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School Reforms That Call for Fresh Thinking and Support

By UCLA IDEA

An opinion survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California found that many public school parents think that schools do a poor job of preparing students either for college—43 percent—or for jobs—45 percent. With adequate support, two related reforms might help address these concerns. First, efforts are underway to have more students take the minimum number of A-G courses needed for admission into a University of California or California State University campus. At the same time many people are calling for career- and technical-preparation courses that teach workplace skills while also qualifying students for admission to the state's four-year colleges.

Five districts, including Los Angeles Unified, have committed to give all students college-qualifying courses. Giving all students these college-qualifying courses does not presume that every student will go directly to college, and many will still choose to pursue other post-secondary training or go directly into the workforce. But whatever their interests after high school, they will be better prepared and have better choices.

State Sen. Darrell Steinberg has introduced a set of bills that would encourage more attention to college and career preparation and open up more courses to qualify as college preparation. One bill would include measures of college- and career-preparedness to the state's Academic Performance Index, a yearly measurement of a school's achievement and growth, which includes results of standardized tests. The other two bills deal specifically with the University of California Curriculum Integration Institute (UCCI) that seeks to combine career and technical education (CTE) and college-prep classes into courses that meet A-G requirements. Currently, most CTE courses do not qualify as college-prep, and those that do usually count only as electives.

UCCI helps teachers understand and develop hybrid courses that combine the best attributes of technical and academic classes. Courses such as Business Math and Applied Medical English are promising because students gain academic knowledge and skills in the context of hands-on, high-interest, real-world applications. "I know I have a lot of students that aren't going to college, but my goal is still to prepare them because ultimately they have to be critical thinkers, whether they're in the workforce or they go to school," one educator said about the dual benefits.

However, many cautions are in order. There is the risk that as new thinking is implemented in schools, some of the old thinking and biases remain—with the result that poor students and students of color are presumed to need job preparation while better-off students are "supposed" to go to college. New approaches must not replicate the unfairness of the old.

Further, improving opportunities for students takes much more than simply making students take

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rigorous college-prep courses—whether they are “hybrid” or not. Without proper infrastructure, these college-preparatory courses might simply give a new label to less-than-rigorous learning. Needed are experienced and well-qualified teachers who can bridge the worlds of work and the classroom; and of course, any learning approach requires adequate books, labs and other materials, reasonable class sizes, and so forth.

As policymakers consider how best to prepare students for the future, they need to focus attention on the resources provided at present. San Diego Unified, which recently has committed to A-G requirements, delayed implementing the policy because it lacks the funds to pay for counselors, tutors and other supports for student learning. The district deserves credit for publicly acknowledging the relationship between critical opportunities and desired outcomes. If California's parents want to prepare students for college and careers, now is the time to invest.

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