

Grade 12 Preparedness

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More than 25 years of reform, and where are we?

High school completion rate stuck at about 70%.

Some improvement, but only about one-third of high school graduates prepared for college.

Performance gaps remain huge.

What's gone wrong.

Education reform may have been driven by the business community, but the dialogue has been carried out in traditional educational terms and success is defined by traditional educational measures. At the high school level, actions have been controlled by two rhetorical questions:

Shouldn't we have the same high standards for all students?

Shouldn't we aspire to a college education for everyone?

Educators remained in charge of the standards-setting process with "reformers" demanding rigor – often stated as "difficulty," – with no consideration given to the relevance of content, its application and especially what students need in the real world.

Of course, if the standards, curriculum, and test frameworks are defined by educators, that leaves them in charge of what should be taught.

So, what's wrong with that? Aren't they the experts?

Surveys conducted by Willard Daggett's organization show that when parents, the public, business people and educators are asked about what is most important for students to learn, there is always one group that disagrees with everyone else – educators in each of the disciplines. In love with their chosen fields, they are unable to set clear priorities and, when they, are often at odds with what is valued in the outside world.

Take for instance the new Texas English-language arts standards for 12th grade writing:

"The student is expected to... write in a variety of forms with an emphasis on literary forms such as fiction, poetry, drama, and media scripts;"

Even if the education system had a 100% success rate as defined currently, many students would still not be prepared to compete in the job market and contribute to America's economic competitiveness. That is why students who already have a baccalaureate degree comprise the fastest growing segment of enrollment in the Houston Community College District.

Education is clearly too important to be left to the educators.

But, the recent response of reformers and policy makers to the disappointing results is more of the same – raise academic standards, add courses to graduation requirements, increase testing and toughen up accountability.

And these questions remain unanswered:

What can be done to keep students in high school?

How can more students be prepared for success after high school?

Does “high expectations” have to mean the same standards?

Would different educational pathways necessarily study discriminate against disadvantaged students?

Who have been the winners and losers in the “one size fits all” approach?

Albert Einstein said, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” It just might be time to try something different.

We might begin by considering what students say.

In 1997 the Public Agenda Foundation reported that students said they are not working hard, they are bored and they do not see the relevance of what they are being asked to learn.

The trend of student attitude toward high school seems to be in the wrong direction, especially for those not typically inclined to value education. A 2001 research paper by David Boesel, “Student Attitudes Toward High School and Educational Expectations,” compared the attitudes of students who were going on to a four-year college to those who aspired only to finish high school. Not surprisingly, those who expected to go on to college believed education was more relevant to their future and were more satisfied with their school. However, from 1976 to 1999, both groups saw less relevance in their education and expressed less satisfaction with their schools. And the greatest declines were among those students who aspired only to finish high school.

In a 2005 survey conducted by the National Governor’s Association students said their class work is not very difficult and they would work harder if courses were more demanding or interesting. Of those who had dropped out or were considering doing so, only one of nine said that school work was too hard. The greatest percentage, 36 percent, said they were “not learning anything.”

In 2006, Public Agenda issued a report entitled ***Are Parents and Students Ready for Math and Science***, as one of its continuing *Reality Check series*. When asked what would improve high schools, both parents and students said that “updating high school classes to better match the skills employers want” would be their number one recommendation.

Accordingly, there is another way that merits consideration. Evidence shows that students who are engaged in a career and technical education (CTE) course of study when compared to their peers in the regular high school program have:

- Higher attendance rates,

- Higher standardized test scores,
- Higher high school graduation rates,
- Higher college-going rates,
- Higher persistence rates, and
- Higher post-secondary program completion rates.

Employers will hire students who complete programs that result in an industry-defined license, certificate or degree.

I have one compelling example.

Market Lubbock, an economic development organization, brought together educators in the region to address the shortage of certified automotive service technicians. Together they established a fully articulated program through which students take courses in high school that meet industry standards and have value in the job market. Students can continue their studies at South Plains College to obtain an ASE certification or an Associate of Science degree in Automotive Technology. They can then continue to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering at Texas Tech University.

The program has rigor; its content is relevant; and students learn to use their knowledge and skills in real world situations. At each successive stage, they have increasing value in the job market and the opportunity to continue their education and take their career to whatever level they might desire. In fact, this pathway has another benefit compared to the traditional academic approach because businesses would prefer to employ engineers who come through a technical pathway because it takes less time for them to become productive on the job.

What does that all mean for the 12th grade NAEP?

The last assessment should look forward and measure what students know and can do relative to the requirements of the real world rather than look backward at what the school system has tried to teach them. The Governing Board and NCES should not feel constrained by considerations of stability in the assessment or protestations of educators that it measures what they have not taught. Hopefully, the Business Policy Task Force being established by the Governing Board can provide advice and guidance that will increase the value of the 12th grade NAEP and perhaps even convince students that it matters because what it measures is relevant to the future.
