The Promise of Proficiency

How College Proficiency Information Can Help High Schools Drive Student Success

J.B. Schramm and E. Kinney Zalesne   December 2009

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Executive summary

Given the 21st century workforce's demands, educators and policymakers agree that high school's purpose has changed. Whereas the goal of high school used to be graduation, now it strives to launch students to college and career success.

Unfortunately, high schools' tools have not caught up with their mission. While schools have spent decades learning to measure and manage toward graduation, they now need the data and measurement tools that will demonstrate their college proficiency rate—or how well their students are doing the year after high school. Without this information they must rely on anecdotes at best and guesswork at worst.

And that seems risky, given education's importance to people's lives and to the economy. Indeed, asking schools to deliver postsecondary success without enabling them to measure postsecondary performance is to demand the impossible. After all, we wouldn't ask air traffic controllers to land planes with radars that shut down at 10,000 feet. We wouldn't let surgeons operate if they could only guess at how previous patients had done. And yet at the moment we are asking high schools to deliver students who can perform in college without giving schools the tools to know whether or how their current efforts are paying off.

Throughout America, districts, schools, and nonprofits are starting to see postsecondary data's value, and they are improving their offerings based on whether, where, and how successfully their graduates are enrolled the year after high school. The federal government, too, has begun to see the value of this data and is moving the needle forward, especially with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's call for better data systems and college proficiency reporting.

But the urgency of getting more American students to and through college means the federal government should use the significant opportunity it has to ground certain Recovery Act principles into lasting education policy. With three targeted steps, the federal government can help 21st century high schools meet their 21st century mission. Specifically, the federal government should:

• Support the gathering of college proficiency data by school, so that each school can see how their students are doing in "Year 13," or the first year after college

- Disseminate the data and empower educators to interpret the information and lead relevant programmatic change

- Support and reward high schools for progress in college proficiency, thus encouraging the visibility of and activity toward this success outcome

This paper is about helping every high school in America learn in a systematic, methodical way how its graduates are doing, whether in four-year colleges, two-year colleges, vocational programs, or apprenticeships. And it's about making sure high schools can use that information every day to make sound, strategic decisions to launch their students to postsecondary success.

Destiny's challenge

The following story illustrates the problem high schools run up against when they don't have tools to measure how their students are doing in Year 13.

Principal Charles Thomas runs Crossland High School in Prince George's County, MD. With more than 2,000 students, Crossland is a big, sprawling school that as recently as 2004 was considered one of the worst schools in the county. Barely 15 percent of students met achievement levels in algebra, barely 22 percent did in English, and only a handful of students took advanced placement courses.

In five years of Thomas's leadership, that has all changed. Algebra achievement has tripled to 62 percent, English achievement has risen to 76 percent, and more than one-third of Crossland students now take AP courses.[1] In 2008, Principal Thomas's innovations were highlighted in a Harvard Business School case study about how low-income schools are boosting their college-going culture.[2]

But then Principal Thomas met Destiny. An outstanding student at Crossland for four years, Destiny had won the school's highest awards and earned a full scholarship to college. When Destiny was a college freshman, however, Thomas got a letter from her mother.

"I am forever appreciative of everything Crossland did for Destiny," Mrs. Stuart wrote. "She is having a remarkable time in social activities at school, staying away from trouble at parties, and is excelling as a great leader in her ROTC class. But," she confessed, "Destiny felt as if her academic courses really didn't prepare her for what she was to face in college…Her roommate comments on how her college calculus class has been so much easier for her because she learned all that 'stuff' in high school."[3]

The letter shook Principal Thomas deeply. "I was haunted by it," he says. "We work hard at Crossland. We're sending kids to college. But if Destiny was struggling, then everybody was."

He stopped. "I'm responsible for that," he said. "I couldn't get the letter out of my head."

What Thomas could do was tell every teacher, counselor, and administrator in the school about Destiny's mother's letter. For all of the school's progress, he told them, even the top Crossland students were struggling in college. And so the school refocused its efforts.

