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Nerd Harassment and Grade Inflation: Are College Admissions Policies Partly Responsible?

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Nerd Harassment and Grade Inflation: Are College Admissions Policies Partly Responsible?

Abstract
[Excerpt] In the eyes of American parents, college admissions officers control the single most important gate their children will ever pass through. Nearly all parents hope their child will go to college. Perceptions of what it takes to get into preferred colleges and universities profoundly affect the courses students take, the standards teachers set and the effort students put out. Evidence for this last statement comes from a 1998/99 survey of 36,000 secondary school students at 135 high schools conducted by the Educational Excellence Alliance (EEA). The students were asked "When you work really hard in school, which of the following reasons are most important for you?" The most frequently cited reasons were extrinsic and future oriented.

Keywords
American, college, parent, university, student, school, teacher, admission

Comments

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Working Paper 99-14

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Working Paper 99-14

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This paper has not undergone formal review or approval of the faculty of the ILR School. It is intended to make results of Center research available to others interested in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions.

Nerd Harassment and Grade Inflation: Are College Admissions Policies Partly Responsible?

In the eyes of American parents, college admissions officers control the single most important gate their children will ever pass through. Nearly all parents hope their child will go to college. Perceptions of what it takes to get into preferred colleges and universities profoundly affect the courses students take, the standards teachers set and the effort students put out. Evidence for this last statement comes from a 1998/99 survey of 36,000 secondary school students at 135 high schools conducted by the Educational Excellence Alliance (EEA). The students were asked "**When you work really hard in school, which of the following reasons are most important for you?**" The most frequently cited reasons were extrinsic and future oriented.

- **"I need the grades to get into college"**…… **79 %**
- **"Help me get a better job"**……..……. **58 %**

Parents came in second:

- **"To please or impress my parents"**……. **55 %**
- **"My parents put pressure on me"**…….. **44 %**

Intrinsic motivation placed third.

- **"The subject is interesting"**……..... **42 %**

Teachers came in fourth:

- **"My teachers encourage me to work hard"**. **31 %**
- **"The teacher demands it"**……... **22 %**
- **"To please or impress my teacher"**……. **22 %**

Peers came in last.

- **"I want to keep up with my friends"**……..…. **20 %**
- "**My friends put pressure on me**"…….…. **5 %**

College admissions requirements and selection criteria also influence the behavior of the adults involved in the learning/teaching process. They affect:

- parent decisions about which town to live in, how much TV and video games to allow and how late students can stay out on week nights etc,
- school administrator decisions about which subjects to offer, at what level, and who to assign or hire to teach the course,[i]

- teacher decisions about what to expect of the students and how to teach the subject and
- school board decisions about adding after-school programs, teacher salaries and contract provisions, etc..

Many (but not all) of the admissions selection criteria favored by American colleges and universities unwittingly create incentives for educationally dysfunctional behavior by secondary school students, teachers and administrators and by voters in school budget referendums. The dysfunctional behaviors I refer to include:

- Nerd Harassment--Peer cultures that denigrate studiousness and get you called a "suck up" if you give teachers eye contact or exhibit signs of being interested in what is being taught. Only 40 percent of students think "its annoying when other students talk or joke around in class." Only 41 percent of students think "its annoying when students try to get the teacher off track." (EEA Survey 1999)
- High school students taking "Easy A" or "Easy B" courses that require neither thinking nor much work.
- The pressure placed on teachers to limit homework assignments and to pass students who have not learned the material. Thirty percent of teachers say that they feel pressure "to give higher grades than students work deserves" and "to reduce the difficulty and amount of work you assign"(Peter Hart Research Associates, 1994).
- The need that so many teachers feel to sacrifice content and rigor in order to be entertaining.
- Classroom observation studies find that students are actually engaged in learning activities only about half the time they are scheduled to be in school. A study in Chicago found that students were on task only 51 percent of the scheduled class time at low-achieving schools and 75 percent of scheduled class time at schools with high achieving students (Frederick 1977).
- Principals assigning staff to teach subjects outside their field of expertise and training.—More than half of students in history courses are taught by teachers who neither majored nor minored in history in college. More than half of chemistry and physics students are taught by teachers who did not major or minor in physical science or engineering in college (Ingersoll 1996)

- The low standards set for becoming a secondary school teacher. Most states using the National Teachers Examination/Praxis test have set remarkably low minimum passing scores (Strauss 1998)
- The low salaries and low prestige of secondary school teaching. In 1990 female public school teachers were paid 20 percent less than college graduate women pursuing non-teaching careers. Men pursuing teaching careers were paid 35 percent less than college graduates working outside of teaching (Hanushek and Rivkin, 1997)

The problems just cited are a large part of the reason why American students are so far behind their counterparts abroad at the end secondary school.[ii] They are also largely responsible for the need to provide remedial instruction to so many college freshman, the high drop out rates at most post-secondary institutions and the failure of so many students to achieve their post-secondary education goals.

How can college admissions criteria be causing so many problems? Some selection criteria are fine: the rigor and challenge of academic courses should be given heavy weight as should externally assessed achievement in these courses. This will induce students to take challenging courses and to work hard in them. They also induce administrators to offer rigorous courses (eg. AP and IB courses) and to hire teachers who have the thorough content background necessary to teach them. Most of the other commonly used selection criteria—aptitude test scores, rank in class, high school GPA, rank in class and high school reputation—send as many pernicious signals as they send positive signals.

Proposals for reform will be advanced in section 2 of the paper, but first we need to examine the reasons why the current heavy emphasis on the SAT-I, the ACT and rank in class in admissions decisions is dysfunctional.

I. Sending the Right Signals: How College Admissions Policies Can Help Improve Standards and Achievement in High School

1.1 What's wrong with the SAT-I and the ACT.

Aptitude tests such as the SAT-I and the ACT fail to assess most of the material--economics, civics, literature, foreign languages and the ability to write an essay--that high school students are expected to learn. The SAT-I indeed leaves history and science out as well. The ACT's science and history test are not linked to specific curricula and are as much a reading test as a test of content knowledge in science and history. From the beginning, the SAT was designed to

minimize backwash effects on high school curricula, teaching and student study habits. Indeed, Richard Gummere, Harvard College's admissions director at the time the machine scored multiple-choice Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) replaced the curriculum-based essay style College Board Examinations, was very candid about why the SAT had been adopted:

> ***Learning in itself has ceased to be the main factor [in college admissions]. The aptitude of the pupil is now the leading consideration*** (Gummere, 1943 p. 5).

