



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS: Every Student at High-Poverty, High-Minority Massachusetts School Accepted to College

Nationwide, two out of three high school freshmen read below grade level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This alarming statistic can be changed; educators know a great deal about how to educate low-performing adolescents to high standards, and many schools are successfully meeting the challenge. On September 14, the Alliance for Excellent Education profiled one such school, the University Park Campus School (UPCS) in Worcester, Massachusetts, as part of its series of forums looking at successful adolescent literacy programs and ways they are improving our nation's high schools.

In 1997, when UPCS opened in Main South, the most economically disadvantaged section of Worcester, most of the students read below grade level, and many dropped out in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. About 65 percent of these students came from homes where no English was spoken, 70 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and 60 percent were students of color. Because of these challenges, Worcester Public Schools partnered with Clark University to create UPCS, a school for the neighborhood's seventh to twelfth graders that would not only help them pass high school proficiency exams and prevent them from dropping out, but also would ensure that each student would be accepted into college. When UPCS graduated its first class six years later, every single student had received a college acceptance letter.

Driven by strong school leadership, UPCS has developed its own unique approach to teaching literacy. Rather than being a ready-made package, the UPCS literacy program has evolved out of numerous staff meetings, reflection on success and failure, and a good dose of trial and error.

An important part of UPCS's success is its August Academy, an intensive monthlong session that focuses on literacy development. During this time, UPCS teachers conduct informal classes where students engage in discussion and analysis of literature. During the school year, students in seventh and eighth grade have block schedules that allow them to spend the maximum amount of time in humanities, math, and science classes. In every class, teachers help students learn not only their subject matter but also the literacy skills required to understand and remember that subject. Even in high school, students' schedules are composed of sixty- and ninety-minute blocks, which allow teachers to monitor and reinforce literacy skills through assignments such as papers, journals, or oral presentations.

One morning a week, the entire faculty, including the principal, meets to analyze student test scores and other work, while students take classes from itinerant district-level staff who teach

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subjects such as physical education and computers. Teachers present informal progress reports on individual students so teachers in all subject areas can assess that student's progress in every class. During weekly meetings, teachers and administrators also discuss general concerns, such as how to better integrate writing into daily lesson plans. Lastly, the principal also supervises an informal mentoring program between newer and veteran teachers.

The only requirement for admission to UPCS is to be a resident of the Main South neighborhood; once students apply, they are chosen by a lottery. UPCS's partnership with Clark University also gives students access to university resources. Students can enroll in Clark classes while they are still in high school, and many Clark students and graduates tutor or teach at UPCS. And since paying for college is the biggest obstacle for many students, Clark University pledges to give any UPCS student who meets its admission requirements a full scholarship for all four years of college.

As of 2004, every student at UPCS has passed the English/language arts section on the MCAS, the state's tenth-grade graduation exams. For the class of 2003, math MCAS scores ranked thirteenth out of more than three hundred schools in the state, and its English/language arts score ranked thirty-fourth. In eight years of operation, only one student has dropped out of UPCS. And 100 percent of all UPCS graduates have been accepted into colleges, with 80 percent going on to four-year institutions, including Georgetown, Dartmouth, and Brown, as well as Clark.

Audio recordings from the event, and more information on UPCS, are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/UPCS.html>.

Save the Dates! Upcoming Alliance Events

Full-Day Symposium on Adolescent Literacy

On November 7, the Alliance will hold a full-day symposium on adolescent literacy. This event will focus on the professional development policies needed for high school teachers in all subject areas to provide quality literacy instruction. Join us for a lively and informative discussion about reading, writing, and the next steps in the national movement to improve high school education.

Breakfast Forum: Six Key Strategies for Teachers of English-Language Learners

On December 7, the Alliance will hold its fourth and final high school achievement breakfast forum of the year. At the forum, participants will be introduced to "Six Key Strategies for Teachers of English Language Learners," a professional development tool designed for secondary ELL teachers by the New Teacher Center. Created for beginning teachers and their mentors, this tool provides strategies to improve second-language development and to enhance subject-specific reading comprehension and writing skills. Preliminary findings show that the Six Key Strategies have an impact on student engagement, literacy skills, and teacher practice.

