



**Creating a**

# **High School Diploma that Counts**

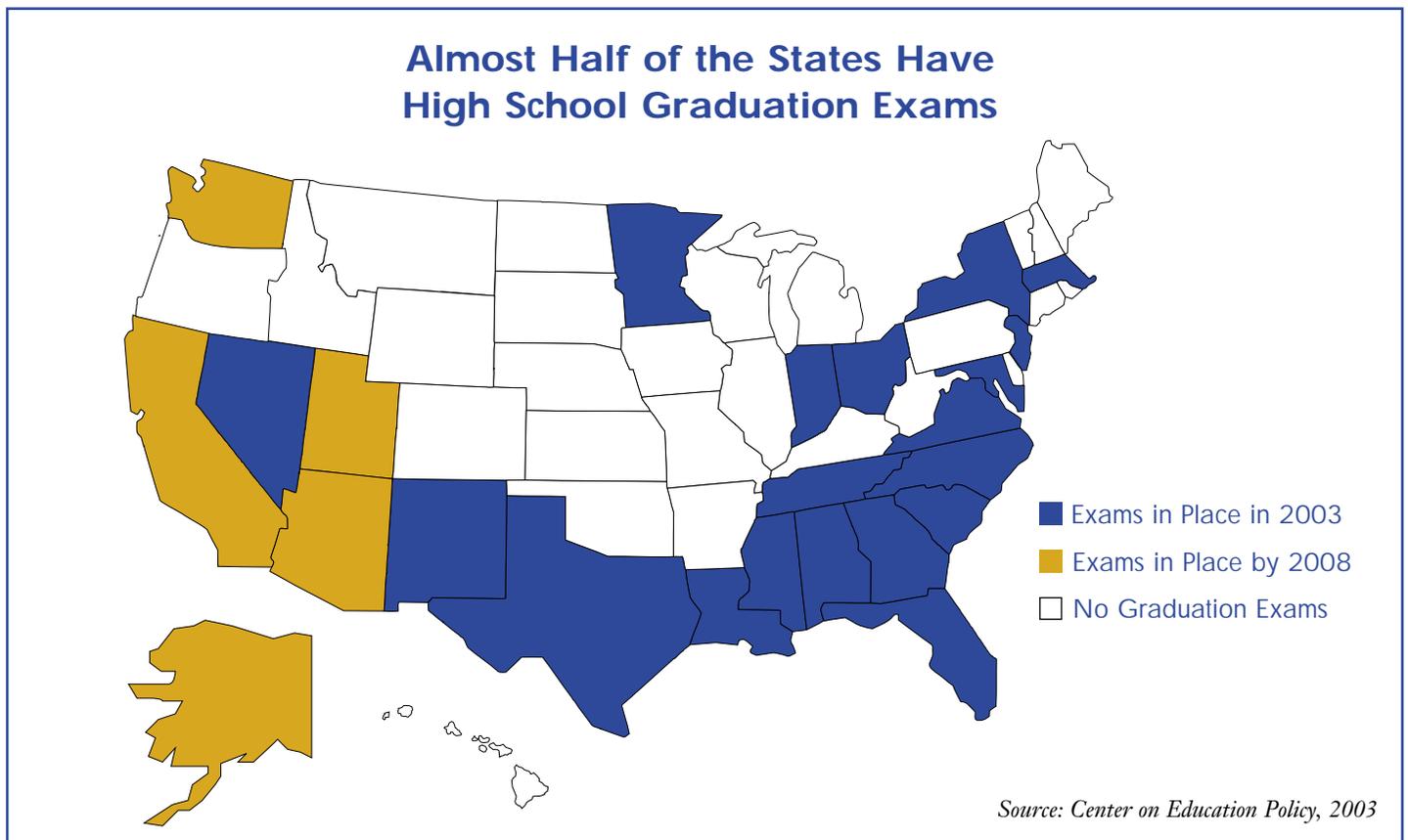


**The American  
Diploma Project**

# The Challenge

**N**ineteen states that educate more than half the nation's high school students give exit exams that students must pass to earn diplomas, with five more slated to do the same over the next five years.

