

Education Opportunity Audit: Executive Report

Oakland Unified School District

The Road to Rigor: OUSD's Commitment to Reform

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and its governing board have made it a clear priority to bring high-impact reform to all students. Through numerous changes in leadership and substantial restructuring and reorganizing of the central office, OUSD has maintained a focus on improving educational outcomes for its students. The leadership recognizes that the central goal must be to implement a college and career-ready high school curriculum in each of its high schools.

As a key step in bringing this ambitious goal to fruition, OUSD's superintendents and senior staff have partnered with The Education Trust–West (ETW) to analyze the educational experiences of OUSD students. By working to improve the educational outcomes of all students—93 percent of whom are students of color—OUSD stands among those districts leading the charge for equity of access and achievement for some of California's most historically underserved students.

The movement to prepare all students for college and career is both timely and important. Increasingly, jobs that pay a living wage require some type of postsecondary education. Jobs that do not are disappearing. As young workers enter the workforce and progress in their careers, they will need to know more and do more than past generations. *Every* young person will need to possess the knowledge and problem-solving capabilities that once were reserved for a select few.

What this means, simply, is that it no longer is acceptable to prepare some young people for college and others for careers. The divisions between “college ready” and “career ready” are increasingly irrelevant and immaterial.

Schools must change accordingly. The rigorous high school curriculum students need begins with the University of California (UC) and California State University's (CSU) A-G requirements, a 15 course sequence in seven different academic areas. These UC/CSU A-G course requirements represent both an ambitious target and a navigable path toward raising both expectations and outcomes for all students. For California to remain economically competitive, this college-prep course sequence—which only 24 percent of students statewide successfully completed in 2007—must become the default curriculum and minimum graduation requirements for all high school students. Across the state, far-sighted and visionary districts such as OUSD have begun to take the steps necessary to make the UC/CSU A-G course sequence available to all students.

California faces a daunting array of challenges in the years ahead. Clearly, a highly educated, highly skilled workforce remains central to our ability to meet these challenges and continue to grow our economy and maintain our standing on the world stage. Translating these principles into standards and a tangible academic program may be a demanding process, but it is far from impossible.

The good news is that all major stakeholders in OUSD understand the importance of this work. In focus groups convened by The Education Trust–West, teachers, counselors, parents, and students repeatedly cited the importance of high academic standards and affirmed their belief that all young people could successfully complete the UC/CSU A-G course requirements.

Parents in focus groups said they expected their children to attend college; students echoed these aspirations. Indeed, while students voiced concern over the lack of access to rigorous coursework and their need for improved support, they believe they are capable of successfully completing a college-prep curriculum and want the opportunity to do so. Parents acknowledge that for students to succeed, families needed to become more involved, and they need more and better information from district leaders.

Teachers and counselors likewise voiced a strong belief in both the importance of college-prep curricula and the potential of students to complete more rigorous coursework. Throughout the discussions, both groups went beyond a declaration of support and suggested program reforms that would enable greater student access and success. Teachers in particular spoke of the importance of upholding rigorous coursework standards and the many ways in which stable and consistent district leadership could support them in this work.

In OUSD, courageous leaders have charted a course for reform, and they are prepared to harness the collective will of teachers, counselors, students, and families. These ambitious goals and policies will end practices that have underestimated and underserved students for far too long.

Where Are We Now: Student Achievement in OUSD

Before OUSD leaders can develop a nuanced plan to make the UC/CSU A-G course sequence the graduation requirements for all students, stakeholders need a clear sense of how students currently are performing. The Education Trust–West, with the OUSD data team, studied senior transcripts as well as publically available data to gain an accurate picture of how students fare in OUSD.

Across California, 65 percent of the class of 2007 graduated within four years; in OUSD, 46 percent did so—less than half of those who started high school four years earlier. The proportion of students who graduated prepared to do college-level work is lower still. According to self-reported data from districts across California, 36 percent of students graduated ready for college. In OUSD, nearly one-third (32 percent) did so. Beneath these averages is a pronounced achievement gap. Slightly more than half of white students (52 percent) graduated college-ready. While 54 percent of Asian students did so, meaningful differences in access and outcomes exist among different Asian ethnic groups that are obscured by conventional data collection and organization. At the same time, Latino and African-American students, who together constitute nearly two-thirds of OUSD students, have far lower rates of college readiness. Only 29 percent of Latino students and 22 percent of African-American students left high school prepared for credit-bearing coursework in college. (See Figure 1).

