EXCELerator™

Mission Statements, Strategic Planning and the College-Ready District: A Case Study Highlighting Four EXCELerator™ Districts

Introduction

School districts communicate core messages in various forms: mission statements, strategic goals and discussions with stakeholders. This case study examines district core messaging about college readiness in 13 school districts across the country that have partnered with the College Board's EXCELerator™ program. EXCELerator believes that school district leaders play a fundamental role in setting nonnegotiable college readiness goals for all students in the district, which then are supported and made actionable by school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders. EXCELerator's emphasis on district leadership is supported by research, including the work of Robert J. Marzano and Timothy Waters, who stress that clear direction and focused leadership have a positive impact on student achievement. According to Marzano and Waters, "Contrary to the opinion that district leadership has no relationship to student achievement, our findings suggest that district leadership has a measurable effect on student achievement."[1] A meta-analysis conducted by Marzano and Waters identifies critical roles for district leaders, including establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction.

College Readiness Defined

Being college ready means — at a minimum — having the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed to complete a first year of postsecondary study without remediation. College readiness can be achieved through a rigorous comprehensive learning system focused on preparing students to successfully complete college-level course work while in high school. This level of preparation is also necessary for students to be considered career ready; students who opt to enter the world of work or to delay college after high school graduation also need, in addition to the professional skills required to enter the workforce, the same knowledge, skills and behaviors as college-bound graduates.

EXCELerator's approach to college readiness builds on research conducted by David Conley of the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC). Conley's work aims to bridge the gap between college eligibility and college readiness. College eligibility is defined by the admission requirements of a postsecondary institution, while college readiness is driven by a student's ability to perform successfully in a postsecondary education program. Students who complete a high school course of study may have met the minimum college admission requirements, such as receiving a diploma or earning a minimum grade point average, but might

1 Robert J. Marzano, and Timothy Waters, *District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance.* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2009).

What is EXCELerator?

EXCELerator is a district improvement model developed by the College Board, which emphasizes a district approach to college readiness. Since 2009, EXCELerator has partnered with leaders in school districts across the United States to identify college readiness challenges and to develop and implement solutions and strategies. EXCELerator partner districts range from large urban districts serving more than 250,000 students to small rural districts serving fewer than 1,000 students. EXCELerator partner districts tend to enroll a high proportion of first-generation, college-bound students.

EXCELerator partnerships typically begin with the District Diagnostic, a process in which the EXCELerator team analyzes strengths and challenges in the district's capacity to ensure college readiness. The EXCELerator team uses a variety of methods to gather data — document review, data analysis, stakeholder interviews and school visits — to diagnose the district's college readiness infrastructure. Following the District Diagnostic, the EXCELerator team partners with the district to create customized solutions and strategies that improve the district's college readiness infrastructure.

not have developed the skills necessary to succeed in college. According to Conley, college readiness requires specific and rigorous preparation in key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, key learning skills and techniques, and key transition knowledge and skills.[1]

Mission Statements and the Strategic Planning Process

A well-communicated mission statement unifies school and district leadership, teachers, families, students and other stakeholders. A mission statement is one part of the larger strategic planning cycle, which includes:

- Collaboratively developing a mission statement
- Developing strategic goals and performance targets based on the mission statement
- Developing a strategic plan and initiatives aligned to that plan
- Implementing the strategic plan and associated initiatives
- Evaluating success by comparing performance outcomes to targets
- Revising strategic goals, performance targets and strategic plans

Mission and Vision Statements

Mission statements are frequently developed alongside vision statements. The mission is a brief, clear and compelling purpose statement that serves to unify an organization's efforts. For example, "The mission of our school district is providing all students with the skills and knowledge to earn a postsecondary credential" communicates the districts overarching goal clearly and succinctly. The vision is a specific description of what the future will be like when the mission is achieved. For example, "Graduates of our school district will be successful and productive contributors to the global economy."

The strategic planning process is a continuous improvement cycle. Districts set goals and performance targets, evaluate progress against performance targets, and regularly refine goals and targets.

While performance targets are generally reviewed and revised at least annually, mission statements are broader and more enduring. Mission statements articulate core, long-term objectives that anchor multiple iterations of the strategic planning cycle.

Boards of Education

Boards of Education are critical stakeholders in the mission statement development and approval process. Many districts require Board of Education approval for mission statements. Because Boards of Education are tasked with district oversight and direction, a district would most likely benefit from involving Board of Education members in the mission development process.

