



10 Strategies for Raising Achievement *and* Improving High School Completion Rates

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SREB

No state can afford to have the percentage of young people who are failing to finish high school remain at the present high levels nor can we afford to ease our standards. We only have one choice and that is to get *more* students to meet standards. We must raise *both* achievement *and* graduation rates. Following are 10 strategies that states can implement to raise achievement and increase high school completion rates.

1. Initiate a transition program for middle grades to high school.

Over the past two decades graduation requirements have been raised and high-stakes exams for graduation and school accountability have been put into place, and we have seen a significant increase in failure rates at grade nine. The ninth grade failure rate now exceeds 15 percent in eight SREB states, up from just four states in 1990. In three states the failure rate exceeds 20 percent. Research indicates that failing grade nine reduces a student's chances of finishing high school by 50 percent. The solution is not to lower standards, but to accelerate the middle grades curriculum so that fewer students enter grade nine unprepared for challenging high school work and to develop special catch-up courses the first half of the ninth grade that enable students to succeed.

2. Require schools to develop an extra-help system aimed to assist students recover when they fail a grade or a course and to pass high-stakes exams.

When you find a high school that is both raising achievement and holding students in school, you will find a persistent effort by the school to help students pass their courses and to provide alternative opportunities for them to retake courses, so that they can stay on track to graduate with their peers. Some schools enroll all ninth-graders who have not had algebra into a common algebra course. Those students who fail the first grading period after extensive extra help start again and the process is repeated until each student has met all course standards.

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3. Require that every student develop a five-year program of study that covers four years of high school and one year beyond.

Parents must be intimately involved in helping to shape and approve the plan. Students with a five-year plan and a personal adviser who supports them in staying on track are more likely to view high school as important to their future.

4. Require high schools to provide students access to quality career/technical studies in high-demand, high-paying career fields.

To hold some students, it is important that they see a connection between high school and a good job. When you find schools that are raising achievement *and* holding students in school, one common element you find is revamped career/technical programs that students believe will lead to better jobs. Often these program are aligned with two-year community and technical colleges. Some researchers have concluded that the best chance for some at-risk students to complete high school is to enroll in three or four academic courses along with at least one career/technical course in grades nine through 12.

5. Require every high school teacher — academic, technical, fine arts and other — to be trained in how to use content-literacy skills and study skills to help students become independent learners in the teacher's subject matter.

Many of the students who fail in high school do not have good study skills and do not have the literacy strategies needed to learn subject-matter content independently. Many high school teachers do not have a repertoire of teaching methods that engage students in reading and writing about the subject matter they are teaching. Nor do they know how to give assignments in such a way that causes students to practice and use good study skills. Unless high school teachers teach in ways that make all students more independent learners, they may not motivate some students to make the effort necessary to meet higher course standards.

6. Require every high school to develop a formalized initiative for the transition from high school to college and careers.

Students who have demonstrated that they are ready for college at the end of grade 11 should have the opportunity during the senior year to earn college credit through dual-enrollment, enrollment on college campuses, Advanced Placement, Web-based instruction or distance learning. Many students should aim to earn 15 semester hours of college credit. For those students who are likely to need remedial courses in college, states should require catch-up courses during the senior year. States could lead the effort, as North Carolina is doing, to offer a catch-up mathematics course designed to teach those essential mathematics skills that would enable students to be placed into credit-bearing mathematics courses at a four-year or two-year college. A similar type of course can be developed in reading and language arts. Finally, local colleges could devise a high school program on campus for at-risk students that would still meet the state's accountability standards but provide a more adult-like learning environment.

7. Expand the use of technology in high school to improve achievement on core academic courses to help students recover when they fail a course and to meet standards on exit exams.

Technology is being used as a major strategy by some high schools to keep students on track to graduate with their peers. Computer-based instructional packages are used to supplement instruction and to aid students in passing core academic courses required for graduation. Courses via the Web and other systems for distance learning can be delivered using commercially and locally-developed materials. Expanding the numerous technology-based options available allows students to earn credit, recover credit for failed courses and prepare for high-stakes exams.

