



# Policy Brief

## High School

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### Involving Families in High School and College Expectations

By Jennifer Dounay

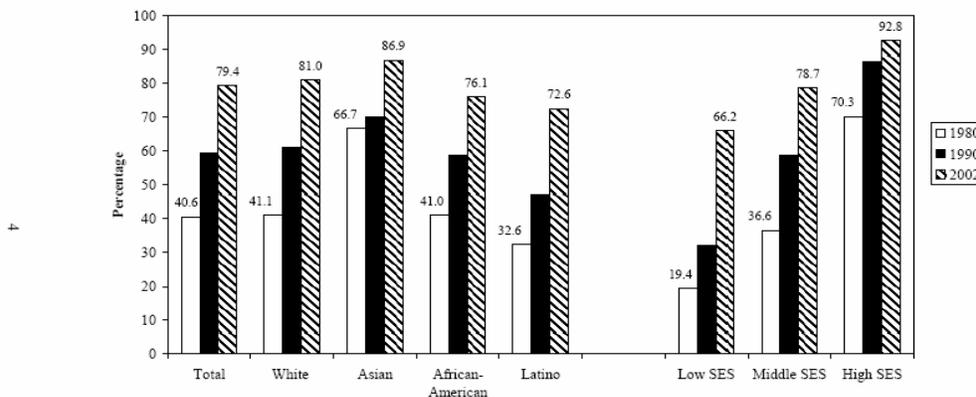
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The numbers are astonishing and unfortunately all too familiar – while four in five high school students expect to complete a college degree, fewer than a third will actually emerge from the high-school-to-college pipeline with a baccalaureate six years after high school graduation. A growing number of parents see a college degree as absolutely necessary for their child’s success, and more students believe that they will attain this goal. But the sad fact is that only one in three will complete a college degree. This policy brief examines the troubling gap between educational aspirations, what students (and parents) need to do to achieve those expectations, and what states are doing to better communicate to students and parents the importance of being academically prepared for college and the steps to take to achieve that level of preparation.

#### Students (and their parents) expect they’ll finish high school and go to college

Most high school students today (and their parents) believe they should – and will – graduate from high school and complete some form of postsecondary education. As the graph below makes clear, this expectation has been rising since 1980 for every racial and socioeconomic group.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1  
Percentage of U.S. 10th-Graders Who Expect to Attain a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher, 1980, 1990, 2002, by Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education (2004).

In addition, more than six out of 10 parents – 62% – say a college education is “absolutely necessary” for their child, according to the public policy research organization Public Agenda.<sup>2</sup> Sixty-five percent of Hispanic parents say a college education “is the one thing that can most help young people succeed.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, most Americans – not just parents – believe that having a college degree is important for economic success. In a 2003 survey commissioned by Jobs for the Future, nine out of 10 respondents, when told only about 29% of graduates who start high school will eventually graduate from college, said this was a “very” (63%) or “somewhat” (27%) serious problem.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, University of Chicago researcher Melissa

Roderick reported high aspirations for students in predominantly Latino and African American high schools in Chicago. Over 90% of the juniors surveyed for her study said they hoped to attend a four-year college. However, according to Roderick's estimates, only about six out of 100 13-year-olds in the Chicago Public Schools "ultimately will graduate from high school by age 19, enter a four-year college, and obtain a four-year college degree within six years after high school graduation."<sup>5</sup>

## **Students (and their parents) are misinformed about what it takes to prepare for college**

While most students voice the expectation that they will go to college, many in fact do not know what kind of preparation it takes to get there. One of the 10 student misperceptions about preparing for and attending college, according to the report *Betraying the College Dream* by Andrea Venezia, Michael Kirst and Anthony Antonio, is that "meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare me for college." They note other related misperceptions students have about the impact of their high school course taking on chances for college admission:

- "It's better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades."
- "My senior year in high school doesn't matter."
- "I don't have to worry about my grades, or the kind of classes I take, until my sophomore year."
- "Community colleges don't have academic standards."<sup>6</sup>

