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# HIGH SCHOOLS AS LAUNCH PADS

How College-Going Culture  
Improves Graduation Rates  
in Low-Income High Schools

**HIGH SCHOOLS AS LAUNCH PADS:**  
How College-Going Culture Improves Graduation  
Rates in Low-Income High Schools

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### Summary

High schools and policy makers are increasingly focusing on reducing the dropout rate, which is nearly 50 percent in low-income communities. This important goal can be advanced by pushing schools and students to look beyond secondary education. A growing body of research suggests that students who work hard in high school do so because they connect their efforts with college and career rewards after high school. Therefore, *in order to raise graduation rates, schools need to stop seeing high school graduation as their ultimate goal and start seeing themselves as a launch pad for college and career success.* Our paper supports this argument with 1) College Summit's experience over the past fifteen years, 2) studies on factors affecting student graduation, and 3) lessons learned from best practices in the field. These sources confirm that building a college-going culture in high school not only increases the likelihood of college degree attainment, but also improves the likelihood that students will graduate from high school college-ready. We then provide policy recommendations at the school district, state and federal level to foster these "launch pad" high schools, with a focus on 1) improving the reliability of college participation data by high school; 2) establishing an objective long-term high school success measure; and 3) providing incentives for high schools to invest in building college-going culture.

## INTRODUCTION

When Carmen, a student at the University of New Haven, speaks about her high school alma mater, she contrasts her experience with that of her older sister. Growing up, Carmen's sister shared stories about shootings and violence within Martin Luther King, Jr. High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice and the apathy that most students felt about their schoolwork. Only 97 of the 280 students who had entered the school four years earlier graduated in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

Carmen followed her sister to MLK after it had been transformed into four small schools in 2002. The school's new principal, Miriam Nightengale, stressed to faculty and students that "reform is hard work." She told the students, "Make no mistake: it takes more effort to take tougher courses, to come to school on time, to complete homework on schedule. But the reward is worth it. And the reward is college and the career of your choice." Principal Nightengale was surprised when a student said to her, "I don't believe you." The principal realized then that it would not be enough to talk "college" and put up posters. MLK would need to make the reward of college real.

Principal Nightengale turned to Larry Block, her Local Instructional Superintendent, for guidance. He recommended that she develop a college-going culture and identified College Summit as a partner to support her efforts. College Summit is a national nonprofit organization that builds the capacity of high schools to raise their college enrollment rates and create the kind of college-going culture that helps all students stay on track academically and graduate college-ready. For more than a decade, College Summit has been equipping high schools and school districts nationwide with a college-going culture solution that in 2008 is supporting the work of over 160 high schools serving 80,000 total students in 12 states and the District of Columbia. The primary model provides college-going culture tools for all seniors in a high school to help them through the college navigation process. A second model under development provides college-going culture tools for every high school student in the building, starting in 9th grade.

Principal Nightengale identifies College Summit as a core part of her strategy for building college-going culture at MLK and establishing "College Enrollment Rate" as a success measure. MLK accessed College Summit training for its faculty and added a required course to help students create postsecondary plans, complete financial aid forms, and apply to college. Faculty members implemented college-going culture strategies throughout the building first by changing their own beliefs about students and then shaping the culture of the school. They shifted the question from *How do we stop kids from dropping out?* to *How can we increase college enrollment?* The school also

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### College Summit's primary model provides four basic tools to its partner schools:

1. Transformative leadership training to equip a select group of influential seniors to build college-going culture in their school.
  2. Professional development and college-going expertise for teachers and counselors.
  3. A year-long curriculum on college/postsecondary planning for all high school seniors.
  4. Data reports offering clear metrics month-to-month of college planning, application, and eventual college enrollment rates for schools/districts.
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recruited its most influential students – rising seniors who attended a four-day residential workshop to complete their applications and receive peer leader training – to push their classmates and younger students to take similar steps. Students shifted their thinking from *No one from here goes to college* to

*What colleges are you applying to?* Finally, the school put in place a data tracking system to measure its progress via leading indicators such as completion of college essays and college lists, and submitting complete applications to college. Now the school sees data that immediately shows if innovations are succeeding or failing in getting their students into college.

After just three years under Principal Nightengale's leadership, one hundred percent of the 2008 senior

class not only applied to college, but was accepted, and *US News and World Report*<sup>2</sup> ranked Martin Luther King, Jr. High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice as one of the finest high schools in the country.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the school's high school graduation rate has risen from below 50 percent to 70 percent. These results show that it is possible to transform failing schools with the support of a focused strategy on building a college-going culture.