8. Examine state policies and their impact on improving graduation rates.

- Today there are 32 states participating in the *High Schools That Work* initiative. Several of these states permit students to leave school at age 16; seven of these states permit students to leave at age 17, and eight of these states require students to be at least 18 in order to leave. In many instances, those that have the 17- or 18-year age requirement also have various exceptions. Are we making it easy for schools to encourage some students to leave school early? As the percentages of those who do not graduate from high school approaches 40 percent in some of our states, we are on the verge of producing a large, undereducated class for too few low-level jobs. Should we look at ways to raise the age requirement?
- State policies that make it possible for students to take the GED at 16 and 17 encourage students to drop out of school, and many of these students never show up to take the GED. Only about 20 percent of students who leave school at ages 16 and 17 take and pass the GED. Will lowering the age at which students can take the GED make it possible for schools to encourage some students to leave school knowing that they are not prepared to take the GED, but create an “easy-out” option? Do we need to re-examine the GED? Having to satisfy 22 different teachers to pass 22 different courses is a far more rigorous standard than being able to pass a three-hour exam.
- Do we need to begin to adopt some flexibility in our assessment for high school graduation? For example, Virginia does not require students to retake the entire test if they have only failed parts of it. The state provides instruction to help students and allows them to retake the portion(s) of the exam that they failed. In most of our states, students have to take the entire exam again. Secondly, most state assessment exams for graduation involve *academic* achievement. Virginia has made it possible for students who can pass national employer exams to get credit for those exams for graduation purposes. Many European countries with high school completion rates in the 90 percent range use similar kinds of exams or other forms of assessment. And finally, if a student has failed the state exam several times, *but* passes all the other requirements for graduation, should states permit the GED to become an alternative exam? Isn't it better to have students stay in high school and pass all the coursework and then take the GED than to leave school at 16 and perhaps take it?
- States should also look at their accountability provisions and the provisions of Adequate Yearly Progress. One principal at an inner-city high school recently confided, “I have one of the lowest dropout rates in the city, but my school is greatly penalized. When you deal with at-risk youth, you are going to have higher absentee rates and they will pull down the overall achievement of all your students. Our performance would appear far better if I did what some do and got those students out of school as quickly as possible.” A question that every state policymaker needs to examine is “Are our state accountability indicators balanced?” Do they give an equal emphasis to raising achievement and holding youth in school? Do they recognize special efforts by schools to keep struggling, at-risk students in school? Is that factored into the accountability measures?

9. Develop a special emphasis on the lowest-performing high schools in the state, including those that have the lowest achievement and the lowest high school completion rates.

The Johns Hopkins University has recently identified more than 2,000 high schools in America with 300 or more students that graduate 60 percent or fewer of the students that enrolled in grade nine four years earlier. All SREB states have some of these schools, and some SREB states have many of these schools. In fact, more than 1,200 of these schools are in the 16 SREB states. There are two special emphases, in addition to the eight strategies already identified, that states should require of these lowest-performing schools:

- Require the state's most chronically low-performing schools to adopt a research-based school-improvement design, such as *High Schools That Work*, First Things First or Talent Development. Every state receives federal Comprehensive School Reform funding that could provide the money required for these schools to adopt a whole-school improvement design.
- In implementing a comprehensive reform design, the state can ask these schools to consider organizing themselves into small learning communities — 250-350 students in grades nine through 12. Small learning communities organized around broad career themes and rigorous academics can improve attendance, graduation rates and achievement.

10. Create a state leadership academy directed at developing a team of district and school leaders for the chronically low-performing, low-completion-rate high schools.

Sending an expert in will work for a period of time. But when the expert leaves, you still haven't developed the leadership capacity at the district or school to carry on the reform. SREB has developed 14 leadership modules that could easily be adapted and used by states to create and deliver an intensive leadership academy for these lowest-performing high schools.

In summary, eight strategies on the list of top 10 apply to all high schools, but two are specific to the lowest-performing high schools in each state. States may want to create a high school center within the state to focus on implementation of these 10 strategies. Regional service agents, universities and state educational agencies would all become a part of such a center's effort. These 10 strategies offer potential, but like any list of strategies they only work if implemented and if lessons learned from them are used to refine the effort.