

Press-Telegram

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Yes, College Prep for All!

By Jeremy Lahoud and Silissa Uriarte Smith

Earlier this year, the Long Beach Unified School District conducted a survey of more than 19,000 high school students. An overwhelming majority—77%—had high aspirations for their education, stating that they wanted to attend a four-year college after high school.

Think about that number for a moment. Then take a look at this one: In 2006, only three out of ten graduates from Long Beach Unified high schools had completed the set of “A–G” courses that are necessary for entry into a University of California or California State University school.

It is even worse for African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American students: only two out of ten graduate having completed the “A–G” courses.

Those numbers are unacceptable.

That’s why student members of Californians for Justice came together with other community leaders to develop a comprehensive proposal to move all Long Beach schools towards the goal of giving every student the opportunity to attend college.

Unlike the current situation where students and parents have to fight to get into the A-G classes, the proposal would make them part of the standard curriculum. But it does much more than just add new required classes. The

proposal calls for raising student achievement in rigorous courses at the elementary and middle school levels to prepare them for the new courses in high school. Providing increased supports and resources for students, as well as more staff development and assistance for teachers will help make this happen. Finally, the plan would phase in the new requirements over a number of years, to ensure a smooth transition.

Community support for this proposal is growing. The YWCA of the Harbor Area and South Bay, Californians for Justice, the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, and the California State University Chancellor’s Office have formed a coalition to support the aspirations of students by supporting the plan to provide college prep classes for all. City council members Tonia Reyes Uranga, Dee Andrews, and Vice Mayor Bonnie Lowenthal also support the proposal.

Some worry that not all students will be able to step up to the new challenging curriculum. But research studies show otherwise. Students who take challenging academic courses drop out less frequently. In 1997 the San Jose Unified School District adopted a college prep for all policy and has actually seen a dramatic improvement in graduation rates since then (not to mention higher proportions of students eligible for a four-year college!).

And for students who decide with their parents that the A–G curriculum is not for them, they would have the choice to opt-out of the plan.

The best thing about “college prep” classes is that they don’t just prepare students for college. They can be woven together with a class schedule that includes career tech courses. More challenging curriculum opens the door to greater job opportunities. We certainly don’t know of any employers that complain about their job applicants having “too much education.”

Three out of four students dream of attending college. They are asking for the tougher classes necessary to get there. It would be shameful for us to deny them that dream.

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Silissa Uriarte Smith is Executive Director of the YWCA of the Harbor Area and South Bay. Since 1918 the YWCA of the Harbor Area and South Bay has been a leading voice for women, teens and girls. Our mission is to foster the economic empowerment, physical and emotional well-being of women and girls in a world of peace, racial justice, dignity, freedom and equality for all.