



## POSITION STATEMENT: PROMOTING RIGOROUS COURSES FOR EACH STUDENT



### PURPOSE

To offer recommendations that promote and facilitate rigorous courses for each student in middle level and high schools in order to ensure that they have the skills to be college or career ready.

### ISSUE

Despite wide disagreements about the role of schools and even the goals of education in our society, there is a growing consensus across a broad political and ideological spectrum that each student must graduate from high school prepared to meet high standards of college or career readiness. The past few years have introduced a movement among states and districts to eliminate barriers to college access and increase student preparation and college attendance.

Yet according to the most recent Nation's Report Card conducted by the National Assessment of Education Progress, "only a third of high school seniors are prepared for college-level coursework in math and reading" (Camera, 2016). Another recent report found that 96 percent out of 911 two- and four-year colleges were forced to enroll students in remedial courses in the 2014–15 academic year, costing taxpayers an estimated \$7 billion



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a year. Not only are these results telling, but many students themselves are unsure if they're prepared for postsecondary education. A recent poll of high school students found that only half feel their high school has properly equipped them with the skills and knowledge to be college or career ready.

There has also been an increase in ensuring the career readiness of students. It is important that those who are interested in doing so are able to effectively join the workforce immediately following their secondary education. However, many employers believe that students directly out of high school are often unprepared to immediately enter a career. A recent Gallup poll found that only 5 percent of employers believe individuals with a high school degree are "very prepared" to be successful in the workplace. Fifty-eight percent believe these individuals are "somewhat prepared" with 19 percent believing they're "not at all prepared." Promoting rigorous coursework often instills skills that benefit students in the workforce, such as teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, and a stronger work ethic.

Strengthening the rigor of courses taken in middle level and high schools can be an effective strategy to raise student achievement levels and ensure college and career readiness for more students. Raising expectations for all students to enroll in rigorous courses, including AP, dual- or concurrent-enrollment courses, or IB is crucial—particularly for students who have historically been underrepresented in those courses. This is true at the middle level as well. One study recently found that students taking less rigorous coursework at the middle level were often further behind their classmates in their ability to take more rigorous courses in high school. This just further highlights the issue that high-level courses are often open to only a select group of high-achieving students, thus perpetuating historical inequalities in academic outcomes.

Consider the following facts: The achievement gap for white and black students in reading was larger in 2015 (30 points) than it was in 1992. Also, the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students (20 points) is on par with its 1992 status. The percentage of ninth graders earning AP or IB credit in math or science is double for white students (17 percent and 16 percent) than it is for their black peers (6 percent and 8 percent). The percentage for Hispanic students is higher but still unfortunately behind those of their white peers (12 percent and 10 percent).

Yet simply removing the barriers that have been erected against access to high-level courses in and of itself is not sufficient to improve readiness and performance. Students from low-income and minority backgrounds often have academic and social deficits and need a set of academic and social support mechanisms to help them navigate the challenges of rigorous courses and gain access to the same opportunities afforded by their more privileged peers. For example, currently over 20 percent of our nation's school-aged children come from households living in poverty

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(Kelly, 2015). Rigorous courses that come with a price tag, such as AP tests, can often be too expensive for these students to take advantage of.

A growing body of work has unveiled promising policies and practices that may enable equity and excellence to coexist. Accompanying these policies and practices is the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA contains a number of new provisions that can be used to advance equity and excellence throughout our nation's schools for these historically underserved populations. Two key changes in ESSA that expand access to high-level coursework for all students are new measures in school performance and progress and a more substantive focus on resource equity. ESSA requires that states use multiple measures of accountability for evaluating student progress by including one or more indicators of "school quality or success." States are able to choose measures that can incentivize the expansion of access to high-quality learning opportunities for all students. Lastly, ESSA includes provisions that require states to evaluate and address resource inequities in schools. ESSA also establishes incentives for districts to enrich curriculum opportunities for historically underserved populations of students.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Educators must support challenging graduation requirements that prepare all students for postsecondary success.
- Policies and practices must be instilled in schools to help close the achievement gap and better provide all students with equitable education opportunities.
- NASSP has identified a number of high-achieving middle level and high schools that are serving large numbers of low-income students in a program called Breakthrough Schools. Access to rigorous coursework for all is a key feature of those schools, and they offer valuable lessons on how they raised expectations and supported their students in the process.
- NASSP promotes open access to rigorous courses for each student and supports ending low-level courses as these are often detrimental for whole school improvement.

