

An Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools



2005
National Education Summit
on High Schools

Sponsored by **Achieve, Inc.**, and **National Governors Association**
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States and the Hunt Institute*

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Introduction

America's high schools are failing to prepare too many of our students for work and higher education. Just ask business leaders and college presidents, who say they must spend billions of dollars annually to provide their employees and students with the skills and knowledge they should have attained in high school. The statistics they cite to support their claim are indeed troubling. On state assessments in English and mathematics, roughly one in three high school students fails to meet standards.¹ Nationwide only 71 percent of students graduate from high school, and worse, only about half of black and Latino students graduate.² Nearly a third of high school graduates who go on to college require immediate placement in remedial education courses.³

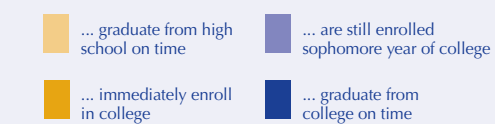
High school graduates also say they are not adequately prepared for college or work. In a recent poll, approximately 40 percent of graduates reported key gaps in their preparation. An overwhelming majority noted that if they could do high school over again, they would work harder and take more challenging courses.⁴

Our high school students' lack of preparedness has serious implications for our economy and prosperity. For most of the nation's history, manufacturing workers with modest formal education could earn decent wages. For roughly 60 percent of the jobs in today's labor market, at least some postsecondary education is needed, and that percentage is expected to increase in the years ahead.⁵ The jobs of the 21st century require more sophisticated skills and knowledge. Businesses are looking for employees who can write and communicate clearly, analyze information, conduct research, and solve complex

problems. Employers say the high school graduates they hire need the same skills and knowledge that colleges and universities assert enrolling students should have. Consequently, *all* students — those attending a four-year college, those planning to earn a two-year degree or get some postsecondary training, and those seeking to enter the job market right away — need to have comparable preparation in high school.

Few Students Make It through the Education Pipeline

Of every 100 ninth graders, the number who ...

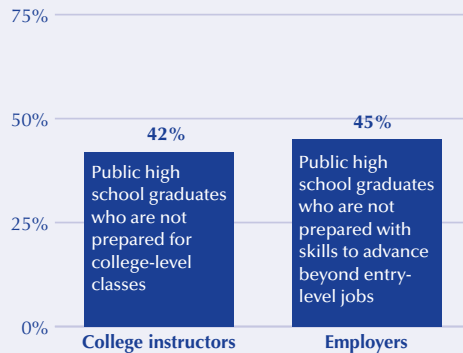


Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Policy Alert, April 2004. Data are estimates of pipeline progress rather than actual cohort.

Unfortunately, American high school graduates are less prepared for college and work than their peers elsewhere. The United States has one of the lowest high school graduation rates among industrialized nations.⁶ In international math and science comparisons, American high school seniors outperform only students from Cyprus, Lithuania and South

College Instructors and Employers Say Graduates Are Not Prepared for College and Work

Average estimated proportions of recent high school graduates who are not prepared



Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* prepared for Achieve, Inc., 2005.

Africa. Even though the United States has one of the highest college enrollment rates in the world, our college completion rate is average to below-average among developed countries.⁷

Not surprisingly, this lack of preparedness is costly to U.S. taxpayers, businesses, colleges and students. Each year taxpayers pay an estimated \$1 billion to \$2 billion to provide remedial education to students at public universities and community colleges.⁸ Deficits in basic skills cost businesses, colleges and underprepared high school graduates as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs. Employers in Michigan, for example, spend about \$40 million a year just to teach workers how to read, write and perform basic math operations.⁹

The demands of college and work are dramatically different today than a generation ago, but American high schools remain virtually unchanged. State and federal efforts to improve education standards

have focused more on providing a strong foundation for learning in the early years than on ensuring students have the skills and knowledge they need at high school graduation. Governors and state and local education officials assumed raising student achievement in the elementary and middle grades would solve the problems with high schools. As a result, high schools have been largely untouched by the past two decades of education reform.

As evidence of unacceptably high dropout rates and low academic performance has become more compelling, inattention has begun to give way to action. A growing number of ground-level efforts aim to redesign existing high schools and create new school designs. Often sparked by the need to help students pass high school graduation exams or by the support of committed foundations, superintendents, principals and teachers are pioneering these initiatives. New high schools in these communities are providing rigorous courses for all students. They also are offering education options that make instruction relevant for students with different interests and learning styles and help them forge positive relationships with adults who can help guide their learning.¹⁰

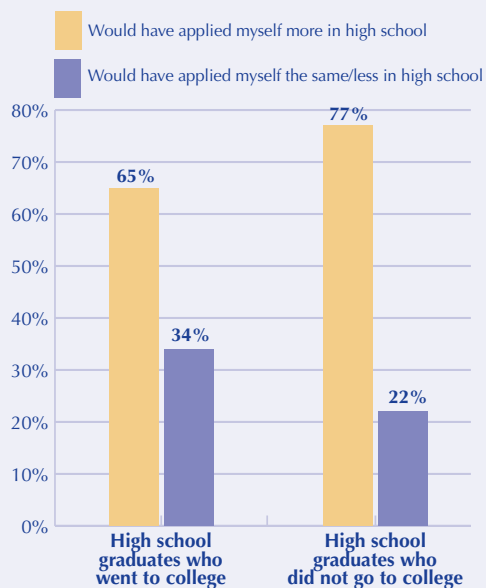
These nascent high school restructuring efforts by local educators are very encouraging because improvements in teaching and learning must be made by those closest to students and supported by parents and communities. Yet America's high schools cannot be transformed one at a time.