## HIGH SCHOOLS AS LAUNCH PADS

The experience of MLK suggests a correlation between college-going culture and high school graduation rates that has become increasingly evident in College Summit high schools. The correlation suggests that in order to raise high school graduation rates, *high schools need to stop telling students that high school graduation is their ultimate goal and start showing them that the purpose of a high school is to serve as a launch pad for their college and career success.*

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*“High schools as launch pads’ is exactly the direction we are heading in DCPS. A college-going culture needs to permeate everything our high schools are doing.”*

MICHELLE RHEE  
CHANCELLOR, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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In recent years, policy makers and advocates have focused their efforts on increasing graduation rates. Indeed, the dropout rate has reached epidemic proportions, with fifty percent of African American and Latino students, and nearly half of students in urban school districts leaving high school without graduating.<sup>4</sup> The implications of dropping out last a lifetime. A single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and

productivity.<sup>5</sup> Four out of every ten young adults (ages 16 - 24) lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001. High school dropouts are also more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as are individuals with at least a high school diploma. Studies show that the lifetime cost to the nation for each youth who drops out of school and later moves into a life of crime and drugs ranges from \$2.6 to \$4.4 million.<sup>6</sup>

While helping students stay in high school through graduation is an important goal, launching them on the path to higher education or career is even more critical in terms of enabling them to achieve the American Dream. A high school diploma increases economic potential while a college education leads to dramatically better economic and personal outcomes for both the individual and society.<sup>7</sup> Whereas a high school graduate earns 28% more than a drop-out, a student who attends some college but does not graduate earns 16% more than a high school graduate. And a two-year college graduate earns 11% more than a student who attends some college, while a four-year college graduate earns 24% more than a student with a two-year degree.<sup>8</sup> Compared to a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree can cut in half the chances of being unemployed.<sup>9</sup> The average college graduate will contribute over \$238,000 more in federal taxes than the average high school graduate.<sup>10</sup> And because college graduates earn substantially more than high school graduates over the course of their careers and their children are almost twice as likely to enroll in

college themselves, every person who is the first in a family to graduate from college has the potential to lift that family permanently out of poverty.<sup>11</sup>

The well-intentioned case has been made that it is not advisable to orient high schools around college because some students are not “college material.” Yet a recent study by ACT provides empirical evidence that “whether planning to enter college or workforce training programs after graduation, high school students need to be educated to a comparable level of readiness in reading and mathematics.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, “the same level of academic preparation

is necessary for college and ‘entry-level’ jobs that require less than a bachelor’s degree, pay a wage sufficient to support a family, and offer the potential for career advancement.”<sup>13</sup> Further, manufacturing and agricultural jobs long cited as examples of good pay without a college degree increasingly require some post-high school education.

Fortunately, as the MLK experience illustrates and a growing body of research<sup>14</sup> supports, building a college-going culture not only increases postsecondary attainment, it also helps encourage students to stay in school to graduate.

## RESPONDING TO STUDENT DEMAND: RELEVANCE TO LIFE GOALS

To understand why college-going culture is so critical, it is important to examine the research explaining why students decide to stay in school or drop out before graduating. A large number of the students who fail

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*“Handing out diplomas won’t work anymore. Educators must focus more on students’ desire to participate in the global economy and their future success.”*

**RUDY CREW**  
FORMER SUPERINTENDENT, MIAMI-DADE  
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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to graduate drop out of school during or shortly after the ninth grade. While they do so for a variety of reasons, most leave for reasons relating to academic motivation. According to *The Silent Epidemic*, based on focus groups and interviews with a diverse group of youth and young adults who did not complete high school, eight out of ten dropouts say that schools could have motivated them by making stronger connections between coursework and future careers.<sup>15</sup> This finding, from studies of the students themselves, echoes expert analysis on the role of extrinsic motivation in high school achievement and graduation. It also points

to “aspirational relevance” – connecting students’ school experience with their life goals– as a key factor in school success.<sup>16</sup> Students work harder – and high school dropouts say they would have been more inclined to stay in school – if high school felt important to their long-term goals.

The data suggest that schools will be more likely to achieve their academic goals if they consider the student “demand” perspective. What do students want out of high school? Given that only 7% of freshmen see a high school diploma as their ultimate goal, connecting academic work to their postsecondary goal – ensuring that students experience high school as a “launch pad” for their college and career success – makes obvious sense as a strategy to increase graduation rates, academic achievement, and college enrollment.<sup>17</sup>

Increasing “aspirational relevance” also affects a second key success factor: rigor. There is general agreement that rigor is the key to academic preparation both for high school and college success.<sup>18</sup> If students expect to go to college, they take more challenging courses (assuming they are offered) and work harder to succeed in those classes. For this reason, it is likely that the “most effective way to drive academic preparation in high schools is to set a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum as the default for all students and provide the support necessary for them to pursue it.”<sup>19</sup>

Such a step will benefit not only those students who ultimately go on to college, but all students - including those who might otherwise graduate inadequately prepared to begin a career. Increasing students'

awareness regarding how high school and college fit into their own lifetime goals leads them to shift their courses to align with those long-term goals. In short, rigor follows "aspirational relevance."

## CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH STUDY

Research by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago illustrates the strong connection between extrinsic motivation and student success. In 2007, the Consortium drew on multiple data sets to provide an unprecedented comprehensive look at how academic performance of Chicago high school freshmen is related to eventual graduation.<sup>20</sup> Unique to this study were measures of school climate created by the Consortium using survey data from teachers, students, and principals. Prior work by the Consortium found that students who were on-track at the end of their freshman year were nearly four times more likely to graduate from high school than their classmates who were not on-track.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, this study sought to identify school and personal factors that contribute to freshmen's success or failure in school.