If a large proportion of OUSD students are not graduating college-ready, what then are they leaving with? They are not obtaining certificates from a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. Although many students take CTE classes, students commonly take a hodge-podge of mismatched courses. Few complete a rigorous pathway that culminates in a formal CTE certificate.

Without substantial reform, these patterns most likely will continue. The Education Trust–West analyzed transcripts from the class of 2008 and calculated a projected UC/CSU eligibility for OUSD seniors: Across the district, 37 percent of students are projected to complete the UC/CSU A-G course sequence. The transcript study suggests 72 percent of white students and 54 percent of Asian students will graduate eligible for admission to a four-year college, while fewer than one-third of Latino (30 percent) or African-American seniors (26 percent) will do so. (See Figure 2).

Gaps of access and achievement exist not only between different student groups but between different types of high schools as well. Students in OUSD may attend comprehensive high schools, complex high schools (larger schools broken into small schools), or stand-alone small high schools. Comprehensive high schools have a larger proportion of students on track to meet the UC/CSU A-G course requirements (42 percent) than either complex (25 percent) or stand-alone small high schools (34 percent). (See Figure 3).

These rates of A-G completion represent an unacceptably low level of success and reveal the extent of the work needed to improve both access to and achievement in a rigorous high school curriculum.

Coming Up Short: Chokepoints and Barriers to College Readiness

The comprehensive transcript analysis revealed several conditions and institutional practices that impede student access to a rigorous college-prep high school curriculum.

Graduation requirements: The greatest barrier to increasing the proportion of students who graduate college-ready is the gap between the UC/CSU A-G course sequence and the OUSD graduation requirements. In mathematics, the A-G requirements are three years of coursework through Algebra II; OUSD requires three years through geometry. In science, the A-G requirements are two years of laboratory science, including biology and either chemistry or physics; OUSD requires three years, but the graduation requirements may be satisfied with low-rigor, non-laboratory science courses. For foreign language, the A-G course sequence requires two years of study; OUSD requires only a single year of study.

Because students can satisfy the district's graduation requirements without completing the UC/CSU A-G course sequence, many students attend high school without undertaking the more rigorous college-prep coursework in which they may otherwise succeed.

Course-taking patterns: The master schedule is the foundation for teaching and learning. The master schedules of OUSD high schools present a number of additional barriers to students' ability to follow a college-prep curriculum.

For example, students routinely are allowed to follow a regressive sequence of math courses, in which they take increasingly lower level courses from one year to the next. Latino and African-American students take far less rigorous math courses in their freshman year than their white and Asian peers, and they are enrolled in the less rigorous Intermediate Algebra course at rates disproportionate to their total enrollment. In science, many students take courses that are neither rigorous nor lab-based. Such low expectations are especially evident in the proliferation of senior year course-taking patterns that are devoid of rigor and meaningful academic work. (See Figure 4).

Indeed, too few of the courses offered by OUSD's high schools meet the UC/CSU A-G requirements. Although nearly all of the social studies, science, and foreign language courses qualify, a much smaller percentage of English and mathematics satisfy the A-G requirements. And not all high schools offer equivalent access. At some high schools, nearly two-thirds of all courses meet the A-G requirements, while at others, as few as 45 percent of all courses qualify. (See Figure 5). This means that far too many students are enrolled in classes that do not prepare them for college and career.

Low grades: Across subject areas, low grades consistently limit students' ability to complete a college-preparatory course of study. The UC/CSU A-G requirements mandate a minimum grade of C in the 15 A-G courses, but district policies consider D a passing grade. A student earning a D therefore may satisfy OUSD requirements and move on to a higher level course but fail to fulfill the UC/CSU requirements for that course.

To compound matters, the district does not offer remediation for students earning a D in any course—either during the regular school year or through a summer program. Indeed, ninth and tenth-graders are prohibited from attending summer school at all. This combination of factors makes it nearly impossible for students who have fallen off track for A-G completion ever to catch up. In all cases, failing grades may prevent students from moving on to higher-level courses, and an overall GPA below 2.0 renders any student ineligible for admission to a state college. Even students who have earned a 2.0 GPA may still find themselves ineligible for admission to a four-year state college, since some GPA calculations include such nonacademic courses as physical education that are not part of the UC/CSU A-G course sequence.

