

Opinion: Calif. falls short on educating students

By Dan Walters, CalMatters

The fundamental mission of a K-12 school system should be to have as many students as humanely possible graduate from high school with the fundamental skills they need to succeed as adults.

We Californians who are already adults sometimes lose sight of that goal as we bicker over financing, curriculum, testing and other pedagogic issues involved with educating 6 million students.



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California's high school graduation rates, once abysmally low, have improved somewhat in recent years, although the factors in that improvement are a little cloudy. It's unclear whether kids are being better educated and thus are more capable of meeting graduation requirements or the requirements themselves have been dumbed-down.

It's noteworthy that the Legislature has eliminated the high school exit examination. It tested the essential knowledge and skills 12 years of education were to have provided. Passage was required before a diploma could be awarded, but the exam was criticized for blocking too many students, particularly poor, Latino and black students, from graduation.

We also know that too many of the state's high school graduates entering college—40 percent of enrollees in the California State University system, for instance—have been required to take remedial English and math courses because their high school instruction fell short.

Faced with that dilemma, CSU is eliminating such courses and folding remediation into courses required for graduation—a policy aimed at increasing college graduation rates but one that could mask, rather than solve, high schools' failures.

A recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California points out that even without an exit exam, California's high school graduation requirements, in terms of academic courses taken and passed, are among the nation's lowest and are also significantly lower than what CSU and the University of California require for admission.

A concurrent PPIC report underscores the failure of the state's school systems to produce enough graduates prepared to succeed in college and thus fill the state's needs.

"Far too many California students are falling off the pathway to and through college," the PPIC study concludes. "At current rates of high school and college completion, only about 30 percent of California 9th graders will earn a bachelor's degree, a rate that is insufficient for an economy that increasingly demands more highly educated workers."

The report points out that most California high school graduates do not complete the courses required for college admission, and "even academically prepared students are falling off the pathway" by starting, but not completing, the required courses, with black and Latino students particularly "likely to drop off the pathway at every stage."

Finally, CSU does not have the capacity to enroll and educate those students who have completed admission requirements, PPIC says.

“In the past four years, CSU has turned away more than 69,000 qualified California high school graduates, who have completed the ... course requirements,” its study found.

California’s shortcomings in preparing students for and later delivering successful higher education will bite a state whose economy, as PPIC says, increasingly needs highly educated workers.

No, not every Californian needs a four-year college degree. And society needs lots of skilled workers without college diplomas to produce services and goods and maintain our machinery, from cars to power plants, and technology.

However, we do need enough college-educated workers to replace retiring members of the baby-boom generation and keep us competitive in a global economy, and we need those graduates to be truly educated, not just shuffled through a system with lowered standards.