The Consortium study had an important finding: while educational experiences prior to high school - as well as gender, race, and economic status - do have some relationship to school failure and therefore to graduation rates, all these factors together account for only 12 percent of the variation in freshman failure. In contrast, behaviors that are impacted by school climate and practices - attendance and studying - accounted for 61 percent of school failure.<sup>22</sup>

The study also found that the schools with the best outcomes were characterized by two features: supportive relationships between teachers and

students, and a *perception among students that the work they were doing in high school was preparing them for the future.*<sup>23</sup> The research found that when teachers expect their students to attend college, students see a higher purpose for their academic work - as a means to an end, not an end in itself. According to the study, "Those schools that are able to make the connection between high school and students' futures tend to have lower absence and failure rates and higher average grades. These are *schools in which more students report that what they do in high school matters for college and the workforce.* Schools where many students felt that high school grades matter for success in college and the workforce and felt that classes give useful preparation for life averaged fewer absences and failures, and higher grades, than schools where few students felt high school was relevant for their future."<sup>24</sup>

Earlier research cited in the Consortium study support the connection between high school graduation and student ability to connect their academic work to their future success. For example, Fashola and Slavin found that programs that successfully increased high school graduation rates had several elements in common, including connecting students to an attainable future and academic assistance to help students succeed in rigorous, not remedial, classes.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Balfanz and Legters, studying the "dropout factory" phenomenon, found that schools that "beat the odds" in terms of freshman promotion rates connect instruction to higher education and the workplace.<sup>26</sup>

## CRITICAL CULTURAL SHIFTS

Over the last decade, College Summit has learned a great deal about helping low-income high schools build college-going culture and achieve measurable results. According to third-party data, College Summit high schools have, on average, been able to increase college going by 15 percent over their own baselines during a time in which the college enrollment rate for low-income students nationwide increased by less than four percent.<sup>27</sup> The first to second year persistence rate in college for these students is nearly 70 percent, which exceeds the national rate for students from all income levels at two and four-year institutions.<sup>28</sup> These results have been achieved in diverse settings such as the urban schools in the St. Louis Public Schools district and the largely rural schools of Kanawha County in West Virginia.

Based on comparisons of its high-performing and low-performing schools, College Summit has identified four critical “mind shifts” that establish college-going culture and set the stage to achieve significant increases in both high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

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*“Setting college enrollment rate and its leading indicators as high school performance measures has helped us increase expectations for what adults and students can accomplish and for what high schools can deliver.”*

JOHN DEASY  
SUPERINTENDENT, PRINCE GEORGE'S  
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Shift to counting college enrollment rates as a measure of high school success.** The maxim “we value what we measure and we measure what we value” is true in schools as it is in many arenas. Schools will not create a culture with postsecondary success as their “north star” if they aren’t measuring—and valuing—their students’ postsecondary success. In an environment in

which measurement and accountability are strong drivers, it is essential to include college enrollment rates as a key measure, as distinct from, but a necessary complement to, the critical measure of high school graduation and college readiness lest this goal be undermined as schools pursue shorter-term outcomes.<sup>29</sup> In order to bring about this shift, College Summit encourages its high school partners to make college enrollment rates a central measure of their success.

**Shift from thinking postsecondary guidance should be for some students to providing it to all students.** Most high schools have a drop-in college counseling model, where only students who self-select as college material tend to engage. Some schools choose to designate a few students as promising and focus college-preparation support on this select group. In contrast, the highest performing schools provide support for all students in college and career planning. This approach sends the message to all students that they can pursue postsecondary education and ensures that they receive the support they need to navigate the process.

Research supports this shift. For example, the Consortium study suggested that schools that make a “schoolwide press for all students – not just the top students – to have high aspirations, work hard, and plan for the future tend to have lower failure rates than expected, given the types of students served by the school.”<sup>30</sup> Studying college degree attainment, Bridgespan researchers similarly concluded that “the most successful college access programs will target as many high school students as possible (i.e., they will be whole-school models).”<sup>31</sup>

**Shift from a “guidance counselor only” model to a guidance counselor plus teacher-engaged effort to encourage college-going.** Students get most of their college information and expectations from the college-educated adults closest to them, which in low-income communities are their teachers.

In affluent communities, college counselors provide expertise, while the day-to-day management of the college application process is provided by parents—and sometimes special counselors hired by their families. In lower-income communities where most parents are not college-experienced, they are not able to supplement the work of counselors. Numerous studies document the limited information that such parents typically have regarding the college admissions process and sources of financial aid.<sup>32</sup> While some schools may fill this gap by bringing in outside experts, such programs are costly and not sustainable over many years.

In College Summit schools, teachers leverage the efforts of guidance counselors by not only working to ensure that students are academically prepared, but also by raising student expectations and supporting students in completing their college applications. This model allows for counselors with very high student loads to provide students with the support they need by equipping teachers to have effective, regular contact with students. It would be unreasonable, however, to think that teachers can play these roles without proper preparation and support. Many teachers lack connections with postsecondary institutions, as well as the admission and placement information that would make them effective at helping students plan for college.<sup>33</sup> Because of the important role teachers play in helping low-income students plan for college, College Summit focuses on training teachers to be college savvy and college positive.

Furthermore, many teachers don't believe their students are capable of high achievement: surveys suggest that only one in four teachers believe that disadvantaged students can reach the same performance level as students in affluent schools.<sup>34</sup> Efforts to raise both teacher expectations and college knowledge are necessary to achieve this essential shift.