Basing college admissions on aptitude tests, sends pernicious messages to students and schools:

- We reward the Smart, not the Studious.
- We don't care how well you write.
- We don't care how much you learned about art or literature.
- We don't care how proficient you are in a foreign language.
- Where the SAT-I is used, we also don't care how much science and history you learned.
- Make sure your child gets a good test prep course.
- The quality of the Kaplan SAT prep teacher is more important than the quality of the high school's chemistry & history teachers.

These criticisms are not new. Jencks and Crouse (1982) and the College Board's Commission on New Possibilities for the Admissions Testing Program (1990) made similar points a decade ago. Despite the new name, the content of the SAT-I has changed very little.
The solution to these problems is to substitute end-of-course achievement exams (eg. AP exams, SAT-IIs, NYS Regents and Maryland's end of course exams for the SAT-1 and the ACT. Before presenting a detailed proposal, however, the dysfunctional signaling effects of using rank in class and GPA also needs to be examined

1.2 Class Rank and Grade Point Averages Discourage the Taking of Challenging Courses

Students are not found in challenging courses largely because they choose not to be in them. The guidance counselor in a wealthy suburban community described the process:

> ***A lot of... parents were in a 'feel good' mode. "If my kids are not happy, I'm not happy." …Probably…25 percent …were going for top colleges. They were pushing their kids hard. The rest---75 percent (I'm guessing at the numbers)---said "No, that's too hard, they don't have to do that."……If they [the students] felt it was too tough, they would back off. I had to hold***

> ***people in classes, hold the parents back. [I would say] "Let the kid get C's. It's OK. Then they'll get C+'s and then B's." [But they would demand,] "No! I want my kid out of that class!"***

Teachers also often support students switching to easier classes.

> ***....frankly we couldn't get the staff to agree [to hold struggling or lazy students in more rigorous classes] either. They would say, 'He's not learning….Get him out….Let the kid drop into an easier class.'"***

Teachers are aware of student preferences and adjust their style of teaching and their homework assignments with an eye to maintaining enrollment levels. Attempts to get students to volunteer for tough courses often fail:

> ***An angry math teacher [who remembering] the elimination of a carefully planned program in technical mathematics for vocational students simply because not enough signed up for it,...[said] 'Its easy to see who really makes decisions about what schools teach: the kids do****.'* (Powell, Farrar and Cohen 1985, p. 9)

Trying to counteract this problem, college admissions officers have been telling students and counselors that they take the rigor of courses into account. This effort has been partly successful. More students are taking chemistry and physics and advanced mathematics. But apparently many students have not gotten the message and still think taking easy courses is a good strategy. One student told a reporter:

> ***My counselor wanted me to take Regents history and I did for a while. But it was pretty hard and the teacher moved fast. I switched to the other history and I'm getting better grades. So my average will be better for college. Unless you are going to a college in the state, it doesn't really matter whether you get a Regent's diploma****.*(Ward, 1994)).

Theodore Sizer observed, "A lot of the honors students aren't questers. They dodge the hard problems, the hard courses, to keep their averages up."(1985, p. 53)

We need more effective ways of convincing students to take challenging courses in high school. On May 1, 1994, the New York City Board of Education announced that starting with those entering 9th grade in the fall of 1994, all students would have to take 3 Regents level math and 3 Regents level science courses before graduating. Ramon Cortines, Chancellor of New York City School System, declared:

> ***The easy way out is the road to nowhere. If achievement in our schools is to improve, we must raise our expectations for students and staff. Our system will fail in its obligation to this community unless we equalize educational opportunity and raise standards in all of our schools***. (Charisse Jones, NY Times, 5/2/94, p. 1)

If New York City's Board of Education and the State Board of Regents can handle the political heat of requiring **all** high school students to take rigorous Regents level courses and pass exams in the subject before getting a high school diploma, why are colleges so timid. Why are they unwilling to say publicly that taking rigorous courses is also "a requirement for admission to our college"?

1.3 Admitting College Freshman on the basis of Class Rank and Grade Point Averages tends to generate an Anti-Nerd High School Peer Culture

In the EEA survey 24 percent of the students said "My friends make fun of people who try to do really well in school." Fifty-five percent reported that 'My friends joke around and annoy the teacher." Most students give silent support to the students who disrupt classes. Sixty percent said it wasn't annoying "when other students talk or joke around in class." Fifty-eight percent said it wasn't annoying "when students try to get the teacher off track."

Steinberg, Brown and Dornbusch's recent study of nine high schools in California and Wisconsin found that:

> ...less than 5 percent of all students are members of a high-achieving crowd that defines itself mainly on the basis of academic excellence... Of all the crowds the 'brains' were the least happy with who they are--nearly half wished they were in a different crowd (Steinberg, 1966, 145-146).

One of the reasons for the unpopularity of the studious is our society's almost exclusive reliance on signals of academic achievement that assess performance **relative to other students in a class** (e.g., grades and class rank) rather than relative to a fixed external standard (results on national or provincial examinations). This gives students a personal interest in persuading each other not to study. As one student said, *"It was my friends who did better than I on this test. But it was my friends, and still, I was mad at them (Wexler 1992, p. 58)."* The studious are often called nerds, dorks and suck-ups, in part, because they are making it more difficult for others to get good grades or to be ranked near the top of the class. Since devoting time to studying for an exam is costly, the welfare of the entire class is maximized if no one studies for exams which are graded on a curve. The cooperative solution is "no one studies more than the minimum." Participants are generally able to tell who has broken the "minimize studying" code and reward those who conform

and punish those who do not. Side payments and punishments are made in a currency of friendship, respect, ridicule and harassment that is not in limited supply. For most students the benefits that might result from participating actively in class are less important than the very certain costs of being considered a "brain geek", "grade grubber" or "acting White," so most students abide by the "don't raise your hand too much" “don’t give the teacher eye contact” norm.

> ***Being a brain really did have a stigma attached to it. Sometimes during a free period I would sit and listen to all the brains talk about how much they hated school work and how they never studied and I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud. I knew they were lying, and they knew they were lying too. I think that a lot of brains hung around together only because their fear of social isolation was greater than their petty rivalries. I think that my two friends who were brains liked me because I was almost on their level but I was not competitive (Tim 1986).***

Note how those who broke the 'minimize studying' norm tried to hide the fact from classmates. They did not espouse an alternative "learning is fun and important" norm. [iii]

If, by contrast, students are evaluated relative to an outside standard, they no longer have a personal interest in getting teachers off track or persuading each other to refrain from studying. Peers should become less supportive of students who joke around in class or try to get the class off track.

1.4 When Class Rank and GPA Determines Access to College, Teachers are seen as Judges not Coaches. They are not perceived as on the student’s team.

