

A Statewide Network Promoting
College Readiness, Access and
Success

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



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Toward a College Preparatory High School Curriculum in Florida

By Jayesh D'Souza and Paul Dosal

Although recently released FCAT data suggest that Florida's students are making substantial academic progress, the rise in FCAT scores alone does not necessarily indicate that Florida's high schools are doing a better job of preparing students for college. The test is useful for K-12 school accountability and measuring academic performance for grades 3 through 10, but alone it fails to reveal the extent to which high school graduates are prepared to enter and succeed in college. Fortunately, with both the leadership of Sen. Don Gaetz and the passage of SB 1908, Designation of High School Grades, Florida has adopted a more comprehensive measurement of high school performance that includes factors that reflect college readiness. Beginning in the 2009-2010 school year, a part of a high school's grade will be determined by the postsecondary readiness of students as measured by the SAT, ACT, or the Common Placement Test, as well as student participation in and passage of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses and exams.¹

By holding high schools accountable for preparing their students for college, policy makers and educators obviously expect significant improvements in the college readiness of all high school graduates. Unfortunately, today's statistics indicate that Florida's high schools are not doing an adequate job preparing our students for college-level work. A study conducted by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) in 2006 revealed that "78% of students enrolling at Florida's community colleges and 10% of students enrolling at the state's public universities required remediation in mathematics, reading, and/or writing." In these difficult budget times, the state of Florida simply can not afford to pay for students

¹ See "Three Positive Results for Education Despite a Terrible Budget," Enlace Florida Policy Research Brief, Vol. 2, Issue 5 (May 2008). Go to www.enlaceflorida.org

to learn in the community colleges what they should have learned in high school. According to the same OPPAGA report, “the cost of remediation courses taken by students was \$118.3 million during 2004-05 (the most recent data available), with the state paying 53% (\$62.9 million) of this amount.”²

While there are signs of progress in FCAT scores and the National Assessment of Educational Progress³ (the Nation’s Report Card), the record shows that we are not gaining ground in the area of college readiness. In fact, OPPAGA noted that college “remediation rates have improved little since 1997.³ This is likely because the general focus of most of Florida’s educational improvement initiatives has been on improving educational outcomes in the K-12 system and not specifically on improving college readiness.”⁴

Fortunately, there are remedies at hand, but they will require a concerted effort on the part of all parties involved, including policy makers, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents—all of whom bear some responsibility for our schools’ inability to graduate more students who are ready to succeed in college. We must all demand more of ourselves. We must also demand and deliver a high school curriculum that guarantees that our students are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education or a career. Florida needs a high school curriculum that is more rigorous and relevant; Florida’s high school students deserve a true college prep curriculum.

The National Movement toward a College Prep Curriculum

In the last three years, at least 15 states have passed legislation imposing higher graduation requirements to a level that enables all students to be prepared to enter and succeed in college or a high-paying job. Another 15 states, many of whom are participating in the American Diploma Project (ADP) of Achieve, Inc., are seriously considering the adoption of a college prep curriculum as the default curriculum for all high school students. According to a report by Achieve, Inc., the link between strong academic preparation in high school and success in college and careers is clearer than it has ever been. Whether high school graduates go directly to college or into the workplace, they need advanced knowledge and skills if they are going to be successful. In fact, what once was considered the ‘college preparation’ level is now the standard that all students need to meet to be successful after high school.”⁵

² Florida Legislature, Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), “Steps Can Be Taken to Reduce Remediation Rates, Report No. 06-40, April 2006: <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/educ/r06-40s.html>

³ For the 2007 State Profile of Florida from the National Center for Education Statistics, go to: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>

⁴ OPPAGA, “Steps Can Be Taken to Reduce Remediation Rates, Report No. 06-40, April 2006: <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/educ/r06-40s.html>.

