

# School Transformation and Dieting: Secrets of Long-Term Success

*Reversing the trend of obesity will take time and so will our goal of graduating all students college and career ready.*

By Anne W. Miller, Ph.D., and Clark J. Godshall, Ed.D.

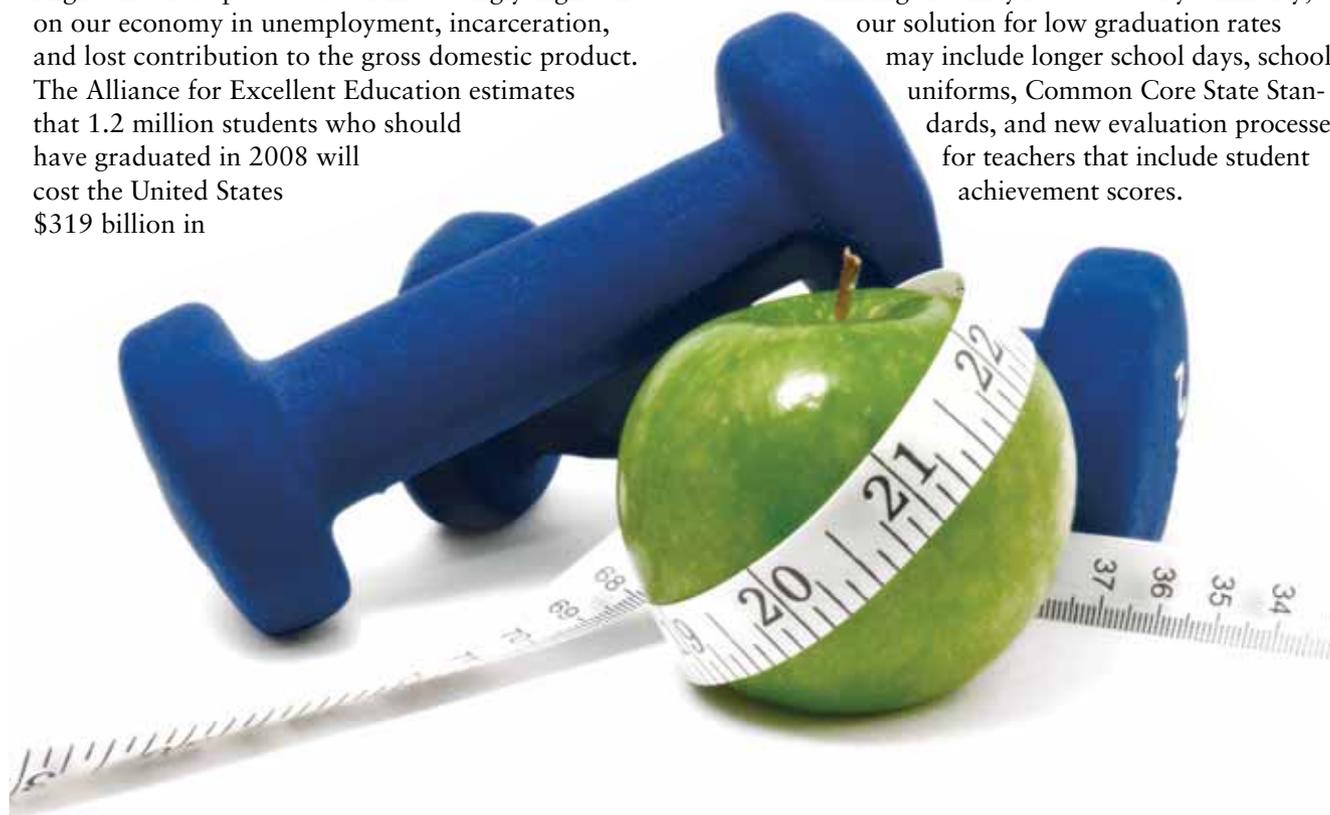
Comparing our population's health problems with high school graduation rates may seem like a stretch, but just as obesity poses a real threat to our nation's future, so does our inability to graduate students who are career and college ready.

- The rate of obesity in our country is at an all-time high—more than 60% of us are overweight.
- At 2,000 of America's high schools that serve predominantly low-income children, fewer than 60% of the students graduate, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education ([www.all4ed.org/about\\_the\\_crisis](http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis)).
- Obesity takes an increasingly high toll on the cost of health care.
- High school dropouts take an increasingly high toll on our economy in unemployment, incarceration, and lost contribution to the gross domestic product. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that 1.2 million students who should have graduated in 2008 will cost the United States \$319 billion in

lost income over their lifetimes ([www.all4ed.org/about\\_the\\_crisis](http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis)).

Reversing the trend of obesity will take time and so will our goal of graduating all students from high school ready to succeed in college. Many of those students who do graduate from high school are still not prepared for college. More than 40% of community college freshmen and 20% of freshmen in four-year institutions must take at least one remedial course in college (Alliance for Excellent Education 2006).