Experiences Within EXCELerator™ Districts

In The Four Phases of Mission Statement Development section, we first outline a framework that describes four phases of mission statement development based on observations of the mission statements in 13 districts that have participated in the EXCELerator's District Diagnostic. Then, in the Mission Statement Development in EXCELerator Districts section, we tabulate the specific successes, challenges and opportunities faced by four selected districts. Each district profiled represents one of the four phases of the mission statement development.

The Four Phases of Mission Statement Development

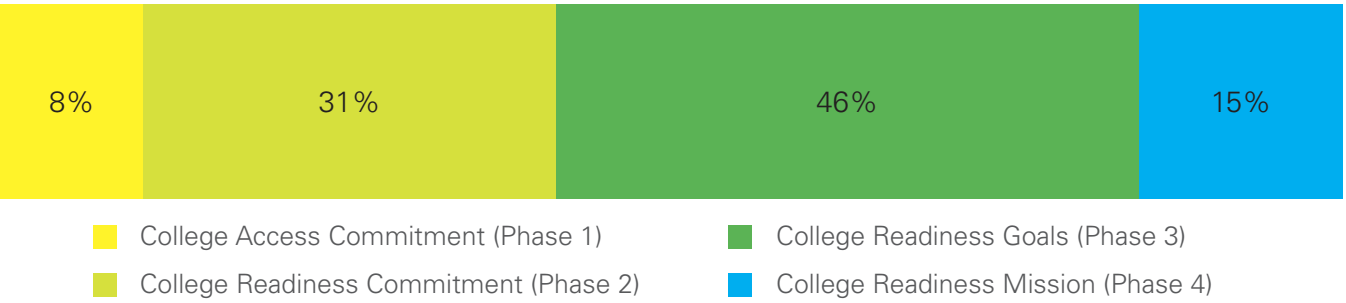
Over the course of its partnerships with school districts, the EXCELerator team has observed that districts fall into one of four phases of developing a mission statement aligned to college readiness:

- College Access Commitment (Phase 1): District leadership is committed to preparing students for graduation and college admission. District leadership equates college eligibility with college readiness. The district's mission and goals do not specifically reference college readiness.
- College Readiness Commitment (Phase 2): District leadership is committed to preparing students for college and careers. District leadership differentiates between college eligibility and college readiness and has made some progress in moving the district toward college readiness. The district's mission and goals do not specifically reference college readiness.

1 David T. Conley, *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

- College Readiness Goals (Phase 3): District leadership is committed to preparing students for college and careers. District and school leadership differentiates between college eligibility and college readiness and has made substantial progress in moving the district toward college readiness. District goals specifically reference college readiness, but are not linked to a college readiness mission. The district's mission does not specifically reference college readiness.
- College Readiness Mission (Phase 4): District leadership is committed to preparing students for college and careers. District and school leadership differentiates between college eligibility with college readiness and has made substantial progress in moving the district toward college readiness. The district's mission statement specifically references college readiness, and the district's strategic goals grow out of its mission statement.

Distribution of College Readiness Mission Statement Development Phases in EXCELerator Partner Districts



Two in 13 (15 percent) of the EXCELerator districts analyzed have a mission statement clearly aligned to college readiness. In most districts, commitment to college readiness is embodied either in the district goals (46 percent), or in beliefs verbally articulated by district leaders (31 percent). Only one in 13 (8 percent) of EXCELerator partner districts struggles with defining college readiness as a goal for all students.

Mission Statement Development in EXCELerator Districts

The four phases of mission statement development form a continuum. Each phase is accompanied by a unique set of successes, challenges and opportunities. In general, districts that strive to meet the criteria of College Readiness Mission (Phase 4) are well-positioned to communicate and plan around a strong commitment to college readiness for all students. The four EXCELerator districts described in the table exemplify the challenges and opportunities faced by districts in each phase of the mission development continuum.

In Phase 4 districts with mission statements aligned to college readiness, EXCELerator staff has observed pervasive commitment and consensus around college readiness throughout the entire district community, from district leaders to school leaders and staff and among community stakeholders. In these districts, the commitment to college readiness for all students has permeated the culture. Although the EXCELerator team has also observed commitment and consensus around college readiness among district and school leaders in districts with goals aligned to college readiness (Phase 3) and leadership committed to college readiness (Phase 2), school staff commitment to college readiness was inconsistent in districts lacking a college readiness mission statement. Critically, EXCELerator has observed that districts with mission statements clearly aligned to college readiness, but lacking goals and strategy, struggle to move towards college readiness. Overall, EXCELerator's experiences suggest that mission statements do focus district work, but that developing a mission statement aligned to college readiness alone will not propel a district towards college readiness unless supported by goals, strategy and strong communication.

