Teens Think Deeply About Student Achievement
May 7, 2012

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Executive Summary

In a 2011 online project with teens from around the nation, Citizens League Students Speak Out asked, "Should we broaden our nation's predominant definition of student achievement?"

Teens are frequently exposed to the predominant definition of student achievement. It is part of their daily lives in their schools. But Citizens League wondered: What would teens say if they were exposed to some of the lesser-known ideas in today's dialogue?

This project evolved out of Citizens League's participation in dialogues about achievement and assessment around Minnesota. It is our observation that there is some disagreement regarding what students should know and be able to do when they graduate from high school, even as our state currently requires its young people to meet high standards in order to graduate. Some citizens and organizations are on-board with current policies, while others deeply question whether the policies will increase student achievement and maximize use of limited resources. The debate seems far from over.

Students' voices are a rarely heard voice in this mix. With their futures at stake, the Citizens League believes students' thinking must be a part of the dialogue. Our purpose in taking on this project was to learn from teens' insights and experiences.

Over a nine-week period, a diverse group of teens answered questions from adults with outside-the-mainstream perspectives about student achievement and went on to dialogue with other project participants about each topic—digging deeper into one another's ideas. After nine weeks, there were six primary findings:

Finding 1: Teens agreed that reading, writing and math are important. But mastering these subjects—especially as they are taught today—is not *all* that is important when it comes to student achievement.

Finding 2: Teens said that as long as knowledge can be legitimately demonstrated, students should be awarded credit for what they have learned both inside and outside of schools.

Finding 3: Teens said that individual progress should be acknowledged as achievement, even if a student's highest-level of achievement in high school does not meet what her state has defined as "high standards" or does not qualify her for a four-year college.

Finding 4. Teens said they need and want a lot more information about the array of higher education opportunities as well as counseling services that would help them as they determine *their own* best choices for success.

Finding 5. Some teens were comfortable with current cultural expectations of adolescents, but others wondered if they might achieve more if they were expected to take on greater levels of personal responsibility.

Finding 6. Some teens reported their belief that a major cultural shift will be required for there to be any change in our current approach.

Introduction and Background

In a 2011 online project with teens from around the nation, Citizens League Students Speak Out asked, "Should we broaden our nation's predominant definition of student achievement?"

Teens are frequently exposed to the predominant definition of student achievement. It is part of their daily lives in their schools. But Citizens League wondered: What would teens say if they were exposed to some of the lesser-known ideas in today's dialogue? Have they considered them? Do they see any validity in ideas about achievement that are outside of what they experience in their schools? After exposure to and consideration of new and different ideas, would they think we should stick to today's policies as they relate to achievement, or pursue a broader definition of achievement?

The nation's movement toward Common Core Standards in an effort to boost student achievement has sparked intense debate. Opponents suggest that implementing the standards will narrow public perception of what is considered to be "quality," at the expense of both individual and national progress.

There is also debate over whether students should meet high standards in reading, writing and math. What if, instead, we required students to meet basic standards in some subjects and high standards in others, depending on students' aptitudes and interests? More questions loom about whether high standards should come with high stakes in reading, writing, math, and science. In other words, should each student's graduation hinge on meeting high standards in these specific subjects?

Additionally, many wonder if Common Core Standards suggest that "achievement" is something that only happens in schools. Do students ever achieve outside-of-schools? And, if so, should we accept such learning as formal achievement, so long as students meet any required standards?

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Students' voices are a rarely heard voice in this mix. With their futures at stake, the Citizens League believes students' thinking must be a part of the dialogue. Our purpose in taking on this project was to learn from teens' insights and experiences. At this time we do not intend to assert any agenda other than the idea that teens' voices are an important part of framing this major discussion about K-12 public policy.

Students Speak Out's Methods and Project Participation Level

Teens dialogued about the definition of student achievement for nine weeks as participants in Students Speak Out's moderated online discussion forum at www.StudentsSpeakOut.org. There were 60 total participants, a mix of teens and adults. We identified six teens as "lead commentators" who were responsible for participating in every dialogue. The lead commentators represented a range of schools and experiences:

- Molly, an honors student in her junior year at Harry D. Jacobs, a traditional high school in Algonquin, Illinois.
- Kumar, an eighth-grade student in a private Montessori school in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Miriam, a bilingual, Mexican-born, chartered-school student at Salt Lake Center for Science Education in Utah.
- Marie, a 19-year old public magnet school student in Colorado, who graduated "late."
- Semeo, a formerly homeschooled student attending Brooklyn Free School, an independent school in New York.
- Sara, a freshman at the traditional Armstrong High School in suburban Plymouth, Minnesota.

There were also two teen moderators who helped lead the online discussions in conjunction with their participation with the Citizens League in the Civic Youth Leadership Initiative. Both teen moderators had participated as members in previous Students Speak Out projects.

- Brett Campbell, a freshman at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Formerly a student at Avalon School, a self-directed and project-based chartered school also in St. Paul.
- Nora Kane, a junior at Southwest High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

For seven of the nine weeks, the teen moderators, lead commentators and other teen and adult participants responded to seven "question askers" from all over the nation and, each week, dialogued about the topic raised by each "asker" with all project participants. The "askers" were selected because

of their outside-the-mainstream perspectives on student achievement. During the other two weeks, the first week and last week of the project, teens expressed their opening and concluding ideas about student achievement. See Appendix A for a list of the weekly questions and "askers." All dialogues can be seen in their entirety at StudentsSpeakOut.org.

All-in-all, the project generated 458 comments during the nine week period. Public interest in "watching" the dialogues was high. As of eight months after the project conclusion there had been approximately 1,200 unique visitors and 13,300 page views.

Six main findings

Finding 1: Teens agreed that reading, writing and math are important. But mastering these subjects—especially as they are taught today—is not *all* that is important when it comes to student achievement.

Teens said that reading, writing, math, and science are important subjects to learn. But there is a lot *more* that teens learn that is vital to their individual success, and the nation's success. For this reason, teens believe that "student achievement" should involve more than accomplishing high standards in core subjects.

Teens indicated that one important aspect of students' achievement, for example, is having an understanding of how "core" academic subjects connect to their personal life goals. Or, for students who haven't yet set such goals, having the opportunity to develop personal life goals as part of their exploration of core academic subjects. To accommodate this, some teens suggested exposing younger students to the basics of a broader array of subjects, and allowing for them to specialize as they grow older.

