Why Are High Expectations of All Students Essential?

The vast majority of American high school students say they want to attend college in order to pursue rewarding careers. Of students responding to the 2005 High School Survey of Student Engagement, 83 percent indicated that they expected to go to college.\(^1\) Despite high student aspirations, however, large achievement gaps persist among students by income and race/ethnicity. Only about 52 percent of African-American and 56 percent of Hispanic students graduate from high school on time, as compared to 76 percent of their white peers.\(^2\) Moreover, just 47 percent of recent high school graduates from the bottom income quartile (up to $36,174) go to college, compared to 85 percent of students from the top income quartile (more than $96,000).\(^3\)

Chronic achievement gaps arise in part from the differing academic expectations that many public schools traditionally held for more affluent populations and white students, as compared to low-income and minority students. Just as some students were routinely placed on a college-prep track, others were shunted into a less demanding, “general” curriculum. This latter group has expected to earn a diploma and enter the workforce right after high school.

While there once was a time when a high school diploma was sufficient for obtaining a skilled job and earning a livable wage, increasingly that is no longer the case. Today, about 67% of new jobs require at least some postsecondary education—and that percentage will continue to rise.\(^4\) In order to compete in today’s knowledge-based workplace, all students...
must have the option to pursue postsecondary education. It is sobering to note that the United States has the greatest income disparity of all economically-advanced countries. This great divide between haves and have-nots will only be narrowed by ensuring that the education necessary to participate in a 21st century global economy is attained by all Americans.

**Toward a Culture of High Expectations**

Education leaders must champion a compelling vision of high expectations within their states, districts, schools, and communities. Teachers, counselors, parents, and community stakeholders alike must believe that all students are capable of achieving at high levels and that all must be prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and work.

On the front line of implementing high expectations for all students are classroom teachers and guidance staff who share this vision and are committed to achieving equitable learning outcomes for every student, especially those from underserved populations. It is critical that all school staff embrace students’ cultural differences and diverse learning styles as assets to the learning process, not impediments to rigorous preparation.

Research provides compelling evidence that when children of color are given a challenging academic curriculum and supported by high expectations, they can and do achieve at high levels. Students who take more rigorous academic programs enroll and persist in higher education at higher rates than students who take less challenging programs of study: this effect is especially significant for African-American and Latino students.

To help narrow achievement gaps, states and school districts should adopt informed policies that require a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum as the “default option” for all students. In Texas and Indiana, for example, all high school students are automatically enrolled in a college-prep curriculum unless they formally opt out with parental consent. This demonstration of high expectations, tangibly embedded in policy and practice, will motivate students to achieve academically and help create a culture of college-going within schools.

An important corollary to high expectations and rigorous preparation is the provision of academic and social support systems for students who begin high school poorly prepared for rigorous academic work. Underpinning each of these is systematic use of student performance data, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability status—in order to continuously improve student outcomes.
What Actions Can We Take Now?

States/District Policymakers

- Make the completion of a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum a high school graduation requirement for all students.
- Hold schools publicly accountable for closing achievement gaps by income and race/ethnicity.
- Provide schools which have large underserved student populations the resources and support required to address achievement gaps.
- Ensure that underserved students are taught by highly qualified, experienced teachers.

Principals/Teachers/Counselors

- Expect that all students are capable of being prepared to enroll and succeed in college.
- Provide all students with rigorous coursework along with the academic and social support they need to succeed.
- Collect and disaggregate student data by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability status to identify achievement gaps.
- Provide staff with professional development opportunities that address value and belief systems that perpetuate lower expectations for underserved students.
Learn More:

To find these and other resources, search the online PCN Library at http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ListTopics.aspx

- Adolescence: Are Parents Relevant to Students’ High School Achievement and Postsecondary Attainment (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1158)

- Challenging the Myths: Rethinking the Role of School Counselors (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=249)


References