



A Well-Rounded Education

Rethinking What Is Expected of High Schools

By Laura Jimenez and Scott Sargrad | August 16, 2018

Not that long ago, a high school diploma was a ticket to a middle-class job. Today, however, in too many states, earning a high school diploma might not even mean that students are eligible for college—let alone ready to succeed there.

A recent CAP report analyzed high school graduation requirements across the country and found that only two states—Louisiana and Tennessee—both align the coursework required to receive a high school diploma with public university admission standards and require a 15-credit college-ready course sequence that includes high-level math, science, English composition, U.S. and world history, and a foreign language.¹

While alignment between high school and college requirements will improve college completion rates, the report also found that few states require students to complete a truly well-rounded education in order to graduate high school. However, students need exposure to a well-rounded education that includes the arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences, English, and math. This will allow them to be prepared for college, the 21st century workforce, and global citizenship. If this country truly wants to improve educational attainment and career preparedness, it is critical that it rethinks what it expects from high schools and how high school course requirements and the courses themselves are designed.

American students are falling behind

Since the 1990s, the United States has fallen behind on college completion, slipping from first in the world in 1995 to 10th in 2016.² A major factor in the country's low rates of college completion is a lack of true college preparation in the K-12 education system. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the math achievement of 12th graders has remained stagnant since 2005, and reading achievement is actually 5 scale score points lower than it was in 1992, more than 25 years ago.³

The lackluster performance of American high school students is also evident in international assessments. Every three years since 2000, the Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA) has tested 15-year-olds in math, reading, and science. Since the first test results in 2003, American performance has not changed significantly in any subject; but it has fallen behind other countries.⁴ The United States scores lower than 14 other countries in reading, 36 countries in math, and 18 countries in science.

States across the country have taken important steps to reverse this trend, and some are successfully raising standards for students in reading and math by adopting the Common Core State Standards, an effort initiated by governors in 2010. These standards describe what students should know and be able to do in math and reading; furthermore, students who are proficient in these standards can enter into college-level work once enrolled. While it will take more time before one is able to analyze these new, more rigorous standards' long-term impact on student achievement, thus far, results on annual state tests show that third-grade students improved the most in test scores—which makes sense since these students have been exposed to the more rigorous standards since kindergarten. However, even dramatically improving reading and math scores is not enough to ensure that students are successful in college and careers.

Importance of a well-rounded education

High-performing countries are not excelling simply because they focus exclusively on core academic subjects; they also expose students to a vibrant, well-rounded education that teaches them how to read and think critically.⁵

Reading is about more than just deciphering words. For proof, one need look no further than the meteoric rise of “fake news” and the impact it has had on the American electorate.⁶ Reading is a continuous process that draws on a host of skills: deciphering the sounds that letters make, developing vocabulary knowledge, reasoning, and connecting ideas within a text and to the broader world.⁷ Research shows that comprehension depends heavily on the background knowledge of readers—which is exactly what a well-rounded education helps provide.⁸ According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a well-rounded education includes the arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences, English, and math.⁹ Background knowledge in these subjects allows students to transfer the ability to read into other subjects and experiences that require them to make meaning of what they read. Therefore, a content-rich curriculum is not just a necessary building block for educational attainment but for comprehension beyond the classroom.

Furthermore, in high-performing countries, more low-income students achieve higher test scores on international assessments. This means that the achievement gap in high-performing countries is significantly smaller than it is in the United States.¹⁰ Some of these countries spend more than the United States on education—such

as Norway, which ranks 17th on PISA's science, reading, and math tests, while the United States ranks 31st.¹¹ However, not all do; Japan and South Korea, for example, allocate their education funding differently. They require fewer hours in school, spend more resources on improving teacher quality, and/or require more time for teacher collaboration and feedback to students.¹² The United States falls behind on all of these investments, which compounds its failure to provide a well-rounded education to all students. Investing in American students would have long-term benefits for both students and the country's global competitiveness.

Few states require a well-rounded education in high school

The recent CAP report provides the most comprehensive understanding to date of high school coursework requirements.¹³ The analysis helps to understand the emphasis, or lack thereof, that states place on a well-rounded education. It compares the coursework that states require for students to graduate high school against what is needed for college admissions and other key college- and career-readiness benchmarks, like a well-rounded education.¹⁴

For the most part, states ensure that students take classes in writing, social studies, health and PE before they can get a diploma. In most other subjects, however, states fall short. About half of states do not require study of a foreign language, as is required by most college admission offices. And less than half of states require students to take coursework in subjects such as computer science, engineering, and career and technical education (CTE) in order to get their diploma.

Requiring a well-rounded education is not just an issue for high schools; sometimes subjects such as arts, the humanities, and computer science are also not required for admission to a state's public university system. For example, less than half of states' public universities require applicants to have taken coursework in art, while even fewer require computer science, engineering, and CTE coursework.

Perhaps even more important than students' improved performance on tests, those who receive a well-rounded education are likely better-prepared for college and careers because they develop a wider range of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. About half of students who enter college need extra help before they are allowed to take college-level classes—largely because their K-12 schools failed to adequately prepare them—and most of these students who need remediation do not graduate college.¹⁵ Employers in all fields report that they need workers with cross-cutting skills who can fill jobs in information technology, engineering, accounting, and finance.¹⁶

Conclusion

Improving the quality of education in American high schools is not simply about requiring additional subjects for high school graduation; states must ensure that all students have access to rigorous coursework and the supports they need to be successful. States will also need to prepare the teaching workforce to meet these demands.

These investments are well worth the cost to the American taxpayer. The future of the nation depends on students having a high-quality, well-rounded education that will prepare them to successfully compete on a global stage and engage as citizens. States can start by ensuring that their high school graduation requirements reflect this standard and by rethinking the high school experience for students in order to give them the well-rounded education they deserve. To achieve this goal, states can adopt the course sequence required by most public universities for admission, investigate and address high school course quality, and do a better job tracking and reporting disaggregated data on high school course-taking patterns. Finally, states can encourage more innovation at the local level so that high schools can be designed around the needs of the 21st century.

Laura Jimenez is the director of standards and accountability at the Center for American Progress. Scott Sargrad is the managing director of K-12 Education Policy at the Center.

Endnotes

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