



Raising the Bar

What it Will Take to Increase College Enrollment and Graduation,
and Secure Michigan's Future Economic Growth



Michigan Association
of Secondary
School Principals

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The Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) applauds Gov. Jennifer Granholm for her creation of The Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, chaired by Lieutenant Governor John D. Cherry.

MASSP fully supports—and offers its educational expertise in achieving—the Commission's goal of ensuring that our students learn the skills necessary for 21st century jobs.

MASSP has prepared this white paper to help address two of the Commission's main objectives:

- Doubling the number of Michigan college graduates over the next 10 years.
- Resolving the falloff of students who express an interest in college, but do not go.

This agenda is critically important, and it's one that we—the middle and high school principals of Michigan—share on a daily basis. As Gov. Granholm has pointed out, fewer than 22 percent of all Michigan adults hold college degrees—2 percent below the national average—and only 34 percent of those aged 25 to 34 have a college degree.

Meanwhile, as baby boomers retire and jobs requiring a college education increase, our state and nation face a looming shortage of workers needed for economic growth and competitiveness. In Michigan alone, this shortage has been projected at 334,000 workers within 10 years.

Fortunately, although the window of opportunity to correct this situation is closing fast, the key steps have already been identified in recent, authoritative studies on education reform, as summarized here.

Executive Summary

For more than a century, America’s system of mass education provided the workforce to run its industrial, mass-production economy, which was the envy of the world. But since 1980, increases in global competition and domestic deregulation have wiped out millions of manufacturing jobs—170,000 of them in Michigan in just the past few years. As a result, a high school diploma no longer guarantees a job that pays enough to support a family in a middle-class lifestyle.

While the new “knowledge economy” is creating more high-paying jobs, most require education beyond high school. Yet, the rate of college enrollment in the United States has remained stagnant, while competing nations are rapidly increasing theirs.

Demand for better-educated workers, coupled with retirement of the baby boomers, is expected to produce a shortage of more than 300,000 workers in Michigan alone in the next decade. Companies that can’t find the talent they need here at home will fill more jobs abroad or relocate to foreign countries—with dire effects on Michigan’s economy.

Leading research studies on education reveal key factors that influence high school students to enroll in and complete college. Among these are:

- Exposing all high school students to a rigorous, “college preparatory”-type curriculum.
- Ending the channeling of low-income and minority students into “general” and “vocational” curriculums, which discourages preparation for college and high-paying careers.
- Fostering equal opportunity by offering a state-funded college entrance exam to all Michigan high school students.

Shouldn’t Michigan students have equal access to the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in Illinois and Colorado?

MASSP—joined by associations representing the state’s school boards, teachers, school counselors, parents, manufacturers, and others—strongly supports accomplishing the latter step through proposals now pending before the Michigan legislature. These would replace the state-sponsored MEAP high school test with a Michigan Merit Exam based on the ACT assessment and the ACT/WorkKeys workplace readiness exam.

Two states that recently incorporated the ACT college entrance test into their statewide high school assessments—Illinois and Colorado—both experienced dramatic increases in college readiness and enrollment, especially among disadvantaged students.

Michigan State University’s director of admissions concludes that statewide administration of a college admission exam such as the ACT “has the proven potential to have an immediate and profoundly positive impact on the education and future of thousands of young people in the state of Michigan.”

Raising the Bar

What it Will Take to Increase College Enrollment and Graduation, and Secure Michigan's Future Economic Growth

MAXIMIZING ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Education is the Engine of the Economy

It's no secret to people in Michigan that the economy is changing dramatically. Over just the past few years, approximately 170,000—or more than 20 percent—of our manufacturing jobs have disappeared. Nationwide during the same period more than 2.5 million manufacturing jobs have vanished.

As a society, we're feeling the harsh impact of the decline of the industrial economy—and we're not yet ready to excel in the new “knowledge economy.”

The challenge for parents, educators, corporations, and government policymakers alike is to prepare our children to compete in this new global economy. Succeed or fail, the stakes are high in terms of democracy and quality of life.

As authors Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers observe in *Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform*¹:

“Until the 1970s, the United States’ economic dominance rested on a solid agricultural and manufacturing base wherein workers with high school or less could provide a comfortable living for their families. However, since the 1980s, increases in global competition and domestic deregulation have altered the underlying structure of the existing economy in ways that have made postsecondary education the price of admission to the American middle class.”

