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A-G Implementation within the Los Angeles Unified School District:

Questions and Answers

UCLA IDEA

May 1, 2012

This fall, Los Angeles Unified School District's entering freshmen will be required to complete the A-G course sequence in order to graduate. Concerned that incoming freshmen have not been adequately prepared to meet this requirement, the LAUSD is proposing to lower the number of credits required for graduation from 230 credits to 180 credits. According to the district, "reducing the graduation credits would give students more flexibility with their schedules to repeat classes to get tutoring during the school day due to limited availability for Summer School after State budget cuts." Indeed, faced with collapsing budgets and diminished support for teachers' professional development, class size reduction, along with summer school, proponents want to pare down course offerings and graduation requirements.

The LAUSD Board of Education approved the Resolution to Create Educational Equity Through the Implementation of the A-G course Sequence as part of the District's High School Graduation Requirement on June 14, 2005. This resolution sought to remedy long-standing inequalities in access to college preparatory courses across Los Angeles high schools that contributed to unequal patterns of college-going. It called for the district to: a) implement a rigorous and relevant A-G course sequence for all students entering 9th grade after 2008; b) align the k-12 curriculum with this new goal; and c) provide learning supports across the grade span to ensure that all students are prepared to enter and succeed in the A-G course sequence. The goal was to improve the learning conditions and increase opportunities for all students while raising the bar.

While LAUSD's proposal is in keeping with the letter of the 2005 resolution, it raises a number of questions and concerns regarding its ability to make good on the promise of the resolution – to expand opportunities for all students. Below are a number of questions that have been posed and responses to those questions, based on available data and research.

Q. What is the average number of credits required to graduate from a high school in California?

A: In order to graduate from California public high schools, students must complete specified state and local graduation requirements. Local school districts have the authority and responsibility for establishing high school graduation requirements, and they vary among districts. However, California Education Code specifies that students must pass a minimum set of required courses and an exit examination. Most California public high schools require the equivalent of between 22 and 26 yearlong courses or between 220 and 260 local units for high school graduation.

Q: Have other districts that have implemented an A-G graduation requirement lowered the number of credits needed for graduation?

A: No. For example, the Board of Education of the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) approved new high school graduation requirements in 1998 that included completion of the A-G requirements. All SJUSD high school students, beginning with the Class of 2002, were required to complete a total of 240 credits. All SJUSD courses are college preparatory courses that fulfill UC/CSU admission requirements. Other large urban school districts such as San Francisco Unified, Oakland Unified, San Diego Unified and East Side Union have similar A-G graduation requirements in place for the class of 2016 or earlier years. These districts have not lowered the number of credits required for graduation. In addition, a number of these districts also require that seniors complete a senior project or exhibition to graduate.

District	First Graduating Class Required to Satisfy A-G	Minimum No. of Credits Required for Graduation
San Jose Unified	2002	240
San Francisco Unified	2014	230
Oakland Unified	2015	230
East Side Union	2015	220
San Diego Unified	2016	220

Q: Given statewide budget cuts, is there a trend in California to reduce the number of credits required for graduation?

A: No. Indeed, a number of districts are currently proposing to raise the number of credits required for graduation. Palo Alto Unified School District is proposing to increase the number of credits required for graduation from 210 to 220 to create better alignment between graduation requirements and college entrance requirements. Porterville Unified School District has increased the school day for high school students to seven periods, and is now raising graduation requirements beyond the 220 credits currently needed for graduation. Some high schools within Porterville encourage students to complete 260 credits to be college and career ready.

Q: What can we learn from districts that have an A-G requirement in place?

A: A great deal. In particular, the large amount of data that the SJUSD has compiled over the last decade dispels a number of myths regarding what would happen if all students were required to fulfill the A-G course sequence. Three findings stand out. First, longitudinal data demonstrates that grades within SJUSD have remained unchanged as students have enrolled in more rigorous coursework. The average grade point average for SJUSD graduating seniors has remained approximately the same (at 2.76) between 1998 (before A-G) and 2008. Second, high school graduation rates have remained steady between these years (at 71%). This fact is all the more noteworthy since the exit exam requirement came into effect after SJUSD adopted its A-G policy. Third, students who have been traditionally underserved and previously assigned to the non-college



bound track are achieving at more advanced levels. Latino students have made steady gains on statewide standardized test scores since 1999, and the gap between Latino and white students has narrowed by 38%.

LAUSD has an opportunity to continue to challenge these myths.

Q: How many students within the Los Angeles Unified School District are currently graduating from high school? And, will the A-G graduation requirement negatively impact graduation rates from the LAUSD?

A: Graduation rates in LAUSD have improved modestly in recent years, but remain very low. Of the 46,133 students that entered high school as freshmen in 2007-08, slightly more than half (56%) graduated four years later. Indeed, the district must grapple with its graduation rate problem, whether or not the A-G graduation requirement goes into effect. The question is whether three additional courses that comprise the A-G graduation requirement (an additional year of a sequential math course and two years of a foreign language) will lead graduation rates to drop. Data from other districts suggest that this need not be the case.

The district's proposal directly responds to the dropout crisis. A-G aside, the proposal aims to reach out to the 44% of students who are currently leaving the district without a high school diploma. Providing an opportunity for these students to remain in school and make up classes they have previously failed is a laudable goal. However, it does not satisfy or respond directly to the intent of the A-G Resolution – to expand opportunities for all LAUSD students.