District	Mission Development Phase Rating	Supporting Evidence for Phase Rating	Key Successes	Challenges	Opportunities
District 1 Small, suburban district	**College Access Commitment** (Phase 1)	• District goals focus on graduation and state assessments • High school graduation equated with college readiness	District is committed to preparing students for high school graduation	District leadership and stakeholders conflate college eligibility with college readiness	Establish common, districtwide understanding of college readiness
District 2 Mid-sized, suburban district	**College Readiness Commitment** (Phase 2)	• Superintendent discusses college readiness priorities in meetings with staff • District staff differentiates between college eligibility and college readiness	Actively developing college-going culture by requiring seniors to apply to college and by setting rigorous graduation requirements	Student academic performance lags behind college aspirations	Align strategic goals, performance targets and academic programs to college readiness standards
District 3 Large, county-wide district	**College Readiness Goals** (Phase 3)	• District goals are aligned to college readiness • District goals were collaboratively developed and approved by the Board of Education	College readiness goals drive district strategy	Some school-based staff do not differentiate between state standards and college readiness standards	Develop a mission statement aligned to college readiness and a communication strategy
District 4 Large urban district	**College Readiness Mission** (Phase 4)	• Mission and vision statements specifically reference college readiness • Strategic plan aligned to college readiness mission • High Schools implement college readiness programs	College readiness strategy is well implemented in district high schools	Middle school role in district college readiness strategy remains undefined	Extend high school strategy to middle schools

Conclusion

Developing a college readiness mission statement and setting college readiness goals are not a panacea. EXCELerator districts have found that, after developing a mission statement and strategic goals, the implementation of college readiness strategies is their greatest challenge. Nevertheless, developing a mission statement and a strategic plan provides a district with the opportunity to create a single focus for all staff and to systematically plan for the future. EXCELerator believes that developing a college readiness mission statement and strategic goals is a critical initial step in district reform. A college readiness mission statement is one important way that the district can set clear expectations, communicate its vision, and serve as a rallying point for educators, students and the community.

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Four EXCELerator™ District Profiles — In Detail

District 1
College Access Commitment (Phase 1)

District 1 is committed to success for all students. The district has established goals that include improving scores on the high school state exam and increasing high school graduation rates. While the district has well-established and commonly understood goals focused on state assessments and graduation rates, these goals do not explicitly define efforts to increase college readiness or to strengthen its college-going culture.
The district conflates college eligibility requirements, such as high school graduation and state standardized exam performance, with college readiness requirements. District and school leaders understand these goals, but these goals are not linked to a strategy for building college readiness or developing a college-going culture. Since District 1 conflates college readiness with college eligibility, the first step in aligning its mission and goals to college readiness is developing a clear understanding of college readiness. District leaders can build expertise in college readiness by organizing a book study or attending professional development seminars. The district's college readiness experts should disseminate college readiness information and spearhead the development of a districtwide definition of college readiness. A common definition of college readiness would inform the district's future mission statement development and strategic planning processes.

District 2
College Readiness Commitment (Phase 2)

Although the district's mission statement and goals are not explicitly aligned to college readiness, District 2's leadership is committed to fostering a college-ready, college-going culture. The district's superintendent is a champion for college readiness with a clear vision of what college readiness means. The superintendent emphasizes college readiness priorities in monthly meetings with principals. The superintendent has fostered the development of a college-going culture in the district's high schools through initiatives such as setting rigorous graduation requirements that exceed minimum admission requirements at local colleges, committing financial resources to expand the Advanced Placement® program, providing dual enrollment opportunities through partnerships with local colleges, and requiring seniors to apply to at least three colleges and for three scholarships. Awareness of college readiness has reached the schools; in conversation with EXCELerator staff, one high school counselor noted that "stakeholders hear the words 'college readiness' [much] more." District 2's initial success in fostering a college-going culture is particularly noteworthy because the district implemented these changes during a period of budget cuts.

