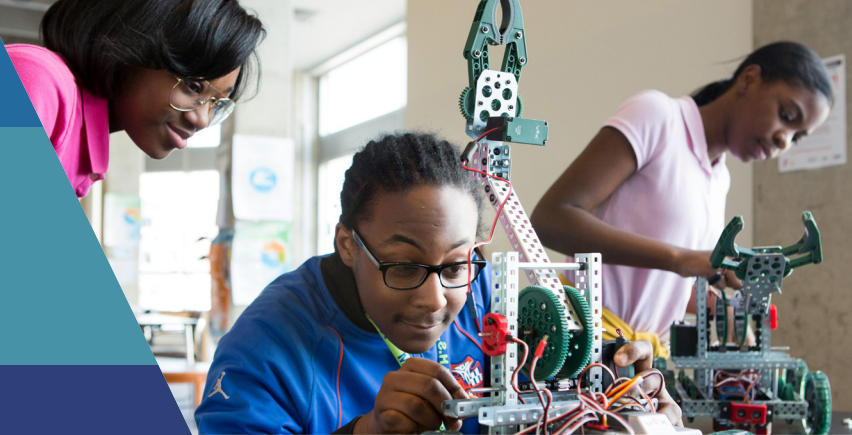


# Academic Gateways and International Best Practices

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Top-performing countries across the globe set clear academic gateways that students must pass through during their primary and secondary school years. These gateways mark levels of achievement that, cumulatively, prepare students for gainful careers and/or postsecondary education. For example, in Singapore, the instructional system is controlled centrally with standards for each grade level and subject, and a curriculum and syllabus for each course aligned with national examinations at the end of primary, secondary, and postsecondary school. The compulsory curriculum for all students through the age of sixteen includes English, mathematics, mother-tongue language, science, social studies, art, music, physical education, and citizenship. Finland, meanwhile, established clear gateways for students at seven and sixteen years of age, with students at sixteen fully ready to move either into a "senior secondary school" or a "vocational school with apprenticeship training."<sup>1</sup>

## Assessment in the United States

In the United States, there is currently a federal requirement for annual testing in mathematics and English/language arts (ELA) in grades 3–8 and once in high school, together with a less frequent science assessment. However, there is no uniform assessment, and the number of states sharing a single testing format shrunk drastically from only three years ago. States do not have uniform stakes for test failure at elementary or middle school grade levels and do not tie course content in math and ELA to high-stakes assessments; their high school graduation requirements are set well below a true college- and career-ready standard. To give one example, Maryland currently has three separate, disconnected indicators that measure students' success in high school and readiness for higher education: (1) a set of high school graduation requirements; (2) measures of college and career readiness in English and math; and (3) a set of high school course completion requirements for acceptance to selective schools in the University of Maryland system, which is published annually.<sup>2</sup>

One consequence of the American system is that students take high school-level assessments in many different grades. Some students take high school mathematics assessments in eighth grade, while others take the same assessment in twelfth grade.<sup>3</sup>

Because high school students are at different levels of academic attainment, there can be little coherent planning around the last year of high school. In most cases, students' college application process is complete prior to any twelfth-grade summative assessments. Consequently, the final high school year may be regarded as wasted time by both students and teachers. Because state high school graduation requirements are set so low, many students are graduation-ready well before twelfth grade. As a result, twenty-one states allow students to graduate from high school early.<sup>4</sup>

## A More Meaningful High School Experience

In their review of international and U.S. education practices, conducted on behalf of the Maryland Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, Marc Tucker and the National Center on Education and the Economy outline several recommendations for making high school more meaningful for students. The most important recommendation is to establish the American high school graduation level through a series of college- and career-aligned assessments in tenth grade.<sup>5</sup> Ideally, but not necessarily, these assessments would be tightly linked to state-approved course content rather than the generic "skills-based" tests common today. Secondly, these assessments would be given in more than just math and ELA and include other subjects such as social studies, sciences, and ideally the arts and a foreign language. Prior to tenth grade, nationally normed end-of-course assessments in all major subjects would generate constant early-warning indicators of students who were off track for graduating from high school on time; this, in turn, would trigger intense summer and after-school programs and in-class interventions for those identified.

This revised assessment system would offer students at least three course progression options in grades 10–12. First, students unable to pass the tenth-grade assessments would have two years of study to do so. Second, students could enroll in a high-quality career and technical education (CTE) pathway leading to an industry-approved entry-level credential by the end of twelfth grade. Third, students who wanted to pursue a traditional four-

year college degree would have two years to take Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, early-college, or other advanced courses. The key is that the K–10 system would be geared to deliver sufficiently rigorous instruction so that the majority of students would be able to choose between the second and third options for their final two years of high school.

## Guiding Questions

- Do policymakers have the political will to tie high school graduation to true college- and career-ready standards?
- Are policymakers willing to create a high-quality CTE pathway option that students could select ahead of their last two years in high school?
- Will policymakers fund research-based interventions from the earliest grade levels to minimize the number of students who will be off track to meet the required tenth-grade standards?

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy, "Finland: Instructional Systems," <http://ncee.org/what-we-do/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/finland-overview/finland-instructional-systems/> (accessed July 6, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> Maryland State Department of Education, "2016 Maryland Report Card, High School Program Completion: Course of Study," <http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/HighSchoolCompletionOther.aspx?PV=38:12:99:AAAA:3:N:0:13:1:2:1:1:1:2:3> (accessed July 6, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> For an example, see S. Moses, "Should All 8th-Graders Take Regents Classes? CNY School District Moves in That Direction," *Syracuse.com*, July 15, 2015, [http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2015/07/should\\_all\\_8th\\_graders\\_take\\_regents\\_classes\\_cny\\_school\\_district\\_makes\\_changes.html](http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2015/07/should_all_8th_graders_take_regents_classes_cny_school_district_makes_changes.html).
- <sup>4</sup> G. Toppo, "More High-Schoolers Reinvent or Skip Their Senior Year," *USA TODAY*, February 24, 2010, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-02-25-senioryear25foronline\\_st\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-02-25-senioryear25foronline_st_N.htm).
- <sup>5</sup> From notes taken on June 28, 2017, by one of this paper's authors, Dr. David Steiner, who is a member of the Maryland Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education.

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Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for **American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action**

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