External assessment of accomplishment puts students, teacher and parents on the same team. It assists the development of mentoring relationships between teachers and students. In the absence of external assessment, the effort to become friends with one's students and their parents tends to deteriorate into extravagant praise for mediocre accomplishment. In courts of law, judges must disqualify themselves when a friend comes before the bar. Yet, American teachers are placed in this double bind every day. Often the role conflict is resolved by lowering expectations or hiding failure with charitable phrases such as "does good work when he chooses to participate." Other times the choice of high standards means that close supportive relationships are sacrificed.

This is one of the considerations that has led most European secondary school teachers to support externally graded exams and external reviews of a student's completed projects. When changes in this system were proposed in Ireland, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland wrote:

> ***Major strengths of the Irish educational system have been:***
> ***(i) The pastoral contribution of teachers in relation to their pupils***
> ***(ii) the perception of the teacher by the pupil as an advocate in terms of nationally certified examinations rather than as a judge.***
>
> ***The introduction of school-based assessment by the pupil's own teacher for certification purposes would undermine those two roles, to the detriment of all concerned....***
>
> ***The role of the teacher as judge rather than advocate may lead to legal accountability in terms of marks awarded for certification purposes. This would automatically result in a distancing between the teacher, the pupil and the parent. It also opens the door to possible distortion of the results in response to either parental pressure or to pressure emanating from competition among local schools for pupils (ASTI 1990 p. 1).***

1.5 Evidence that Curriculum-Based External Exams Improve Teacher-Student Relationships and the norms of the Student Peer Culture.

The EEA data set is an excellent place to test whether CBEEES tend to generate a student peer culture that is more supportive of learning and has a more favorable perception of teachers.[iv] New York State has a low to medium stakes curriculum-based external exam system in place, the Regents exams. Its neighboring states do not. Attitudes in New York can be compared to neighboring states. School means on various attitude and behavior indices were constructed for each gender and each grade surveyed at each of the 135 high schools in the study. Forty-two percent of the schools were from New York State. Multiple regression models were estimated predicting these indices as a function of gender, grade, a dummy variable for grades 7 or 8, parental education of the students in the school, average number of siblings, proportion of students living in single parent homes, proportion of students Hispanic, proportion of students Asian and proportion of students African-American, a dummy variable for non-public school and dummy variables for state. New York State was the excluded category. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of how student attitudes in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey differ from those in New York. The metric of the X axis is standard deviations of the individual student data on each attitude index. In the estimations predicting attitudes, New York is significantly different from Connecticut or Massachusetts (at the 5% level on a two tail test) if the difference has an absolute value greater than .07 . New York is significantly different from New Jersey if the difference is greater than |.08|.

The Motivating Teachers index was derived from questions asking the student to agree or disagree with statements like "My teachers grade me fairly," "My teachers maintain good discipline in the classroom" and from responses like "To please or impress my teacher" to the question about what motivates them to work hard. Items that had a negative effect on the teacher motivation index were answers of "I disliked the teacher" or "The teacher was very disorganized" in response to a question about reasons for not doing assigned work. The final item in the index was a "The teacher was unfair" response to "Everyone gets a poor grade sometimes. When you get a poor grade, which reason usually causes the low grade."[v] The Motivating Teachers index is 25 percent of a population standard deviation lower in Massachusetts high schools, 17 percent of an SD lower in Connecticut high schools and 12 percent of an SD lower in New Jersey high schools.

The *Its Annoying when Students Joke or Distract* index is a normalized average of the responses to the two questions given at the beginning of section 1.3 about whether the respondent is annoyed when other students talk or joke around in class or try to get the teacher off tract. Compared to New York students, classroom disruptions were .2 SDs less annoying for Massachusetts students, .12 SDs less annoying for Connecticut students and .15 SDs less annoying for New Jersey students.

Thirty-eight percent of EEA students agreed that "If most of the class did not understand a concept, some of my teachers do not put it on the test." This is a direct measure of whether students perceive classroom expectations to be negotiable. If the students do not put the time in to learn the material, the teacher will back off the expectation that the students learn it. Students in the three neighboring states were significantly more likely to agree with this proposition than New York students.

The Positive Peer Pressure index was derived from the following questions: "My friends think it is important for me to do well in science [mathematics, English] in school." Agree or Disagree and "How important do your friends think it is to study hard to get good grades?" The two other items in the index were choosing "My friends put pressure on me," and "I want to keep up with my friends" as reasons for working hard. New York students experienced significantly more positive peer pressure than students in neighboring states. Positive peer pressure was 11 percent of an SD lower in Connecticut, 17 percent of an SD lower in Massachusetts and 20 percent of an SD lower in New Jersey.

The Intrinsic Motivation Index is based on the answers to four questions: "How often…do you find what you are studying intrinsically interesting"; "If I didn't need good grades, I'd put little effort into most classes"[reflected] and responses of "The subject is interesting" and " I want to learn the material" to the question about reasons for working hard. New York high schools were

