

THE THREE MYTHS OF HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to the College Board AP Conference

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Speaker may have deviated from remarks

Thank you, Gaston, for that kind introduction. I want to talk to you today about a mission that goes to the heart not just of the work of the College Board but is at the very core of the administration's agenda for high schools.

Virtually everyone in this room believes that America's high schools need to be transformed to meet the demands of the 21st century. The North Star guiding all our efforts is President Obama's goal that America should once again have the highest college completion rate in the world by the end of the decade.

To achieve that goal, high schools must shift from being last stop destinations for students on their education journey to being launching pads for further growth and lifelong learning for all students--including ELL students and students with disabilities. The mission of high schools can no longer be to simply get students to graduate. Their expanded mission, as President Obama has said, must also be to ready students for careers and college--and without the need for remediation.

A high school should be a place where all students are prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter postsecondary education and pursue meaningful careers. Students should feel safe in school. They should have a well-rounded curriculum and quality extracurricular activities to explore. And teachers, principals, and counselors should feel responsible for helping students reach their goals after high school. The entire culture of high schools must be changed to support student success beyond K-12—and the administration stands ready to work with you to accomplish that transformation.

I am not the first person to call for redefining the mission of the American high school. Five years ago, the National Governors Association hosted a National Education Summit on High Schools. At that summit, Bill Gates gave a speech to the National Governors Association where he said America's high schools were "obsolete."

The outdated architecture of high schools that Bill Gates alluded to was designed more than half-a-century ago. The spread of comprehensive high schools and tracking of students presumed that many students were not college or career ready. But in the era of the knowledge economy, the imperative to build a more competitive workforce has exposed the inadequacies of high schools that just aim to get students a diploma--as important a goal as that may be.

There is an obvious puzzle here. The belief that our nation's high schools must get dramatically better is universal. And yet one has to ask, if everyone agrees that we need to improve high schools, why is it taking so long to move them into the 21st century? As Rahm Emanuel, the President's White House Chief of Staff wrote in 2006, "A nation with many of the best colleges on earth must no longer tolerate having some of the worst high schools."

I believe that three widely-shared myths are impeding the transformation of our high schools. Those three myths are, first, that setting higher standards and expectations for students will only lead more students to fail, driving up the dropout rate.

The second myth is that poverty is destiny. By the time adolescents reach high school, some educators claim it is too late to get students who are lagging behind on track for college and success after graduation. Particularly in the face of poverty, a school, a teacher cannot just make that much difference—or so the argument goes.

And finally, the third myth is the idea that high school educators and counselors cannot really prepare students for careers or college because the concept of college and career-readiness is itself too elusive to evaluate meaningfully with assessments or to track with longitudinal data systems.

I am thrilled to be here today because I think the work of those assembled in this room offers a powerful rebuttal to these three myths. To the College Board, the AP teachers, the principals, the guidance counselors—all of you are showing that success can spread when standards are raised, not shrink. You are showing that demography is not destiny. You are showing that good assessments and data are a blessing in the classroom—and not a burden.

Before I talk about the AP's invaluable contributions, I would ask you to step back for a moment to consider just how ill-suited many of the nation's high schools are for meeting this new mission of preparing students for careers and college, without the need for remediation.

About a quarter of students today drop out of high school—and the dropout rate is much higher in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students. The results of college entrance exams suggest that only about a quarter of graduating high school seniors nationwide are college-ready. In community colleges, more than 40 percent of all students take at least one remedial class.

The fact is that our secondary schools were designed in an earlier industrial age. Comprehensive high schools reflected the life adjustment movement that first took hold in high schools in the 1940s. The top 20 percent of kids were supposed to be college-bound and get a college prep curriculum.

Another 20 percent of students were tracked for career and technical education, and got a vocational curriculum. But most students were not required to take college-prep courses, and were tracked instead into general life skills classes. It is easy to forget that, on the eve of World War II, just one in 16 young adults enrolled in colleges and universities.

That educational model made sense when you could drop out of school and get a decent job at the factory to support your family. But those days are over.

To transform our nation's high schools, we are going to have to challenge traditions, including the out-dated mindset of some educators and the culture of the American high school itself. We have a lot of work ahead to accomplish that transformation.

Today, parents and students rank preparing students for college as the most importance purpose of high schools. But many teachers and principals do not.

Numerous states still have laws on the books that make it hard for students to graduate early. Or they bar students from demonstrating on state assessments that they are ready to enroll in college simply because they lack the right amount of seat-time in prescribed classes.

The truth is that many high school principals today have little idea and no accountability for what happens to students after they graduate. Principals get limited feedback or data on whether their programs are doing a good job of preparing students for college or careers.

College counselors are an invaluable yet woefully neglected resource in high schools. A recent study by Public Agenda concluded that “the existing high school guidance system is a perilously weak part of the nation’s efforts to increase college attendance and ramp up degree completion.”

School counselors should “own the turf” when it comes to college and career readiness counseling. They should be leading advocates for students pursuing two-year and four-year college degrees. But the reality, as you know, could not be more different. Nationwide, there is roughly one guidance counselor for every 475 students. In California, the ratio is closer to one counselor for every 1,000 students.

