



CenturyCollege

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High Schools Need to Ramp Up College Readiness, Kent Pikel Tells Century Audience

High school student achievement will only improve if readiness for higher education is emphasized, Kent Pikel of the University of Minnesota told area K-12 officials at a recent gathering at Century College.

“We have to stop emphasizing high school graduation as the end of the rainbow,” said Pikel, executive director of the College Readiness Consortium, on Oct. 30. “We will only turn the corner on achievement if we emphasize readiness for higher education in high school. A focus on college readiness for all students can and must transform our schools and our society.”

Pikel said Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak often tells high school students that the college resource room in their school could be called “the million dollar room” because students with a college degree can expect to make a million dollars more over their lifetime than a student with just a high school degree.

“The only reliable pathway out of poverty in the United States today is education,” said Pikel. He noted that if you are a poor child whose parents are in the bottom quintile of income in the United States, your chances of moving into the top income quintile advance from 5 percent to 19 percent if you earn a college degree.

“The rest of the world is racing ahead of us in terms of the percent of citizens who have a higher education degree,” said Pekel. The size of Minnesota’s college-educated workforce is expected to remain about the same over the next 20 years while the number of new jobs and the number of retirements increases. Meanwhile, only about a third of Minnesota students are ready for college-level English, social science, algebra and biology when they graduate from high school. “This is a picture than can and must change,” said Pekel. “If we do not change direction, we are going to get where we are going.”

Pekel said achieving positive change will take vision, skills, incentive, resources and an action plan. “We can’t leave out any of these components,” he said.

He noted that a better vision statement than “educating our students to reach their full potential” is “providing every student with a top-of-the-line college preparatory education.” Necessary college-level skills include analytic reasoning, curiosity, interpretation, writing, persistence, understanding the big ideas in core subjects and an awareness of what it takes to get into college.

“Basically, we must reinvent school around the idea of college readiness for all,” said Pekel. “We must integrate college readiness into K-12 standards. It is not easy work.”

The University of Minnesota’s Ramp-Up to Readiness project was created in 2006 to increase the number and diversity of students who graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills and habits for success in higher education. Ramp-Up to Readiness aims to develop and implement a program that will guide junior and senior high school students through a research-based sequence of courses, projects and activities that prepare them for postsecondary success. The program is being designed during the 2008-2009 school year.

High schools participating in the design include Centennial, St. Paul Central, Chaska, Forest Lake, Richfield, Shakopee and South.

The research team includes Century College President Dr. Larry Litecky.

In part, the Ramp-Up project is about dispelling pervasive myths about college, including:

- Students can't afford college and won't qualify for financial aid. (Students and parents regularly overestimate the cost of college and most receive financial aid.)
- Meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare students for college. (Adequate preparation requires going beyond high school requirements.)
- Community and technical colleges don't have academic requirements. (Community and technical college students must take placement tests to qualify for college-level courses that earn credit.)
- It is better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades. (The best predictor of college success is taking rigorous courses.)

“We need to start seeing every student as college material and every school as a prep school,” said Pekel.



Photo: St. Paul School Board Member John Broderick, Park High Principal Dr. Efe Agbamu and Kent Pekel of the U of M.