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### RECOMMENDATIONS FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

- Provide full funding for the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants under Title IV, Part A of ESSA to help K-12 schools cover costs for low-income students to participate in pre-AP and AP courses and tests.
- Fund a significant literacy initiative that supports students from early childhood through high school.
- Create a separate secondary school funding stream to improve student achievement at the middle and high school levels with an emphasis on rigorous courses and college preparation.



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- Expand support of the Federal TRIO Programs, which serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities as they progress from middle level to post-baccalaureate programs.
- Help drive student success and achievement by providing proper funding for programs under the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation Fund.
- Continually provide support to states throughout the ESSA implementation process to ensure that state plans include initiatives aimed at improving access to high-level courses for all students.



### RECOMMENDATIONS STATE LEADERS

- Expand statewide incentives designed to increase the number of minority and low-income students taking pre-college exams, such as AP, SAT, or ACT.
- Work with groups such as the Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, the College Board, and ACT to develop and implement a common core of standards in key subject areas.
- Instill strong, rigorous early learning requirements around base core subjects for all students to ensure that students of underserved subgroups do not fall behind early on in their educational careers.
- Increase access to rigorous learning opportunities by including AP/IB or dual- or concurrent-enrollment coursework achievement in annual school performance determinations.
- Ensure that offered diploma options different from a regular high school degree are teaching students the proper knowledge and skills necessary for them to be successful after high school.
- When developing ESSA state plans, clearly identify strategies aimed at closing achievement gaps and providing educational assistance to traditionally underserved populations.
- Instill teacher and administrator training and preparation programs that promote a more diverse workforce in education.

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### RECOMMENDATIONS DISTRICT LEADERS

- Establish districtwide policies to facilitate access to high-level courses and programs for low-income and minority students at both the middle and high school levels.
- Provide professional development that helps teachers and administrators gain a deeper awareness of the multiple forms of intelligence and culturally responsive teaching—and prepares teachers in integrated instructional strategies for remediation.



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- Provide professional development that helps teachers distinguish between behaviors and academic ability. Teacher perceptions that lower academic potential and are linked to disorderly or passive behavior must be changed.
- Use technology to provide online access to and support success in advanced courses when live courses are not available in schools and districts.
- Use multiple and diverse assessments that tap individual skills in different areas.
- Design a coherent and rigorous K–12 reading, writing, and math curriculum that prepares all students for college or a career following their secondary education.

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### RECOMMENDATIONS SCHOOL LEADERS

- Provide open-enrollment opportunities to participate in advanced courses. Encourage students who do not meet eligibility criteria but are committed to making an effort in the course to enroll.
- Systematically seek out high-performing, low-income, and minority students. Some higher-scoring students choose not to enroll in advanced courses. An educator should contact them and encourage them to enroll.
- Personalize the school environment to enable each student to meet rigorous academic standards.
- Ensure that each student is provided a personal adult advocate to help them personalize the educational experience and a pyramid of interventions that provide academic and social support.
- Involve each student, particularly low income, first-generation college, and underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds, in precollege program learning experiences that focus on developing college aspirations and preparing students for entry into higher education. Ensure that all teachers are aware of these programs.
- Implement alternatives to tracking and ability grouping.

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- Help teachers design high-quality work and teach in ways that engage students; cause them to persist; and result in student satisfaction and acquisition of knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.
- Recruit, develop, and maintain a diverse staff of educators that are able to educate and share different viewpoints with students.
- Help teachers use a variety of instructional strategies, including frequent assessments, and settings that identify and accommodate individual learning needs and engage students.
- Make sure that each student has a personal plan for progress that is reviewed often and ensures students are engaged in an effort to meet high standards.
- Adopt the Building Ranks™ Process Circle (gather and analyze data to determine priorities, explore possible solutions, assess readiness and build capacity, create and communicate development plan, implement the plan, and monitor and adjust to ensure successful and sustainable implementation of changes).