



# Doc H's Blog

**Kentucky Education Commissioner  
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## **Easy standards and tests don't help students reach college/career-readiness**

Last week, I attended the annual Policy Forum of the Council of Chief State School Officers. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee delivered a wonderful speech about the importance of the arts in a balanced education.

Also, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan participated in a question and answer session with chiefs from more than 30 states. Secretary Duncan, in response to a question about the rising tide of criticism about the Common Core State Standards, said he was surprised that “soccer moms” from affluent schools were pushing back on tests over the new standards because the results showed their students may not be performing at the levels they had been used to. This comment seemed very reasonable and factual in context, however, immediately the social media universe exploded with the “soccer mom” comment. From my point of view, the real issue runs much deeper.

For years, SAT and ACT data have told us that many students who graduate from high school are not ready for college-level work or to enter a career. “Not ready” means that students who graduate from high school have to take remediation classes in college -- classes that cost parents and students a lot of money and for which students do not receive credit. Students who graduate from high school college/career-ready are more successful in college/career. They have a significantly higher GPAs their freshman year in college, complete more credit hours and are more likely to return for a second year than those students who are not college/career-ready.

The Kentucky General Assembly recognized all of these issues when it passed Senate Bill 1 in 2009 and required higher education and K-12 education to work together to increase the percentage of high school graduates who are college-ready by 50 percent by 2015. When we started measuring in 2010, the percentage of high school graduates who achieved college/career-ready status was 34 percent. The Class of 2013 had improved to 54 percent. We are well on our way to reaching the goal of 67 percent by 2015.

The work to help students reach college/career-readiness begins with early childhood programs and continues through the K-12 experience. Students cannot wait until high school to start working toward reaching college/career-ready standards. With that understanding, Kentucky and other states changed state testing to be more aligned with the results from SAT and ACT. Kentucky aligned tests in grades 3-8 so that parents will know every year whether their child was on target to reach college- and career-readiness.

What Secretary Duncan was addressing was the pushback in New York from parents who did not like hearing their elementary and middle grade students were not achieving at the highest levels. Parents were upset that in previous years, their child had been “exceptional” on state tests but under the new

state tests, their child may be at the “needs improvement” level. I believe many parents do not understand the simple message that we’ve intentionally raised the bar on state tests and from the 3rd grade, the results provide a clear indication of student progress toward college/career-readiness. We know these new tests are good predictors of the percentage of students who will graduate from high school college/career-ready because the tests are aligned to the SAT and ACT results that we have seen for many years.

My concern is that much of the national debate is focusing on the politics of common core, rather than helping children reach higher expectations. I believe that every parent wants their child to succeed and reach college/career-readiness. Our challenge as educators is to communicate in ways that parents can understand and fully support parents in helping their child reach this goal.

While Secretary Duncan’s remarks may have been taken out of context, I know that his intention is to help more students reach college/career-readiness so the students will be competitive in the global job market and our national economy will remain the top economy in the world.

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