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# 'RESTORING VALUE' TO THE HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA: THE RHETORIC AND PRACTICE OF HIGHER STANDARDS

Executive Summary

October 2007



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## **‘Restoring Value’ to the High School Diploma: The Rhetoric and Practice of Higher Standards**

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### *Executive Summary*

A new wave of commission reports since 2004 has attacked the high school and called for its “reinvention.” Four themes emerge from the fray: that standards and rigor are too low; that the high school has lost its relevance, particularly to future employment; that the high school is inequitable; and that the high school is simply boring.

The movement for standards and rigor has generated the most response, especially in higher state graduation requirements and exit exams. The case for high standards rests, in part, on two arguments. One is that economic catastrophe and competitive decline await the nation unless rigor is enhanced. A second and more persuasive case is simply that all too many graduates—and certainly dropouts—lack the competencies necessary to be successful in postsecondary education or to be competent workers, civic participants, and community and family members.

In formulating solutions, the major commission reports promote standards on the apparent assumption that rigorous assessments, including exit exams, can motivate students and teachers into improved learning and performance. Yet proponents of higher standards and rigorous testing have little to say about how their imposition will enhance student performance generally.

To some extent, the arguments for rigor are simplistic. Two conceptions of rigor are dominant: test-based rigor, requiring higher scores on conventional tests; and course-based rigor, requiring more demanding courses (like Algebra II and AP courses). However, these conventional academic conceptions neglect several other conceptions of rigor: as depth rather than breadth; as more sophisticated levels of understanding including “higher-order skills”; and as the ability to apply learning in unfamiliar settings. In addition, while promoters stress “college *and* workplace readiness,” in fact very few strategies link to the workplace. Ultimately, these arguments really call for high schools to do a better job of college preparation.

Recent legislation has forced the translation of rhetoric into practice. Most states have increased their graduation requirements, and half the states have adopted exit exams. With very few exceptions, both graduation requirements and exit exams replicate the conventional academic

## The Rhetoric and Practice of Higher Standards

curriculum of the late nineteenth century. In addition, most state exams are written at the seventh- to ninth-grade levels—not at what proponents would label as *high* standards. The conventional response to student failure has been to provide remediation, an approach that also undermines learning beyond basic skill levels and narrows the curriculum to a few tested subjects, and which may have even contributed to *lowering* standards and reducing graduation rates.

Overall, then, the push to enhance rigor and standards behind the high school diploma is seriously flawed. Moreover, any gains come at the expense of other goals for high school reform, including equity, curricular relevance, and student interest. A more promising approach to reshaping the high school involves pathways, structured around a coherent theme, either broadly occupational or non-occupational. Focus on a single theme nurtures multiple concepts of rigor. Moreover, the approach distributes responsibility for standards throughout the educational community, and it provides students with the benefits of curricular choice and several routes to graduation.

We recommend, then, that:

- Proponents of standards consider conceptions of rigor aside from the conventional test-based and course-based conceptions.
- The uneven application of standards be more seriously examined. High standards are already present in the best high schools, but many other schools, especially in urban areas, lack the capacity to meet high standards. The central problem is therefore one of inequality, whereas the movement for standards has largely neglected the issues of raising achievement for the lowest-performing students.
- Alternatives to the conventional academic program be more seriously considered, partly as ways of achieving more than one goal of the high school reform movement. In particular, fostering multiple pathways through high school provides opportunities for developing multiple conceptions of standards as well as distributing the responsibilities for standards to a broader group of stakeholders.

If our society continues to focus only on standards defined in conventional academic ways, it seems destined to continue the cycle of “reforming again and again and again,” with incomplete reforms in one period leading to further critiques and still other reforms in the next—the pattern of the high school reform merry-go-round since the 1890s.