

Prepped for life

Getting students ready for the world after high school

By Kristi Garrett

As much as educators talk about closing the achievement gap, it's often difficult to grasp its true significance. Some even tire of hearing about the elusive gap, unconvinced that age-old differentials in student performance will ever be equalized. Yet, behind the labels that separate college-prep, general track students and dropouts, and masked within columns of data about various student subgroups, are real people — those whose life course and prospects depend largely on their ethnicity and social class.

In a series of four feature stories over the next year, we'll visit with four typical students several years after their scheduled graduation to see how education policies affected their aspirations and their options after high school. Were they prepared for the gritty reality that lay outside the high school gate? And how did their family background and experience in school affect their outcome? If they are not on track to achieve a median standard of living, what consequences are there for society? In other words, how does the achievement gap affect each one of us on a daily basis?

We hope this look into the options students have for their lives and why they make the "choices" they do, will demonstrate why we can no longer afford to let the gap between the haves and the have-nots continue to grow. — The Editors

Part 1: Francis' story

Francis Tran sits at a sunny sidewalk table in a Sacramento suburb, telling with pride his father's story. In the late 1970s, with communism pressing in upon his homeland, the elder Tran helped build a boat to take his family away from Vietnam. About 100 refugees crammed themselves onto a tiny craft headed to Indonesia, only to be robbed by pirates on the high seas, who left their vessel disabled. The group drifted for a week before the same group of pirates came across them again — but this time they helped them start their engines and resume their journey. The Tran family made it to Indonesia, and then the Philippines, where Francis was born in 1983. Thereafter, the family made its way to join an uncle in the United States, and settled in Sacramento when Francis was about three.

Tran is a 2001 high school graduate whose family story exemplifies the American dream for many immigrants. Seeing education as the key to economic opportunity, the Trans made schooling the No. 1 priority for their children. Tran's older brother and sisters, being farther along in their education, helped him with homework, since his parents spoke little English. Both parents worked diligently to provide for the family, which eventually included six children.

Tran remembers how much fun he had in school during the early years. "You're absorbing all this stuff like a sponge and you're just eager to learn new things," he says. He and his siblings, pressed by their father to do well, earned high grades. Eventually, his older sisters all earned advanced degrees in psychology and his older brother became an architect. Once Tran got to

high school, however, other priorities started to take over.

“I think I was just more about having fun,” he admits. “My mind wasn’t on school a lot.”

His grades started slipping, though he maintained a C average to remain eligible to play football. When the time came to choose which courses to take, Tran opted for the general track instead of college prep. He never took the SAT. And his father, understandably weary of holding his children’s noses to the grindstone, let up a bit on Tran and his younger brother. After graduation, Tran joined many of his classmates at the local community college with the goal of transferring to a nearby state university, a path repeated by his younger brother.

“Looking at myself now,” Tran says, “I feel sort of lost. I mean, I’m going through the regular community college system and I still don’t know what I want to do. I don’t know if it’s the same with other kids, but I see a lot of it with my fellow peers, my other friends. I think it happens with a lot of people.”

Why such different outcomes in the same family?

Tran thinks it’s because his older siblings knew clearly why they came to this country. “They were about five or six when it all happened. They still remember little things that happened on the boat — escaping. They remember all the water. It’s something they’ll never forget,” he says.

Actually, Tran is no different than many native-born American teens who lose focus on their goals during high school. According to a number of recent studies, about one-third of high school students have clear plans for college, one-third drop out, and one-third graduate and enter the workforce, sometimes dabbling at community college. Part of the problem, Tran says, is that his high school never made it a priority for him to formulate a plan for life after graduation. “Thinking about it,” he says, “if I was more focused in high school, maybe if I knew what I wanted to do in high school, it probably would have helped me out.”

But is it really so crucial that more students leave high school with a plan to advance their skills? Isn’t that what’s behind the push for higher graduation standards — so a high school diploma means something?

What's at stake

On every front, researchers are projecting that California’s workforce needs to be considerably more educated than it is now. The Public Policy Institute of California predicts that within the next 15 years the state will need far fewer workers with a high school diploma or less, and will need considerably more with at least an associate degree. Service jobs, the fastest-growing employment sector, now call for workers with relatively more education.

Likewise, on a national level, the U.S. Department of Labor projects that by 2012 jobs requiring advanced skills will grow twice as fast as jobs calling for basic skills. That fact, combined with a majority-minority population developing in California and the rest of the nation, means that more students — especially those from minority backgrounds — will need a college education to stay employed in a knowledge-based economy.

Currently, though, a large proportion of California’s students leave high school unprepared to stake their claim to the opportunities of the new economy. For them, an early achievement gap leads to a degree gap, which manifests itself in a widening income gap.

