

Establishing a Statewide Plan to Ensure Rigorous Course Taking for Minnesota Students

Final Report and Recommendations

Presented to:

The Minnesota P-20 Education Partnership

Presented by:

The Working Group on Rigorous Course Taking

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Overview

Minnesota's P-20 Education Partnership appointed the Rigorous Course Taking working group in June, 2010 to address the following charge:

Develop a statewide plan to ensure that all middle school and high school students take rigorous courses that prepare them for college and careers. The plan should analyze the number, type and quality of courses that secondary students currently take and how this relates to achievement patterns of student subgroups and students overall. The plan should suggest strategies for ensuring that the following occur:

- Schools, families, policymakers, and business leaders understand the role of high expectations and support the achievement of all students
- All students are enrolled in and successfully complete rigorous courses;
- Minority students and those from low-income families have access to a rigorous college-prep curriculum, including but not limited to content typically taught in Algebra II; and
- All students have opportunities to build the skills necessary for success in rigorous coursework throughout their K-12 experience (e.g. Springboard, AVID, etc.)
- The content suggested by course titles is sufficiently challenging and not watered-down (e.g., the content in Algebra II is not advanced arithmetic.).

Throughout the second half of 2010 and into 2011, the twenty-one work group members met in-person and virtually (through a password protected work group website) to complete this assignment (see membership list, Attachment A). Through strategic visioning sessions and extensive review of planning efforts that preceded the work of this group, the Rigorous Course Taking Workgroup identified barriers, highlighted promising practices, and made recommendations for policy and practice related to four priority strategy areas:

1. Communicate the importance of rigorous course taking
2. Establish viable pathways for students
3. Ensure adequate resources in schools to support rigorous course taking for all students
4. Ensure that the content suggested by course titles in secondary schools is sufficiently challenging and rigorous

These strategy areas and related policy recommendations are outlined in this report. For clarity, we have included definitions of key terms that the group adopted or endorsed as we completed this work.

Definition of Key Terms

Rigorous course taking. Rigor in school curricula denotes the high intellectual demand that is made on the student. *“Rigorous” coursework is intellectually demanding coursework that engages students in the essential core knowledge and skills of a discipline and contains appropriately sophisticated content*¹. Rigorous instruction can develop students’ understanding of the same subject through more

than one curricular vehicle. For example, mathematical skills can be developed in an Algebra II class *and* in an engineering design process course. In both cases, rigor is required if students are to be prepared to enter postsecondary study and workforce success without the need for remediation. Or, put another way, *relevance cannot substitute for rigor nor can rigor substitute for relevance*. If we hold the expectation that all students should graduate college and career ready, it is expected that all high school courses should be rigorous and relevant.

Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness includes the knowledge and skills that high school graduates need in order to do credit bearing coursework at a [two-or four-year] college or university and/or to embark successfully on a career-track employment position (that pays a living wage, provides benefits, and offers clear pathways for advancement through further education and training)ⁱⁱ.

When considering rigorous course taking as well as postsecondary and workforce readiness, the work group endorsed the following statement about creating multiple pathways for learners:

As laboratories of innovation, it is up to states to lead the charge for college- and career-readiness. Unlike years past, a student should be able to choose between an entirely academic course of study or a mix of academic, technical, online, and dual-enrollment courses and be prepared equally well for the future. State policy can set this context by ensuring high schools offer rigorous academics and several pathways for students to become college and career ready by graduation, as well as by ensuring supports are available for students as they work to meet these higher expectations.

Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools; 2009ⁱⁱⁱ

Rigor of curriculum or course of study.

The report: *America's High School Graduates: Results of the NAEP High School Transcript Study*, defines three curriculum levels by the number of course credits earned by graduates in specified types of courses during high school as follows:

Standard: At least four credits of English, and three each of social studies, mathematics, and science.

Midlevel: In addition to standard requirement, geometry and algebra I or II; at least two courses in biology, chemistry, and physics; and at least one credit of a foreign language.

