

On Course for Success

A Close Look at
Selected High Schools
That Prepare All Students
for College and Work

Implications for Policymakers

In a new report entitled *On Course for Success*, ACT and The Education Trust examine ten high schools with challenging student populations that have overcome the odds by fostering greater access to college. What we have found is that when students are provided with high-level courses, qualified and experienced teachers, teaching that is flexible and responsive to students, and extra support when they need it, all students can be prepared to succeed.

A New High School Agenda

The need to improve high school education has taken on great urgency among educators and policymakers. Among all the competing ideas on the table, one significant area of consensus is emerging: that all students should be adequately prepared for the challenges of higher education and high-performing jobs when they graduate from high school. But while the goal for all students may be clear, the way to get there is just coming into view. Research shows, for example, that taking a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum in high school is the single biggest predictor that one will eventually earn a college degree. But what are the courses in this curriculum? What does “rigor” look like? What are the components that put students “on course for success?” It’s these questions that ACT and The Education Trust sought to answer.

The Study

Our study focused on “successful” high schools where the student population was at least 40 percent minority and/or at least 50 percent low-income. “Success” was defined as producing a significant proportion of graduates who had met

or exceeded ACT College Readiness Benchmark scores that predict at least a C grade in first-year college courses. We limited our study to English, mathematics, and science.

We selected ten qualifying schools to participate. With the help of the schools, we were able to identify the courses that the high-scoring students took and the teachers who taught them. We surveyed these teachers about their experience, teaching philosophy, and instructional practices. We then visited all ten schools, observed a total of 41 classrooms, and interviewed the teachers.

What we found is that students in these courses were provided key academic resources that previous research supports as having a positive impact on student learning:

- high-level college-oriented content,
- qualified and experienced teachers,
- teaching that is flexible and responsive to students, and
- extra support for students when they need it.

The added value of this study is that it begins to fill in the details about what these resources look like in practice. For example, we found a high incidence of teaching that made content meaningful to students through connections to the real world, other topics and subjects, and popular culture. We also observed teachers directing instruction while constantly taking and asking questions, heading off the possibility that a student will not understand.

Perhaps the major contribution made by this study comes out of the hundreds of instructional materials that we collected and analyzed. The artifacts provided the basis for the Model Course Syllabi and Course Descriptions that form the bulk of *On Course for Success*. These rich curricular models begin to provide real answers to the questions: What does rigor look like? How can it best be taught?

What Can Policymakers Do?

On Course for Success suggests several policies to improve high schools' ability to adequately prepare all students for a smooth transition to college, should they choose to go. These policies extend from the federal level to the classroom.

At the Federal Level

- **Provide additional funding to allow all students to have access to rigorous courses, highly qualified teachers, and additional in and out of classroom support.**

At the State Level

- **Reexamine high school standards and course requirements.** The content in the courses examined in this study exceeded the standards most states have established for high school graduation. States should reexamine their high school standards and graduation requirements in English, math, and science to see if they align to the courses featured in this study. This examination should include state assessments.
- **Ensure an adequate supply of qualified and experienced teachers.** The highly qualified teacher provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act are a starting point to making sure all students have the benefit of capable teachers who are experts in their subjects. Certification policies for secondary teachers should be evaluated for what they certify about teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills. States should pay special attention to making sure that high-poverty high schools have sufficient access to experienced teachers.

- **Support school-based programs to provide extra help for students.** High schools should be responsible for providing extra help before, after, and during school hours and, if needed, on Saturdays and in summer programs. States should help with the resources schools need to provide these services.
- **Define college admission and course placement requirements in terms of specific courses to be taken by students.** Work with postsecondary institutions to communicate admission and course placement requirements in terms of specific Courses for Success, rather than only in terms of the number of courses.

At the District Level

- **Reevaluate the content of college-oriented curricula as currently taught.** Just having the right course name doesn't guarantee that a course's content will focus on the skills students need to be ready for college. The syllabi and course descriptions in *On Course for Success* represent a starting point for evaluating present college-preparatory courses. They should also be used to inform the adoption of textbooks and other curricular materials.
- **Make sure all schools have teachers qualified to teach these courses.** Beyond certification, teachers need opportunities to maintain and enhance their mastery of the discipline and appropriate pedagogy.
- **Support the implementation of a high-level curriculum for all students.** School boards, superintendents, and community leaders should commit to providing all high school students with a college-preparatory curriculum. This means providing the necessary resources for qualified teachers, high-level curricular materials, and extra academic services for students when they need it.

At the High School Level

- **Reevaluate current courses, syllabi, and lesson plans for rigorous college-oriented content.** Begin with the composite syllabi and course descriptions in *On Course for Success*.
- **Make sure all students are taught this curriculum.** It's important that all students from grade 9 to grade 12 are prepared for the option of college. Administrators and counselors should be especially attentive to providing this curriculum to low-income and minority students who have not always had access to high-level content.

- **Provide students with help outside the classroom when needed.** High schools should organize tutorial help both during and outside school hours for students who need it. Counselors have a special responsibility to make sure that struggling students are not just offered help but actually receive it.

This is an ambitious agenda but one that's gaining currency across the nation. Increasingly, we know what needs to be done. This study sheds light on how to get there by showing what content and instruction will keep students *On Course for Success*.

Visit www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/success.html to read the full *On Course for Success* policy report.



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