

# If We Raise Standards in High School, Won't Students Become More Disengaged?

A frequent objection to raising graduation standards and increasing rigor in high school is that students won't be motivated to take harder courses or put forth the effort required to succeed. Raising standards, the argument goes, will simply alienate students and cause more of them to tune out.

Such concerns are deeply rooted in modern beliefs about American teenagers — that they are obsessed with the rituals of high school, not the substance, and are much more interested in play than hard work.

But what do students themselves have to say? The answer is surprising: Many teenagers want to be more challenged by school and have a great deal of interest in taking rigorous academic courses. And their interest would be even greater if adults did a better job helping them understand the link between the courses they take now and what skills they need to be successful later on.

## Students Want Rigorous Courses

Although well over 80 percent of secondary students say they plan on going to college, only about half of today's high school graduates complete a set of academic courses that can be considered "college prep." Why are students planning on college but not preparing for it? Are they simply lazy? Or are they not really serious about college after all?

It's not because they aren't really serious about going. About eight out of 10 graduates enroll in postsecondary education within two years of leaving high school. Unfortunately, about a third of them end up in remedial reading, writing or math courses because they weren't adequately prepared for college-level work.

Although it seems to defy common sense, a major reason for the preparation gap is that **challenging high school courses simply are not available** to some students, particularly low income and minority students. A survey by the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering found that when it comes to math, demand for rigorous courses among minority students greatly exceeds supply. Although two-thirds of minority boys said they are interested in taking tough math classes, fewer than half said such classes are available to them. Seventy-five percent of minority girls expressed interest — a higher percentage than either white boys or girls — yet only 45 percent said rigorous math classes are available.

That survey challenges another widespread belief about minority teenagers — that their peers discourage them from taking tougher courses. In fact, minority students were no more likely than white students to say their friends discourage them from taking upper-level math courses, *but they were twice as likely to say that their teachers do so.*

Demand for college-prep courses became vividly clear in Los Angeles in summer 2005. As the school board deliberated whether to require all incoming 9th graders to enroll in the A-G courses required for admission to California's public universities, a crowd of students wearing T-shirts printed with "Let Me Choose My Future" rallied outside — *in support of the proposal.* After the measure passed, an activist told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Students fought to make this possible."

And just listen to students in the first California school system to require those A-G courses for graduation, San Jose Unified School District: "I can't imagine not having it," says Cesar Lopez. "Students will find the motivation ... they only need the opportunity." His classmate Joshua Herrera agrees, "I think they should do it in all high schools."

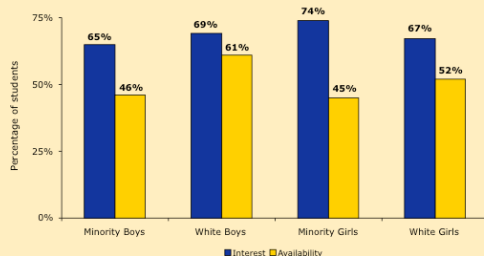
## Even More Students Would Want Rigorous Classes If They Were Better Informed

Of course, not all teenagers are rallying to demand access to rigorous courses. But is that because they don't want them?

A national study by the testing company ACT found that much of the mismatch between students' ambitious postsecondary plans and less ambitious course-taking occurs not because students are unmotivated but because **students are ill informed about the kinds of courses necessary to become prepared for success in college and in well-paying jobs.**

### Students want advanced courses

Advanced math classes: minority interest far exceeds availability



Source: National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, *Progress Toward Power: A Follow-Up Survey of Children's and Parents' Attitudes About Math and Science*. Research Letter, October 2001. Survey conducted by Harris Interactive, 1999.

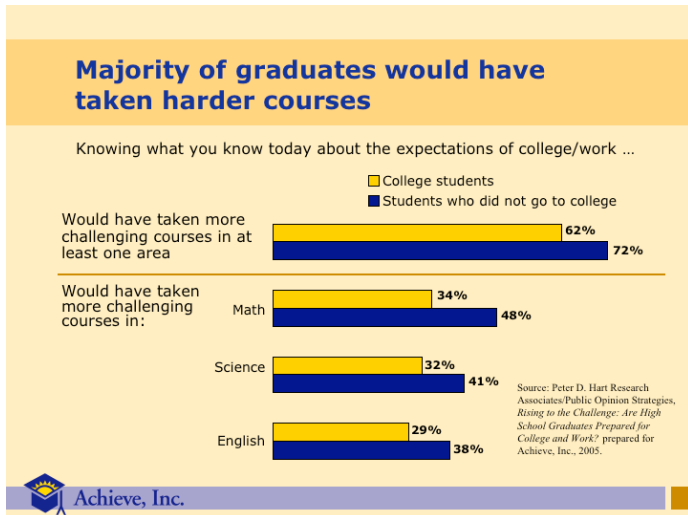
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Part of the blame lies with policymakers and school officials who have set course-taking requirements too low. In most states, students can take all of the courses required to earn a diploma and still not be prepared for success in college or good jobs.

**Only eight states have aligned high school graduation requirements with standards for college and work readiness.**

Misinformation parents contribute to the problem as well. Surveys show that students rely on parents more than school personnel to help with course selection, and parents are mainly concerned that their students fulfill high school graduation requirements, often assuming that these courses will adequately prepare them for college. Students whose parents did not attend college themselves are put at a particular disadvantage.

In fact, even more high school students might be willing and eager to take tougher classes if only we helped them better connect their course-taking with their ambitions early enough to make a difference. A national survey of recent graduates by Achieve, Inc., revealed that, "knowing what they know now," 62 percent of college students would have taken more challenging courses in high school. And an astounding 72 percent of young adults *who did not go on to college* say they regret not taking more challenging courses in high school.



In other words, most teenagers are no different than their parents or other rational adults — willing to work hard if they have reason to believe it is important and will pay off.

## Challenging Doesn't Have To Be Boring

Of course, motivation within the classroom is a concern as well. What if students enrolled in more challenging academic courses find themselves bored by them? Won't they lose interest and even drop out?

Challenging doesn't automatically mean interesting, and academic courses can be taught in ways that seem dry and irrelevant to students. But it doesn't have to be that way. Many high schools are making math come alive for students through projects and real-world problem solving. Others are finding ways to connect academic instruction with career and technical preparation, helping students understand not just how to use Algebra, but when, what for and why.

An excellent example of this is the High Schools That Work program run by the Southern Regional Education Board. This national network of more than 1,200 high schools in 32 states encourages teaching rigorous academics in ways that are engaging and relevant to students. At one high school, students from multiple classes work together each year to design and build a house. The emphasis is on applying their mathematics skills to the task.

As any teenager can tell you, the worst classes are those that are boring enough to cause students to tune out but not challenging enough to teach them much of anything. The best classes — and the ones most likely keep teenagers engaged in school — are *both* challenging *and* interesting. In fact, many teenagers become disengaged from school not because they are teenagers, but because schools make little effort to make learning relevant and engaging.

## The Bottom Line:

**No one believes that raising academic standards will be easy. But the conventional wisdom about American teenagers is wrong and misleading. When students see a clear connection between rigorous classes and future opportunities, they become strong supporters of higher standards.**