

Connecticut High School Reform

Q&A

The Connecticut State Board of Education is taking the first steps in a process to improve the high school experience for students and raise standards of performance. Based on the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on Secondary School Reform, the State Board has adopted a broad outline of recommendations and has authorized a public participation process to refine and shape its final proposal to the legislature. Several public forums and meetings have been scheduled to gather input from citizens on how to improve the proposal in order to form the best and most effective model.

Why do we need to reform high schools in Connecticut?

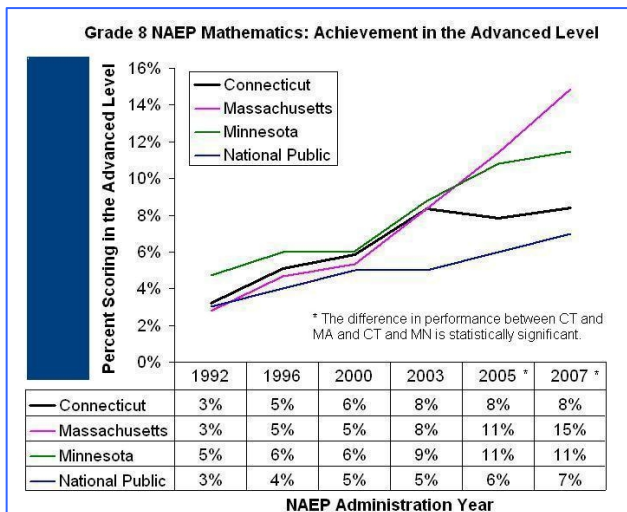
NAEP scores show that Connecticut no longer leads the country in mathematics and reading, as it once did in the early 90s. Many states have caught up with Connecticut, and others, like Massachusetts, have surpassed Connecticut. Higher percentages of Connecticut's high school graduates are requiring remedial coursework when they enter college; the purchasing power of a high school degree is no longer enough to support a family of four, and too many high school students are dropping out and enrolling in adult education programs. Briefly summarized, student achievement in Connecticut has remained flat since 2002. We have seen almost no significant improvement on national tests since that time, and the achievement gaps between Whites and Blacks and Whites and Hispanics have grown rather than narrowed. Literacy achievement, in particular, appears to be in decline.

What does this mean? What are the implications for the future?

In the years to come, Connecticut's competitiveness in the global marketplace will depend upon the skills of its workforce. Connecticut's business community—from the Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA) to the Office of Workforce Competitiveness (OWC)—has expressed grave concern that without a significant number of skilled employees possessing strong mathematics and science proficiencies, Connecticut's economy will falter in the next decade. Demographic forecasts continue to show that the state's workforce will largely come from Connecticut's large urban centers, where significant numbers of high schools are failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), and the dominant racial and ethnic groups—African Americans and Hispanics—are falling farther behind or are dropping out of school at high rates.

Isn't this just a problem with our urban high schools?

No, national test scores show that other states are catching up with and surpassing Connecticut in Reading, Mathematics and Science performance, including the performance of the states' best students. For example, in the latest mathematics assessment under the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Connecticut's Grade 8 students outperformed their counterparts in only 19 states in the percentage of students scoring at or above the proficient level. Connecticut performance was not significantly different from that of 24 states. **Six states (Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Dakota, and Vermont) outperformed Connecticut in this category.**



As the graph (left) demonstrates, improvement in the percentage of students scoring at advanced level in Connecticut has not kept pace with other leading states and was only one percentage point above the national average in 2007.

Is Connecticut keeping pace with other states?

