
Introduction

Over the next 10 years, nearly half of all new jobs will require education that goes beyond a high school education. . . . And so the question is whether all of us—as citizens, and as parents—are willing to do what’s necessary to give every child a chance to succeed.

President Barack Obama,
State of the Union Address, January 25, 2011

Each year, nearly two-thirds of all high school graduates enter postsecondary education as the first step in their adult lives. This is a wise choice given the highly competitive marketplace of the 21st century. As noted in President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address quoted above, a high school diploma is no longer enough to compete in the new economy.

This was not always the case. During the first half of the 20th century, a high school diploma was a satisfying achievement as well as a sound credential for successful employment and economic security. During the 21st century, however, a high school diploma without further training provides far fewer options for young adults. High school graduates have an unemployment rate of 32 percent—twice that of college graduates (Dillon, 2009). In addition, college graduates earn 74 percent more than their counterparts with only a high school diploma (Ames, 2010). Clearly, in our present economy, postsecondary education has become a necessity, not merely an attractive option.

This is in part because technology has changed everything. When it comes to securing jobs, our students not only compete with their classmates, they compete on an international playing field as well. In a single generation, revolutions in technology have transformed the way we live, work, and do business. Because of technology, steel mills once manned by one thousand workers now only need one hundred, and the Internet

allows anyone anywhere in the world to produce and sell products to a global market (Obama, 2011). Video conferencing and faster and more prevalent Internet connections will only accelerate this trend in years to come.

If American students face international competition for jobs, it makes sense to compare how they do in college with the college performance of students around the world. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an alliance of industrialized countries whose mission is to promote economic growth and engage in research. One topic of interest is the educational level of its member countries' citizens. Of the twenty-nine member nations of the OECD, the American college completion rate, defined as the rate of completion for those who begin college studies, is now below the OECD average, ranking 13th. What is equally as troubling, however, is that the United States has the lowest college completion growth rate of all OECD nations. Between 1995 and 2006, the postsecondary education completion rate for Finland's students grew from 28 percent to 48 percent. Australia's rate increased from 36 percent in 2000 to 59 percent in 2006. The American yearly college completion rate, however, has hardly budged—in 1995 it was 33 percent and eleven years later it was 36 percent (OECD, 2009). In fact, our nation's college dropout rate was the highest among OECD countries in 2006 (College Board, 2009).

Although there may be a variety of reasons why students drop out of college, preparation is a factor that must be considered. Among OECD members, our students rank below average in reading, mathematics, and literacy. Problem solving, a skill needed to be successful in college and the workplace, is the capacity to understand problems in unique situations, develop effective solutions, and solve and communicate possible solutions to others. In this very important skill, American students ranked 24th of the 29 participating countries (OECD, 2004). Half of all American students failed to demonstrate these problem-solving skills that the OECD considers necessary to meet the needs of the 21st century workforce (College Board, 2009).

If you dig deeper, you find that behind the average scores, there is also tremendous divide in American student performance. Even as some American students do extraordinarily well, even more do extraordinarily poorly. The proportion of American students who performed at the highest level of proficiency on the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the OECD, was 9 percent, which is a little above the OECD average. However, there is a far larger proportion of students at the lowest level—24 percent. In fact, the United States is the only OECD country that has a large percentage of performers at the top and a large percentage at the bottom (College Board, 2009). And therein lies the problem. As

this and other PISA results show, we prepare some students very well, but others are dismally neglected. We simply do not provide the same challenging and enriched educational experience for all students.

Our society can no longer afford to have educational *haves and have nots*. Although ultimately not all students will attend college, every child has the right to make that choice. That is what college and career readiness is all about. Even if a student elects to enter the world of work after high school, if he or she is to secure a job that will earn more than a minimum wage and have a career path that will lead to additional responsibility and a better salary, a sound academic high school education is key. This is why forty-five states have adopted the Common Core Standards grounded in rigorous expectations and world-class expectations (National Governors Association, 2010). The challenge now is to not affirm that all students can learn, which was a slogan of the past, but rather to affirm that all students can learn to read well, to write with clarity and confidence, to understand how to apply mathematical thinking, to think critically, to communicate in a second language, and to understand the principles of science. We are at a crossroads where we must choose whether all students develop the higher level skills and complex knowledge needed for this new century, or whether we continue to prepare only the lucky and the elite for success.

Can this be accomplished? Our experience and practice tell us that the answer to that question is *yes*. However, schools cannot realize that ideal with heavy-handed testing and punitive measures for teachers and schools. Students' life circumstances most certainly impact their learning—we do not subscribe to the “no excuses” philosophy that refuses to acknowledge the inequities in students' lives and in the funding for the schools they attend. Wise educators know that meaningful reform does not happen overnight and that it is complex.

That wisdom guided Finland as it transformed its educational system (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004). Social conditions must be addressed, structures must become equitable, curriculum must be revised, and instruction must change.

In this book, we address those factors that schools can control. We believe that there are four critical ingredients—acceleration, critical thinking, equitable practices, and support (ACES)—which, when deliberately interwoven into curriculum, instruction, and structure, work together to bring all students to college and career readiness. Although any of these four can have a positive impact on learning, when they are systematically combined, they create a synergy that can transform classrooms and schools.

The enriched curriculum and teaching strategies that promote critical thinking and college and career ready achievement for our most proficient

students must be consistently used with all students. It is not just for those who come in the most prepared to learn. Although students surely will choose different paths when they leave us, it is our job to make sure that when they graduate they will be able to make a choice as to which path they will follow, and that they can be successful in the choice they make.

The solutions posed in this book are not for readers who want a quick, politically expedient solution. Rather, they are designed for those who are willing to persistently engage in deep change that emanates from the belief that all students can become college ready. We believe the tools and strategies that we present here are both timely and valuable. We hope you agree.