The researchers found that in all five of the states they studied (California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Oregon), fewer than 12% of the high school students knew what courses were required by the selective institution(s) in their state; even fewer knew which courses were required for less-selective programs. Students in all five states except Maryland expressed a need for information about the specific courses they should take in high school and the types of courses and majors offered at the institutions, noting the information sent by colleges themselves was superficial and not helpful. "Overall, our study found that many students, their parents, and educators are very confused or misinformed about how students should prepare for college. Students had vague understandings of specific admission and placement policies ...."<sup>7</sup>

The authors recommend "ensuring that colleges and universities state, and publicize, their academic standards so that students, their parents, and educators have accurate college preparation information. Since almost all students are planning to attend college, all students should receive college preparation information and resources. Policy communication and signaling is key; not enough attention is paid to communicating clearly up and down the systems. This effort must go beyond targeted outreach, and fragmented categorical programs, to universal programs for all students."

The University of Chicago research found that while nine out of 10 of the students surveyed hoped to go to college, fewer than half (48%) had the grade point averages, ACT scores and coursework that would allow them to apply to at least a "somewhat selective" four-year institution. Twenty percent had the qualifications to apply to a selective institution, and just 4% met the prerequisites to apply to the most selective four-year programs.

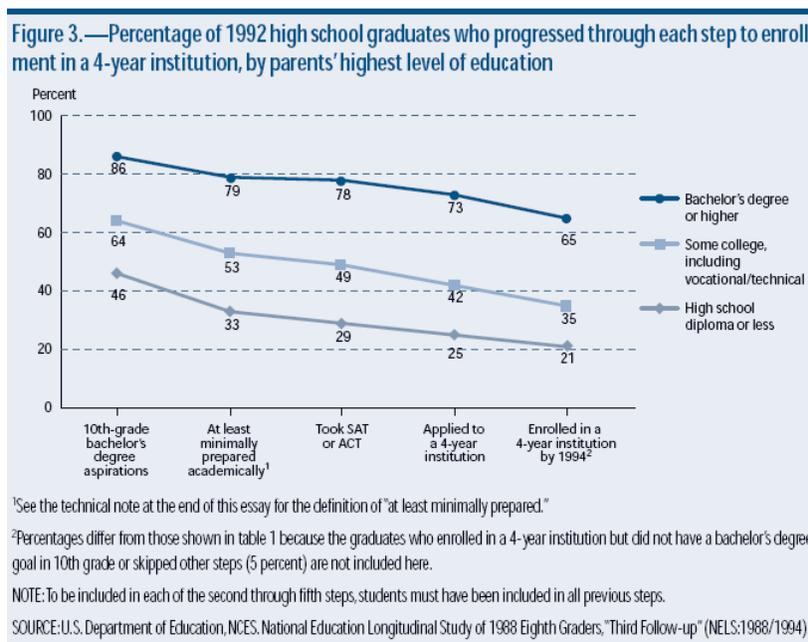
Monica Martinez and Shayna Klopott note in their 2005 report, "The Link Between High School Reform and College Access and Success for Low-Income and Minority Youth," that a substantial body of research suggests academic preparation, access to information, and parental involvement and knowledge about college are the strongest predictors of college entrance and completion, especially for disadvantaged students. "Often students of color, those from low-income families, and students whose parent(s)/caretaker(s) did not attend college do not have the knowledge, information, or social and cultural capital to understand the academic work and college application processes needed to plan and pursue postsecondary education." The authors propose a key element of high school reform is ensuring that students and their parents are informed about college entrance requirements.<sup>8</sup>

## **Students whose parents did not go to college need the most help**

According to a federal report on the college-going patterns of first-generation college students, "the path to college enrollment consists of five somewhat sequential steps (Berkner and Chavez 1997), although students do not always think of the process in these terms (Hossler et al. 1999). First, students must

decide that they want to pursue postsecondary education and what type. Second, they must prepare academically for college-level work. Third, if they want to attend a 4-year institution, they must usually take the SAT or ACT entrance examinations. Fourth, they must choose one or more institutions and file applications. Finally, they must gain acceptance and make the financial and other arrangements necessary to enroll.”<sup>9</sup>

The table below indicates the percentage of 1992 high school graduates – disaggregated by those whose parents’ highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree, some college (including vocational/technical), or a high school diploma or less – who completed each of the steps identified by the researchers as essential for entering a four-year postsecondary institution.