Percent of Students Performing at or above *Proficient* in the Top Performing States – **2003 NAEP**

Percent of Students Performing at or above *Proficient* in the Top Performing States – **2007 NAEP**

GRADE 4		GRADE 8		
Reading 2003	Connecticut	43	Massachusetts	43
	Massachusetts	40	New Hampshire	40
	New Hampshire	40	South Dakota	39
	New Jersey	39	Vermont	39
	Minnesota	37	North Dakota	38
	Vermont	37	Connecticut	37
	Colorado	37	Minnesota	37
	<i>NATION</i>	30	<i>NATION</i>	30

GRADE 4		GRADE 8		
Reading 2007	Massachusetts	49	Massachusetts	43
	New Jersey	43	Vermont	42
	New Hampshire	41	New Jersey	39
	Connecticut	41	Montana	39
	Vermont	41	New Hampshire	37
	Pennsylvania	40	Connecticut	37
	Montana	39	Maine	37
	<i>NATION</i>	32	<i>NATION</i>	29

GRADE 4		GRADE 8		
Mathematics 2003	New Hampshire	43	Minnesota	44
	Vermont	42	Massachusetts	38
	Minnesota	42	North Dakota	36
	Kansas	41	Connecticut	35
	Massachusetts	41	Wisconsin	35
	Connecticut	41	Vermont	35
	North Carolina	41	Montana	35
	<i>NATION</i>	31	<i>NATION</i>	27

GRADE 4		GRADE 8		
Mathematics 2007	Massachusetts	58	Massachusetts	51
	New Jersey	52	Minnesota	43
	New Hampshire	52	Vermont	41
	Kansas	51	North Dakota	41
	Minnesota	51	New Jersey	40
	Vermont	49	Kansas	40
	Pennsylvania	47	South Dakota	39
	Connecticut	45	Connecticut	35
	<i>NATION</i>	39	<i>NATION</i>	31

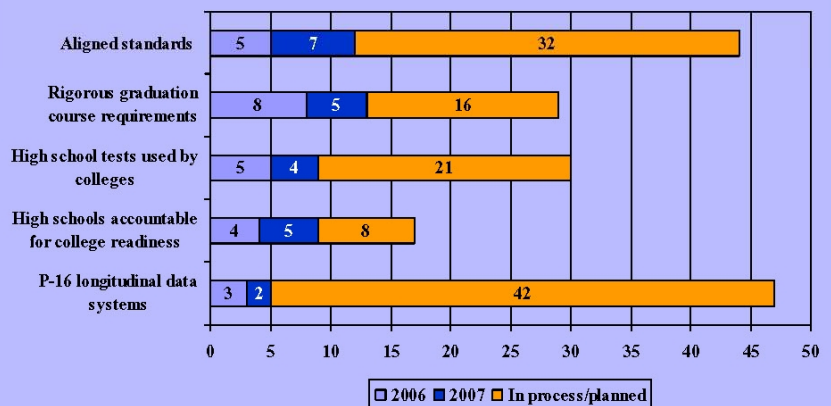
Note: Bold states indicate performance significantly different from Connecticut performance.

Are other states involved in high school reform?

Yes, in fact Connecticut becomes the 30th state to take action toward comprehensive high school reform.

Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Texas – have already begun the process to significantly raise the rigor of their high school standards, assessments, and curriculum to better align them with the demands of postsecondary education and work. Other states plan to do so next year.

A growing number of states have policies that help prepare H.S. graduates for college and work



Isn't high school hard enough? Won't we encourage more students to drop out?

In its most recent annual survey of American youth, the Horatio Alger Association found that nearly 60% of high school students felt only "moderately" or "somewhat" challenged in their coursework, and an additional 12% felt expectations were "low." Similarly, the 2005 report, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* stated that nearly half of recent high school graduates who had gone on to college – and 58% of those who had gone directly into the workforce – felt they were not well prepared, or only somewhat well prepared, for expectations after high school. A striking 86% of those who had enrolled in college acknowledged a gap in their preparation in at least one knowledge or skill area. Further, the drop out rate has not changed significantly in those states with more rigorous graduation requirements. Go to: <http://www.achieve.org/files/ImproveGradRates.pdf>

What are the major components of Connecticut's proposal for high school reform?

The proposal has three themes: **Rigor, Engagement** and **21st Century Learning**

Rigor: The proposal calls upon all school districts in Connecticut to adopt a core curriculum of required courses, end-of-year assessments, and a minimum of 24 credits. All students will be called upon to earn *three credits* in mathematics, science, and history/social studies; *four credits* in English language arts; and *two credits* in world language, career and technical education and the arts, and health and wellness. All of the required courses will be supported by state-developed model curricula that will feature the essential content, skills understandings, core concepts, and background knowledge needed to succeed in college and/or in Connecticut's future work force. Each of these courses will be the source of an end-of-course written assessment, or a performance task that must be passed at an acceptable level in order for a student to receive a diploma. In addition, students must earn four credits in electives and one credit for a senior demonstration project.