In their study of the links between education and economic success, the researchers also noted:

“Knowledge has become the engine of growth among nations, and individuals need a solid academic foundation in order to meet the increasing skill demands on the job. ... Those who are not equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to get, and keep, good jobs are denied full social inclusion and tend to drop out of the mainstream culture, polity, and economy.”

Kati Haycock, director of the Educational Trust, Washington, D.C., asserts that the Carnevale and Desrochers study should be “required reading” for K-12 educators—and, MASSP would suggest, for education policymakers as well. Following are several other noteworthy facts drawn from *Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform*:

- Since 1980, the real inflation-adjusted earnings of high school graduates and dropouts have declined precipitously, while the earnings of college-educated workers have increased. College-educated workers now earn 62 percent more than high-school-educated workers. Back in 1979, the gap was 43 percent.

1 Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ, 2003. Available online at: <http://www.ecs.org>

- 60 percent of all jobs in the U.S. are now held by workers with at least some postsecondary education, compared with 20 percent in 1959.
- Other countries are quickly catching up with America's leading level of college education. In the past 10 years, England, Ireland, France, and Spain have all increased the number of their 18- to 21-year-olds enrolled in postsecondary education by more than 10 percent, while there has been virtually no increase here.
- The U.S. has fallen to sixth in the world—behind Norway, Japan, Korea, Czech Republic, and Switzerland—in high school graduation rates.
- American employers don't have to depend on homegrown talent. Immigration is a major source of math and science professionals. Most of our civil engineers, for example, are foreign born. What's more, American companies can and do move production offshore when they can't find the right talent here at the right price.

The fact of the matter, say the researchers, is that “the United States cannot remain a first-rate economic power with mediocre human capital.”

Their findings echo those of *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind*, a 2001 study by National Commission of the High School Senior Year.²

Equal Opportunity is Key

While higher education is the path to individual opportunity, mobility, and civic and cultural participation in the new knowledge economy, for many students systemic inequality remains a powerful barrier to attaining a first-rate education. As Camevale and Desrochers put it:

“At present, there are significant differences in K-12 preparation and access to colleges, especially selective colleges, among racial, ethnic, and income groupings. Many low-income and minority students are not afforded an equal opportunity to learn, and many who are qualified for four-year colleges do not attend for want of information, support, and money.”

The researchers point out that only 36 percent of students from the lowest quarter of the socioeconomic scale receive a postsecondary education. But among students in the second and third quartiles, the figures are 53 and 71 percent, respectively. And in the top quartile 89 percent continue their education beyond high school.

To keep America from further becoming “a nation of education-haves and education-have-nots,” they say, “the overarching goal of high school must be to prepare **all** young people for further education.”

MASSP believes that state government—particularly educational policymakers—must guard against inadvertently discouraging students from shooting for the stars.

² Sponsored by a partnership of the U.S. Department of Education, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Oct. 2001. Available online at <http://www.woodrow.org>

IMPROVING COLLEGE PREPARATION & COMPLETION

Curriculum is Key

Many factors—such as family income, parental education, and peer pressure—influence the decisions of high school students as to whether or not to pursue postsecondary education.

But the resounding conclusion of the chief studies on the U.S. educational system is that **curriculum is the most important factor of all:**

“To continue to grant high school diplomas to students who have not completed a rigorous and demanding program of studies is to foreclose their opportunities and consign them to a lifetime of low-paying drudgework.”

—National Commission of the High School Senior Year

“School quality is the most likely predictor that a student will or will not attain his bachelor's degree. The content of a child's high school curriculum has everything to do with college success. This conclusion comes from a unique U.S. Department of Education Report, Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment.”³

—Center for Education Reform⁴

“While a majority of high school graduates enter college, fewer than half leave with a degree. Significantly fewer blacks and Hispanics than whites attain bachelor's degrees. Many factors influence this attrition, but the preparation students receive in high school is the greatest predictor of bachelor's degree attainment—more so than family income or race.”

—American Diploma Project, Achieve, Inc.⁵

The *Achieve* study notes that, while students and parents may believe that the high school diploma signifies adequate preparation for adult life, employers and colleges are skeptical because the diploma is often “disconnected from what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school—either in the classroom or in the workplace.”

The problem is that curriculum quality varies from school to school, as the Center for Education Reform points out:

“The bottom line is that not all high schools offer the same opportunities to each student. Students from rural areas, working class students, and minority students are more often affected by schools that do not offer the advanced courses needed to prepare them for college.”

