

Increasing Academic Rigor in High School

*A Common Agenda for
National Education
Organizations*



NATIONAL
HIGH SCHOOL
ALLIANCE

WASHINGTON, DC

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The National High School Alliance (Alliance) is a partnership of fifty leading organizations that share a **vision** for a nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in our high schools and communities.

To advance this vision, the Alliance's **mission** is to engage its partners to work individually and collectively to inform policy, practice, and research, and to promote public awareness and engagement. The Alliance accomplishes this by providing a forum for professional discourse and collaborative effort to leverage its partners' resources, knowledge, and capacity.

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Introduction and Context

There is a widespread awareness that not only are students not completing high school, but that those who do are not being challenged, and are not equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in post-secondary education and work. Increasing academic rigor is at the fore of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's and National Governors Association's Honor States initiative and is perhaps the most commonly heard rallying cry among policymakers responding to public dissatisfaction with the quality of the nation's high schools. As states struggle to develop policy for reform in this complex arena, non-profit organizations and educators at all levels are working to increase rigor as well. But what is meant by increasing rigor? Is there an emerging consensus about what needs to change, and what success looks like? What does increased rigor look like within the context of effective schools that provide the structures and supports to engage and motivate students?

As policymakers and practitioners nationwide are recognizing the need to significantly raise expectations for all students by increasing academic rigor, they are grappling with the implications for ensuring that students with a range of needs can rise to the challenge. Raising expectations is critical for all students, but particularly for those who have been consigned to the "general," remedial, or other non-academic tracks in which coursework is less demanding and disconnected from any viable post-secondary pathway. These students are at highest risk for dropout. Moreover, according to a growing body of research, effective preparation for success in the 21st century economy requires a common set of competencies for all students – regardless of their plans immediately after high school graduation. In short, while leaders nationwide are advocating for increased academic rigor to ensure students are prepared for college, careers, and active civic participation, there are many different views about how "rigor" is defined and the strategies to ensure all students have access to it.

This report from the National High School Alliance (Alliance) provides a national context for the debate on academic rigor and offers suggestions for how national education organizations can help to define a shared vision and common agenda around rigor that is coordinated across the national, state, and local levels. To prepare this report, the Alliance reviewed the current literature of national policy and research organizations to identify expert perspectives on what constitutes a rigorous high school curriculum and to determine how the national education organizations are defining and framing rigor for their constituents. This information is organized into the following sections:

- I. Identifying Elements of a Rigorous High School Curriculum;
- II. Defining and Framing Rigor; and
- III. Taking Action: Recommendations for National Organizations.

I. Identifying Elements of a Rigorous High School Curriculum

Based on a review of recommendations from national policy and research organizations, the following strategies for increasing academic rigor emerge:

- Raising graduation requirements;
- Ensuring access to quality course content and instruction;
- Aligning course content and assessments with the skills necessary for higher education and employment;
- Institutionalizing additional support for students at risk; and,
- Developing a comprehensive approach.

Raising Graduation Requirements

One of the strategies gaining traction is to ensure that graduation requirements compel all students to complete and master a curriculum that prepares them for college and the workplace. The argument that more rigorous requirements are needed for all is based on the needs of a changing economy and a society that demands updated goals for high school to remain competitive. First, no student should be precluded from post-secondary education by a curriculum that does not meet college entrance requirements or does not prepare him or her for college-level work. A number of studies have shown that students who take a college preparatory curriculum are more successful in college. Second, every student needs a solid foundation in the primary disciplines (e.g. mathematics, science, social studies, and English/Language Arts), and the opportunity to develop the higher level thinking and writing skills necessary for success in life and the workplace. A growing number of career fields are upgrading the skills they demand of workers to meet the needs of changing technology. Many careers that do not require a college degree do require strong mathematical and literacy skills. Moreover, most careers offer more potential for advancement to employees who have these skills.

Many states and districts are responding by eliminating differentiated diplomas and requiring a college preparatory curriculum for all students. States like Texas, Arkansas, and Indiana have adopted a college preparatory curriculum as the default curriculum for all students. A growing number of states are increasing the number of Carnegie units required to earn a diploma and specifying that students complete specific, high-level courses to graduate. Achieve, the Southern Regional Education Board's High Schools that Work, ACT and other national organizations have specified minimum requirements for what they consider a rigorous high school diploma.