Governors, business leaders and education officials must ensure *all* high schools facilitate *all* students' successful transition to postsecondary education and the workforce. Governors are in a strong position to coordinate the efforts of multiple state

agencies with responsibility for elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. They must bring together business leaders, state officials and local educators to chart a new path for high schools and high school students. Governors also must forcefully communicate to students, schools and the public the need for high standards so there is sufficient will and commitment for the changes that have to be made.

Business leaders have a particularly important role to play. They must be a strong and consistent voice for reform. They can communicate to parents, students, their employees and the public the skills and knowledge it takes to succeed in the new economy and insist states assess whether students possess the requisite skills and knowledge. They also need to encourage states to collect and report

Knowing What They Know Today, High School Graduates Would Have Worked Harder



Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* prepared for Achieve, Inc., 2005.

An Agenda for Action

To ensure that all high school graduates are prepared for post-secondary education and work, governors and business and education leaders must develop a comprehensive plan for their states to:

- Restore value to the high school diploma by revising academic standards, upgrading curricula and coursework, and developing assessments that align with the expectations of college and the workplace.
- Redesign the American high school to provide all students with the higher-level knowledge and skills, educational options, and support they must have to succeed.
- Give high school students the excellent teachers and principals they need by ensuring teachers and principals have the necessary knowledge and skills and by offering incentives to attract and retain the best and brightest to the neediest schools and subjects.
- Hold high schools and colleges accountable for student success by setting meaningful benchmarks, intervening in low-performing schools and demanding increased accountability of postsecondary institutions.
- Streamline educational governance so that the K–12 and post-secondary systems work more closely together.

data on the performance of each high school, so successful schools are recognized and unsuccessful ones receive the help they need.

The agenda for action is ambitious. All students who start high school must graduate with the skills and knowledge they need for college and work. This will necessitate upgrading the requirements for earning a diploma, changing how high schools are structured, providing all students with access to effective teachers and principals, collecting better data to measure progress, holding high schools and post-secondary institutions accountable for results, and streamlining and improving education governance.

Our failure to ensure students' readiness for post-secondary education and the labor market threatens to slow American productivity, lower our standard of living, and widen the gulf between rich and poor. We must heed the call to action. The lessons from past decades of education reform and more recent efforts to improve high schools provide a clear roadmap for moving forward.

Restore Value to the High School Diploma

In every state today, students can meet the requirements for high school graduation and still be unprepared for success in college or the workplace. Simply put, our standards have not kept pace with the world students are entering after high school.

To restore value to the high school diploma, governors, legislators and state education leaders need to raise standards for all students and tie high school graduation tests and requirements to the expectations of colleges and employers. Colleges and employers must then honor and reward student achievement on state tests through their admissions, placement and hiring policies. This will send a powerful signal to students that it pays to meet higher standards in high school.

■ ANCHOR HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIC STANDARDS IN THE REAL WORLD

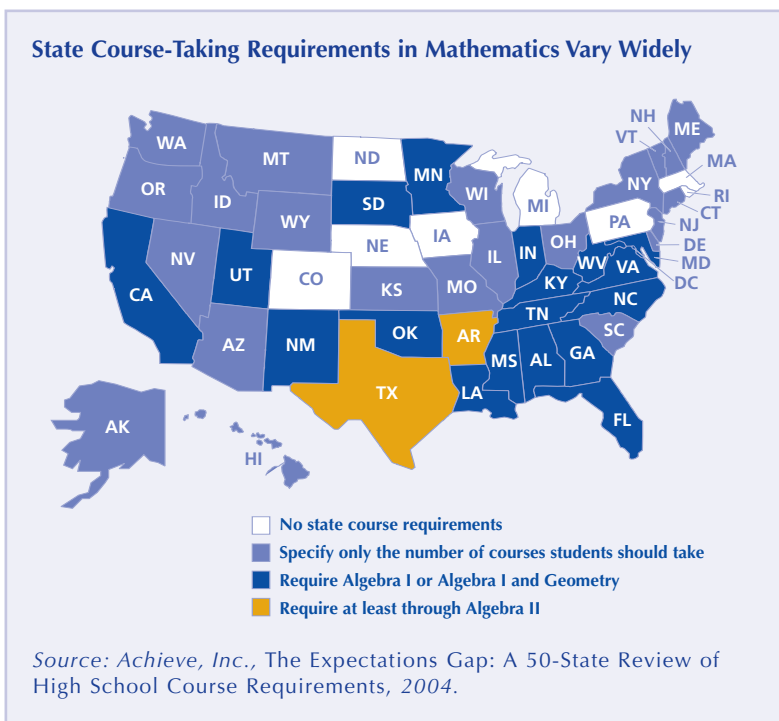
Although every state has academic standards for students to meet in high school, very few have successfully connected those standards to the requirements for success in college and the workplace.¹¹ Some state high school standards top out at 10th grade skills and knowledge. In states that have set standards higher, often those standards have not led to meaningful changes in courses, tests or graduation requirements.

