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# RAISING THE BAR

UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING A-G  
COLLEGE READINESS REQUIREMENTS AS  
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION STANDARDS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A major goal of every educational institution is to prepare its students for the next step in life. Whether those next steps will be a career or a college education, the reality is many students in California are graduating from high school unprepared for either of these goals. Currently, a student who fulfills state and district graduation requirements does not automatically have the option of going to a 4-year public university should he or she choose to do so.<sup>1</sup> Adjusting the high school graduation requirements to match the level of coursework universities require of incoming freshmen, many argue, could help fix some of the problems in the California public high school system.

In order to be eligible to apply to a University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU), a high school student must complete a set of 15 classes, known as the “a-g” requirements.<sup>2</sup> The students must complete all 15 yearlong courses by the end of their senior year at a grade level of “C” or higher.<sup>3</sup> As it stands, however, many students graduating from public high schools in California are eligible to attend public universities. California state graduation requirements only include 13 yearlong courses, and many students are falling short of the A-G requirements even after completing the coursework necessary for receiving a high school diploma. In 2009, the college-going rate<sup>4</sup> for students in California to UC schools was 7.2% and the rate to CSU schools was 10.5%.<sup>5,6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>California state graduation requirements include 13 yearlong courses, whereas eligibility to attend a University of California or California State University is not granted unless at least 15 yearlong courses are completed. “California High School Graduation Requirements” (California Department of Education, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as “A-G”.

<sup>3</sup> Courses in which grades of D are earned must be repeated, except in the areas of math and language other than English, where grades of D can be validated by successful completion of higher-level coursework. (UC Berkeley, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> College-going rates were calculated by dividing the number of entering students from public schools in the county by the total number of graduates from public schools in the county. (CPEC)

<sup>5</sup> “2009 College-Going Rates to University of California.” California Postsecondary Education Commission. <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/CACGRCountyGraph.asp?Segment=A>.

<sup>6</sup> “2009 College-Going Rates to California State University.” California Postsecondary Education Commission. <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/CACGRCountyGraph.asp?Segment=B>.

Movements to align high school graduation requirements with the A-G requirements in some high school communities have sparked a discussion about the effects of this reform. To date, several school districts have either adopted or made progress in adopting the A-G requirements. In 1998, the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) was the first district among the six to implement this change in policy. The movement to require A-G coursework is still young: SJUSD is the only district of the six to have seen a class graduate under the A-G requirements.<sup>7</sup>

While we found that most communities, leaders, and advocates at least support the main goals behind requiring college-preparatory coursework of their students, some are doubtful of the policy's benefits in practice. Proponents of A-G in the high school curriculum argue that raising the standards increases the number of students eligible for 4-year public postsecondary education (and who therefore will have a choice to attend), and, even enhances the learning experience for students who do not choose to go to college. However, opponents argue that the raised standards will harm at-risk students and push career/technical opportunities out of the high school curriculum.

The movement to align A-G requirements with high school graduation standards is the policy issue we explore in this report.<sup>8</sup> We seek to answer two main research questions:

1. What are the academic impacts of incorporating the A-G requirements as high school graduation standards?
2. What are the practical implications of A-G and how might the policy be implemented most effectively?

In order to answer these questions, we conducted research in two phases. First, we reviewed the literature on A-G and the academic research on increasing graduation requirements and measures of student achievement. Next, we conducted 16 direct interviews with district personnel, community activists and education research analysts.

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<sup>7</sup> All the districts in Table 1 have separate provisions for exceptions, such as special education students or English Language Learners.

<sup>8</sup> From here onward, when we refer to "A-G," we mean the policy measure to align the A-G requirements with high school graduation standards in California.

We present our findings in four sections. First, we discuss past research on A-G policy and similar policies in other states. Second, we build on the previous research to examine the academic impact of requiring A-G for high school students. Third, we explore the pragmatic issues that districts face in implementing A-G. Finally, we bring together our findings to present recommendations on how districts should approach A-G and areas for future research.

### ***Building on Past Research***

The only study currently available on A-G policy is a case study done by the Ed Trust–West on the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD), which concludes that the implementation of A-G in SJUSD had a positive impact on student outcomes. Although this case study is the most complete analysis of A-G, it has some limitations, such as a lack of time series data and comparisons to other districts. When we attempted to improve upon the study’s quantitative analysis, we found that much of the publicly available data on statistics, such as A-G completion rates, was erroneous. Therefore, we shifted to the qualitative approach of expert interviews.

