Everyone agrees that America's high schools need to do a better job of preparing students to be "college- and career-ready." But the big problem is, how do we get them to do that?

One state has just come up with a bold solution - and it could serve as a model for education reform throughout the entire country.

California recently passed a law that reduces the weight of standardized test scores for ranking high schools. Now, crucial factors like graduation rates, attendance and student advancement will play a larger role in grading the ability of public schools in preparing students to succeed after high school

This law is a big step in the right direction -- and it paves the way for other states to pass similar reforms aimed at preparing students for college and beyond.

Why the change? Since 1999, every California public school has been granted an Academic Performance Index, or API, score based almost entirely on how its students fare on a handful of standardized tests. Other states are also similarly reliant upon test scores to evaluate their schools' successes.

These scores help determine everything about a school's future -- whether it receives funding, whether parents can move their children to a better school, even whether home values rise or fall. So the pressure to get a high score is enormous.

The intention, of course, has been to hold schools accountable for their performance and to give them incentives to improve. The problem is that the system puts too much emphasis on tests that don't necessarily predict how well a student will actually do after high school. In the end, students were being prepared to succeed on tests while they were in school, not to succeed beyond graduation.

Sure enough, a closer look at the numbers reveals that, when based primarily on these tests, a school's API score can be an unreliable predictor of how well its students will perform in college. A 2012 study conducted by Education Sector found that one school with the relatively high API score of 778 out of 1,000 had a 91 percent graduation rate but sent just 66 percent of its students to college. Meanwhile, a school with a score of just 698 had a graduation rate of 95 percent and sent 86 percent of its students to college.

The API's true shortcoming is revealed when the scores are applied to schools with a high proportion of low-income students. According to our study, three of the five high-poverty schools with the lowest API scores were among the top five overall in sending their graduates to college. And the school with the lowest API score had the highest postsecondary enrollment rate: 79 percent of its graduates in 2009 went on to a postsecondary institution, 5 percentage points above the state average.

Standardized test scores certainly provide one valid measure of student success. But it is clear that they are not entirely accurate in measuring whether students are really ready for life after high school.

And this problem has serious real-world consequences. Only 25 percent of high school students taking common college entrance exams in California are deemed college- and career-ready. And two out of every five college students must take remedial classes for basic skills before they can qualify for credit-bearing work. Our nation's high schools have been failing to provide the requisite tools for students before sending them out the door.

The new law does much to fix how California ranks its schools. It ensures that, as of 2016, test scores can count for no more than 60 percent of a school's API score, and it says that the state superintendent must add graduation rates and measures of college- and career-preparedness to the mix.

The reality of today's economy is that students must start preparing for life beyond high school from the moment they enter a freshman classroom. It's our job to make sure that our high schools are helping them do just that.

If we want America's students to arrive at college ready for postsecondary work, then we must improve our country's systems for evaluating high schools. California just put forward a great model for reform. What we need now is for the rest of the country to follow.

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