To ensure student **Engagement**, the proposal asks school districts to reshape the dynamics of the classroom instruction, and the relationships that bring students and teachers together. Instead of falling back on the anonymity of a master schedule of eight 45-minute classes of "talk and chalk," teachers are encouraged to work more intensively with smaller groups of students and to serve as mentors or "guides" to students the moment they begin transitioning from 8th to 9th grade.

Apart from designing smaller and more personalized learning environments, the Committee believes that three essential changes in expectation must come about: (1) incoming freshman must be charged with developing a long-range, multi-year plan of courses to be taken in pursuit of an academic or career interest following graduation; (2) all high school teachers, not simply guidance counselors, must be held responsible for assisting students in developing these plans and guiding their students through them; and (3) the "student success plan" conceived and adjusted over time will culminate in a "senior demonstration" or project that pulls together some significant aspect of the skills and knowledge acquired over the 3-5 years needed to move through high school.

Finally, to support **21st Century Learning**, the proposal requires that every model curriculum developed for the core curriculum must, as a matter of expectation, explicitly address different aspects of the 21st Century skills and professional habits of mind needed by college students and/or successful workers. These include such attributes as communication skills, ability to work in a team, time management and personal responsibility. The model curriculum envisioned for future Connecticut classrooms will, of necessity, involve the teaching of complex content as well as essential 21st Century skills that have been embedded in units, assignments, formative assessments, and different ways of presenting problems to solve in and out of class. As might be expected, the widespread use of technology in delivering and assessing these skills will be paramount, just as it will in the development of the senior demonstration.

What is the senior demonstration project?

The **senior demonstration** will be completed in a single, year-long course that will culminate with a project, portfolio, internship, or other research task in the second semester of a student's senior year. It offers an opportunity for each student to find his or her area of interest and study it in depth. Students will focus their skills in an interdisciplinary way to delve into specific projects or areas of learning that has meaning to them. Each student would be supported by an advisor/mentor in this process.

By definition, the senior demonstration will strive to make maximum use of the human resources and opportunities made available through each community, including surrounding institutions of higher education. The Advisory Committee on Secondary School Reform believes that a culminating activity like the senior demonstration is a great way to reach all students, allowing students to steer their own course while focusing on long-range outcomes that will be both personally interesting and conceptually engaging.

What about students who struggle? How can we be certain they will graduate?

The State Board of Education makes its recommendations with a full understanding that if we are to raise standards in such a dramatic way, we **must also build in safety nets** for those students who, for one reason or another, cannot negotiate the pathways charted and must be given more time, support or alternatives for earning a high school diploma. Such considerations will require additional supplementary or remedial instruction if not multiple opportunities for re-testing when end-of-course assessments are not passed the first time.

Not only must a careful retesting plan be developed and analyzed for cost, but rigorous alternatives must be put into place well before any testing program begins. The process needs to examine (1) what other states have done to remediate and accommodate students who are not successful test takers; (2) investigate whether *all* assessments must be passed in order to earn a diploma; or (3) whether some form of compensatory system might be permitted to allow students to pass, say, four of the five assessments; or to substitute grades and/or other examinations like the SAT or AP tests for state-delivered end-of-course assessments. Having reasonable, but rigorous safety net is essential.

What is the schedule of this reform proposal?

Input from parents, students, educators, board members and business and community leaders will help to inform the Board as it makes its final recommendations to the legislature. It is anticipated that the Board will first ask the General Assembly in its 2008 session to fund a feasibility study to determine the costs – both to the state and to local and regional school districts- for the new graduation requirements. It is expected that the Board will make its recommendations including cost considerations to the 2009 session of the General Assembly. If the proposal is enacted by the legislature and signed by the Governor, the new requirements would affect public school students entering high school in 2011 and graduating in 2015.

Where can I submit my suggestions, comments, concerns?

Please send your suggestions to:

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