We also conducted a survey of other states’ graduation standards to learn from their experiences with similar policies. Michigan’s implementation of the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) proved to be a useful model for A-G given that the MMC most closely resembles A-G, and the state has collected data since the policy’s adoption in 2006. We used research on the MMC to put the implementation of A-G into context at various stages in our analysis.

### ***Academic Impact of A-G***

In this section, we discuss our findings on the academic issues at stake in the A-G policy debate. Specifically, we examine the effects of the A-G policy on access to A-G courses and college, academic rigor and learning, school dropout rates, and Career Technical Education. Our findings are summarized below:

1. *Access:* Limited space in A-G classes and lack of awareness prevents some students from completing A-G. Requiring A-G would significantly reduce these two problems.
2. *Academic Rigor and Learning:* Because grading is subjective, completing A-G does not in itself show that students are learning at the same level of rigor across districts,

let alone classrooms. One concern raised in opposition to A-G is that class rigor may be compromised as students of varying academic backgrounds are put in the same classrooms. Our research yielded limited support for this theory. In terms of determining how much students learn under A-G, our results indicate that student learning at least remained steady and likely increased.

3. *Dropout Rates:* Another concern about A-G is that low-achieving students will be incapable of meeting the higher graduation standards, which may lead to a rise in dropout rates. Multiple academic sources found that increased standards typically did not increase the dropout rate. However, we learned of one case in which increased standards negatively affected some students because the school failed to provide adequate academic support in conjunction with the raised standards.
4. *Career Technical Education (CTE):* As A-G is adopted in a school's curriculum, some believe it will push out courses that are geared toward vocational training and, in doing so, limit student choice. While A-G may limit student choice somewhat, programs exist that incorporate career-focused classes into the A-G curriculum and may bridge the gap between A-G and CTE.

Even though much of the literature and analysis on these academic issues is fairly recent, we believe the evidence generally points to a positive academic impact from an A-G policy.

### ***Pragmatic Issues of A-G:***

To properly implement A-G, a district must consider the pragmatic issues such as political support, cost, and six system design elements. Below we present key findings from our analysis on implementation issues related to A-G policies.

1. *Political support* is necessary to overcome the opposition to A-G and convince the school board to approve the new policy. A coalition of school board members, nonprofits, parents and students often provides the necessary political support.
2. *Cost:* All of the initiatives to properly implement A-G can be costly for school districts, such as increasing student support systems and teachers'/counselors' professional development. However, some districts report that A-G costs them very

little. This may be because they already have many of the supports in place or because they are able to reallocate current resources to A-G with relative ease. In any case, districts should make sure they have sufficient funding to effectively implement all critical implementation components before passing an A-G for all policy.

3. *System design considerations*

A) Opt out: The opt-out provision makes A-G policy more politically feasible, but it may decrease student learning and A-G completion rates.

B) Support systems: Support systems for low-achieving students who would struggle with the higher standards are an important component of implementation. Different methods to support these students include “shadow classes,” tutoring, and a summer bridge program.

C) Professional development: Professional development, another critical component of implementation, raises awareness of A-G among counselors and teachers and gives them tools to guide all students along the A-G path.

D) Course Rigor: Districts should exercise oversight of course rigor to ensure it does not fall off in spite of the increase of low-achieving students who will take A-G courses after the enactment of A-G policy.

E) Scheduling: While some districts can insert the A-G curriculum easily into their class schedules, others may run into time constraints. School districts have made changes like extending days to minimize scheduling conflicts.

F) College-going culture: Even with a greater percentage of students completing A-G, high schools must create a college-going culture to motivate students to attend college.

In sum, we find that implementing A-G is a complex, time-consuming endeavor. We also find that neither the A-G policy nor the implementation steps alone are sufficient: both are essential to increase student learning and college-going rates.

***Recommendations:***

From our analysis, we recommend that districts considering adopting A-G. We recommend that districts adopt the A-G requirements if and only if they have the means to implement the policy properly. A district must determine if they have the resources to establish

adequate supports, provide sufficient professional development, and execute the other important steps discussed in the practical issues section.

Furthermore, we encourage districts to methodically plan for A-G well in advance, and to have committed leaders steering the initiative. To improve further research on the policy's effects, we also recommend that districts pay closer attention to data reporting. We also hope that our research will help inform future studies.