Rigorous: In addition to midlevel requirements, an additional credit in mathematics including pre-calculus or higher; biology, chemistry, and physics; and at least three foreign language credits.

Minnesota Graduation Requirements; Course Credits (MS120B.024)

- 1) Four credits of language arts;
- 2) Three credits of mathematics, encompassing at least algebra, geometry, statistics, and probability sufficient to satisfy the academic standard;
- 3) Three credits of science, including at least one credit in biology;
- 4) Three and one-half credits of social studies, encompassing at least United States history, geography, government and citizenship, and world history, and one-half credit of economics taught in a school's social studies, agriculture education, or business department;

- 5) One credit in the arts;
- 6) A minimum of seven elective courses
- 7) A course credit is equivalent to a student successfully completing an academic year of study or a student mastering the applicable subject matter, as determined by the local district.

Strategy 1: Communicate the Importance of Rigorous Course Taking

Current Barriers Identified by the Working Group:

Lack of understanding about rigorous course taking- what it means and where to get it

- Misperceptions about what rigor is. It could include career and technical education courses but is often only associated with “academic” courses.
- Parents and students may focus more on grades than on the actual learning of skills.
- Educators (teachers and counselors) tend to focus on ~~success~~ course completion and grades in individual courses rather than on content and rigor.

Low expectations

- Student mind set is a barrier. Some students have come to believe they can’t be successful in rigorous courses; they fear failure.
- Student mindset that they don’t want to do the work required in more rigorous courses.
- Belief by parents and students that the goal is a diploma and not deep learning.
- Fear of “lowering my GPA”.

Lack of relevance

- A misperception that the importance of learning is only for future educational pursuits.
- An under-emphasis by educators on the applicability of what is taught to the needs and interests of students and society.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Establish clear messages for students, parents, families about the importance of rigorous course-taking as a fundamental pathway to achieve postsecondary success and workforce readiness.

- Start with the belief that all kids *can* and *should* be successful needs to start with messaging from the school leaders and carry down to staff, kids, and parents.
- Communicate messages, opportunities and expectations in a context and voice that resonates with the audience (students, parents and educators).
- Take the message to where parents are (e.g. apartment buildings; workplaces; churches)

Encourage and facilitate community partners (business, civic, faith community leaders) directly engaging with students and families to demonstrate the link between the skills developed in rigorous course taking and postsecondary success and workforce readiness.

- Promote and increase opportunities for community partners to serve as role models and parent liaisons.

- Bring business into district classes to discuss workplace expectations they have for employees they hire.
- Build mentoring/coaching into the education system for students. Perhaps small cohorts in each grade level working with school staff and community members.

Spotlight on Promising Practices

CPEO (Connecting Parents to Educational Opportunities)

CPEO, launched in 2008, is a parent education program currently operating in 28+ schools in the Minneapolis school district. The curriculum is based on the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) designed to serve the diverse populations of students and families attending Minneapolis public schools. The philosophy behind CPEO is that all parents love their children and want a better future for them. CPEO has four primary goals:

- Give parents a better understanding of the school system;
- Offer creative ways for parents to support their kids at home (homework help);
- Help build relationships among parents and school staff;
- Prepare students for college.

This seven-week educational program for parents is delivered in Spanish, Somali, Hmong and English. Partners include the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Community and Technical College

For more information: <http://ofce.mpls.k12.mn.us/CPEO.html>

KnowHow2Go

KnowHow2Go is a website aimed at providing parents and students up to date information on how to access and succeed in postsecondary education. The website was funded by the American Council on Education and the Lumina Foundation on Education to help parents and students to have a central repository of information regarding college knowledge. The website overviews the step by step process for parents and students on how to make their postsecondary selection by age appropriate guideline. This interactive site includes public service announcements, career and college readiness assessments, and a blogging opportunity to talk to a college ambassador to have specific questions regarding college knowledge answered.

For more information: <http://www.knowhow2go.org/>

Learn. Do. Earn.