The “Answers in a Toolbox” study by the U.S. Department of Education defines a rigorous high school curriculum as:

- four units of English (no remedial classes)
- four units of math (no remedial math classes)
- three or more science units (two of which should be lab science units)
- three or more years of social science/history units
- two or more units of a foreign language
- and a half unit of computer science

3 “Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment,” Clifford Adelman, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 1999.

4 “Finishing College: The Facts That Most Influence Success,” Christine Lynd, CER Action Paper, Dec. 31, 1999.

5 “Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts,” American Diploma Project, Achieve, Inc., Washington, DC, 2004.

Expectations are Key

Merely offering a rigorous, “college preparatory” curriculum is not enough to increase Michigan’s rate of college enrollment and graduation.

This is because students tend to respond to expectations—whether high or low—that are communicated by their parents, peers, schools, and community. **And the tragic reality is that many students, particularly the disadvantaged, are repeatedly given the message that college is not for them.**

While this discouraging message comes from many sources, curriculum is perhaps the major communication vehicle. According to U.S. Department of Education’s *No High School Senior Left Behind* study, only 43 percent of American high school students pursue demanding “academic” programs of study. Another 45 percent are arguably channeled into “general education” curriculums, and 12 percent into vocational education programs.

The consequences of curriculum channeling are clear to the admission directors of Michigan’s universities and community colleges. In the words of Pamela T. Horne, director of admissions at Michigan State University:

“We want every student in Michigan, including those who may aspire to the trades and service occupations, to at least keep open the possibility to pursue academic work beyond high school. Age 14 or 15 is too early for students to limit their options ... Too often, [economically and educationally disadvantaged students, and students of color] do not aspire to college because of lack of information, unfamiliarity with the process, and self perception that they are simply not college material.

Every year, admissions personnel encounter unprepared students with potential during the students’ senior year of high school, when it’s not necessarily too late, but options are limited: the students have not elected college preparatory classes, they never took the SAT or ACT, and have not been exposed to the college admissions process.”

Each year, as many as 300,000 students nationwide who have the potential to achieve high scores on college admissions tests do not enroll in a four-year college, estimate researchers Camevale and Desrochers: “Why? Not because they were incapable of mastering the skills essential to success in further education, but because they were not educated as if they were bound for college.”

MASSP believes that state government—particularly educational policymakers—must guard against inadvertently discouraging students from shooting for the stars.

This is especially important because curriculum can cause students to set their sights too low and neglect to prepare for college—and because Michigan schools gear their curricula to the MEAP-HST, which colleges and universities do not recognize as an entrance exam.

EXPANDING PARTICIPATION

College Admission Testing is Key

A rigorous curriculum and high student expectations may not, by themselves, produce the desired degree of increase in the rate of college enrollment and graduation in Michigan.

The reason—conclusively demonstrated by educational research—is that, among equally prepared students, those from wealthier families are more likely than others to take a college entrance exam and enroll.

Clearly, then, offering a state-sponsored college entrance exam to all Michigan students is essential for eliminating the inequality fostered by our current educational system—and for creating equal opportunity for all students.

MASSP—representing more than 2,000 middle and high school principals across Michigan—strongly supports legislation to replace the state-sponsored MEAP high school test with a Michigan Merit Exam based on the nationally recognized ACT college admissions exam and the ACT/WorkKeys workplace readiness assessment.

The proposed change, now before the state legislature, is also supported by:

- Michigan Association of School Boards Legislative Committee
- Michigan Parent-Teacher-Student Association
- Michigan Education Association
- Association of Michigan School Counselors
- Michigan Manufacturers Association
- Manufacturers Council of Grand Rapids

The evidence from two other states—Illinois and Colorado—that have based their statewide high school assessments on the ACT is “overwhelmingly positive and compelling,” says MSU Admissions Director Pamela Horne:

“In two years, the number of students in Illinois taking the ACT increased by 51 percent. Significant increases were seen among students in groups underrepresented in higher education: students of color, males, and students from families earning \$30,000 or less annually. In ONE year, college enrollment among high school graduates was up 23 percent. Included in this increase were 15 percent of ACT-tested students who said that they did not intend to go to college when they took the exam as juniors! ... At the same time, college readiness increased, as the number of students who scored 18 or higher on the ACT increased by 27 percent in two years. ...

“Colorado tells an even more dramatic story: overall, test-takers increased by 69 percent in two years; students of color taking the ACT increased by 94 percent in two years; male test takers increased by 85 percent in two years; and lower-income students by 70 percent. College aspirants increased by 33 percent and those who scored 18 and above increased by 42 percent.”