Parents, students, employers, colleges and universities, and the public should demand more from our high schools. Governors and state education leaders must ensure their states' high school standards reflect a new understanding of the skills and knowledge students need to be successful when they leave high school. They also should ensure that the standards lead to meaningful changes in

the courses students take, the content taught and tested, and the requirements for graduation. Further, it is imperative that elementary- and middle-grade standards and coursework adequately prepare students for the new high school expectations. Postsecondary leaders and the business community should work with K–12 educators to verify that the high school standards reflect the skills and knowledge high school graduates need to succeed in entry-level, well-paying jobs and credit-bearing courses at any college or university.

■ UPGRADE HIGH SCHOOL COURSEWORK

Governors, legislatures and state boards of education should require all students to complete a common set of high school courses that will provide them with the skills and knowledge they need for college and work. State leaders also must specify the core content that should be taught in these



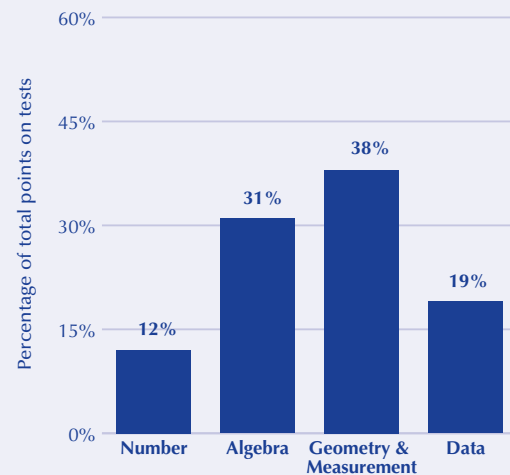
courses while giving schools and teachers the flexibility to teach in ways that engage students and match their learning styles. At a minimum, course requirements for graduation need to include four years of rigorous English and a math curriculum that teaches the competencies of Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, and data analysis and statistics.

Arkansas and Texas are examples of states that are demanding rigorous high school courses across the board. All students in these states will be automatically enrolled in a college- and work-preparatory curriculum, unless they opt not to participate.¹² In these and other states, there is growing evidence that high expectations make a real difference, particularly for poor and minority students. When the San Jose Unified School District in California required all students to follow the college-preparatory curriculum required for admission to the University of California system, the test scores of its black 11th graders increased nearly seven times as much as those of other black students across the state.¹³

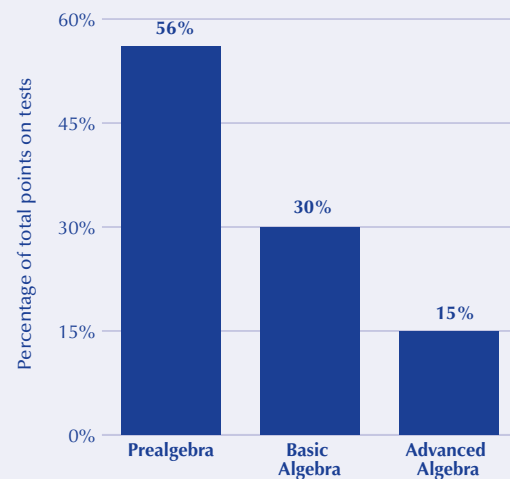
■ CREATE COLLEGE- AND WORK-READY TESTS

The tests that states give to students in high school should measure college- and work-ready skills. This is not the case in most states today. High school tests typically measure 8th, 9th and 10th grade skills — only a subset of the skills that students will ultimately need.¹⁴ The result is colleges and employers pay little attention to state test results, inadvertently sending a signal to students and parents that students' performance on those tests does not matter in the real world.

High School Graduation Tests Have Gone from Emphasizing Arithmetic to Emphasizing Algebra and Geometry ...



... But the Tests Are Tilted Heavily Toward Low-Level Skills, Not What Is Required in College and Work



Source: Achieve, Inc., Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams, 2004.

State K–12 and postsecondary education leaders must jointly develop better tests that provide schools, students and employers with information about how prepared students are for college and work. For example, Texas uses the same test — but different scores — for high school graduation and college placement. The California State University system worked with the elementary and secondary education system to add college readiness questions to the state’s 11th grade test. Michigan just voted to replace its high school exam with a college-ready test.

Some states are beginning to pull together coursework, testing and graduation requirements. In Indiana, for example, business and education leaders have recommended that all high school students complete the “Core 40” college and work readiness curriculum, beginning with the class of 2011. The state’s end-of-course exams will tell students, parents, colleges and employers that students have met the Core 40 standard. The business and education leaders also have called for the state’s colleges and universities to use students’ test scores for admissions and financial aid decisions.

Redesign High Schools

Governors, state and local officials, business leaders, and educators must act now to bring the American high school into the 21st century. It is no longer acceptable for high schools to prepare only some students for college and work. That must be the goal for all students. This will require more rigorous coursework and tests that measure college and work readiness. It also will require restructuring high schools that may be too impersonal, inflexible and alienating for some young people, particularly those who need extra academic and social supports to catch up and succeed.