Whereas they had set earlier goals to boost AP enrollment, now they set a new goal: At least 15 percent of their AP students—up from 2 percent—would score at least a 3 on the AP exams. Thomas threw himself into training, supporting, and inspiring his teachers to meet that goal.

But here's the problem: Crossland's reform came about by chance. But for a communicative mom, Principal Thomas would not have known that even the best Crossland students were struggling in college. No system, method, or process was in place to tell one of America's most reform-minded principals how his graduates were doing. Once he knew, he could make the difference he has been celebrated for. But until there was Destiny, there was merely chance.

College proficiency reporting makes sure we don't leave the success of America's high schools to chance.

High school's new mission

"Prep schools" bring to mind starched collars and ponytails, penny loafers and Latin-logo sweatshirts. It's a phrase from the days when only a privileged few students got "prepped" for college and everyone else was steered toward a "regular" job.

But for at least a generation in America, it hasn't been sufficient to merely earn a high school diploma. "Regular" jobs have dwindled, and the difference in earning power between a high school graduate and someone who's finished eighth grade has shrunk to nil.[4] More pointedly, as compared to other countries around the world, America is plummeting in its percentage of college-educated adults[5]—even as college-level thinking is becoming more, not less, critical for 21st century jobs.[6] Higher education's necessity means now all schools must be prep schools.

Indeed, the case for postsecondary education in America—from both an individual and societal perspective—is overwhelming. Among full-time workers, college graduates earn 74 percent more than high school graduates.[7] They are also half as likely to be unemployed,[8] pay almost $250,000 more in federal taxes over a lifetime than high school graduates,[9] and are more likely to vote, volunteer, exercise, and prepare their own children to succeed in school.[10] What's more, college benefits even extend to non-college-educated neighbors: For every 10 percent increase in the fraction of a city's population that has four-year degrees, regional wages at every educational level rise by 8 percent.[11]

Even partial completion of college is valuable: Full-time workers who have completed some college, but not all, earn about 22 percent more than those with high school diplomas.[12] Trade school graduates are said to make just under that.[13]

So as a matter of national policy, America's high schools must point every student toward success in Year 13. Studies show that whether that first year after high school involves college, vocational training, or an apprenticeship, success requires academically rigorous "college prep" training.[14] Focused attention on college preparation in grades 9 through 12 improves performance in both high school and college. When students see a link between their current work and their future plans, they recommit to the rigor of high school.[15] When they are taught how to navigate financial aid systems in their first year of college, and are helped to pick a postsecondary program that matches their academic and social needs, they persist and succeed in college at dramatically higher rates.[16] In short, college-going culture in high school drives college success.

"Those of us in the K-12 world need to realize our responsibilities don't end in high school."[17]

— Joel Klein, Chancellor, New York City Department of Education

A new survey conducted by professional services organization Deloitte[18] indicates low-income students and parents rank preparing students for college as high school's primary mission.[19] Employers know it, too. But for schools to be able to deliver on it, they need to know a lot more about what's happening post-graduation than what they may or may not learn by chance.

Year 13 data yields many nuggets of wisdom

Examples of how information on graduates can help high schools prepare students

Curriculum wisdom. Linda Calvo, principal of Arleta High School, a large school of 1,650 students in Los Angeles, CA, recalls the time an Arleta graduate stopped in and mentioned the trouble she was having in freshman English. "I went straight to my faculty," Calvo said, "and we talked about ways to strengthen our writing curriculum. But," she noted, "That was just one student—and a relatively successful one—who happened to drop in. It would be lovely if I had this kind of information in a comprehensive, methodical way."[20]

Student support wisdom. John Deasy, deputy director of education at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has a distinct memory from his days as a superintendent. "It was heartbreaking when we learned that even our best-prepared students were dropping out for financial aid reasons. That information prompted me and my staff to focus on financial aid training, to supplement all the gains we were making in academic rigor."[21]

College-matching wisdom. Bennett Lieberman, principal of Central Park East School in New York City, highlights the importance of credible Year 13 information in his guidance staff's college-matching work. When he or a colleague learns of a graduate's experience in college, the Central Park East team develops a more informed perspective to help current students choose the right school. Mr. Lieberman applauds this use of postsecondary data, but laments today's anecdotal system. "I want to gather postsecondary data on how all of our students fare so that our guidance staff can more precisely understand the student profile that succeeds, or fails, at particular colleges."[22]