Rain Bongolan, the development coordinator for English learner instruction at the New Teacher Center, will present, and **Deborah Short** from the Center for Applied Linguistics will provide a response.

More information on both events is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/index.html>.

Oregon High School to Require AP English for Every High School Junior

The process of “fitting in” to high school was made a little easier for juniors at North Eugene High School in Eugene, Oregon, this year. Earlier this summer, when class schedules were mailed out, all students had at least one class in common—namely, Advanced Placement (AP) language and composition. The decision to have all students, from straight-A honors students to English-language learners (ELL), take an AP English class is part of a movement in the school to raise expectations and boost success for all students.

“There was a lot of worry on the part of our ELL and special education staff,” **Principal Peter Tromba** told the *Eugene Register-Guard*. “Some of them were mad.” Tromba admitted to having doubts when the school’s English Department first suggested the plan, but he warmed to the idea when confronted with recent research. “Having kids be exposed to that curriculum and being challenged and being in a college-level class is a good thing. The data show kids do better.”

Amy Samson, North Eugene’s remedial reading teacher, supported the decision, but wonders whether it will improve achievement. She noted that more than 80 percent of North Eugene’s freshman class struggled to read at grade level last year, with 60 percent reading at or below a sixth-grade level.

When parents and students learned about the decision last spring, both Tromba and **Diane Downey, the head of the North Eugene English Department**, heard complaints, but not as many as might have been expected. Tromba said he heard from about ten parents, all of whom were concerned that their high-performing students’ progress might be slowed by the presence of lower-performing students.

“I kind of, as nicely as I can, let them know that this is a public school and we are obliged to provide the best education for all students, not the best education for the brightest and the ones with the pushiest parents,” Downey said.

The complete *Register-Guard* article is available at <http://www.registerguard.com/news/2005/09/06/a1.northap.0906.p1.php>.



MAYHEM IN THE MIDDLE: New Report Argues for High Standards and Accountability for Student Achievement in Middle Grades, Seeks to Eliminate “Middle Schoolism”

The middle grades too often focus on “social adjustment, individual growth, coping with early adolescence, and looking out for the needs of the ‘whole child,’” according to *Mayhem in the Middle*, a new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. As an alternative to this practice, which it dubs “middle schoolism,” the report calls for a thorough reform of middle-grade education that would include a new focus on high standards, discipline, and accountability for student achievement.

During the middle school years, American students’ performance drops dramatically in relation to their international peers, and forms the basis of an ever-widening gulf that is difficult to overcome when students reach high school. According to international comparisons such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the 2003 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA), American students typically do well in grades K–4, begin to falter in grades 5–8, and perform dismally in high school.

According to the Fordham report, middle schools are too often viewed as an “environment where little is expected of students either academically or behaviorally, on the assumption that self-discipline and high academic expectations must be placed on hold until the storms of

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adolescence have passed.” Unfortunately, waiting for “storms” to pass often leaves many students too far behind to “pick up the pace and meet current state academic requirements, much less the challenging expectations of federal laws such as No Child Left Behind.” As a result, far too many students arrive in ninth grade without the skills they need to succeed. “Abundant evidence indicates that the seeds that produce high school failure are sown in grades 5–8,” the report reads.

It does not have to be this way, says **Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Fordham Foundation**. “Though youngsters between the ages of ten and fifteen can be ornery and exasperating, they can also learn lots of math and history, plenty of literature and science, and an abundance of art and music,” he wrote in the report’s foreword.

