

Teachers say critical thinking key to college and career readiness

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California teachers say critical thinking skills, not scores on standardized tests, are the best way to assess whether students are prepared for success in college and the workplace, according to an online survey by EdSource in partnership with the California Teachers Association.

Teachers said they have received much more training on how to prepare students for college – and far less on preparing them for non-college options.

They also said college and career readiness has not been fully integrated into the professional development training they have received to implement the Common Core State Standards.

Preparing students to graduate from high school prepared for college and careers is now a principal goal of all major education reforms being implemented in California, including the Common Core standards and the Local Control Funding Formula, which was approved by the state Legislature in June 2013. This represents a major shift from the goal of the No Child Left Behind reforms of the past 15 years, which was to promote proficiency on standardized tests.

The survey of 1,000 teachers randomly selected from among a list of CTA's more than 300,000 members was conducted last spring. Carried out by the polling firm GBA Strategies, it is the first of its kind to probe teacher attitudes regarding college and career readiness. The survey was partially underwritten by The James Irvine Foundation.

Defining what exactly "college and career readiness" means – and what it will take to ensure that students reach that goal by the time they graduate from high school – is currently a major concern of educators and policy makers around the state, and the teachers' role in making that happen will be critical.

Teachers overwhelmingly supported the goal of preparing students for college and careers. When asked to rank the most important indicators of college and career readiness, 78 percent of teachers ranked developing critical thinking skills among the three most important indicators. Eight percent of teachers ranked proficiency on the Smarter Balanced test, which more than 3 million students took for the first time last spring, among the three most important indicators.

"I think most college professors would agree that students' ability to think critically and analyze texts, and to integrate information is much more important than what they did on a test," said David Plank, executive director of Policy Analysis for California Education, or PACE, a joint policy and research institute of UC Berkeley, Stanford University and the University of Southern California. "The disagreement would come from admissions officers who find tests very efficient in deciding who is eligible for admission or not."

David Conley, professor of education policy at the University of Oregon, and president of EdImagine, a strategic consulting firm that is working on college and career readiness issues with school districts in California and the California Department of Education, welcomed teachers' emphasis on critical thinking skills, but he said that the high school curriculum has largely not reflected that emphasis. "The arrows are all pointing toward greater alignment of high school and college, but the challenge will be course redesign at the high school level in

particular, and training (of teachers) in new instructional methods,” he said.

Just under one third (30 percent) of teachers said their districts have clearly defined standards for what constitutes college and career readiness. Thirty-five percent say that their districts have standards, but that they are not clearly defined. Eight percent say their districts have no standards at all.

Conley, who authored “[Getting Ready for College, Careers and the Common Core](#),” said that it is essential that districts adopt a specific definition of college and career readiness that goes beyond just requiring students to meet the A-G course requirements for admission to UC and CSU. He said what will be needed “is a definition that you can put into operation through professional development (of teachers) and curriculum development. A vague definition doesn’t do you any good.”

At a time when teachers are being asked to take on a number of new reforms, nearly three-fourths of teachers say they are either “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied” with their jobs. Thirty-one percent of teachers support the Common Core standards, and nearly half support the standards with some reservations. Twelve percent say they are opposed to the standards altogether.

The survey also provides some guideposts for what additional resources teachers feel they need to adequately prepare students for college and careers. At the top of their list are programs that link the high school curriculum to the workplace with a specific career pathway along with more high school career-technical courses.

“High schools have historically done a better job preparing students to graduate ready for college,” said Jon Snyder, executive director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. “They have not done as good a job in our schools preparing students for careers.”

Snyder said it was important to “break down the false dichotomy between college and career.” “We used to say college or career, and you

had these two tracks,” he said. “It is important to say ‘both and,’ not ‘either or.’”

Key Findings Include:

Support for college and career readiness as a goal

- More than three-fourths of teachers say they believe that preparing students to be ready for college and the workplace by the time they graduate from high school is a very or somewhat realistic goal. Twenty-three percent feel it is not very realistic or not realistic at all.
- There are differences in teacher attitudes depending on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students in the schools where they teach. About 58 percent of teachers in schools where fewer than 1 in 4 of their students are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals believe that college and career readiness is a “very realistic” goal. But 20 percent of teachers in schools where more than 3 in 4 students qualify for federally subsidized meals have similar attitudes.

Lack of clearly defined standards

- Thirty percent of teachers say their districts have clearly defined standards for what constitutes college and career readiness. Thirty-five percent say that their districts have standards, but that they are not clearly defined. Eight percent say their districts have no standards at all.

Little professional development or training for non-college options

- Although almost all teachers consider themselves knowledgeable about what should be done to prepare students for college and careers, 36 percent say they have received specific training to help them prepare students for college over the past two years.
- Eight percent say they have received training to prepare students for options other than college.
- At the high school level, 43 percent of teachers say they have received training to prepare students for college, and 14 percent say they have received training for other career options.
- Those teachers who have received training say that the professional development training they have received in preparing students for college and careers has been useful to them (69 percent).

College and career readiness training often not integrated with Common Core training

- Seventy-nine percent express support for the Common Core standards (31 percent support them unconditionally, while another 48 percent support them “with reservations”). Twelve percent are unequivocally opposed to them.
- At the same time, the majority of teachers (51 percent) say that the goal of college and career readiness has not been integrated into the workshops, in-service training or professional development related to the Common Core they had participated in. Ten percent said that college and career readiness was “very strongly integrated” into this professional development and training.

Resources teachers need

- Teachers ranked career academies, linked learning or other programs that tie the high school curriculum with a specific career pathway as the No. 1 resource their school or district needed most to prepare students for college and careers.
- Ranked second and third respectively are more high school career-technical courses and additional school counselors to help students make choices about colleges or alternatives to college.
- Teachers who were aware of programs outside of their school district to promote college and career readiness also placed a very high value on workplace internships – with nearly two-thirds listing internships as an effective way to prepare students for college and careers.