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*“Graduating kids from high school is a very important part of our mission, but it is simply NOT enough. We must deliver our children to the doors of higher learning, fully prepared to walk through those doors and into the rigors of college life. When you start pushing the ceiling, the floor comes up.”*

ABELARDO SAAVEDRA

SUPERINTENDENT, HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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**Shift from thinking of students as recipients of school culture to drivers of school culture.** Peers are key to a student's decision to undertake the challenge of applying for college.<sup>35</sup> When a majority of a student's friends are planning to go to college, a student is far more likely – as much as four times as likely – to seek a higher education.<sup>36</sup> In one study, having a college-going peer cohort had the largest impact on the likelihood of college completion of any social or cultural factor.<sup>37</sup> However, the study also found that half of all students lacked such a peer cohort. For this reason, a key element of most successful college-going culture initiatives is to build a social network of peer support, one of a handful of core practices positively linked to increased college enrollment.<sup>38</sup> Experts also observe that “where almost every graduating senior will attend a postsecondary institution even 9th grade students are keenly aware of what college preparatory tests they need to take and the scores they must achieve to be competitive applicants.” Much of this information is picked up informally around the lunch room.<sup>39</sup>

In recognition of this fact, College Summit trains the most influential students to be leaders who promote college-going culture among their peers.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FOSTERING COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Policy makers at all levels can help high schools make the culture shifts described in this paper. Policy should focus on three areas: 1) making reliable college enrollment, persistence, and completion data available; 2) encouraging the adoption of “college proficiency rate” as a central measure of high school success; and 3) providing incentives and structures for high schools to invest in building college-going culture.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION #1:**

**Make college enrollment, persistence and completion rates by high school reliable and publicly available.**

When high schools — and the communities they serve — know their college participation rates they are more likely to invest in strategies to increase college going and success. However, most high school and district leaders do not have access to reliable data. While some schools know their *college acceptance* rate or *intent to enroll in college* rate - which is information they can access directly from students or school staff before the students graduate from high school - these surveys of intent correlate weakly with students actually *enrolling* in college, which is the measure that matters. Moreover, it is important for high schools and parents to know the rates at which their student cohorts are persisting and graduating from college; although there are many factors affecting college retention and completion rates, knowing these results can provide illuminating information for high schools on their effectiveness in preparing their students for college and career success. It is important to calculate college persistence and graduation rates based on the cohort of high school graduates—not college enrollees—to ensure the data fully captures the transition from K-12 to higher education.

### **State Policy Makers**

There is general consensus on the need for K-12 and postsecondary longitudinal data systems. The Data Quality Campaign has laid out a clear agenda for what state policy makers can do to implement state longitudinal data systems to improve student achievement.

The federally-funded Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Grant Program is investing tremendous resources in helping states develop K-12 data systems, having already awarded over \$100 million dollars to 27 states to aid state education agencies in developing

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### **SPOTLIGHT ON WEST VIRGINIA**

West Virginia has one of the best state college enrollment data systems in the country, yet provides a good case study of just how challenging it can be for a state to determine accurate college enrollment rates by high school. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Committee collects extensive data on high school graduates from all the high schools, and college enrollment data from all two- and four- year public institutions in the state. Private two-year and four-year institutions are not required to provide these data, and not all institutions report. The out-of-state enrollment numbers are estimates, provided by County Commissioners using data collection methodologies ranging from sample surveys to rigorous reporting.

These processes lead to high quality data on student participation in the in-state public higher education system, but lack of consistency renders the overall data unreliable for high schools where a significant percentage of students attend private in-state institutions, or enroll out-of-state. This points to the need for national data sources and incentives for private institutions to contribute.

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and implementing longitudinal data systems. Yet in many states these systems do not link to higher education data systems. To maximize the benefit of these investments, state policy makers should ensure that their K-12 and higher education system databases

are linked so that states can collect high school graduation and postsecondary participation data, and then calculate each high school's college enrollment, persistence and success rate on an annual basis. The state can then share the college participation information in a number of useful ways, including absolute college participation, change over time, comparison with similarly situated schools, and two-year and four-year distribution.

College Summit conducted a state-by-state analysis of databases capable of producing reliable college enrollment rates by high school.<sup>40</sup> The review identified five states that already provide reliable college enrollment rates by high school to the public for students attending two-year and four-year in-state public institutions (Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). Two states provide reliable college enrollment rates by high school for students attending four-year in-state public institutions only (California and North Carolina). Thirteen states have the means to make two-year and four-year college enrollment rates available by high school because of reliable, publicly available information: Louisiana, Hawaii, Ohio, North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Missouri, Colorado, Minnesota, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Texas. These states could provide these meaningful data to its schools and the public with relatively little effort.

### **School District Leaders**

School district leaders can determine their own high schools' college enrollment rates even in the absence of a strong state data system. Currently, the most useful national source of information is the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), a non-profit organization that reports college enrollment data from 3,200 postsecondary institutions representing 91% of college students in the United States. For a fee, school districts and high schools can contract directly with the National Student Clearinghouse to find out their college enrollment rate; over 400 school districts and high schools currently contract with NSC. The most reliable data from NSC can be accessed when students' social security numbers (SSNs) are provided. Unfortunately, many school districts are not

willing or able to provide SSNs. Without proper SSNs, absolute college enrollment rate information is not reliable; however, trend data by high school can still be meaningful information for a high school.

