

What High Schools Can Do to Better Prepare Students for College

How can high schools help more of their students make it to college and be better prepared to do college-level work?

Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do (PDF), a new practice guide from the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, offers five straightforward recommendations:


- Offer a college preparatory curriculum and make sure that, by ninth grade, students understand academic requirements for college entry and success.
- Use assessment throughout high school to help students understand their relative readiness for college, and help them address any identified deficiencies.
- Surround students with people — adults and peers — who build and support their college-going aspirations.
- Help students complete required steps for college entry.
- Increase families' financial awareness and help students apply for financial aid.

As is true of all What Works Clearinghouse practice guides, these suggestions were developed by a panel of individuals chosen for their expertise both in the subject matter and in research methodology. The aim of each guide is to develop a list of practical recommendations based on the best available research and expert judgment and that, together, add up to a coherent approach for addressing a common — and complex — education challenge.

This particular guide began with a search for, and review of, research on college access programs in the U.S. The search yielded more than 500 studies, of which 99 had causal designs and focused on programs intended to ready secondary school students for college by preparing them academically, helping them complete the steps for college entry, and making it more probable that they would enroll upon acceptance. In the end, the five recommendations were rooted in 16 studies (of 10 different college-access programs) reflecting the strongest evidence available about what high schools should do to prepare more of their students for college acceptance and success.

For some readers, these recommendations will sound familiar. That's because they validate what many high schools that consistently prepare their students for college success are already doing. "There are certainly schools that routinely do everything the guide recommends — in ways that are

► This article was first published in WestEd's *R&D Alert*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2010.



systemic and coordinated and have broad support from the school community," says WestEd's Neal Finkelstein, one of the guide's five panelist authors. As a result, these schools routinely prepare large proportions of their students to successfully pursue college degrees.

"But there is also a whole roster of schools that send less than five percent of their students to college, and there are a lot of other schools in between," he adds. "In most high schools, if a student rooted around enough, he or she could take the classes that met the basic eligibility standards for college and get the support needed to be successful. But is it easy? Is it the culture? Is a college-ready curriculum with necessary support the default? Not necessarily."


Like his fellow authors, Finkelstein came to the panel's task having spent much of his professional life focused on secondary-to-higher-education transition issues. Prior to joining WestEd, when he served as Director of Educational Outreach Research and Evaluation for the University of California Office of the President, he studied the effectiveness of K-12 and university-based student academic preparation and support programs, particularly in relation to postsecondary education matriculation. At WestEd, his research on this topic has included, for example, examining course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California's public university systems among minority youth.

Finkelstein recognizes that, even when high schools send a large proportion of their students to college, it does not necessarily mean that all of the college-going students are ready to succeed in their postsecondary studies. Noting that in some areas of the country about a third of incoming community college students are required to take remedial courses prior to starting credit-earning classes, he says, "The panel was very clear that if the next step after starting college is remediation, there hasn't been adequate preparation for higher education.

"We wanted the guide to be applicable to practitioners in high schools where there are not programs in place to systematically prepare kids for college."

To that end, in addition to summarizing the supporting evidence for each recommendation, the authors also include guidance on how to carry out the recommendation and, as appropriate, they provide sample materials. For example, one suggestion for implementing the first recommendation (i.e., offer courses that prepare students for college-level work and make sure they understand "what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by ninth grade") is to communicate the curriculum requirements in a mailing to eighth grade students at the high school's feeder schools. The guide includes a sample course-requirement mailing advising eighth graders that "selecting the right courses is a life-defining decision."

Equally important, the authors have drawn from their collective knowledge of both the research and the field to identify potential roadblocks to implementing each recommendation and to offer some possible solutions (though Finkelstein is quick to note that neither the roadblocks nor the solutions are intended to make up a comprehensive list). For example, the guide suggests three different ways that a school can implement the recommendation to "surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations."



One suggestion is to provide mentoring by college-educated adults or by recent high school graduates who have enrolled in college. Drawing from college-access programs that have shown evidence of success, the guide explains specific ways in which mentors can help prepare high school students for college, such as serving as a college-going role model, assisting with a student's college selection and application process, or monitoring a student's academic progress and advocating for extra help if the student is struggling.

Identified roadblocks for this suggestion relate to the possibility of mentoring relationships not lasting or mentors becoming less available over time. A suggested solution is that high schools partner with a local college that offers academic credit for its students' volunteer work, making it more likely that a college student would maintain the mentoring relationship for a longer period.

Given his prior research and wide reading on the topic of college readiness, Finkelstein was not surprised by much he learned in his work on the panel. What he found most important, however, was "the constant reminder that addressing just one aspect of college preparedness, like helping a family understand how to complete a financial aid form, is insufficient for getting more students to college. It's the more holistic programs — those in which there is a strong college preparatory curriculum, effective assessment, and multiple, interwoven student support approaches — that show the greatest impact."

For more information, download *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College* (PDF) at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/higher_ed_pg_091509.pdf