College proficiency data offer the tools to match the mission

Imagine trying to run a great restaurant and not knowing that your diners are leaving their plates half full. Or trying to develop a cure for a disease and not knowing how the cure is doing in clinical trials. That is the situation high schools are in. They are trying to graduate students who will succeed in postsecondary study, but they don't even have rudimentary systems for finding out whether what they're doing is working.

The key data

High schools need to understand two things to equip today's students for college and career success:

- **College enrollment**, or the rate their graduates are enrolled in postsecondary study the semester after high school graduation

- **College proficiency**, or the rate their graduates complete at least one year of college credit, as applicable to a degree, within two years[23]

In recent years the federal government has paid laudable attention to college enrollment rates. In August 2008, as part of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, Congress called on the U.S. Department of Education to make publicly available the year-to-year postsecondary education enrollment rate trends of high school students, disaggregated by school.[24] This was a critical first step toward helping schools use postsecondary data to accomplish postsecondary success.

But to accompany college enrollment rates schools also need college proficiency data—both aggregate and anonymous student-unit data showing whether students are still enrolled in college months later and how they are doing. Right now principals have to hope they'll be lucky enough to hear from Destiny—what they need are systemwide, methodically gathered data on college proficiency. Such data are critical for three reasons.

First, what happens in Year 13 is proximate enough to be useful to a high school. If a school learns that its graduates are struggling in college math, but not in writing, the school can promptly take steps within its math program. If a school's college dropouts are

"In Massachusetts, the MCAST test administered in 10th grade tells us how successful K-8 was. But to know if 9-12 is successful, we need data on at least one year post-high school."[25]

— Doug McNally, former principal, Taconic High School, Pittsfield, Massachusetts

disproportionately Latino, it can target efforts in that community. And such responses can be implemented within time to make a difference.

As A. Richardson Love, program manager for education at the MetLife Foundation, says, "You can't ask high schools to take full responsibility for all of college. But there is a reasonable period of time when there is shared responsibility between K-12 and higher education."[26]

Second, college proficiency is a strong proxy for college graduation. The peak time for dropping out of college is the first year. If students make it through that year and enroll for a third semester, their chances of making it to graduation rise substantially.[27] That makes the first postsecondary year particularly worthy of attention from both high schools and colleges.

Finally, college proficiency measures actual college readiness. In recent years, there has been a strong movement to focus high schools not just on graduation, but on "readiness" for college and career.[28] The problem is that readiness tends to be measured by prospective indicators, like scores on standardized tests or number of advanced courses taken. As we saw in the case of Destiny, while those measures predict success, they don't confirm it. By contrast, college proficiency provides actual proof of whether a high school has fulfilled its mission. If a student succeeds in her first year of postsecondary study, it is axiomatic that her school prepared her.[29]

Using the data

One of the key lessons of recent years is that data alone do not improve student outcomes. To be truly useful data must be deployed by educators who trust it, understand it, and use it to launch students in accordance with their mission. Otherwise, data inspire hostility at worst or are utterly useless at best.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation understands how important data use is. Recently, it set out to help schools access college enrollment data, investing in the technical improvements needed to make the data systems complete *and* the usability solutions necessary to make the data meaningful to end users. This two-pronged approach is necessary, in the foundation's view, to ensure superintendents, principals, counselors, and teachers are able to see patterns and devise solutions in response to data.

The foundation engaged College Summit, whose Deloitte-developed data warehouse allows it to provide educators with more useful college enrollment reports. College Summit, whose staff has trained educators for more than a decade in how to use data, is helping the foundation train educators in how to take data from a bunch of numbers to the basis for strategic decision-making.