Teens want to know: What else would we learn if we pursued a particular academic subject further? How does this subject connect to jobs and careers? What do people do in those occupations, and what kind of lifestyles do they lead? What academic and nonacademic skills will we need to accomplish personal goals (which teens expect will vary by student)?

> "I do not believe that 'achievement' in the skills of reading, writing, math and science is sufficient. I find that knowledge without direction is useless. One can be well versed in any subject they put their minds toward. Memorizing, however—simply knowing how to recite information—says nothing of one's true aspirations nor does it say anything of their preparedness to pursue those aspirations." *Semeo*

> "I think that middle-school curriculums could be improved a bit to help us realize our talents. Include more options of study instead of just earth, life, and physical science? Introduce students to basic chemistry, biology, and physics as well … so that we can at least experience how many different core subcategories there are. If we can get introduced to more material [at a basic level] … then we'll have a better understanding of what our future will look like and what occupations might suit us better." *Liz*

The teens delved deeper into these ideas in a discussion about math learning. All teens said that math learning is important, although there was debate about what kind of math learning. While most teen commentators defended current high standards (e.g., Minnesota's requirement that students must pass Algebra II to graduate), nearly all said that math learning must be made more relevant to their lives—especially their future careers.

This caused some teens and adults to strongly challenge the majority, asking tough questions. Do we, as a society, accept math teaching and learning as it is (a linear path from algebra to calculus) because we've been told it's *the* way even though we have serious questions about how it is taught and its relevance to our futures? Might there be other, better ways for some students learn math (such as financial literacy, game theory, graph theory, or behavioral economics)? Is being told that algebra-to-calculus is "*the* path to success" a good enough reason to keep math learning as it is?

Most teens said the importance of learning continuous math (algebra to calculus) at a high-level is that completing the coursework well will help them to get in to college. Learning continuous math is also important to teens "just in case" they pick a career that will require high-level mathematics. Some teens, who described themselves as honors or Advanced Placement math students, said that they are learning math for the sake of college entrance and plan to drop it after that, mostly because they do not see how it relates to their college major or career plans. Some teens said they don't think the current math learning is best for their overall learning, but what are they to do? They must do what is necessary to get in to college.

> "I think every student should take Algebra II because you never know [if you might have to] use it in your job." *Miriam*

> "I am currently in the honors [math] track and my honors friends agree continuous mathematics is beneficial to our future. The higher the math level course, the more it is likely for one to test out of math courses in college. [Generally, these same friends] do not have the desire to continue math throughout their high school career and typically stop at Algebra II. I think that every student should take Algebra II and BEYOND in order to be successful in a well-paying job. The standards are being raised for this generation and students should take the courses offered to them, despite the challenge, in order to be prepared for their future. I believe there is a correlation between a student's desire to learn math and their knowledge of how it will pertain to them in the future. If students aren't provided with the motivation to learn in high school, it's most likely they will not pursue higher level careers that require beyond Algebra II math skills. I see how this may lead to the increase of drop-out rates. If motivation is not instilled in high school, it is likely this will carry on to the professional world. …Perhaps the classes … [should] reflect the students' interests [and] pertain to real life scenarios." *Molly*

> "This staunch defense of … continuous mathematics, despite recognition that much of the math taught in a high school is irrelevant to the average person's life, is a clear sign of what is wrong with the American education system … Let me be clear: I am a

hypocrite. I am in an advanced track in my school's math program. I am not interested in pursuing a career that benefits from higher math, yet I plan on taking all four years of math myself—likely culminating with an AP test or two. I wish this was not the case. I do not blame those who recommend the previously mentioned requirements. They are on to something—that certain math courses, even when not actually used in the career of choice, are nearly essential to success. …[But] it is my belief that math, rather than be taught for regularly applicable skills or recommended as a necessity for those who wish to specialize in a study or career that requires it, has become a mere benchmark; just another way for colleges and universities to help determine which students to admit to their gates. There needs to be change. The system, as it stands, is being clogged by the bureaucratic insistence by school administration that every student achieve a certain level of achievement in fields that, by practical applications anyway, are irrelevant to most." *Michael*

"I would be inclined to believe that proficiency standards should be geared less towards AP calculus and more towards financial independence. Can you do basic arithmetic? Can you balance a checkbook? Calculate interest? Keep a budget? These are the sorts of things that keep a person afloat in Grown-Up Land, not y=mx+b. Most of my teachers in subjects other than math, by their own admission, would have trouble breaking 400 on the math section of the SAT. But despite what some of my past math teachers would have me believe, [my other teachers] are all still happy, successful people who can, to the best of my knowledge, put their pants on without bruising themselves." *Marie*

"I think that if math were required only up to a certain level, I would certainly stop taking it. My problem with the math we learn in school is that there are no connections made to real life in the way it is taught. My interest and the engagement of my mind on certain things really depend on how important I think it is. I am not questioning the importance of math, it's just that I want to know what the importance of certain kinds of math is." *Kumar*

"I am currently a student of an honors course of Algebra II, and I feel that although there is frustration with math, that frustration can be addressed with changes and referendums on the curricula that can legitimize that which students learn. Hopefully, these changes would include connections to real life that are not hypothetical or dated. I believe that even though we might not use all of the tools we learn of in school, the experience of learning and mastering material is of greatest importance. Algebra II and the programs that follow it challenge a student's ability to comprehend new material that they haven't ever before discussed. This in itself is a valuable lesson." *Annika*

"I am in calculus class not by my own choosing but by that of my parents. I have been on the math fast track, which led up to calculus this year, for years. I have had a hard time not only understanding the subject but also in wrapping my head around how I will ever use it. I do not plan on going into the math field, so calculus will most likely never

> "It isn't the essays and the scores that I'm proud of, or even getting into colleges. I'm proud that I overcame a learning disability and years of clinical depression to get where I am today: about to graduate high school—late, but none the worse for wear—and attend my first choice college. I don't know how I did it. But I certainly didn't learn it in school."
> *Marie*

benefit me, besides in applying to colleges. While I don't think that this was the right course for me to take, I definitely believe that I should be taking some math course, just maybe one that will be useful for me later on." *Nora*

Other important aspects of student achievement, teens said, are gaining career, learning and innovation skills. Also, some said that their volunteerism has taught them it is important to gain an understanding that there are societal goals and needs in addition to personal goals and needs. Teens explained that schools' focus on academics, grades and test scores does not convey value for these skills and relegates this learning to outside-of-school.

