

And They're Off! How States are Reexamining Students' Early Graduation from High School

Graduating early from high school provides today's students with more options. They can take advantage of a variety of postsecondary and career offerings sooner. As a high school teacher for 23 years, I know that many of my students would have benefited from the new models that are emerging in states today.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

For the last four decades, students have had the option to graduate early from high school. In almost two dozen states across the country, with parental consent, school and district notification, and course credit completion students may leave high school before their senior year, and even earlier in some cases ¹. Highly motivated and academically strong students have long taken advantage of early graduation.

But, today's policymakers are revisiting early graduation as they come to the realization that postsecondary remediation is too costly; that postsecondary institutions and potential employers need an assurance of proficiency over a set of core academic skills and content; and that time saved by students who meet their graduation requirements early presents opportunities for improving postsecondary preparation. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, remediation costs the country upwards of \$3.7 billion ².

To meet the needs of today's students, states are piloting and applying new approaches that make graduating early an accessible option for a variety of students. Early graduation is one of many strategies policymakers are eyeing within the larger context of reforming the nation's high schools.

States are leveraging the latter years of high school

Data show that persistent numbers of high school graduates continue to be unprepared for college. In fact, among full-time, first-time college students entering

four-year institutions in 2001, the six-year graduation rate among degree-seeking students was just 57 percent.³ Researchers also have found that "in the past, the opportunity to take college courses while still in high school was mainly offered to those students who already excelled beyond their grade level. However, education reform leaders are now looking at ways to reach out to a wider pool of students who can benefit from college coursework and, in the process, decrease the amount of remediation that needs to be offered at the college level."⁴

Noted findings by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year reveal that student motivation drops in the senior year; and, as a result, serious preparation for college ends at Grade 11. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling also warns that "slacking off" during the senior year even impairs students who kept up with their coursework throughout high school.⁵ According to former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley, college leaders described the senior year of high school as a "wasteland."⁶

To maintain students' academic momentum and decrease the need for postsecondary remedial courses, states are enlisting programs that keep students on track for the demands of college and a variety of career and technical education programs:

- **Board Examinations:** The National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) and eight states are collaborating to pilot an early graduation program, called the Board Examination Systems Program, that will offer 10th grade board exams –

tests that set at the level necessary to succeed in first-year college courses. If students pass these tests, they will receive their high school diploma and enroll in community college. If students do not pass, they may retake the exams and gain valuable insight to the knowledge and skills they need for postsecondary readiness. NEA is a supporter of the pilot program, and discussions and activities continue among collaborating state affiliates in Arizona, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Utah.

- **Dual Enrollment Plus:** The Education Commission of the States (ECS) reports that a small but growing number of states have developed programs that permit students to enroll full-time in postsecondary courses their final semester or year of high school. Though technically not an early graduation approach (since seniors in dual enrollment plus programs may be earning needed high school credit), such programs provide students who have completed all graduation requirements before the end of Grade 12 an opportunity to accrue postsecondary credits and keep their academic skills sharp.⁷

States are experimenting with financial incentives

In some states, students who complete all high school requirements before their senior year are eligible for state scholarships. These types of financial incentives are available in a small number of states, such as the Texas Early High School Graduation Scholarship Program, the Arizona Early Graduation Scholarship Program, and the Utah Centennial Scholarship Program.

Award amounts may reach as much as \$2,000 to offset tuition, books, and fees. Early graduation scholarship programs provide the largest awards to high school juniors and gradually decrease support for subsequent semesters. Students may use these non-need based awards at public or private institutions of their choice in addition to accredited career and technical education programs.

Early graduation scholarship policies are relatively new. ECS cautions policymakers against lowering graduation

requirements to allow students to graduate early. They also urge consideration of the potential difficulty for students with fewer credits to gain admission to more competitive postsecondary institutions, as well as ongoing issues surrounding transfer students should early graduates decide to leave the college originally attended following high school.⁸

States are strengthening collaborations with community colleges

For many students who graduate early, community college is the next stop. It is also where students' career and college readiness is tested and where the transition from high school to postsecondary success becomes delicate. In fact, a key component of NCEE's new Board Examination Systems Program is its focus on a mastery of skills that should reduce students' need for remedial courses.

Paramount to efforts to curb postsecondary remediation and ensure success is the relationship between high schools and colleges. As a result of an increasing awareness of the need for enhanced articulation between levels of institutions by administrators, parents, and state education department officials, more effective partnerships are developing.⁹

In 2007, the state of Illinois passed the College and Career Readiness Act, Public Act 095-0694, to fund pilot projects consisting of a community college and partner high schools to support the alignment of K-12 curriculum with college level coursework, as well as to better prepare students to be successful in transitioning from high school to college. The College and Career Readiness (CCR) Act has five main purposes: 1) align ACT scores to community college courses to diagnose college readiness; 2) reduce remediation through college preparatory courses, college readiness skills, and successful transitions; 3) align high school and college curricula; 4) provide resources and academic support to students; and 5) develop an evaluation process to measure the effectiveness of readiness programs.¹⁰