Offering a state-sponsored college entrance exam to all Michigan students is essential for eliminating inequality.

Statewide administration of the ACT or SAT as a junior-level assessment, concludes Horne, “has the proven potential to have an immediate and profoundly positive impact on the education and future of thousands of young people in the state of Michigan.”

Statewide administration of a college entrance exam such as the ACT opens the door to opportunity by simplifying what many students and families see as a complex, expensive, and daunting college search, admissions, and financial aid process. Students would not have to schedule,

register for, or pay for the exam. Their scores would be delivered on a timely basis to the colleges in which they are interested. And the colleges, which purchase mailing lists from the national testing services, would keep students better informed about the admissions process and options.

But, as the Illinois and Colorado experience shows, perhaps the most important effect of administering a college entrance exam as part of a statewide high school assessment is the increase in student readiness for college and the workplace. In Michigan, curriculums would be geared more to the ACT, and schools would no longer “teach to the MEAP.”

The MEAP-HST is Part of the Problem

If a rigorous high school curriculum, encouragement of postsecondary aspirations, and college admission testing of all high school students are keys to raising college entrance and graduation rates—as educational experts across the nation agree—then the MEAP-HST represents an obvious obstacle to success.

It is no secret that the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is opposed to the proposed replacement of the MEAP-HST with a new ACT-based Michigan Merit Exam.

MDE’s Ed Roeber, senior management executive, MEAP Office, argues that:

“Depending on student talent and aspirations, a student may: Apply to a four-year college, apply to a two-year or community college, apply to a technical or trade school, enter the military, seek employment after high school, or pursue other life paths. ACT is not needed for most of these life paths.”

While this statement may be true in a narrow sense, it also implies continued channeling of high school students into general and vocational curriculums. That runs counter to the recommendations of education experts nationwide, who believe every student should be exposed to a demanding “college preparatory”-type curriculum, regardless of their post-high-school plans. The ACT, of course, measures student knowledge and skills gained from such a curriculum, and serves as a portal to career opportunity.

The MEAP-HST serves no such function, nor is it needed for any life path.

Moreover, the MEAP is a state-devised test with a myopic Michigan focus. As Tom Watkins, MDE’s state superintendent, explains it:

“MEAP High School Test questions are based on Michigan’s unique standards of what students should know and be able to do by the end of the 11th grade.”

Perhaps there is some virtue in this “uniqueness,” but educators must prepare students for the real world, which for many entails competing for jobs and college admission in other states, as well as our own. Because the MEAP is not recognized by colleges or employers here or elsewhere, its results are not portable, whereas ACT results have currency nationwide.

If, as Mr. Watkins says, the present version of the MEAP-HST is designed to test the knowledge and skills of high school students at the end of their junior year, then its results will be even less useful to anyone. This is because the MDE plans to reschedule the MEAP from the end of the junior year to the *beginning* of the year—well before students have learned enough to fully pass the exam.

The relative value of the ACT assessment, compared with the MEAP, is summed up well by Doug Ross—a former U.S. assistant secretary of labor who is superintendent of a public charter school in Detroit—who writes⁶:

“A Michigan Department of Education publication opposing replacement of the MEAP with the ACT as the state’s mandatory assessment bases its case on a central claim: ‘We do not have a college admissions problem in Michigan or the nation. We have a college graduation problem, with nearly 40 to 50 percent of college students not completing graduation requirements.’

“There may not be a college admissions problem in Bloomfield Hills, Wyoming or Burton. But there is a crisis of college admissions in places like Detroit, Grand Rapids and Flint.

6 “ACT test trumps MEAP,” Detroit Free Press, June 1, 2004.

“In Detroit, of an estimated 15,000 public school students who enter the 9th grade each year, fewer than 2,500 enter a four-year college four years later—well under 20 percent. At the beginning of the 21st Century, this tragically low college enrollment rate represents an enormous loss of human hope and potential ...

“[For urban public schools to] succeed, they must focus like a laser on the skills and knowledge required by American colleges for admission and predicted success ...

“The ACT is the test the public universities and colleges in Michigan use to decide whether to accept a student and to predict the likelihood of that student graduating from college. University deans of admission have told me repeatedly that they do not even look at the MEAP scores. In short, for urban kids seeking a path into the world of opportunity and higher education, the ACT is the key.”

