

POLICY BRIEF 2017-07

Improving College and Career Outcomes of Low-Performing High School Students

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Improving College and Career Outcomes of Low-Performing High School Students

Many students are not completing postsecondary education or thriving in the labor market. Moreover, this lack of success often comes as an unfortunate surprise to students, whose high expectations for postsecondary achievement are belied by low completion rates. Without the necessary school engagement, preparation for postsecondary academic work, and career planning and mentorship in high school, many students cannot succeed after high school.

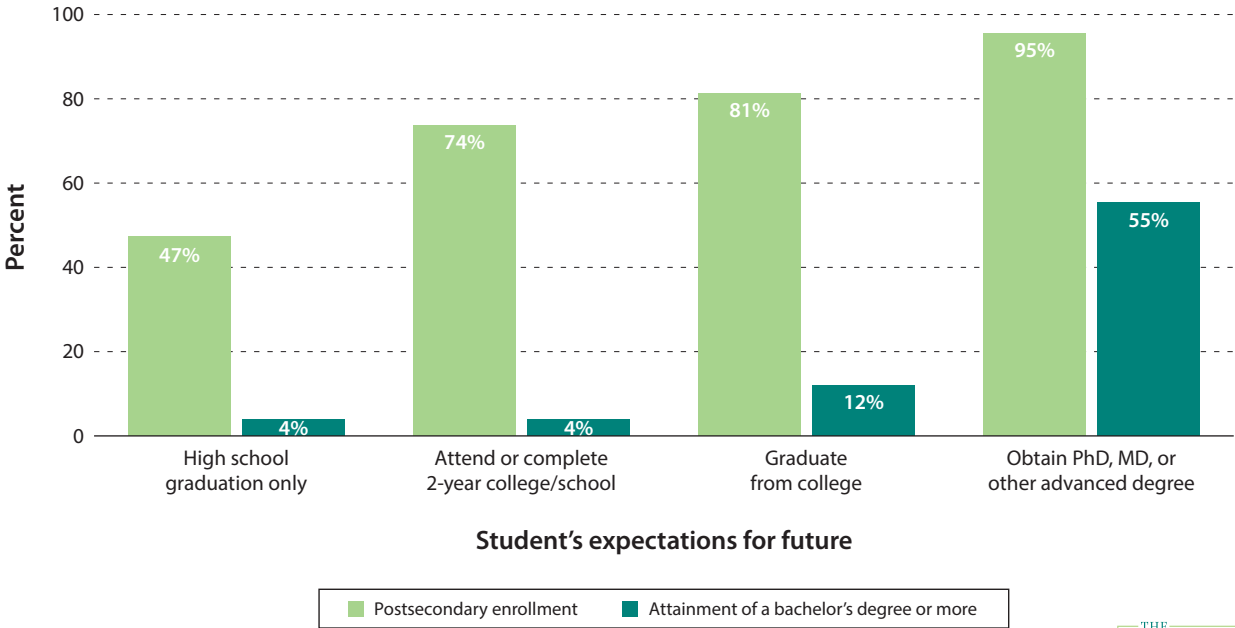
State accountability systems play an important role in encouraging schools to implement best practices that benefit students. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), high school accountability metrics targeted proficiency on standardized tests as well as graduation rates. However, with the enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the focus has broadened. Since states are now required under ESSA to make high school accountability systems more multifaceted, states should add a high school accountability measure based on students’ postsecondary and career outcomes which would provide incentives to improve school quality and long-term student success.

In a new Hamilton Project policy proposal, Louis Jacobson of the George Washington Institute of Public Policy discusses the challenges facing disengaged, middle-skill students—defined as those individuals who will graduate high school but lack adequate preparation for college or a clear plan for college and career success. This policy proposal, “Improving College and Career Outcomes of Low-Performing High School Students,” draws on evidence from Jacobson’s study of a statewide program in Florida called the Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative, which was designed to improve the academic preparation of the state’s middle-skill high school students. He proposes reforms to state accountability systems that emphasize college and career outcomes; for example, states would measure earnings and the completion of four-year degree, two-year degree, and certificate programs. In support of this approach, he provides a set of best practices that schools can implement to improve these outcomes for middle-skill students.