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### **SPOTLIGHT ON LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (LAUSD)**

LAUSD is the second largest school district in the country, educating 700,000 students. In 2005, it became one of the first districts in the nation to develop a "College-Going Culture" Task Force. A key indicator for determining the effectiveness of the district's initiative was college enrollment; however, district leaders realized they did not have a good system for tracking college enrollment rates. In 2006, the Los Angeles School Board entered into a contract with NSC to track LAUSD graduates into colleges and universities both in California and throughout the nation. LAUSD reports that it provides student names and dates of birth to NSC to obtain college enrollment data for its graduates, and reports a 65% match rate.<sup>41</sup> LAUSD plans to share high school level findings and "facilitate effective conversations around what the data tells [school districts] and to establish goals for improvement."<sup>42</sup>

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### **Federal Policy Makers**

Federal policy can do two things to accelerate the reliability and availability of college enrollment rate data by high school. First, it can provide financial incentives for states to ensure that their data systems produce this information. Any federal support should ensure that longitudinal data systems can track high school students through college. Second, the Department of Education can play an important role by facilitating the availability of national data that addresses student mobility across state borders.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION #2:

### Make college proficiency rate a key success measure of high schools.

High schools should be responsible for producing college-ready high school graduates; “college-readiness” and high school graduation rates are important measures of a high school’s success. But should they can go further: we propose that high schools also adopt college proficiency rate as a key measure of their success.

We define “college proficiency” as the percentage of the high school graduating class persisting to their second year of postsecondary education.<sup>43</sup> An important leading indicator to college proficiency would be a high school’s college enrollment rate, which should also be adopted as a success measure.

College proficiency is an objective measure of college readiness, which reflects how well high schools equip their students with the academic and behavioral skills to complete one year of postsecondary education. From a societal perspective, the measure is important because students are more likely to drop out of postsecondary education during the first year than any other time.<sup>44</sup> From a high school view, this measure is close enough to when a student completed high school to establish a causal connection. Three main factors for why students do not persist to their second year of college are that they were not academically prepared, the college was not a good match to begin with, and they did not secure the necessary financial package beyond their first year.<sup>45</sup> A high school’s college proficiency rate addresses these three factors:

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### SPOTLIGHT ON THE METRICS ACT

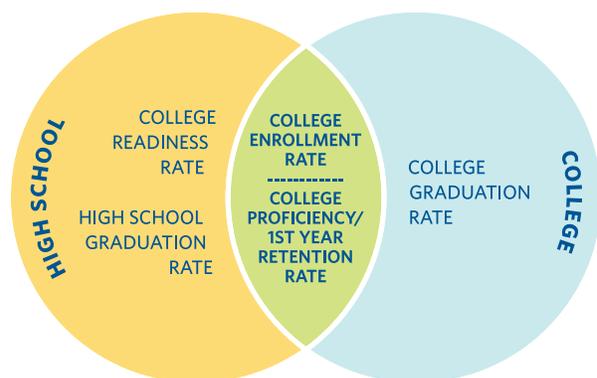
The Measuring and Evaluating Trends for Reliability, Integrity, and Continued Success Act (METRICS Act) introduced in the House of Representatives July 31, 2007 and a similar bill introduced in the Senate would authorize \$150 million in formula grants to states for the development and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems.

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it reflects a high school’s effectiveness in preparing students academically for college, ensuring they enroll at a well-matched college, and providing them with the skills to navigate the financial aid process before and while in college.

Postsecondary institutions should have responsibility to maximize access to their institutions, and to ensure the success of the students enrolled in their institutions. From both sides of the equation, we should measure our progress and reward institutions for strong and improving outcomes:

### College-Ready & College Success: Opportunity for Shared Impact



### State Policy Makers

In a recently released guide called *Measures that Matter*, Achieve and The Education Trust provide state policy makers with an excellent framework to focus high schools squarely on the mission of college and career readiness for all, supported by an information and accountability system that gets “everyone pulling in the same direction.”<sup>46</sup> The Guide recommends that states build their accountability systems around three indicators of college and career readiness: course completion and success, achievement, and post-high school attainment. The Guide recommends that states should consider incorporating data on college enrollment and remediation into their accountability systems. We agree with these recommendations, and propose the college proficiency rate measure as the ultimate representation of the Guide’s “exceeding college and career readiness.”<sup>47</sup>

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## SPOTLIGHT ON MISSOURI

Missouri is the first state to include college enrollment rate as an indicator for analyzing high school and school district performance. While Missouri's annual performance model is visionary and forward thinking, the methodology for measuring college enrollment varies widely among districts. While some use the National Student Clearinghouse, many more perform phone surveys to collect data from the graduating class. Concerns around the lack of uniformity of measurement methodology and data integrity are likely to be resolved in the near term: beginning with the graduating class of 2009, the state will use a linked student unit record system to track college-going by high school.

In 2005, St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) district, aware that the state included college enrollment as a district performance measure, set out to increase the number of students who went on to college after they graduated from high school. To execute this strategy, SLPS partnered with College Summit to introduce a reform model to ensure that all high school seniors received support in their college application process. The district has benchmarked monthly how each high school is faring towards its goals, including progress on the postsecondary planning, application completion and federal financial aid filing rates for high school seniors. The focus of principals and other school leaders on these and other postsecondary benchmarks has contributed to their cultivation of a college-going culture on their school campuses.

