In nearly every state today, students can meet the requirements for high school graduation and still be unprepared for success in college or the workplace. Simply put, our standards have not kept pace with the world students are entering after high school.

States need to raise standards for all students and tie high school tests and requirements to the expectations of colleges and employers. Colleges and employers must then honor and reward student achievement on state tests through their admissions, placement and hiring policies. This will send a powerful signal to students that it pays to meet higher standards in high school.

The American Diploma Project
The American Diploma Project (ADP) is an Achieve initiative created to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to face the challenges of work and college. The ADP Network includes 35 states dedicated to the same goal. ADP is designed to ensure that all states:

- Align high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school.
- Require all graduates to take rigorous courses—aligned to college- and career-ready standards—that prepare them for life after high school.
- Streamline the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school also can serve as placement tests for college and hiring for the workplace.
- Develop reporting and accountability systems that value college and career readiness for all students.

Keeping Pace with Rising Knowledge and Skill Demands
In the new, knowledge-based economy, employers and college leaders are placing a higher premium on high-level math and communications skills than ever before. Yet, few states expect students to take high school courses in math through and beyond Algebra II or advanced courses in English and science, despite the research that finds students that complete this coursework are more likely to be successful in work and college. Only nineteen states have high school graduation requirements aligned with college and workplace expectations.

High School Graduates Are Not Prepared To Succeed
Far too many recent high school graduates enter college and the workplace unprepared for the demands of learning and earning. According to a survey commissioned by Achieve, 39 percent of recent graduates enrolled in college and 46 percent in the workforce say there were significant gaps in their preparation. Professors and employers estimate that four out of ten graduates are unprepared for college or employment.
These gaps come with a steep price. States, postsecondary institutions, employers and young people spend an estimated $17 billion each year on remedial classes to re-teach material that should have been mastered in high school. This price tag might be acceptable if remediation was a proven fix, but one national study indicates that 76 percent of students who take remedial courses in reading and 63 percent of students who take one or two remedial courses in math fail to earn college degrees.

What Is Causing the Expectations Gap?
Only recently have state officials, together with college and business leaders, begun working to define what skills and content signify college and work readiness. This lack of collaboration has bred confusion in the past: parents, teachers, colleges and employers have no agreed-upon benchmark for what readiness entails, so students don’t know what courses to take to ensure they are prepared. As a result, the case is not effectively being made that hard work in high school leads to future success in the marketplace, college, and beyond.

Unless these stakeholders come together, high school courses will continue to vary widely in their academic content and rigor. Although some students are exposed to content-rich and stimulating classes that build college- and career-ready skills in high school, many others only have access to courses that offer remedial and non-academic content. These watered-down courses are unlikely to engage students, let alone prepare them for work and college, and can lead to higher drop out rates.

Next Steps for the States
The good news is that progress is being made throughout the states. While only a handful of states have put into place the policies championed by ADP, many others are in the process of implementing them. Over half of the states already have aligned their academic standards and developed comprehensive data systems – or plan to do so in the coming years. There is certainly more work to be done, but the ADP agenda is gaining momentum.