"An A on your report card in … required classes does not equate [to] an education. It's not good enough for me, and it's not good enough for America. If our education stays like this we'll all be good book-smart people without getting anything worthwhile done. Outside of my core classes, I learn teamwork, people skills and critical thinking/solving—things that along with a traditional education will propel me far in life. While some of these skills are learned in the classroom, most of them are not, and they're certainly not valued in the way an 'A' is. Volunteering, organizing events, and training with my athletic teams have been the main places where these qualities [are developed and acknowledged]." *Sara*

"I found achievement through being given support and room to explore what I aspired to pursue, which often go beyond the basic subjects of reading, writing, math, and science. I do not believe a focus on 'achieving' skills in the basic academic principles will benefit the nation. I have achieved much from talking and facilitating discussions among my peers, learning decision making skills in meetings with members of my community, planning trips and fundraisers, and being a part of community projects." *Semeo*

Another important aspect of student achievement, teens said, is learning life-management and coping skills. This includes learning how to manage school, job and extracurricular schedules as well as personal health problems, communicating learning needs with teachers, and more. Teens asserted that understanding their aptitudes and interests could help them with life and school management.

"I don't often use or see the word achievement without its attendant set of scare quotes anymore, most probably because I don't honestly consider the types of things we call 'achievements'—the grades, the essays, the test scores—to be particularly exciting or meaningful accomplishments. I don't say this as someone who is merely

bitter. I've earned test scores competitive enough and written essays slick enough to be admitted to selective colleges despite having no letter grades.

"I think knowing my potential strengths would be very helpful, as it could influence what classes I take and fields I choose to pursue. I've found that I enjoy things I'm good at, so if there was a way to kind of predict my success beyond just knowledge I've accumulated that would be helpful." *Sara*

Finding 2: Teens said that as long as knowledge can be legitimately demonstrated, students should be awarded credit for what they have learned both inside and outside of schools.

There was unanimous agreement among teens that academic credit should be awarded for possessing knowledge—no matter where it was gained. Teens were asked if credit should be awarded for what is learned via the World Wide Web (via resources such as Kahn Academy's collection of math-learning videos, for example). Teens said, "Yes!" They also added that credit should be awarded for other outside-of-school learning, whether knowledge is gained from books, employment, conversing with people, or other sources.

"If online schooling works for a particular student, it should absolutely 'count' if the student can demonstrate his understanding of the material, because in my book, ability to demonstrate understanding is the very definition of learning. The knowledge itself is the desired result, and how that knowledge was acquired is a largely moot question." *Marie*

"I believe that any information you can find with the use of technology can be found through books in a library or (my personal favorite way of learning) talking to people and listening to what they know." *Semeo*

Several teens said that their teachers are already encouraging use of Web resources for supplementary learning (e.g. teens wanting more information or extra help) or to help students make-up what they miss when they are absent. One student was taking an online course in math for college credit, but her other courses were conventional. If these learning formats are legitimate, teens said, then all learning teens *choose* to do— whether via the Web or other resources—should be seen as legitimate and worthy of academic credit.

> "A teacher's lesson can sometimes only go so far, and online learning is a great tool to supplement their instruction." *Sara*

"A teacher's lesson can sometimes only go so far, and online learning is a great tool to supplement their instruction. A lot of my teachers understand this, and have encouraged us to find outside resources to help and extend our learning within the classroom." *Sara*

"I can't say I'd take every class this way, but online math is working out quite well for me. I've always struggled with math, but particularly when I've tried to learn it in the usual, brick-and-mortar classroom setting. I find that most math textbooks provide only vague, elliptical explanations of each new concept and assume the classroom teacher will fill in the rest. I absorb information I've read much better than information I've heard and I've always found it difficult to keep up with a lecture while taking notes, so it's been a tremendous help to have all the information in writing. It's a little austere, yes, but I've never had an A in math before." *Marie*

Teens were clear that legitimizing outside-of-school learning would require development of a fair means of demonstrating knowledge attained outside of school.

"There is not a problem with taking the course online but demonstrating that they know the material could be a problem. I think that the students would have to test at school to prevent cheating. If students were tested on the material outside of school it would be too simple to test on one computer and use another to search answers for." *Nikolaus*

Some teens also had concerns about legitimizing outside-of-school learning. These teens feared that legitimization would be a slippery slope to a school system based entirely on online learning, and they had a number of assumptions about what that would entail. They associated online learning with teachers losing their jobs (not good, they said, since relationships with teachers can motivate students), a negative impact on funding for conventional schools, and a lack of socialization. When Students Speak Out moderators exposed these teens to unconventional ideas about how students' means of socialization, teachers' roles, and the general design of school might evolve as outside-of-school learning became more prevalent, such that their concerns might be addressed, they did not respond.

"[Learning from online sources should be considered legitimate], however, I do not believe it should provide an alternative to the traditional classroom setting, and should only be utilized as a [supplementary] resource. …School districts … in … budget crises … have been using online schooling as an alternative to traditional schooling in order to be more 'frugal,' and [to avoid paying] for teachers. In my opinion, this is an outrage and online schooling should not provide a replacement for traditional schooling methods. The material may be the same, however the teacher-student bond would be nonexistent, what many students rely on to motivate themselves in school settings." *Molly*

"The community feeling of going to a physical school five days a week, where you are interacting with the same students and teachers every day, is very important. Most of my close friends have come into my life through school, and I think the school experience is so important to a person's development." *Kumar*

Finding 3: Teens said that individual progress should be acknowledged as achievement, even if a student's highest-level of achievement in high school does not meet what her state has defined as "high standards" or does not qualify her for a four-year college.

Teens said that individual academic progress ought to be acknowledged as achievement. There are distinctions in students' opportunities and goals. Furthermore, they said, it is impossible for all teens to be at the same place on the "track" at the same age. Life just doesn't happen like that. Teens explained that failing to acknowledge individual distinctions, and individual progress, suggests that teens who do not meet high standards are at fault, or have no chance to reach goals at a later age than 18 (when most are expected to graduate).

