

Helios Education Foundation believes education changes lives and strengthens communities. As a result, we strategically partner and invest our knowledge, expertise and resources to create opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education. By fostering a college-going culture and advancing the academic preparedness of all students beginning in early childhood, the Foundation seeks to increase the number of young adults graduating from high school ready for college and career, as well as entering and completing postsecondary education.



Middle school and high school are crucial, formative years for students because the knowledge and skills they acquire set the stage for success in college and career.¹ Referred to as the “transition years”, they are challenging times for students as they face significant social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth and pressures.² They are also the educational stages when students are most at-risk of losing interest and disengaging from school if they are not challenged or fail to see the connection between their education and their long-term goals and aspirations.³ The stakes are high during these years, and, unbeknownst to many students, the academic options available to them and the decisions they make about their education may limit their opportunities upon graduation. More than ever before, every Arizona and Florida student must be challenged and supported academically in order to graduate skilled, knowledgeable and prepared to succeed in college, career and life.

Our Theory: If Helios Education Foundation facilitates the development of rigorous, high-expectation academic environments for all students within middle and high schools and promotes the development of a college-going culture, then more Arizona and Florida graduates will be prepared for college and career and pursue postsecondary education.

THE CHALLENGE

Arizona and Florida students are entering a rapidly changing, knowledge-based, global economy. The vast majority of jobs for which they will compete will require some form of postsecondary education or training.⁴ As a result, our primary and secondary education systems must prepare all students for success in college and career. Yet, only 28% of college instructors believe public high schools adequately prepare graduates to meet the expectations they face in college.⁵ College readiness is defined as the ability of graduates to enter and complete credit-bearing college courses without remediation.⁶ However, nearly 60% of Arizona’s and 54% of Florida’s students entering college require developmental education.⁷ Instructors report, in addition to poor work and study habits, too many entering students do not have the ability to think analytically, conduct research or solve problems.⁸

Lacking the academic foundation and valued 21st Century skills, the majority of graduates are also unprepared for the workforce. Only a quarter of employers say that recent high school graduates are prepared for typical jobs in their company, and only 18% say such graduates are prepared for advancement within their organizations.⁹ They cite dissatisfaction with the ability of graduates to read and understand complex material, think analytically, apply learning to solve real-world problems and communicate effectively.¹⁰ Thus, colleges and employers alike desire individuals with higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, as well as the ability to collaborate and utilize effective communication skills.¹¹

Turning the tide requires improving the academic preparedness of all students while fostering high-expectation, college-going cultures within schools and communities. In Arizona, 72% of fourth-grade students are below proficient in reading, 69% of eighth graders are below proficient in math, and 77% of eighth graders are below proficient in science.¹² Similarly, 61% of Florida fourth-grade students are below proficient in reading, 69% of eighth graders are below proficient in math, and 72% of eighth graders are below proficient in science.¹³ Of greater concern, the performance of Hispanic, Black and Native American students trails their White counterparts in all three categories by an average of 26 points.¹⁴

Ensuring all students have access to rigorous, relevant and engaging curriculum that becomes more challenging as they progress toward high school graduation improves student academic preparedness and degree attainment.¹⁵ Increasing access to academic rigor such as dual credit, honors, advanced placement (AP) and international baccalaureate (IB) coursework, along with the necessary supports and interventions, improves student options and readiness upon graduation. Research shows that students who take academically rigorous, intense programs of study in high school, even if they demonstrated low achievement previously, are more likely to enroll and persist in postsecondary education than their peers who took less challenging coursework.¹⁶ For example, students who take Algebra II, Chemistry and Geometry are twice as likely to be prepared for postsecondary education. Those who complete Physics are three times more prepared for postsecondary success.¹⁷ Moreover, based on their current college and/or work experience, the vast majority of high school graduates report that, in retrospect, they should have taken more challenging courses in at least one area such as mathematics, science or English.¹⁸

The ability of schools to provide academically rigorous and engaging environments for all students depends on high-quality teachers in every classroom. Developing higher-order critical, logical and reflective skills in all students requires teachers to teach in new ways, inspiring learning through greater relevancy, and, in many cases, to draw upon deeper content knowledge.¹⁹ Student-centered classrooms where teachers scaffold lessons—providing support at the beginning and then later transferring ownership of learning to the student—require teachers to be skilled in communicating expectations clearly, fostering discussion and inquiry-based learning and guiding students to think critically and persist to the problem solution.²⁰ STEM-rich environments, which take an interdisciplinary approach to learning, effectively integrate science, technology, engineering and mathematics into real-world, rigorous and relevant learning experiences for students.²¹ Cultivating such widespread and embedded teaching skills requires ongoing professional development and teacher support systems such as effective school leaders, instructional coaches, timely and actionable feedback and dedicated time for professional collaboration.²² In addition, ensuring content expertise is especially challenging considering it is estimated that 30% of math and 59% of physical science teachers currently in the classroom do not have a degree in the content area and are not certified to teach the subjects.²³