Several states are focusing on demonstration of competencies rather than on acquisition of credits. For example, Rhode Island's performance graduation requirement is not tied to courses, but to performance-based assessments that measure skills and knowledge across the curriculum; New Hampshire has eliminated course requirements and allows for a range of alternatives through which students can earn diplomas.

Ensuring Access to Quality Course Content and Instruction

Another set of strategies for ensuring rigor address access to both quality course content and quality instruction. While many states are establishing policies specifying courses required for graduation, such policies alone do not guarantee that the content of those courses is rigorous, that the quality of instruction is sufficient for students to ultimately demonstrate their knowledge and skills, or that all students have access to these courses.

Because course title alone does not ensure rigorous course content, a process is needed to determine whether courses are actually challenging students to think critically and develop the higher order, problem-solving skills they will need to be prepared for post-secondary education, careers, and citizenship. Moreover, teachers must be prepared to deliver this higher-level content in a way that enables all students to demonstrate the acquisition of the required knowledge and skills. Cultivating the capacity of teachers to do so will require an examination of how teachers are prepared and developed throughout their careers.

Finally, the issue of access to these rigorous, quality courses must be addressed. National organizations advocate opening access to a college preparatory curriculum as well as encouraging dual/concurrent enrollment and other means of exploring postsecondary study while in high school.

Many states and districts are reviewing the content of their standards and curriculum to ensure the bar is set appropriately high. They are also beginning to implement policies that increase access to college level courses for all students. Supporting students in taking AP and IB courses and exams, increasing dual/concurrent enrollment programs, and de-tracking high school courses are some policies states and districts are pursuing to better prepare students for college-level study. Although some analysts debate whether all of these courses offer rigorous instruction, they usually provide access to college level content and there is some evidence that students who take these courses are more successful in postsecondary education.

Aligning Curriculum and Assessments with Post-Secondary Education and Work Readiness Standards

According to several reports, a large proportion of American youth leave high school unprepared to succeed in college courses or the workforce. The Education Trust, the Stanford Bridge Project, and others have noted significant variation in states' graduation requirements and a lack of alignment between high school and college course requirements and assessments. High school course requirements often bear little connection to college entrance requirements and the skills students need to succeed in college and careers. In addition, many students take a large variety of assessments, including state assessments, end-of-course exams, and high school graduation exams, most of which do not reflect the skills and content assessed in college entrance and placement exams. High school graduation exams are frequently not demanding,

reflecting content taught early in high school, rather than the skills required of college and career entrants. “In most states, even students who follow all the rules in high school have no guarantee of meeting postsecondary education’s course requirements.”¹

Moreover, high schools have long separated the career and technical education curriculum from the academic, college-prep curriculum. Analysts argue that treating academic and career preparation as separate goals, intended for two different sets of students, does a disservice to all. They recommend eliminating vocational courses and programs that do not provide strong academic preparation and upgrading the quality and content of all career and technical education to provide all students with the skills and preparation they need to be successful in higher education or the workplace. A recent report from ACT provides empirical evidence that high school students need the same skills whether they are headed to college or the workforce. This report is one of an increasingly large body of literature that indicates that students should be educated to the same high standards regardless of their post-high school plans.

In response to these data, many national organizations are advocating the development of partnerships between the K-12, higher education, and business communities to develop college- and work-ready standards for students. When they are clearly defined, curriculum and assessments can be developed to reflect and align with these standards. Many states are upgrading the quality of high school graduation and end-of-course exams to ensure they are aligned with college entrance standards and implementing performance based assessments that measure students’ proficiency in specific content areas.

Institutionalizing Supports for Students at Risk

With the emphasis on increasing rigor so that curriculum, instruction, and assessments are aligned with college- and work-readiness outcomes, there is also a growing recognition that a comprehensive, institutional approach to providing supports is necessary to addressing both the academic and social development of all students. An integrated system of supports is particularly important for students who are most at-risk of disengaging and/or dropping out, such as older students who have too few credits, and those whose literacy and numeracy skills cause them to struggle with high school course content.