But having completed each of these steps still did not ensure that students were college-ready. The study found that only 19% of students whose parents had completed a high school diploma or less were “very” or “highly qualified” to enroll in a four-year postsecondary institution, while 49% of these students were “marginally or not qualified.” These figures rose to only 31% and 33%, respectively, for students whose parents had completed some college, including vocational/technical education.

The study likewise notes, “Whether students received help in choosing a high school program was also related to their parents’ education. High school graduates whose parents had no postsecondary education were less likely than those whose parents had bachelor’s degrees or higher to report in 12th grade that they chose their high school program with their parents’ help (34 versus 48 percent), and more likely to report that they chose it by themselves (28 versus 22 percent) (Horn and Nuñez 2000). Teachers and counselors do not appear to serve as surrogates for parents who are not involved in their students’ curricular choices. At each level of parental education, 43 percent of students reported that they chose their high school program with the help of teachers or counselors.”<sup>10</sup>

## A state policy solution

The research cited above suggests that getting from high school to college consists of a series of equally important steps that, while somewhat overlapping, might be roughly summarized in the following chronological order:

- Students and their parents obtain **information on colleges’ entrance expectations** – minimum coursework requirements, GPA, etc. – preferably as early as the middle grades if not earlier, but absolutely at the beginning of high school.
- Students and their parents **set goals** related to students’ post-schooling aspirations and **annually choose high school courses** to guarantee that college entrance expectations are achieved by end of grade 12.

- Students and their parents receive **annual updates on students' progress** toward their high school graduation goals – and information about remediation opportunities, if necessary.
- Students and parents receive information on making **the transition from high school to college** – including applications for college admission and financial aid.

The problem is that while many states make information available to help students and parents negotiate the transition from high school to college, policies are often not in place to ensure that *all* students and parents – not just those who have already learned how to negotiate the system – receive the information they need. In addition, state policies need to ensure that transmission of such information is early, explicit and continuous throughout the system. By the time a student is in grade 12, too many decisions have already been made.

Lastly, states must also consider **postsecondary affordability** – a Texas policy provides one example of a state mechanism to help ensure that middle- and low-income families are not priced out of a baccalaureate.

While no state at this time appears to have a set of policies to communicate each preparation point to students and parents, state policies seen together provide a picture of what such a set of state policies would look like. The state policies in each category below are by no means a comprehensive list; ECS is happy to provide additional state policy information on request.

### **Information on colleges' entrance expectations**

It may come as a surprise that most states do not appear to have policies in place to inform all students and their parents on state postsecondary institutions' admission requirements. **Texas**, however, is an exception. As early as the elementary and middle grades, counselors must advise students and their parents on the importance of higher education and the coursework that will best prepare students for higher education. During a student's first and senior years of high school, counselors must provide students and their parents with information on the benefits of completing the "recommended" or "advanced" high school program. (The "recommended" program, to become the default high school curriculum effective with the Class of 2008, is similar to the curriculum recommended for admission to many four-year postsecondary institutions around the country; however, with the class of 2008 and beyond, students will have the option of selecting a lower-level curriculum if they feel it is most appropriate for them.)<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, every Texas district must have a district improvement plan. The plan, to be revised annually, must indicate the strategies the district will use to provide middle and high school students and their parents, teachers and counselors with information about higher education admissions, among other college-prep components.<sup>12</sup>

### **Setting goals and choosing high school courses**

Through individual graduation plans, more states in recent years have begun to assist students and their parents in the step of early goal-setting and annual updates to such plans. According to ECS' [database](#) of high school graduation requirements, 20 states either require or will soon require all students to develop what are known from state to state as a "learning plan" or "individual graduation plan." Such plans often are first established by the parent, student and school counselor when a student is in grade 8, defining the courses the student will take in grade 9 and successive years, culminating in a planned destination the student's first year after high school – the workforce, a two-year or four-year institution, the military, or a certification program.