The teens were asked if a fellow student could be described as having "achieved" if she were to enter ninth-grade doing fifth-grade level math and leave high school doing ninth-grade level math. At that level, the student could gain employment in some jobs (but not others) or continue making progress after graduation and eventually pursue a career in a field that uses math. Generally, teens said that this student has indeed achieved. One teen who had declared himself a supporter of high standards associated with high stakes (i.e., graduation depends on meeting the high standards) answered:

> "Although the student may not have been able to pass Algebra II … if improving in the field of mathematics was the students' goal, she definitely reached that point and therefore achieved. Realistically, society's predetermined 'achievement' cannot be met by absolutely everyone due to any number of factors. By meeting what may have been her goal of furthering her math education, the student shows not only a high level of dedication, but of achievement in a personalized sense." *Matthew*

Teens said that the idea of meeting high standards by a certain age implies there is only one way to succeed. They worried that when teens do not meet the timeline, they start to believe that their future opportunities are poor. These teens might give up trying, even when they are making great progress. A longer path to their goal should not be seen as "off track," teens said. Teens can be "on track," but at a slower pace. They can also be on a path to success, but not to a four-year college.

Teens reported that they need to know there is "still time" and that there are "many paths." Failing to acknowledge this can easily drive some teens to quit altogether. Teens will see their future as already determined and lose the motivation to set and achieve personal goals.

> "As a young black man, I can't tell you how many times I hear from other young black or Latino kids say how going to college or getting a nice job is something for white people or rich people. In a very subtle way the [way some teens see themselves as a result of the achievement] gap kills would-be successful minority doctors, lawyers, scientists, etc." *Semeo*

"I think [helping teens see] into the future is key. If a student can see how their choices in high school will affect their life, maybe they would be more willing to work harder, get help, etc. ...Some student(s) might think it's impossible for them to attend/attain an undergrad degree, but if other pathways to success were made available or at least shown, that could be a motivator. …If a four year college isn't realistic for them, why try? That's why I believe all pathways to success should be acknowledged and respected." *Sara*

"I learned [from this Students Speak Out project] that there is still time for people to achieve and make a difference." *Miriam*

"The students with minimum resources that continue to live a life successful in their terms, pursuing what they intend on doing with the minimum resources they have, should be applauded. If they can discover a sustainable lifestyle with what they are given, this is achievement in a sense …There are many students after high school who cannot afford a college education, [who] are swept up in the vacuum of the real world, unable to provide for themselves or their family." *Molly*

"All kids and students need to feel a sense of belonging. …Adults should be the ones maintaining that attitude of 'I can'; which students will look upon and use as a motivation. Researchers state that origins of the achievement gap begin in early childhood. It manifests itself way before kindergarten happens. Once students are behind, they will never, or find it increasingly harder to catch up. The schools should find ways to accommodate different students, such as (although impossible when faced against budget cuts) reducing class size, and smaller schools." *Liz*

Some teens suggested that meeting high standards can also cause a "check the box"/"conform to this plan" mentality that might be hindering the potential of top performers, for whom the standards might be below what they have the capacity to do. One teen said she was underachieving in honors classes, even though she was getting good grades.

"I learned [from this Students Speak Out project] that there is still time for people to achieve and make a difference." Miriam

"I … am mostly in honors, International Baccalaureate, or Advanced Placement classes and sometimes feel I am 'underachieving' despite good grades." *Nora*

Some teens worried that the idea of broadening the definition of achievement would cause policymakers and parents to mandate more standards. Teens feared having to know even more than is already required. More and more requirements, they said, would only serve to worsen the problems identified during this project, such as adults' failure to acknowledge learning that occurs outside of schools or adults using standards as a reason to try and keep all students on the same pace and track.

Most teens recommended that standards be individualized. Schools could present all of the available opportunities to individuals, at basic levels, and connect these opportunities to what students are learning. As teens gain awareness about their opportunities, they should be able to identify their own definition of achievement. They can then determine how to achieve high standards in their own areas of pursuit, with guidance from adults along the way. This will boost student motivation and morale, teens suggested.

> "Yes, we should broaden the definition of student achievement. The big problem I see is that not all students are the same. We aren't robots and can't all be judged on the same scale. We aren't all either 'good' or 'bad.' We aren't able to do exactly the same thing as the next person. The definition of student achievement should be more individualized." *Kumar*

> "[A lot of teens already] feel that if they are not involved in and committed to numerous activities, then they are not good enough or will not get into the college of their choice. This societal idea that teens need to have every minute of their day scheduled is detrimental to their physical as well as psychological health. There was an interesting study done that we discussed in school where monkeys were given a puzzle and once they solved it they were rewarded with food. After repeating this processes many times the monkeys learned that by solving the puzzle they would be rewarded. The same group of monkeys was then given puzzles but not rewarded for solving them. However, most of the monkeys continued solving the puzzles, some even solving them faster than before. The study concluded that monkeys were more motivated when they were not given a reward. I think this concept can be applied to humans and teenagers as well. If we don't have to do a task for something or for someone we will do it better because we are merely curious." *Louise*

> "I think it is most important for each of us individuals to have our own concept of achievement as (for many of us) it is one of the greatest feelings one can have and that feeling of achievement leads one to want to continue achieving in larger fields and motivates that person onto success." *Semeo*

> "I believe achievement is defined as the level of 'success' one reaches, at the point where they are happy." *Molly*

Finding 4. Teens said they need and want a lot more information about the array of higher education opportunities as well as counseling services that would help them as they determine *their own* best choices for success.

Most teens initially asserted that four-year college should be *the* goal. This is what they've always been told, they said. But when asked if a hairdresser—who chose not go to four-year college when she knew she wasn't interested, took on significantly less debt to attend a cosmetology program, and now happily financially supports her family—has achieved well, they said that she has. They also suggested that from

the messages they have heard in school, they would expect that the hairdresser had been told that her chosen life path was not "successful" before she left school.

