



# College Readiness as a Graduation Requirement

## An Assessment of San Diego's Challenges

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DIGITAL VISION

### SUMMARY

To be considered for admission to the University of California (UC) or the California State University (CSU) system, high school students must complete all a–g courses with grades of C or higher. The a–g course sequence includes 30 semesters of UC-approved college preparatory coursework in seven subject areas, and completion indicates a high level of academic preparation. Recently, four large school districts (San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland) adopted new graduation policies requiring that students complete these courses to obtain a high school diploma. These policy changes are in part a response to concern expressed by the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups about wide variations in a–g completion rates across high schools in major urban districts.

This study examines the potential effect of this bold change by analyzing the transcripts of students in the San Diego Unified School District. Focusing on the class of 2011, we assess how course-taking patterns will need to change for the class of 2016. Findings from San Diego should inform implementation of new graduation policies in the other districts, in which a similar percentage of graduates meet UC/CSU admission eligibility requirements.

Although the UC/CSU systems require that students pass all a–g courses with a grade of C or higher, San Diego and other districts that have instituted new a–g graduation policies allow grades of D or higher to count toward meeting the requirements for graduation, perhaps in recognition of the difficulty of college preparatory coursework. In San Diego's class of 2011, 61.1 percent of graduates would have met the lower D or higher standard, whereas

only 41.8 percent would have met the C or higher standard. The share declines if we include students who dropped out or were still in school but did not graduate in 2011.

English Learners, Hispanic and African American students, males, students whose parents had a high school education or less, and students enrolled in special education had lower than average a–g completion rates. In the most dramatic gap, 67.2 percent of graduates who had never been English Learners completed the a–g course sequence with grades of D or higher, compared to only 35.2 percent of graduates who were still English Learners in grade 12.

San Diego Unified, and most likely its counterparts, will need to undertake major interventions to make sure that all students accelerate their learning to meet the new standards and graduate from high school. Otherwise, the very students whom the reforms aim to help could be denied high school diplomas.

Our findings raise a number of policy issues, apart from the obvious need for interventions to retain and assist at-risk students. We found that in San Diego, 12 percent of graduates who did not meet the a–g requirements with grades of C or higher nonetheless enrolled in four-year colleges or universities. This raises an important concern: a–g courses are required only by the UC and CSU systems, and it would be unfortunate if students who might go to other colleges or universities are unable to do so because they fail to graduate from high school.

Another policy concern is that the new requirements may discourage students from taking the Career and Technical Education courses that prepare them for careers either immediately after high school or after completing postsecondary programs.

Perhaps the most important policy implication is that clear communication with students, parents, and teachers about the new requirements is critical. This communication needs to begin in middle school, if not earlier, because middle school students take many courses that either meet a–g requirements or prepare them to complete subsequent a–g coursework in high school.

Districts implementing these new graduation requirements will need to guard against two unwanted side effects: the watering down of a–g course content and possible grade inflation that allows students to graduate even though they are not mastering the content of a–g courses.

As an aid to administrators in districts that have adopted the a–g course sequence as a graduation requirement, we are releasing the “a–g On Track Model”—a set of spreadsheets that can forecast which grade 6 or grade 7 students will have the most difficulty fulfilling a–g requirements. Districts that have not adopted a–g graduation requirements may want to use the On Track Model to forecast the college readiness of middle school students.

The a–g On Track Model is available at  
[www.ppic.org/main/dataSet.asp?i=1336](http://www.ppic.org/main/dataSet.asp?i=1336)  
and <http://sanderu.ucsd.edu/resources/index.html>

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