"We measure college 'readiness'—but the best indicator of high school performance is how many students are actually performing in college without remediation."[31]

— Tom Boasberg, superintendent, Denver Public Schools

Helping schools use postsecondary data
Two success stories

Learning to love the data

An Indiana High School struggled with its first forays into postsecondary data. One teacher was especially skeptical and even asked facilitators how they were going to skew the data so that it would say what they wanted it to say. But as the College Summit training progressed, the educators learned how they might regularly look at college enrollment data along with high school performance data to help students stay on track throughout high school. The same teacher who had initially been skeptical eventually expressed to her principal her desire to see the data more frequently.

The school today conducts monthly reviews of leading indicators for postsecondary success to identify students who are struggling and help them stay on the path to college.

Using data to drive change

Elise Darwish, the chief academic officer of the Aspire Schools, a charter schools network,[32] recognizes college enrollment data's impact on her students. Aspire educators and administrators have worked with College Summit to use college enrollment data as a networking tool—connecting recent high school graduates with Aspire alumni at the same college, and with counselors and on-campus support groups that the Aspire administration is closely connected to.

Darwish, who has used this data to drive academic and nonacademic reforms at Aspire, understands the value of knowing where former Aspire students are enrolling. "But," she concedes, "while it's really helpful to know where they're planning on going, it's even more helpful to know how they're doing once they get there."[33]

National momentum

Fortunately, policymakers are leading the way on the importance of postsecondary data, especially college proficiency. In his State of the Union address in February 2009, President Barack Obama called on all Americans to complete at least one year of postsecondary training.[34] Whether in a four-year college, two-year college, vocational program, or an apprenticeship, the president said, all students should finish high school and at least one additional year of higher-level preparation.[35]

In April 2009, as part of administering the State Fiscal Stabilization Funds included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asked states applying for funds to demonstrate "the number and percentage of students, by subgroup who graduate from high school … [and go on to] complete at least one year's worth of college credit, as applicable to a degree, within two years."[36]

And in November 2009, as part of its "Race to the Top" fund guidelines, the U.S. Department of Education again asked that states integrate concepts of college enrollment and proficiency into their respective education reform agendas. As part of their applications, states are required to articulate their plans to "[increase] college enrollment… and [increase] the number of students who complete at least a year's worth of college credit that is applicable to a degree within two years of enrollment."[37]

Along with the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act's call for college enrollment data, Secretary Duncan's recent actions represent a momentous shift. Federal policymakers have defined high school success as being tied to graduates' postsecondary performance for the first time in history.

Schools now need the tools to make this happen and the federal government can help them get there.

Successful businesses could never run without outcome data
Business leaders praise calls for postsecondary data prepare students

Not surprisingly, the business community praised Secretary Duncan's call for college proficiency measures, knowing how important outcome data is in their own work. In September 2009, as part of an effort organized by College Summit, the CEOs of companies from Deloitte to Google to Pepsico to the Dallas Mavericks joined high school principals and university presidents in cheering Secretary Duncan's call for postsecondary reporting.

"As the CEO of Pepsico," Indra Nooyi wrote, "I know my organization's metrics: profit, loss, employee recruitment and retention…With quality and meaningful data, I can understand what strategies are working and not working…"[38]

Google Chair and CEO Eric Schmidt agreed:

> With meaningful, quality data, we strategize and position our company for…success. Increasing the nation's…college-educated workers begins with increasing the quality and transparency of…reporting on college enrollment [and] college proficiency …."[39]

Barry Salzberg, CEO of Deloitte, concluded: "This reporting requirement measures what really matters: how well high schools are preparing students to enroll in and graduate from college."[40]

The tools are emerging

Thankfully, college enrollment and proficiency information is getting easier to obtain.

State longitudinal data systems

Since 2004, most states have been developing longitudinal data systems designed to connect—for the first time ever—their pre-K-12 and postsecondary student data. Thanks to the coordinating effort of the Data Quality Campaign and others, every state in the nation has made progress toward accomplishing the DQC's "10 elements" needed to support educators in moving students through pre-K to graduate school. (See Appendix for a full description of the 10 elements.) Six states have implemented all 10 elements, and almost all have implemented at least four. Twenty-eight have the capacity to link their Pre-K-12 systems to their postsecondary counterparts.