English-language learners: English-language learners (ELLs), who constitute 14 percent of the class of 2008, have the lowest rate of A-G completion; only 5 percent of ELLs in the transcript analysis are projected to complete the course sequence. Until an English-language learner is reclassified as fully English proficient (R-FEP), he or she will not receive access to college-prep coursework in English classes. While the academic performance of ELLs is a concern, more troubling still is the large number of ELLs who have attended OUSD schools for many years

without earning reclassification. Far too many ELLs arrive at high school after many years in the district still in need of English-language supports.

Special education: None of the core subject areas in special education offers an equivalent curriculum to the regular education courses, and no special education course meets UC/CSU A-G course requirements. The only students with potential access to college-prep courses are those who receive Resource Specialist Program (RSP) services; students in Special Day Class (SDC) settings remain in self-contained classrooms, undertaking low-rigor work. Of particular concern, too, is the fact that some special education students do not enroll in all necessary core classes. When they do so, special education students experience many of the same chokepoints as do general education students, particularly the regressive math sequence.

What's Next: Removing Barriers and Improving Access

The Education Opportunity Audit (EOA) establishes a strong foundation and serves as a baseline for developing the “Blueprint for Implementation of the College-Ready and Career-Ready Curriculum” for all students. The blueprint is the action plan that will describe, in detail, the steps necessary to transform the current course-taking patterns to the point where all students are enrolled in the full complement of courses required to be ready for a variety of postsecondary options.

As OUSD enters this next critical phase, district leadership will need to undertake and address eight key priorities.

1) *Change graduation rates to align with the UC/CSU A-G course sequence.*

Of all the chokepoints and barriers, the most damaging gap is between the courses OUSD requires for graduation and the courses the two state higher education systems require for admission. Research and the experience of high-performing schools across the state confirm what we've known for some time: Student performance will conform to the level of adult expectations. To prepare all students for college and career, OUSD leaders must require rigorous coursework for all students and cease to keep it a privilege for a select few.

2) *Develop early warning systems to identify struggling students as soon as possible.*

The initiative to prepare all students for college and career cannot succeed as a uniquely high school endeavor. K-8 and preschool educators alike must raise their expectations and the rigor of their assignments, and OUSD leaders must develop systems to identify struggling students *before* they reach high school. Whether this entails a more effective data system, greater articulation between grades, increased communication, or more opportunities for professional development, students must not be allowed to languish in under-achievement year after year while the opportunities for postsecondary success move further out of reach.

3) *Implement effective student supports.*

Some OUSD students will require more support to succeed in the UC/CSU A-G course sequence. All stakeholders cite the need to develop and implement effective systems for identifying struggling students early, remediating their academic difficulties, and helping them move forward. Supports may include shadow classes, targeted use of zero and seventh-period courses, and opportunities for students to retake core classes in which they earn a D. Regardless of which steps are taken, however, all supports must be monitored and evaluated for their effectiveness and impact on student achievement.

4) *Implement effective teacher supports.*

Teachers and students agree that instructional rigor must increase across the district. Doing so will require a wide-reaching initiative, but a critical component must entail providing OUSD teachers with greater access to effective professional development targeted to their current skills. Indeed, as OUSD institutes a more rigorous high school curriculum, teacher support will be critical. Teachers should have input in selecting high-quality professional development. Further, strong measures are needed to ensure all teachers are accountable for bringing their increased knowledge and skill into the classroom. OUSD has a districtwide professional development plan in place that must be monitored for its effectiveness in improving student achievement.

5) *Improve the ELL instructional program.*

Far too few ELL students successfully complete the UC/CSU A-G course sequence, and far too many students remain classified as English-learners, despite numerous years in the district. OUSD leaders must analyze the instructional program for ELLs to accelerate their progress toward reclassification and then ensure they receive instructional support in Structured English Immersion (SEI) courses that will give them access to a college-prep curriculum.

6) *Develop an effective community outreach strategy.*

The focus groups and community conversations confirmed that OUSD families want students to leave high school prepared for college and career. They also believe that all students should follow the UC/CSU A-G course sequence that makes this possible. OUSD leaders must improve communication with families and existing community-based organizations, particularly regarding the details and importance of the A-G course sequence. This outreach should involve the community early in the process of developing new policy and provide critical information in Spanish, Cantonese, and other languages.