> "I do believe [the hairdresser] made a rational choice [to not attend four-year college]. Perhaps success isn't based on what others believe you have accomplished, but accomplishing for yourself, a career that makes you truly happy." *Molly*

> "These options are still painted in a condescending light more often than not. Even when hearing presentations from representatives of these very programs, I've noticed a distinct subtext of, 'School was too hard for this chump, but now he has a good job and we're so proud of him.' It becomes a sort of insult, then, to suggest such an option to a student. Even well-meaning people refer to these sorts of programs as 'alternatives' to college." *Marie*

Teens went on to suggest that school professionals must acknowledge and tell students that there are a range of valid options for their future. These professionals need to make clear the costs of each choice in addition to the benefits. After considering other higher education options, and learning more about costs of four-year colleges in comparison, teens felt that they were previously under-informed.

Schools' focus, teens say, is only on four-year college and its benefits. They all agreed that four-year college is an excellent opportunity that should be presented as an option for all. But it should be presented alongside other options, and with due credit to the others. Four-year college, they said, is not necessary for all careers, it can be costly, and the job market is not particularly good for recent graduates (although it will turn around). Its value can depend on a number of factors.

> "I think that, right now, most people view a college education as the only way to be truly successful in their life, and many of them do not know anything about the other roads they could take. I certainly didn't know much about them until [participating in this dialogue], and I know I am not alone."

> "I think that, right now, most people view a college education as the only way to be truly successful in their life, and many of them do not know anything about the other roads they could take. I certainly didn't know much about them until [participating in this dialogue], and I know I am not alone. …If students set a goal for their future and could plot out which education path fits not only their future, but their budget as well, this could be a huge asset in planning high school and college courses (or the decision to skip college)." *Kumar*

> "My cousin Jen owns her own salon and supports her husband as he is still going through school. They have two kids, and it works for them. I think that for many people

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like this—entrepreneurs, business owners, etc.—a four year college degree is not necessary and may be a waste of money." *Sara*

"[I believe that] more guidance given to students about well-paying jobs and whether they have to attend college or not [to achieve their goals] will help their self-awareness [and improve their ability] to choose their destiny. …In my school they work everybody really hard so [students] can go to college and have a great future. … [At my school, teachers are] speaking about careers this week for the ninth graders. We needed to think of a job we wanted and write about it and it was very good because it was making the students think. …I am thinking about what I want to do after high school and that's a really good thing. I think it's a very good idea…to talk to someone about the field I would like, because they give you more information about what they do and if you like it you go for it and if you see that it's something that you were not looking for then you can look for something else." *Miriam*

"Many students, especially in this economy, consider technical school to pursue their dreams considering it is most likely more affordable than a four-year college. I find that when students take the extra step towards this specialized diploma, this gives them an advantage in reference to their after high school plans. I also believe that students should graduate with a variation of skills and knowledge because not every plan of each students' future is the same. The knowledge and skills one gains should be determined upon the goals they plan on accomplishing in the future." *Molly*

When teens were asked whether it would be helpful to have more information about their aptitudes and interests, they said, "Yes." Teens made connections between having a better idea of their aptitudes and interests and the ability to customize their learning program. This would improve students' motivation to learn, they suggested. Teens also said they'd appreciate connections with adults to develop an understanding of their aptitudes and interests, as they relate to careers.

Too often school counseling is limited to helping students stay on the academic path to four-year college, students said. Counseling does not seem to provide students with an array of information and tools to make decisions. This focus does not allow teens to develop their purpose in pursuing higher education. Having the opportunity to consider personal motivations, aptitudes and interests would be a good idea, they said. Again, teens want more information prior to making such a big investment of time and money in higher education.

Teens warned, however, that counseling about aptitudes must be approached carefully. It is important that such learning be used to expose teens to information about themselves so they can consider options, and not to limit options. Teens worried that adults would associate aptitudes with potential, and that knowing teens' aptitudes would give adults an opportunity to "track" them into something they do not want to do.

"If students were given the opportunity to capitalize on their aptitudes rather than herded through cookie-cutter curricula, they might accomplish bigger and better things

at earlier ages … or at least be happier people. …The one thing we'd want to avoid is an overly deterministic attitude towards the tests. …We don't want young people to get the idea that their futures were determined more or less at birth." *Marie*

"If I were to understand my aptitude profile I would definitely be more motivated in school and probably have a solid prospective career in mind. This idea would possibly clear my class schedule of irrelevant electives and unnecessary classes that have no benefit. …Also, in my school, career counseling is nonexistent without request. I am terribly disturbed by this!! Our counseling staff's main objective is to work on the students' schedules. This makes things increasingly difficult as I am approaching my senior year in high school, without a solid idea of my career path. I would love to experience talking with adults working in a specific field that may interest me. This could increase my likelihood of actually pursuing that career and solidify my path in college. …I would highly appreciate some sort of 'career' fair. Not a college fair ... but a fair where people of different professions come to display their occupation and interest teens." *Molly*

> "As long as we have students with individual and unique goals and different preferences for learning, it's not possible for all of them to leave high school with the same knowledge and skills."
> *Semeo*

"I partially like the objective to help find what field you are most likely to succeed in, [but] I find I dislike the idea of someone being 'capable' or only having 'potential' to succeed in specific field." *Semeo*

"When I think about achievement, and look at the way students in my graduating class (of 24 students) personalized their education, each of them achieved success. When students are allowed this individualization, and aren't expected to conform to one particular mold such as '[four-year] college for all' we don't crush valid alternative options, (such as professional rugby, environmental projects and vocational school). Student's aptitudes are taken into account, and no one is forced down a pathway where they don't have a chance at being successful. All 24 of us are going on to do something unique and ideal for us." *Brett*

Almost all teens affirmed the idea of offering specialized diplomas at the high school level—for example, students could choose between standard, technical, advanced standard, or modified standard diplomas as is currently the case in Virginia[1]. Teens said that such diplomas would affirm for all teens what they

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[1] According to the State of Virginia Web site, www.virginia.gov, high school students may choose to work toward and graduate with either a Standard Diploma, an Advanced Standard Diploma, a Modified Standard Diploma (for students with disabilities), a Standard Technical Diploma, or an Advanced Technical Diploma. The state of Virginia also offers its students the General

see as the truth—that students have varying knowledge, skills and life paths—and the four-year college path is not the only legitimate option.

