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Rethinking the High School Diploma

EDUCATION NEXT TALKS WITH

CHESTER E. FINN, JR., RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG AND SANDY KRESS

As states move to implement the Common Core State Standards, key challenges remain. One is how to make sure a high school diploma acknowledges what students have achieved. Should states adopt a two-tiered diploma, in which students who pass internationally aligned Common Core exams at a career- and college-ready level receive an “academic” diploma, while students who fail to meet that bar receive a “basic” diploma? Yes, say three prominent thinkers who have long wrestled with questions of standards, testing, equity, and excellence. Chester E. Finn, Jr., is distinguished senior fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Richard D. Kahlenberg is author of the definitive autobiography of Albert Shanker, and Sandy Kress advised President George W. Bush on the No Child Left Behind Act.

DIFFERENT KIDS
NEED DIFFERENT
CREDENTIALS
BY CHESTER E.
FINN, JR.



THOUGH THE OCCASIONAL political firecracker still flares across the night sky, as of mid-2014 it seems likely that most of the 46 jurisdictions that originally embraced the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will stick with them.

That’s a seismic development for American public education, but whether it produces a 1 or an 8 on the Richter scale remains to be seen. It depends on 1) the thoroughness of implementation, 2) the selection (and scoring) of
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HOLD STUDENTS
ACCOUNTABLE
AND SUPPORT
THEM
BY RICHARD D.
KAHLENBERG



WHEN CONGRESS PASSED the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, the then-distant date of 2014 was the point at which we would reach educational nirvana and 100 percent of American students would be proficient in math and reading. The goal was never met because, as a fundamental matter, individual human variability makes 100 percent proficiency to a meaningful standard an impossibility. But there were other problems as well: NCLB did not itself
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DIPLOMAS MUST
RECOGNIZE
COLLEGE AND
CAREER READINESS
BY SANDY KRESS



STATES SHOULD ADOPT a two-tiered diploma system, in which students who have demonstrated college and career readiness receive a “diploma plus” and other graduating high-school students receive a diploma of the sort typically granted today.

Before making the case, I want to establish the context.

First, the future of our young people and indeed the economy of our nation require that an ever-increasing number of our graduates exit high school
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assessments, and 3) perhaps most of all, the ways in which results revealed by those assessments affect the lives of real people and their schools.

Today all three are up for grabs.

The most important thing to know about the Common Core standards is that learning what they say you should learn is supposed to make you ready for both college and career, i.e., for a seamless move from 12th grade into the freshman year at a standard-issue college, where you will be welcomed into credit-bearing courses that you will be ready to master.

That's the concept. It's a really important one and the main justification for the heavy lifting and disruption that these standards will occasion.

Today, far less than half of U.S. 12th graders are "college ready." (Never mind those who have already dropped out of high school.) The National Assessment Governing Board estimates not quite 40 percent are college ready. The ACT folks estimate 26 percent are college ready across the four subjects that comprise their suite of questions.

Literally millions of others go on to college anyway, generally into remedial—the polite term is "developmental"—classes and, often, to fall by the wayside and never earn a degree.

The Common Core is supposed to solve that problem by producing generations of high school graduates who are truly college ready. How can that happen unless the K–12 system radically alters what high school diplomas signify?

Today, those prized documents are won every year by enormous numbers of young people who aren't anywhere near college ready but have met their states' and districts'

reason for colleges to accept these high school credentials—and the main point of the painful CCSS shift will be rendered moot. That outcome one might term educationally untenable.

What to do? In my view, states have no alternative, for the foreseeable future, to issuing (at least) two kinds of diplomas. The one with the gold star will signal college readiness, Common Core style. The other one will signal much the same as today's conventional diploma, mainly that one has passed a set of mandatory courses to the satisfaction of those teaching them.

This is akin to the practice for many decades (until 2012) in New York State, where a Regents Diploma denoted a markedly higher level of academic attainment than a local diploma, and it's somewhat similar to the practice in today's England, where you can complete your schooling with a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), but if you're bent on university, you stick around to earn a more-demanding A-level certificate.