The great promise of state longitudinal data systems is not only the depth of the data, stretching as they do from pre-K to the end of college, but also the richness of the fields. The more advanced states, like Florida, can *already* track how students are doing in Year 13—and if the data suggest patterns or problems there is time to intervene.

As part of the 2009 Recovery Act the U.S. Department of Education committed $250 million in grant funding to support states in the further growth and development of their statewide longitudinal data systems. As of December 2009 the competition for these grants is underway.

Sample P-20 page[41]

National Student Clearinghouse

The second and more immediately useful resource is the National Student Clearinghouse, or NSC. Originally founded to verify student enrollment as a service to providers of student loans, the Virginia-based NSC now has a "StudentTracker for High Schools" program, which allows high schools to systematically learn when and where their graduates enroll, how long they persist, whether they transfer, whether they graduate, what their degrees are, and their courses of study.

For a nominal fee a school can get an annual report summarizing its graduates' enrollment rates, institution types, locations in or out of state, and most attended institutions. As of 2009 the NSC's database contains records on over 93 million students who are attending or have attended more than 3,300 colleges and universities, and it represents 92 percent of current enrollees in American higher education.

In 2009 the NSC launched its Secondary Education Research Initiative, funded in part by the Gates Foundation, to dramatically expand StudentTracker for High Schools.[42] The initiative aims to broaden both the completeness of the nation's postsecondary data, and, with College Summit's support, improve schools' ability to interpret and act on the information to improve student outcomes.

Sample NSC report page

REPORT OF CURRENT SCHOOL OF ENROLLMENT
SAMPLE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
Date of Report: December 1, 2004

| | Year of High School Graduation | | | | | | |
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
Total # High School Graduates	400	420	435	455	480	500	2690
Total College Enrolled	37	105	166	198	240	350	1097
% of High School Graduates	9%	25%	38%	44%	50%	70%	41%
By College Type:							
Less Than 2 Year	0	0	1	4	5	18	28
2 Yr. Public	3	8	10	13	24	58	116
2 Yr. Private	1	2	2	5	10	12	32
4 Yr. Public	30	79	119	137	157	210	732
4 Yr. Private	4	16	34	39	44	53	189
By Enrollment Status:							
Full-Time	24	67	106	127	154	224	702
Half-Time	12	33	51	61	74	109	340
Less Than Half-Time	2	5	8	10	12	18	55
By Location:							
In-State	28	79	124	149	180	263	822
Out-of-State	9	26	41	50	60	88	274
Top Schools:							
1 Finest State University	9	25	38	44	50	67	233
2 Community College of the County	3	7	8	15	30	49	112
3 Learned College	2	8	18	21	23	28	100
4 University of Knowledge	2	5	8	9	10	14	48
5 University of Books	2	5	7	8	10	13	45
6 Studious University	2	5	7	8	9	12	43
7 City Community College	1	2	2	4	8	14	31
8 Library College	1	3	6	7	7	9	33
9 Great State University	1	2	2	3	3	7	18
10 City Institute of Technology	0	0	1	2	3	10	16
…etc.							

Note: This report reflects students' enrollment in postsecondary institutions as of the date of this report.

Both the state longitudinal data systems and the NSC resource are triggering innovative reactions from schools and districts. Some states, such as Missouri, have made "college placement" a key reporting metric for district accreditation. Several cities, including Chicago, Austin, Denver, Boston, and Milwaukee have formed consortia to analyze their districts' postsecondary data and make comprehensive recommendations to maximize student success.

Spotlight on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
School district in North Carolina sees value in postsecondary data

In many cases, districts are just now waking up to the possibilities data can provide. Robert Avossa, chief accountability officer at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, or CMS, said, "We didn't know postsecondary data was so easy to get…Our people couldn't imagine revamping our approach, because we had no way of knowing, beyond anecdotes, how our students fared when they left CMS. Now, we've got the data, so the question is what can we learn from it."[43]

Early lessons are telling. From Charlotte-Mecklenburg's first NSC report, the district learned that African-American students who scored at the same levels on tests as their white counterparts enrolled in college at a higher rate, whereas Hispanic students with similar test scores enrolled at lower rates.