American high schools typically track some students into a rigorous college-preparatory program, others into vocational programs with a less-rigorous curriculum and still others into a general track. Today, all students need to learn the rigorous content traditionally reserved for college-bound students, particularly in math and English. High schools can still provide different programs, including vocational programs and specialized programs in areas such as finance, health sciences and the arts. These programs can appeal to students' varied interests and learning styles while teaching them the same core content.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for the high schools we need. In some communities, large comprehensive high schools already offer rigorous college- and work-ready courses. In other locations, large high schools need to be broken up into small learning communities. These "schools-within-schools" can organize the instructional program around different themes, such as arts, law enforcement and international studies, and provide students with internships or other oppor-

tunities to apply what they learn in school. In still other cases, local communities need to create new small high schools, each with a particular theme and instructional philosophy.

States should support different high school design approaches, but all high schools must share a common goal to prepare all students for successful transitions to careers, college and citizenship. Although state leaders can promote the development and replication of new and innovative high school models, local education officials, principals and teachers will be the ones to bring these redesigned schools to life. Business leaders can help by recognizing schools that are succeeding and by convening educators to learn from those schools. They also can share their expertise and experience in improving the performance of complex organizations.

■ REORGANIZE LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS FIRST

Not every high school needs to be redesigned. The need for change is greatest in schools that are failing to educate most of their students up to even minimal standards. Schools in some communities are experiencing dropout rates of nearly 50 percent, and few of the students who manage to graduate are successful in college and careers. These are schools in crisis, and state and local officials must make it a priority to intervene in and reorganize them.

Texas sponsors a \$38-million competitive grant program to spur its lowest-performing high schools to offer different education options. For example, the state encourages these high schools

to restructure into early college high schools, which give students an opportunity to improve their basic skills, take college-preparatory and college-level courses, and graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree — all in five years. The state also provides \$21 million for schools adopting comprehensive schoolwide reform strategies based on the proven practices of high-performing schools that serve similar students. Another \$5 million is set aside for schools working to reduce high school dropout rates.

■ EXPAND HIGH SCHOOL OPTIONS IN ALL COMMUNITIES

Chronically low-performing high schools must be states' top priority, but they are not the only schools that need attention. Governors and legislators should provide incentives for all communities to expand the supply of high-quality high schools available to students. For example, states can create more options by supporting charter school laws and state finance policies, such as an innovations fund, that encourage the creation of new schools, especially in communities where they are needed most.

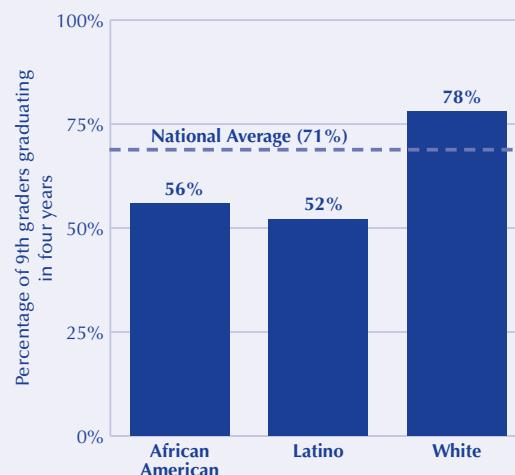
To help prepare students for college, governors, state education officials and college presidents can provide opportunities for students to take college-level classes and earn college credit while in high school. State policy also can support students who want to begin working toward industry-recognized certification while still in high school. Further, governors and higher education leaders can help finance new types of high schools that accelerate

learning, such as the early colleges being created in North Carolina, Texas and Utah. Parents and communities need to insist that enough options exist to meet student demand. The principals of these new schools should be afforded more authority to manage budgets and make hiring decisions, and teachers must be given more time to collaborate with one another to improve teaching and learning.

■ PROVIDE SUPPORT TO LOW-PERFORMING STUDENTS

There are students in every community — urban, rural and suburban — whose needs are not being met adequately by their high schools. States have a special responsibility to ensure that students at risk of failure receive the help they need no matter what kind of high school they attend.

Too Few Students Graduate High School, Especially Minority Students



Source: Jay P. Greene, Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates, 1991–2002, 2005.

Schools should be encouraged to target time and resources to low-performing students during the school day by adopting intensive assistance strategies, such as double class periods in English and math for struggling students. States and local districts must provide the resources necessary to ensure every student who needs extra help has access to after-school tutoring and summer school programs. Low-achieving students should be encouraged to take more challenging courses, and schools should provide them with the time and attention they need to help them succeed. State and local leaders also need to ensure teachers get additional training in strategies for helping struggling students master the basic math and

literacy skills they require to move to higher-level coursework.

Schools should develop individual learning plans for at-risk students. These plans map out the coursework a student needs to complete during high school to make a successful transition to college or work. Schools also can use the plans to help steer students to courses, activities and adult relationships that help them connect what they are learning in school with their individual interests outside school, such as a job, hobby or future career. All students also need access to after-school activities sponsored by schools and community-based organizations that promote healthy youth development.