> "As long as we have students with individual and unique goals and different preferences for learning, it's not possible for all of them to leave high school with the same knowledge and skills." *Semeo*

> "I think specialized high school diplomas are a great idea for people who are interested in pursuing a career in a technical field, or maybe for those who just want to learn more hands-on. A specialized high school diploma could also be very beneficial for someone who doesn't plan on going to a four-year college. If you don't have the means or interest to go to college, a diploma like this could set you apart in a technical field. I think most students should graduate high school with all the basic skills, but if they want to specialize they should choose what they would like to specialize in. ...I would not want to [choose a specialty] at this point in my life, but rather wait and find out what I want to go into to. But for those who can't afford to do so, and need a job that pays more than minimum wage right out of high school, I can see where this would be extremely beneficial." *Sara*

Finding 5. Some teens were comfortable with current cultural expectations of adolescents, but others wondered if they might achieve more if they were expected to take on greater levels of personal responsibility.

When asked if they might achieve more if there were different cultural expectations of adolescents that required them to take on more responsibilities, most teens said that adolescence—which they defined as a life period during which they are able to make mistakes under the guidance of their parents, presumably without suffering major consequences—is a necessary period of life. These teens were content to do what parents and other adults tell them to do rather than take steps to pave their own paths. In the context of school, for example, they were willing to take courses that they did not believe would enhance their chances at achieving their personal definitions of success because it did not occur to them that they had the power to challenge or make any change to the universal definition of "achievement."

In this particular discussion teens said they had also been, without question, willing to accept reports on the "teen brain" that suggested all teens were not capable of accomplishing particular tasks or of having the same competence level as adults. An adult project participant from the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies argued that these reports were inaccurate. He said, "Anthropological studies show that the kind of turmoil we see in teens in many Western countries *is entirely absent in more than a hundred cultures around the world;* if teen turmoil were the inevitable product of the developing brain,

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Achievement Diploma (GAD), the General Education Development Certificate (GED), and the Certificate of Program Completion which is awarded to students who do not qualify for diplomas but who have completed "prescribed programs of studies."

we would see such turmoil everywhere, but we do not. The fact that the teen brain differs in some respects from that of young children and older adults tells us nothing about the causes of teen turmoil."

Some teen participants said they had never heard this perspective, and a few vowed to research the topic further, but only two went on to consider the point more deeply in later dialogue. For the most part, the teens did not dialogue further about current cultural structures around adolescence as it relates to achievement. In "Finding 6," below, they admit that an unwillingness to question the current culture will be a major barrier to evolving the definition of achievement.

> "Adolescence is the perfect time to make mistakes. We are not like adults that have experience in this world. We try new things and mess up but we learn from it." *Miriam*

> "I believe that adolescence is a time when teenagers, or 'adolescents,' are allowed to develop their own belief systems, learn from experiences in the freedoms that they do have and experience the guidance that their parents and other members of society offer (maybe forcefully at times) for a few more years. …This period of my life has been instrumental in allowing me to define my spiritual beliefs and societal beliefs and I feel that jumping straight into adulthood would have denied me that opportunity." *Matthew*

> "I do not think that it would be the best idea to have people like me be completely free. I know my friends and I sometimes do not make the best decisions and don't think things through fully; this is probably because we are not as mature and ready to take on the whole world as our teachers, parents, and other adults in our lives are." *Kumar*

Some teens challenged these assertions, however, saying that learning from mistakes and developing personal beliefs is a natural part of adult life, too. Our culture's treatment of adolescents limits teens' understanding of their own capabilities as well as their willingness to embrace those capabilities, these teens suggested. As a consequence, teens are delayed in taking responsibility for their own lives, which can have personal and societal consequences. Teens said that if we want them to take responsibility for their own learning, we must first give them more responsibility for it rather than asking them to do it because we told them to.

> "After reading everyone's comments I notice that the idea of having time to make mistakes, as well as the idea that as teenagers we do not have experience in this world, are reoccurring. I find that there is no moment one stops making mistakes and even far into our adulthood we spend time learning to make good decisions. Perhaps some may find closure in being allowed more of a pass to make mistakes as society often expects young people to make, but I feel we as the next generation can do so much more if we are given not just by society but by ourselves, a sense of responsibility. I also feel that age doesn't determine experience. It all depends on how we live our lives and use our time. Personally, I don't believe in the idea, of someone suddenly becoming mature or capable at a certain age. I believe when someone truly loves learning about something, they will pursue learning it against all odds, including society's general idea that kids and teens are less responsible or less capable." *Semeo*

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"We experience life as citizens from a whole different perspective than adults. We understand things with a different sense of logic in comparison to adults. However, with the limits placed upon us, it is hard for adults to see how insightful we can be. I believe the concept of adolescence is imaginary, only made up by adults because they do not think we are capable, or mature enough, to handle 'adult' tasks." *Molly*

"As things stand, I can't say what kind of person I would be today if I hadn't been raised (by my culture more than my parents) to feel stupid and cowed simply because of my age, but I would like to know." *Marie*

"I think that the concept of adolescence should not be ended but redefined. For many adults the word adolescent or teenager holds a negative connotation. They think of someone who is lazy, immature, and doesn't care about life. A few of my classmates fit this stereotype but most of them don't. If this stereotype were to be eliminated, I can see how many teens would live a much more healthy and productive life. I definitely think that many teenagers could do the work that adults are doing and maybe even do it better." *Louise*

Finding 6. Some teens reported their belief that a major cultural shift will be required for there to be any change in our current approach.

Throughout the online dialogues, and especially in the last dialogue in which teens were asked to sum up what they had learned, teens repeatedly acknowledged that while fringe ideas about achievement had merit, they were unlikely to be implemented due to widespread cultural acceptance for the way things are already done. Some teens said they had accepted dominant ideas about achievement before participating in the Students Speak Out project. At the conclusion of the project they saw the need for change, and were open to working toward solutions.

Some teens hoped that adults in a position to make change would take the initiative to at least examine how society approaches student achievement, and whether it is best for our future. To them, cultural acceptance without questioning seems the biggest barrier to change.

