



*New graduation requirements aim to align with college admission standards and address inequities in college and career readiness.*

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**Angélica Infante-Green**

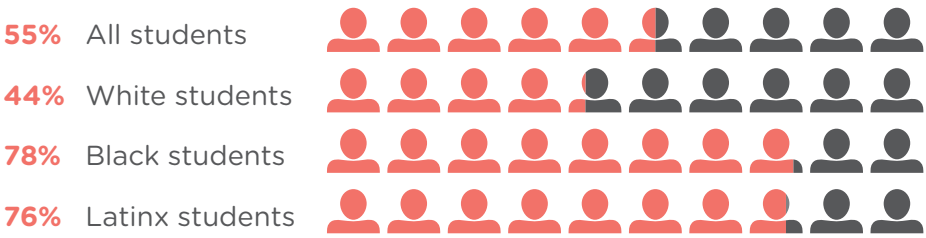
## How Rhode Island Increased the Value of a High School Diploma

A high school diploma should mean that all students are ready for college and a career, but in Rhode Island, it did not. According to a 2019 audit, just four in a hundred Rhode Island seniors were prepared for both college and a career,<sup>1</sup> and more than half graduated without concrete career skills. Thousands were

ineligible to enroll even in the state's own college system because they had not completed course requirements.

When I became commissioner of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) in 2019, I committed to ensuring that Rhode Island would start providing all its high school students with equitable

Figure 1. Rhode Island Students Ready for Neither College Nor Career (percent)



Source: XQ Institute

opportunities for postsecondary success. To start that transformation, the department had to take a long look in the mirror. In 2019, RIDE entered into a partnership with XQ Institute, a national organization dedicated to reimagining high school education.

XQ and RIDE engaged Rhode Island education stakeholders in a statewide high school redesign challenge to create high school experiences that would enable students to determine their own learning paths, careers, and adult lives. One component of the effort was an educational opportunity audit that went beneath the surface of Rhode Island data in order to figure out which kids were not graduating college and career ready. At the start of the audit, community members strongly affirmed that a high school education should prepare students for success in careers and college.

Based on quantitative and qualitative data from transcripts, surveys, and focus groups, the audit revealed inequities and ineffective practices that were preventing kids from graduating ready. Surveys showed eight of ten Rhode Island seniors strongly wanted to attend two-year or four-year colleges,<sup>2</sup> but only half were eligible. More than one-third fell short of college eligibility by only one or two courses. Why were so many of our students falling short when they were so clearly demonstrating that they could succeed in most of their courses? These data pointed to a systemic failure, and statewide graduation requirements were to blame.

At the time, there were no statewide graduation requirements for specific math, lab science, or foreign language courses that aligned to state standards for admission to

institutions of higher education. Students at one high school might be offered a sequence of courses that met college eligibility requirements, while students at another might never have that chance, even if they did everything right and excelled in their classes.

Inequities also existed within school buildings, where some students were provided the opportunity to participate in the learning experiences necessary for college readiness, and others were not. These inequities disproportionately affected students of color, low-income students, differently abled students, and multilingual learners, creating large opportunity gaps (figure 1).

Problems with high school course offerings went beyond minimum college eligibility requirements. The audit analysis of high school transcripts showed that many students did not take math or science in 12th grade.<sup>3</sup> For those students who wished to major in STEM-related fields, one year of missed coursework may have prevented them from fulfilling their dreams. A student who completed Algebra I and II might find no further math courses available or be assigned a lower-level math course to fill up their schedule rather than proceeding to trigonometry or precalculus.

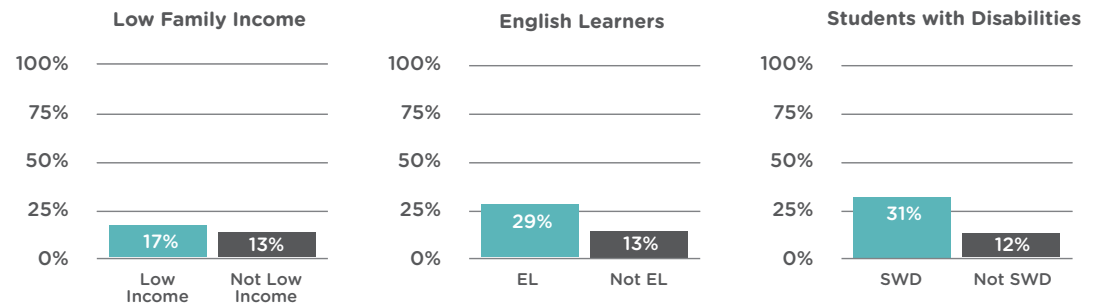
Many students were also failing to take two years of the same world language in high school and laboratory science classes. About a third were taking three linked career and technical (CTE) education courses. Further, students were taking courses in many disciplines out of sequence.