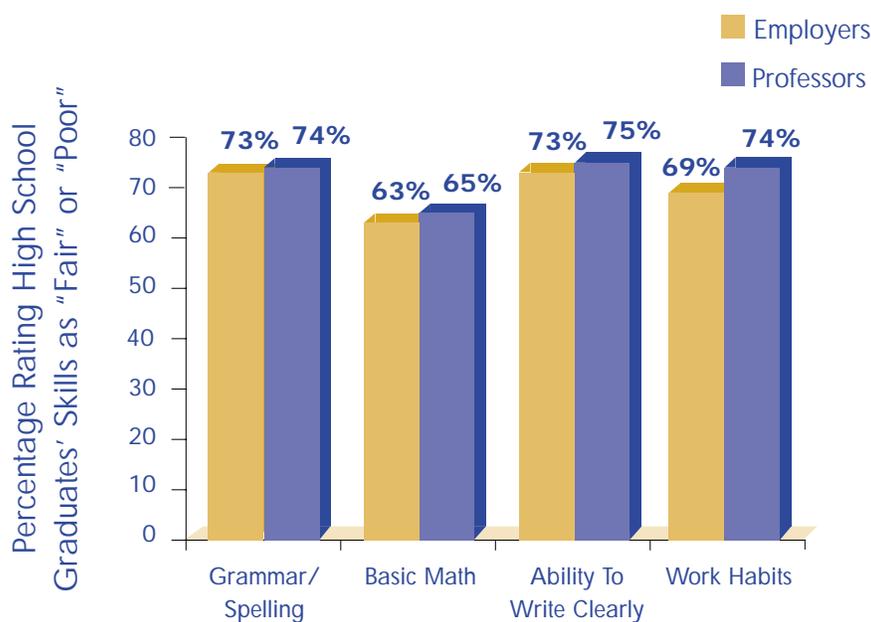
Schools in every state face new federal accountability measures. This unparalleled level of accountability has prompted renewed attention on improving student achievement generally, and on raising the quality of high schools in particular through efforts to upgrade curriculum; improve teaching; offer support for failing students; and create more focused, smaller high schools.



Requiring students to pass more ambitious tests is the right path for states to take. Unfortunately, states' expectations for high school graduation remain largely disconnected from the real-world demands graduates confront in postsecondary education and the workplace. This gap could cripple efforts to improve high schools. No matter how well intended, designed and implemented, reforms that rely on standards that fall short of real-world demands will only add to the number of young people who earn a high school diploma, yet remain unprepared for postsecondary education or work.

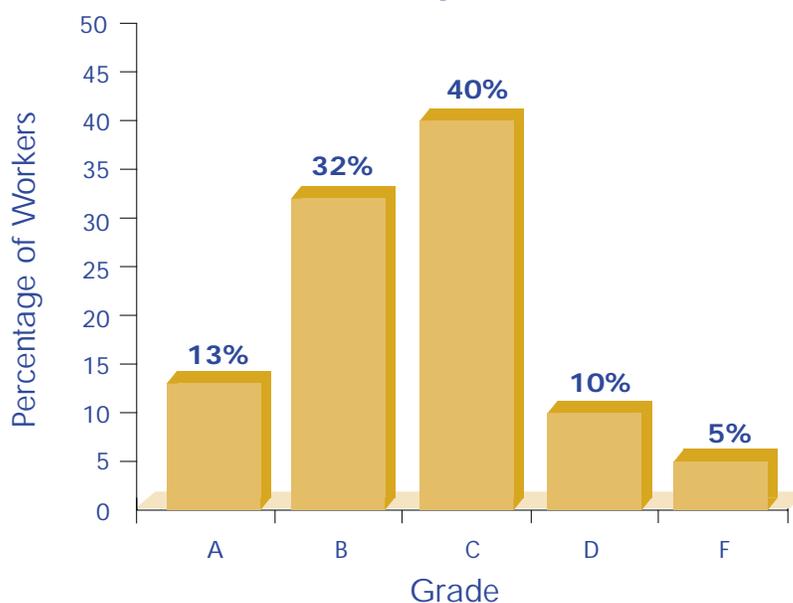
The American Diploma Project (ADP), a collaboration of **Achieve, Inc.**, **The Education Trust** and the **Thomas B. Fordham Foundation**, has been working for two years to help states address this challenge. With a few notable exceptions, ADP has found that state high school assessments and the college entrance and placement exams states use are not necessarily well aligned, either to each other or to the emerging picture of English and math required by postsecondary educational institutions and employers alike. In general, the gaps are greatest in math. In some cases, the high school assessments could provide useful information to