New York scrapped the local diploma for a reason. They didn't want a double standard or a two-level society. They didn't want schools to split kids into separate tracks. They wanted everyone to get a proper—and equal—education.

That's surely the right impulse. But is it a realistic education policy if the single standard that everyone must meet is really, really demanding?

I don't think so, at least not for quite a while. It's possible that, over time, as young Americans work their way from CCSS-aligned kindergarten classes up through the grades and end up with 13 years of CCSS-level education, provided that their year-to-year promotions are faithful to the expectations of the standards, a state may be able to do away with the lower-level diploma and give everyone the kind with a gold star.

It's politically correct to say, "I hope it works out that way." But I'm unpersuaded that college readiness is the proper goal of everybody's high-school education, and it remains to be proven that the Common Core's academic standards are truly needed for success

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course requirements with passing grades. In about half the states, graduates have also made it through statewide graduation tests that are typically pegged to an 8th-, 9th-, or at most 10th-grade standard of actual performance. Not even Massachusetts, our highest-achieving state on myriad measures, was so bold as to make the passing score on its celebrated MCAS test equate to true college readiness. That would have meant denying diplomas to far too many teens, lots of them from poor and minority families.

As the Common Core and its new assessments kick in, how will states handle high school graduation? True college (and career) readiness would mean that hundreds of thousands of today's—and tomorrow's—12th graders won't receive diplomas. Politically, that's simply untenable. Yet lower those expectations and there's no

in myriad careers. That doesn't mean we should water down the standards. It doesn't mean we must deny diplomas to countless thousands. It does mean that we should, more like England, think of different ways of completing—and being credentialed for completing—one's primary and secondary education.

I expect howls of protest from those who cannot accept anything more than a "single standard for all." But much as I admire the Common Core standards and hope that they gain enormous traction across the land, I have never seen, in any line of endeavor, a standard that was both truly high and universally attained.

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provide sufficient incentives for students to work hard, as only teachers were held accountable for failure, and the legislation did not end the enduring inequalities

of educational opportunity for low-income and minority students that underlie the achievement gap.

As American education reformers try again, under the Common Core State Standards, to create a sensible system of standards, assessments, and accountability, what can we learn from our earlier mistakes? Three ideas stand out: Assessments aligned with CCSS must give students greater skin in the game by requiring them to pass assessments in order to graduate; tests should be linked to two or more different types of diplomas rather than imposing a rigid single standard for all; and low-income and minority students should receive far greater support than they currently do.

1. *Hold students as well as teachers accountable.* The threshold question is whether states should require any level of minimum competency on meeting Common Core standards in order to graduate. NCLB did not include such a requirement, and according to a September 2012 study of the Center on Education Policy, only about half of states (26) on their own require that students pass state high-school exit exams to earn a diploma.

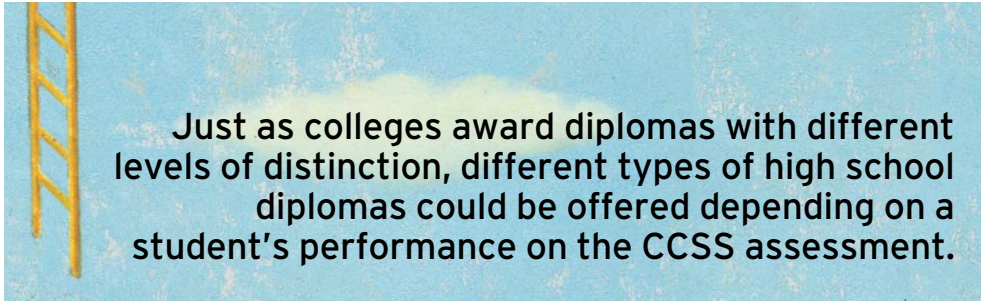
Holding teachers accountable for success, but not students, produces a very odd set of incentives. As Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, noted, it makes little sense to tell students that if they fail an exam, they won't be punished, but their teachers will be. As Shanker often noted, when he was a teacher and gave a quiz, all the students' hands would go up: "Does it count?" the kids wanted to know.