The first courses in a student’s high school education are critical, setting the stage for

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**Figure 2. Rhode Island Students Off-Track by the End of Ninth Grade (percent)**



Source: XQ Institute

**Students told us they felt disengaged from their classes and disempowered by their choices.**

advanced classes in later years.<sup>4</sup> Without this strong foundation in ninth grade, 9 in 10 students will never catch up to be college eligible upon graduation. Rhode Island data showed differently abled and low-income students falling off-track as early as ninth grade (figure 2).

RIDE pressed ahead during the pandemic. In June 2020, XQ and RIDE staff presented audit findings to the Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, or K-12 Council for short, which is organized under the state board of education and oversees K-12. The council challenged us to identify solutions and create a plan to address the barriers Rhode Island students faced.

## Engaging the Community

Every school system I have encountered in my nearly 30 years of experience has valued community input and listening to families, students, and educators. Yet in many cases, those engagement efforts fail to lead to transformation. I wanted to do something different, so RIDE committed to sharing data, going wherever we needed to go to hear from stakeholders, and creating the space for our community to co-develop solutions.

Reimagining High School working group sessions were open to everyone. RIDE and XQ held ongoing meetings with stakeholder groups, attended any meeting to which we were invited, and spoke with anyone who would share ideas for reimagining high school.

We specifically sought out current and former Rhode Island high school students to learn from their experiences and perspectives on how well their high schools had prepared them for the rest of their lives. In partnership with XQ and For Freedoms, an art organization, Rhode Island students expressed their desire to change high school through an art and activism challenge in which they designed billboards that were displayed across the state.

The meetings unleashed a flood of emotions. Students told us they felt disengaged from their classes and disempowered by their choices. They wanted more real-world, relevant learning experiences. Other students felt trapped by their academic schedule, and they absolutely wanted to complete a college-ready course sequence. Some had family responsibilities—taking care of siblings or working to contribute financially to their households. At one meeting, an educator broke into sobs because they felt complicit in the failure to prepare students for the next chapter in their lives.

We also sought the leadership of parents, educators, school counselors, school and district leaders, industry partners, and community members. The data and the stories that they shared reflected the painful truth that our system was not only failing to prepare students for college, it was exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequality. I will never forget the powerful silence that filled the room after we revealed data that Black male students who were not low-income were only about as likely to

complete advanced coursework as white males from low-income backgrounds.

The community voices at the center of the process consistently raised solutions and pointed toward a path forward. Each conversation underscored that high school graduation requirements were the entry point and a lever for full system change. If we could elevate the value of a Rhode Island diploma by overhauling graduation standards across all high schools so that they met state college admissions requirements, then we could promise parents a hopeful future for their children.

The feedback we received helped RIDE develop a new set of graduation requirements that we proposed to the K-12 Council in February 2022. The requirements were based on three key priorities: preparing graduates to create their own futures; increasing student engagement by increasing real-world, relevant learning experiences; and supporting kids and their families throughout their high school experience.

## Preparing Graduates for College and Careers

The state's goal is to increase the number of graduates who can earn an associate's degree tuition-free while in high school and thus reduce the student loan burden. The new graduation requirement is that all Rhode Island students take four credits of math, including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, with the option for advanced coursework. Students' three credits of science now must include two credits of lab science rather than the three unspecified credits previously required. Students also must take two years of a world language. These are the learning experiences that the University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and most regional colleges require for general admission. The default expectation is that all students will graduate having participated in the learning experiences necessary for success in college.

Not every student will pursue a college education directly after high school, and most must work to support themselves before completing postsecondary education. Rhode Island students in full-time CTE programs will receive additional schedule flexibility to deepen their career exploration, all high schools will develop policies to recognize work-based learning as academic credit, and all students and all parents

will now receive information on transitioning to a career, apprenticeship, and the military so they can make informed decisions about their future.

Although Rhode Island leads the nation in Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, its students need more support in accessing the financial aid they deserve. For decades, the onus was placed on the student to figure out how to apply for aid. These new requirements place the responsibility on high schools to help students and families navigate this process.

## Relevant Learning Experiences

Students' high school learning experiences have been disconnected from their passions. Yet students whose passions are engaged during school are two and a half times more likely to say they get excellent grades and do well in school.<sup>5</sup> Rhode Island high schools will provide students participating in CTE and full-time dual enrollment programs with schedule flexibility to take coursework more aligned with their goals.

Rhode Island students will also graduate proficient in civics, financial literacy, computer science, and the arts. They will gain the knowledge and skills to navigate career and life choices. These initiatives will also help teachers unlock their creative genius and develop interdisciplinary learning experiences that involve partnerships with local community leaders. As long as students demonstrate competency and meet state standards, they will enjoy more flexibility in how their academic day is structured.