In partnership with the Rochester Area School District, Workforce 2020 deployed the Learn.Do.Earn. program in local schools in 2008. The program is business-driven and designed to be utilized by teachers, parents and students in an effort to inform, motivate and guide students (grades 6-12) as they navigate their way through high school and beyond. It has been expanded to include all of Rochester Public Schools, as well as many private and area schools.

Learn.Do.Earn. uses eye-popping data to provide students with a statistical rationale and makes a compelling case for working hard now and taking challenging courses. Four key focus areas for the messages include: building academic momentum, fostering strong work ethic, strengthening financial literacy and computer proficiency. Learn.Do.Earn. creates cultures of high expectations for students that effectively prepare them for college and the workforce.

For more information: Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce; www.rochestermnchamber.com

Strategy 2: Establish Viable Pathways for Students

Current Barriers Identified by the Working Group:

Lack of clear pathways for students from elementary through high school and into higher education and employment

- Lack of communication between K-12 and postsecondary education systems regarding college readiness expectations.
- Lack of preparation (academic) from earlier grades; one argument is that until more students arrive at high school prepared to do rigorous work, high school rigor will remain limited.
- Lack of awareness of postsecondary degree and credential options.
- Lack of knowledge about financial resources and opportunities available to reduce postsecondary educational costs and time to degree completion through rigorous course-taking options.
- Lack of knowledge about the soft skills and academic skills necessary to be prepared for college and careers.
- Lack of knowledge about courses needed for success after high school.
- Lack of goal setting and academic/career strategic planning by students for postsecondary success and workforce readiness.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Illustrate/establish pathways for students to achieve postsecondary success and workforce readiness.

- Implement pathway recommendations presented in previous P20 Education Partnership work group report (e.g., *Pathways to College and Career Readiness; Road Map to Readiness*)
- Provide supports, interventions and early information at middle school and before.
- All students should have an individual learning plan no later than Grade 8 (Governors Workforce Development Council)
- Illustrate the alignment between rigorous coursework, college success, and employment options.

Spotlight on Promising Practices

Your Choice, Your Future

MDE partnered with ACT in 2010-2011 to create the *Your Choice, Your Future* campaign for eighth graders, which aims to address the opportunity gap by making students aware of the benefits of taking more rigorous courses in high school.

College and Career Readiness forums for eighth grade students are held after schools receive their EXPLORE data. Motivational performers and speakers inform the students about the benefits of taking more rigorous courses. Videos and a media site WebEx presentation are available for schools to support this effort. In addition, workshops are available for school counselors and administrators to assess individual student academic strengths and weaknesses, academic achievement and progress, college and career readiness information utilizing EXPLOE data.

The North Central Comprehensive Center (NCCC) assisted MDE with the creation of a *Minnesota College and Career Readiness Framework and Toolkit*. Another aspect is a communications campaign to provide students with information about college and career readiness. The *Your Choice, Your Future* flyers and posters for eighth graders, which can be used for registration, advisories, careers classes, and/or parent meetings, are available free to all schools.

For more information: YourChoice.YourFuture@state.mn.us.

Programs of Study

Minnesota has defined Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs of Study as *non-duplicative sequences of academic and technical courses; beginning no later than grade 11 and continuing for at least two years beyond high school; culminating in a degree, diploma or certification recognized as valuable by our business and industry partners.*

Minnesota's CTE Programs of Study must be approved by the Department of Education and the Office of the Chancellor at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and must include an articulation relationship through which participants at the secondary level may receive credit at the postsecondary level for work completed. Each CTE Program of Study will utilize (and at this time many do utilize) valid and reliable technical skill assessments aligned with industry-recognized standards.

For more information: www.MNpos.com

Ramp-Up to Readiness

Ramp-Up to Readiness is a school-wide guidance program that helps middle and high school students master the knowledge, skills and habits for success in a high-quality college program, whether it be at a technical college, a community college or a four-year college or university.