[Regarding giving teens more responsibility.] "Ironically, young people will need older adults to bolster the idea if it is to gain widespread credibility; otherwise we would be too easily written off as 'teenagers who think they know everything.' (Actions speak louder than words, I hear you cry. But most teenagers who act like adults are simply labeled 'exceptional.')" Marie

"I have no doubt there are highly challenging branches of math outside of calculus, but as it stand the alternatives sometimes already exist … but are considered 'joke' classes. Because no student is relying on a good education in the subject matter for AP, SAT or ACT tests, the teacher (in my experience) is often under much less pressure to teach it rigorously. Or worse, in some cases [under] pressure to not teach it rigorously." *Michael*

"[While individualized learning based on aptitudes and interests] is a good notion, the business world is often based on results, and letter grades and achievement tests are examples of that. Not only would the colleges have to change, but maybe our culture too, if that were to be successful. Right now, 'achievement' is valued by businesses, and I think that is reflected in our schools. Whether it is a good thing or not, I guess is another discussion, and how you would go about changing that." *Sara*

"I believe every citizen in the country deserves to hear out the issues pertaining to achievement and the education system." *Molly*

Appendix A

Weekly Discussion Topics
(These have been edited for length. Visit StudentsSpeakOut.org for full questions.)

Week 1. What does "achievement" mean to you?

Question (as posed by Lindsey Alexander, Citizens League Project Facilitator): Is "achievement" in the skills of reading and writing, the knowledge of math and science, sufficient? For you as an individual? For our nation? What else do you achieve that is outside the scope of traditional academics? *Where* do you achieve these things?

For example, for those of you who have jobs and outside-of-school activities, or participate in student competitions, what do you do? And what have you found is important to accomplish/achieve/learn in order to be successful in those things?

Week 2. Should students' capacity for self-learning from the Web affect the definition of student achievement?

Question (as posed by Joe Graba, Founding Partner of Education|Evolving): Do you ever use Web sites that provide instruction—sites that pertain to your traditional courses at school—for your learning? If so, which sites? And how are they (or, if you don't use them, how would these be) helpful in your regular learning?

Please note we're not asking only about what's assigned by teachers. We're mainly asking about sites you've sought out and used yourself.

Do you think learning via the Web could be legitimized? In other words, should students be given credit for it if they could demonstrate that they had learned the material, even if they didn't learn it from a teacher?

Week 3. In the name of maximizing teens' energy and talent, might it be time to end the concept of "adolescence?"

Question (as posed by Dr. Robert Epstein, Founder & Director of Emeritus, Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies): In my book *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*, I asserted that adults largely deny teens both the responsibilities and rights of adult life, yet we expect you to be serious about learning (as well as driving, your health, and many other matters). I discuss how "adolescence" was invented to help keep youth out of sweatshops and coal mines, but the long-term effect is that you are trapped in a phase of life that's unnecessary, restricting you from achieving a lot for yourselves and for our nation.

What do you think? In the name of maximizing teens' energy and talent, might it be time to end the concept of "adolescence?" Do you feel restricted, or held back from what you might otherwise be

accomplishing? If so, in what ways? With less restriction, would you spend your time differently? If given more responsibility and opportunity, would YOU achieve more? How so?

Week 4. Should learning your aptitudes be part of school? How might this influence your school, work, and life achievement?

Questions (as posed by Peg Hendershot, Director of Career Vision, and Kevin Field, Assessment Systems Manager of Career Vision):

At Career Vision we measure students' aptitudes—the potential to acquire a skill or learn to perform a task. These are natural talents. Aptitude is not what interests you, your education level, your personality, or even what you know. Each person has a unique combination or pattern of aptitudes that provides important insight into what types of work tasks and environments offer the greatest potential for success and satisfaction. Research and experience show that satisfaction is highest when your work and your abilities are aligned. For example, maybe you have a strong aptitude for fixing cars but not for writing essays. You might be interested in solving engineering dilemmas, and do well at science in school, but not have an aptitude for it. Or you might do poorly in school in an area where you have strong aptitude but where you have very low interest and motivation to achieve.

- Do you think you have a clear understanding of how aptitudes differ from achievement testing? Please try to keep aptitudes separate from other career related topics such as interests and knowledge.
- Would it be helpful to understand what your full range of potential strengths are, and what performance environments would tap those?
- What role (if any) has your school had in helping you to clarify your aptitudes or natural abilities?
- How much one-on-one time has been spent helping your family understand this area?
- If you were to understand your aptitude profile, how might you apply this information to school achievement? How might your aptitudes be related to activities outside of school, such as sports or hobbies?
- Considering that people have different strengths or aptitude profiles, how could schools adjust curriculum, instructional, and evaluation methods to directly support or encourage the development and achievement of each student's career aspirations?

Week 5. What do YOU think should be the kind of math competence we require students to learn? And, is it important for students to see the relevance of math to jobs and everyday life?

Questions (as posed by Sol Garfunkel, Executive Director of Consortium for Mathematics and Its Applications):

At COMAP (Consortium for Mathematics and Its Applications) we work with teachers, students, and business people to create learning environments where mathematics is used to investigate and model real issues in our world. In our 2009 paper, Math to Work we argued for offering curricular alternatives in math that would emphasize how discrete ideas taken from high school math courses apply to a

variety of careers and your everyday lives. These alternatives would help students like you make connections between what they are learning and how you would use those skills in future jobs.

COMAP further argued that too many people have accepted a false argument that continuous mathematics is essential for all students. Continuous mathematics are highly technical subjects that teach a good deal of symbol manipulation (like using "x" and "y" in Algebra II) and typically lead up to calculus and analysis. This kind of math learning is necessary for future engineers and epidemiologists, but for the large majority of students it won't be needed. The false argument goes like this: All students need to learn mathematics (so far so good). We shouldn't discriminate against any group of students (still hard to argue). All students must be given the opportunity to reach some basic level of mathematical competence. That basic level of mathematical competence can be defined by the content of Algebra II (as exhibited on a particular test). Criminal!

- To what extent have you been told that continuous mathematics is important for all students? Have you heard varying ideas about this from different people? What do you think of the idea that every student must learn Algebra II to be successful at a well-paying job?
- Do you think there is there a relationship between students' motivation to learn math and their understanding of how it will be useful in future jobs and in their everyday lives? (Generally? In their specific areas of interest?) How so?
- Some have suggested: If teens don't see clear connections between school, work and jobs, they might see dropping out of college (or maybe even high school) as a rational choice—especially in today's economy where financing for four-year college is out of reach for many. The paper I just linked suggests that this is because other pathways to well-paying jobs aren't obvious (the "false argument" prevails). Would high school students benefit from increased guidance about the variety well-paying jobs available, whether you attend college or not? About what kind of math and other knowledge you'll need to do the jobs well? Do you think this could have an impact on dropout rates?
- Your working question in this project is "What is Student Achievement?" Read the third paragraph above one more time for my opinion. What do YOU think should be the basic level of math competence we require students to learn? Need it be associated with "continuous mathematics?"