7) *Improve consistency of district policies, practices, and leadership.*

OUSD is emerging from a tumultuous period characterized by frequent changes in leadership and inconsistent policies. It has undertaken numerous reforms—some markedly successful, others less so. The challenge for district leaders is to adopt a clear agenda for change. This does not mean enforcing unnecessary uniformity or jettisoning work that has

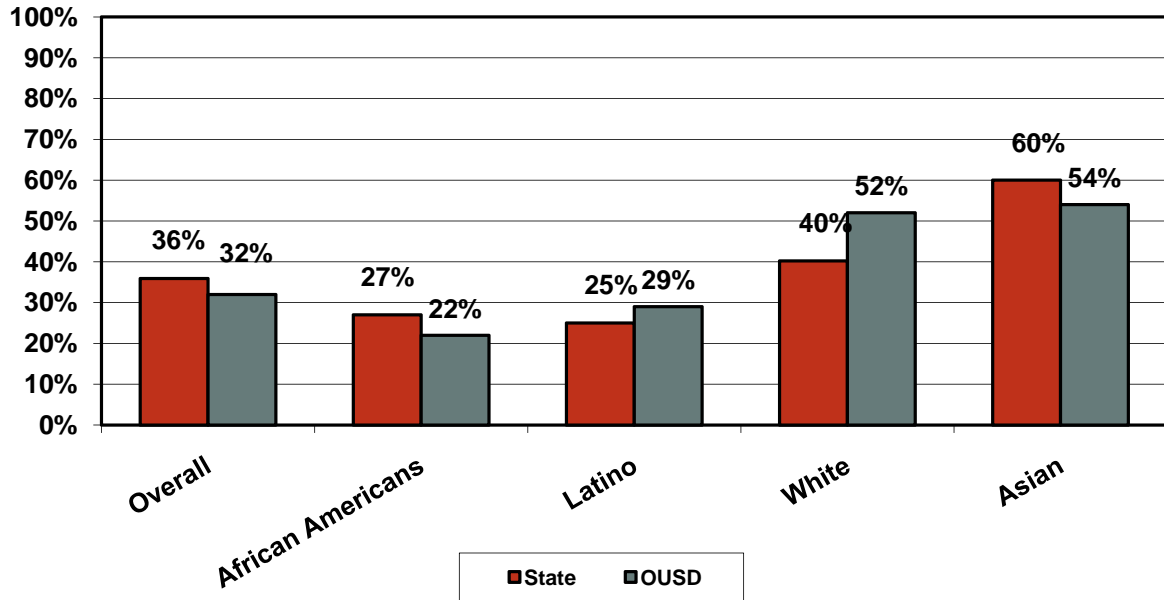
proved effective, but it does mean working to bring a measure of much-needed stability and consistency to OUSD's schools and communities.

8) *Prioritize resources that enable reform.*

California is experiencing an unprecedented fiscal crisis, and the state has asked schools and districts to bear an especially large proportion of the budget shortfall. Thus, districts must be particularly thoughtful about resource allocation and focus on the reforms that matter most. Streamlining processes, eliminating ineffective programs, and committing stimulus and Title I funds to the goal of a college and career-ready curriculum for all students will allow the district to continue its reform efforts even in the face of financial hardship. Effective reform will cost plenty, but delay will prove more costly.

