

We're Seeing Momentum on Developmental Education



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Last month at the *ExcelinEd* National Summit, I joined a panel on the topic of ‘The Future of Education’. To kick off the conversation, we were asked what we think our country’s education system will look like 100 years from now. It was a difficult question to answer, and it got me thinking about the areas where we’re seeing progress in our own work at the Gates Foundation.

In our roughly twenty years of investing in education as a foundation, we’ve seen that the headline-grabbing initiatives aren’t necessarily the ones that get the most promising results. Rather, our experience has shown that progress tends to develop in pockets and build into a movement. For example, one big story about progress that has quietly been coming alive over the past decade is around developmental education.





Helping students access education after high school and gain momentum as they pursue a degree or certificate has been a key focus of the foundation's education work for the last decade. Our work on developmental education — which essentially means courses designed to develop the reading, writing, or math skills of students who are seemingly not ready for college-level work based on placement tests — started twelve years ago in response to the high failure rates we were seeing in the developmental system.

At that time, inaccurate placement systems were funneling 63% of students into long developmental course sequences as required prerequisites to their first college-level gateway courses, which are taken for credit and apply to the requirements of a degree or certificate. To put it another way, students who may or may not have needed extra support were having to take extra time and pay college tuition to “learn” what they should have learned in high school, even before they could start taking classes that would earn them credit toward a degree or certificate.

Only 12% of students placed in long developmental course sequences actually made it to gateway courses. And of the too few students who did make it past gateway math courses, too many were left without a clear picture of how those courses fit into their overall program of study or credential. In addition to this being an unacceptable success rate, it was also a critical issue of equity. When data were disaggregated, students of color and low-income students were shown to be enrolled in developmental education at much higher rates than their white counterparts.

Fortunately for students, research showed that placement exams to determine whether they needed developmental classes were not very accurate. In fact, the data showed that many students in these courses didn't actually need to be there at all. Researchers like Judith Scott-Clayton found that “up to a third of students who tested into remedial courses because of college placement tests could have passed college-level classes with a grade of B or better.” And students often knew very little about the stakes involved in taking these placement exams, which contributed to the low performance.

This sobering realization led to a rethinking of developmental education at both the state policy and institutional levels over nearly a decade. Policies were created at the state level to encourage the use of multiple measures for class placement, co-requisite instruction, and aligned pathways that made clear to students how they would progress from course to course before ultimately finishing their program of study. The University System of Georgia, the California Community College system, the City University of New York, and the states of Tennessee and Texas are just a few examples of policymakers and higher education systems who have responded to this challenge with forward-thinking policies that help students gain momentum towards a credential.

These shifts have also required changes at the institutional level. In 2015, a coalition of our partners outlined the Core Principles for Transforming Remediation, and we've worked closely with many colleges and universities — directly and through partners like Strong Start to Finish — who have made the shifts in culture, policies, and instructional practice necessary to implement these changes successfully.

As with most reforms, progress has evolved differently in different places. But the news so far has been good. Today, studies examining tens of thousands of students clearly demonstrate that placing more students directly into college-level math and English while providing them with appropriate supports can improve gateway course completion rates by 36 percentage points. And we're also seeing early signs from a randomized control trial that co-requisite support can improve student completion rates by more than eight percentage points.

Maybe one reason you haven't heard as much about this story is because it has taken more than 10 years to unfold. What started as awareness of the problem turned into a series of interventions being tried out in different ways. Over time, and as important lessons were learned, the work grew into a coordinated movement of organizations collaborating to drive state and system-level change.

Today, 250 colleges and universities that enroll nearly 4 million students are continuing their work to ensure more students pass gateway math and English courses in their first year. Since this early momentum is a critical predictor of whether students will complete their programs or not, this work is likely to have a long-term, and more equitable, impact on student outcomes. I don't know how it will impact our education system 100 years from now — but it's certainly the kind of progress we hope to see more of.