⁵ “Aligning High School Graduation Requirements with the Real World: A Road Map for States, Achieve Policy Brief, (December 2007), <http://www.achieve.org/node/980>

In April 2008, Florida became the 33rd state to join the ADP Network. Commissioner of Education Eric Smith, appointed by Governor Crist to lead Florida's participation in the ADP, explained that "we want our high schools to help our students dream big. We want to do better. We want all of our students to graduate and to graduate with a meaningful diploma." By signing onto this national initiative, Florida may be on a path leading toward the adoption of a standard high school curriculum that will ensure that all graduates are college- or career-ready. The ADP project is designed to raise high school standards across the country which means that all high school students will be expected to take more rigorous courses. ENLACE FLORIDA enthusiastically endorses Florida's participation in the ADP project and supports the effort to impose higher and more rigorous standards for all high school students.

Florida currently offers its high school students the option of choosing from three different programs of study: Traditional, Accelerated College Prep, or an Accelerated Career Prep Program. The graduation requirements for each of the three programs of study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Florida High School Graduation Requirements

Graduation Requirements For Students Entering Ninth Grade In 2007-2008 School Year and Thereafter			
Subject Area	24-Credit/4-year Traditional Program	18-Credit/3-year College Preparatory Program (Accelerated College Prep)	18-Credit/3-year Career Preparatory Program
English	4 credits	4 credits	4 credits
Mathematics	4 credits (1 of which must be Algebra I or equiv)	3 credits (all of which must be Algebra I or above)	3 credits (1 of which must be Algebra I or equiv)
Science	3 credits	3 credits	3 credits
Social Studies	3 credits	3 credits	3 credits
Foreign Language	Not required for graduation, but required for admission into SUS	2 credits in the same language or demonstrated proficiency in second language	Not Required
Fine Arts	1 credit	Not Required	Not Required
Physical Education	1 credit	Not Required	Not Required
Electives	8 credits, of which:	3 credits	5 credits
Total	24 credits	18 credits	18 credits
State Assessment Requirements	Passing score on Grade 10 FCAT or a concordant standardized test	Passing score on Grade 10 FCAT or a concordant standardized test	Passing score on Grade 10 FCAT or a concordant standardized test
GPA Requirements	Cumulative GPA of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale	Cumulative weighted GPA of 3.5 in college prep courses and at least 3.0 in each of the 18 required credits	Cumulative weighted GPA of 3.0 in career prep courses and at least 2.0 in each of the 18 required credits

Statistics provided by the Florida Department of Education show that most of the high school students in the state graduate with the traditional or standard diploma. Only a small number of students graduate with the 18-credit college prep diploma and even fewer graduate with the 18-credit career prep diploma. Florida does not, in fact, have a true and viable college prep curriculum; it has an accelerated graduation track that appeals only to students who are willing to forego their senior year.

The exact figures are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Graduates At Florida High Schools Based On Diploma Type, 2006-07

	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	ASIAN	AMERICAN INDIAN	MULTI RACIAL
STANDARD	71,575	21,837	25,641	3,954	369	2,062
COLLEGE PREP	64	15	10	5	1	2
CAREER PREP	14	1	4	0	0	0

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2007

In contrast, a number of states have adopted a more rigorous curriculum with the guidance of benchmarks set by the American Diploma Project (ADP). The Texas legislature passed a law in 2001 requiring all students to pursue a college-prep curriculum, which is now the default curriculum. Texas high school students have two options: the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program. The requirements of the Recommended Program include four years of English, three years of science, two years of a foreign language, and three years of mathematics, including Algebra 2. The Distinguished Achievement Program imposes even higher standards, including a third year of a foreign language and the completion of additional options such as a research project. Texas high school students are only allowed to pursue a “minimum” academic plan (which does not include Algebra 2 or a foreign language) if they and their parents specifically request this option.⁶

The Texas legislature established the college-prep curriculum as the default curriculum for all high school students with strong support from the business community. The higher standards would produce more career-ready workers AND reduce the money spent on remedial courses in postsecondary institutions. Moreover, John Stevens, executive director of the Texas Business and Education Coalition, argued that today’s job market requires a strong foundation in math and science. If Texas schools did not produce qualified graduates for these high-end technology jobs, the state would have to recruit them from outside the state.⁷

⁶ Sean Cavanagh Education Week Several States Making College-Prep Courses The Default Curriculum, April 20, 2005: <http://www.ndus.nodak.edu/uploads/document-library/694/4C--SEVERAL-STATES-MAKING-COLLEGE-PREP-COURSES-THE-DEFAULT-CURRICULUM--ED-WEEK.PDF>

⁷ Ibid.