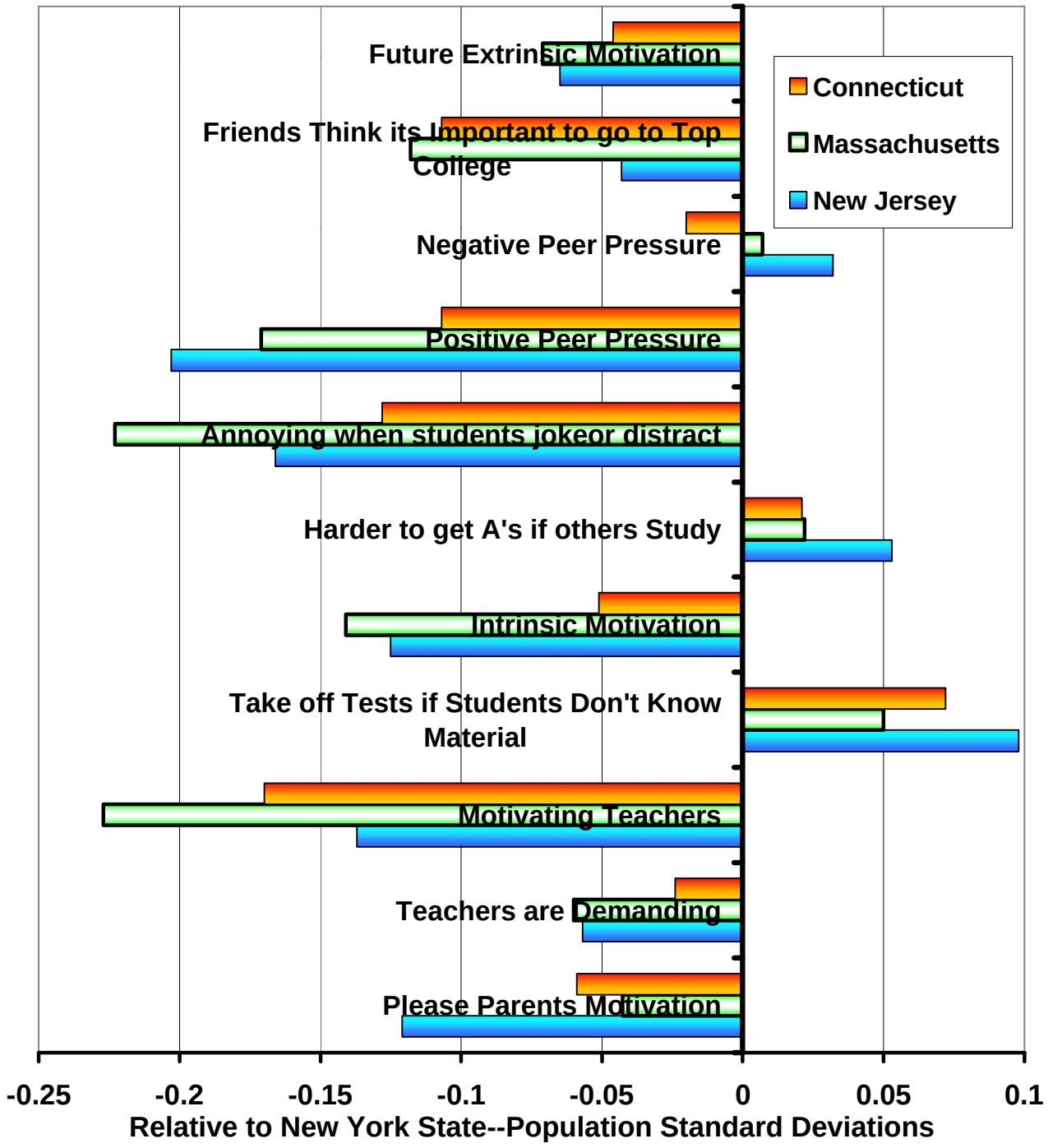
significantly higher (12 to 14 percent of an SD higher) on the Intrinsic Motivation index than Massachusetts and New Jersey high schools.

The question about reasons for working hard also provided the items for the Motivated to Please Parents index. The Please Parents index was an normalized average of the following responses to that question: “My parents put pressure on me”, “I don’t want to embarrass my parents” and “To please or impress my parents.” High schools in Connecticut and New Jersey were significantly lower (6 to 12 percent of an SD lower) on this index than high schools in New York State.

Figure 2 presents differences between the states in student behavior. The Student Engagement index is based on the following questions: How often: “do you really pay attention in class?”, “does your mind wander?”, “do you joke around in class?”, “do you contribute to class discussion?” and “do your homework for one class in another?” New York students are 22 percent of an SD more engaged than student in Massachusetts and 12 percent of an SD more engaged than New Jersey students.

New York students are significantly more likely than Massachusetts students to “study together (outside of class)” and to talk with friends “outside of class about things we learned in school.” They are also more likely to do homework assignments than students in Massachusetts and Connecticut. They spend significantly (16 minutes per day) more time doing homework than students in New Jersey. They also spend significantly more time (22 extra minutes) studying for end of marking period history exams than students in Massachusetts. They are also substantially more likely to be in college prep or honors classes than students in Connecticut and New Jersey. With only two exceptions—the negative peer pressure index and the Friends skip class, joke and neglect their work index—the comparisons are all in favor of New York.

Figure 1: How Attitudes in Neighboring States Differ from New York



1.6 Externally Set End-of-Course Exams Improve Teaching

Many fear that external exams will negatively effect teaching. Opponents argue that "preparation for high stakes tests often emphasizes rote memorization and cramming of students and drill and practice teaching methods" and that "some kinds of teaching to the test permits students to do well in examinations without recourse to higher levels of cognitive activity (Madeus 1991 p. 7-8)."

CBEEES advocates counter by challenging the assumption implicit in the above argument that examinations developed by the committees of teachers working for state departments of education are/will be worse than the tests developed by individual teachers. In fact, the tests that teachers develop for themselves are generally of very low quality. Fleming and Chambers (1983) study of tests developed by high school teachers found that "over all grades, 80% of the items on teachers' tests were constructed to tap the lowest of [Bloom's] taxonomic categories, knowledge (of terms, facts or principles)"(Thomas 1991, p. 14). Rowher and Thomas (1987) found that only 18 percent of history test items developed by junior high teachers and 14 percent items developed by senior high teachers required the integration of ideas. College instructors, by contrast, required such integration in 99 percent of their test items. Secondary school teachers test low level competencies because that is what they teach.

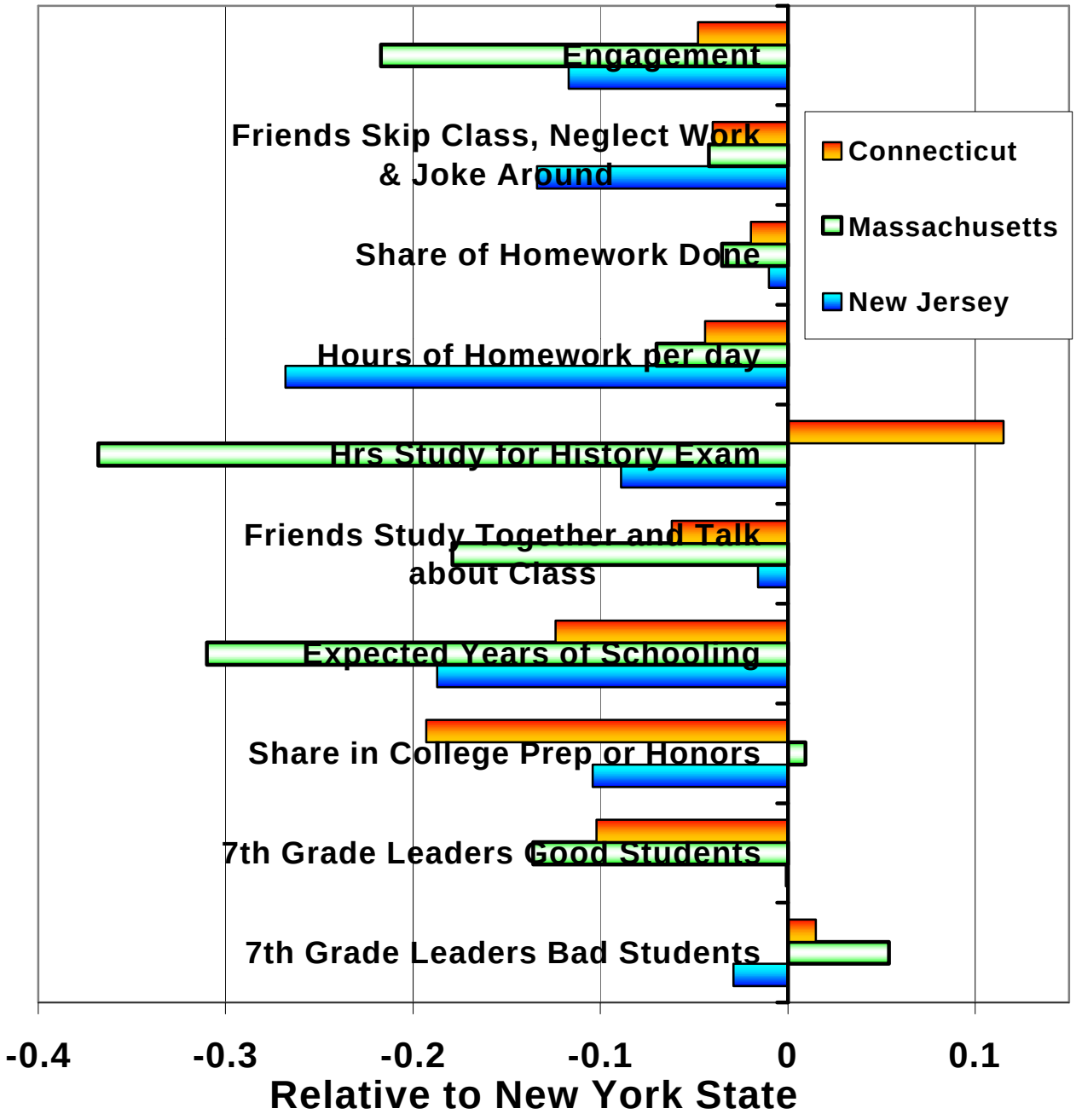
If care is taken in designing external exams, they can induce improvements in instructional practice. Sherman Tinkelman, New York State's Assistant Commissioner for Examinations and Scholarships, describes one such instance:

