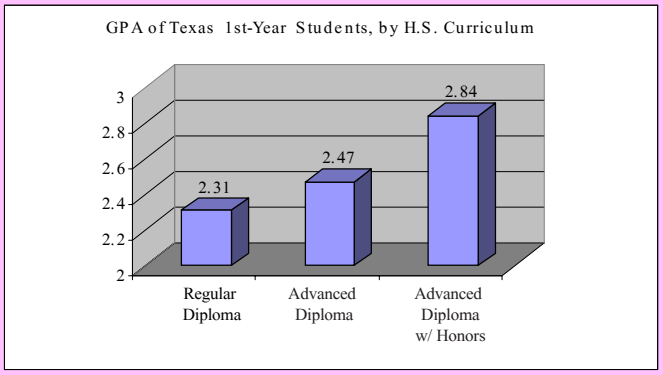
Grade Point Average (GPA) and percentage distribution of GPA quartiles for 1995-96 beginning students in their first year of college among those enrolled in 4-year institutions, by high school academic curriculum

	Lowest quartile (2.11 or lower)	Middle quartiles (2.12-3.26)	High quartile (3.37 and higher)	Average First-year GPA
Total	24.6%	50.2%	25.2%	2.69
By High School Academic Curriculum				
Core Curriculum or less (1)	29.9%	50.9%	19.2%	2.53
Mid-Level (2)	24.5%	51.5%	24.0%	2.67
Rigorous (3)	7.8%	50.0%	42.1%	3.10

(1) Core curriculum includes 4 years of English, 3 years of Social Studies, 3 years of mathematics, and 3 years of science.
(2) Mid-level curriculum exceeds core curriculum but is less than rigorous. Includes at a minimum 1 year of a for. lang., geometry, algebra I, and 3 years of science including two of the following courses: biology, chemistry, or physics.
(3) Rigorous curriculum includes 4 years of English, 4 years of mathematics (including precalculus or higher), 3 years of a foreign language, 3 years of social studies, 3 years of science (including biology, chemistry, physics), and at least one advanced placement (AP) class or test taken.

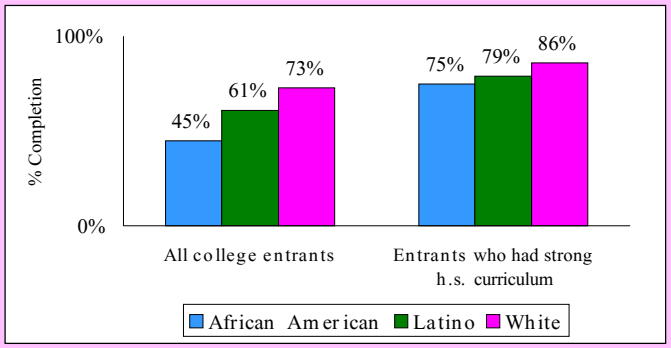
Source: U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, First Follow-up (BPS: 96/98).

Figure 23: And More Rigorous Curricula Lead To Higher College G.P.A.s in Texas



Source: Source: Lopez, Dr. Omar S., The Relationship of the Texas High School Curriculum to College Readiness: An Update, December 2000.

Figure 24: A Strong High School Curriculum Leads To Higher College Completion



Source: Adapted from Adelman, Clifford, U.S. Department of Education, Answers in the Toolbox, 1999.

San Jose Unified School Districtِ Experience

We've seen on a national level that students enrolled in a college readiness curriculum perform better in virtually every measurement. We have further seen that, when an entire state chooses to increase the rigor of its public high schools' curriculum, a number of very positive results occur: higher skills, better standardized test scores, greater college attendance, better academic achievement levels, and increased college attainment/graduation levels.

Beyond this broader data, however, we can look right here in California at the experiences and results of the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) to see how the implementation of a default college readiness curriculum has actually worked in a large California district.

Letِ spoil the surprise: itِ working well.

