



The High School Diploma

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An eighth grade education and willingness to work hard were what was needed from America's labor force throughout the first half of the twentieth century. By the end of World War II the demands of the economy had changed. A high school diploma was a necessary achievement and more Americans were going to college. During the half century following World War II high school diplomas became commonplace and the number of college diplomas also increased.

Today, the high school diploma is an absolute necessity. We still respect the achievement. The economy is demanding more than ever some level of training or education beyond high school. The high school diploma is the official gateway to the workforce, to the industry certificate or credential; the two-year associates degree from a community college, the bachelor's degree and beyond.

Nebraska does a good job of getting high school students to graduation. Minimum state requirements for graduation from a Nebraska high school call for four years of language arts, three years of math, three years of science, three years of social studies plus credit hours in elective areas.¹ Nebraska rules are fairly flexible as to how each of those requirements is met. According to the Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education's 2014 Higher Education Progress Report, Nebraska's 2011-12 cohort four-year graduation rate was 88%, which ranks Nebraska second, behind only Iowa, out of 47 states reporting.² Parents, Nebraska schools, the Legislature, the Nebraska Department of Education, and a host of education data collectors use the graduation rate as one indicator of education achievement. The graduation rate is a number that is readily available and easy to understand.

As with any number, there is more to the story of graduation rates in Nebraska. Nebraskans should be proud of a graduation rate that is the second highest in the country. We certainly would be concerned if we found our state towards the bottom of the ranking. Several years ago one of the goals set by the state's P-16 Initiative, which was chaired by the Governor, the President of the University of Nebraska, the Chair of the Legislature's Education Committee, the Commissioner of Education, and a representative of the private sector, was to increase the state's high school graduation rate to 90%.³ Schools did what they were asked to do even when confronted with the challenges of poverty, English as a second language, disengaged students, and sometimes disengaged parents.

The state's public high school graduation rate is headed in the right direction. But, the more substantive question is whether the students we are graduating in Nebraska are proficient at a level that is expected by higher education institutions, by most sectors of the 21st century labor market, and by the public. Nebraska's graduating seniors who have aspirations of going on to a four-year higher education institutions typically take the ACT exam for college placement, and statistically, Nebraska students consistently score a bit better than the national composite score.⁴ In addition, Nebraska ranks in the top ten nationally of total students who enter some kind of higher education.⁵

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But do we really know how prepared a Nebraska high school graduate is? What about the students who choose not to go to a four-year institution but matriculate at a community college? Students wanting to enter a Nebraska community college take the Compass placement exam at the time of entry. If they score above a college-determined cut score, they can start their program. If not, students must enter into remediation classes to improve proficiency before they can start their programs. How many students have to be remediated when the high school diploma they were granted implied that they were proficient in math and reading at a level necessary for doing community college level work? About 24% of the 2012 graduating cohort did not initially go on to any type of postsecondary education.⁶ We assume they entered the workforce or the military. Did the diploma they had in hand adequately prepare them for the workplace? It is easy to gather anecdotal evidence from employers that would say that entry-level positions go unfilled because of applicant's inability to perform the skills that a Nebraska high school diploma said they were ready for.

A high school diploma is more important today than ever. Doing all that we can to ensure that a Nebraska high school student earns that diploma is critical. Earn is the key word. We need to clearly identify the standards to be achieved and be sure that those standards align with the demands of the 21st century workforce and the expectations for success in educational opportunities beyond high school. The curriculum needs to be focused and engaging. The outcomes should be fairly and accurately measured. *There is pressure on the classroom teacher to, at times, give into the pressures of "but the student worked really hard" or "they did the best that they could given their circumstances" or "this is the second or third time they've taken my class, I am passing them" or "the parents just want me to let their kid graduate and they'll worry about the next step later"*. A diploma should be awarded when earned with demonstrated and measured proficiency. We want our graduation rate to be one of the best in the nation, but we also want it to mean something.

Endnotes

¹Nebraska Department of Education. (2012, September). *Nebraska Department of Education Rule 10, Regulations and Procedures for the Accreditation of Schools, Title 92, Nebraska Administrative Code, Chapter 10*. Retrieved from http://www.education.ne.gov/legal/webrulespdf/RULE10_PLEDGE_2012.pdf, 4-5.

²Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. (2014, March). *2014 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, 31-32.

³Nebraska P-16 Initiative. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://p16.nebraska.edu>.

⁴Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. (2014, March). *2014 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, 43.

⁵Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. (2014, March). *2014 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, 59.

⁶Nebraska Department of Education. (2013). *High School Feedback Report*.