



A Close Look at High School Reform



From the student-centered approaches examined in the [Eight-Year Study](#) of the 1930s and 40s, to the [Sputnik-era](#) focus on science and math in the 1950s and 60s, to the [small schools movement](#) of the early 2000s, to the [current](#) career and technical education craze, high schools have long experienced waves of reform.

In a new [research brief](#), NEPC Fellow [Michal Kurlaender](#) of the University of California, Davis, and her dozen co-authors take stock of the status of high school reform efforts in California, the nation's most populous state.

Like many states, California has undertaken reforms over the past decade by attempting to better align postsecondary and higher education. These reforms encourage more students to prepare for two- and four-year colleges. In some areas, this involved piloting new models such as High Tech High that aim to improve student learning by harnessing research on adolescent development. Kurlaender and her coauthors find that this work is far from complete.

The study was released in May as part of a massive project, [Getting Down to Facts III](#), which produced 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs reviewing California's public education system. The influential project is the subject of May's [NEPC Talks Education](#) podcast interview of Stanford Professor [Susanna Loeb](#), who led the initiative and is one of Kur-laender's co-authors on this brief. Multiple NEPC Fellows contributed to this effort. Other studies have been highlighted in past newsletters, and additional work will be described in future installments.

Here are four takeaways from the brief that, while focused on California, could easily apply to high schools throughout the United States.

- 1. Students who take more college prep courses are indeed more likely to enroll in college:** Since the early 2000s, school districts in California have been [encouraging](#) more students to fulfill the course-taking requirements of the state's public colleges (the so-called "A-G" sequence). For example, large districts including Los Angeles Unified, Oakland, San Diego, San Francisco and San Jose Unified implemented policies making the college-prep A-G requirements the default for all students. In the wake of these changes, the share of high school graduates who met the requirements has risen from under 40% to about 50% in the past 25 years. More than 80% of students who take such college-credit courses while still in high school enroll in college right after graduation. By contrast, only 67% of California graduates overall enroll in college right away.
- 2. Opportunity is uneven:** Black and Hispanic students remain less likely than White, Asian, Filipino or multiracial students to meet A-G requirements or take college-credit courses while in high school. Compared to females and students from higher-income families, males and students from low-income families are also less likely to take these types of courses. One reason is that the schools attended by Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students are less likely to offer these courses. But students in these subgroups are also less likely to enroll in college prep courses even when they are available.
- 3. Pre-high school course taking shapes college eligibility:** As California shifted to the Common Core, the share of students taking Algebra 1 in Grade 8 dropped from about 60% to less than 20%.

This has had predictable impact on later course-taking. Students who wait until high school to take algebra are less likely to meet the math course requirements for the state's public colleges.

- 4. High schools are still not organized around students' needs:** Over the past 30 years, high school reforms have focused on better serving the needs of adolescence. The more successful programs have combined rigorous academics with a focus on developing strong relationships that cultivate a sense of belonging and that integrate real-world experiences. However, many high schools continue to prioritize tradition or cost savings over research evidence by maintaining short class periods, fragmented curricula, and large class loads for teachers that make it challenging for them to know students well enough to make personal connections and to provide needed supports. Meanwhile, chronic absenteeism is rising (19% in 2024-25 versus 12% in 2018-19), and three-quarters of the nation's students have negative feelings about their high schools.

"California high schools are expected to prepare students for college and career while also supporting broader developmental goals," the researchers conclude. "The evidence reviewed in this brief shows that the state's high schools do not yet provide these opportunities consistently."

The same, unfortunately, can undoubtedly be said for most of the rest of the nation's high schools.

NEPC Resources on High School and/or Secondary School

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