A handful of states have aligned their high school graduation and college admission requirements to ensure that young people and their families are aware of the preparation postsecondary institutions expect of entering students, and to avoid de facto "tracking" of students whose teachers, counselors, parents (or even the students themselves) might hold to non-collegiate expectations. These states include **Indiana** (effective class of 2011) **Oklahoma** and **South Dakota** (both class of 2010). For additional information on these states' alignment of high school graduation and college admission requirements, please see the April 2006 ECS StateNote, [Alignment of High School Graduation Requirements and State-Set College Admissions Requirements](#).

### ***Annual updates on students' progress***

ECS has been able to identify a few states that mandate that parents be annually notified of whether their child is on track to graduate from high school. **Washington State** and **Maryland** require high schools, at the beginning of each school year, to provide students and parents with a copy of the graduation requirements applicable to the student. Washington additionally requires schools to send parents a progress report at the end of each school year, indicating the student's progress toward completing those requirements. If a student is not making normal progress toward completing the graduation requirements, the high school is required to notify the student and parents "of alternative education experiences, including summer school opportunities available in the community" or the area.<sup>13</sup> Maryland likewise requires private schools to annually provide parents of enrolled students with its policy on the credits required for high school graduation.<sup>14</sup> In addition, **California, Georgia, Maryland, Nevada, North Carolina** and **South Carolina** all have clear policies requiring parents to be informed about the state's exit exam requirement.

### ***Transition from high school to college***

Applications for college admission and financial aid can be daunting to anyone, but can pose particular obstacles to students whose parents themselves did not attend college. **Texas** requires counseling all students and parents receive during the student's first and senior years of high school to include information on:

- Financial aid eligibility; counselors must provide information in these sessions on:
  - The types of financial aid – and not just need-based aid – including grants, scholarships, loans, tuition and/or fee exemptions, and work-study
  - The types of organizations that offer financial aid, such as federal and state government, civic or church groups, foundations, nonprofit organizations, parents' employers and institutions of higher education
- Instruction on how to apply for federal financial aid
- The state's [center for financial aid information](#)
- Automatic admission of certain students to general academic teaching institutions
- The eligibility and academic performance requirements for the TEXAS [Toward Excellence, Access & Success] Grant (see the [Web site](#) for additional information).

The information counselors provide about the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's Center for Financial Aid Information in these sessions must include the center's toll-free number, its Web address, and the various publications available to students and parents.<sup>15</sup>

**Tennessee**, which directs proceeds from its state lottery toward college scholarships for students in the state, passed legislation in 2005 requiring the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC), with the support of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the University of Tennessee system, and the state university and community college system, to hold a lottery scholarship day every school year "to inform high school students and their parents of financial assistance available from net lottery proceeds for attendance at eligible postsecondary institutions." TSAC, on lottery scholarship day, is to provide grade appropriate information regarding:

- Eligibility requirements for the various lottery scholarships
- Admissions requirements for eligible postsecondary institutions, and the differences between these requirements and the eligibility requirements for scholarships
- Computation of grade point averages for lottery scholarship eligibility, both for scholarship receipt and retention
- Testing dates for the ACT and SAT, the differences between these tests, and the use of such tests in admission decisions by eligible postsecondary institutions.

Lottery scholarship day must also offer workshops on filling out college applications and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); high school seniors and their parents must be provided the opportunity to complete the FAFSA at these workshops. At the end of the lottery scholarship day, TSAC is required to provide each high school with "a list of the students who attended the day, in order that the high school may ensure that all students not attending receive information on lottery scholarships, college admission standards, and other requirements for college attendance."<sup>16</sup>

### ***Postsecondary affordability***

Of course, financial aid information is only of limited help if the cost of college (even after financial aid) or the admissions requirements leave postsecondary education out of reach for too many families. In its 2003 session, **Texas** enacted legislation related to access and affordability, which may be the only of its kind in the nation. The policy requires the chief executive officer of each public two- and four-year institution in the state to provide the officer's governing board with a report for the last three semesters, examining the affordability and access of the institution. The report must include:

- Statistical information on the percentage of gross family income required for a Texas resident student to pay tuition and required fees
- The institution's admissions criteria
- An analysis of the criteria used to admit students and to award financial assistance to students, considering the mission of the institution and the purposes of higher education in this state
- An analysis of the manner in which the factors described by subdivisions (1)-(3) relate to:
  1. Regions of this state in which students reside
  2. Race or ethnicity of students
  3. Gender of students
  4. Level of education achieved by the parents of students
- Comparisons of the institution with peer institutions in this state and in other states with respect to affordability and access."<sup>17</sup>

## **Results**

The aforementioned efforts to increase student and parent awareness and preparation for postsecondary expectations have much promise for expanding postsecondary access, in that they appear to specifically address parents' and students' lack of information cited in many recent studies. However, because many of the policies are so new, definitive data on their impact will be available only in the years to come. For example, Texas adopted the requirements regarding postsecondary counseling in the first and final years of high school in 2001 – those high school freshmen in the fall of 2001 benefiting from such counseling graduated high school in the spring of 2005, leaving one year of data at best.

However, states are in the process of developing longitudinal data systems that will allow policymakers to track which students complete high school, go directly into a postsecondary institution, and emerge with a certification or degree two, four, six or more years later. **Arizona, Florida, Texas** and a handful of other states have developed or are in the process of developing such data systems. An ECS [database](#) provides greater detail on efforts to align K-12 and postsecondary data systems, as does the [Data Quality Campaign](#), an effort managed by the National Center for Educational Accountability and supported by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to improve the collection, availability and use of high-quality education data, and implement state longitudinal data systems to improve student achievement.

While states are expressing the desire for more students to graduate high school and complete a college degree, too many students will be left behind without explicit, ongoing guidance on academic preparation and parental involvement and knowledge about college. States must ensure that all students – not just those whose parents already know the way – receive accurate information about the academic and financial prerequisites to getting into and staying in college.

For further information on how schools, districts and parents can support those aspirations, please see the 2004 ACT report, [Schools Involving Parents in Early Postsecondary Planning](#), by George L. Wimberly and Richard J. Noeth.

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## Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Roderick, "Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform, School of Social Service Administration and The Consortium on Chicago School Research, The University of Chicago, for MDRC, April 2006. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/427/full.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Public Agenda,

[http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/red\\_flags\\_detail.cfm?issue\\_type=higher\\_education&list=4&area=3](http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/red_flags_detail.cfm?issue_type=higher_education&list=4&area=3), accessed July 25, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Public Agenda,

[http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/red\\_flags\\_detail.cfm?issue\\_type=higher\\_education&list=5&area=3](http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/red_flags_detail.cfm?issue_type=higher_education&list=5&area=3), accessed July 25, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "Leaks in the Postsecondary Pipeline: A Survey of Americans", Jobs for the Future and Lake Snell Perry & Associates, 2003.

[http://www.jff.org/JFF\\_KC\\_Pages.php?WhichLevel=1&lv1\\_id=4&lv2\\_id=0&lv3\\_id=0&KC\\_M\\_ID=99](http://www.jff.org/JFF_KC_Pages.php?WhichLevel=1&lv1_id=4&lv2_id=0&lv3_id=0&KC_M_ID=99)

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Roderick, "Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform, School of Social Service Administration and The Consortium on Chicago School Research, The University of Chicago, for MDRC, April 2006. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/427/full.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/betrayingthecollegedream.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/betrayingthecollegedream.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Monica Martinez, KnowledgeWorks Foundation and Shayna Klopott, Teachers College, Columbia University, "The Link between High School Reform and College Access and Success for Low-Income and Minority Youth," for the American Youth Policy Forum and Pathways to College Network, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Choy, Susan, *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence and Attainment*, National Center on Education Statistics, December 2001.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Choy, Susan, *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence and Attainment*, National Center on Education Statistics, December 2001.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 33.007

<sup>12</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 11.252

<sup>13</sup> WASH. ADMIN. CODE § 180-51-045

<sup>14</sup> MD. REGS. CODE tit. 13A, § 03.02.12, 09.09.09

<sup>15</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 33.007, § 61.1071

<sup>16</sup> TENN. CODE ANN. § 49-4-932

<sup>17</sup> TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 51.4031