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STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
NAEP 2009 High School Transcript Study

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For years, our nation has been sounding an alarm about the need to ensure that students graduating from high school leave equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in college and the workplace. While it appears as though our students are getting the message, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2009 High School Transcript Study are a sobering reminder of how much work remains.

Data from the study show some real progress, especially for students of color—whom, traditionally, our school systems have shunted into low-level classes. All groups of graduates are earning more credits toward at least a standard curriculum. And about half of all African-American and Latino graduates now complete a midlevel curriculum, which includes four credits of English, three credits of math (including at least geometry and algebra I or II), three credits of science (including at least two credits selected from biology, chemistry and physics), three credits of social studies and at least one credit of a foreign language.

These trends matter because higher level coursework is associated with better outcomes for students. Indeed, African-American graduates who took a rigorous curriculum, for example, scored 45 points higher on the NAEP mathematics exam than those who took a standard curriculum. That difference is far greater than the 29-point achievement gap between all African-American 12th graders and their white counterparts. And when it comes to postsecondary success, eight of every ten students who take the most intense curriculum in high school eventually complete a bachelor's degree, whereas the success rates drop to just one in ten among those who took the lowest level coursework.[i]

Despite the good news at the lower end of the spectrum, we aren't making nearly enough progress getting more students into the rigorous curriculum that many colleges are looking for: four credits of English and math (including at least pre-calculus), and three each of science (including biology, chemistry and physics), social studies, and foreign language. Far too many students—especially those who are African-American or Latino—still do not have the kind of high school experience that they need:

- African-American and Latino graduates are still only about half as likely as white graduates to complete the most rigorous curriculum.

- There's been no improvement in the percentage of African-American and Latino graduates completing this curriculum since 2005.

In addition, the grades earned by African-American and Latino graduates have stagnated. On average, African-American and Latino graduates have grade point averages (GPA) between a B and a B-, whereas white and Asian graduates have GPAs between a B+ and a B. GPAs among Latino graduates haven't improved since 1998, and among African-American graduates, GPAs haven't risen since 2005. And because white students' GPAs have risen, the gaps have actually widened. For example, the gap between the average GPA of Latino graduates and that of white graduates has doubled since 1990.

Despite the general link between taking a more rigorous curriculum and higher test performance, improvements in test performance among students of color have lagged behind improvements in high school course-taking. Among students completing the same level curriculum, African-American and Latino graduates' knowledge and skills lag far behind those of their white and Asian classmates. Latinos completing a midlevel curriculum, for instance, perform about as well on the NAEP mathematics and science assessments as white students completing a below standard curriculum, and African Americans completing the most rigorous curriculum perform about as well as white graduates completing a midlevel curriculum.

This picture of higher level course-taking with little or no progress in achievement raises serious questions about the level of course rigor in schools serving many students of color. Some might argue that there is an unavoidable trade-off between greater and more equitable access to courses like algebra II or chemistry and the actual rigor of those courses. That seductive but flawed argument assumes that as we let more students into these courses, we inevitably lower their quality.

This pattern of uneven course quality is undoubtedly playing out in some schools, but we know it doesn't have to be this way. The idea that we have to choose between access and excellence is dead wrong. My colleagues and I at The Education Trust have studied high schools across the country that are working for all students, and we know that increased rigor and higher achievement can and should go hand in hand. At schools like Elmont Memorial Junior/Senior High School in New York, for example, more students take the most rigorous courses, and achievement for all groups of students is far higher than elsewhere in New York. But at far too many other schools, without a focus on strong instruction, a "rigorous" curriculum can be rigorous in name only.

So what can we do to change this?

States are increasingly focused on ensuring that students are college and career ready. They are also beginning to put in place high standards and more rigorous assessments that align with this goal. In order for this critical and potentially game-changing work to live up to the promise of college and career readiness, higher standards and assessments *must* be coupled with access for all students to rigorous coursework and strong, well-supported teachers.

We know this isn't what happens now. African-American and Latino students are still less likely to attend high schools that offer high-level math courses like trigonometry and calculus,[ii] which severely limits their ability to take the courses they'll need to be successful.

Even in schools where high-level courses are available, students of color too often can't take them because of decisions made earlier in their academic career.[iii] Consider: Almost two-thirds of graduates who complete a rigorous curriculum took algebra before high school. But only 35 percent of *high-achieving* African-American fifth graders are enrolled in eighth-grade algebra, compared to nearly two-thirds of high-achieving white fifth graders.[iv]

Of course, enrolling in a course with a certain name is not enough. Even when two courses have the same name—or use the same textbook—there's no guarantee that they are equally rigorous. Often, students of color receive less rigorous assignments than their peers in schools or districts with lower concentrations of minority students.

A transition to more rigorous standards will help this process, but implementing them consistently across districts, schools and classrooms is critical. To support high achievement for all students, teachers need access to rich curricular support materials and professional development opportunities that provide examples of and guidance on developing high-quality lessons and assignments.

We also need to ensure that all students have access to qualified teachers. Students have higher math achievement when their teacher has a background in the subject, especially at the high school level. However, nearly one in three math classes in high-minority high schools are taught by teachers who did not major in a math-related field and who are not certified to teach math.[v]

Today's Transcript Study results represent systemic failure in our public schools. Students are doing what's asked of them, but they aren't being taught any more than their predecessors were. While we've made progress in some areas, far more work remains to ensure that all students are equipped with the knowledge and skills that they need to be successful in life.

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[i] Adelman, C. *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006.
[ii] Adelman, C. 2006.
[iii] Adelman, C. 2006.
[iv] Walston, J., and J.C. McCarroll. *Eighth-Grade Algebra: Findings from the Eighth-Grade Round of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K).* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2010.
[v] The Education Trust. *Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses and High-Poverty Schools.* Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2008.