

Achieving the Possible: What Americans Think About the College- and Career-Ready Agenda

College and career readiness. Common Core State Standards. Race to the Top. Common Assessments.

These initiatives are driving much of today's education reform agenda as policymakers seek to raise the bar and ensure high school graduates are prepared for college and careers. While the college- and career-ready agenda only recently has taken on more urgency at the national level, many policymakers at the state and local levels have been hard at work on this agenda for years. They understand both the need and the challenge this agenda represents: over 80% of all jobs require at least some education after high schoolⁱ but only about 70% of students graduate from high school (a number that drops considerably for minority and low-income kids).ⁱⁱ Of those who do graduate from high school, nearly 30% need remediation in English or mathematics, before they can even begin to take classes for credit, significantly lowering their chance of earning a postsecondary degree.ⁱⁱⁱ Currently, only 28% of students at two-year colleges earn a degree within three years, and 56% of students at four-year institutions earn a bachelor's degree within six years.^{iv}

What is clear to these policymakers is that we are losing too many young people along the education pipeline and it is a loss that has significant consequences for individuals and their communities. As a country, it is a loss we cannot afford if we hope to compete globally and maintain our way of life. This is what drives policymakers who support the college-and career-ready agenda.

But what does the general (voting) public think?

While there seems to be an emerging consensus among most policymakers that we need to increase expectations so that high school graduates are prepared for their next steps – and all of the related policy that entails – how does the public feel about the agenda? Do they support these goals? Do they believe that high school graduation is enough or do they think that students will need more to succeed?

To better understand the public's views on the college and careers-ready agenda, Achieve commissioned a first-of-its-kind poll¹ to find out how the engaged public (voters) view these issues.

KEY FINDINGS FROM ACHIEVING THE POSSIBLE: WHAT AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THE COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY AGENDA

- *There is widespread agreement that all students need additional education and training beyond high school.*
- *Support for policies aimed at preparing high school students for college and careers is **broad, deep and fully bipartisan** with equally high numbers of Democratic, Republican and Independent voters supporting such reforms.*
- *There is strong support for the specific policies that put common expectations in place for all students – including common standards, common assessments and graduation requirements.*
- *There is near universal agreement across partisan, ethnic/racial and geographic lines that some education and training beyond high school is necessary – and that stronger expectations in high school will go a long way towards preparing students for their next steps.*

¹ On behalf of Achieve Inc., Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted a national survey of 800 registered voters between May 23-26, 2010, which has a margin of error of $\pm 3.5\%$.

Achieving the Possible: What Americans Think About the College- and Career-Ready Agenda

While Achieve anticipated there would be some support for policies aimed at raising expectations for all students and preparing them for college, careers and life, in an environment where policy and partisan divides have never seemed wider, the poll revealed some surprising – and very encouraging – truths about the breadth, depth and bipartisan nature of the support for these policies. In that sense, it appears that the public supports the college- and career-ready agenda far more than most policymakers realize – and, if engaged properly, could become a powerful ally in seeing the agenda through.

There is strong agreement among voters that education or training beyond high school is necessary for future success:

- 89% of voters agree that “to really get ahead in life a person needs at least some education beyond high school, whether that means university, community college, technical or vocational school.”
- 89% of Republicans, 90% of Democrats and 87% of Independents agree with this statement.

There is also strong agreement that rigorous requirements in high school are critical for ALL students, will better prepare them for the global economy and that students should be challenged:

- 90% of voters believe “academic and graduation requirements in public high schools will better prepare students to take their next step in life.”
 - 85% of Republicans, 83% of Democrats and 92% of Independents agree with this statement.
- 82% of voters agree that “academic and graduation requirements in public high schools will better prepare students to compete in our global economy.”
- 83% of voters agree that “all students should be pushed to take rigorous and broad academic requirements in high school to make sure they have as many options as possible upon graduation.”

Voters understand the connection between advanced math courses and problem-solving skills but do express some anxiety about whether all students can pass advanced math:

- 85% of voters agree that “important skills like critical thinking and problem-solving can be developed by studying advanced mathematics and English in high school,”
- 83% of voters agree that “some high school students will never pass advanced math courses, but there should be other pathways that would allow these students to graduate,”
- 65% of voters agree that “many of the math skills needed by electricians, construction workers, plumbers and other traditional blue collar jobs are the same as what is necessary to do well in college courses.”

Voters are divided on whether current high school graduates have the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare them for their next steps:

- 48% of voters believe high school graduates “are prepared to meet the expectations they face as they take the next steps after high school,” while 50% believe graduates are not prepared for their next step.