As examples of schools that are successfully serving their students, the report offers three K–8 models in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Milwaukee. In Philadelphia, students from K–8 schools were 11 percent more likely to be accepted into the most challenging high schools than their middle school counterparts. Baltimore K–8 school students were more likely to pass the state tests in math and scored significantly higher than their middle school counterparts in reading, language arts, and math. In Milwaukee, students in K–8 schools had higher academic achievement and were less likely to be victimized than students in a separate middle school setting.

The report acknowledges that middle school grade configurations where separate buildings house students in some combination of fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade can work, but stresses that expectations must be high and accountability for academic performance must exist for students and teachers.

James A. Beane, a professor of education at the National Louis University in Milwaukee and an expert on middle schools, said that the middle school movement has been successful, but most schools haven’t fully used the techniques. “It’s fair to criticize the incomplete implementation of the middle school movement, but it’s not fair to criticize its ideals or goals,” he said at the press event at which the report was released.

Ultimately, *Mayhem in the Middle* concludes that the “essential problem with middle schoolism is not grade configuration but educational ideology. However a school is structured, in the era of standards and accountability, it must focus first and foremost on students’ acquisition of essential academic skills and knowledge.”

The report also traces the roots of middle school reform and offers several suggestions for planning and implementing the transition to a K–8 model and then for sustaining success. It is available at http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/2960_MayhemFINAL.pdf.



FLUIDITY IN MOTION? NOT YET: New Report Offers Levers to Match High School Requirements to College Expectations

The Governance Divide: A Report on a Four-State Study on Improving College Readiness and Success, is a new study from Partnerships for Student Success (PSS), a joint effort of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Stanford University’s Institute for Higher Education Research, and the Institute for Educational Leadership. It offers several policy levers for states that are interested in better connecting K–12 and postsecondary education systems in order to create a more fluid K–16 system.

“Particularly now, in the twenty-first century, when more students must complete some postsecondary education to have an economically secure life, the need for improved transitions from high school to college is urgent,” the report reads. “This need for some postsecondary education extends beyond individual aspirations. In this global economy, businesses and communities—and our nation as a whole—must have residents who have achieved educational success beyond high school.”

Today’s high schools are too often “giant sorting machines” that direct some students into college preparation programs but deem that other kids are best suited for less rigorous technical training, which effectively denies access to postsecondary education to many high school graduates. According to the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, the high school graduation rate of the class of 2002 was 71 percent, but only 34 percent of entering ninth graders ultimately left high school with the skills and qualifications necessary for college. Given the disparity between these two numbers, it is not surprising to learn that 63 percent of students in two-year colleges and 38 percent of students in four-year institutions required a year or more of remedial course-taking. In addition, the American Diploma Project reports that students taking remedial courses are 20 percent less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than their better-prepared peers. Taken as a whole, these facts make it obvious that states must do a better job of aligning high school requirements and postsecondary expectations. But how?

In a study of four states with different K–16 systems (Florida, Georgia, New York, and Oregon), the report identified policy levers that states can use to create change within their education systems. Perhaps first and foremost, states need to “make sure that what students are asked to know and do in high school is connected to postsecondary expectations—both in coursework and assessments,” the report says. For example, in many states, the state exit exam only measures what students learned up until tenth grade. As a result, students are left believing that their tenth-grade assessments and curricular standards are what they need in order to succeed in college.

Secondly, state education finance systems must also become K–16. The report argues that having an education system that can span education systems gives the potential to create incentives and drive change. For example, Georgia allows both K–12 and postsecondary institutions to receive full funding for dual enrollment, a practice where students who are still in high school also take college courses.

Data systems are a must. Without effective data collection, states cannot track students’ progress across systems, assess needs effectively, or evaluate reforms already underway. According to the

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report, only ten states link their K–12 student records with postsecondary enrollment and only eight states have information about student remediation in postsecondary education.

Florida, by contrast, has connected its data systems for K–12, postsecondary education, workforce training, and even corrections. “Through this work, the Florida Department of Education plans to be able to assess relationships between K–12 programs and postsecondary achievement, and between teacher education programs and student achievement through the K–20 continuum,” the report reads.