Figure 1

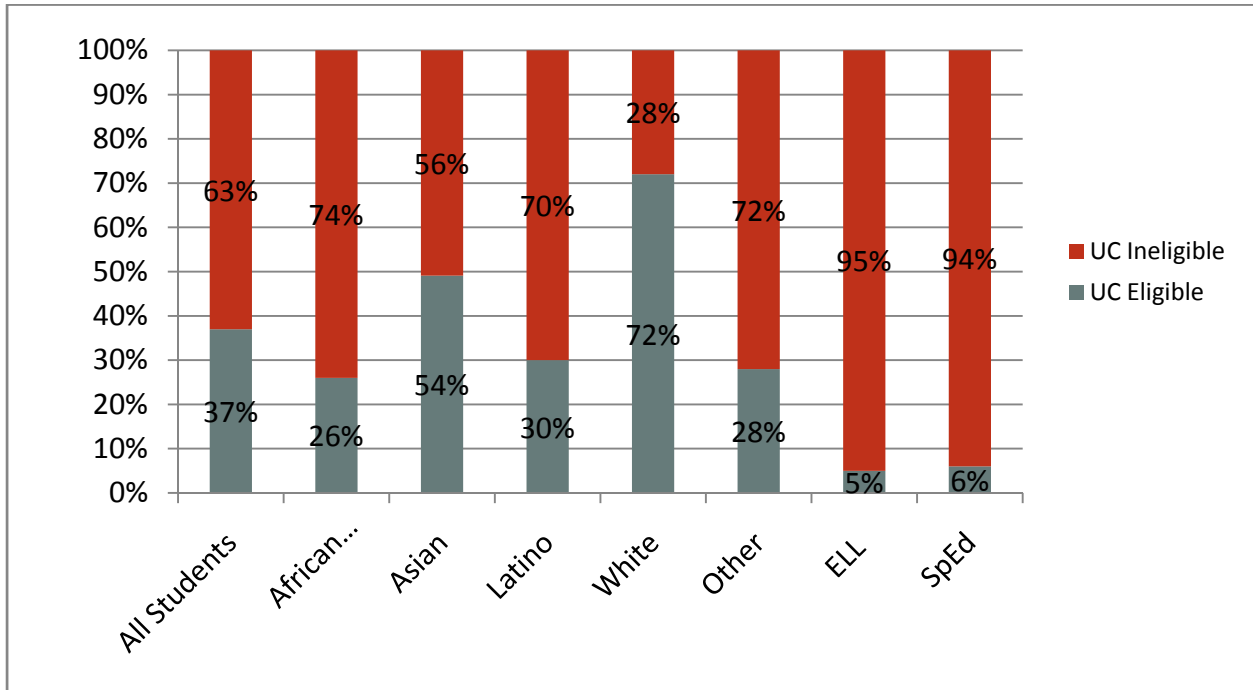
College-Ready Graduates Among OUSD 2006-07 Seniors by Ethnicity



Source: ETW analysis of California Department of Education data, 2008

Figure 2

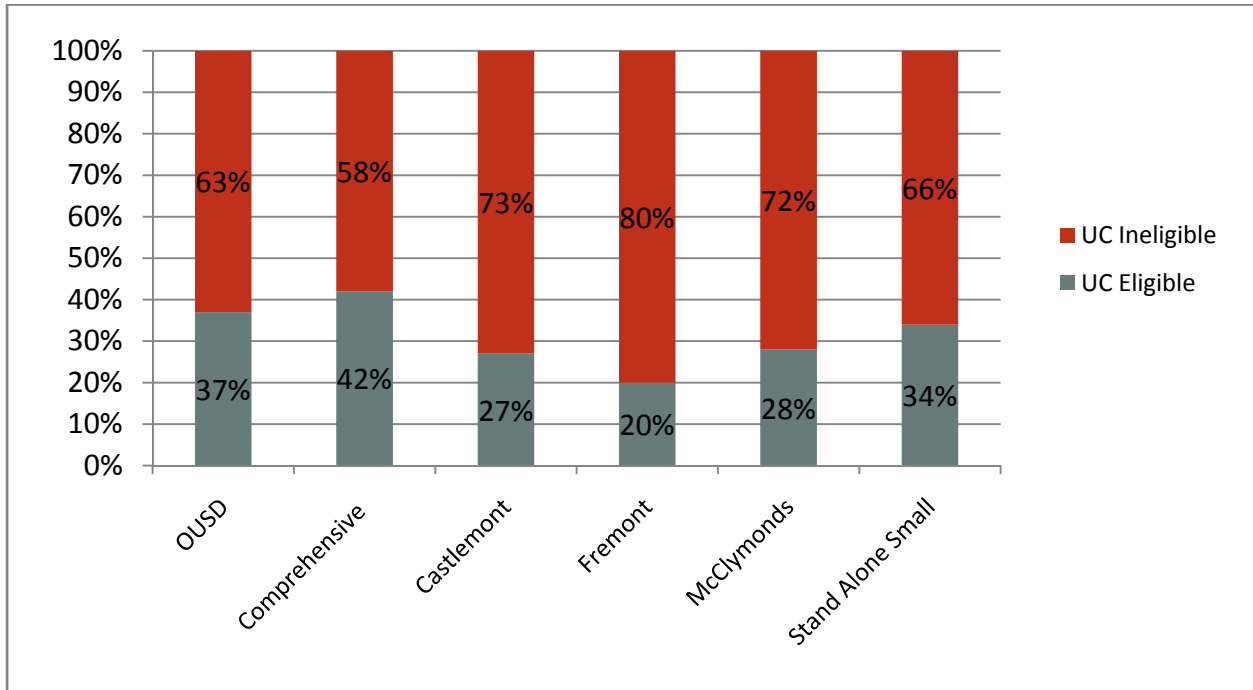
**OUSD Class of 2008 Projected On Track to Meet UC/CSU A-G Requirements by Sub-Groups
The Gaps are Wide**