Providing access to rigor for all students naturally places increased demand on student academic supports. Early detection and intervention systems are necessary to identify struggling students quickly, as well as those who are ready for greater academic challenge. Quality, aligned assessments and data systems with real-time reporting place valuable academic data in the hands of teachers, students and counselors, allowing for differentiated learning, targeted interventions and immediate remediation. Schools with such support systems in place are able to minimize students falling behind, keeping those who do need support in their classrooms and on track to complete the necessary coursework sequence.²⁴

Counseling, integral to fostering a college-going culture for all students, is an important part of the student support system within rigorous academic environments. In addition to assisting students with college and career planning, counselors help students map their course pathways aligned with their post-high school aspirations and encourage the pursuit of postsecondary education.²⁵ Counselors are also a critical resource to students and their families in building college knowledge and understanding of the academic skills that ensure college success. (College knowledge is formal and informal information about gaining admission to college – identifying colleges of interest, applying for admission and financial aid and navigating the system.²⁶ Academic skills, also known as college skills, include desirable habits and behaviors, including regular attendance, time management, test preparation and completion, using information resources, taking notes and communicating with teachers and advisors.²⁷

Culture, leadership and family and community engagement also contribute significantly to student academic success and college and career readiness. High-expectation educational environments demonstrate a unique and unwavering commitment to ensuring all students have access to academic rigor and college-going opportunities.²⁸ Studies show that high-impact schools—those successfully closing the achievement gap and preparing students for college and career—have consistently higher expectations for all students. Such environments proactively engage students in future-oriented conversations, guiding them through rigorous and relevant academic pathways, targeting supports and facilitating persistence to graduation and college entry.²⁹ Strong, steady leadership can effectively focus collective efforts on student achievement and the importance of postsecondary education for all. Additionally, engaged families and communities are more likely to share in the responsibility of helping students realize their potential by setting high expectations, supporting a college-going culture, guiding discussions about postsecondary education planning and, ultimately, increasing the long-term success of all students.³⁰

OUR FOCUS

By facilitating rigorous, high-expectation academic environments and promoting the development of a college-going culture, Helios Education Foundation believes more Arizona and Florida students will graduate prepared for college and career and pursue postsecondary education. Building on our lessons learned, internal expertise and research from the field, we promote academic rigor and college-going opportunities for all students. Our College and Career Readiness investments are informed by research-based strategies and practices that improve student performance and result in improved college and career readiness. The Foundation's priority is to partner strategically and invest our knowledge, expertise and resources to:

- **Increase Academic Rigor and Relevance** - We increase academic rigor, relevance and engagement through programs of study which challenge all students, prepare them to achieve their personal and professional goals, meet postsecondary education requirements and address 21st Century needs. Helios Education Foundation works to enhance the skills and expertise of teachers, leaders and counselors who embody a commitment to academic rigor, college-going opportunities and high expectations for all students.
- **Foster High-expectation, College-going Cultures** – We work to embed high-expectation, college-going cultures across educational systems and communities to improve academic performance and increase access to postsecondary information and opportunities for all students. In doing so, we facilitate the alignment of student academic supports leading to improved college- and career-readiness, as well as increased college knowledge and academic skills among all students and

families. Furthermore, we seek to actively engage families, schools and communities in the academic success of all Arizona and Florida students.

MEASURING OUR IMPACT

Helios Education Foundation measures its impact within our *College and Career Readiness* reform priority based on a number of short- and long-term indicators. When we are successful, as defined by our theory of change, we anticipate more Arizona and Florida students will graduate from high school ready for college and career, and pursue postsecondary education. Internal and external expertise, best practices, practical experience, research and evaluation all inform our work and guide our investment of time, money and talent. To achieve the greatest impact, we work with local and national partners, including public and private institutions, businesses, nonprofits and other foundations. Beyond demonstrating results within our priorities, we also seek to add value to our partners, improve systems, shape discussions and lead meaningful change within education in Arizona and Florida.

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