

# Every Student READY FOR COLLEGE

Many readers of this collection will be familiar with the old story that's often told about the first day of law school. A professor (who inevitably talks like John Houseman from *The Paper Chase*) surveys a room full of first-year students and says: "Look at the person on your left. Now look at the person on your right. Only one of you will graduate from law school."

It's a lively story that makes for good drama. But what if the scene shifts, and now the setting isn't law school—it's middle school. A teacher greets a class of new eighth graders and says: *Look at the person on your left. Now look at the person on your right. Only one of you will graduate from high school ready for college or a good job.*

Now the story isn't just dramatic; it's heart-breaking. Yet it's true: only one-third of

today's eighth graders will graduate from high school with the skills they need to succeed in college or to hold down a family-wage job. Another third will graduate, but will be totally unprepared to join the workforce or continue their education. And fully one-third of students will simply drop out.

These statistics represent a social, economic, and civic disaster. They are the reason that Bill and I have focused our foundation's education program on a single goal: All students should graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship.

I recognize that this is an extremely ambitious vision, given the many challenges our students and educators face. But what great changes have not been ambitious? In the time it will take to read this article, two dozen students will drop out. Tomorrow, three thousand will do the same. This year, it'll be a million. How could we possibly have a greater impact on the future of our country?

### All Students College-Ready

Let me start by explaining what I mean by "all students college-ready." First, we must do more for every high school student, including minorities. Almost *half* of African-American and Hispanic students will not graduate at all.

It's also crucial that students graduate *ready* to take on advanced coursework. According to a report by the American Diploma Project, more than half of all college students take at least one remedial English or math class.

Our high school graduates should not be forced to catch up with their fellow freshmen.

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Finally, a word about what I mean by "college." Most people think of a college as a four-year institution that offers a bachelor's degree. But that's only one of the many and varied educational possibilities that can follow high school. They can take a lot of different forms: community college, technical school, and apprenticeships, to name a few.

### What's At Stake

Whatever form it takes, post-high school education is vitally important. For one thing, our students' economic well-being

depends on it. Our economy is changing fast, from a manufacturing base to one that values knowledge, adaptability, and higher-level skills. In fact, 80 percent of the fastest-growing occupations today will require some education after high school. Many graduates are finding that family-wage jobs require the same skills that they would've needed to get into college.

We also need to reemphasize a bedrock principle: that the United States is committed to equal opportunity. Bill and I created our foundation to increase equity, whether in health, education, access to digital information, or—in the Pacific Northwest—support for

vulnerable children and families. In education, the greatest inequity stems from the fact that so few students graduate truly prepared to succeed after high school.

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Obviously, no one can wave a magic wand and fix this problem overnight. Getting a student ready for college takes work at every level of the school system. But our foundation has targeted high schools as the area where we can make the most difference. They are certainly not the only area deserving of support, but they are where we feel we can make the biggest impact. Too many of them are big, impersonal schools where students are bored and teachers feel disconnected.

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### The New Three R's

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way. Bill and I are optimists; we believe that even our most difficult problems can be solved. In education, we know it's true because we've seen successful schools all over the country, in urban and rural areas, facing every sort of challenge. We've found that they have three things in common; our foundation calls them the New Three R's.

While the traditional Three R's that we all grew up with will always be the core of a great education, we think that all excellent schools also incorporate a different trio: rigor, relevance, and relationships. That is, classes should *challenge* children rather than bore them. Students should have one-on-one relationships with caring adults who have a stake in their success. And curricula should be connected to students' lives and aspirations.

## The Gates Commitment: Transforming High Schools

The Foundation is partnering with school districts around the country to help the New Three R's take root in as many schools as possible. Sometimes that means creating new schools; other times it means transforming large, impersonal high schools into small schools where students get personal attention and a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to their lives. A decade of research has shown that students in small schools have better attendance records, fewer behavior problems, and higher graduation rates than their counterparts in large schools.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation currently supports fourteen hundred innovative high schools across the nation. But that's only *8 percent* of public high schools in the United States. We hope to see an infusion of rigor, relationships, and relevance in *every* American high school.

I am not for a second under the illusion that we at the Foundation can do this alone. Nothing we do will ever compare to the work that students, parents, teachers, administrators, and school board members do every day. And they face some tough pressures, from legislative constraints and tight budgets to federal mandates.