To institutionalize supports, national leaders recommend that state and district systems implement a variety of strategies that go beyond quick-fixes and instead aim to transform the entire high school into a student-centered learning environment that engages, motivates, and supports all students. These strategies include restructuring the size and organization of high schools so that students learn in a more personalized atmosphere and have the individualized attention of adults who are trained to recognize and address problems. School restructuring may include developing smaller learning communities, career academies, schools within schools, theme-based schools, and new

¹ Somerville and Yi, 2002

small schools. Other strategies for personalizing and individualizing instruction include building greater flexibility in the school schedule, providing additional instructional time in core subjects, and providing individual counseling and advising to students.

Many analysts also recommend focusing on ninth grade, a key transition year for preventing dropouts and ensuring success in high school. Transition programs prepare elementary and middle school students to succeed in high-level courses when they reach ninth grade and help ninth graders develop the skills they need to be successful in a demanding high school program. The challenges in supporting at-risk students vary with the composition of the student population and their particular needs, so each district or state must develop strategies that suit the context in which its students are learning.

The Alliance report, *Academic Interventions to Help Students Meet Rigorous Standards: State Policy Options* (May 2007), provides more detailed information on how state policies can improve academic supports for struggling students.

Developing a Comprehensive Approach

Many national organizations are working to help policymakers understand that there is no silver bullet for achieving increased rigor—no one of these elements can be successful if implemented independently. In *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth*, the National High School Alliance makes the case for increasing rigor as part of a comprehensive approach to achieving improved outcomes for all youth that includes personalizing the learning environment, developing innovative pedagogy, supporting professional learning communities among educators, engaging community and youth, and holding leaders accountable. An integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and supports also serves a critical role in that it “mandates common expectations for all students; clearly communicates parameters for success in each successive year of school and for successful transition into post-secondary education and careers; and outlines how students will learn, be assessed, and receive support.”

Thus, states and districts must simultaneously employ a range of strategies that increase rigor and ensure that all students are well prepared for the future. In addition, strategies must be selected that consider existing state and district policies and progress. For instance, some states may already have minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college, but need to improve supports for all students.

Though there is not yet consensus on all of the strategies and how they should be implemented to the greatest effect, there is growing recognition that the *purpose* of efforts to increase rigor in high school is to ensure that all students are well prepared for postsecondary education, career and civic life. Too many students leave high school ill-prepared for college or career, at a time when a growing body of research points to the common requirements of both.

II. Defining and Framing Rigor

From September, 2005, to August, 2007, the Alliance convened the National Network of Constituent Organizations (Network), a network comprised of national education organizations representing important stakeholders at the community, district, and state levels. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Network was designed to foster collaboration, coordination, and the development of new ideas and activities related to the National Governors Association/Achieve Action Agenda. The organizations comprising the Network² represent the voices of important constituents in high school redesign and therefore play an important role in the communication of strategies for increasing academic rigor. Network organizations address several of the strategies identified previously in their publications and outreach, and many are currently developing materials that could incorporate greater emphasis on these strategies in the future.

This scan of Network publications is an attempt to evaluate how national education organizations are currently communicating about the issue of increasing academic rigor as a foundation for discussion and for planning future work in this area. The Alliance collected publications, including reports and newsletters, from all Network organizations that included a discussion of increasing academic rigor and reviewed each of these publications to identify key messages and common themes. The findings based on this analysis are described below. References for all of the publications reviewed are provided in Appendix A.

Network organizations typically recognize, and advocate for, the importance of a rigorous high school program.

All of the network organizations have publications that include a discussion of academic rigor or highlight policies and practices that increase academic rigor. While each organization talks about different aspects of the issue, every organization emphasizes its importance.

Several of the Network organizations' products define a rigorous curriculum by referencing *Answers in the Tool Box* (Adelman, 1999), which assesses the rigor of high school course work and its importance in predicting whether students earn a postsecondary credential. Common points highlighted from the Adelman research include:

- The rigor of the high school curriculum is the most important predictor of college completion—it is more important than parent education level or family income;

² National Network of Constituent Organization Members includes the following organizations: Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Conference of State Legislatures, State Higher Education Executive Officers. National Council of La Raza was also a participant in this meeting and in the review of resources.