Yet as a society, we have come to expect instant results, instant gratification. Some local governments require restaurants to include nutritional information on their menus or to reduce trans fats in their foods, thinking that may reduce obesity. Similarly, our solution for low graduation rates may include longer school days, school uniforms, Common Core State Standards, and new evaluation processes for teachers that include student achievement scores.



But unless and until we are persistent and committed to *long-term* implementation, we will be tempted to add more policies or change course when results aren't quickly evident.

## Changing Patterns

At one time or another, many of us have made a commitment to lose weight. We set goals, made charts to measure progress, invested in a proven weight-loss plan, and announced to our friends and family that we were going to lose weight and this was how we were going to do it. For a few weeks, we dutifully weighed in and marked progress on a chart. So why, six weeks later, were we eating fries and rich desserts again?

We failed to stay with the plan for many reasons:

- We were too busy with other things to focus on the plan.
- We didn't change our routine to accommodate the plan.
- We forgot to keep tracking and reviewing progress on our chart.
- We didn't become knowledgeable enough about what to do and what not to do.
- We didn't look to others for feedback, support, and suggestions.
- We didn't have the resources to purchase what was required in the selected plan.
- We didn't have the will to change.
- We weren't being held accountable.

Now reread these eight reasons for lack of success, but this time think of schools, school districts, and K–12 education reform initiatives.

How many districts have evaluated and selected research-based reform initiatives, invested in resources, set goals, and announced the new initiatives publicly, only to change plans or personnel before significant and sustainable progress was made?

This pattern happens frequently in our most challenged districts. Let's say a district implements several research-based initiatives shown to improve graduation rates over time. Advanced placement courses are made more accessible to all students. All students are required to take Algebra I and II. The school year or the school day is lengthened. New textbooks are adopted and teachers are trained on the content.

Research suggests that these initiatives *can* positively affect student achievement and increase the likelihood of graduation, but it takes time. The average tenure of an urban superintendent is fewer than four years. So in the midst of reform, district leadership changes and so do the initiatives. Why? Because the results of the previous superintendent's efforts weren't immediately evident and the new superintendent comes in with different strategies and his or her own vision.

When results don't come quickly, we often change plans rather than stay the course. "Well, Jenny Craig didn't work for me so now I'm going to try Weight Watchers." Or in a school, "We lengthened the day last year, but we're not seeing much of an increase in graduation rates, so we're going to develop a new curriculum for next year."

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It's understandable. There is and should be a sense of urgency. Education leaders at all levels—school, district, state, and national—are under pressure to narrow the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students quickly. As a result, persistent, rigorous implementation of new policies and initiatives may go by the wayside in favor of switching to a new plan—whether it's a new curriculum, a new schedule, a new principal, or new teachers.

New plans may be necessary to improve a school, but without high-quality implementation of the strategy over time, you cannot say you actually tried the selected plan. School improvement is much like dieting. To succeed, we need to change our habits and sustain the new habits over time. Think about how many people you know who lost a significant amount of weight, looked great for a while, and then ballooned back to their previous size. Transformation is hard work!

## Effective Implementation

Dieters are accountable to themselves, but school district leaders are accountable to and dependent on the ongoing support of an ever-changing board. So what about the eager school board members or policymakers who expect a high school turnaround within a short time frame? Such expectations are a challenge because the term of many school board members and policymakers is often shorter than the time needed to change habits to sustain increasing student achievement.

To maintain the school board's support, the district leaders should share trend data regularly—at every board meeting—and help the board members understand the nature of school transformation. If the key measures of success are flat or declining, the district leaders should explain the reasons and suggest strategies to get back on track, emphasizing the importance of high-quality, long-term implementation.

Likewise, the superintendent must regularly hold principals accountable for school data on the key indicators related to the schools' plans. If students are struggling with a more rigorous curriculum, it is critical for the principal and staff to drill down to determine what the issues are: Reading ability? Attendance? A teacher in

need of coaching? Then, the school leaders should create improvement plans and share them with the superintendent to demonstrate how the schools will meet and sustain their goals.

Having solid plans to turn around a school is important, but if the rigor of implementation is lacking or is not sustained, then incremental change, at best, will be the outcome. Like dieters, school leaders succeed best when they

- Select a plan that is supported by research.
- Plan for quality implementation over time, recognizing that if they have chosen a proven research-based plan, the longer they stick to it, the more likely they will develop new habits and the more successful they will be.
- Set realistic goals and milestones and measure progress regularly.
- Seek the support they need to ensure the fidelity of the implementation and to change old habits to a new culture and way of thinking.
- Share their progress with stakeholders, helping them understand the process, the progress, and the goals for results.

There are no easy answers to improving graduation rates and ensuring that our students leave high school ready for college and career. Nobody should expect immediate results. Rather, the goal of the district should be to implement and nurture a school improvement plan that produces *sustainable* results.

## Reference

Alliance for Excellent Education. 2006. Paying double: United States spends over \$1.4 billion annually on remedial education for recent high school graduates. *Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress* 6 (16).

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