At the heart of Ramp-Up to Readiness are the 20 Ramp-Up Standards, a sequence of actions and outcomes that progressively builds students' knowledge and skill in five goal areas: Academic Readiness, Admissions Readiness, Career Readiness, Financial Readiness, and Personal and Social Readiness. In each of those goal areas, the Ramp-Up Standards guide students through four developmental phases: *Understand*, *Believe*, *Plan* and *Achieve*.

While Ramp-Up to Readiness students do not move through these developmental phases in a uniform or linear fashion, in general they focus on the *Understand*, *Believe*, and *Plan* phases during their middle and early high school years and on the *Achieve* phase during their last two years of high school.

For more information: http://www.collegeready.umn.edu/programs/ramp_up.html

Strategy 3: Ensure adequate resources in schools to support rigorous course taking for all students

Current Barriers Identified by the Working Group:

Lack of support beyond the classroom for students across all Minnesota schools

- Lack of statewide resources for support and intervention programs that promote college and workforce readiness, such as AVID, Get Ready, Ramp-up to Readiness and TRIO.
- Lack of consistent messaging for all students by school personnel and community members that all students need to take rigorous courses leading to postsecondary success and workforce readiness

Limited school structures and professional development

- Insufficient professional development for teachers to bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary educational expectations.
- Focus on standardized test results may lead to curriculum focused on improving test scores rather than on improving critical thinking skills, deep understanding of core concepts, and alignment of high school to postsecondary expectations.
- Teachers may lack the skills and knowledge to adequately provide instruction in rigorous courses.
- Scheduling and funding can be barriers to increasing access to rigorous courses.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The education community should...

- Provide more counseling, small group meetings and planning seminars with students to assist in planning for postsecondary success and workforce readiness..
- Advocate for funding focused on rigorous course taking and student planning based on the calculated return on investment.
- Embed developmentally appropriate rigor (*intellectually demanding coursework that engages students in the essential core knowledge and skills of a discipline and contains appropriately sophisticated content*) into all classes.
- Provide academically-focused professional development, emphasizing vertical alignment between secondary and postsecondary educators; and horizontal alignment incorporating essential skills across the curriculum.
- In addition to rigor, maintain focus on engagement and an appreciation of learning.
- Develop new or link to existing websites (eg, Minnesota Learning Commons, Office of Higher Education; Minnesota Department of Education, iSEEK; Ramp Up to Readiness) to provide a portal for networking across systems and serve as a repository of model programs and opportunities.

Community partners can build partnerships with schools to support professional development and build capacity to achieve postsecondary success and workforce readiness.

- Create professional development opportunities that involve all constituent groups.
- Build communication networks between businesses and teachers, both pre-service and current.
- Identify and communicate hiring and workplace expectations across a wide range of professions.
- Support “educators-in-the-workplace” initiatives.
- Emphasize the value of rigor across the entire curriculum (eg liberal arts, STEM, career and technical education).

Spotlight on Promising Practices

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)

AVID is an elementary through postsecondary college readiness system designed to increase school wide learning and performance. AVID targets students in the academic middle (B, C and D range), pulling them from unchallenging courses and placing them on a rigorous college track. AVID students not only enroll in honors and AP courses but also take an AVID elective. The AVID curriculum is based on rigorous standards developed by middle and senior high teachers in collaboration with college professors. The core is the WICR method (writing, inquiry, collaboration and reading). The results indicate that AVID students are more likely to take AP classes, complete their college eligibility requirements and get accepted into college than comparably performing students who do not take AVID.

For more information: <http://www.avid.org/>

St. Paul Second Shift

The “Second Shift” refers to the time young people spend outside of school. Young people spend 20% of their time in school and 80% in the out-of-school time. Focusing on the opportunities available to youth during the “Second Shift” is critical to closing opportunity gaps and ensuring that all young people have opportunities to succeed. To increase access to effective out-of-school learning while creating a bridge to in-school-learning, the Second Shift initiative is working with partners to create a city-wide comprehensive learning system. It works with libraries, park and recreation centers, public, private and charter schools, colleges and universities, and a network of community-based and non-profit organizations. The building of this infrastructure will increase the opportunities for young people to develop the skills, qualities, and knowledge necessary to thrive as productive, contributing citizens in the 21st century.

