

College Remediation & K-12 Leadership

Research Brief

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If you think that a student who graduates from high school with a strong GPA and a solid college entrance exam score is adequately prepared for the demands of higher education, you may be wrong. Postsecondary enrollment trend data show that high school graduation does not equate to college readiness.¹ The alarming rate at which first-time freshmen have been funneled into remedial courses makes it clear that high school graduation is not as strong an indicator of readiness as one would expect. But it doesn't have to be this way. K-12 instruction can better equip graduates to be successful in postsecondary education. This brief overviews college remediation, explores its connection to K-12 preparation, and describes the opportunities one Georgia school district identified to intervene and support students more effectively to shore up college readiness.

Overview of College Remediation Nationally

College remediation is the process by which students who have enrolled in college are assessed and placed in non-credit bearing courses designed to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. According to a recent study, the majority of first-year students requiring remediation enroll in math (26%), followed by writing (25%) and reading (16%).² But how exactly are students assessed to determine their need for remedial courses?

Many institutions rely primarily on students' performance on college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT to determine readiness for credit-bearing courses. Others rely more heavily on placement exams like the ACCUPLACER and COMPASS, which are content-based tests in reading, writing, and math and administered to incoming students to determine readiness.³ With both types of placement exams, students whose scores meet or exceed the institution's established cut scores are permitted to enroll in courses of their choosing, while students whose scores fall below that performance threshold are referred to remedial courses. But the ways in which colleges and universities use these tools to place students vary greatly across institutions.⁴ The variation in assessment and placement practices notwithstanding, colleges and universities nationally carry the steep expense of offering these courses. Strong American Schools estimates that approximately \$3 billion is spent on remedial education annually.⁵

What Remediation Means For Students

Remedial courses impose numerous burdens on students. Students receive no credit for taking and passing remedial courses, yet they are still required to pay for each remedial course in which they enroll, a cost that is usually equal to that of a credit-bearing course. Additionally, research suggests that students who enroll in remedial courses tend to "lose academic momentum," experience poor overall performance, and ultimately fail to complete their degrees.⁶

Note: While this particular brief focuses on college remediation as an indicator of college readiness, GLISI acknowledges that career preparation is an equally important issue. See our research brief entitled "[Soft Skills Development in K-12 Education](#)" for a look at how school leaders are preparing students for the demands of the 21st century workplace.

In fact, data show that students who enroll in remedial courses complete college at half the rate of students enrolled in credit-bearing courses, and in the most extreme cases, the graduation rate of remediated students has been reported as low as one third the rate of students not enrolled in remedial courses.⁷ Research suggests that low literacy is at the root of remediation issues, a point that we spotlight in our district overview later in the brief. As Strong American Schools puts it, “if you can’t read well, you can’t perform well in any other college classes.”⁸ Not only are students who are required to take remedial reading courses usually enrolled in several other remedial courses, essentially compounding the effects of remedial education, but also they likely struggle in most courses due to their poor literacy skills.

College Remediation in Georgia

- **Spending is high:** The University System of Georgia (USG) spends \$22 million on remedial education annually. The cost for the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) during FY12 was \$31.9 million.⁹
- **Remediation is widespread:** According to the 2012 Complete College Georgia report, “Both of the University System of Georgia’s two-year colleges provide remediation to 59 percent of [their] entering students, and its 14 state colleges provide remediation to 48 percent of [their] entering students.” Further the “25 institutions in the Technical College System of Georgia provide remediation to 26 percent of [their] first-time entry students.”¹⁰
- **Time to completion is longer:** Twenty-four percent of USG students who enroll in one or more remedial courses graduate within six years. And remediated students pursuing associate’s degrees at two-year institutions complete their programs at a rate of 7 percent within three years.¹¹

It is important to note that Georgia is making strides toward improving students’ postsecondary success. Not only has the state committed to the “Complete College America goal that by 2020, 60 percent of young adults will hold a college certificate or degree” and received a grant from Complete College America to advance this initiative, but USG and TCSG are also making a joint effort to ensure postsecondary success for the state’s students through Georgia’s Higher Education Plan.¹²

How Can Students Be Better Prepared for College & Career Success?

