



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Jan. 28 – Feb. 1, 2013

## Numbers Might Not Add Up, but Expanding College Access Still the Answer

By UCLA IDEA

In 1998, San Jose Unified adopted a policy that all students would enroll in the college-prep (a-g) curriculum necessary to enter the state's public university systems. Policymakers and educators believed that this new requirement or default curriculum would prepare many more students for a higher level of workforce and postsecondary success—including advanced training and/or college. They pointed to the very low number of such classes available in schools serving poor students and students of color, and rejected arguments that these groups of students didn't want or weren't capable of meeting the standards of high-level (and high-value) courses.

San Jose was also responding to parents' wishes for their children to be prepared for college. These parents felt betrayed by the schools' complex sorting and grading mechanisms that would "guide" some students (based on perceived abilities) toward college-preparatory courses, and others toward classes that would prevent direct entry into the state's four-year colleges.

Over the past decade, San Jose Unified reported that their policy had been successful in three ways. First, all San Jose Unified students have access to and are expected to complete the a-g curriculum. Second, high school graduation rates remained steady, even as the curriculum became more demanding. The constant graduation rates blunted opponents' fears that difficult classes would discourage students, cause them to fail classes, and then drop out. Third, San Jose reported a dramatic increase in the proportion of these graduates who successfully completed the a-g course sequence (and hence were four-year college eligible.)

This week, a *Los Angeles Times* article revealed that this third claim was based on false data; San Jose Unified had not increased the proportion of graduates who were eligible for four-year colleges. The district had overstated its college-prep rate by counting students receiving D grades as having met the a-g requirement (universities require a C or better) and including students who were close to completion but who hadn't yet fulfilled the full set of demands.

So now, with the *Times*' revelations, policymakers, advocacy groups, parents, researchers, school districts, and the press are all scrambling anew to make sense of the broad educational and social goal of "college opportunity for all," and a-g requirements in particular. We offer here a number of observations we hope can help focus continuing debates:

- San Jose students were enrolled in higher-level courses and their graduation rates did not plummet. The district's experience has not been *spectacular* as was previously suggested, but nor have the fears of critics been realized—the high school graduation rate in San Jose Unified has held steady. Even this very modest claim has merit considering California's low level of school supports over the past years.

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- San Jose in 1998 (and other districts including Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified, Oakland Unified, San Diego Unified, and East Side Union) identified core needs and a strong rationale for advancing college opportunity through the implementation of a-g graduation requirements. These needs and possibilities remain today.
- Advocates of a-g reform believed that increasing students' engagement or success in high-level courses would require more than simply changing requirements. It was known that other reforms and practices (including new and relevant content, pedagogy, and assessments) were necessary to promote a-g success.
- Advocates of a-g reform recognized that schools needed to provide better conditions and supports to enable student success. Yet, schools faced with deep budget cuts in recent years have provided less of everything. We need to return to the original ideal of college prep for all and ensure students small classes with well-prepared teachers, expanded learning time like summer school, and an array of academic supports.
- Self-interest and ideology tend to inflate successes, and animus exaggerates failure. We need trustworthy data on access to college-prep courses and a-g completion, and this requires transparency and oversight—probably from the state.
- More than nine in 10 California parents, across income and race, report that they want their children to graduate from four-year colleges and universities. California's public schools need to tap into this reservoir of hope and commitment and engage parents in following their children's progress and supporting efforts to expand college access in their local communities.

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