



Raising the Bar for Student Success | Commentary

Posted Aug 4, 2014 12:00 PM
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For the first time in our history, American students have crossed the 80 percent high-school graduation rate threshold, remaining on pace to reach a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020. To succeed in today's economy, earning a high school diploma is a necessary first step, not the end goal. Yet too often, the path to a diploma is not rigorous enough to prepare our graduates for their next steps. America cannot compete globally if 20 percent of our team isn't at the starting line, and still others are not prepared for success in college or their careers.

Implementing more rigorous standards is not a silver bullet to improve educational outcomes. However, common sense dictates that if we continue to set a low bar, we will never reach a higher target. Our students must have access to a rigorous education that will prepare them for college and career, regardless of zip code, race, ethnicity or income.

In order to move forward, educators, policymakers, parents and students must acknowledge that based on measures of college preparedness, too many students are completing high school without the skills to succeed in a knowledge-based and global labor market. College and career readiness benchmark scores set by the SAT and ACT have flat lined over the past five years. And the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's most recent Survey of Adult Skills reveals that U.S. adults rank below their international peers in every area measured — literacy, numeracy and problem-solving with technology. We must boost the rigor of American education and adopting high standards, such as those set by the Common Core State Standards, is a necessary first step.

The Common Core was built on the best existing state standards with the support of teachers, Republican and Democratic governors, policymakers and the business community. All wanted to create "consistent, real life learning goals" — without dictating how information should be taught — and recognized that whether you live in New York, Alabama or Colorado students should master the same fundamental English language arts and math concepts. Common Core significantly raised the bar in many states and set a goal of eliminating disparities in rigor that persist nationwide. For example, while standards in states such as Massachusetts rival those of the Common Core, the state standards in Connecticut, Illinois and Pennsylvania received a D grade from the Fordham Institute.

These higher standards will not be simple to implement, and students will need time to meet higher expectations. For example, Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core in the fall of 2010, replacing state standards that had ranked Kentucky among states with the lowest English and math standards in the nation. During the first year of the new Common-Core-aligned assessments, the portion of Kentucky students who scored “proficient” or better in reading and math dropped by approximately one-third for elementary and middle schools. Second year results were also disappointing: students at all three levels missed the state’s performance targets in reading and math.

However, after these struggles, there are signs that the Common Core are beginning to have the desired impact. Through data, states are not only able to track how far they have to go, but understand in real time the progress being made. Kentucky Commissioner of Education Terry Holliday stated, “In the last four years in Kentucky, the number of high school graduates who have met enough standards to be deemed college-ready has gone from 34 percent to 54 percent.” There is still an uphill battle ahead, but Kentucky’s education community, including the majority of teachers in the state, believe that implementing the Common Core provides a good path forward.

There’s a great deal to learn from the experiences of those states implementing Common Core, and that information can help us improve policy and scale what works. Using this evidence-based framework, and raising standards, will give students the opportunity to excel after high school graduation.

Yes, the work is difficult, but a challenging implementation does not mean we should take the easier road. The Common Core significantly improved the educational standards previously in place in most states and has the potential to help eliminate some of the disparities in rigor that persist among schools and districts in the same state. We must work together to raise the bar rather than throw in the towel.

Graduating all students from high school — college and career ready — is the current goal. If we give them our full support, schools, teachers and students will rise to the challenge.

Melody Barnes and John Bridgeland were former directors of the White House Domestic Policy Council under Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, respectively. Both serve on the advisory board of Results for America, an initiative of America Achieves.