### Setting the Vision

These challenges are hard, but you can still take concrete actions to help every student graduate with the skills needed to succeed. To begin, you need to set the vision. If we believe that all students can graduate college-ready, and that our democracy demands no less, then we need to get that message out. We need to let everyone know, around the country and in every school district, how important this goal is. And we need to make sure that students *know* what's expected of them. Young people want to be challenged—and they excel when they are.

For example, in the San José Unified School District, all students now take college-prep courses. The result? Reading and math scores are up, with the largest gains among African-American and Hispanic students. Test scores for African-Americans rose seven times higher than their peers statewide. How do they do it? The district sets high expectations but provides support and safety nets as needed so students are not overwhelmed. It is better for a student to learn algebra in three semesters than to waste two taking low-level math.

## Learning from Success

But setting a vision is not enough. We need to learn from the success of other schools. Schools all around the country are doing this well. I can't overstate how much I've learned from the simple act of going around and meeting dynamic school administrators. There is simply nothing like going outside one's own district. You can benefit from seeing creative solutions firsthand, brainstorming, and sharing resources with others who are achieving results.

Just outside of Seattle, where I live, the Truman Center used to be a place for the district's unwanted teachers and students. Now it's exactly the opposite—two smaller schools of real learning and hope. There are no bells. No lockers. The students work all year in big open spaces they designed themselves. Everyone knows their names. Teachers give their students their attention, their confidence—and their home phone numbers. At the Truman Center I saw young people totally engaged in school, often for the first time, because teachers tapped into their skills and interests.

The students can now imagine themselves as professionals: doctors, legislators, and, yes, teachers. They understand why it's important to take hard classes and go on to college. In just one year, dropout rates are considerably down, while the percentage of students going on to college and technical school has more than doubled. For the first time in Truman's history, 75 percent of the 2003 graduates are pursuing further education.

Another model school is Boston Arts Academy. Highlighted as a "breakthrough" high school by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, it is the first high school in Boston that focuses on the arts, and does it in an innovative way that brings in science, math, technology, and world cultures. Students may take courses for college credit at one of five area colleges. And the local arts community contributes by offering classes and internships at local museums and theaters. Boston Arts Academy faces all of the challenges of a school in an urban setting. Yet it is seeing higher passing rates on exit exams than the rest of the district. Ninety percent of Academy students are graduating and continuing on to college.

Drawing from these trailblazers, you can create a responsive school within your own school system. What does being a "responsive

school” mean, exactly? It means being aware of the needs of students, teachers, and parents. It means being accountable at every level. It means, especially, knowing when a school or a principal or a teacher needs a little extra help.

A final example I’d like to talk about is Withrow University High School in Cincinnati. Eighty-two percent of the school population is African American—50 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Withrow is a small redesigned high school, housed with two others in a large traditional building built in the 1920s. Yet Withrow is anything but traditional. Its motto and operating assumption are that “every student is college bound.” And they are. Since the school opened in 2002, attendance rates are over 95 percent and test scores have dramatically improved. Students have posted 40- to 55-point gains in state proficiency scores.

How has this happened? For starters, all ninth graders attend a five-week program called “Summer Bridge” at a local university. This improves their skills, gets them thinking about college, and explains the steps to get there. In school, students receive personal attention, an individually designed academic plan, mandatory afterschool tutoring if they fall behind, and *college-level* classes. Above all, they gain confidence that they can succeed in college, and they’re motivated to get there.

### **Believing Is Seeing**

These schools, and others like them, are making a tangible difference. But a few good schools here and there are not enough. We need to provide ten thousand great high schools in the next ten years to meet the needs of this country’s children. It will require political will, money, and a great deal of hard work. But there is no valid reason that it cannot be done.

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I know how daunting these challenges are. I also know that they are not insurmountable. If you finish reading this book of essays thinking only one thing, I hope it is this: “Every student *can* graduate ready for college, and I can go do something about it.” I hope you believe that. I know I do.



Melinda French Gates is cofounder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Along with her husband and cofounder, Bill, Gates provides strategic direction for the Foundation, advocates for its core issues, and reviews its major grants.

Melinda Gates has met with children and women in Africa, India, and Thailand to gain firsthand knowledge of the global health work the Foundation supports. She has visited high schools in New York and California to promote smaller, more personalized learning environments where all students can achieve. And she is involved in a variety of philanthropic endeavors that support the arts, social services, and education in the Pacific Northwest.

Gates earned a bachelor's degree in computer science and economics from Duke in 1986 and a master's degree from Duke's Fuqua School of Business in 1987. Upon graduation, she joined Microsoft, where she played a leadership role in the development of many of the company's multimedia and web-based products until 1996.