

Moving from College Readiness to College Success

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Rethinking how we serve our students, families and communities

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“College for Certain” has been Aspire’s mission since our founding in 1998. Helping low-income, urban and rural students succeed in school, get “college ready,” and gain admission to a four-year college was — and still is — an audacious goal. In some districts where [Aspire Public Schools](#) works, as few as 20% of students complete the California college entrance requirements. In contrast, at Aspire, all of our students complete the requirements, and for eight consecutive years, 100% of our high school graduates have been admitted to four-year colleges.



We’re proud of what we’ve accomplished. But we are striving for more: It’s time to build on our “college readiness” success, and aim to ensure that our students are both ready for college and ready for college success — defined as college graduation.

Helping students get *to* college has long been a strength for Aspire. Thanks to some of our readiness strategies, such as Early College High School — high school students completing at least five college courses prior to high school graduation — we have one of the strongest post-secondary matriculation rates in the country, with over 90% of our high school graduates enrolling in a post-secondary program. Of these students, two-thirds enroll directly into four-year colleges, while others enroll in two-year programs.



To some extent, getting into college leads to getting through college. The four-year college graduation rate of Aspire’s high school graduates is more than three times the national graduation rate for the demographic of students we serve, in the lowest income quartile. Our numbers are also improving as our network of schools gets bigger.

But we’re not satisfied.

Nationally, only 9% of students in the lowest income quartile graduate, while 77% of students in the highest income quartile graduate. We want all of our students to graduate from a post-secondary program, preferably a four-year college. So while our numbers are beating national averages, we believe we can and must do better.

To help our students not just get into college — but to help them succeed and graduate — we have engaged in a three-prong approach. First, we joined a data sharing consortium, which helped us to share data and strategies around college access and success.

Second, we studied academic research. Our findings affirmed our belief that non-cognitive skills and mindsets beyond academics are needed for four-year college success. Third, we turned to our own alumni, looking at National Student Clearinghouse data and conducting a comprehensive alumni survey in 2014-15, with over 85% of alumni from the past 10 years represented.

Through this three-pronged approach, we have identified five factors that contribute in measurable ways to college success. Aspire already excels at some of these elements, but there is more we can do to ensure that our students have even greater college success.



1. Academic Preparation: Through our Early College High School model, we provide students with a rigorous curriculum that requires completion of college-level courses while still in high school. Alumni who completed our survey reported that these college courses were more successful than any other Aspire strategy in preparing them for life after high school.

2. College Belonging: We've learned that our students need to see themselves as four-year college graduates. Early College High School helps here, but where we need to grow is in connecting students and families with no-cost and low-cost opportunities that expose students and families to colleges — from diversity weekends to STEM programs hosted on college campuses, to debate tournaments and sports camps.

3. High-Quality College Advising: Embedding full-time, dedicated college advisers within each high school to coach students on how to search for, select and apply to the right college is a critical component of college success. We already do a good job of helping students identify good matches within the array of public colleges in California, but we need to expand horizons for our students. Our students and families would benefit from better access to information about public colleges outside of California, and private colleges both in and out of California, and of course more support in completing compelling applications for those good-fit colleges.

4. College Access: Establishing formal mentorship and coaching relationships dedicated to helping students during the summer after high school graduation helps to ensure matriculation in the fall. Many low-income students lose momentum over the summer and end up not enrolling in the fall; we call this “summer melt.” We are working to develop more touch points with graduates during this critical transition time.

5. Alumni Support: Lastly, we are working to develop a more consistent relationship with our alumni, including tracking their progress after they leave us and providing each one with support and counsel as they move through college. Some of our peer charter management organizations have paved the way on this work, building sophisticated technology platforms and coaching strategies. We can learn from and adopt a lot from their successful strategies in the college success space, just as they have learned from us in data-driven instruction, teacher residency, and Early College High School.

We are committed to making changes to ensure that our students succeed, not just when they're with us, but also when they're out in the world, and especially during their college years.

True success for us, and for the young people in our schools, is rooted in college success — and we're eager to work with our Aspire teams, our peers in education, and the students, families, and communities with whom we work to raise the bar and do better.

Since 2003, the Walton Family Foundation has supported the launch of 31 Aspire schools, as well as supporting other Aspire programs related to special education services and training high quality teachers and school leaders.