The Challenge

Although completing postsecondary education increases lifetime earnings, many high school graduates do not attend or—if they do attend—do not complete such programs. High school students frequently do not meet their own expectations regarding postsecondary outcomes (figure 1). For students with lower expectations—for example, seniors who said that they only expected to graduate from high school—college degree

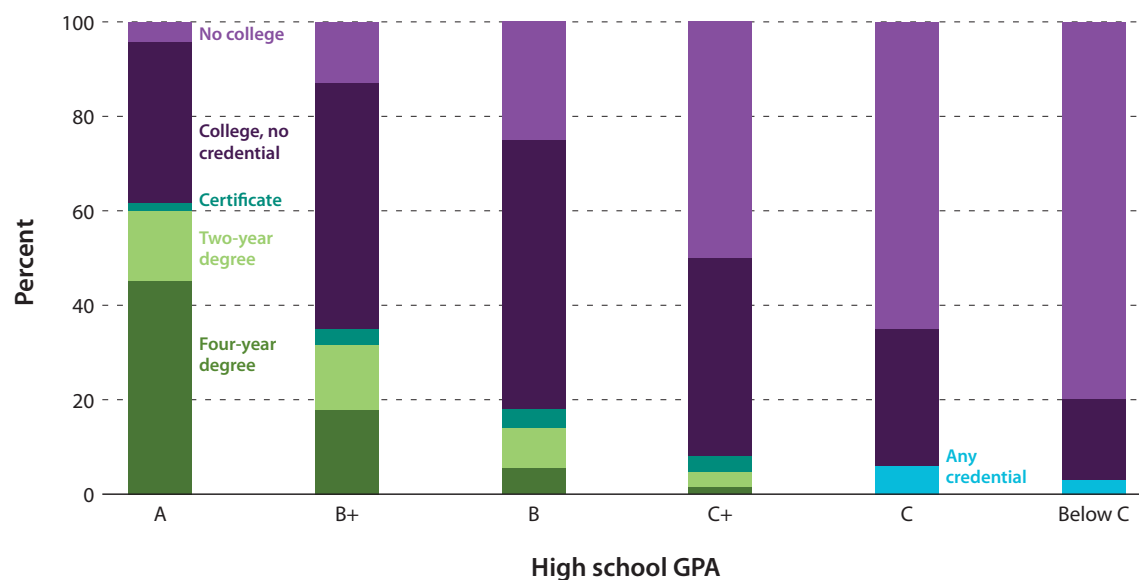
FIGURE 1. Postsecondary Enrollment and Credential Attainment, by Student Expectations in Senior Year of High School



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2002), “Education Longitudinal Study of 2002,” U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC. Note: Students were interviewed as high school seniors in the spring of 2004, and again in 2012 to determine their attainment level six years after graduation.

FIGURE 2.

College Attainment by GPA



Source: Author's calculations using Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative (FCCRI) data.

Note: Attainment rates are measured six years after students leave high school. The sample is restricted to Florida public high school students. For students with a GPA of C or below, the three types of credentials are grouped together.



attainment is nearly nonexistent, though almost half enrolled in a postsecondary program. Among those who expected to graduate from college, the vast majority enrolled but only 40 percent completed. Even those who expected to earn an advanced degree only finished a four-year degree slightly more than half the time.

While there are many factors that contribute to success at the postsecondary level, Jacobson focuses on actions high schools can take. Jacobson argues that public high schools lacked incentives under NCLB to appropriately address the academic, informational, and motivational needs of students who are neither firmly on the college-going track nor in danger of dropping out of high school. Partly as a result, many of these middle-skill students do not complete the postsecondary programs they undertake. As states begin to broaden their accountability systems under ESSA, Jacobson encourages states to consider metrics, such as postsecondary or career outcomes, that would encourage investments in the success of middle-skill students.