District 2 high school students have high educational aspirations: four in five report plans to attend a four-year college. There is a gap, however, between aspirations and academic preparation. The majority of students planning on attending a four-year college did not meet college readiness benchmarks in mathematics or reading; nine in 10 students did not meet the mathematics college readiness benchmark; and six in 10 did not meet the reading benchmark. In interviews with EXCELerator staff, district leaders stated that the district's focus is to prepare students for postsecondary education; however, student performance outcomes indicate a need to focus more closely on academic preparation that ensures postsecondary success.

A clearly defined college readiness mission supported by specific goals, academic programs and performance targets would increase the district's ability to increase postsecondary readiness for all students. A district with an incipient college-going culture should ensure that performance targets are aligned to college readiness, not college eligibility. Since a large proportion of the district's college-bound students do not meet college readiness benchmarks, it should focus its college readiness strategy on academic rigor throughout the curriculum. In addition, embedding performance tasks related to key content knowledge and to key cognitive strategies and expanding participation in higher-level classes taught by trained teachers would be key steps toward increasing college readiness. With a continued focus on academic rigor in combination with strong community engagement plans, District 2 can begin to build a sustainable college readiness strategy.

District 3
College Readiness Goals (Phase 3)

District 3's goals are aligned to college readiness. The district developed its college readiness goals in a collaborative process: district leaders, administrative teams and select school representatives reviewed and refined goals. The collaboratively set goals were approved by the district's Board of Education. The district's leadership team and the Board of Education review district goals on a quarterly basis to ensure that the district progresses toward meeting its performance targets.

Despite the thoroughness of its goal-setting process, the district struggles with communicating its college readiness mission to all schools. Since district staff were involved in goal development, most are familiar with the district's goals. Only a subset of principals was involved in goal development. Most principals learned about newly developed goals through the superintendent's district goals presentation. Though some school leaders and educators have internalized college readiness goals, many have not. The EXCELerator staff have found that there is confusion about the difference between the college readiness standards and the state standards. One high school teacher stated, "I teach the [state standards] … I have not been asked to teach any college readiness standards, but I would assume that the standards I do teach are indeed college readiness standards." Most school improvement plans are not aligned to the district's college readiness goals but to state standards.

District 3 could benefit from communicating its goals to stakeholders and developing processes for making individual schools accountable for implementing them. District 3 can build on the processes it has already developed to expand its communication with stakeholders. The superintendent's presentation to principals could be modified for use with school staff and with parent–teacher associations. Just as the college readiness goals were presented to school principals, they should be presented to educators and community members. The district could also communicate its goals in district mailings and the local newspaper. Finally, school principals should not only be aware of district goals, but also accountable for them. The district should require school principals to integrate district goals into school improvement plans, and to align their performance targets to the district's strategic performance targets.

District 4
College Readiness Mission (Phase 4)

District 4 has a mission statement and a vision statement that clearly articulate its commitment to college readiness. The district's mission has been communicated through newsletters, the district website and banners in schools and district offices. The district's strategic goals and a long-term strategy grew out of its mission. The college readiness strategy has been successfully implemented in the district's 20 high schools. The district-developed high school planning guide provides guidance on academic planning to students, families and school staff. District leadership has communicated its expectation that schools implement college-access programming in meetings with principals. High schools offer college entrance exam preparation, college planning nights, financial aid workshops and specialized resources for undocumented students.

District 4 has the opportunity to improve the development and implementation of a middle school college readiness strategy. In interviews with College Board staff during the District Diagnostic, both high school and middle school staff demonstrated awareness of the district's college readiness mission; however, only one middle school mentioned college readiness–related outreach. The strategic plan had clear college readiness achievement targets for high school (college entrance exam achievement, Advanced Placement and college enrollment), but it focused on state assessments for middle schools. The district's college readiness initiatives were focused on high school students (college planning assistance, dual enrollment courses and college entrance exam preparation), but excluded earlier grades. Parents reported inconsistent information about college in the early grades and said that most college information is provided when students are preparing to graduate. Although the high school planning guide helps make connections to college readiness explicit, no similar tool exists for middle schools.

District 4 can build on its success by expanding its college readiness strategy to middle schools. It can build on some of the tools in place already, for example, developing a middle school guide that mirrors the high school guide, developing college readiness programming for middle school students and developing college-access programming geared for middle school parents. It can also plan backwards from the high school curriculum to create a seamless transition from middle school to high school.

To learn more about EXCELerator, please visit **excelerator.collegeboard.org.**

To learn more about EXCELerator's partner organization, Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), please visit **epiconline.org.**

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