Source: ETW analysis of OUSD senior transcripts, 2008

Figure 3

2007-08 Projected UC Eligibility By School
The Percent of Students on Track to Meet A-G Requirements Varies by Type of High School



Source: ETW analysis of OUSD senior transcripts, 2008

Figure 4

Senior Schedules Lacking Rigor

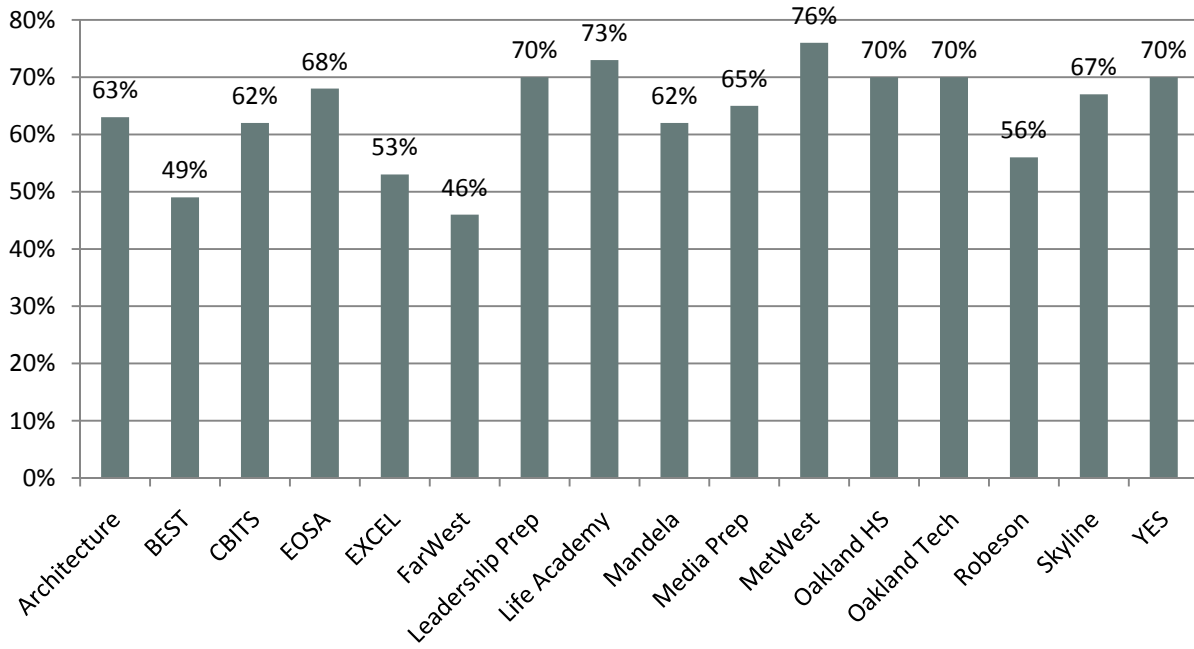
Student A	Student B	Student C
English 4	English 4	Art 1
Adv. Algebra	Int. Algebra	PE
PE	Dance	Arch & Graph
PE	IWE	Am. Gov't/Econ
Advisory	Advisory	ELD HB C
		ELD HB CC

Source: ETW analysis of OUSD senior transcripts, 2008

Figure 5

Students Do Not Have Opportunities to Enroll in Courses Needed For College and Career

Percent of Courses Which Meet UC/CSU A-G Requirements



Source: ETW analysis of OUSD high school master schedules, 2008