Although Illinois does not have a formal early graduation policy per se, students who have fulfilled their high school graduation requirements may petition to leave

school before their senior year. In addition, policies generated by legislation like the CCR Act reveal movements among policymakers that may have broader implications. For example, according to a related first-year evaluation report on the CCR Act, the legislation was successful in the following areas:

- One approach advanced by the CCR Act is for pilot sites to address the critical window when high school students at the junior level (Grade 11) take the ACT test as part of the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE), enroll in their senior year (Grade 12) of high school, and matriculate from high school to college in subsequent years.
- The community college administrators and liaisons work collaboratively with high school partners to facilitate and support curriculum alignment. By demystifying the teaching and learning process at both levels, faculty can better understand the gap between what high school students are learning and how they are expected to perform in college.
- An important advantage of the CCR Act is its potential to engage professionals throughout the state in a collective dialogue about college readiness.

Emerging policy areas for early graduation

Completing high school is the first step toward becoming an adult; yet, studies find that young people leave high school unprepared for current career realities and that both the career and personal areas of their lives are in a state of change and uncertainty.¹¹ Factors cited as hindering the post-high school transition included career confusion, lack of post-secondary educational opportunities, and difficulty in adjusting to post-secondary educational demands.

For this reason, NEA supports public high schools expanding graduation and promotion options for students and creating partnerships with colleges, alternative schools, and career and technical programs. The Association believes that states and local districts should employ multiple options in determining graduation and promotion requirements, and asserts that these options serve as valid indicators of readiness for postsecondary opportunities.¹²

Although early graduation is not a new option for students, many components of its more recent iterations will require more research and evaluation. As pilots and practices evolve, there are some areas of early graduation policy that are percolating and may be subjects of additional interest in future policy discussions:

- Advanced math and science: questions are being raised about early graduates earning fewer credits in middle- and advanced-level classes, as well as the low number of credits earned in math and science courses.¹³
- Middle school outreach: experiences of early college high schools – schools designed so that students can earn both a high school diploma and an associate’s degree or up to two years of credit toward a Bachelor’s degree – increasingly cite the necessity of bridge programs as critical to improving the academic and social preparation of high school students.¹⁴
- Early graduation as a cost-savings measure: proposals to eliminate the senior year of high school to save money periodically are floated among some state policymakers. Although early graduation is and may be becoming a more viable option for many students, efforts to rush graduating students before they are ready are being met with much public scrutiny.

References

- ¹ Education Commission of the States, Graduation Requirements database, "Additional Coursework Options and Requirements," last update February 2007: <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id+740>
- ² Alliance for Excellent Education, *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).
- ³ Knapp, L. G., Kelly-Reid, J. E., and Ginder, S. A. (2009). *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2007; Graduation Rates, 2001 & 2004 Cohorts; and Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2007*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
- ⁴ Karp, M. M., Bailey, T.R., Hughes, K.L. & Fermin, B. A. "State Dual Enrollment Policies: Addressing Access and Quality, 2004."
- ⁵ "Tips for Avoiding Senioritis," National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2000.
- ⁶ Remarks as prepared for delivery by U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, National Commission on the High School Senior Year, Washington, D.C., January 17, 2001.
- ⁷ "Helping Students Get a Head Start on the Real World: State Strategies for Early High School Graduation," Education Commission of the States, May 2010.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Arthur R. Greenburg. "High School-College Partnerships: Conceptual Models, Programs, and Issues." ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, 1992.
- ¹⁰ Baber, Lorenzo DuBois, Barrientos, Jessica I., Bragg, Debra D., Castro, Erin, Khan, Sadya. "The Illinois College And Career Readiness Act: Year-One Evaluation Results," February 2009.
- ¹¹ Amundson, N.E., Borgen, W.A., & Tench, E. (in press). "Personality and intelligence in career education and vocational guidance counseling." In D. H. Saklofske & M. Zeidner (Eds.) *International Handbook of Personality and Intelligence*, New York: Plenum.
- ¹² National Education Association 2009 Handbook.
- ¹³ Wright, Douglas E. "Utah's Early High School Graduation: A Descriptive Study Comparing Early Graduates with Traditional Graduates (Advanced Placement, School College Cooperation, Concurrent Enrollment)," 1996.
- ¹⁴ "Findings from the Early College High School Initiative: A Look at Best Practices and Lessons Learned Regarding a Dual Enrollment Program," The National High School Center, May 2007.

Resources

National Center for Education and the Economy

<http://www.skillscommission.org/boardexaminationproject.htm>

National High School Center

<http://www.betterhighschools.org/>

Education Commission of the States

<http://www.ecs.org>

National Association for College Admissions Counseling

<http://www.nacacnet.org/Pages/default.aspx>

Texas Early High School Graduation Scholarship Program

<http://www.collegefortexans.com/apps/financialaid/tofa2.cfm?ID=417>

Arizona Early Graduation Scholarship Program

<http://www.azgrants.gov/AZGrants2009/EGSG.html>

Utah Centennial Scholarship Program

http://www.schools.utah.gov/curr/early_college/Centennial.htm