"This data refined our focus," Avossa said. "We realized that different groups face different barriers to postsecondary success. Now, we can differentiate our approaches," including boosting the number of African-American students who get high scores, boosting college enrollment among strong-testing white students, and learning what was holding talented Hispanic students back.

When districts couple postsecondary measurement with systemic supports, they achieve dramatic gains. Two leading examples are Chicago Public Schools and St. Louis Public Schools, which have measured their college enrollment rates and instituted systemic reform during this past decade.

In 2003, Chicago Public Schools developed a comprehensive postsecondary initiative, largely in-house, that coordinates external resources, including those of various nonprofit programs, and organizes their equitable and strategic distribution within the district.[44] St. Louis Public Schools has co-developed a district-wide postsecondary intervention with College Summit, which provides, according to Assistant Superintendent Dr. Dan Edwards "a successful college application and awareness process for our students."[45] The outcomes in both districts are promising (see graphs on page 14).

Chicago, Illinois: Increases in college enrollment[46]

Enrollment in two- and four-year institutions
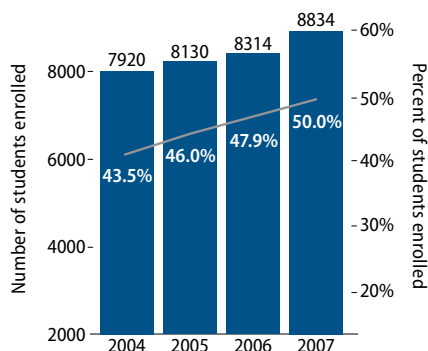
College students enrolled in four-year institutions
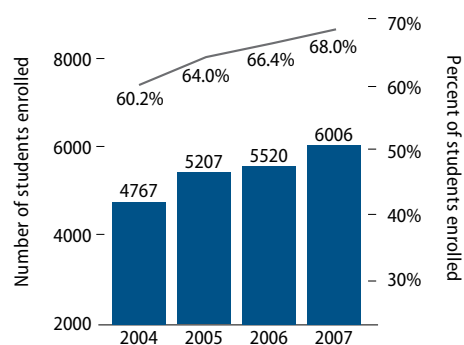
St. Louis City Postsecondary Rates Compared with Neighboring Counties[47]

The total number of graduates going to college and the persistence rate in the four largest St. Louis metropolitan counties

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total mean	Percent change
St. Louis City							
Number in college	658	898	799	951	903	4,209	37.2%
Persistence rate	0.52	0.64	0.57	0.63	0.65	0.60	24.7%
St. Louis							
Number in college	7,799	7,783	7,594	7,714	7,915	38,805	1.5%
Persistence rate	0.79	0.78	0.76	0.78	0.76	0.77	-4.5%
Franklin							
Number in college	680	740	714	710	732	3,576	7.6%
Persistence rate	0.66	0.64	0.66	0.65	0.63	0.65	-4.8%
Jefferson							
Number in college	1,636	1,492	1,413	1,606	1,773	7,920	8.4%
Persistence rate	0.71	0.67	0.67	0.68	0.72	0.69	1.4%

How the federal government can catalyze data use

The tools to measure college enrollment and proficiency are developing. What remains is to make it common practice that high schools get and use their college proficiency data. To make this happen the federal government should do three things to sustain and extend recent progress made in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act:

1. Support the gathering of college enrollment and proficiency data for every school in the nation.
2. Disseminate postsecondary data and empower educators to use it.
3. Reward schools that make substantial progress in raising their college proficiency rates.

Support the gathering of college enrollment and college proficiency data

Through the state longitudinal data systems and the National Student Clearinghouse, enormous strides have been made in generating postsecondary data in a way that schools can use. But these systems are far from complete because they are still unable to generate user-friendly data in a secure and comprehensive manner.