Achieving the Possible: *What Americans Think About the College- and Career-Ready Agenda*

- However, there is more intensity among those voters who believe students are unprepared for their next step: 16% of voters said that graduates were “very unprepared” while only 4% of voters said graduates were “very prepared” to meet the expectations they face in life after high school.

Support for common standards, assessments and graduation requirements is robust:

- By nearly a two-to-one margin, voters believe it is “better for all states to have the same standards at each grade level in math and English so students across the country have to meet the same expectations” (62%) rather than for states to have “their own standards reflecting their own priorities” (35%).
- Similarly, voters generally believe it is “better for all states to have the same tests at each grade level in math and English so test scores can be compared across states” (64%) rather than all states to have “their own tests that reflect their own priorities” (34%).
- 63% of voters believe it is “better to implement the same rigorous graduation requirements for everyone so all students are being pushed to succeed and achieve their potential,” while just 32% believe “It is better to implement higher graduation requirements for top-performing students and have lower requirements for students who are struggling.”

Support for college- and career-ready graduation requirements is overwhelming:

["College- and career-ready requirements" are defined in the survey as including 4 years of English, 3-4 years of math (including Algebra, Geometry and Algebra II), 3-4 years of science (including biology and chemistry), 3-4 years of social studies (including U.S. and World History, and economics), and various electives chosen from fine arts, career technical, or foreign language subjects]

- 86% of voters support these “college- and career-ready” requirements – with 65% *strongly* supporting the requirements for all students.
- This support crosses party lines: 85% of Republicans, 87% of Democrats, and 85% of Independents support these requirements for all students – and 70% of Republicans, 65% of Democrats, and 61% of Independents *strongly* support such requirements.
- The support also crosses ethnic/racial lines: 85% of White, 84% of Black and 95% of Hispanic voters support college- and career-ready graduation requirements for all students.
- This support is also shared across all communities: 87% of urban, 86% of suburban and 81% of rural voters support these requirements for all students.
- Among voters living in the 21 states with requirements at this level in place, 92% support either keeping their state’s requirements the same or raising them further.
- In the remaining states that have not yet adopted college- and career-ready graduation requirements, 73% of voters believe their state’s requirements should be raised and 20% believe they should stay the same.

Voters are split over whether raising graduation requirements would increase the dropout rate:

- 49% of voters agree – and 50% of voters disagree – that “raising academic and graduation requirements means more students will drop out of high school.”

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Implications of Achieving the Possible

What do these results mean for education reform moving forward? For one, there is little question that over the past decade a paradigm shift has occurred and the high school diploma is no longer viewed as a terminal degree by the public. Agreement is near universal that everyone needs some additional education and training beyond high school to truly be successful.

In addition, voters overwhelmingly believe high school academic requirements can and should be rigorous, well rounded and aligned with college and career expectations. This suggests that states are well positioned to continue making progress on the design, adoption, implementation and sustainability of critical college- and career-ready policies. The survey also indicates that policymakers who push for these policies do so with public support – and that they public can and should be engaged more fully in the debate.

The two areas where voters were split on their opinions were whether public high schools are currently adequately preparing graduates for their next steps, and whether raising graduation requirements would cause more students to drop out. Interestingly, despite a near even split among voters on whether college- and career-ready expectations would increase the dropout rate, this did not impact the voters' overwhelming opinion that college- and career-ready graduation requirements were the right thing for all students. Rather, it suggests that states need to be aware of the valid concern that some students will need additional support as expectations are increased, and be prepared to respond to it.

In addition, the fact that voters are split on whether high schools are already doing a good job preparing students but still strongly support common standards and assessments and college- and career-ready graduation requirements suggests that voters, even those that think high schools are doing a good job, recognize the opportunity to improve the current system.

Perhaps the most important finding from the survey is that it revealed that college- and career-ready education reform is an issue that Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike clearly value and support. Voters universally understand the demands of the global economy and the need for all students to have additional education and training after high school. With the high level of bipartisan support for college- and career-ready policies, even in a contentious election year, the possibilities for collaboration between leaders at the national, state and local level are very real and are ready to be realized. And so is the public support.

Achieve 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 currently is working with 35 states through the American Diploma Project Network to design and implement policies that aim to close the expectations gap. For more information see www.achieve.org

ⁱ Holzer, Harry J. & Robert I. Lerman, *The Future of Middle-Skill Jobs*. Brookings Institution, February 2009.

ⁱⁱ Education Week, *Diplomas Count 2010*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2010/06/10/index.html>

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

^{iv} National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey, analyzed by National Center for Management of Higher Education Systems. <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?measure=19>