



# Levers for Change: Opportunities to Strengthen California's High School Curriculum

## DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOW TO IMPROVE

high schools have been going on for decades, often with an emphasis on their organizational structure. Increasingly, however, the high school reform discussion is focusing more deeply on the curriculum—what gets taught, how, and to whom. Those who support change can take advantage of three key leverage points related to the curriculum: California's academic content standards, eligibility to attend the state's public universities, and career and technical education.

### Lever 1: California's academic content standards

These standards—which outline by subject area and grade level what students are expected to know and be able to do—have been lauded as some of the “deepest” and “widest” in the country. But the standards have not been implemented consistently across the state, and there is concern that the students who would benefit the most are receiving the least exposure to a rigorous, engaging curriculum.

State law stipulates a course of study for grades 7–12 and a set of minimum high school graduation requirements, but local school boards can set local courses of study and graduation requirements that exceed the state minimums. As a result, those requirements vary by district. In addition, the mechanisms used to decide high school curricular materials are only loosely tied to the state standards. Districts select their own materials for high schools. To qualify for state textbook monies, districts must certify that their materials align with state standards.

#### State tests influence curriculum

The most direct strategies that state policymakers have adopted to influence the high school curriculum are state tests. In particular, the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) sets a minimum standard for what students need to know—but in English and math only—to receive their diploma.

The California Standards Tests (CSTs) cover the four core subject areas (English, math, science, and social studies), but students experience no particular consequences based on their performance. The CSTs, as they are currently implemented, appear to be a rather weak lever for compelling high schools to align their instruction with the state's standards.

#### Strengthening the alignment of curricula to content standards would help

Strengthening the alignment of high school curricula with the 9–12 academic content standards could help improve California's high schools. If all high school students were proficient based on the standards and instruction was done in an engaging way, they would, at a minimum, have a good high school education. Many believe the standards are high enough that students would be well prepared for success at the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) campuses. However, existing state policies to either encourage or require districts to complete that alignment are relatively limited. Local educators' lack of capacity to do so is also a serious obstacle.

### Lever 2: University eligibility and postsecondary readiness

Although California's academic content standards are voluntary, every high school must provide its students with access to the sequence of courses that are required as part of UC and CSU admission. University eligibility is a potent incentive for high school students and teachers.

#### UC's “a-g” required courses drive the “college prep” curriculum in California high schools

California is distinctive in the extent to which its public university system approves the specific high school courses (referred to as “a-g”) that students must take.

UC's course approval and quality control processes are crucial links between the policy

of requiring the “a-g” courses and the actual content to which students are exposed. However, the approval and monitoring processes have been openly criticized, and the approval process was recently strengthened.

UC does not have a process for monitoring course quality or re-evaluating a course after it is approved. There are no ongoing requirements regarding teacher credentials or training. Courses stay on the list even if they were approved decades ago, and schools rarely inform UC if a course has been revised. It is likely some courses do not meet the university's expectations, and consequently, students might not be receiving the kind of college preparation they need.

University eligibility data reveal that though 35% of high school graduates overall complete the “a-g” courses, only 25% of African American and 24% of Latino students do so. In addition, a substantial number of students complete the “a-g” course requirements, gain admission to CSU or UC, and still need remediation.

#### Standards-based tests have been aligned with CSU readiness expectations

In an attempt to better align K–12 courses with college expectations, the CSU system developed the Early Assessment Program (EAP), which includes:

- The augmentation of the 11th grade CSTs in math and English to include items that indicate readiness for CSU;
- Teacher preparation aligned with CSU's expectations; and
- Recommendations for new course work for 12th graders who need additional help to prepare for college.

#### Postsecondary readiness goes beyond course taking

California's community colleges are conspicuously absent from most discussions of college readiness, and there is little understanding of the

standards students must meet to take college-level courses in these institutions. The full battery of “a-g” courses is not necessary for admission, but students still need strong academic skills.

More generally, a national effort called the American Diploma Project is working to detail postsecondary and workplace readiness standards based on skills and knowledge, not course taking. The “real world” expectations enumerated by the project are more rigorous than typical high school standards, which helps explain why students are not well prepared for college or the workplace.

California schools need to make sure that the courses their students take for university eligibility also prepare them for university-level academic work. Doing so will set the bar higher for all high school curricula. Students and parents also need a clear understanding of both the courses and skills needed to pursue the full range of postsecondary options, from enrollment in an elite university to immediate employment after high school.

### Lever 3: Career Technical Education

A third lever involves a dramatic strengthening of courses traditionally labeled as vocational education and now called Career Technical Education (CTE). The CTE movement’s primary goal is to integrate academic knowledge and skills into courses that are academically rigorous and also relevant and engaging. Many advocates believe that this blend would help address the high school drop-out problem as well as generally increase student motivation and performance.

The State Board of Education (SBE) officially adopted CTE standards for grades 7–12 in May 2005 and a curriculum framework in

January 2007. These standards integrate California’s academic content standards with industry-specific knowledge and skills. Generally viewed as an international model for rigor, the new CTE standards are expected to prepare students for the workforce and some form of postsecondary education. They are based on students learning “through the interaction of declarative and procedural knowledge.” Declarative knowledge provides information (facts, events, concepts, and principles), and procedural knowledge is what the learner can do with the information. The interaction between these two types of knowledge gives students the ability to adapt and use information and skills in “real world” situations.

#### *Some factors may limit high schools from offering rigorous CTE courses*

The state’s adoption of the new CTE standards and curriculum framework does not carry any mandates for schools and districts. However, in order to receive funding for some new and some established CTE programs, local educators may have to align their offerings with the standards.

Of greater concern is the limited capacity of the current teaching force to implement the new CTE vision. The state faces issues related to its CTE credentialing process and teacher professional development. On the other hand, California’s community colleges play a central role in preparing students for the workplace and could provide valuable assistance by working more closely with high schools in this area.

UC course approvals are a linchpin in the effort to unite academics with CTE, and some attention has been paid to this by the UC system. However, according to a 2005–06

analysis, fewer than 20% of CTE courses meet the “a-g” requirements.

### All these levers can improve California's high school curriculum

Nationally and in California, there is increasing interest in a “multiple pathways” approach that rejects the historic division of the high school curriculum into two tracks, one for college-bound students and another focused on career preparation. Advocates for multiple pathways believe that high schools can provide curricula that are engaging *and* rigorous and that such curricula can prepare students for postsecondary education *and* for a career after high school.

The multiple pathways concept is one example of how high school reform efforts can integrate academic standards, postsecondary readiness, and CTE to improve outcomes for students. Taking advantage of these levers for change will take more than a vision. It will require professional development that gives high school educators the capacity to align their work with more demanding standards. Students will also need more support and guidance if they are to succeed in more challenging courses and reach their postsecondary goals.

No single approach to the high school curriculum provides the answer for every student. There are many options that combine rigor and relevance and many ways to effectively organize high schools. Understanding the potential leverage points—and accepting the need for multiple strategies—can help California strengthen its high school curriculum and improve all its students’ chances for adult success. [11]

*For an in-depth discussion of California’s high school curriculum, see the full report available at: [www.edsource.org](http://www.edsource.org)*



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