Middle-Skill Students Are Particularly Unlikely To Complete Four-Year Degrees

Middle-skill students typically attain a high school diploma, and many pursue postsecondary education. However, graduation requirements do not necessarily align with college readiness; that is, middle-skill students successfully graduate from high

school but are often insufficiently prepared to complete a postsecondary program.

Identification of middle-skill students is relatively straightforward given the strong association between high school grade point averages (GPA) and postsecondary attainment. While those who were A students in high school are likely to complete a college degree or certificate, C+, B, and even B+ students are far less likely to complete any postsecondary credential, let alone a four-year degree. Strikingly, 82 percent of B students in Jacobson's study of an academic preparation program in Florida either did not attend college at all or failed to complete their postsecondary programs, as shown in figure 2.

High School Accountability Policies Could Improve Long-Term Outcomes for Students

Under NCLB, public high schools were required to identify and serve students at risk of dropping out. NCLB also provided incentives for high schools to improve student achievement in math and reading. The nature of the incentives resulted in schools targeting students close to an academic proficiency threshold. To the extent that middle-skill students are neither at risk of dropping out nor on the brink of the achievement threshold, they are likely to be poorly served by the existing system.

The Every Student Succeeds Act improves upon NCLB's accountability provisions by broadening the focus beyond

academic achievement and graduation rates to include an additional indicator of school quality or student success. Jacobson argues that by incorporating long-term postsecondary and career outcomes into the high school accountability system, schools will increase their focus on the needs of middle-skill students.

A New Approach

Jacobson argues that middle-skill students are not well-served by accountability systems under NCLB. ESSA represents an opportunity to improve long-term outcomes for more students by broadening the scope of accountability pressure. Jacobson argues that state policy makers should use the authority of ESSA to create incentives for schools to adopt best practices for middle-skill students. These best practices help to provide realistic pathways for students to succeed in their college and career choices. Without intensive, individualized assessment of realistic postsecondary options, middle-skill students often leave high school without a clear plan for success.

Accountability Policies

Jacobson proposes that states add an accountability metric based on students' postsecondary and career outcomes—specifically, earnings and completion of postsecondary education and training programs six years after high school graduation. This type of outcome-based system has several major advantages over accountability systems that are exclusively test-based:

- **Accuracy:** Outcome-based systems are more accurate than projections based on test scores.
- **Flexibility:** Outcomes reflect the effects of a wider array of high school programs than are captured by traditional testing.
- **Long-term focus:** Outcome-based systems would incentivize schools to make long-term investments—including career advising and postsecondary planning—in their students.

Consideration of long-term outcomes in accountability systems would give high schools an incentive to implement interventions that can improve college and career outcomes, even if they have relatively small effects on test scores. For example, the author notes that the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) is such a program; JROTC has substantial effects on outcomes while leaving test scores unaffected. However, outcome-based measures have notable disadvantages: namely, the time lag between students' participation in new initiatives and the availability of subsequent outcome information. Unlike test scores, long-term outcome-based systems do not allow schools to track year-by-year improvement of individual students. For these

Roadmap

- States will use indicators of college and career success to meet new accountability policy requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- States will evaluate schools with outcome-based measures such as postsecondary credential completion six years after graduation, incorporating a wide range of postsecondary options including four-year degrees, two-year degrees, and certificates.
- States will supplement the outcome-based measures with exams—such as the SAT and ACT—that accurately predict college-readiness.
- Schools will adopt best practices to improve postsecondary outcomes.
 - Middle schools and high schools will introduce planning modules into curricula for all students, including counseling for high school and career options.
 - Schools will extend college readiness assessment to all students, and so target college readiness classes for students who are unprepared for postsecondary education.
 - Schools will partner with outside groups to provide students with mentorship opportunities.

reasons, it might be desirable to use early postsecondary and career indicators that are highly correlated with longer-term outcomes.