> For years our foreign language specialists went up and down the State beating the drums for curriculum reform in modern language teaching, for change in emphasis from formal grammar to conversation skills and reading skills. There was not very great impact until we introduced, after notice and with numerous sample exercises, oral comprehension and reading comprehension into our Regents examinations. Promptly thereafter, most schools adopted the new curricular objectives (Tinkelman, 1966 p. 12).

External end-of-course exams also strengthen incentives to hire highly competent teachers who are thoroughly prepared in the subjects they will teach. In the absence of such exams, the principal who has a surplus of biology teachers will find it convenient to assign one of them—probably the most junior—to teach chemistry or physics despite the fact they took only one or two physical science courses in college. Need something for the football coach to do. Have him teach history.

If the only signal of how much students have learned is the grade the classroom teacher awards, teachers become unaccountable. If the class is not going well, he can hide this from his colleagues and the principal by lowering what he expects the students to accomplish. If the teacher's primary function is to rank their students—that's what using rank in class as an important selection criterions tells high schools—there is no need to pay teachers wages that are comparable to those of other college graduates. Schools do not have to pay high wages to recruit caring teachers who can entertain adolescents for 45 minutes a day and do a fair job of ranking them at the end of the semester. If they want teachers who can also teach mathematics, history or chemistry to a high level, they will need to pay more. A GPA/class rank driven signaling system undermines the case for setting high standards for entry into secondary teaching. Without a system of external end-of-course exams to force school administrators to set much higher subject matter competence standards when hiring new teachers, the coming shortage of teachers will be handled by lowering minimum hiring standards not by raising wages to a point where the teaching profession competes effectively for talent with other college graduate occupations.

Figure 2: How Student Behavior in Neighboring States Differs from New York



1.7 High School Reputations do not change quickly when schools Improve. As a result, incentives to raise standards at the local high school are very weak.

Many of the dysfunctional effects of basing admissions decisions on course grades and rank in class could be eliminated if colleges had perfect information about the instructional quality and grading standards of each course taught at each of the high schools from which students apply and then used that information to adjust the grades to a common metric. Obviously, college admissions officers do not have anything like this kind and amount of information about the academic standards of particular high schools. They do, however, have opinions about the academic quality of individual schools and they base admissions decisions, in part, on those opinions.

How do admissions personnel develop these opinions? In my experience the primary source of information on the academic standards of an applicant's high school was the school profile provided along with the transcript. When I was on my college's admission committee, the indicators we looked at were the share of graduates attending four-year colleges, mean SAT scores, National Merit Scholars and the number of students taking and passing AP exams. The applicant's class rank percentile was interpreted in the light of these indicators. The professional staff expressed opinions about some schools, but most of the applicants were not from schools they knew. When they did express an opinion, it was often based on memories of a student who attended our college years before or a visit to the school many years in the past. We are a small school, so we seldom have more than one or two students from a single high school attending in a given year. Would it be fair to blackball a high school because just one graduate messes up? Consequently, the reputations that do develop are very difficult to change.

In my interviews of associate admissions directors at other SUNY schools I asked whether anyone had heard of a university formally studying the success rates of students from different local high schools.[vi] No one had heard of anyone doing it. What my interviews revealed was that the admissions committee upon which I had served was not unique. Everyone I talked to used the school profile and the same items from the profile as the primary sources of information for judging how competitive individual high schools were. The other source of information was conversations with admissions personnel at other universities. Among the phrases my respondents used to describe the process were: "It's all anecdotal" "…use a gut feeling." Thus even at large state universities high school reputations are based primarily on word of mouth, on school visits by admission staff, impressions left by interviews of the school's graduates and the marketing savvy of the high school's college counselors. When

a member of the admissions staff moves to another job, those impressions are carried to the new job, not left in an Excel spreadsheet or a three ring binder for the next occupant of the position.

Now lets look at the process of reputation formation from the high school's perspective. Imagine yourself a high school principal trying to raise academic standards at your school. You believe that future graduating classes will benefit from the higher standards you intend to implement and you want to make that case to the school board. Your husband asks you "What if Mr. Johnson, the school board president, asks 'Well, will it mean more of our student's get into the University of Michigan [the most competitive of the state's universities]?' Can you answer, 'YES'?" Unfortunately both you and the board chair have cousins who work in college admissions, so you both know the score. You both know, for example, that the most important determinant of your school's rep is the share of students attending four-year colleges. That in turn is determined primarily by the wealth and educational background of parents, something you and your teachers are unable to change. The next most important determinant of rep is SAT-I scores and National Merit scholars. How do you propose to influence that? Do you ask the English department to devote class time to reviewing old PSAT and SAT-I tests rather than discussing Macbeth? I hope not. So what do you do.