For more information: <http://www.stpaul.gov/DocumentView.aspx?DID=14044>

Students First Initiative

Bemidji’s *Students First Initiative* aims to help secondary students understand their potential and their options as well as receive support from adult mentors. Objectives of the program include: 1) increasing the number of students going on to postsecondary education; 2) increasing student connections to community life; 3) increasing high school graduation rates; and, 4) connecting students with another caring adult. At the core of this effort is the goal of increasing student awareness of individual strengths, career options, goal-setting, and postsecondary planning and options. Beginning with the Class of 2013, the initiative intends for every student to have access to a talent plan and a community coach. A pilot project is also planned that will recruit seventh grade participants and match them with success coaches in eighth grade.

For more information: Jim Hess, Superintendent, Bemidji Public Schools
jhess@bemidji.k12.mn.us

Metro Alliance College Readiness Initiative

Metro Alliance College Readiness Initiative is a collaborative effort sponsored by metro area MnSCU campuses to assess high school students’ readiness for college by administering the Accuplacer. Students are subsequently provided an overview of options ranging from PSEO, College in the Schools or, if needed, advice on ways to improve their college readiness scores prior to graduating from high school. This initiative also sponsors many opportunities for dialogue between high school and college faculty by content area to strategize on ways to work together to assure students graduate college ready and curriculum aligns between systems.

For more information: <http://www.mnscu.edu/media/publications/connections.html>

Strategy 4: Ensure that the content suggested by course titles in secondary schools is sufficiently challenging and rigorous

The Minnesota Common Course Catalogue (grades 9-12) is currently under development. This system will provide an index of all courses offered in Minnesota public high schools. The primary purpose of this statewide, common course system is to make it easier for school districts and the state to maintain longitudinal student records and transmit student course-taking information from one district to another and to MDE. A secondary benefit is the standardization of student course-taking information for those agencies who evaluate student transcripts for postsecondary admission and research purposes. This system will enable comparison of course offerings among school districts as well as encourage the use of course-taking information in the evaluation of and research about student achievement.

Summary and Conclusion

The work of this committee builds on the research, analysis and policy recommendations submitted by previous P-16 and P-20 Committees (http://www.mnp20.org/working_groups/index.html). The rigorous course-taking initiative strives to develop a statewide plan to ensure all middle and high school students complete rigorous courses that prepare them for both postsecondary and workforce readiness and success. In order to bring such an initiative to scale, the committee recommends a four-pronged approach:

1. a clear communication plan to all constituent groups on the importance of rigorous course taking;
2. the development of individualized student plans for rigorous course taking which map back to clear and transparent pathways for postsecondary and workforce readiness;
3. the allocation of sufficient and sustainable resources which promote rigorous course taking; and,
4. the assurance that the content suggested by course titles in Minnesota secondary schools is sufficiently challenging and rigorous.

In order to measure effectively whether these strategies have had the desired outcomes, the committee further recommends longitudinal analysis *across systems* to monitor and evaluate rigorous course-taking patterns and their impact on postsecondary and workforce readiness. Ongoing data gathering should include the percent of high school graduates who assess as “college ready” when they enter higher education, the percent who persist in higher education from year one to year two, and the percent who earn diplomas and/or certificates “on time.”

If the proposed strategies in this statewide plan are effective, we anticipate that enrollment in non-credit bearing, developmental postsecondary courses should decrease, and the rates of on-time postsecondary completion should increase, which will result in a sizeable return on our state’s educational investments.

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ⁱ Achieve, 2006 Criteria used in evaluating the quality of state standards

ⁱⁱ Achieve, Inc, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*, 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ National Governors Association, *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools*, 2009