Give High School Students the Excellent Teachers and Principals They Need

State and local education leaders must do a better job of recruiting and preparing outstanding teachers and principals and deploying them to the schools where they are most needed. Effective teachers and principals are critical to helping all students meet higher standards and leave high school ready for college and work.

■ IMPROVE TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

As states raise standards for students, they need to help teachers upgrade their skills and knowledge in the subjects they teach. For example, if all students are expected to take four years of mathematics at a level that will ensure college and work readiness, high school teachers will need advanced knowledge of higher-level math and strategies for teaching it to a diverse group of students. Attention also must be focused on how high school teachers can be better trained to help high school students with low-level reading skills.

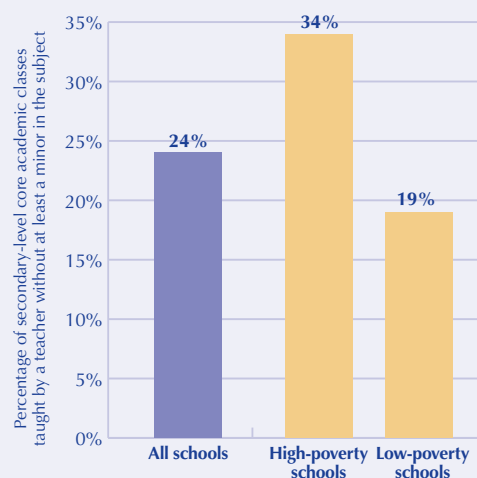
State elementary, secondary and postsecondary education leaders need to work together to establish clear standards for the skills and knowledge high school teachers require in their subjects to help prepare students for higher education and the workplace. States that already have teacher knowledge standards should review them to ensure they reflect a new understanding of what students must learn to be college- and work-ready. They can start by upgrading the content knowledge requirements for math and science teachers.

State leaders also will have to change the requirements for a teaching license to better reflect the new standards. In addition, they will need to craft

more effective assessments and evaluation tools to measure how well teachers have developed the requisite skills and knowledge.

Higher education leaders should redesign teacher preparation programs so they reflect the new teacher standards. These programs also must better prepare high school teachers to help struggling readers and teach college- and work-preparatory courses to all students. State officials should give teacher preparation providers the flexibility to design their programs — both traditional programs for college undergraduates and alternate-route programs for college graduates and middle-age career changers — in different ways and hold them accountable for producing a supply of well-prepared teachers in the subjects and for the schools in which they are needed most.

Classes in High-Poverty High Schools Are Much More Likely To Have Out-of-Field Teachers



Source: Craig D. Jerald and Richard M. Ingersoll, *All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching*, 2002.

States need to reconsider how they allocate their professional development dollars and insist these funds be spent only on teacher training opportunities that are tied to the higher-level content high school teachers must teach and the more rigorous curriculum high school students must learn.

District leaders must redesign professional development opportunities for high school teachers to address teacher and student learning needs, including providing training for teachers on how to use test data to change their teaching and address student weaknesses. States and districts should monitor professional development investments to ensure they produce improvements in student achievement.

■ **PROVIDE INCENTIVES TO RECRUIT AND KEEP TEACHERS WHERE THEY ARE NEEDED MOST**

Students in high-poverty and low-performing high schools are much more likely than students in low-poverty and high-performing high schools to have the least-experienced and least-qualified teachers. Classes in high-poverty secondary schools are 77 percent more likely than those in low-poverty secondary schools to be assigned “out-of-field” teachers who do not have at least a minor in the subjects they are teaching.¹⁵ States must make closing the teacher qualifications gap in these schools a top priority, and they also need to address the critical shortages of qualified teachers in subjects such as math, science and special education that exist in many schools.

Governors and state leaders should target recruitment and retention incentives to teachers in greatest demand. States can create an alternate-route

preparation program to help nontraditional prospective teachers receive training and a license to teach. Such a program could target experienced mathematicians and scientists who are interested in switching to a teaching career and who already have an undergraduate degree in the subject they want to teach. An alternate-route program also could help classroom aides working in urban, low-performing high schools attain a bachelor’s degree, receive teacher training and earn a license.

State leaders should provide incentives for colleges and universities to produce more teachers in subjects with critical shortages and increase the placement and retention of their graduates in the neediest schools. For example, Louisiana has created a new approval system for its teacher education programs based on performance indicators. The system will eventually include measures of quality as well as growth in the number of graduates entering critical shortage subject areas and working in districts that are chronically hard to staff. Retention rates of graduates after three years also will be measured.

Scholarships, loan forgiveness and extra compensation can encourage teachers to fill positions in subjects or high schools with critical shortages. Mississippi offers a range of monetary incentives to encourage teachers to teach in schools and subjects with critical shortages. Basing pay on factors such as a willingness to teach in high-need schools or high-demand subjects, rather than solely on years of experience and level of education, can be an effective recruitment strategy.