Until recently, college remediation had been framed as primarily a high school issue. But the responsibility of educating students does not rest at one level. Preparing students for life beyond high school is a K-12 issue, where teachers and leaders across all levels play a critical role in ensuring students have the knowledge and skills to become contributing members of society. For instance, central office leaders are in a position to foster collaborative opportunities with postsecondary institutions to ensure students’ educational preparation align with postsecondary expectations. For school districts that are located near a college or university, dual enrollment, early college, and middle college programs provide invaluable learning opportunities for students.¹³ At the school level, leaders can establish performance cultures where high expectations and a rigorous curriculum are the norm. This includes expanding access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, as well as instituting systems that enable students (and their guardians) to easily track progress against success factors that are predictive of later outcomes. Teachers support these efforts at the classroom level by employing highly effective instructional practices and utilizing appropriate strategies to identify students who need intervention as well as those who should be accelerated.

How One District Used Postsecondary Achievement Data to Inform Practices in K-12

Although college remediation rates are and have been a high profile education issue for some time, many school districts have remained unaware of their high school graduates' postsecondary experiences. This was the case for leaders in the Morgan County School District, located east of Atlanta, GA and home to about 3,200 students. The district's revelation came after participating in the Data Utilization Tools for Georgia's School Leaders Project (DUP), a college and career readiness initiative facilitated by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The project was designed to help districts "use postsecondary student data to plan instructional interventions that improve students' readiness for success in college and career."¹⁴

Essentially, what the Morgan County School District's leaders learned as participants in this project was that their students were not performing nearly as well in college as they believed. In fact, as their superintendent, Dr. Ralph Bennett, recalled, the data, as presented through the High School Feedback Reports (HSFR), showed that about half of their high school graduates "were requiring remediation in either or both reading and math at the college level and that's both technical colleges and the University System of Georgia schools."¹⁵ The data were shocking and sobering for Morgan County's leaders, who had prided themselves on their graduation rate,¹⁶ as well as their numerous AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) course offerings, all of which they believed were indicators of their success in preparing students for college. And when they discovered that even their AP students were being remediated, it became even more difficult to reconcile what the data showed and what they believed about their students' level of college preparation.

Revisiting their achievement data, Morgan County's leaders began digging for the root cause of the issue and found that their students' reading levels were not as high as they needed to be. As Dr. Bennett recalls, "When we looked at our CRCT scores, 95% or more of our kids in each grade were meeting or exceeding standards. So it sounded like or at least looked like we were preparing kids. But when we started digging a little bit deeper into what proficiency meant in the state of Georgia, it became clear that we had hung our hats on a false sense of preparing our kids based on CRCT scores and EOCT scores."¹⁷ Having identified literacy as a root cause, Morgan County's first step in addressing the issue was to adopt a uniform measure of literacy across school levels; the district chose Lexiles. Within the Lexile framework, students' reading ability and a book's level of difficulty are assessed and used to determine a student's likelihood of understanding selected texts. The Lexile measures are then used to assign students ability-appropriate books.¹⁸ Morgan County's adoption of Lexiles not only enabled each school in the district to speak the same "language" with respect to students' reading performance and needs, but it also allowed the district to measure students' overall literacy growth.

The district's second step was to adopt an assessment tool that could be used consistently across the schools to measure student progress. Dr. Bennett noted that the principals were the driving force behind the adoption of the assessment tool they selected, the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP). Before purchasing the tool, which is a computer-adaptive assessment that measures student achievement growth within and across grade levels,¹⁹ the district wanted to see it in action. The district assembled separate teams of principals and teachers to visit a district in the Atlanta metropolitan area, where the tool was being utilized effectively. Shortly thereafter, the district gathered its four principals, who had been consulting with their leadership teams and governance councils, to determine the next course of action. Each principal agreed that MAP was the tool that best suited their needs, so the district agreed to adopt it. Although it is still early in the implementation process, Morgan County has concluded its first assessment with MAP and completed training with teachers for further implementation. The district is also preparing for further training in data analysis and data interpretation.

In the end, Morgan County's response to the college remediation data reflected district leadership's belief that college and career readiness is not and should not be viewed exclusively as a high school issue. As Dr. Bennett asserted, "there is very little that I can point to specifically at the high schools that I can necessarily make a connection between it being a high school problem that so many kids are being remediated." "It has to be a system issue," he insisted, "as to how we figure out how to address this rather than put that burden on a high school or high schools."²⁰



• Georgia's High School Feedback Reports •

Georgia's High School Feedback Reports (HSFR) were created through a joint effort of the USG, TCSG, GaDOE, and DUP pilot districts and offer outstanding formative data to assist Georgia districts and schools in their goals to increase college and career success. They are an essential tool to provide district and school leaders with detailed longitudinal data regarding students' K-12 learning experiences. As the Georgia Department of Education's Chief Information Officer Bob Swiggum explained, "Through the State's Longitudinal Data System and the High School Feedback Reports, high school staffs will now be able to adjust their instruction to ensure their graduates are college ready." (Source: Bob Swiggum. (2013). E-mail correspondence.)