Given the technical challenges involved in implementing such an outcome-based accountability system, the author proposes that states coordinate, pooling their resources in a regional or national institution that would provide technical assistance to individual states.

School Practices

In order to improve students' postsecondary outcomes, Jacobson proposes that high schools adopt three types of best practices: (1) integration of high school and postsecondary planning into high school curricula, (2) extension of college-readiness assessment and appropriate college success courses to all high school students, and (3) enlistment of outside groups for student mentoring.

Learn More about This Proposal

This policy brief is based on The Hamilton Project policy proposal, “Improving College and Career Outcomes of Low-Performing High School Students,” which was authored by

LOUIS S. JACOBSON
George Washington Institute of Public Policy

Integrate High School and Postsecondary Planning into High School Curricula

The author proposes that high school curricula include modules that help students plan for the future, filling information gaps about education and career pathways. Such planning would be particularly helpful for middle-skill students who are not aware of financial aid opportunities or the potentially high returns of certificate programs and community college. Schools would begin planning-for-the-future modules in the first year of middle school to help students gradually build career plans as they gain interests and experience.

Provide College-Readiness Assessment and College Success Courses

Because many students incorrectly assume that they are academically prepared for the first year of their chosen postsecondary program, Jacobson proposes that schools assess the college readiness and college interest of high school juniors in order to utilize their senior year more effectively. Such an assessment could help them target deficiencies and avoid the need for remediation courses later. As part of this assessment, a student would receive an individualized set of projections of their likelihood of attaining various educational

outcomes based on standardized test scores, GPA, and a teacher evaluation. Students who are unprepared for postsecondary education would take college readiness courses, which would resemble courses currently being taught at local community colleges.

Enlist the Help of Outside Groups in Developing Mentoring and Planning Opportunities

Finally, the author addresses the lack of mentorship available to many middle-skill students. Although it would be costly to provide individual counseling for every student using school employees, schools can enlist outside groups like JROTC and Big Brothers Big Sisters to help students become more engaged and develop concrete postsecondary plans.

Benefits

Jacobson proposes improving the college and career outcomes of middle-skill students with relatively low-cost approaches that enhance college readiness and student engagement. By shifting school focus to postsecondary and career outcomes, the proposal would encourage schools to address the needs of middle-skill students. As part of this shift in focus, Jacobson outlines best practices for schools that would enhance students’ earnings and college attainment.

Conclusion

Middle-skill students frequently fall short of their postsecondary expectations, failing to obtain the credentials associated with labor market success. Jacobson proposes that states leverage changes to accountability policy under ESSA to evaluate schools on the basis of students’ long-term outcomes. In doing so, states will encourage schools to adopt best practices and programs that increase student engagement and preparation for postsecondary education. School practices that would be beneficial for these outcomes include increasing education and career planning, providing college-readiness assessment and courses, and working with outside groups to increase mentorship opportunities. Students who develop clear, attainable plans, and who receive sufficient support from high schools, will have postsecondary success and enjoy higher future earnings.

Highlights

In order to address a lack of preparation for postsecondary programs among middle-skill students, Louis Jacobson of the George Washington Institute of Public Policy proposes a reform in accountability policy to shift focus toward students' college and career outcomes, as well as a set of best practices for schools to help students succeed in postsecondary programs.

The Proposal

Focus accountability policies on college and career outcomes. States would evaluate schools on the basis of earnings and postsecondary education completion, including four-year degree, two-year degree, and certificate programs, to assess how high schools are preparing their students for college and career success.

Implement school practices to improve college and career outcomes for middle-skill students. Schools would introduce planning modules into curricula for all students, including counseling for high school, postsecondary, and career options. Schools would also extend college readiness assessment to all students in order to minimize the need for developmental education at the postsecondary level. Finally, schools would partner with outside groups to provide students with mentorship opportunities.

Benefits

This proposal would benefit middle-skill students, who are poorly served by the current school accountability system. Through better preparation, middle-skill students will avoid the need for college developmental education classes, complete postsecondary programs at higher rates, and achieve better labor market outcomes.



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