To respond adequately to the dropout crisis, the district must address its instructional practices and strategies.

Q: How many students with the Los Angeles Unified School District are currently graduating from high school with successful completion of the A-G course sequence?

A: According to the LAUSD, only 15% of entering 9th graders in 2007-08 graduated in June 2011 having successfully completed the A-G requirements (passing all A-G courses with a grade of "C" or better). A large number of students come close to completing the A-G course sequence, but fall short (30 credits or less). These "near-completers" fail to enroll in the full sequence of courses or do not earn a grade of "C" or better in an A-G course. Unfortunately, we do not have access to data that allows us to determine how many additional LAUSD students were "near-completers" in the graduating class of 2011. Nor do we have data that informs us of how many students completed the sequence, but did not earn a grade of "C" or better (but earned a "D" or "F" grade).

A 2008 study conducted by UCLA IDEA of the graduating class of 2006 sheds some light on this question. According to this study, one in three LAUSD graduates fell short of meeting the A-G requirements by 30 credits or less. These students completed at least 80% of the A-G requirements with grades of "C" or better. The high incidence of "near A-G" speaks loudly to the need to identify course bottlenecks that prevent A-G completion and the need to identify practices that allow for successful completion of these courses.



Q: Will the new proposal impact course offerings at LAUSD high schools?

A: Yes, but this likely will play out differently across schools. In order to provide students with the opportunity to make up failed A-G courses, schools will have to replace current course offerings with additional sections of A-G course offerings. While schools will continue to offer “electives” that satisfy the A-G requirements (1 year of a Visual and Performing Arts Elective and 1 year of an A-G elective), these offerings will most likely decrease at some schools. For example, a sequence of three drama courses (that enable students to increase their knowledge and skills in this area of interest) might be replaced with greater offerings of introductory drama courses to ensure all students have access to the required visual and performing arts elective. Similarly, a school that currently offers two different Calculus courses may need to eliminate one so that the math teacher can teach additional Algebra 1 or Algebra II courses.

Schools will respond differently to the 180 credit graduation requirement based on school size, Program Improvement status, and population of students being served. Schools serving greater percentages of struggling students will have to limit course offerings more so than schools serving students who enter high school well prepared for college preparatory courses.

Q: Will charters or pilot schools be impacted by the reduction of credits required for graduation?

A: It is not clear if charter schools will reduce the number of credits required for graduation. If they do not, charter schools will be able to provide students with courses that many LAUSD high schools will no longer be able to offer.

Q: Are there high schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District that are currently graduating high numbers of students with the A-G requirements?

A: Yes. A study conducted in 2008 found that attending a small LAUSD high school increases a student’s chance of graduating on time by 25% and more than doubles a student’s odds of completing the A-G sequence of courses. Notwithstanding the strong relationship between the pre-high school academic experiences of students and on time high school and A-G completion, the study reveals that pre-high school experiences alone do not account for all the variation that is seen in outcomes across the district. Some schools within LAUSD are more effective than others in enabling students to graduate on time and with the necessary preparation to enter California’s public university system.

In particular, the study points to small size, theme-oriented and/or interdisciplinary curricula that engage students as “more effective.” Seventy-one percent of first-time freshmen attending small schools in 2001-02 graduated on time and 54% completed the A-G sequence of courses. LAUSD small schools are more likely to be successful with first-time freshmen with limited English skills, and those that enter high school underprepared. These schools often share structures such as block scheduling that allows for students to take additional courses (including recovery courses) during the school day.



Q: Does the number of credits accumulated matter for entry into California’s public four-year institutions (UC/CSUs)?

A: Yes, it matters. While students must take the “right” courses (A-G), four-year universities are interested in students who go beyond the minimum requirements, and demonstrate an interest in engaging deeply in their learning. Students demonstrate deep engagement by enrolling in advanced and/or capstone courses. If these courses are no longer offered at some schools, students will face an uneven playing field in college admissions.

Freshmen profile data demonstrates that the number of A-G credits earned has steadily increased each year across UC and CSU campuses.

Freshmen Profile at Select California Public Four-Year Institutions, 2009

	Avg. A-G credits	AP/IB/Honors
UC Berkeley	260	95
UC Davis	240	65
UCLA	250	90
UC Merced	230	45

Q: Can the district raise the required number of credits for graduation back to 230 once the economy recovers and the district has funds for necessary support services?

A: Yes, however, it will be extremely difficult. Raising the number of credits required for graduation impacts schools, staffing, and students. As such, most districts do not propose an increase of more than 10 credits a year (one year-long course). It would take LAUSD five years, at a rate of 10 credits a year, to get back to the current requirement of 230 credits.

Q: What next?

A: LAUSD officials have expressed a strong commitment to equal opportunity and to preparing all students for college, career and life beyond high school. As deliberations on graduation requirements move forward, it will be important to assess policy options with these goals in mind. What steps does the district need to take to ensure equitable opportunities across its high schools? How can it ensure that students at all LAUSD high schools experience a broad and robust curriculum? How can it ensure that students at every LAUSD high school have a meaningful opportunity to enroll in a course of study that will make them competitive for admission at any California college and university?