The Public Policy Institute of California looked at family incomes over a 30-year period and found

a disturbing trend: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Whereas in 1969 Californians with incomes in the top 25 percent earned 2.3 times what those in the bottom 25 percent did, by 1999 the wealthiest were making 3.5 times as much. And it wasn't because the wealthy had that much greater earning power; sadly, it was because those at the bottom of the income distribution were losing ground faster.

Consider how those statistics play out in practice. Not so long ago, someone working full time at a low-wage job might be able to rent an apartment, keep a vehicle operating, and obtain the necessities of life. Now, though, a worker needs to make more than \$21 an hour to rent the average two-bedroom apartment in California. And to buy a "starter" home at \$357,000 — well below the median home price in the state — a single wage earner would need to make the equivalent of \$31.25 an hour. When workers lack the ability and education to parlay their skills into higher-wage jobs, important asset-building options such as home ownership are often closed to them.

The cost of self-sufficiency

Mark Baldassare, director of research for PPIC, agrees that society pays the cost when students do not live up to their potential. "When students leave school before they are self-sufficient, we lose the ability to have a large pool of qualified workers for the high-skill and high-paying jobs that are the backbone of the 21st century economy," he says. "In the short run, jobs may migrate elsewhere unless we are able to attract workers to the state — an increasingly difficult task given the high cost of housing here. Moreover, we place our already shaky state-local finance system at greater risk by increasing the likelihood that these young people will end up needing public services for a long time, and will not be providing the tax revenues that we need to maintain our complex system of government services."

The resulting stratification into a class system of "haves" and "have-nots" affects every Californian, even those doing well, says Baldassare. "It is the middle and affluent classes who will be asked to take care of those who cannot provide for themselves through holding a decent-paying job with health coverage and retirement benefits," says Baldassare. "In the long run, the 'haves' may well pay the steep price of underemployment and unemployment of the 'have-nots' through our public health and welfare programs and also our prisons and corrections systems."

Because workers usually obtain health care coverage through their employer, those without secure employment or low-wage earners often go without adequate coverage. According to the Commonwealth Fund, a private research foundation, one in five American workers is uninsured for at least part of the year. And the lower their wages, the less likely they are to have any insurance at all: 46 percent of those earning less than \$10 an hour were uninsured. Illness and death among those uninsured workers costs the U.S. economy \$65 to \$130 billion each year, estimates the Institute of Medicine. Additionally, employer-sponsored health insurance and sick time usually go hand in hand. "Workers in the lowest-compensated jobs are least able to take sick days and also appear to be in poorer health than the rest of the workforce," says a 2004 report from the Commonwealth Fund. They are also likely to put off or avoid seeing a doctor because of the cost and have trouble paying medical bills.

Young adults who are not in college are among those most at risk of lacking adequate coverage, the fund says, with 40 percent of 19- to 29-year-olds uninsured for at least some time. "It's a cruel irony that young men and women who stay in school, graduate, and enter the job market are simply dropped from the health care system."

Without adequate medical insurance, preventive care such as blood pressure screening and cholesterol tests, dental and eye exams, and cancer screening are often unavailable to low-wage workers. Serious illnesses, once diagnosed, become more complicated to treat and can mean

financial catastrophe to the low-income family.

The costs of uninsurance spill over into the community as well. Hospital emergency rooms that are used as primary care facilities for uninsured patients may cut their hours or offer fewer high-cost services.

Looking ahead

Tran is fortunate. His job at Starbucks offers medical and dental insurance. “It’s a well-paying job for my age,” he says. “I make enough money that I’m able to go have fun and also handle bills and help out at home. It’s sufficient.”

But the prospect of moving to his own place is still remote. “The majority of my friends live with their families. A couple of people I know that live on their own, they’re struggling a little. It’s pretty tough,” Tran says. “If I was to live on my own, I don’t think I’d be able to; I don’t think I make enough money.”

Imagining what his life will be like at age 30, Tran sees himself happily settled in his own home with his wife and children. “We don’t have to live lavishly. I just want to be happy,” he says. “Not pressed by poverty. I’d be happy just living normal.”

The career path that leads to that “normal” life is still hazy to Tran. Granted, at 21, he has time. But without a clear career goal, Tran’s progress toward a transfer degree is on idle. Earning a degree remains his long-term goal, but he admits to dropping “a lot” of classes. “In community college, there’s no one forcing you to be there,” he admits. “I think if I was more focused on doing one thing and knowing what I want to do, it would probably help me out because I’d be on a set plan. But now I’m just sort of going about my business. I don’t know what I want to do.”

The average high school is able to devote precious little time to helping students discover a career they would like to pursue, and then showing them how to do it. Tran recalls perhaps one trip to the school’s career center at the end of senior year to take a test, and times when the entire class would focus on planning for college or work. But “nothing organized,” Tran says.