Like Texas, Indiana developed a college prep curriculum with input and support from the private sector. Beginning in the fall of 2007, all Indiana high school students are required to take the state's Core 40 Program, which has been offered on a voluntary basis since 1994. As summarized in Table 3, the Core 40 Program mandates a course of study very similar to the Texas college prep curriculum. Students can only opt-out of the Core 40 program through a formal process requiring parental consent. All high school students are expected to rise to the higher level of expectations. Legislators, like business people, see little difference between the college and career prep tracks that have traditionally divided high school courses of study. "With the loss of manufacturing jobs in Indiana, Representative Greg Porter argued, "students must be ready to go on to college or prepared to enter the workforce with better skills for success."⁸

Table 3: Florida Compared to California, Texas, and Indiana

Comparison of College Preparation Curricula				
Courses	Florida	California A-G Curriculum	Texas*	Indiana**
English	4 Credits	4 years	4 Credits	4 credits
Mathematics	3 credits (one of which must be Algebra I or equivalent)	3 years required; 4 years recommended (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II required)	3 credits (Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry)	3 credits (including Algebra II) All students are required to take a math or physics course during their junior or senior year.
Science	3 credits (2 must have a lab component)	2 years required, 3 years recommended (2 of courses must be Biology, Chemistry, or Physics)	3 credits. Students are encouraged to take courses in biology, chemistry, and physics.	3 credits (including Chemistry I or Physics I)
Social Studies	3 credits	2 years	3.5 credits	3 credits
Economics			0.5	
Foreign Language	Not required, but required for admission into SUS	2 years required, 3 years recommended	2 credits in the same language.	Not required; 3-4 credits required for Academic Honors
Practical Arts/Performing Fine Arts	1 credit	1 years	1 credit (Speech may not substitute.)	Not required; 1 credit required for Academic Honors
Life management Skills	.5 credit			
Physical Education	1 credit		1.5 credits	1 credit
Health Education			0.5 credit	0.5 credits
Speech			0.5 credits	
Technology Applications			1 credit	
Directed Electives				5 credits
Electives	8.5 credits	1 year	3.5	3 credits
TOTAL	24 credits		24	20**
State Assessment Requirements	Passing score on the Grade 10 FCAT or a concordant standardized test		Yes	Graduation Qualifying Examinations
Grade Point Average Requirements	Cumulative GPA of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale			

* College Board advanced placement and International Baccalaureate courses may be substituted for requirements in appropriate areas for all subjects except Speech, Physical Education and Health Education.

**Credits have been changed from the Indiana system of offering 1 credit per semester to the Carnegie unit system, in which 1 course credit is counted for the full year

Some school districts in southern California have also adopted a college prep curriculum as the default curriculum for all high school students. The curriculum, known as the A-G curriculum, consists of 15-required courses (see Table 3). The California State University and University of California systems will only admit students who have completed the A-G curriculum.⁹

In May 2004, California State Superintendent Jack O'Connell introduced four bills before the state's legislative policy committees as part of his High Performing High School proposal package. One of them was State Bill1795, sponsored by Senator Richard Alarcon, which would have made the A-G curriculum the default curriculum throughout the state. Superintendent O'Connell argued that the legislation marked a first step toward making every California high school a high-performing institution. He urged the legislators to support the bill on the grounds that "students who have access to challenging courses, standards-aligned to instructional materials and school leaders who can provide guidance in a rigorous academic environment are more likely to graduate from high school well prepared for college or meaningful career opportunities."¹⁰