The only educationally defensible option you have is to introduce new Advanced Placement courses and make sure that the courses are well taught. This in turn requires that courses leading up to the AP classes be rigorous and well taught so standards of all classes need to be raised.[vii] You now have an educationally defensible strategy, and you can make a credible argument to the school board that the students who work hard to achieve the new higher standards will benefit in very tangible ways.

If it were not for the existence of externally set end-of-course exams reflecting high standards, "*grade inflation"* would probably have been your chosen strategy. Presenting the "*grade inflation*" strategy to the school board you might have said: "Well part of the plan is to stop publishing class rank and award more A's to the students taking the more rigorous courses. This, I expect, will persuade University of Michigan to admit more of our graduates." The unwillingness of many high schools to calculate class rank and the increasing number of students getting straight A averages in high school suggests that many high schools are choosing the "*grade inflation"* strategy. Teachers want to assist their best students in their aspirations to attend competitive colleges. In an AP class, the teacher would have only one option—teaching to a high standard and assigning a lot of homework. In other classes the temptation is to cut your students some slack when a favored group of students—in some cases

honors students, in other cases athletes or student leaders--signal that they are not willing to do more work.

Now lets look at it from a parent's point of view. Should I try to improve my local schools so my child has a better chance of getting into a good college? Probably not. In most states, your best strategy is to send your child to a highly respected private school or to move to a community that already has a high school with a strong reputation.[viii] If moving and private schools are not an option, your next best strategy is to make sure your child is placed in honors and accelerated classes, to make sure she studies hard (with tutors provided if necessary) and to arrange for enriching summer experiences. How your child ranks in the graduating class is much more important than the modest improvements in the quality of the school you and your friends are likely to be able to pull off. Trying to improve your local schools is for altruists, not realists. Success in improving local schools will not help your child to enter a better college, because even if the schools improve, the competitive colleges you want your child to attend are unlikely to be aware of the improvement.[ix] This is one of the reasons why most parents do not even vote in school board elections and why school site-based councils tend to focus on quality of life issues not academic standards.

Basing College Admission Solely on Class Rank.

The University of California and state universities in Texas are now admitting a proportion of their freshman class solely on the basis of class rank. In Texas all students in the top 10 percent of their graduating class will be admitted to the state university of their choice. In California every student in the top 4 percent of her high school graduating class will be admitted to one or more UC campuses. The rest of the freshman class will be selected as before on the basis of scores on SAT-I and SAT-II tests and weighted GPAs that take account of the tougher grading standards of honors and AP classes. The 4 and 10 percent rule are supposed to increase the number of under represented minorities attending the state's most selective universities. In the first year of the new admissions regime, however, the new rules had only small effects on the ethnic composition of freshman classes in Texas and at the University of California. Almost all of those admitted under the top 4 and top 10 percent rules were also admissible under standard admissions criteria. It is too early, however, to tell what the long run effect will be. The rule may change where top ranked students apply and, if it does, the effects on the composition of the freshman class might grow.

Basing admissions decisions solely on class rank, however, will have other unintended negative consequences. It very publicly pits the best students at each school against each other. When one student studies hard, he is reducing the likelihood that classmates will be

admitted to selective state universities. Nerd harassment will probably worsen. It also reduces the incentive that school boards and administrators face to improve the quality of local schools. Four percent of your graduates are guaranteed admission to UC (10 percent in Texas) no matter whether your school gets better or not. For many schools, setting higher standards and hiring better teachers will not raise the number of students who are admitted to selective state universities.

1.9 Where State Education Departments Sponsor High School Exit Exams, the Public Colleges in the state seldom use the results in their Admissions Process.

Transcripts from New York State high schools contain Regents exam scores so New York colleges already have the information they need to use externally assessed achievement in high school courses in their admission's decisions. I interviewed associate admissions directors at a number of the state's public universities and found that they paid little attention to Regents exam marks when evaluating applicants from New York State. They also reported that they did not require applicants to take SAT-II tests. Their explanation for not requiring SAT-II's was wanting to avoid imposing additional expenses on students. SAT-I and ACT scores were used in preference to the Regents exam results because "the data was not available for out-of-state applicants" and for some in-state high schools as well. But if they are willing to create and use concordance tables to translate ACT scores into equivalent SAT-I scores, why cannot the same be done between Regents exams and SAT-I's. They clearly did not see it as their responsibility to support the Board of Regents effort to raise academic standards by using Regents exam results in their own decision making.

Summing up, some external assessment of student achievement in high school is essential if school administrators, schools board and voters in school budget referenda are to face the correct incentives to set high standards in the local schools. Locally elected school boards and the administrators they hire (not state departments of education) make the thousands of decisions that determine academic expectations and program quality (eg. homework guidelines, whether to retain a popular but not very effective teacher, whether to raise wages to attract better teachers, etc.). When there is no external assessment of academic achievement, students at a school and their parents benefit little from administrative decisions that raise standards such as hiring more qualified teachers, teaching more difficult material or dropping an unchallenging course from the curriculum. The immediate consequences of such decisions--higher taxes, more homework, having to repeat courses, lower GPA's, less time for fun courses, a greater risk of being denied a diploma--are all negative.

When student learning is not assessed externally, the positive effects of choosing academic rigor are negligible and postponed. Since college admission decisions are based on rank in class, GPA and aptitude tests, not externally assessed achievement in high school courses, upgraded standards will not improve the college admission prospects of the school's graduates. Graduates will perform better in difficult college courses and will be more likely to get a B.A., but that benefit is uncertain and far in the future. Maybe over time the local reputation of the high school, and with it the admission prospects of future graduates, will improve because the current crop of graduates are more successful in local colleges, but that prospect is far in the future.

2. SOLUTIONS

2.1 Advise for College Admissions Officers

College admissions officers manage the interface between K-12 education and higher education. Their first job is to market their college to high school counselors and prospective students. Their other responsibility is to find and admit the very best students possible. The faculty want good students but not at the cost of a couple of weeks spent reading essays and reviewing portfolios. Consequently, expensive time consuming means of assessing applicants are not feasible.

Admissions officers do not believe that the selection criteria their institution chooses will have a noticeable impact on the behavior of high school students and administrators. They do not believe that they have a powerful voice in matters of high school curriculum, standards and teacher qualifications. Consequently, the admissions criteria used are not selected to send the “right signals” back down the pipeline, they are selected because the data is available, it’s cheap and it predicts success in college.

Some admissions criteria accomplish both objectives—selecting successful students and sending the right signals to high school students and administrators. The most prominent of these criteria is **the challenge level of courses taken**. The second selection criterion that accomplishes both objectives is **external assessments of student achievement in specific courses or course sequences** [eg. AP exam results, Regents exam grades, the end-of-course exams in Texas and Maryland, the SAT-II Achievement tests]. While aptitude test (SAT-1 and ACT) scores, GPA and class rank may be useful predictors of freshman year grades, the heavy emphasis on these admissions criteria induces high school students and school administrators to behave in educationally dysfunctional ways. The anti-intellectual norms of the student peer culture, the pressure on teachers to sacrifice rigor for entertainment and the large numbers of teachers assigned to teach outside their field of expertise are, in part, a consequence of the heavy emphasis

college admissions places on aptitude, GPA and class rank and the insufficient emphasis given to the challenge level of courses and externally assessed achievement in these courses.