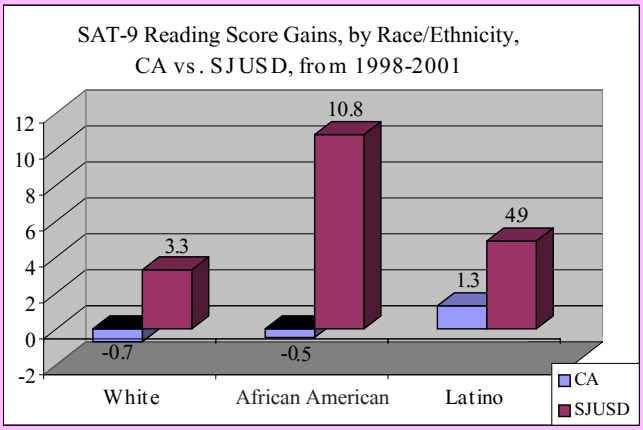
No matter how you look at it, SJUSD's implementation of a default college readiness curriculum is improving academic achievement throughout the district's high schools.

Achievement levels show clear improvement, and achievement gaps narrow. As measured by SAT-9 scores, achievement levels among students at the district have shown a clear, marked increase since the district implemented the A-G curriculum as the default curriculum (see Figures 25 & 26). As Figures 25 and 26 show, these gains have occurred in a statewide environment in which scores either rose modestly or actually declined. Equally important, SJUSD has made great strides at narrowing achievement gaps between the various racial and ethnic groups. While all groups saw improvement, both African Americans and Latinos gained at a faster rate. Note, in particular, the gains in African American and Latino math scores at SJUSD:

- African Americans in SJUSD saw a gain of 15.7 points, compared to 2.7 points statewide.
- Latinos in SJUSD experienced a gain of 13.9 points, compared to 4.1 points statewide.

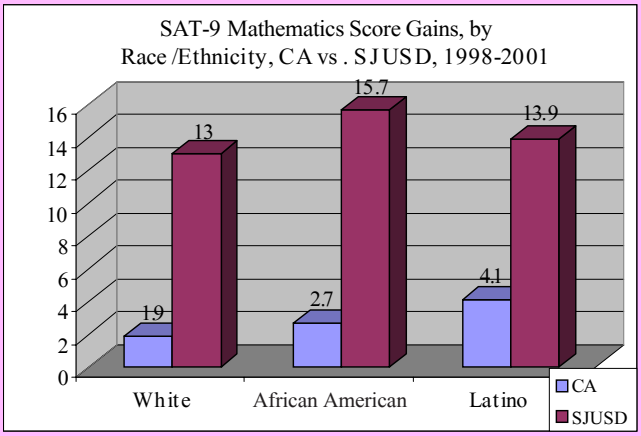
Data from the New Haven Unified School District (NHUSD also has implemented a default A-G curriculum, beginning with the class of 2007) show similarly positive results.

Figure 25: Achievement Gains at SJUSD Higher than Statewide Figures



Source: California Department of Education, 2002.

Figure 26: Improvement at SJUSD Far Outpaces State Average; Achievement Gaps Narrow



Source: California Department of Education, 2002.

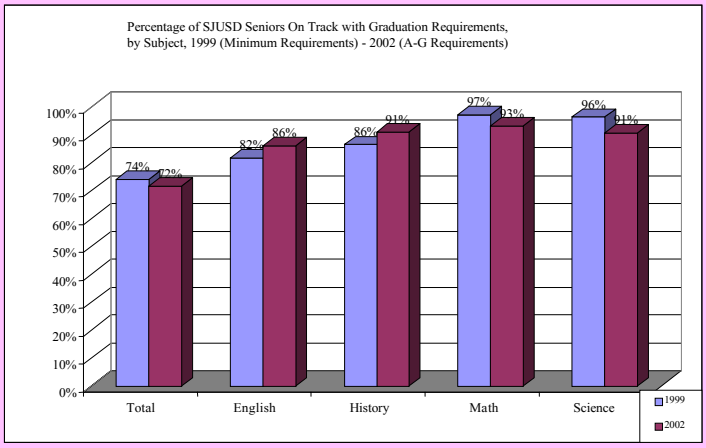
School ranks have improved.
More than 1/3 of SJUSD's schools showed improvements in their statewide ranks (compared to 1/5 of all schools across the state). 57% showed improvements in their Similar-Schools Ranks (compared to 37% statewide).[xiii]

