

California's High School Graduation Requirements

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➤ **California's high school graduation rate has increased steadily in recent years.**

California's high school graduation rate increased from 75% in 2009–10 to 83% in 2015–16. Much of this increase has come from rising graduation rates among students of color: rates for both Latino students and African American students have increased 12 percentage points (to 80% and 73%, respectively). Graduation rates for English Learners and economically disadvantaged students have risen 16 and 12 percentage points.

➤ **The state sets minimum high school graduation requirements.**

The California Education Code specifies minimum course requirements for the state's public school system: three years of instruction in both English and history/social science, two years in both math and science, and one year of either visual or performing arts, a foreign language, or career technical education. The state encourages local districts to set their own requirements but requires them to include these courses.

➤ **California jettisoned its high school exit exam but has not revised course requirements.**

To better align statewide requirements with the new Common Core State Standards, the governor recently signed legislation that ended the California High School Exit Exam, which had been a graduation requirement since 2006. But statewide math requirements have not been revised since 2003, and science requirements have not been updated since 1998—although the new Next Generation Science Standards require at least three years of science.

➤ **California's graduation requirements lag behind those of other states.**

Over the past decade, 18 states have made significant changes to their math requirements, adding years of instruction or requiring students to take math beyond algebra 1. California is one of three states requiring only two years of math—most require three years or more. In English, California and Nebraska are the only states that require three, instead of four, years of instruction. Forty-two states require three years of science for high school graduation; California is among the few states that require only two years.

➤ **UC and CSU eligibility criteria exceed the state's high school graduation minimums.**

Both the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) require completion of the a–g sequence with at least a C in each course. The a–g is comprised of yearlong courses in seven areas, from history (“a”) to a college preparatory elective (“g”), which must be approved by UC and CSU. Not all high schools offer the full a–g sequence—small and rural schools, in particular, are much less likely to do so.

➤ **Many school districts supplement the statewide requirements.**

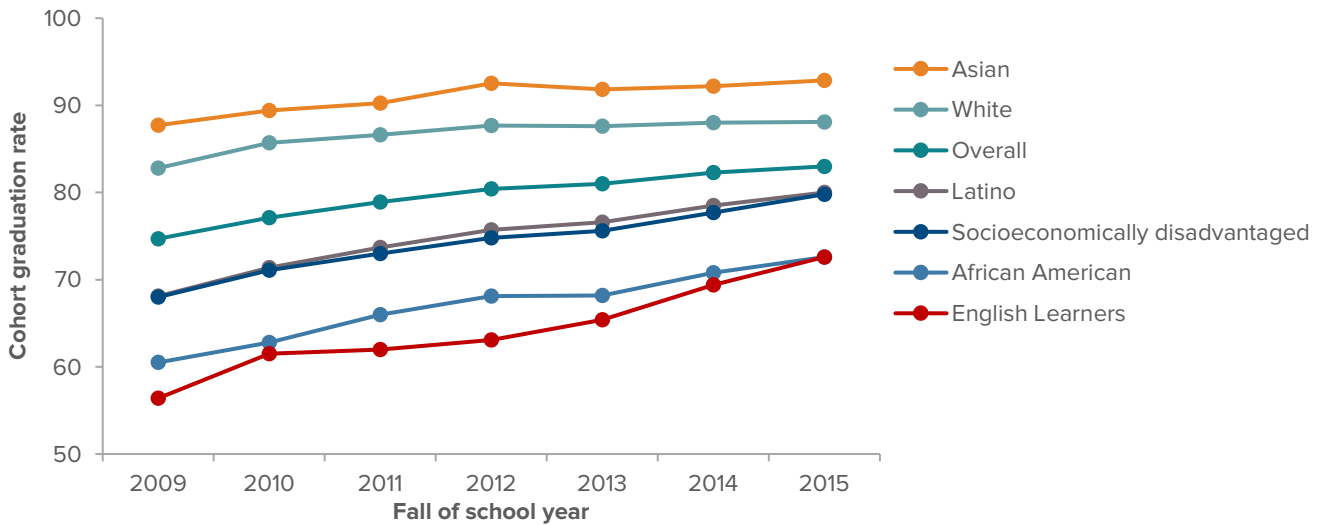
A recent PPIC survey of school districts found that during the 2015–16 school year, 63% of unified and high school districts required an additional year of math for high school graduation. Districts with more than 20,000 students are somewhat less likely to require an additional year of math. Four in ten districts require an additional year of science; unified school districts are more likely than high school districts to do so.

➤ **Many districts have incorporated the a–g sequence in their graduation requirements.**

A 2017 survey of districts shows that 51%—including some of the state's largest—required students to complete the a–g sequence. Districts with large shares of “high-need” students (e.g., economically disadvantaged and English Learner students) and unified districts are more likely to require a–g completion. Most districts with a–g policies (72%) require a C or better in each course; the rest require at least a D. There may be exemptions for some students, including those with learning disabilities and/or those on alternative graduation pathways.



High school graduation rates have risen significantly, particularly among students of color



Source: Cohort graduation rates, California Department of Education, 2009–2015.

Note: Data restricted to years where cohort graduation rates are available.

California's graduation requirements do not align with UC/CSU eligibility standards or with requirements in other states

Core subject area	State graduation requirements	UC requirements	CSU requirements	Rest of US
Math	2 years: ▪ algebra 1	3 years: ▪ algebra 1 ▪ geometry ▪ algebra2	3 years: ▪ algebra 1 ▪ geometry ▪ algebra 2	3 years
Science	2 years: ▪ biological science ▪ physical science	2 years with labs: ▪ biology ▪ chemistry ▪ physics	2 years with labs: ▪ biological science ▪ physical science	3 years
English	3	4	4	4
Social science	3	2	2	3

Sources: California Department of Education; University of California; California State University; California State Department of Education; departments of education in other states, 2017.

Sources: Cohort graduation rates, California Department of Education, 2009–2015. California Department of Education; University of California; California State University; California State Department of Education; departments of education in other states; 2016 PPIC Math Placement Survey; 2017 PPIC Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) Survey.

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