- An intensive academic curriculum had the strongest effect for African American and Latino students; and
- Students completing a college preparatory curriculum are more likely to succeed in college and less likely to need remedial coursework.

Several of the organizations cite other research to support the importance of focusing on increasing rigor. For example, NCSL cites the Achieve poll (American Diploma Project, 2004) of recent high school graduates, college instructors, and employers, which finds that most recent high school graduates report being only moderately challenged in high school. NCSL also cites research (Adelman 2005), which demonstrates that students who take remedial courses earn college degrees at lower rates than other students. SHEEO cites a study (Somerville and Yi, 2002) that finds that high school graduation requirements have little relationship to the requirements of higher education institutions. SHEEO also discusses a body of research that demonstrates that student skills and knowledge grow more in rigorous college-preparatory courses than in other courses and their failure rates are not higher in more rigorous courses.

Network organizations discuss the issue of academic rigor in ways that reflect their individual missions and constituencies.

Consistent with the interests of their state policy constituents, the NASBE and CCSSO newsletters highlight promising state policies and programs. NAACP presents the issue in terms of its importance to minority students and their success in college. NCLR stresses its importance to the success of ELL students. NASSP, the organization working most directly with schools, defines the characteristics of academic rigor and presents an assessment tool that schools can use to evaluate their level of academic rigor.

No Network organization, other than Achieve, has their own policy that specifically defines a rigorous curriculum in terms of course requirements.

Few organizations with a national policy focus endorse a particular curriculum or set of courses, which is generally the purview of states and districts. Some of the Network organizations' publications summarize state efforts in this area, but do not define or endorse a particular curriculum. SHEEO recommends K-12 and higher education come to agreement on a rigorous course of study that enables students to meet standards and prepares them for higher education.

In their publications, Network organizations guide policymakers and practitioners by educating them about effective policies and programs.

How does one know rigor when one sees it? NASSP talks about the characteristics of rigor and how to identify whether schools offer a rigorous curriculum. *Breaking Ranks* publications use the Pathways to College Network's "School Academic Rigor and Support Self-Assessment Tool" to assist schools in assessing their level of rigor. NASSP recommends opening honors, AP, and IB classes to all students and

eliminating low level tracks, and provides examples of the types of support students might need to meet rigorous standards (including strategies such as ninth grade academies, increased instructional time, alternative schools, and smaller learning communities.)

NCSL highlights reform models that offer a rigorous curriculum—including High Schools That Work, Talent Development, America’s Choice models, and Early College High Schools—recommending raising expectations for all students and requiring that all students complete a college or work-ready curriculum.

SHEEO also highlights effective state policies for increasing academic rigor—developing an optional state college preparatory curriculum, requiring a rigorous core preparatory curriculum for all students, and aligning high school exit exams with college placement exams.

Similar to our findings in the literature from other national organizations, Network organizations agree on broad, state-level policies to increase academic rigor, but few devote much attention to defining the specifics of a rigorous curriculum or how to implement it at the school or classroom level.

Network organizations tend to focus on state-level policies and programs that increase academic rigor, rather than school or classroom level strategies. The Network organizations appear to agree that increasing academic rigor means increasing graduation requirements, providing students with a college and work preparatory curriculum, and opening advanced courses to greater numbers of students. What is less clear from this review is what a rigorous curriculum looks like, how it should be defined, and how to achieve it. These questions are a good launching point for future action and attention from these organizations and others.

III. Taking Action: Recommendations for National Organizations

We conclude that while there is significant national interest in increasing rigor for all students, there is less agreement about how specifically to define it or how to best focus scarce resources to advance the rigor agenda. It is a multifaceted and complex challenge with many components, and must be approached in a way that does not come at the expense of policies and strategies that provide the supports students need to remain in school and to be motivated to meet high expectations. Given this complexity, it may make more sense to focus on clarifying the discrete aspects of policy and programmatic change that, taken together, will result in an appropriately rigorous high school system.

National organizations can play a number of roles in advancing the goal of increased rigor for high school students, depending on the needs of their individual constituencies and target audiences. The Alliance recommends the following action steps:

- Develop a common definition;
- Conduct outreach to constituent networks;
- Refine state and district level strategies; and,
- Develop tools for self assessment.