Students are successfully mastering more difficult subject matter.
Students at SJUSD have been enrolled in a more challenging curriculum, and they have met the challenge head-on. As an example, the number of students taking geometry or higher has risen from 74% in 1998-99 to 93% in 2001-2002. Equally important, the implementation of A-G has significantly narrowed the achievement gap: the corresponding numbers for Latino students have risen from 57% to 88%. Over 30% more Latino students are taking higher-level math courses in SJUSD![xiv]

Students are keeping up with requirements.
An important concern voiced by opponents of a default college readiness curriculum centers around students' pre-high school preparation. In other words, "Can these kids keep up with tougher classes and tougher requirements?" Again, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" As shown in Figure 27, if we look at the current senior class, and examine the percentages of students on track with the A-G requirements, compared to 1998-99's senior class which had the minimum requirements, there has been no significant change in the ability of students to keep up with the new, more rigorous curriculum.

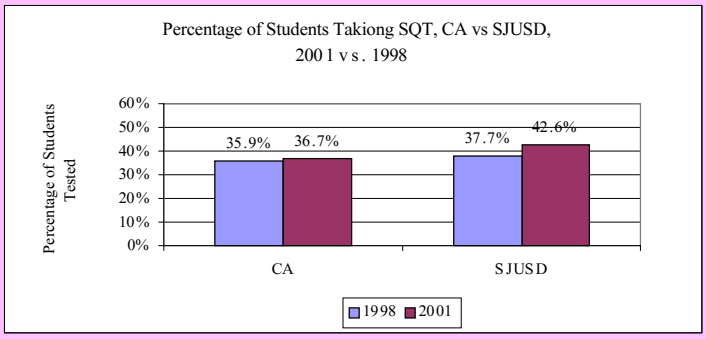
Improving academic results are leading to increases in college-going desire.
SJUSD has begun to prepare its students for postsecondary education, with the result that SJUSD students are engaged and believe that their high school education is integrally important to accomplishing their future goals:

Figure 27: SJUSD Students are Keeping Up with Requirements.



Source: Unpublished data from SJUSD, 2002.

Figure 28: SJUSD Students Are Taking the SAT in Increasing Numbers



Source: California Department of Education, 2002.

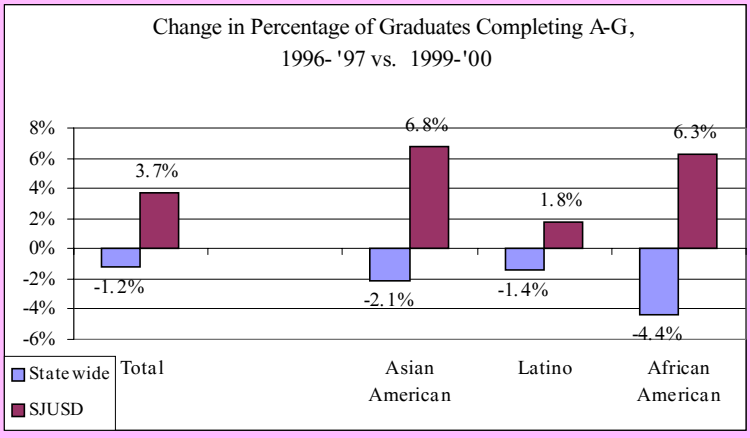
- According to an internal survey performed by SJUSD, 89% of the district's students expected to go on to college![xv] This is significantly higher than the national average.