Week 6. Should we offer different types of specialized high school diplomas for different students?

Question (as posed by Kimberly A. Green, Executive Director of the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium):

Recently, President Obama set a goal for the nation to have the "highest proportion of college graduates in the world." Obama, along with educators, business leaders and experts around the globe, realize that in order for students to compete for a good job and succeed, they will need the knowledge and skills that the global economy demands. As we all know, today's economy is fast-moving and very competitive.

But when President Obama and experts said all students should go to college, he didn't necessarily mean the four-year colleges that people initially imagine when they hear the word "college." In fact, when many people refer to college, it can mean a range of institutions—community college, technical

schools, apprenticeship programs and more. But which is better: a four year college or one of those other colleges? The answer is neither. They all can help different types of students with different goals.

The point of the goal is to send all students to places where they can learn the skills and knowledge that prepare them for a range of jobs. While many people know the benefits of attending a four-year college or university, most don't know about the value of the other colleges—some of which teach very specific skills that one doesn't typically learn at a four-year college. In fact, those colleges are currently preparing students for many of the fastest-growing and higher-paying jobs in the economy. Their students earn valuable credentials and certifications to land those great jobs and then even return to college to earn more credentials, or a four-year degree.

High schools are working to prepare students for those sought-after jobs too. In Virginia, for instance, students all take the important core classes—English, math, science, etc.—to earn a Standard Diploma. But if a student wants to learn technical and job skills, they take Career Technical Education (CTE) classes in addition to their core classes to earn a <u>Technical Diploma</u>. The courses that lead students to earn that diploma can give students who are most interested in earning a certification or credential in college a leg up before they even get there. Further, those courses often give students work-related experience that connects what they learn in core classes with what is actually done in the real world.

What do you think about the idea of offering different types of specialized high school diplomas for different students like in Virginia?

Also, do you think that students should graduate high school with the same knowledge and skills, or can it vary depending on what they are interested in doing when they enter the work world?

Week 7. Should we focus on the gap in achievement? Or the gap in opportunity?

Questions (as posed by Rich Milner, PhD, Associate Professor of Education, [Peabody College of Vanderbilt University](#) and incoming Senior Executive Editor, *[Urban Education](#)*):

In my book *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There* I assert that we ought to redefine what we mean by "the gap." Currently we define "the gap" as the disparities between White students and other groups of students on standardized tests. I suggest that we are focusing too much on the gap by this definition, keeping our time and resources focused on outcomes or end results rather than on why gaps in achievement exist. Student learning opportunities are not equally allocated or available, so why should we expect achievement scores to be equal? Moreover, this definition and focus has at times led to negative consequences for the very people it is meant to help ([see this article](#)).

What if, instead, we defined "the gap" as differences in opportunity—differences in students' access to processes in teaching and learning, as well as to structural and institutional resources available to teachers and students?

- Have you heard of the "achievement gap" before? What do you know about it, and our nation's strategies to address it?

- What might happen to student achievement if our nation dropped the definition of "gap" that focuses on outcomes, and started focusing on a gap in opportunity? Or some other definition (you tell me what yours is or might be)…
- What do you make of the potential for closing the opportunity gap if teachers and schools use the five strategies?
- What are the differences between equity and equality? What does "equal opportunity" mean to you? How should our desire for equality and equity play out in practice?
- How might your answers influence our current definitions of "the gap" and strategies we should employ to address it?

Week 8. Is there more than one pathway to prosperity?

Questions (as posed by Bill Symonds, Director of Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education):

My colleagues and I at the Harvard Graduate School of Education prepared Pathways to Prosperity in which we reported that in the near future there will be millions of jobs available for people with an associate's degree or occupational certificate. Many of these will be in "middle-skill" occupations such as electrician, and construction manager, dental hygienist, paralegal and police officer. While these jobs may not be as prestigious as those filled by B.A. holders, they pay a significant premium over many jobs open to those with just a high school degree. More surprisingly, some pay more than many of the jobs held by those with a bachelor's degree. In fact, 27 percent of people with post-secondary licenses or certificates—credentials short of an associate's degree—earn more than the average bachelor's degree recipient.

We also reported that nearly 70 percent of high school graduates now go to college within two years of graduating. But only about 4 in 10 Americans have obtained either an associate's or bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties. The list of causes is long and varied, including: under-preparation for the required academic work; financial pressures; competing claims of family and jobs.

- Many folks seeking to reform K-12 education advocate that we must prepare all students for four-year college. What if, instead of "college for all," we encouraged "post high-school credential for all" (which includes, but is not limited to, college)?
- What is your experience of this in school? For example, is the message that college is the only path? Or is there an acknowledgement somewhere of broader means of achievement (community college, technical education, or something else)? Is it possible that we have focused too narrowly on pathways to success?
- Our research also found that most high school students receive very little career counseling. Is this the case in your school? How do you feel about this? Does it make it more difficult for you to figure out what you want to do after high school? Would you welcome an opportunity to talk with adults working in fields in which you are interested about career options—and what you would need to do to get a job in these fields?

Week 9. Should we broaden the definition of student achievement?

Questions (as posed by Sean Kershaw, Executive Director of Citizens League):

Citizens League has been considering for some time whether to engage citizens in [examining the] definition of student achievement. Your work in this project will have a significant impact on our decision, and on how we would set up the effort. [I am interested in your concluding thoughts on the following:]

- Should we, as a state and as a nation, broaden the definition of student achievement? Please explain why or why not.
- What are the most important things (three or more) for people who have never thought about the first question to consider? Why are these the most important?
- Are there points you learned or raised questions about here that you wish more people knew about?
- How, if at all, has your thinking changed over the course of your work on this project?
- What, if anything, have you learned about your own capacity for civic participation and active citizenship from being a part of this dialogue?