## Student and Family Support

Families and parents are critical guides through their children's high school experience and beyond, but the burden cannot fall entirely on them. High schools must help families understand their child's high school experience, academic progress toward meeting graduation requirements and college and career benchmarks, and the support provided to them. Two out of three parents in Rhode Island high schools said they did not receive regular updates on their kids' progress at school.<sup>6</sup> RIDE has committed to ensuring that schools will now provide parents such updates annually.

Students who take care of family members or work to lift their families out of poverty should

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Angélica Infante-Green is Rhode Island's commissioner of elementary and secondary education.



for Strategy Instruction Priming the Problem Structure,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 48, no. 1 (2015): 51–72.

<sup>9</sup>The Southern Regional Education Board’s program director for literacy and mathematics, Jason Adair, has helped school leaders develop such rubrics. SREB also has a cadre of professional development staff to help schools implement effective literacy and math strategies.

<sup>10</sup>Michael D. Rettig and Robert Lynn Canady, “High Failure Rates in Required Mathematics Courses: Can a Modified Block Schedule Be Part of the Cure?” *NASSP Bulletin* 82, no. 596 (1998): 56–65.

<sup>11</sup>Jack Jennings, *Fatigued by School Reform* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>Gene Bottoms, Alice Presson, and Lingling Han, “Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Improve Achievement in Rural High Schools: High School Reform Works When Schools Do the Right Things” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2004).

<sup>13</sup>Bottoms, *Tomorrow’s High School*, chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup>In *Tomorrow’s High School* (ASCD, 2021), I detail ways schools and districts can develop year-by-year plans for implementing transformative, practical actions in support of bold goals.

<sup>15</sup>Bottoms, Presson, and Han, “High School Reform Works—When Implemented” (2004) and “Students Can’t Wait: High Schools Must Turn Knowledge into Action” (2006).

<sup>16</sup>National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Engaging Schools*, 80–81.

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not have to choose between academics, family responsibilities, and economic security. To ease the burden on these students, Rhode Island schools will add flexibility in their support, which might include valuing caregiving work as community service hours, flexible class schedules, skill-building and support groups, and work-based learning for academic credit. Additionally, these changes eliminate seat time as a criterion for awarding academic credit. Rhode Island students will earn credit based on subject mastery and student proficiency. The Carnegie unit is no longer the driver of student learning in Rhode Island high schools.

RIDE developed these priorities by genuinely listening to community members and embracing difficult conversations. After the initial proposal to revise graduation requirements was presented to the K-12 Council last year, there was a period of public comment that included seven hearings and four town halls across the state. Students and families were present at each of the seven public hearings. With over 400 comments, this set of regulations received the most public comment in the history of Rhode Island K-12 education.

## Conclusion

Today, there is much to celebrate and feel hopeful about in Rhode Island. On November 15, 2022, the K-12 Council unanimously approved the final proposed graduation requirements. It is no easy feat to implement a statewide partnership, yet a focus on community voices and patience enabled Rhode Island to change the framework for high schools completely and reorient the entire educational system to ensure that every student graduates with open doors to create their own future.

To get to this point, Rhode Island parents and community leaders joined state education leaders to dig beneath the surface of the toughest questions in a collaborative process. That makes me optimistic about the future. If there is any piece of advice for other states that seek to make high schools better for their students, I would say that it is important to lead with vulnerability. RIDE’s goal was to get the requirements right for kids, even if it meant admitting that we did not always have easy answers to difficult problems. We were open to change and were guided by the voices of the community. I also credit the K-12 Council itself for giving the department the mandate to implement changes, as well as their pushing forward on solutions mutually agreed upon.

RIDE opted to phase in the new requirements over the next five years. We could have implemented these changes more quickly, but sustainable, transformational change will take the same sort of inclusive community leadership that got us this far. Over the next two years, RIDE will ensure that all students are automatically enrolled in courses required at Rhode Island’s state colleges. The implementation of these requirements will inform the next phase of the work and may hold lessons for other school systems and communities hoping to transform their high schools to build the future our students so rightfully deserve. ■

<sup>1</sup>Rhode Island Department of Education, “Educational Opportunity Audit RIDE Final Report” (April 2020).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>RIDE, “Educational Opportunity Audit” (October 2017).

<sup>4</sup>Chenoa S. Woods et al., “How High School Coursework Predicts Introductory College-Level Course Success,” *Community College Review* 46, no. 2 (February 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Tim Hodges, “School Engagement Is More Than Just Talk,” (Gallup, October 2018), <https://www.gallup.com/education/244022/school-engagement-talk.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup>RIDE, “Educational Opportunity Audit” (April 2020).