- As an additional proxy for college-going desire, we note that more of SJUSD's students have been taking the SAT since SJUSD implemented the default A-G curriculum (see Figure 28).

Most important, more kids are graduating with A-G. After all of the previous discussion, data points, and charts, it's possible to lose sight of the fundamental question: "Has the implementation of the A-G default curriculum resulted in more prepared students?" The answer, unequivocally, is, "Absolutely!" Figure 29 shows the changes in percentages of students graduating with the A-G requirements for the state and SJUSD, from 1996-'97 through 1999-'00.

SJUSD's A-G improvement runs counter to the statewide trend of declines.
As Figure 29 shows, the gains made by SJUSD are not typical for the state as a whole. In fact, while the percentage of students graduating with the UC/CSU curriculum has increased at SJUSD over this time period, corresponding statewide figures have declined. Furthermore, the gains are seen by all groups and achievement gaps are closing.

Figure 29: SJUSD A-G Graduates on the Rise, Despite Statewide Declines



Source: California Department of Education, 2002.

Conclusion

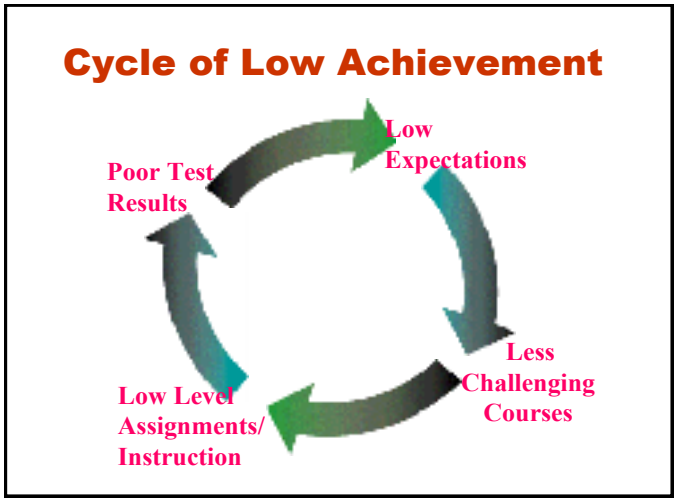
To have any real chance of success in the world of work, or in postsecondary education, our high school students must regularly engage in more rigorous, intellectually challenging work, and must make substantially more progress during their secondary years than they do now.

California's current statewide minimum curricular requirements do not prepare our high school students for a hopeful future. This much is apparent. We are not preparing those high school graduates without college aspirations for the workplace. We are not preparing those students who have college aspirations, but are not "competitively eligible." Finally, judging by the college remediation rates, we are not adequately preparing even our most successful high school students to be successful in post-secondary work.

Luckily, we're ahead of many states because we've already reached consensus on the content of an appropriate high-rigor curriculum: the A-G curriculum. The problem is that the vast majority of our students never successfully complete the A-G curriculum and far too many don't have access to the courses in the first place. The numbers are worse for African American and Latino students.

The patterns in the data make it clear: to have any chance of gaining solid footing in the economy of the 21st Century, *all* students will need at least some form of postsecondary education or training, or at least be highly skilled in order to succeed in the workplace. The real question is whether we have the will to deeply restructure teaching and learning so that we teach *all* students a challenging curriculum and accept accountability for the results.

The cycle of low achievement begins and ends with low expectations of our students.



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[xiv] Unpublished data from SJUSD, 2002.
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The Education Trust West is a newly opened West Coast presence of the national policy organization, the Education Trust. The Education Trust was created to promote high academic achievement for all students at all levels, kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in education improvement efforts: those serving Latino, African American, Native American and low-income students.

The Education Trust West works alongside policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders, in cities and towns across the west coast, who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also share lessons learned in these schools, colleges and communities with policy makers in Sacramento to ensure that there is a voice for students in California policymaking.

The Education Trust-West