### Employers and College Professors Say Students' Skills Lacking



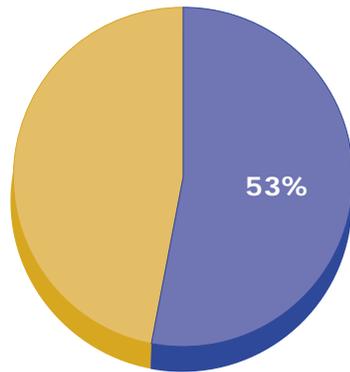
Source: *Public Agenda*, 2002

### Workers Give High Schools a "C" in Job Preparation



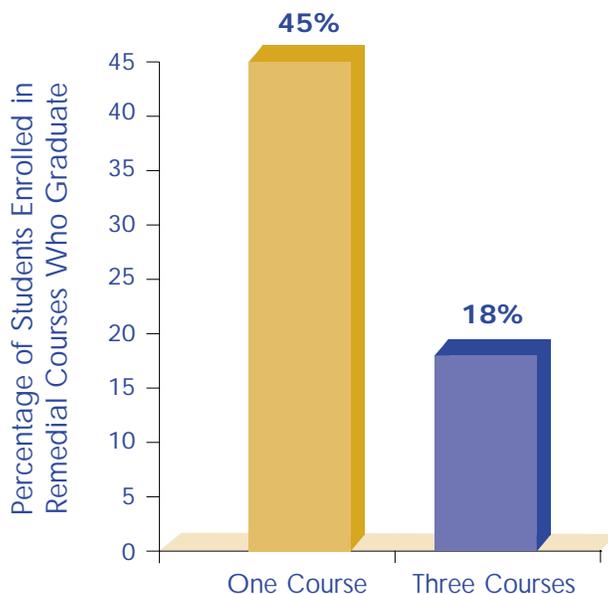
Source: *Heldrich Center for Workforce Development*, 2000

## More Than Half of All College Students Take Remedial Courses ...



■ Percentage of postsecondary students taking remedial reading or math courses

## ... And Students Who Take Remedial Courses Are Less Likely To Finish College



Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1998

employers and postsecondary institutions, although few currently use them.

Not surprisingly, postsecondary institutions and employers largely ignore state high school test results because they do not believe the results reflect the knowledge and skills required of first-year students or new employees. Of the 24 states using or planning exit exams, only six use students' results for admission or placement decisions in even some public universities and community colleges, according to a Center on Education Policy survey.

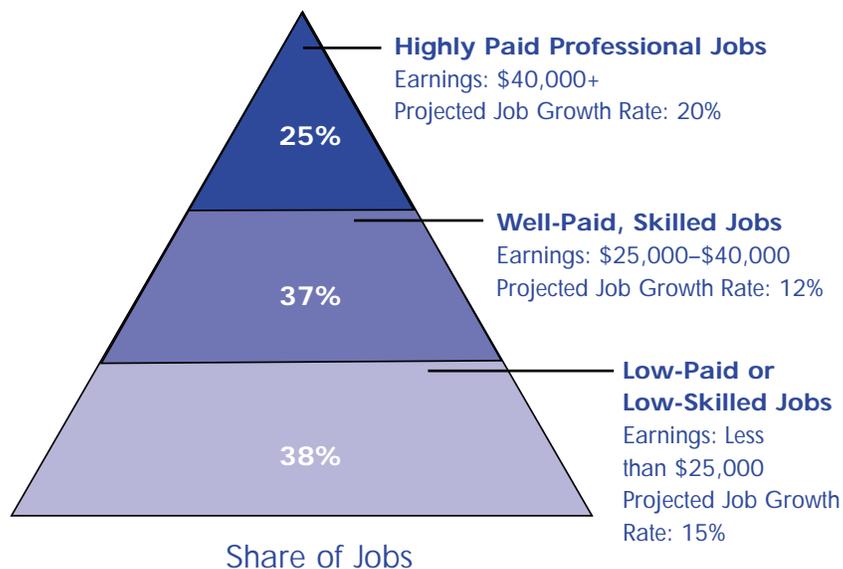
Professors, employers and workers clearly believe states need to raise their expectations of graduates. More than six in 10 college professors and employers consistently rate high school graduates' skills in spelling, grammar, clarity in writing and basic math as only "fair" or "poor," according to Public Agenda. A majority of American workers give high schools no better than a "C" for the job they are doing preparing students for the new economy, a Rutgers University survey found.

As a result, a high school diploma represents a ticket to nowhere for too many students, who learn only after graduation — when it is too late — that they are not prepared for the real world after all. Half the students entering higher education take at least one remedial course (40 percent of those entering four-year institutions and 63 percent of those entering

two-year schools); nearly two in 10 entering students take three or more remedial courses. College completion rates drop sharply with each remedial course taken.