According to the Data Quality Campaign, as of November 2008, 28 states can connect their pre-K-12 and higher education system records. But 22 others cannot, citing reasons ranging from lack of resources to privacy to K-12 and higher education system incompatibility.[48]

Even among the 28 states whose data systems "speak" to each other, their data includes only in-state, public enrollment. So if a student graduates from South Miami Senior High School and attends Florida State University, her data will be retrievable in Florida's system, but if she attends Florida Institute of Technology or Alabama A&M, it will not.

As described earlier, the federal government's $250 million Recovery Act investment in state data systems and the guidelines it has articulated in the current "Race to the Top" competition will go a long way toward helping states move toward completion and interoperability. But states need an even more systemic call to pursue common goals and directions.

Congress should amend the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002, which authorized the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program, to ensure that states receiving funds under this act are held accountable to the Data Quality Campaign's "10 elements" and "10 actions" that are required to make the systems internally complete and linkable to each other.

The amendment should also articulate minimum common data definitions and standards that can be used across sectors and states to ensure the availability of college proficiency data. Finally, the amendment should specify that 5 percent of SLDS funds are to be set aside for the kind of capacity-building work described below in the second federal role.

Disseminate the data and empower educators to use it

Congress should appropriate $25 million for the program it authorized in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008—HEOA Part H Section 808—calling for the U.S. Department of Education to work across the public, nonprofit, and private sectors to make postsecondary data by high school available and useable to all educators. With that funding the department could make sure that by drawing on readily available resources, college proficiency and postsecondary attainment reports are created for every American high school.

The funding would also be used to engage experts in data analysis, and professional-development services to be delivered by nonprofits, universities, researchers, foundations, and/or private-sector entities to help principals and teachers identify practical ways to improve their students' postsecondary results. Every high school educator should be able to recount insight into their students' postsecondary performance, much like the moment of learning Principal Thomas shared. While there may be other legislative vehicles to consider, funding this already authorized program in the HEOA is the surest way to do this.

Provide support and rewards for progress in college proficiency

Congress should support schools in boosting their college proficiency rates to raise the profile of college proficiency data.

Building on the $13 billion Recovery Act allocation under Title I and the president's proposed 2010 budget increase for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's School Improvement Program, Congress should—in Section 1003(g) of ESEA—articulate that "the creation of a college-going culture" be a required intervention by states and districts using school improvement money to turn around low-performing high schools. This is consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's Recovery Act guidance that "college-going culture" is a strategy that states and districts could use to drive results for all students.[49]

And as part of this change to ESEA, Congress should authorize direct federal financial awards to high schools that demonstrate at least a 10 percent increase in their college proficiency rate over two years. This two-part approach—support for improving college proficiency rates and reward for succeeding at it—will draw schools' attention to college proficiency's power and promise.

Conclusion

High schools need tools to launch students to postsecondary success. High school hasn't been an end in itself for a generation, and "readiness" no longer suffices. A secondary education is either a launch pad to postsecondary success or it's a very short, icy runway.

But asking schools to deliver postsecondary success without enabling them to measure postsecondary performance is imposing an impossible burden. Schools can't match their offerings to their students' postsecondary needs if they don't know whether their current efforts are working.

Fortunately, the momentum is out there—including within the government—to collect, become comfortable with, and use postsecondary data. Now the federal government needs to catalyze this progress, putting certain key Recovery Act measures into long-term law and funding the measures already put in place in the Higher Education Opportunity Act. Only when educators have and strategically deploy information on how their former students are doing can they effectively prepare their current students to succeed.

Appendix

Ten essential elements of a state longitudinal data system[50]

(The following is an abridged version of Data Quality Campaign produced materials.)

Each state's education system is unique, but the Data Quality Campaign proposes 10 essential elements for any longitudinal data system.

1. **Statewide student identifier.** A unique statewide student identifier is a single, nonduplicated number that is assigned to and remains with a student throughout his or her pre-K-12 career. A unique statewide student identifier assigned to every student in the pre-K-12 system provides a way to follow students as they move from grade to grade and across campuses and/or districts within the state.

2. **Student-level enrollment data.** Accurate information on student enrollment, demographics, and program participation—for example, student participation in special education or the free and reduced price lunch program—is essential to evaluate the effects of schools and programs and to assess student mobility and continuous enrollment's effects on learning.