The legislators rejected the bill, with opposition coming from a number of groups.¹¹ According to Sara Lundquist, a member of ENLACE California's leadership team, opponents of the A-G default curriculum included career technical institutions as well as the University of California system, which feared that it would not be able to accommodate the potential increase in enrollment. However, individual school districts like Santa Ana, San Jose and more recently, Los Angeles, have adopted the A-G curriculum as the default curriculum. The challenge in these districts, which have higher enrollments of racial and ethnic minorities and limited income students, is to channel more minority students into the college preparatory courses. Although 8 out of 10 high school students in California plan to attend college, only 25% of African American and 22% of Hispanic students complete the A-G curriculum in comparison to 40% of White and 58% of Asian students.¹²

The Costs and Benefits of a College Prep Curriculum

The adoption of the A-G curriculum by some of California's school districts brought about certain challenges. Lundquist, Vice President of Student Services at Santa Ana College, warns that schools that adopt the default curriculum should be pre-

⁸Sunny Deye, "A+ for Rigor," *State Legislatures* (October/November 2006), National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org/programs/pubs/slmag/2006/06SLOctNov06_Rigor.htm

⁹Education Trust-West, "The A-G Curriculum: College-Prep? Work-Prep? Life-Prep," Spring 2004: http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/25B673DE-1D3C-4293-8EBE-855B6E6386EE/0/AG_Guide_2004_final.pdf

¹⁰California Department of Education School Chief Jack O'Connell Announces First Step of Approval for High Performing High School Bill Package, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr04/yr04rel39.asp>

¹¹"Lawmakers Ruin Chance," *Oakland Tribune*, July 7, 2004.

¹²Education Trust-West , "A 21st Century Education For All Students," <http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/ETW/College+Prep.htm#students>

pared for the additional required investment in science laboratories and professional development for teachers. Limited school budgets and teacher shortages initially dampened enthusiasm for the adoption of the A-G curriculum in California. However, in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), 104 additional high school teachers (64 of them in foreign languages) had to be added to teach the new A-G curriculum. The LAUSD employed 36,180 teachers, so the new hires represented only 0.3% of the teaching force. According to the Education Trust-West, the LAUSD had most of the teachers it required to offer the A-G curriculum, but they were not at that moment teaching in the appropriate subject areas. Teachers qualified to teach intermediate algebra and geometry were instead teaching pre-algebra and beginning algebra. “This under-utilization of teachers wastes teacher talent as much as it wastes student talent,” the Education Trust-West concluded.¹³

Assuming that school districts can reallocate existing resources or reassign teachers, the imposition of a college-prep curriculum can increase the high school graduation rate, narrow the achievement gap, and prepare more students for college or the workforce. Students can and often do rise to the level of our expectations. At least one student in the San Jose school district responded positively to the increased rigor and higher standards imposed on high school students there. Ana Castro, then a senior at Pioneer High School in San Jose explained: “I really appreciate how the administration in our school is pushing kids, taking them out of class and talking to them, and explaining to them what needs to get done in order to finish high school. They are expecting a lot of the kids. I think it’s a good thing because it gives them a little pressure to do better in high school especially when you are a minority such as at our school.”¹⁴

For educators and policy makers, the following results of the San Jose school district experiment with the A-G curriculum should compel Florida stakeholders to give the college prep curriculum serious consideration. Between 1998 and 2004 in San Jose:

- The achievement gap between white and Latino students in reading decreased 55%
- The achievement gap between white and Latino students in math decreased 43%
- Pass rates for Latino students in A-G courses increased
- Graduation rate increased from 73% in 1999 to 79% in 2003.¹⁵

¹³ <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/7AAD1563-BE27-4114-B6E2-B34A4AFD45B7/0/LAUSDAG.pdf>

¹⁴ Education Trust-West, “Students Speak Out – Why The A-G Curriculum Is Important To Students,” http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/C2EC1D17-2B43-4241-94DA-454DFEB9CDF6/0/StudentsSpeakOut_Revised2.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid.