High turnover rates of nearly 50 percent among new teachers in high-poverty schools leave these schools with a revolving supply of novice teachers who lack the skills and experience to help students succeed.¹⁶ To keep teachers in these low-performing high schools, state and local leaders need to improve working conditions by providing strong principal leadership, mentoring and support for new teachers, and time for teacher collaboration. Smaller, redesigned high schools have a track record of creating the kind of safe, collaborative working environment where teachers want to stay and teach. North Carolina has surveyed teachers about working conditions, and the state is using the information to address teacher concerns and better retain teachers where they are needed most.

■ DEVELOP AND SUPPORT STRONG PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

State and local education leaders must work together to clearly define the role of the high school principal and create the conditions that enable principals to be successful. The primary responsibility of the high school principal is to serve as the school's instructional leader. Other administrators should handle responsibilities that are less central to the school's core academic mission.

Principals must be given the authority to make school-level personnel and budgeting decisions, and they must be held accountable for results, such as improved student achievement, increased attendance, reduced truancy, higher graduation

rates and better staff retention. State and local leaders need to consider changes in principal compensation that include bonuses or performance pay for meeting improvement goals.

Leaders from K–12 and postsecondary education should work together to redesign principal training programs to help principals be effective leaders of redesigned high schools. All principal training programs must include in-school clinical opportunities for observing effective principals and gaining on-the-job experience. Like teachers, principals need better training on how to manage and use data, including how to use test data to change course content and target teaching to address student weaknesses. State leaders should consider alternate-route training for principals to help attract non-traditional candidates and provide options for completing principal training that are different from traditional programs in university schools of education. Members of the business community can support improved training and preparation of school leaders by sharing their expertise about leadership development and helping apply it to the development of education leaders.

Governors and state education leaders also should change licensure requirements to ensure prospective principals have the skills required to be successful. This may necessitate moving to a more performance-based credentialing system.

State and local education leaders must ensure the salaries for high school principals are sufficient to

attract quality candidates. They also need to target recruitment incentives to attract minority candidates to the principalship and persuade effective principals to work in low-performing schools where they are needed most. District leaders can create programs to identify potential future leaders from among the teaching ranks and help those candidates enter principal training programs. Delaware, for example, has an aspiring leaders academy that aims to identify potential future leaders.

Set Goals, Measure Progress, and Hold High Schools and Colleges Accountable

During the past 15 years, state and federal education policies have focused primarily on elementary and middle schools and have contributed significantly to achievement gains at those levels. For the needed changes in high schools to occur, state leaders must now set goals for improvement, measure progress, and hold high schools and postsecondary institutions accountable for student success.

■ SET GOALS AND MEASURE PROGRESS

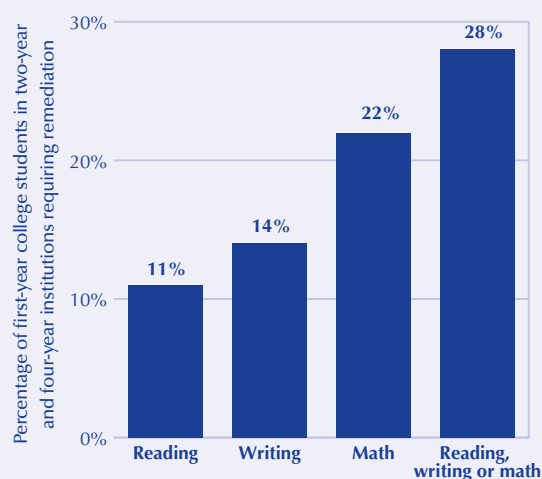
Governors, business leaders, and secondary and postsecondary educators and officials need to work together to set measurable goals for improving the performance of high schools and colleges and universities. Those goals should include raising high school graduation rates, increasing the percentage of students who are prepared for college and work, and improving postsecondary enrollment and completion rates.

To accomplish these goals, states need to dramatically improve their ability to collect, coordinate and use secondary and postsecondary data. Few states have data systems that can gauge how well high schools prepare students for college and work. Only nine states collect student-level high school course completion information from transcripts, and just six states collect the results of SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams. Fewer than 10 states have data linking K–12 student records with college enrollment, and only eight states make information about student remediation in college available.¹⁷

Florida is among the few states that have created a unified data system to enable combining information on the performance of students in high

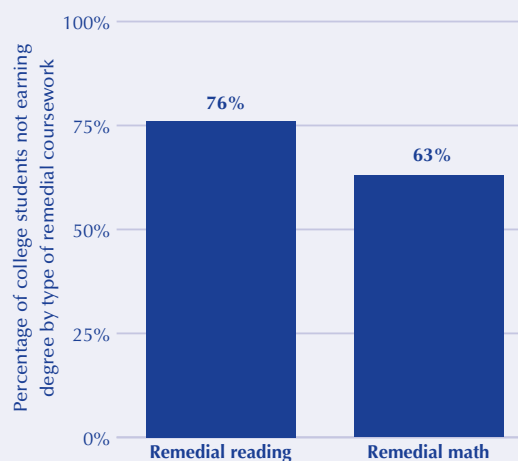
school with data on their performance in postsecondary education. Kentucky is moving down a similar path, setting clear statewide targets and building a stronger data system. Since the state

Many College Students Require Remediation ...



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000, 2003.