Countries that lead the world in education expect more of students. According to a 2011 report of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), 9 of 10 countries that score highest on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) use high-stakes "gateway" exams to mark transitions, including the one from high school to college or career. In these countries, the NCEE report notes, "Every student has a very strong incentive to take tough courses and work hard in school. Students who do not do that will not earn the credentials they need to achieve their dream," and "because the exams are scored externally, the student knows that the only way to move on is to meet the standard." In other countries, as Shanker noted, students know in advance what is expected of them, and teachers are allies rather than adversaries. "It's like the

Olympics," Shanker said. "There's an external standard that students need to meet, and the teacher is there to help the student make it."

2. *Multiple diplomas.* Holding all students to a single performance standard, whether that is proficiency under NCLB or a single cut score for graduation under assessments linked to CCSS, will never meet the needs of all students. As the University of Pittsburgh's Lauren Resnick notes, a single standard may be at once impossibly high for some special education students and fail to sufficiently challenge many other students.

On the one hand, if content and performance standards are set at a very rigorous level for all students, many will inevitably fail. The mantra that "all children can learn to the same high levels," said Shanker, "is news to parents, teachers, and the public; it defies everything we know and appreciate about human differences." While group differences between races and classes can be addressed with proper supports, there will always be differences between individual students. A high performance standard,



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yielding high rates of public school failure, will only confirm left wing fears that the Common Core is a Trojan horse for privatization.

This concern is particularly acute because assessments associated with CCSS are generally more rigorous than state tests administered under NCLB, requiring high-level critical thinking. In Kentucky and New York, the first two states to adopt Common Core exams, student passage rates have declined. The drops were particularly pronounced in New York schools with large numbers of black and Hispanic students, a *New York Times* analysis found. Requiring all students to meet a very high single standard for a diploma could significantly diminish the economic prospects of large numbers of society's most vulnerable students.

On the other hand, a single standard, like the goal of 100 percent student proficiency under NCLB, could lead over time to a watering down of CCSS performance standards for all students. Studies by the Fordham Institute and by researchers at the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan both found that states with high performance standards tended to weaken them in response to NCLB's

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goal of moving all children to a single standard. As a political matter, it will be difficult for supporters of CCSS, already under attack from various corners, to sustain a system in which large numbers of students are denied diplomas.

To avoid these two extremes, it makes far more sense to adopt multiple performance standards tied to CCSS. Just as colleges award diplomas with different levels of distinction (*summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, *cum laude*), different types of high school diplomas could be offered depending on a student's performance on the CCSS assessment. In this way, students from all elements of the academic distribution would have an incentive to work harder and learn more.

3. *Support low-income and minority students to earn stronger diplomas.* Any system involving multiple diplomas raises a very legitimate concern: will low-income and minority students disproportionately receive a less-well-regarded degree? In New York State, for example, high school graduates can receive a Regents Diploma or a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation. In

2013, 43 percent of white students received the Advanced Designation diploma, compared with only 9 percent of black students and 12 percent of Hispanic students.

But civil-rights advocates have recognized that shining light on disparities of result, such as the requirement that test data be disaggregated by racial and income groups under NCLB, is an important first step to reform. Stark differences in the awarding of different types of diplomas under CCSS should be a spur to action, in both the political and legal arenas, to close the opportunity gap from which the achievement gap springs. If courts can strike down teacher tenure laws as a violation of the rights of poor and minority children (see "Script Doctors," *legal beat*, Fall 2014), why not use the results from CCSS assessments to go after the drawing of school boundaries in a way that perpetuates economic school segregation and denies children equal opportunity? In that way, the Common Core can fully serve its twin purposes of promoting both excellence and equity.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the Century Foundation, is author of Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Union, Race and Democracy.

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ready for college and career. We have considerable data on the knowledge and skills now generally required to get the better-paying, fast-growing jobs in the economy. And, sadly, we

also have considerable data on how few students currently attain that level of knowledge and skills.