2.2 Some Colleges must stick with an Open Admissions Philosophy

Some have argued that the problems listed above should be addressed by raising minimum academic standards for admission to post-secondary education. Albert Shankar, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Robert Samuelson, editorial writer for Newsweek, for example, have proposed that college admissions and financial aid go only to those who have demonstrated some minimum level of achievement on an external assessment. They point out that East Asia and most European nations have such a high stakes examination for admission to tertiary education and this is a major reason why secondary schools in these countries set high academic standards.

Such a policy would certainly strengthen incentives to offer and to take rigorous courses in high school, but it is **not** part of the reforms proposed below. The first reason for rejecting this policy recommendation is philosophical. Society should offer everyone, no matter their age or how many mistakes they have made in the past, the opportunity to go back to school and try to make something better out of the rest of their life. High schools cannot fulfill this function. Their adolescent culture make them alien territory for adults. Only colleges with open door admissions policies can serve this function.

The second reason for rejecting this approach is that it would reduce college attendance and graduation rates. The economic payoff to a college education is higher now than it has been at any time since the end of World War II (Goldin and Katz, 1999). It makes no sense to restrict opportunities to attend college at such a time. One of the primary reasons for raising academic standards in K-12 education is to expand opportunity for and participation in post-secondary education. Ending open-door admissions policies would prevent that objective from being realized.

The problem with college admissions policies is not the low minimum standard for entering some colleges--the open-door community colleges. Rather, the problem is the criteria used to decide which students are admitted to colleges that are at selective or at least moderately selective in their admissions policies and the means of deciding which students must take non-credit remedial courses.

2.3 A MODEST PROPOSAL: External Assessments of Student Achievement in Specific Fields of Study Should Displace the SAT-I and ACT test in College Admissions and Placement Decisions

Curriculum-based external exit exams (CBEEE) given at the end of specific high school courses should be an important factor in deciding who is admitted to particular colleges, to particular programs within a college[x] and into degree credit programs generally. Students who do not meet a college's minimum requirements would be required to take remedial courses that would not yield credits towards an associates or bachelors degree. The number and character of the remedial courses would depend on the student's deficiencies as measured by the CBEEEs.

This is not really a radical proposal because most colleges already offer remedial courses that students with academic deficiencies must take without getting degree credit. The proposal is to make a few simple changes in existing practice:

The examination program would be sponsored jointly by the State Education Department and the State University System. They could design the exam themselves or select a contractor. SAT-II tests and Pacesetter exams are examples of the kind of assessments that could fulfill this function.

The exams should be longer and more comprehensive than the typical placement tests administered during orientation week of freshman year and should be based on the state's content standards for that subject.

Like the Regents in New York State and Texas and Maryland's end of course exams, they should be given at the completion of specific courses or courses sequences. Some might be taken senior year, but many would be taken in 10th and 11th grade.

As in Canada, the students final grade in the course would be influenced by examination results but "passing" the exam would not be necessary to pass the course or to graduate from high school.

Teachers would be brought together in regional committees to anonymously grade the extended response components of the exams. The test developers would develop the rubrics for grading the exam and train the teachers in their use.

All public colleges in the state would be required to use the results of these exams in their placement and admissions decisions for students coming from within the state. Students who score below state set minimum standards in reading, writing and mathematics would have to take and pass remedial courses in their weak area before being admitted into a degree credit

program at public and state subsidized colleges. Individual colleges could set higher cutoff scores if they want.

The exams would be offered at least three times a year and students could retake the exam multiple times.[xi]

The State University system would direct public colleges and universities in the state to tell graduating seniors that scores on the ACT and SAT-I would not be a factor in admissions decisions. The ACT and SAT-I tests would continue their current role in the admission of out-of-state applicants, foreign students and adults.

Substituting externally assessed achievement exams given at the end of specific course sequences for the SAT-I and ACT test will have a salutary effect on student study habits and the decisions of school administrators. Colleges and universities are already stratified in their rigor and prestige and the economic rewards for graduating from the finest colleges are substantial (Solomon 1975; Loury and Garman 1995; Dale and Kruger 1998; Brewer and Ehrenberg 1996; Brewer, Eide and Ehrenberg 1999). This means that strong incentives to compete for admission to the best colleges already exist. The problem is not a lack of competition, but the basis of that competition--teacher assessments of achievement relative to others in your high school and aptitude tests that do not assess what has been learned in most high school courses. When college admissions decisions are based on external assessments of achievement in the subjects studied in high school, student incentives to study in high school and parental incentives to press for higher standards will substantially improve.

Implementing the recommendation just outlined requires concerted action by a state's education department and its university system. Creating a system of end-of-course exams is a big challenge so the full blown system described above is not likely to soon become a reality outside of a few states—such as New York, Texas, Oregon and Maryland--that already have systems of high standards end-of-course exams in place or under development.

2.4 Incremental Steps

Are there incremental steps that individual colleges or groups of colleges can take that would move them part way down the path? YES. Individual colleges should give the new Pacesetter program a positive reception and, of course, give scores on AP and IB exams substantial weight in evaluating the students who take them.

In 1999 686,000 students, about 11 percent of the nation's juniors and seniors took at least one AP exam. The number of students taking AP courses has grown at a compound annual rate of 9 percent per year (College Board 1999a). Despite this success, however, 44 percent of the

high schools still do not offer even one AP course and many others allow only a tiny minority of their students to take these courses. Pushing high schools to expand their AP and IB programs is one of the primary ways colleges can raise high school standards. If high schools are to respond college must act in concert. A large group of prestigious selective colleges and universities should announce that taking a couple of AP courses (and sitting for the AP exams) or IB courses or taking courses at a college campus (eg. in the summer) has already or soon will become (in 2004) a defacto admission requirement for admission to their college. This announcement should be sent to every high school principal (with copies to the school board and local newspaper) urging them to establish additional AP or IB courses and encourage more students to take them.[xii]

In 1999 1,220,130 college bound seniors took the SAT-I and 237,857 took one or more SAT-II achievement tests (College Board 1999b). This ratio needs to be reversed. Individual colleges can help this along by switching which test is optional. Why not make four or five SAT-II Achievement test scores (or AP and IB exam results) a requirement and make the submission of SAT-I scores optional.