In this example, state attention to college enrollment rates was an important factor in the resulting improvement: in 2004 the district's college enrollment rate was 44.8%; by 2008 the percent of SLPS students going to college skyrocketed to 60.6%.<sup>48</sup>

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States whose college participation data are sufficiently accurate and reliable can do just that, and several states are equipped with these accurate data today. These states can employ a variety of strategies to make college enrollment and proficiency rates a high school success measure, with rewards for districts and schools showing district-wide or school-wide gains.

### School District Leaders

Increasingly, innovative school districts are using college enrollment as a measure of high school success. For example:

- Prince Georges' County Public Schools in Maryland is determining each high school's college enrollment rate in 2008, and will make college enrollment a performance measure across the district in 2009.
- Baltimore City Schools Superintendent Andres Alonso has included indicators of college enrollment on the accountability rubric for high school principals. They include the following: a) the percent of college-bound seniors who have sent at least one application to college; b) SAT participation rates; and c) SAT performance. Next year, the school district plans to include college enrollment rates in the measure.

### Federal Policy Makers

The data are sufficiently reliable and uniform across the nation, college enrollment and proficiency rates should be standard success measures for high schools. In the short term, we recommend that they be included in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind as a reward measure such that schools that achieve gains in college enrollment and proficiency rates can apply these successes to their efforts to meet adequate yearly progress targets. In this way, districts that decide to prioritize college enrollment and proficiency can do so and be rewarded, while districts that do not are not penalized.

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## SPOTLIGHT ON CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a national leader in using college enrollment data. In 2003, CPS became the first major school system in the country to track and report the college participation rates of its graduates using data from the National Student Clearinghouse. CPS has single-handedly advanced the field by contributing to research that “examines the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes.”

In 2005, CPS launched the High School Scorecard Directory to “create a more complete picture of a school beyond just test scores,” so parents can make informed decisions about their child’s future. This directory includes college enrollment rate results by high school.<sup>49</sup>

In 2007, CPS initiated annual meetings with principals in which they were asked to present a vision for their school, their strategies to increase their college enrollment rates among other measures, and to back their case with data. The district then benchmarked monthly how each high school is faring towards its goals, including progress on their postsecondary plan, student participation rate on their online college and career planning portal, the FAFSA completion rate and college application completion rates for high school seniors. The attentiveness of principals and other school leaders to these and other postsecondary benchmarks contributes to their cultivation of a college-going culture on their school campuses.<sup>50</sup>

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The Graduation Promise Act, a proposed bill which seeks new funding to build capacity for secondary school improvement, offers an innovative approach to leveraging the use of college enrollment rate data through their High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund. The legislation would create a grant program for states to “develop a set of school performance indicators to analyze high school performance, determine the amount and type of support each school needs, and guide the school improvement process.” Based on these performance indicators, which could include college enrollment rates, high schools that miss “adequate yearly progress” for two consecutive years could use college enrollment rate as part of their set of measures that illustrate where they lose students and the key levers for driving improvement. This data would inform turnaround strategies and help district leaders develop tailor-made solutions for transforming underperforming high schools.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION #3:**

#### **Encourage high schools to invest in building college-going culture**

While it is possible to build college-going culture with modest resources, state and federal policy makers can accelerate these efforts by providing incentives and structures to encourage high schools – especially those serving predominantly low-income populations – to focus their energies in this direction. Modest investments in this area would yield significant returns.

#### **School District Leaders**

Districts with unsatisfactory high school graduation rates should take on a strategic initiative to shift the purpose of their high schools to serve as launch pads for college and career success. The initiative could include the following elements:

- A method for engaging all students in considering and planning for college and career.
- A method for informing adult expectations throughout the school building and equipping teachers to provide college knowledge to students through the classroom.

- A method to mobilize students to become catalysts of culture change.
- A system that tracks student progress towards their postsecondary goals, to ensure timely interventions and continuous improvement.

These elements could be applied by school district leaders looking to bolster and improve existing school structures with a college-going culture, as well as supporting more systemic work tied to complete high school redesign initiatives.

Even in the absence of additional funds, district leaders can begin the process of building a college-going culture by dedicating professional development funds and other existing funding streams toward this end. School districts may choose to invest in proven models to build their capacity. In addition to College Summit, national organizations provide support for important pieces of the college-going puzzle, including the federal programs Gear Up and TRIO, and the non-profit AVID.

### **State Policy Makers**

States could offer college-going culture grants to high schools with low college enrollment rates or high school graduation rates. States can also allocate professional development funds to train educators to better support students through the postsecondary expectations and planning process.

State policy makers should require the completion of a postsecondary plan, or application to college or a job credentialing program as a requirement for high school graduation, as well as including college and career planning activities in the state's learning standards. Some states are already innovating in this direction: Kentucky has made it a high school graduation requirement that all students complete a postsecondary plan; and Maine now requires that all students complete one college application in order to graduate.

