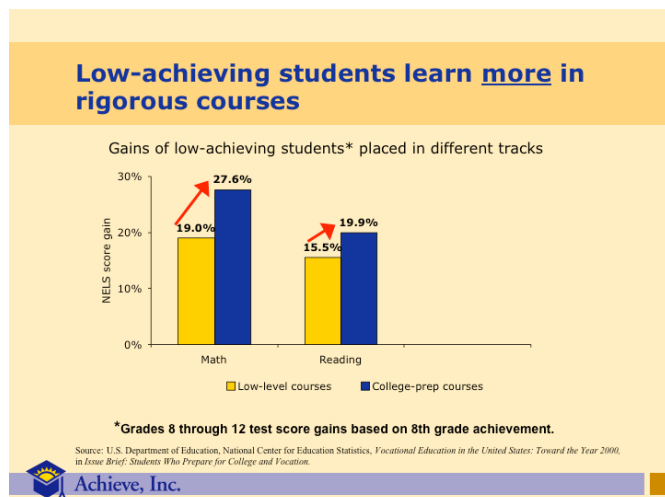


Requiring Readiness: Can All Students Benefit?

As states and districts upgrade their standards to better prepare graduates for college and work, some worry that not all students will benefit. How can we raise graduation requirements, they ask, when so many teenagers already fail their classes and score poorly on statewide assessments? Can low-income and low-achieving students ever meet the standards? Won't such policies hurt more than help? Such concerns might seem like common sense, but a convincing body of research and experience proves they are profoundly misplaced.

High Standards Help Rather than Hurt

Over the last 15 years, research has consistently shown that **all students learn more** when they are placed in more challenging courses. One national study found that students who took Algebra rather than general math experienced much higher test score gains between 8th and 10th grades — even those with the very lowest initial 8th grade math scores.

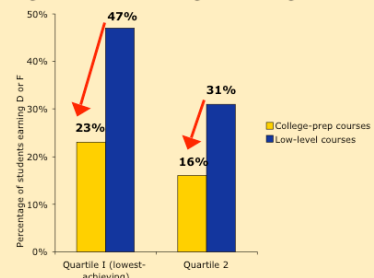


Another study found that low-achieving urban students placed in college-prep math courses logged much bigger gains on standardized tests than those who took general track courses. A federal evaluation of vocational education found similar results in both math and reading. And a recent study by the testing company ACT concluded, “Students gain from taking more rigorous courses regardless of their achievement level.”

What about classroom grades? Won't many students fail if asked to take more challenging courses? Again, recent research suggests otherwise. It turns out that **all students earn better grades** when they take rigorous courses. Tracking more than 3,000 students from middle school into high school, for example, the Southern Regional Education Board found that low-achieving 8th graders were less likely to earn Ds and Fs when placed in college prep courses in high school. Nor will students necessarily drop out at higher rates either.

Low-achieving students fail less often in rigorous courses

9th grade English performance, by 9th grade course and 8th grade reading achievement



Source: Cooney, Sandra and Gene Bottoms, Southern Regional Education Board, *Middle Grades to High School: Measuring a Weak Link*, 2002, p. 9.

Achieve, Inc.

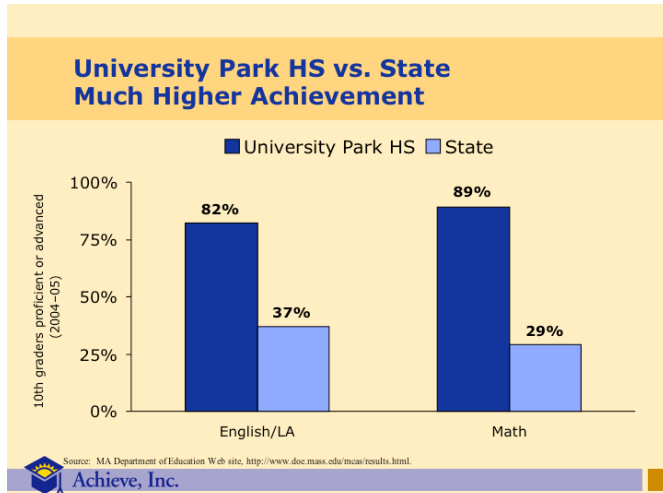
Clearly, the traditional practice of placing low-achieving students into “easier” classes does not help them learn more or get better grades, but actually does more harm than good.

More Students Can Succeed

Education leaders who have applied that lesson are finding that far more students can meet higher standards than we traditionally have believed. University Park, a secondary school in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a student population that is 73 percent low income and 61 percent minority, expects all students to prepare for postsecondary education. Despite the fact that the majority of students come from families that speak a language other than English at home, nearly every student graduates and every single graduate enrolls in college. Not only do all of University Park's students pass the state exit exam, four in five score at the “advanced” or “proficient” level, compared with only about a third of students statewide.

Big high schools can successfully raise standards, too. At Jack Britt, a comprehensive high school enrolling more than 1,800 students — nine out of 10 African American or Latino — 97 percent of the students passed North Carolina's Algebra II assessment last year, compared with 79 percent of students statewide.

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Finally, big improvements are possible, even on a statewide scale. The proportion of students passing Virginia's rigorous Algebra I assessment *doubled* from 40 percent to 80 percent between 1998 and 2004.

The Bottom Line:
Raising expectations is never easy. But concerns that higher standards will hurt students are unfounded. Students are far more likely to succeed when we expect them to do so, and more likely to fail when we do not.

Whole school systems have found that many more students can succeed as well. Several years ago, San Jose Unified School District began requiring all students to complete the full set of courses required for admission to California's public colleges and universities. In 2004, 65 percent of San Jose graduates completed all of those courses with a C or better, up from just 37 percent in 2001. And that success hasn't come at the expense of higher dropout rates, as many feared; the district's four-year graduation rates actually improved slightly over the same period.

