



Week of April 16-20, 2012

The Opportunity to Repeat

by UCLA IDEA

The Los Angeles Unified School District is considering changing its graduation requirements. Current district policy requires the incoming class of 2016 to graduate college-ready, meaning students would have to pass the minimum sequence of subject-area courses required for eligibility into a University of California or California State University campus, known as a-g. However, faced with collapsing budgets and diminished support for teachers' professional development, class size reduction, summer school, facilities and more, proponents want to pare down course offerings and graduation requirements.

The proposal, which will come before the full board in May, calls for eliminating all non- a-g electives and reducing the required number of credits to graduate from 230 to 170. District officials say requiring fewer credits will create flexibility in students' schedules so that they can make up failed courses.

In 2005, the board passed a resolution to graduate all students college-ready, to create educational equity across the district and to close the achievement gap. While LAUSD's new proposal is in keeping with the letter of that resolution, it strays from the spirit of expanding opportunities.

Seven years ago, most schools in South and East Los Angeles did not offer a full complement of a-g courses, or they rationed those classes to a small proportion of students whom schools considered college material. After parents and students organized and demanded greater access to college prerequisites (the opportunity to take and succeed in the a-g sequence), the board passed a resolution mandating a-g for all students and stipulated that the requirements be accompanied by "necessary learning supports, realignment and dedication of resources necessary beginning early in a student's education so that they are prepared to successfully complete the A-G course sequence at all grade levels from K-12."

But those "necessary learning supports... at all grade levels" never fully materialized. Indeed, some conditions have deteriorated dramatically, such as access to summer school, tutoring, and small class sizes. Without these and other supports, students are not passing their college-prep classes at acceptable rates. And, unless this pattern changes, once new graduation requirements are enforced, graduation rates will drop.

Some critics of LAUSD's new plan believe that reducing the number of required credits and eliminating non- a-g electives will result in students from historically underserved neighborhoods becoming less engaged in school, less likely to graduate, less likely to be accepted to the most competitive colleges, and have fewer prospects for success if they do get to college.

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The new “flexibility” created by the district’s proposal appears designed to allow students to make-up classes instead of finding some way to provide the k-12 resources that prepare students to pass their a-g classes the first time around. Of course, schools with lots of resources and with a history of high achievement might take good advantage of the new flexibility by adding more varied and engaging curriculum. But elsewhere, parents, students, and educators worry that their schools are falling into a cycle of failure, remediation, and poor prospects for college.

As members of the public and LAUSD officials deliberate about the policy in the weeks ahead, they would do well to consider several questions:

- If the proposed policy is implemented, will schools that presently experience high rates of failure in a-g classes add more credit recovery classes and subtract elective and advanced coursework?
- If they do, will students in these schools receive as full and rich an education as students at other LAUSD high schools?
- Is it acceptable to have some district schools that provide more varied and higher-level coursework than others?
- What can be learned from Los Angeles schools that already graduate substantial proportions of their students college-ready? What conditions prevail at these schools and their feeder schools? What does the district need to do to foster those conditions across all schools?

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