

Getting Students Ready for College and Careers

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Southern Regional Educational Board

http://www.sreb.org/main/Goals/Publications/06E04-Students_Ready_College_Career.pdf

Getting Students Ready for College and Careers is an important companion to the SREB report Getting Serious about High School Graduation. Together, they make powerful statements to you as policymakers and education leaders about the problems in high schools and what you can do to fix them. Getting Serious details the decline in high school graduation rates in most SREB states over the last decade. Getting Students Ready for College and Careers goes a step further by describing how many of those who do graduate are not prepared to be successful in college and the workplace. Not only do states need more students to graduate from high school; they also need graduates who are ready for what lies ahead: more advanced learning and high expectations on the job.

More students need to take an essential core of courses to prepare for college and careers.

Teachers, policy-makers and parents have long agreed that those bound for college should take an academically challenging curriculum. However, the latest research shows that the courses once prescribed only for students preparing for college are actually necessary for all students: English; mathematics courses including Algebra II; laboratory-based science; and social studies. Getting Students Ready for College and Careers also asserts that this essential core should include a fourth mathematics course in the senior year, which could be a course beyond Algebra II, a course on data analysis and statistics, or a course specifically focused on preparing students for college-level mathematics.

But students who complete this essential core to prepare them for college and careers may still not be ready.

Research from ACT Inc. suggests that perhaps as many as four in five college freshmen are not ready for college in all of the key subjects. How can this be? Quite simply, states do not have college- and career-readiness standards built into high school curricula, instruction and statewide assessments. This means that teachers are not always focused on college and career readiness. And it means that courses are not equally challenging from school to school, or even from classroom to classroom. Policymakers should require all high schools and all high school teachers to focus intentionally on college and career readiness. Right now in many states, students are lucky if they are assigned a teacher who has the high expectations to push them to high levels of achievement. SREB states can't afford to leave college and career readiness to luck.

Higher education also must shoulder some of the burden to make college and career readiness a top priority for high schools and teachers. Higher education leaders and policy-makers within each state have not agreed on what it means to be ready, so high schools, teachers, parents and students are left without clear messages on what college readiness means.

- Job one is for high school and college faculties in each state to define and agree on these standards. The standards should spell out what it takes - particularly in writing, reading and mathematics -for high school students to succeed in college and careers. Then all public colleges statewide should adopt them.
- These standards should then become the basis for your state's high school curriculum and statewide assessments - and students should know by the junior year of high school if they are on track to meet them.
- For students who are not on track, the school should help them become ready during a rigorous and challenging senior year.

Dual enrollment is growing fast and needs more attention from policy-makers.

This report spotlights trends in dual enrollment programs, some of which are disturbing. The fivefold, 10-year increase in high school students across the nation who are taking college-level courses for both high school and college credit shows the rising popularity of the program. Dual enrollment has clearly grown beyond an opportunity for the most accelerated students and now is available to a much more diverse group of students, including those in career and technical programs. While there are likely some benefits of this change, the program needs more oversight from policy-makers. Too few states have comprehensive policies about who is eligible for dual enrollment and at what standards the “college-level” courses will be taught. The program is being promoted as a potential savings for states and students and as a means to motivate students who might drop out of high school. However, student learning and college success will suffer if dual enrollment students are not ready for college-level courses, if the courses offered are not really college level, or if these courses displace other school-based, high-level English and mathematics courses. Dual enrollment serves neither the state nor the students if these students are not really prepared to take college-level work.

It is time to get serious about establishing standards and programs that help all students make a successful transition to college and careers. For your state, it all begins with clarifying specific standards for college and career readiness, so that postsecondary education can speak with one voice and all high school students within a state can receive the same signals.