... And Those Who Do Often Fail To Earn a Degree



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education 2004, 2004.

started measuring college readiness several years ago, college-level course taking has increased 350 percent.¹⁸

■ STRENGTHEN HIGH SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The mission of high schools is to prepare all students for college, careers and citizenship. The state education accountability system should be consistent with that mission. High schools must be held accountable for increasing the percentage of incoming 9th graders who graduate ready for college and work. States should collect and report performance data for low-income and minority students to ensure all student groups are making adequate progress.

To better judge the adequacy of each school's performance, states need to use multiple indicators, including test scores, high school graduation rates, the percentage of graduates who enroll in college and/or earn an industry-recognized skill credential, and the percentage of graduates who need remediation after enrolling in two- or four-year colleges. In addition to using existing high school tests, states should develop better measures of college and work readiness, including value-added assessments that measure student progress over time. Several states, including Minnesota, Ohio and Tennessee, have committed to using such tests to gauge year-to-year student progress.

Postsecondary institutions have a role to play in high school accountability, too. Students who get into college but need remediation in math, reading or writing are not college-ready. Two- and four-year colleges should be required to keep track of the incoming students from each high school who

need remedial courses and to share that information and work with the high schools to make changes in course content and instruction. State officials also can use the college remediation data to hold high schools accountable.

State leaders should ensure the data on high schools are user-friendly and publicly accessible. In Colorado, online report cards provide information about college readiness and enable parents and the public to compare individual schools — by student achievement; student-to-staff ratios; and other characteristics, such as whether after-school programs are offered. Several organizations, including Standard & Poor's and the National Center for Educational Accountability, have developed Web sites that enable parents to compare schools within and across states. This information should become more focused on the success of each high school in preparing students for college, work and citizenship.

■ INTERVENE IN LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS

Measuring and reporting the percentage of students in each high school who graduate college- and work-ready are important first steps. An effective accountability system also must include consequences for schools that fail to improve on their own. States and local school districts should work together to ensure every struggling school receives appropriate help.

Once the low-performing high schools are identified, states and districts must then assess the strengths and weaknesses of each one before determining the right assistance. Some schools-

United States Trails Most Countries in High School Graduation Rate

	OECD Member Countries	Graduation Rate (%)
1.	Denmark	100
2.	Norway	97
3.	Germany	93
4.	Japan	92
5.	Poland	90
5.	Switzerland	90
7.	Finland	85
7.	Greece	85
9.	France	82
9.	Hungary	82
9.	Italy	82
12.	Czech Republic	81
13.	Belgium	79
13.	Iceland	79
15.	Ireland	77
16.	United States	73
17.	Sweden	72
18.	Luxembourg	68
18.	Spain	68
20.	Slovak Republic	61

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Education at a Glance 2004, 2004.

may have weaknesses in specific subjects, or with particular subgroups of students, while otherwise performing at acceptable levels. Targeted assistance, such as upgraded curricula, teacher training

and changes in how students are assigned to courses of study, may be sufficient to improve their performance.

Particularly in high-poverty urban communities, however, there are schools with high dropout rates, persistently low academic achievement, and low expectations for staff and students. In these schools, highly focused assistance is not enough to improve student performance as quickly as is necessary. State and local school boards need to close these schools and replace them with proven models of redesigned high schools. These new schools could be several small schools, each with a distinctive design, philosophy and instructional approach. Students and personnel should be given a choice about which new school they attend or staff. The new schools must be open to all students who want to attend, up to a size limit, and they need the flexibility and resources to recruit and hire effective teachers and principals who are committed to the school's design and philosophy.

Boston and Chicago have moved aggressively during the past five years to close their lowest-performing high schools and open smaller schools in their places. These new schools have new management, new curriculum and new teacher supports and a more intensive focus on literacy, personal attention, and parent and community involvement. Boston is committed to giving 30 percent of its high school students a redesigned, better high school by 2007.

■ STRENGTHEN POSTSECONDARY ACCOUNTABILITY

The nation's colleges and universities are more integral to our democracy and our economy than

ever before. Although the United States has one of the highest college enrollment rates in the world, our college graduation rate is average to below-average among developed countries.¹⁹ In addition, scientists, engineers and mathematicians from countries such as China and India are quickly outpacing the supply of these professionals who are graduating from our universities.²⁰

Governors and business leaders must insist that colleges and universities pay more attention to their dropout problem. One out of every four students who enroll in a four-year college and nearly half of all community college students fail to return after the first year.²¹ Every postsecondary institution should be required to publicly report how many entering students are enrolled in remedial courses, how many drop out after their first year of college and how many ultimately complete a degree. Governors and legislators should provide financial incentives to colleges and universities that show progress on improving completion rates and that graduate more students with the credentials needed in growing jobs and industries, as occurs effectively in Florida and Tennessee.²²

Governors and legislators should provide financial incentives for higher education leaders to work with local education officials and high school faculty to improve college readiness by helping to strengthen the curriculum, validate graduation standards, assess college readiness and facilitate students' earning college credit while in high school. In Kentucky and Oklahoma, for example, a statewide report card tracks how well colleges,

individually and collectively, improve college readiness. A portion of state funding is based on campus' efforts.