The impressive gains in San Jose have been replicated elsewhere. In districts and states that have imposed a college prep curriculum, students, parents, educators, and policy makers initially expressed concerns that the higher standards would lead more students to drop out. Given that 3 out of every 10 students who enter high school in Florida do not graduate, Florida educators should proceed with caution.¹⁶ However, the evidence from Texas and Indiana also shows that the higher standards led, in fact, to HIGHER graduation rates. High school graduation rates in Texas climbed from about 62% in 1994 to 68% in 2003, while the rates in Indiana increased from 70% to 73% during the same time.¹⁷

Further corroboration comes from the ACT, which analyzed nearly 400 U.S. high schools where students have made significant gains in ACT mathematics or science test scores. The ACT found that the increases were associated with a substantial increase in the numbers of students taking more rigorous courses in mathematics and science, namely Algebra II and Chemistry. The ACT concluded that rigorous, college prep courses make a difference, even in high-poverty, high-minority districts. On average, students who took Algebra II improved their ACT Mathematics Test scores 4.2 points (21.6 vs. 17.4), while all ACT-tested students who took Algebra II improved their scores 2.1 points (19.1 vs. 17.0)," the ACT reported.¹⁸

Policy Implications

The ACT report concluded with an alarming assessment of the risks we face: "Students who are not ready for college are less likely to enroll in college, more likely to need remedial coursework during their first year of college, less likely to succeed in their college courses, and less likely to earn a college degree. If we do not raise the rigor of courses, U.S. students are in danger of entering the workforce unprepared for the challenges of competing in a technology-based global economy. If we are unable to maintain and increase U.S. economic competitiveness throughout the world, then not just the graduates themselves but the nation at large will suffer."¹⁹

Florida's decision to join the ADP Network is a wise and necessary step toward the establishment of greater rigor and relevance in the high school curriculum. The risks of inaction are much greater than the costs of moving forward. A comparison of Florida's traditional high school curriculum with the college prep curricula in California, Texas, and Indiana reveals that Florida is not far from having a default college prep curriculum (refer to Table 3). In English, Science, and Social Studies, Florida's requirements are closely aligned with the college prep curriculum advocated by Achieve and the standards applied in California, Texas, and Indiana.

¹⁶ Dave Weber, "Three out of 10 Students who Start High School in Florida won't Finish," *Orlando Sentinel*, May 27, 2008.

¹⁷ "Will Raising High School Graduation Requirements Cause More Students to Drop Out?" Achieve, Inc., <http://www.achieve.org/node/599>

¹⁸ "Rigor at Risk: Reaffirming Quality in the High School Core Curriculum," (May 2007), ACT, <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/rigor.html>

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

The significant curricular differences are in mathematics and foreign languages. Florida does not require Algebra II in its traditional high school program. According to research completed by Achieve, high school students must take four years of challenging mathematics, including Algebra II or its equivalent, to be prepared for success in any postsecondary setting.²⁰ Florida (like Indiana) does not require at least two years of study in the same foreign language, but students must have at least two credits in a foreign language for admission to a state university.

In advocating for college readiness, access, and success for Latino, African American, and other underrepresented students, ENLACE Florida does not expect policy makers to relax their standards or make exceptions for underprivileged students. In fact, ENLACE Florida expects students to welcome the imposition of more rigorous and relevant standards. If we demand more from our students, we are confident that they will deliver more. Based on mounting evidence from several states and school districts involved in or inspired by the American Diploma Project (to which Florida is now committed), ENLACE Florida is confident that the state can convert its traditional high school program into a college prep curriculum at a minimal cost. Students should be allowed to opt out of this curriculum with parental consent, but all students should be expected to graduate from our high schools prepared to enter and succeed in college or the high-technology workplace.

²⁰ Achieve, Inc., "Closing the Expectations Gap," 2008, <http://www.achieve.org/node/990>



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ENLACE FLORIDA is a statewide network funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and managed by NCCEP to promote college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented students through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support.

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