As MASSP has pointed out previously, among the MEAP’s numerous shortcomings are these:

- It’s meaningless to students. High school students generally regard the MEAP as irrelevant to their plans for future education or careers. This is mainly because zero colleges or universities accept the MEAP as an admissions test, whereas all recognize the ACT.
- It’s too expensive. During 2003, Michigan paid more than \$8.2 million to administer the MEAP-HST. But that’s only part of the price. The MEAP imposes an even greater burden on Michigan’s high schools—approximately \$9.2 million in staff time to administer the exam each year. Assuming the same number of students took ACT/WorkKeys as now take the MEAP, our schools would save about \$4.2 million in staff time.
- It keeps teachers from teaching. Michigan high school teachers lose about 205,875 hours of classroom instructional time each year to MEAP administration. It takes 11 hours over two weeks for students to complete the MEAP, but only six hours over two days for ACT/WorkKeys—which would restore about 93,670 hours for teachers to teach.
- It’s costly for parents. Because the state-funded MEAP is ignored by colleges, more than 75,000 (or 70 percent) of our high school juniors already take the ACT exam, too—at their parents’ expense. This represents a \$2 million burden per year on Michigan families that would be relieved by switching to ACT/WorkKeys.
- It’s needless duplication. The MEAP’s most widely known purpose—which benefits only college-bound students—is to determine eligibility for state-sponsored Merit Award scholarships. Yet, the ACT is also being used to make eligibility determinations for the same award—as well as for most college scholarships nationwide. Another purpose of the MEAP is to assess how well schools teach course content specified by state standards, but ACT/WorkKeys is eminently suitable for this, too.
- It’s unreliable. The MEAP is a non-standard exam whose results cannot be used to compare Michigan students with their peers nationally. ACT/WorkKeys is the standard for comparing student performance across the state and nation. In addition, it can take up to six months for MEAP to report test scores, so it’s tough for schools to base curriculum on MEAP results. ACT reports results in six weeks or less.
- It’s discriminatory. For students not going on to college, it offers no benefit. Neither employers nor trade schools care about MEAP results, whereas ACT/WorkKeys assesses student readiness for both college and the workplace—and the results are valued in both settings.

An Authoritative Prescription for Success

“Although high school graduation requirements are established state by state, a high school diploma should represent a common currency nationwide,” according to the 2004 American Diploma Project sponsored by Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit organization created by state governors and business leaders. “Families move across state lines, students apply to colleges outside their own state and employers hire people from across the country. States owe it to their students to set expectations for high school graduates that are portable to other states.”

ACT/WorkKeys fully satisfies this goal. The MEAP-HST hardly comes close.

Achieve further asserts that states should:

- Align academic standards in high school with the knowledge and skills required for college and workplace success.
- Require all students to take a quality college and workplace readiness curriculum because successful preparation for both postsecondary education and employment requires learning the same rigorous English and mathematics content and skills.
- Define specific course-taking requirements in English and mathematics for high school graduation (e.g., Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II), which will substantially increase the number of low-income and minority students, in particular, who graduate from high school academically prepared for college and work.
- “Measure what matters and make it count. ... States have developed high school assessments without much regard for what colleges need ... States must streamline their assessment systems so that high school graduation and college admission and placement decisions are based on student achievement of college and workplace readiness guidelines.”

The Education Alliance of Michigan states that “Michigan’s benchmarks and standards have been considered and included in the development of the ACT/WorkKeys assessments.”

“The ACT Assessment and WorkKeys are aligned to Michigan state standards,” asserts the testing firm itself, adding that, “In 1998-1999, ACT reviewed state education standards from all 49 states that had published such standards; surveyed 14,400 middle/junior high and high school teachers, 1,500 curriculum specialists, and 6,000 entry-level-course postsecondary faculty; and convened expert content and curriculum panels to discuss the survey results and the curriculum review results.”

Speaking on behalf of the Illinois State Board of Education, Lynne Curry, director of planning and performance, says:

“For high schools and for the state, the [ACT/WorkKeys combination] generates criterion-referenced scores suitable for state and federal accountability requirements. It is valid, reliable and fair. The technical merits of the test have never been called into question. The embedded ACT makes the test a natural motivator for students.”

Shouldn’t Michigan students have equal access to the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in Illinois and Colorado?

From the viewpoint of the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, adopting a new Michigan Merit Exam, based on ACT/WorkKeys, is a crucial component of any effort to increase college enrollment and graduation rates, and secure Michigan’s financial future.



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1001 Centennial Way, Suite 100, Lansing, Michigan 48917 517-327-5315
michiganprincipals.org