### **Federal Policy Makers**

With peer leadership a key component of building a college-going culture, federal policy makers should look to service-focused programs to provide resources

to train and support student leaders. For example, AmeriCorps could be amended to allow high school students to earn Segal education awards for their service assisting other students to plan for college, or a new education corps could be authorized to support specific education outcomes including increasing college enrollment.

As with states, the federal government could offer targeted grants for school districts with the lowest college enrollment and high school graduation rates to build college-going culture, implementing the best practices spelled out earlier in the paper. Grants should require districts to create the data systems that allow them to track increases in college enrollment and proficiency accurately as well as to monitor the effectiveness of program implementation.

The Pathways to College Act, recently proposed in the Senate, would create a competitive grant program to help low-income school districts implement programs designed to increase the number of students who are entering and succeeding in college. The grants would go towards providing professional development to high school teachers and counselors in college advising; arranging meetings for each student with an advisor to discuss college planning; providing college and financial aid information to all students and parents; and ensuring that each school develops a comprehensive plan of action to strengthen its college-going culture.

Finally, federal policy makers should authorize a fund to build the capacity of effective nonprofit organizations that partner with schools and school districts. These organizations often face challenges meeting demand because school districts are unable to pay the full cost of their services, and growth capital from other sources is limited. Such a fund should limit support to those organizations with proven track records for producing school-wide gains and well-thought-out plans for expansion to serve low-performing school districts and schools.



## CONCLUSION

Building college-going culture in high school is a central strategy that will drive two important outcomes: increased high school graduation rates and increased college success rates. We can achieve these outcomes if systems, programs, and resources are made available. The next steps of school reform at the national, state and local levels should include efforts to ensure that all students experience high school as a launch pad to their college and career success.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lewin, Tamar. "Lawsuit Says Manhattan High School Illegally Discharged Students Without Hearings." *New York Times* October 15, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. News & World Report America's Best High Schools methodology applies a filtered approach in three steps: select schools who students perform better than statistically expected and select from those schools whose least-advantaged students (black, Hispanic, and low-income) perform better than statewide averages. From the schools that are successfully getting all kids to outperform their peers, select those that perform best at producing college level achievement for the greatest percentage of students.
- <sup>3</sup> "Best High Schools". *U.S. News and World Report*. 2007. *U.S. News and World Report*. September 25, 2008 <[http://www.usnews.com/listings/high-schools/new\\_york/mlk\\_high\\_school-law\\_advocacy\\_%26\\_community\\_justice](http://www.usnews.com/listings/high-schools/new_york/mlk_high_school-law_advocacy_%26_community_justice)>.
- <sup>4</sup> McDonough, Patricia. *The School-to-College Transition*. Washington: American Council on Education, 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> Amos, Jason. *Dropouts, Diplomas, and Dollars: U.S. High Schools and the Nation's Economy*. Washington: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Cohen, Mark, and Piquero, Alex. "New Evidence on the Monetary Value of Saving a High Risk Youth." *Vanderbilt Law and Economics Research Paper No. 08-07* (2007)
- <sup>7</sup> Bedsworth, William, Colby Susan, and Doctor Joe. *Reclaiming the American Dream*. Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics; published by Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY; 2006 unemployment rate, 2005 earnings as presented in "Postsecondary Success," The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, November, 2008"
- <sup>9</sup> "Creating a College-Going Culture Guide". *CollegeEd*. 2007. *College Board*. September 25, 2008 <[http://www.collegeboard.com/prod\\_downloads/collegeed/collegeEd-create-college-going-culture.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/collegeed/collegeEd-create-college-going-culture.pdf)>.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul, Osterman. *College for All: The Labor Market for College Educated Workers*. Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Choy, Susan. *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment*. Washington: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> "Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?" Issues Brief. ACT, 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Bedsworth, William, Colby Susan, and Doctor Joe. *Reclaiming the American Dream*. Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters of Johns Hopkins University, John Bridgeland of Civic Enterprises, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, and The Bridgespan Group have provided much of the research that inform this report.
- <sup>15</sup> Bridgeland, John, Dilulio John, and Morrison Burke Karen. *Dropouts: Perspective of High School Dropouts*. Washington: Civic Enterprises, 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> Steinberg, Adria, and Cheryl Almeida. *Raising Graduation Rates in an Era of High Standards: Five Commitments for State Action*. Washington: Jobs for the Future, 2008. Also, Hupfeld, Kelly. "Resiliency Skills and Dropout Prevention." Success Highways. Denver: ScholarCentric, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> "High School Survey of Student Engagement." High School Survey of Student Engagement. 2005. *Center for Evaluation & Education Policy*. September 25, 2008 <[http://www.indiana.edu/~ceep/hssse/pdf/hssse\\_2005\\_report.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~ceep/hssse/pdf/hssse_2005_report.pdf)> Also, Bedsworth, William, Colby Susan, and Doctor Joe. *Reclaiming the American Dream*. Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, at 4.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, at 19.
- <sup>20</sup> Data sets include CPS data on all freshmen who entered CPS high schools in fall 2004 (24,894 students) and those who entered in the fall of 2000 who did not leave before September 2004 (20,803 students). Additional data came from CPS grade, attendance, and administrative files, along with standardized test scores and census data. These data sets did not include students who attended charter schools. Finally, the study used measures of school climate from surveys conducted by the Consortium in spring 2005 in which nearly 130,000 students, teachers and principals reported their views on the learning climate in their schools.
- <sup>21</sup> Roderick, Melissa, Nagaoka Jenny, Coca Vanessa, Moeller Eliza, Roddie Karen, Gilliam Jamiliyah, and Patton Desmond. *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, at 24.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, at 30.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, at 32.
- <sup>25</sup> Slavin, Robert, and Fashola Olatokunbo. "Effective Dropout Prevention and College Attendance Programs for Students Placed at Risk." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 1998: 159-183.
- <sup>26</sup> Balfanz, Robert, and Legters Nettie. "The Graduation Rate Crisis We Know and What Can Be Done About It." *Education Week* July 12, 2006.