3. **Student-level test data.** States should maintain a statewide database of individual student performance on state exams with the ability to disaggregate the results by individual item and objective in order to provide good diagnostic information to teachers. This database should also match individual students' records across time and with other databases (enrollment, course completion, and graduation databases).

4. **Information on untested students.** States need to go further than tracking students who do not take tests to find out why they are not tested and then match those records to separate enrollment and program participation databases. This makes it possible to identify patterns associated with specific student populations—for example, special education students or English language learners—and ensure that all students are held to high expectations.

5. **Statewide teacher identifier with a teacher-student match.** Matching teachers to students by classroom and subject is critical to understanding the connection between teacher training and qualifications and student academic growth. Collecting this data

makes it possible to identify which students and which courses are being taught by teachers with different levels and types of preparation or certification, and which forms of teacher training and certification have the greatest impact on students' academic growth in the classroom.

6. **Student-level course completion (transcript) data.** Many states encourage students, particularly low-income and minority students, to take rigorous courses in high school so that they are better prepared for success in postsecondary education and the job market. In most states, however, course-taking data is not collected at the state level, making it impossible to monitor these policies' impact. To fill in the missing information, states should collect student-level transcript information from middle and high school, including courses taken and grades earned.

7. **Student-level SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement Exam data.** States need to collect and report student performance data on college admissions, placement, and readiness tests to ensure students make a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education. Student performance on SAT, SAT II, ACT, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate exams are important indicators of students' college readiness.

8. **Student-level graduation and dropout data.** States need to be able to track individual students over time to calculate the graduation rates defined in the new National Governors Association compact. The calculation of accurate graduation rates also requires the ability to accurately account for what happens to students who leave public education. For example, states must be able to distinguish correctly between departing students who drop out or get a GED from students who transfer to another school.

9. **Ability to match student-level pre-K-12 data and higher education data.** As states and school systems work to align expectations in high school with the demands of postsecondary education, they need better data on students' success when they leave the P-12 system and enter college.

10. **A state data audit system.** Invalid or unreliable reporting by some schools and districts is a problem in a number of states, and this problem will likely continue without checks on the accuracy and quality of data submitted by schools and districts. The public can't be confident in the quality of the information coming out of its state's public education system without a well-designed and well-implemented state data audit system.

Ten state actions for effective data use[51]

The Data Quality Campaign has identified three overarching imperatives for changing the culture around data use and maximizing states' investments in longitudinal data systems. Within these imperatives the DQC also has identified 10 actions states should take to make certain key stakeholders use the data effectively.

Imperative I: Expand the ability of state longitudinal data systems to link across the P-20 education pipeline and across state agencies

- Link state K-12 data systems with early learning, postsecondary education, workforce, social services, and other critical state agency data systems.
- Create stable, sustained support for robust state longitudinal data systems.
- Develop governance structures to guide data collection, sharing, and use.
- Build state data repositories—such as data warehouses—that integrate student, state, financial, and facility data.

Imperative II: Ensure data can be accessed, analyzed, and used, and communicate data to all stakeholders to promote continuous improvement

- Implement systems to provide all stakeholders timely access to the information they need while protecting student privacy.
- Create progress reports with individual student data that provide information educators, parents, and students can use to improve student performance.
- Create reports that include longitudinal statistics on school systems and student groups to guide school-, district-, and state-level improvement reports.

Imperative III: Build the capacity of all stakeholders to use longitudinal data for effective decision making

- Develop a purposeful research agenda and collaborate with universities, researchers, and intermediary groups to explore the data for useful information.
- Implement policies and promote practices, including professional development and credentialing, to ensure that educators know how to access, analyze, and use data appropriately.
- Promote strategies to raise awareness of available data so that all key stakeholders, including state policymakers, know how to access, analyze, and use the information.

About College Summit

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College Summit helps its partners use a systemic, data-driven approach to increasing college-going rates, including professional development services, peer leadership training, and a postsecondary planning curriculum.

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The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

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Acknowledgments

Endnotes

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