“Maybe they could have a specific class that you could take that would help guide you to what you want to do in the future — a whole class,” he suggests. “A day or two out of the year is not really helpful.”

If he’d had that sort of planning early in high school, or even in middle school, Tran says, it would have made a big difference in his motivation. “Maybe if I had that plan in freshman year, I could have focused more on school. I could have taken the courses I needed to go to a university.”

Such programs do exist. The University of California and California State University systems offer outreach programs at each campus that help students who are likely to slip from the college path. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, such programs are able to serve just a fraction of their target population — students who will be the first in their families to go to college.

The Legislative Analyst’s Office recently recommended that schools make more information available to students and parents about career options, beginning in eighth grade. A career exploration phase, followed by career and academic counseling, would go into creating a high school course plan for each student based on their academic and vocational goals. The LAO sees that plan, along with a 10th grade “tune up,” helping to ensure that each student leaves high school ready for what follows.

Class matters

Almost nine in 10 young Americans agree with Tran in expecting their finances to be much better by age 30, according to a survey by Public Agenda. Most also expect to be better off than their parents.

Yet here is where class differences play out in a distinct degree gap. Whereas 60 percent of those from families in the top quarter of the income distribution earn college degrees by age 26, only seven percent of young people from low-income families do so.

It's easy to predict the number of eventual degree-holders from each high school. At Tran's high school, for example, only 22 percent of his graduating class had completed the "a-g" courses required for entrance to the state's two public university systems. That was below the statewide average of 35.6 percent that year. Overlay that statistic with the average household income in the neighborhood where the school is located, at \$45,000. The state average is \$50,000.

In comparison, at Beverly Hills High, in an area where the average family income is \$113,000, 69 percent of graduates had completed the "a-g" coursework in 2001.

The desire to balance the strong influence social class exerts on outcomes is one reason educators are looking for ways that schools can improve the chances that students will continue on to college. One way of doing that is to provide all students with a rigorous curriculum.

PPIC looked at the impact of advanced math classes on student outcomes and found that those who take algebra, geometry and even higher-level math courses eventually earn more, regardless of whether they complete a college degree. Evidence exists to support the belief that it is the skills themselves that are valuable in the workplace. According to one theory, says the PPIC, advanced math classes not only teach students skills that are directly applicable to their jobs, but they also learn logic and reasoning skills that make them more productive workers. PPIC researchers found evidence that differences in the math curriculum may account for one-fourth of the difference in earnings for students from low- versus middle-income families. Thus, the institute advises policy-makers: "Whereas many other factors help to determine the labor market success of students whose parents have average and high incomes, students of low-income families could significantly improve their earnings prospects with a better curriculum. Policies aimed at encouraging, motivating, and preparing low-income students to take a more rigorous curriculum could have substantial benefits for both current and future generations." Interestingly, a more rigorous curriculum added little value for the children of high-income earners.

This is an especially important finding, says PPIC, because "it is most likely the low-income students who slip through the cracks or are diverted into the less-rigorous curriculum paths. The results imply that if policies are in place to target these students and arm them with the prerequisites necessary to succeed in the more rigorous courses, the school system might increase the effectiveness of high school education for disadvantaged students."

In other words, differences in the type of math courses taken by minority students, relative to white students, can explain why they have different earnings than white students.

Prospects for the future

Chances are good that Tran's life will turn out much as he envisions it at age 30. Strong family support and the example of his older siblings make it likely that, once he identifies a career goal,

he'll progress swiftly to a degree.

His personable demeanor already translates well in the workplace. "Probably the best thing I learned in high school — and that probably didn't have anything to do with my education — was the social aspect," he observes. "Like communicating with my peers, being able to gain confidence. I became a people person, and it allowed me to communicate better in the workplace."

Many educators already see the need to help students develop the "soft skills" that employers demand. Businesses say, as Tran instinctively knew, that the ability to work cooperatively with others and persist at a task until the job is done is at least as important as good grades.

As districts throughout the state examine local priorities for improving student outcomes and making the high school an institution that helps students graduate ready for life in the workplace or higher education, the defining principles are becoming clearer.

High school reformers believe that the new "3 Rs" — rigor, relevance and relationships — can help students stay motivated in school and persist to a successful outcome. A rigorous curriculum helps develop the critical thinking skills employers value and reward. Seeing the relevance of what they're learning in their own lives helps students stay motivated. Having strong relationships with adults at school helps students avoid risky behaviors and set their sights on high goals.

As schools work with business partners, parents and others to design a secondary experience that best suits their community, the goal will be to produce graduates well equipped to share their talents — and all will reap the rewards.

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