The report cautions that problems in one sector cannot be solved without the cooperation of the other: “Our research suggests that creating incentives for systems to work together—whether through finance structures, accountability mechanisms, or other means—appears to be essential.” For example, if a college or university wants to increase minority enrollment or decrease the number of students who require remediation, it must depend on high schools to close achievement gaps and better prepare graduates.

The report is available at

http://www.highereducation.org/reports/governance_divide/index.shtml.



EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS ACROSS IMMIGRANT GENERATIONS: Report Finds That Mexican Americans’ Educational Attainment Lags Behind Other Immigrant Groups, Warns Disparity Could Jeopardize California’s Future Labor Force

As the children of first- or second-generation Mexican immigrants enter the U.S. school system, they quickly move beyond the educational attainment levels that were achieved by their parents and grandparents. But these gains begin to slow by the third generation, according to a new report from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). *Educational Progress Across Immigrant Generations in California* found that the share of Mexican Americans who earn a high school diploma climbs steeply from the first to the second generation—from 25 percent for Mexican-born parents to 86 percent for their American-born children. However, the gain between second- and third-generation Mexican Americans is not as steep, and leaves them behind other immigrant groups in educational attainment. Considering that Mexican Americans make up such a huge percentage of California’s young population, their low educational achievement should be of considerable concern, both to individuals and to the state as a whole.

“The findings overall are good news for the state—with a dose of caution,” said **PPIC Program Director Deborah Reed**, who coauthored the study. “Although entire groups are making educational gains from generation to generation, the low education we find for Mexican Americans is disturbing.”

According to the study, young adults of Mexican descent have the lowest levels of education among all the major racial and ethnic groups in California. *Among Mexican youth aged sixteen to eighteen who recently arrived in the United States, less than half are even enrolled in school.*

Rather than attending school, most of the men are working and most of the women are working, married, or raising children. In order to reach workers, the report suggests that adult education programs in school districts and community colleges could provide part-time, evening, and weekend coursework that these individuals need. It also suggests that employers could offer programs that help workers develop English language and literacy skills.

Of Mexican Americans ages twenty-five to twenty-nine living in California, only 51 percent have earned their high school diploma, compared to 93 percent of non-Hispanic whites. For the individuals who enroll in and attend school, learning English is obviously a chief concern, but the report adds that educational counseling programs and tutoring could also be helpful. It notes that about 30 percent of California's children are growing up in families where neither parent completed high school.

The report found that more Mexican Americans earn a high school diploma if they are born in the United States (76 percent), but noted that very few continued their education beyond high school. In fact, among third-generation Mexican Americans, only 11 percent have obtained a bachelor's degree, compared to over 38 percent for third-generation whites. According to the report, if progress continues at the current rate, only 17 percent of the grandchildren of today's Mexican immigrants will attain a bachelor's degree.

“What happens to the second and third generations of Mexican Americans is the story of California,” Reed told the *Los Angeles Daily News*. “While we see progress, it's not sufficient to meet California's economic needs.”

In order to help increase the college enrollment and persistence among Mexican Americans, the report offers community colleges as the best entry point. With their open-admission policies, low fees, flexible schedules, and local availability, community colleges present an attractive option. In fact, almost 80 percent of Latinos who enroll in postsecondary education begin at community colleges. “As the value of education and skills in the California economy continues to grow, [community college courses] will become increasingly important to workforce training, especially for those who do not go on to complete a bachelor's degree,” the report reads.

“Even with all of the adaptive capabilities of California's huge and complex economy, it does not and will not have the capacity to absorb a low-skilled, poorly educated population indefinitely,” wrote **David W. Lyon, PPIC's president and CEO**, in the foreword. “Education has always been and will continue to be the key to success for this and future generations. It is time to address this critical component of the education issue—educating and training our immigrant youth to be highly productive members of the labor force in future years and decades.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=402>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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