



Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education Position Statement on Tiered High School Diploma

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During the 2009 Georgia General Assembly, House Bill 215 proposed to establish three diploma options for high school students: general diploma, career/vocational/technical diploma, and college preparation diploma. While the bill did not gain the necessary support to be passed by our legislature last year, it has been introduced again this year, albeit in a slightly altered format. If enacted this year, HB 215 would establish two diploma options for high school students – career preparatory and vocational. To help inform policymakers and stakeholders about the research and principles related to Georgia’s high school diploma structure, the Georgia Partnership issues the following statement.

Georgia’s leaders have worked tirelessly over recent years to strengthen our educational system, to boost our graduation rates, and to improve our state’s ability to attract and retain new industry. We cannot afford to jeopardize Georgia’s future by undoing any of these past successes. Reinstating a tiered-diploma policy would hinder our efforts to prepare students for success in college and to enable them to compete for high-paying jobs in the work place.

For the thousands of students enrolled in Georgia’s public secondary schools – and for their families, their communities, and their future employers – the value of a high school diploma cannot be understated. Signifying the seamless progression and success through the middle and high school years, a meaningful high school diploma opens the door to a lifetime of opportunity. High school graduates of our public schools should have not only the skills and knowledge necessary to enter college or the workforce, but also the educational foundation that will produce lifetime benefits.

Yet national research on high school graduates’ preparedness for their futures suggests that we aren’t doing enough during the 9th-12th grade years to equip students for college or the workforce. Consider the following:

- Fewer than one-fourth of high school seniors graduating in 2008 who took the ACT scored at the ‘college-ready’ level in all four subject areas.ⁱ
- About 29 percent of community college students and 19 percent of students at public 4-year institutions report having to take some remedial coursework in their first year. Mathematics is the most common remedial course reported by beginning postsecondary students.ⁱⁱ
- More than 40 percent of surveyed employers say high school graduates hired are deficiently prepared for the entry-level jobs they fill. The survey finds that recent high school graduates lack the basic skills in reading comprehension, writing and math, which many respondents say were needed for successful job performance.ⁱⁱⁱ



Couple these research findings with additional labor statistics citing the rapid increase in jobs requiring advanced skills, and the necessity of high standards and expectations for all our high school students becomes clear.

- In 1950, 60 percent of jobs were classified as unskilled, attainable by young people with high school diplomas or less. Today, less than 20 percent of jobs are considered to be unskilled.^{iv}
- Jobs for workers with a college degree will increase from 38 million in 2006 to 43 million by 2016 -- a growth rate of nearly 15 percent.^v
- In Georgia, 81 percent of jobs are middle- or high-skill (jobs that require some postsecondary education or training). Yet only 36 percent of Georgia adults have some postsecondary degree (associate's or higher).^{vi}

Recognizing the increasing demands for a highly-skilled workforce, in 2007 the Georgia Department of Education adopted a new high school graduation rule. A hallmark of the new rule is the elimination of tiered diploma options where students followed either college preparatory or technology/career coursework. Under the new rule, all students are expected to complete a common set of requirements to earn a regular diploma. In addition, the new graduation requirements ensure that all students take four years of math, science, and English courses.

The Georgia Partnership supported the move by state leaders to develop a uniform set of graduation requirements that ensures all students will be adequately prepared for their post high school careers. Georgia's current single-diploma policy – which still allows students to personalize their education through career pathways and elective options – establishes high expectations that will prepare all students for college and the workforce. The single-diploma policy represents a crucial step toward realizing our greatest goal: access for all youth to high-quality public schools that provide the opportunity for obtaining a meaningful diploma, one that signifies readiness for college or the workforce.

ⁱ Gewertz, C. (August 25, 2009). "Scores on ACT Show Majority of Students Not College-Ready." *Education Week* (29)1.

ⁱⁱ Provasnik, S., and Planty, M. (2008). *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to The Condition of Education 2008*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and The Society for Human Resource Management (2006). *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*.

^{iv} Achieve, Inc. (2006). *Perspective: News and Views from Achieve*.

^v U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2009). *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition*. Washington, DC.

^{vi} Skills to Compete. www.skills2compete.org.