Key Questions for District Office Leaders

- Are we tracking the types of institutions and programs our high school graduates are enrolling in as freshmen? Are we aware of the level of postsecondary success those students are having?
- What type of data do we have access to that will help us improve our K-12 instruction and better prepare students for postsecondary success?
- How does our district share critical postsecondary data with staff?
- Do all stakeholders in our district believe that college readiness begins long before high school?
- What types of personalized learning opportunities do we introduce at the elementary level and extend through middle and high school that help students see the relevance of their educational experiences?
- Does our district communicate the value of strong, positive relationships and equip teachers with techniques to incorporate into their “everyday interactions with students: communicating positive expectations, correcting students in a constructive way, developing positive classroom pride, demonstrating caring, and preventing and reducing your own frustration and stress.”²¹
- What types of academic intervention systems do we currently have or believe we can create and implement to identify those students in need of additional support?
- How does our district engage the community in our efforts to better prepare high school graduates for postsecondary success?

Conclusion

What is the value of K-12 aligning educational experiences with postsecondary expectations? It's simple: students are better equipped for life after high school. In order to make this a reality, the P-16 education pipeline must operate both cooperatively and collaboratively, ensuring a tighter relationship between the preparation students receive throughout K-12 and what postsecondary institutions and employers expect high school graduates to know. This means that leaders and teachers in the P-16 context take ownership of their role in student learning and understand that each stop along the educational pipeline is an important one that adds tremendous value to students' overall intellectual growth and development toward becoming engaged, productive citizens.

¹ See, for example, Sparks, D. & Malkus, N. (2013). First-year undergraduate remedial coursetaking: 1999-2000, 2003-04, 2007-08, 3. NCEES. The data collected in the study were self-reported via a nationally representative survey of 688 students in college remediation.

² Kurlaender, M. & Howell, J. (2012). College remediation: A review of the causes and consequences, 1. Background Paper of the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center.

³ Strong American Schools. (2008). Diploma to nowhere, 4. Washington, DC: Author.

⁴ Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/12/21/colleges-rely-heavily-popular-remedial-placement-tests>; College Board. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/students/faqs>; ACT. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/products/higher-education-act-compass>.

⁵ Kurlaender, M. & Howell, J., 3.

⁶ Strong American Schools, 10.

⁷ Strong American Schools, 11-12.

⁸ Strong American Schools, 12. The specific findings are based on data collected on students who graduated high school in 1992 and enrolled in college. Of those who took no remedial courses, 57% graduated with a degree within 8 years. The rate was 29% for students who enrolled in one or two remedial courses, and 19% for students who took three or four courses.

⁹ Strong American Schools, 12-13.

¹⁰ Mike Light. (January 7, 2014). Phone call. Mike Light is the Executive Director of Communications for TCSG.

¹¹ University System of Georgia. (November 2011). Complete college Georgia: Georgia's higher education completion plan 2012, 17.

¹² See note 6

¹³ University System of Georgia, 2.

¹⁴ Bangser, M. (2008). Preparing high school students for successful transitions to postsecondary education and employment. National High School Center.

¹⁵ GLISI. (2013). Data utilization project. Retrieved from <http://www.glisi.org/datautilizationproject>.

¹⁶ Ralph Bennett, Jr. (September 20, 2013). Phone interview.

¹⁷ In 2011, Morgan County's high school graduation rate was 87.5% according to <http://gaosa.org/Report.aspx>

¹⁸ Ralph Bennett, Jr. (September 20, 2013). Phone interview.

¹⁹ Lexiles are measures used to assess students reading levels or the difficulty of a particular text. For more information, visit <http://www.lexile.com/about-lexile/lexile-overview/>

²⁰ Northwest Evaluation Association. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.nwea.org/products-services/assessments/help-all-kids-learn>

²¹ Ralph Bennett, Jr. (September 20, 2013). Phone interview.

²² Boynton, M. & Boynton, C. (n.d.). Educator's guide to preventing and solving discipline problems. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/105124/chapters/Developing_Positive_Teacher-Student_Relations.aspx

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