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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

High School's Last Test

By J. B. SCHRAMM and E. KINNEY ZALESNE

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THE federal government is about to make a huge investment in high school. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Congress has appropriated more than \$100 billion to public schools, including a competitive “Race to the Top” fund that encourages innovation.

But the real revolution, tucked away in the [Race to the Top guidelines](#) released by the Department of Education last month, is that high school has a new mission. No longer is it enough just to graduate students, or even prepare them for college. Schools must now show how they increase both college enrollment and the number of students who complete at least a year of college. In other words, high schools must now focus on grade 13.

To be sure, this shift is long overdue. It has been a generation since a high school diploma was a ticket to success. Today, the difference in earning power between a high school graduate and someone who's finished eighth grade has shrunk to nil. And students themselves know, better even than their parents or teachers, according to a [recent poll conducted by Deloitte](#), that the main mission of high school is preparation for college.

Still, this shift will be seismic for our nation's high schools, because it will require gathering a great deal of information, and using it. And at the moment, high school principals know virtually nothing about what becomes of their graduates. Most don't even know whether their students make it to college at all.

What data they have is anecdotal. “Once a graduate happened to drop by and tell us she was struggling with college writing,” Linda Calvo, the

principal of Arleta High School in Los Angeles, told us. “We changed our writing curriculum based on what she said. But her visit was a totally random occurrence.”

A smattering of states, school districts and nonprofit educational organizations have begun to gather data about how students fare in college during their first year after graduation, but their progress has been slow and haphazard. Florida has one of the best systems, but even it can't account for a high school graduate who enrolls in college in another state. The nation is asking principals to deliver students who can succeed in college, without ensuring they know whether what they're doing is working.

The Department of Education has begun to solve this problem by instructing states on how to keep good records of its graduates' progress in college. This gives high schools the two pieces of information it most needs: its college enrollment rate and its “college proficiency” rate (the speed with which graduates complete a year of college-level coursework).

But what's critical is that the Education Department also helps high school principals and teachers learn to use their data to improve student achievement — to find out which of their educational strategies actually result in student success after high school. If the department could do this, and also reward those schools that demonstrate increasing postsecondary success, we'd see high schools begin to truly meet their mission.

Race to the Top has finally established a realistic purpose for high school in the 21st century. If principals can now get the support they need to fulfill that purpose, high school can once again be a top-notch producer of American potential.

J. B. Schramm is the chief executive and E. Kinney Zalesne is the former president of College Summit, a nonprofit organization that helps school districts and states increase the number of high school graduates who succeed in college.