



## **The Case for Change in Arkansas High Schools**

About 20% of Arkansas ninth graders do not obtain a high school diploma. The drop-out rate is even higher for African Americans and Hispanics. And only 16% of adult Arkansans hold a higher education degree, one of the lowest rates in the country.

Too many students leave our high schools unprepared for the challenges of college and work. National Governors Association (NGA) statistics say one in three high school graduates who go to college nationally need immediate remedial education; in Arkansas 52% of those attending college need remedial courses.

More than three-fourths of Arkansas employers interviewed say less than half of the recent high school graduates who apply for jobs in their company have quality writing skills or the ability to do basic math. More than 60% are not satisfied with recent high school graduates ability to read and understand written instructions and materials.

### **Restore the Value of a High School Diploma**

There is a crisis in high schools because students are graduating without the skills they need to succeed in the workplace or in higher education. In Arkansas, we must restore the value of a high school diploma so that our graduates are better prepared to succeed, whether they pursue employment or higher education. There can no longer be a two-track system in Arkansas high schools. The college prep track has become the all-student track in Arkansas with the enactment of more rigorous high school graduation requirements under the nationally-recognized Smart Core program.

Employers who hire high school graduates want to hire people who can read, write and communicate clearly, analyze information, solve complex problems, and conduct research and make comparisons. College professors want people with the same skills.

To succeed in today's economy, Americans must know and be able to do more than ever before. All students need to graduate high school with the same level of skills. The same skills in English (four years) and math (through Algebra II) are needed for college and for the 21st century work environment. For example, a college freshman and a pipe fitter need algebra, geometry, trigonometry and physics mastery. A sales professional and a college freshman need advanced math as well as written and oral persuasive communications skills.

## **Students Can Meet the Challenge**

Students can meet the challenge of the rigorous high school curriculum – known as Smart Core in Arkansas high schools – when we raise our expectations. Higher expectations mean higher academic achievement.

When more rigorous curriculums are implemented, ALL STUDENTS LEARN MORE. NGA data shows that students who took Algebra rather than general math had much higher test score gains between 8th and 10th grades – even those with the very lowest initial 8th grade math scores.

ACT scores in Arkansas rose for the first time in 2006 after years of remaining constant, but there is a gap between all students and African-American and Hispanics that is growing. The academic achievement gap between low income and minority students and others is LESS when a rigorous high school curriculum is followed by all students, according to NGA data.

When they take harder courses, ALL STUDENTS EARN BETTER GRADES. Tracking more than 3,000 students from middle school to high school, the Southern Regional Education Board found that low achieving 8th graders were less likely to earn Ds and Fs when placed in college prep courses in high school.

NGA statistics indicate a clear majority of high school graduates say they would work harder and take more rigorous courses in high school if they could do it over. Of those who did not go to college, 72% say they wish they had taken more rigorous courses.

## **High Expectations Mean High Performance**

A rigorous high school curriculum has not caused the dropout rate to rise. NGA data indicates that students are more engaged and achieve higher test scores when their curriculum is rigorous.

Parents can lead the way. Parents who encourage their children to attend college are raising the economic standards of their families – college graduates earn 62% more than high school graduates and high school dropouts earn 43% less than high school graduates. So if parents sign Smart Core waivers, they are limiting their child's future opportunities and their ability to support a family.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offers an updated take on the three Rs: rigor, relevance and relationship. More **RIGOROUS** courses that students see as **RELEVANT** to their lives and **RELATIONSHIPS** with educators who are interested in individual students – not only help engage students, but also raise achievement levels.

As a community, we have to set goals, measure progress, hold our schools accountable and streamline governance to make needed changes in our high schools. We will know we have succeeded when:

- Readiness for college and workforce increases.
- College remediation rates decrease.
- Retention and timely graduation at colleges/universities increases.
- High school intervention required decreases.