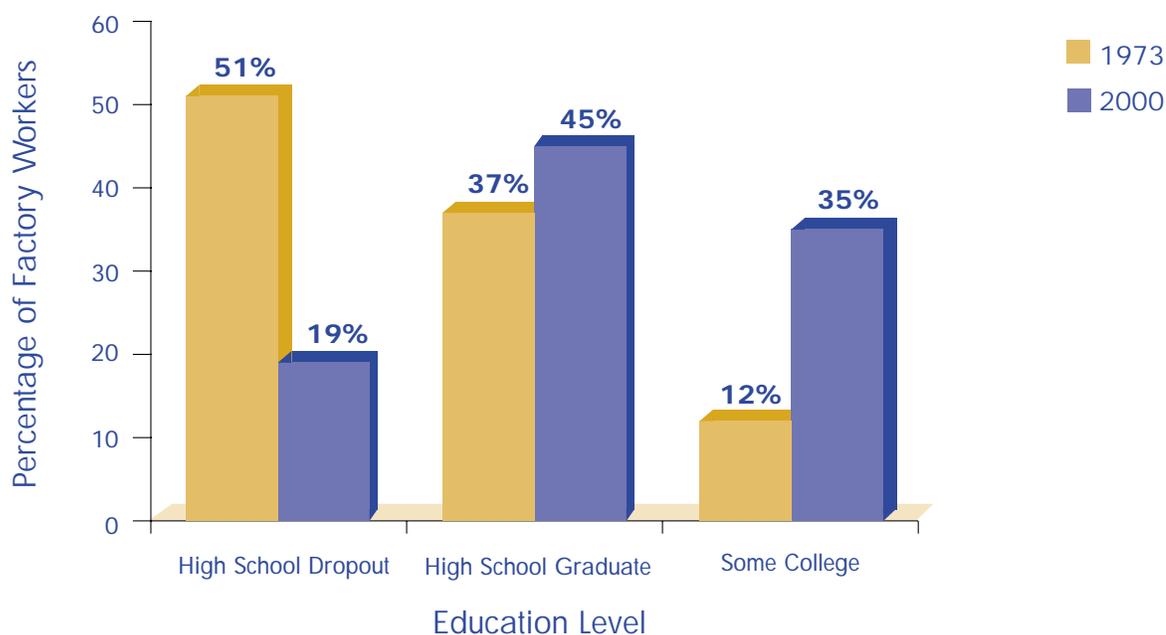
These findings reinforce what ADP has learned through research involving a wide range of postsecondary faculty in five states and employers across the country — traditionally divergent sets of expectations for college and workplace readiness are a thing of the past. Simply stated, jobs in high-performance, high-growth industries — the kinds of jobs that can support a small family well above the poverty line — are far more intellectually demanding than they used to be. The share of jobs held by college-educated workers and the education level