These impossible caseloads and antiquated conceptions of the role of counselors force many guidance counselors to spend most of their day on non-guidance tasks, like being hallway monitors, mailing deficiency notices, filling in as substitute teachers, and administering discipline. But our students--particularly first-generation college-bound students--desperately need help with college planning, preparing financial aid forms, and securing scholarships.

It is absolutely shameful that, in 2010, many college-ready minority students who want to attend college never enroll. And more than 60 percent of our top-ranked minority students are “undermatched”--meaning that they enroll not in colleges that were too demanding, but rather in schools that were not demanding enough.

For all of these obstacles, I am actually optimistic that high schools are beginning to rethink their traditional, industrial-age mission. When I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Chicago became the first big-city district to track the college enrollment and success rate of our public school graduates. It was staggering to me that using college data to monitor college readiness was considered novel at the time. But you know what? It’s not new anymore.

In Florida, they are tracking the effectiveness of individual high schools in preparing students for college and careers. Thirty-six states now report ACT, SAT, or AP scores. Fourteen states measure credit attainment, college GPAs, or other markers of success for graduates by their high school of origin.

Curriculum and standards are changing too. It would have been unthinkable a year ago, but 48 governors and chief state school officers have signed on to a state-led initiative to develop common but rigorous college and career-ready standards. Since February alone, nearly half of the states—23 and counting—have adopted the common core standards.

Clearer and higher standards for career and college-readiness are absolutely vital to transforming secondary school education. In too many states, we have been lying to parents and children, telling students they were ready for college when they are not. This work by the states to develop shared standards for college-readiness is an absolute game changer. And the College Board was right to hail the Common Core state standards as “a monumental achievement.” I applaud your support of the common core standards and their ongoing implementation by the states.

Even before states joined together to craft and adopt the Common Core standards, states were moving to align high school policies with the demands of college and careers. Since the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, the number of states that require all students to complete a college-prep curriculum has jumped from 3 states to 20 states.

At the same time, AP enrollment and dual-credit courses have exploded. More than 70 percent of high schools now offer dual credit courses to students--and in states with longstanding dual enrollment programs, anywhere from 10 to 30 percent of juniors and seniors are earning college credit for dual

enrollment courses. Twice as many students took an AP course this year as a decade ago--and more than a quarter of high school seniors today take an AP course.

The story is much the same with online instruction and early college high schools. Nationwide, nearly 50,000 students are attending early college high schools in 24 states. In North Carolina alone, 70 early college high schools have 10,000 students enrolled. Our new \$100 million College Pathways and Accelerated Learning program would provide college-level and other accelerated instruction in high-needs schools by expanding the availability of AP and IB, early college high schools, and dual enrollment programs.

For students who are on the verge of dropping out, big-city districts like New York, Nashville, Indianapolis, Newark, and Philadelphia are successfully setting up multiple pathways and alternative schools for over-age and under-credited youth to get them back on track for a diploma and college or careers.

At the federal level, we are also taking unprecedented steps to boost college- and career readiness. We all know that high schools that are little more than dropout factories have persisted for far too long. But for the first time, our school turnaround program will provide several billion dollars for states and districts to make far-reaching improvements in chronically under-performing schools and high schools with high dropout rates.

We're taking other major steps to improve college readiness. We have simplified the hopelessly complex FASFA financial aid form--and are going to make it easier for counselors to track when high school students have successfully completed the form. And we are incentivizing districts and high schools to track the success of graduates in postsecondary institutions--so they can learn what is working and what is not working to build a bridge to college and careers.

In so many of these areas, AP administrators, teachers, and counselors are helping to lead the transformation of high schools. You are debunking the skeptics of higher standards and rigorous assessments and demonstrating the power of great schools to change the lives of disadvantaged students. You are setting an example for all of us, showing that more rigor leads to more success, not more failure.

It is no secret that I am a huge fan of AP. Early in my tenure in Chicago, Eric Smith gave me a crash course on the value of Advanced Placement instruction. In Chicago, the number of students taking AP exams rose 90 percent from the 2004-05 school year to the 2008-09 school year. And during that same five-year period, the AP pass rate per 100 test-takers rose 50 percent--those students scored a 3 or higher, earning valuable college credit.

The jump in AP participation and success was particularly marked among black and Hispanic students during the seven years I headed up the district. The number of black students who took one or more AP exam more than tripled--and the increase was almost as large for Hispanic students. The number of minority students who earned scores of 3 or higher also rose by more than 250 percent. And overall, our high school graduation and college enrollment rate rose, especially among black and Latino students.

AP, in short, helped show that raising the bar leads to more success, not more dropouts. In five years, we didn't make the students twice as smart in Chicago. What happened is that we began to create a college-going culture in our high schools, and AP was an important element. The AP program beautifully illustrates that the first myth impeding high school reform doesn't have to be the case. Setting higher standards does not mean more students will fail.

I want to stress that Eric Smith and I are just two of many superintendents who found that AP instruction can help boost college readiness without raising dropout rates. College Board data from the nation's 20 largest school districts indicate that the number of AP exams in big-city districts has increased by 50 percent over the last five years, while the pass rate per 100 test-takers has jumped by a third. Students, it turns out, will respond to a challenging curriculum. They don't call it quits so easily.

