Geography of College Readiness in California

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This post is the first in a series examining how educational opportunities and outcomes differ across California.

Only about a third of California’s 9th graders make it to and through college—and students from middle- and higher-income families are about twice as likely as their lower-income peers to do so. Amid ongoing concerns about the pandemic’s effects on educational opportunities, improving the transition from high school to a four-year college is critical, yet school districts vary greatly as to the share of students who graduate ready for college.

Efforts to boost college readiness have led to improvements in recent years. In California, high school students planning to attend California State University or the University of California must complete college preparatory courses known as A–G courses. For over a decade, the share of high school graduates completing these courses has consistently increased. Over the past several years, a growing number of districts—including some of the state’s largest—have made completing A–G courses part of their graduation requirements. Even more districts have adopted an A–G curriculum, meaning all courses in core academic areas are A–G approved.

While about half of high school graduates have completed A–G requirements, not all students make it to high school graduation. Statewide, 43% of 9th graders go on to both finish high school and complete A–G requirements. The interactive below shows that district-level rates vary widely, from less than 20% to more than 80%. Near Sacramento and in major regions along the coast—such as the Bay Area, San Diego, and Los
Angeles—A–G completion is relatively high. Throughout the rest of the state, college preparation tends to be much lower. Overall, districts in cities (45%) and suburban (44%) neighborhoods have higher A–G completion rates than those in smaller towns (32%) and rural areas (29%).

Equity gaps are apparent in almost all school districts. Statewide, Native American (23%), Black (31%), Pacific Islander (34%), and Latino (36%) 9th graders are much less likely to go on to graduate with A–G requirements than their Asian (71%) and white peers (49%). Similarly, only about a third of socioeconomically disadvantaged students are A–G completers, about half the rate of their peers. (Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are defined as those who receive free or reduced school meals or whose parents do not have a high school diploma.)

Notably, racial/ethnic disparities are sometimes larger in higher-performing districts. For example, in San Mateo Union, an impressive two-thirds of 9th graders go on to graduate with A–G requirements, but about 40% of Black and Latino students are A–G completers compared to 91% and 82% of their Asian and white classmates.
In some districts, access to A–G courses may be a concern. Expanding the availability of A–G approved courses is an important step, though PPIC research has found that this may present hiring difficulties or other challenges for schools. In addition, policies related to course placement, scheduling, counseling, and grading could affect—and in some cases diminish—students’ likelihood of enrolling in these courses.

Even among districts with higher rates of A–G completion, continuing to improve graduation rates is also key, especially among underrepresented student groups. Native Americans (79%), African Americans (80%), and Latinos (85%) are much less likely to graduate high school than their Asian (95%) and white (90%) peers. Early evidence from San Diego Unified—which has made A–G courses part of its graduation requirement—suggests that this policy can indeed improve A–G completion; however, it may also negatively affect graduation rates for some students, including English Learners and students receiving special education services.

While improving college readiness must be a statewide endeavor, a multi-faceted approach will be necessary to address districts’ unique challenges. Ensuring that districts are able to provide additional supports and services to help students succeed in more rigorous coursework is essential. Accountability measures focused on school- and district-level performance could also help incentivize expanded access and begin to address persistent equity gaps.