

# HIGH SCHOOLS AS LAUNCH PADS

## How College-Going Culture Improves Graduation Rates in Low-Income High Schools

### Summary

While high school leaders and policymakers are focusing on reducing the dropout rate, which is nearly 50 percent in low-income communities, missing from the debate on how to solve the dropout crisis is the need for a fundamental shift in the way students in low-income communities experience high school. In order to raise graduation rates, we must ensure that all students experience high school not as a final destination, but as a launch pad to their college and career success.

The strongest motivator for students to work hard in high school is their future. High schools with the best academic outcomes are characterized by a sense among students that their efforts were geared towards preparing them to achieve their future aspirations. For “college readiness” efforts to succeed, we must look at strategies to build college-going culture. Policy efforts should focus on motivating these schools to build college-going culture, in order to increase the number of students who advance along the path to college and career success.

## CRITICAL CULTURAL SHIFTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

College Summit has identified four critical “mind shifts” that establish college-going culture and set the stage to achieve significant increases in both high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

- Shift to counting college enrollment rates as a measure of high school success.
- Shift from thinking postsecondary guidance should be for some students to providing it to all students.
- Shift from a “guidance counselor only” model to a guidance counselor plus teacher-engaged effort.
- Shift from thinking of students as recipients of school culture to drivers of school culture.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION #1:**

Make college enrollment, persistence and completion rates by high school reliable and publicly available.

When high schools – and the communities they serve – know their college participation rates they are more likely to invest in strategies to increase college going and success. It is important for high schools and parents to know the rates at which student cohorts are enrolling, persisting and graduating from college; knowing this data

can provide illuminating information for high schools on their effectiveness in preparing their students for college and career success.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION #2:**

Make college proficiency rate a key success measure of high schools.

In addition to the important measures of “college readiness” and high school graduation rates, high schools should adopt *college proficiency rate* as a key measure of their success. *College proficiency rate* is the percentage of the high school graduating class that persists to their second year of postsecondary education. An important leading indicator to college proficiency would be a high school’s college enrollment rate, which should also be adopted as a success measure.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION #3:**

Encourage high schools to invest in building college-going culture.

While it is possible to build college-going culture with modest resources, state and federal policy makers can accelerate these efforts by providing incentives to encourage high schools – especially those serving predominantly low-income populations – to focus their energies in this direction. Modest investments in this area would yield significant returns.