Develop a Common Definition

Talk of increased rigor at a conceptual level largely dominates high school reform rhetoric. But the reality is that there is less agreement about how rigor is actually defined in operational terms. Without such a definition or guideposts, there are several risks: one, that rigor remains “in the eye of the beholder” and second, that claims of increased rigor not match reality. Network organizations have begun to further the goal of increased rigor by informing the development of a common framework for identifying and assessing programs and policies that increase academic rigor. This is captured in the Alliance publication, *Defining Rigor in High School: Framework and Assessment Tool* (October 2006). Network organizations and other national organizations can further this goal by continuing to develop a common understanding of academic rigor, including providing more detail about what rigor looks like and examples of programs and strategies that promote rigor for their constituents.

Conduct Outreach to Constituent Networks

As a number of Network organizations already do, conducting outreach by focusing communications on the issue of academic rigor will help maintain focus and increase efforts to increase expectations. Communications could include research and examples about how rigor and high expectations result in success in postsecondary education and careers. These resources should inform and educate constituents and stimulate discussions with them about academic rigor and the components of a rigor agenda. Communications experts note that messages need to be repeated multiple times before they impact behavior – reinforcing the importance of providing ongoing reminders and

evidence to educate and motivate constituents. National organizations should consider what a communications strategy would look like, what evidence and examples would be useful, and how best to disseminate them.

Refine State and District Level Strategies

There are a number of state and district level policies and strategies that can be used, over time and in combination, to increase rigor. These include upgrading course requirements, aligning high school content with the requirements for postsecondary education and work, and providing supports to enable all students to succeed in a rigorous academic program. National organizations can support states and districts by providing information about specific strategies for achieving these objectives. There is particularly a great need for guidance on how to align high school curricula with the requirements of higher education and work and for evaluating the content of curricula to assess rigor.

Provide Tools for Self Assessment

For policymakers, community members, business leaders, and parents looking in from the outside, assessing rigor is difficult. Similarly, it is a challenge for educators at the district, school and classroom level to assess progress and identify strengths and weaknesses along the rigor continuum. Tools for self-assessment have the potential for deepening constituents' thinking and understanding of this issue. The Alliance publication, *Defining Rigor in High School: Framework and Assessment Tool* is a framework for assessing rigor at the state and local levels, in the context of the support and resources that students need to be successful.

Appendix A: Network Resources Reviewed

Council of Chief State School Officers. 2005. *State Indicators of Science and Mathematics Education*. Washington, DC.

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Appendix B: Selected References

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Partnership for 21st Century Skills. 2006. *Results that Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform*. Tucson, AZ.

Pathways to College Network. *A Shared Agenda, A Leadership Challenge to Improve College Access and Success*. Boston, MA

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Partners of the National High School Alliance

National Research and Policy Organizations

Achieve, Inc.
Alliance for Excellent Education
American Youth Policy Forum
Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Association for Career and Technical Education
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Carnegie Corporation of New York
Center on Education Policy
CORD
Education Development Center
Education Trust
Institute for Educational Leadership
Jobs for the Future
KnowledgeWorks Foundation
MDRC
National Council of La Raza
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
Pathways to College Network

State Leaders

Council of Chief State School Officers
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Conference of State Legislatures

District & School Leaders

American Federation of Teachers
Buck Institute for Education
College Board
Consortium on Chicago School Research

Middle College National Consortium
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Career Academy Coalition
National Education Association
National Staff Development Council
New England Association of Schools and Colleges,
Commission on Public Secondary Schools

Community & Youth Leaders

Chicago Community Trust
Forum for Youth Investment
National League of Cities
National Youth Employment Coalition
Public Education Network
Rural School and Community Trust
What Kids Can Do

Technical Assistance Providers

Academy for Educational Development, Schools for a New Society
Career Academy Support Network, UC Berkeley
Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Talent Development High School
Coalition of Essential Schools
Commonwealth Corporation
Cristo Rey Network
Education Alliance at Brown University
Institute for Research and Reform in Education, First Things First
National Academy Foundation
National Center on Education and the Economy, America's Choice High Schools
Project GRAD USA
Southern Regional Education Board, High Schools That Work



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