Second, most states have now set clearer, higher learning standards designed to help students prepare for college and career.

Third, a fundamental feature of the effective implementation of these standards is the creation and use of measures that assess success in learning that is predictive of college and career success.

Fourth, irrespective of how these measures are used in accountability, it is desirable, indeed arguably necessary, that key players know whether and to what degree students are on a path to college and career readiness as they progress through K–12, especially as they approach graduation.

Fifth, while we can define college and career readiness in meaningful ways, challenges abound. What level of college do we mean? What degree of readiness for college do we expect? Career? What exactly does that mean? Happily, there's been quite a lot of work done on these questions by solid researchers and various state agencies with the help of educators and testing experts. On the basis of that work, I am hopeful that policymakers may reasonably be able to reach solid judgments about rigorous but realistic standards for readiness that may be used with broad support.

Sixth, the current diploma in most states today is not designed to assure or signify, nor does it come close to assuring or signifying, college and career readiness. We know this too clearly from data on remediation rates in colleges and universities, all the various data on college and career readiness, and most surveys of employer and higher-education views of high-school graduate readiness for postsecondary work and study.

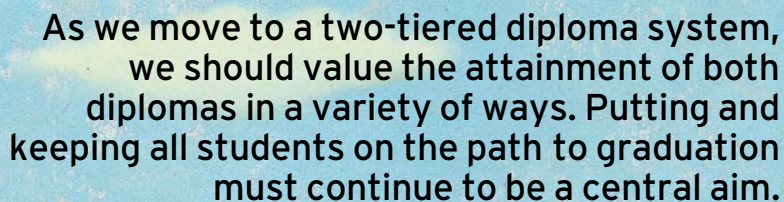
So, let's return to the decision the debate places before us. Should there be special recognition in a diploma to honor and reward a student whose proficiency is tantamount to college and career readiness? Or should there be just a sole diploma, one that assures and signifies that its holder is ready for college and career?

The best answer to this latter question, I believe, is no, and it comes in two parts: 1) however much the economy is changing, not all high-school graduates need to be ready for college and career, in whatever way that term is reasonably defined, and 2) practically, since roughly two-thirds of our high schoolers do not graduate college and career ready, today we would deny well over a majority of our students a diploma if we were to impose these more-rigorous requirements on the attainment of a diploma. So, as much as we may want ever-increasing numbers of students

to graduate high school ready for college and career, amping up the criteria for attaining the general diploma to such a high degree, at least too quickly, is neither the right thing to do, nor is it practically or politically sensible.

Nevertheless, if we continue to give all graduates only the badge of the current diploma, we will badly serve our young people and our country.

Students who achieve at a high level and attain college and career readiness currently get no recognition in the diploma in most states. Employers and higher education get no signal from the diploma about the postsecondary readiness of graduates. Parents and educators who help students make progress and reach college readiness get no credit or recognition for their contribution to this important success. And where students do not reach this goal, parents and edu-



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cators are misled into believing they have accomplished more than is the case. These are serious and harmful failings in a system in which the sole diploma does not connote college and career readiness.

We should move to a two-tiered diploma system, one with both the traditional diploma and a “diploma plus.” But, as we do so, we should value the attainment of both diplomas in a variety of ways, especially in how we structure accountability. Putting and keeping all students on the path to graduation must continue to be a central aim of accountability. Yet, leading more and more students in all subgroups to graduate ready for college and career must be central, too, and an increasingly important goal in accountability. We must value both goals, and we must help reward and honor educators and schools that achieve them. As we know from other successes in education reform if we hold ourselves to account, we can make real progress toward these goals as well.

While we may want to honor students who graduate in all sorts of appropriate ways, I believe we must make a special effort to grant those high-school graduates who are college and career ready a diploma that signifies and celebrates that readiness. Is achieving greater postsecondary readiness truly our valued priority? If so, we must lay down meaningful markers for achieving the goal, both for the students who reach it and the adults who help them.

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