### More Jobs Are Highly Paid or Skilled, Require More Education



Source: American Diploma Project, 2002

### Factory Workers Have More Education Than Ever



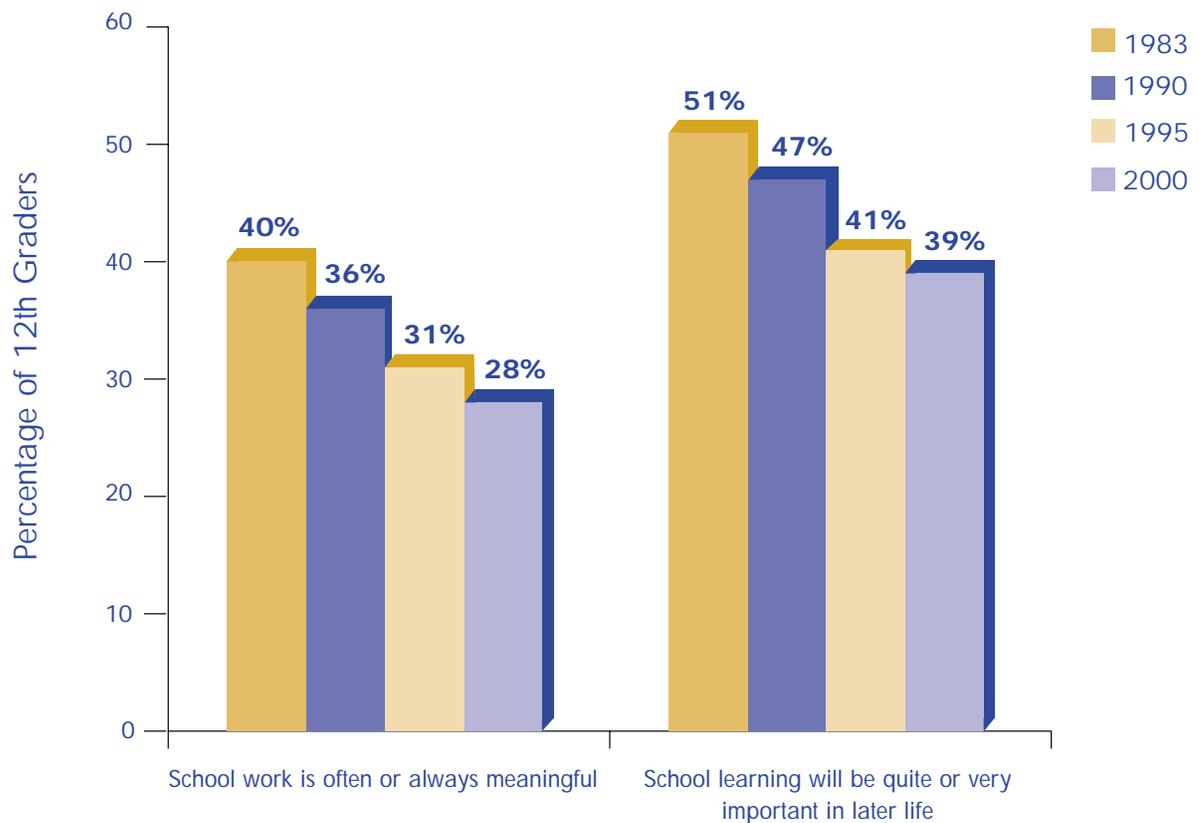
Source: Educational Testing Service, 2002

of factory workers have grown steadily. An Educational Testing Service study commissioned by ADP showed that more than six in 10 workers in “well-paid, white-collar, skilled jobs,” such as health services technicians and sales managers, had taken at least Algebra II and four years of English at or above grade level, the same course-taking pattern as 84 percent of those with “highly paid professional jobs,” such as lawyers and engineers. In most cases, the jobs that pay well require additional education or training after high school. Success

in that training or education requires English and math skills that exceed what states now are expecting for graduation.

For their part, high school students themselves doubt the relevance of what they are asked to achieve. The percentage of 12th graders responding affirmatively when asked if school is “often or always” meaningful to them or if their learning will be “quite or very important” in later life has dropped consistently since in the 1980s, according to University of Michigan surveys.

### 12th Graders Increasingly See Schoolwork as Irrelevant



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002

# The Response

Earning a high school diploma should open doors for all students to a wide variety of options, including college and good jobs. It can and will, once postsecondary institutions and employers are convinced that earning a diploma actually means that a graduate is prepared for the world beyond high school. The top priority is to align high school exit standards closely with college and workplace requirements, so that the awarding of a high school diploma will allow a student to move into credit-bearing college classes or jobs without first having to take remedial courses.

To help states do this, ADP will release a set of high school exit benchmarks in English and math later this year. Over the last two years, ADP had postsecondary faculty from both two- and four-year institutions and employers from across the nation define the specific English and math skills and knowledge incoming students and employees must have. As a result, unlike existing

state and national standards, which often represent a consensus of what is *desirable* for stu-

dents to learn, the ADP benchmarks reflect a set of expectations for what is *essential* for graduates to know and be able to do to succeed.

Educators and employers both need students who can complete a significant research report and apply the higher-level concepts historically taught in Algebra II courses. Whether it

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is interpreting an introductory economics text or communicating safety regulations to a team of co-workers, mastery of these and other content and skills detailed in the ADP benchmarks are rarely required today for graduation.

For the past decade, states have led a sustained movement to raise standards and achievement for all students. They have made significant progress. Now, attention has turned to improving achievement in high schools, with the commitment to do so growing rapidly. The success of these efforts depends especially heavily on the active support of the business and postsecondary communities. Their support, in turn, relies on their strong confidence that the states' standards and assessments required for high school gradua-

tion are aligned to real-world college and workplace demands.

The ADP benchmarks can help states take this next step. They will reduce the burden on states to create the connections between high school exit expectations and the challenges graduates will face. With these benchmarks, states will be able to analyze — and, if necessary, refine — their own standards and tests to ensure that high schools are preparing students so that they have good choices when they graduate. In response, post-secondary education and business leaders must begin to use the results from state assessments in making their key decisions about admissions, placement and employment. Only then will students and parents see the rewards from having higher expectations.



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