U.S. College Graduation Rate Below Average among Developed Countries

	OECD Member Countries	Graduation Rate (%)
1.	Japan	94
2.	Turkey	88
3.	Ireland	85
4.	United Kingdom	83
5.	Korea	79
6.	Spain	77
7.	Finland	75
8.	Iceland	73
9.	Germany	70
10.	Mexico	69
10.	Australia	69
10.	Denmark	69
10.	Netherlands	69
14.	United States	66
15.	Czech Republic	61
16.	Belgium (Fl.)	60
17.	Austria	59
17.	France	59
19.	Sweden	48
20.	Italy	42

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2004, 2004*.

Streamline and Improve Education Governance

None of these strategies for improving the performance of America's high schools will take root if the public education system cannot be made to function more cohesively. In almost every state, the K–12 and postsecondary education sectors are governed, financed and operated independently, and they are often overseen by different boards or legislative committees. Further, oversight of higher education can be highly decentralized, making it very difficult to get institutions to convey uniform messages about college-readiness to parents and high school leaders, teachers and students.

The public recognizes that education policy decisions are made separately by statewide K–12 and higher education governing boards. In a 2003 public opinion survey of 1,000 Americans, more than half

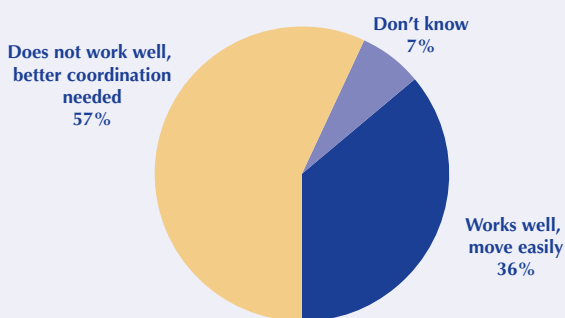
agreed “the system does not work well and better coordination is needed to help students go from high school to college and succeed once they are there.”²³

Governors, legislators and business leaders must act now to make elementary, secondary and postsecondary education work more closely together. At a minimum, states should set up a permanent statewide commission or roundtable to frame a common education agenda and track progress, as Indiana has done. Employers' participation on the Indiana Roundtable has helped break down turf battles and kept the elementary, secondary and postsecondary education sectors focused on the state's most pressing education needs. Alternatively, states could develop a single education governing board and state education agency with authority over early childhood, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. To date, Florida is the only state to try this governance approach.

State leaders must not allow the fragmented governance of higher education to get in the way of better coordination across the K–12 and postsecondary sectors. States such as Georgia, Kentucky and North Carolina have addressed this challenge by establishing strong, central higher education governing or coordinating boards to influence the decisionmaking of individual institutions. As a result, these states have made significant progress on improving students' transition from high school to higher education.²⁴

Many Americans Believe Better Transitions Are Needed between K–12 and Higher Education

How well does the transition work for high school students who want to go to college?



Source: Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Leaks in the Postsecondary Pipeline: A Survey of Americans, 2003.

A Call to Action

This action agenda to ensure the readiness of our high school students for college, work and citizenship is ambitious, but the need for action has never been more clear or urgent. Governors and state leaders can neither implement all of the ideas overnight nor change the education system on their own. The business community must be a strong advocate for needed reforms and a consistent supporter of the education and political leaders who are implementing them. Parents and taxpayers must continue to demand change. Postsecondary education leaders also must get more involved. Most important, local education officials and the teachers and principals who work in our high schools must rise to the challenge and help lead the way.

We must not let the difficulty of the task sway us from taking the right course. We owe it to our youth and our nation to redesign the American high school and make it a cutting-edge institution once again. The future health of our economy and democracy depends on our answering this call to action.

■ Notes

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■ **ACHIEVE, INC.**

Created by the nation's governors and business leaders, Achieve, Inc., is a bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship.

Achieve has helped nearly half the states benchmark their standards and tests against the best examples in the United States and abroad. Through the American Diploma Project, Achieve also has developed benchmark standards that describe the specific math and English skills high school graduates must have if they are to succeed in postsecondary education and high-performance jobs, and Achieve works with states to incorporate these expectations in state standards and assessments for high schools. Achieve serves as a significant national voice for quality in standards-based reform and regularly convenes governors, CEOs and other influential leaders to sustain support for higher standards and achievement for all of America's schoolchildren.

Achieve was founded at the 1996 National Education Summit and has sponsored subsequent Summits in 1999, 2001 and 2005.

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The National Governors Association (NGA) and the Center for Best Practices are the collective voice of the nation's governors and together are one of Washington, D.C.'s, most respected public policy organizations. NGA provides governors and their senior staff members with services ranging from representing states on Capitol Hill and before the administration on key federal issues to developing policy reports on innovative state programs and hosting seminars for state government executive branch officials.

In September 2004, NGA Chairman Virginia Governor Mark R. Warner launched a yearlong initiative, "Redesigning the American High School," intended to spur states to enact tangible systemwide reforms of high schools. NGA believes strongly that these reforms will allow every student to graduate better prepared for either college or a successful career.

NGA was founded in 1908, and its membership includes governors of all 50 states; the territories of American Samoa, Guam and the Virgin Islands; and the commonwealths of the Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico.



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