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Endnotes

[i] The headmasters and guidance counselors that attended the conference said that the admissions policies of the University of Chicago and other similar institutions had a big effect on how they managed their school.

[ii] American 4th graders are better readers and know more science than their counterparts in almost every other country participating in IEA and TIMSS studies. In 8th grade American students have fallen back into the middle of the international league table in reading and science. At the end of high school American students lag far behind students in other industrialized countries in science and mathematics. In most cases the countries that have higher math and science literacy levels at the end of secondary school also graduate a larger proportion of their age cohort than we do (OECD 1998).

[iii]. The costs and benefits of studying vary across students because interest in the subject varies, ability varies, proximity to the college application process varies and parental pressure and rewards vary. This heterogeneity means that some students break the "minimize studying" norm. When they are a small minority, they cannot avoid feeling denigrated by classmates. In the top track and at schools where many students aspire to attend competitive colleges, they are numerous enough to create a sub culture of their own with norms denigrating those who do poorly on tests or who disrupt classroom activities. This is the structural basis of the "brains" and "preppie" cliques found in most American middle schools and high schools. However, most secondary school students are in crowds that do not respect studiousness. At a few especially troubled schools, awards ceremonies held during school time are marred by "some in the crowd jeer[ing] 'Nerd!'" as students are called to come up to receive an award (Suskind, 5/26/94, p. 1).

[iv] The letter that invited schools to participate in the study and join the Educational Excellence Alliance was worded as follows: “We are writing to offer your school the opportunity to obtain an assessment of student norms and peer culture at absolutely no cost to the school. The assessment is being undertaken by the Educational Excellence Alliance (EEA), a group of striving high schools that are interested in learning how to help all their students to achieve at higher levels. To join EEA all you need to do is to administer the enclosed questionnaire to your tenth graders and complete a short questionnaire about the school. We will scan the questionnaire, tabulate the answers and report back to you how the tenth grade answered each question and how their culture and norms compare with that of other schools serving students with similar socio-economic backgrounds. This report should allow you and your staff to more intelligently plan your efforts to improve achievement and build a student culture that honors academic achievement and respects individual differences….” This letter was sent to all high school principals and superintendents of schools in Connecticut and the superintendents and principals of high schools in northern New Jersey (Essex, Bergen, Hudson, Passaic and Morris counties), in Berkshire, Essex, Hampden, Norfolk, Middlesex,, Plymouth and Worcester counties in Massachusetts, Albany, Broome, Duchess, Erie, Nassau, Niagara, Oneida, Onondaga, Orange, Oswego, Putnam, Rensselaer, Rockland, Saratoga, Schenectady, Suffolk, Westchester counties in New York. New York City was approached but they chose not to participate. In addition invitations were sent to all non-public high schools in New York State outside of New York City and in the seven targeted Massachusetts counties. Ten to fifteen percent of invited schools

agreed to participate in the study and returned their questionnaires in time to be included in this analysis.

[v] Candidate items for each scale were selected on an a priori basis. A few candidate items were dropped from scales when they failed to have the expected relationships with other items of the scale. Scales were then constructed by first standardizing (to have a zero mean and unit variance) each item in the scale, then averaging the standardized items using SAS's Means command (leaving out missing items when calculating the average), and then restandardizing the scale to have a population SD of 1.

[vi] Public universities admitting thousands of students from a particular state have the ability to evaluate high school standards more reliably than our small college's admissions committee. They could, for example, tabulate student grade point averages by high school. Even better they could tabulate residuals from a regression using GPA and test scores to predict college GPAs. Julian Betts (1999) conducted such a study on students at the University of California, San Diego and found that the high school attended had a big effect on college GPA even when SAT scores and GPA were controlled. Students from schools where most of the parents had a college education had significantly higher college GPAs even when SATs and high school GPAs were controlled. When I was visiting Alberta a few years ago, I was told that the University of Alberta kept book on high schools in the province by doing computer runs on freshman year grades by high school. The information was used to help interpret GPAs and class rank. They do not advertise this practice, however.

[vii] In states that require students to pass minimum competency examinations (MCE) to graduate, increasing the number of students passing the MCE and getting the high school diploma can become the focus of the school improvement program. Unlike the expand AP strategy, increasing the pass rate on the MCE requires a big focus on helping struggling students. Note, that in both cases it is the existence of an external assessment and large rewards for doing well on the assessment that gives the principal a means of persuading the school board that students will receive tangible benefits if you give me the resources I need to do the job. In the absence of an MCE, the easiest way of increasing the high school graduation rate is to create caretaker classes that are close to impossible to fail for those at risk of dropping out. Many schools appear to pursue that strategy.

[viii] This may not be the best strategy, however, in states that use class rank as a primary criterion for selecting students for selective state universities. In these states—eg.. California and Texas—moving to a district with low academic standards may maximize one's child's chances for admission to the top state university. Such a move, however, increases the chances your child will not succeed at the competitive university and fail out or dropout.

[ix.] Publishing data on proportions of students meeting state targets on standardized tests probably speeds the process by which real improvements in a school's performance influence it's local reputation. However, other indicators such as SAT test scores, proportions going to various types of colleges and the socioeconomic background of the students tend to be more prominent. In Ithaca, New York, for example, the promotional literature of the high school focuses on SAT scores, National Merit Scholarship awards, college attendance rates and AP test results, not the results on State mandated proficiency exams. Only the AP test results are directly related to the quality of teaching at the school.

[x] For example, an electronics technician program might admit only those with a minimum level of competence in algebra and physics.

[xi] The August administration of the exam would occur on college campuses as well as at high schools so that adults returning to college and freshman coming from other states could be assessed by the same placement test. Colleges could, if they want, develop their own placement test for out-of–state, foreign and adult students.

[xii.] This proposal sounds radical but, in fact, is only a modest change from current practice at these selective colleges. A survey of college placement officials conducted by USA Today and interviews of officials at Cornell, SUNY Binghamton, SUNY Albany and other SUNY universities conducted for this paper found that students were expected to take AP courses if they are offered and judgments about the rigor of courses taken influenced how grade point averages were evaluated. Many high school students and parents are unaware of this policy, however, and have not factored it into their course selections. The announcement, therefore, has two effects: it informs students and parents of existing admissions policies and warns that come 2004 those seeking admission to selective colleges will not necessarily be held harmless if a local high school does not offer AP courses. It should also be stressed that students high schools should require all students in the course to take the examination. This announcement will generate strong political pressure on principals and school boards to expand their AP program and allow additional students to take AP courses. Students at schools not offering AP or IB courses might be offered other ways of demonstrating college level proficiency such as an AP independent study option, taking courses during the summer at a local college or high scores on the SAT-II achievement exams. Exceptions would have to be made for foreign students and under-represented minorities.