Studies of AP's impact have also gone a long way to debunk the second myth of high school reform—the idea that poverty is destiny in the classroom, especially when students reach high school. Years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out that children do not learn algebra at the dinner table. "Schools make a very great difference to children," Moynihan said. "Children don't think up algebra on their own."

The AP program shows that rigor and curriculum matter a great deal—even for students with similar abilities. AP students are 50 percent more likely to graduate from college in four years than a control group of students with the same SAT score and socioeconomic background.

Why does taking AP classes alone make such a difference? Because AP courses develop the study skills, critical reasoning, and habits of mind that prepare students for the transition to college.

Much the same singular impact shows up in AP's impact on our future STEM workforce. One recent study found that AP math students were four times more likely than a matched peer group to earn degrees in physical sciences and engineering concentrations—and AP science students were more than twice as likely to earn degrees in life sciences concentrations.

The 67 schools in the new National Math and Science Initiative on AP are great examples of the power of quality instruction, more time spent on task, and rigorous, content-focused teacher training. The NMSI schools are having phenomenal success in raising AP scores among minority students. In the single year of implementation to date, the number of African American and Latino students who scored a 3 or higher on AP exams in math, science, and English, jumped more than 70 percent.

During the last 18 months, I went on a listening and learning tour. I visited 39 states. And I heard two consistent concerns about public schools from parents and teachers. They feared that schools were "teaching to the test." And they worried that the curriculum was narrowing, as school districts placed emphasis on boosting test scores on fill-in-the-bubble tests in math and English.

These concerns are legitimate. There is no doubt that math and reading are vital core components of a good education in today's global economy. But the President and I reject the notion that arts, history, science, writing, and foreign language are ornamental offerings that can or should be cut from school when times are tough. In the information age, a well-rounded, rigorous curriculum is not a luxury but a necessity. That is why the administration has proposed to devote more than \$1 billion to support a well-rounded education in high-need schools.

Only by moving beyond basic skills and bubble tests, can children develop the critical thinking skills that one day will give them the ability to compete successfully in the global economy. We absolutely need better, richer assessments of college readiness—and the \$350 million Race to the Top assessment competition is an unprecedented commitment to support the work of state consortia to develop that new generation of assessments.

AP teachers have led the way in demonstrating the value of high-quality assessments. You are showing that the answer to inadequate tests is not to abandon assessments but rather to use better ones to

assess learning and growth. You are debunking the third myth of high school reform, that college readiness is an ineffable goal that cannot really be measured with data. In basketball, a three pointer is always worth three points. And in AP biology, a three on the AP exam is the same in Mississippi as in Massachusetts.

Nine in ten AP teachers today believe that AP exams effectively maintain the quality of coursework and are aligned well with curriculum and course objectives. And AP standards and learning objectives were developed with renowned college faculty working hand-in-hand with AP teachers to define standards for teaching and learning at the introductory college level. It can be done.

I want to close by challenging the AP educators, principals, and counselors here today to help complete the transformation of our nation's high schools. As you know, participation and performance in AP courses is up substantially for African American, Latino, and Native American students during the last decade. Yet we all also know that minority students are still under-represented in AP courses. Today, half of all students from high-income households take an AP class. But only one in six students from low-income households has taken an AP course.

In some schools, students are being rushed into AP courses to make the schools look good in national rankings, even though most or all of the students are scoring ones and twos on the AP exams. While some research suggests that just taking an AP course can have a positive impact, those schools clearly need to pay a lot more attention to the knowledge and skills of teachers who teach the pre-AP sequence, if they are really going to use AP instruction to boost college readiness.

But the even bigger challenge in equity and access are urban and rural schools in which few students are provided with an AP opportunity. Hundreds of thousands of high school students are sitting in non-AP classes, even though they have the same likelihood of success in AP as peers who have been selected by teachers and administrators for an AP course. Last year, I visited a high school in Detroit where the students told me they did not have any AP classes.

That has to change. Every school should take a look at its AP access policies to determine whether they are being too strict. States like Arkansas and Florida greatly expanded AP participation by using the PSAT to identify more students with AP potential. In Arkansas alone, the number of black students taking AP classes and exams increased nine-fold between 2002 and 2009.

Finally, with 60 percent of AP teachers approaching retirement in the coming decade, it is critical that school administrators and institutions of higher education identify creative ways to groom and empower the next generation of AP teachers. To meet the challenges of the information age, high schools will need to become more rigorous to foster college and career-readiness, and provide multiple pathways to success. They cannot just maintain the status quo.

Today, we have a unique opportunity to rethink the mission of high school for the 21 century and educate our way to a better economy. I'm convinced that what we do in the next several years to complete this transformation will help America's children and the nation's workforce for decades to come.

With your commitment, your courage, and your leadership, you are showing every day what is possible. And you are proving that high school reform is no mission impossible. I thank you for your extraordinary work. Our students need you. Now, together, is the moment to seize this opportunity.

Thank you.