

Tuesday, August 3, 2010  
*Education Week*

## **What Does a High School Diploma Mean?**

**By Ronnie Musgrove**

During the last days of summer vacation, America's students have plenty to think about as they ready their returns to school.

For many, it's a time to decide on the color, size, and style of sneakers, backpacks, and maybe—if there's enough summer-job savings left over—a new or used computer.

It's a time when some seniors start savoring past accomplishments. Others begin pondering future goals. Most wonder, what does having a high school diploma really mean? Because, as U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah once said, "Graduation is not the end; it's the beginning."

This back-to-school season, the nation should join students in considering their futures. This is *the* time to re-examine how prepared our young people are for their postgraduation pursuits.

The National Assessment Governing Board—an independent bipartisan body that sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as "the nation's report card"—has created the NAEP 12th Grade Preparedness Commission to increase awareness about this urgent issue. Together with my colleagues on this newly formed commission, I have been asked to take a hard look at the academic preparedness of America's 12th graders for college and job training.

Ensuring that high school students are well prepared is one of the most important things we can do in today's global, competitive economy. We need a productive, efficient workforce: adaptable people with a capacity for critical thinking and a strong foundation of math and communication skills. Paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, we need educated citizens for a vibrant democracy. Today's young people need more than a diploma; they need the academic tools to succeed in a career, lead a fulfilling life, and participate meaningfully in civic affairs.

Across the country, businesspeople tell me all the time it takes us too long to train new employees. We're losing production and productivity because we have to get our young people up to speed. Clearly, the more prepared they are, the less training businesses will have to do, and the more successful they both can be.

Recent data from the U.S. Department of Labor show a direct correlation between unemployment and lack of education: Among those without a high school diploma, the unemployment rate was 14.1 percent; for those with a college degree, 4.4 percent.

With unemployment rates at highs not seen for decades, exceeding 20 percent for African-Americans and Latinos in several states, there are renewed calls for more education and job training. But, the question remains, can the applicants do the work?

In a 2005 survey by the Washington-based nonprofit group Achieve, employers estimated that 39 percent of recent high school graduates were unprepared for entry-level jobs—and 45 percent were not prepared to advance beyond those positions.

Many graduates are not ready for higher education or training for the kinds of high-skill occupations that will command good pay and make the nation more globally competitive. For example, more than 40 percent of public community college students—and 20 percent to 30 percent of public university students—need remedial courses. The cost to students and families is great, in both money spent on noncredit remedial courses and additional time required to finish a degree.

Especially troubling is the fact that college students who need remediation are the most likely to drop out. The cost to our country is enormous—estimated to be between \$2.5 billion and \$3 billion annually—to teach students in college what they should have learned in high school. This is wasteful spending, particularly in times of tight budgets.

**We need a credible, trustworthy indicator to tell us the degree of preparedness of our 12th graders; but none currently exists.**

While a K-12 education is important, it is no longer sufficient. Today, education or training beyond high school is essential for the well-being of the nation and the individual. As a policy matter, it is important to know whether our 12th graders have the knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of today's college-level academics and tomorrow's high-skill careers. Therefore, we need a credible, trustworthy indicator to tell us the degree of preparedness of our 12th graders; but none currently exists.

The governing board is redesigning NAEP at the 12th grade in reading and mathematics to serve as this indicator—to report to the public on the preparedness of high school seniors. NAEP is uniquely positioned to meet this purpose: It is the only source of nationally representative data on 12th grade student achievement.

To develop NAEP as an indicator of preparedness, the board is sponsoring 17 research projects which, among other things, aim to determine how the NAEP 12th grade reading and mathematics tests align with the skills and knowledge used for decisions about placement into credit-bearing college courses and job-training programs. Remarkably, no consensus on such a definition of preparedness exists today.

This information is important for a business owner to know; it's important for a university or college to know; and it's important for every American to know if we want to sustain our nation's prosperity. The goal of achieving a trustworthy indicator for student preparedness is what differentiates the NAEP preparedness research from anything that has taken place in America before.

The results of these studies will be released later this year. Our commission welcomes the landmark opportunity to make this vital information available to the public, policymakers, educators, and potential employers. We hope they find it useful as they examine and reshape education and workforce-training policy.

The work being done to make the 12th grade NAEP an indicator of preparedness will help us all know that the 2.5 million young people graduating from high school annually are ready. Our students, their parents, and the nation deserve to know a diploma is worth something; that it acknowledges they're prepared for college and training for good jobs; and that, indeed, their commencement will be cause for celebration.

*Ronnie Musgrove is the chairman of the National Assessment of Educational Progress' 12th Grade Preparedness Commission. He served as the governor of Mississippi from 2000 to 2004.*