- <sup>27</sup> National Student Clearinghouse was used to determine college enrollment rates for College Summit partner high schools and, where available, this data was cross checked with state data systems. The national comparison data is from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October Supplement 1972 -2005.
- <sup>28</sup> As there is no single nation-wide rate for students being retained in college, the author calculated and derived the national information for this comparison based on an analysis of research by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems on retention rates of first-time freshman returning their second year.
- <sup>29</sup> David Conley, founder and director for the Center for Education Policy Research at the University of Oregon, is an expert on the subject of developing and analyzing college readiness standards. For further readings consider: Conley, D. T. [Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of College Readiness](#). Eugene: Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2005. Also, [Measures that Matter: Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High Schools: A Guide for State Policy makers](#). Washington: Achieve and The Education Trust, 2008.
- <sup>30</sup> Allensworth, Elaine, and John Easton. [What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools](#). Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007.
- <sup>31</sup> Bedsworth, William , Colby Susan , and Doctor Joe . [Reclaiming the American Dream](#). Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>32</sup> Cunningham, Alisa, Erisman Wendy, and Looney Shannon. [From Aspirations to Action: The Role of Middle School Parents in Making the Dream of College a Reality](#). Washington: Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2007.
- <sup>33</sup> Venezia, Andrea, Kirst Michael, and Antonio Anthony. [Betraying The College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations](#). Stanford: Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, 2003.
- <sup>34</sup> [Ready for the Real World? Americans Speak on High School Reform](#). Washington: ETS, 2005.
- <sup>35</sup> Bedsworth, William , Colby Susan , and Doctor Joe . [Reclaiming the American Dream](#). Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>36</sup> Choy, Susan. [Access and Persistence: Findings From Ten Years of Longitudinal Research on Students](#). Washington: American Council of Education, 2002.
- <sup>37</sup> Bedsworth, William, Colby Susan , and Doctor Joe . [Reclaiming the American Dream](#). Washington: The Bridgespan Group, 2006.
- <sup>38</sup> Gándara, Patricia, and Biel Deborah. [Paving the Way to Postsecondary Education: K-12 Intervention Programs for Underrepresented Youth](#). Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001.
- <sup>39</sup> Schneider, Barbara. [Forming a College-Going Community in U.S. Public High Schools](#). Seattle: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> We defined "reliable" as states that use student-level data to determine in-state college attendance rates. Methods include, but are not limited to: on-line P-16 longitudinal databases, higher education unit record system, and statewide student unit record system.
- <sup>41</sup> Source: phone interview with Cynthia Lim, LAUSD, (213-241-2450), 5/1/08.
- <sup>42</sup> Source: Presentation, Closing the Achievement Gap: Internal Monitoring System Pilot, Phase II, presented by Cynthia Lim and Chris Granado, LAUSD on 12/03/07.
- <sup>43</sup> College proficiency rate is different from a sophomore persistence measure because it features as its denominator the number of students graduating from high school—not only those enrolling in college, so it reflects the entire K-12-to-higher education transition.
- <sup>44</sup> "Retention Rates - First-Time College Freshmen Returning Their Second Year (NCES, IPEDS)." *NCHEMS Information Center for State Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis*. 2008. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. November 17, 2008. <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=223&year=2005&level=&mode=policy&state=0>
- <sup>45</sup> Fogel, Shareen, and Hagedorn Serra Linda. [Increasing Access to College: Extending Possibilities for All Students](#). New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 169-193.
- <sup>46</sup> [Measures that Matter: Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High Schools: A Guide for State Policy makers](#). Washington: Achieve and The Education Trust, 2008.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Source: State of Missouri's Educational Performance Data Graduate Analysis for St. Louis City School District. Based on the author's analysis of college enrollment data for the school district.
- <sup>49</sup> "High School Scorecard Directory". *Chicago Public Schools*. 2007. [Chicago Public Schools](#). October 27, 2008 <<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/Schools/hsdirectory>>.
- <sup>50</sup> Roderick, Melissa, Nagaoka Jenny, Coca Vanessa, Moeller Eliza, Roddie Karen, Gilliam Jamiliyah, and Patton Desmond. [From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College](#). Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2008.

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## ABOUT COLLEGE SUMMIT

College Summit works to increase college enrollment rates of low-income students by building school districts' capacity to guide their students through the college preparation and application process. The organization seeks to create lasting change by helping secondary schools and the communities they serve develop a culture where going to college is what is expected of every student — not the exception. College Summit uses a systemic approach combining teacher training, postsecondary planning curriculum, peer leadership, and data management to foster a college-going culture that results in dramatically more students enrolling in college.



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