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## **Q&A: Kevin Carey**

**Research and policy manager, Education Sector**  
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Kevin Carey is the research and policy manager for Education Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

**Editor:** What is “ready”? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

**Carey:** There are really two classes of skills: One, I think students need a solid academic foundation, certainly in communications, language, and at least the basics of math, and that extends to a lot of the advanced math classes, not just algebra but up to pre-calculus. When you look at a lot of the research on what employers want, that applies to both work and college ready. What is “ready for college” and what is “ready for work” is rapidly becoming indistinct as the nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce changes.

Also, I think that students need more than knowledge — we talk a lot about the knowledge and skills students need, but we’re mostly talking about the knowledge. In a lot of ways I think skills are becoming more and more important, some of them are communications skills, and I think that people need to know how to work with other people, they need to know how to work in teams, they need to know how to think critically, and how to integrate information from a range of different sources.

**Editor:** How well are schools preparing today’s students for tomorrow’s workplace challenges?

**Carey:** I think we have some real problems... Because [schools] are not preparing students to succeed in college, they are therefore not preparing students to succeed in the workplace.

We’re living in an economy where, really, the four-year college degree is the dividing line of opportunity. Basically, all the huge economic gains in the past 30 years in this society have gone to people with at least a bachelor’s degree, and most have gone to people with more than a bachelor’s degree. The people with some college, perhaps an (associate’s) degree, they’re kind of holding on, but everyone below them is declining. So, even as society is becoming more wealthy, big segments without credentials are going in the opposite direction.

The K-12 system is not preparing students for college .... We’re losing vast numbers of students in the transition from the early secondary grades and college, and I think that’s one of the biggest failures.

**Editor:** Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

**Carey:** It is for some students — this isn't a crisis for everybody, some people manage to do OK. But the answer to that question varies a lot depending on which students we're talking about. The dilemma is we have one formula for all students and what we need is multiple formulas, and some of those do probably very much involve thinking about the way we design school time.

There might be more hours in a day, but I'd attach some comments to that—if you have a school that's not sufficiently oriented on workplace and college readiness, just being in that school longer is probably not going to do a lot, it'll be expensive, and time is money in education. There are definitely student populations in places that could benefit from increased time—but it's only going to be worth the money if accompanied by curricular reforms, increases in teacher quality, and other things that we have along with it. And they have to make better use of the time they have.

**Editor:** What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching “readiness” skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

**Carey:** I think we still have a ways to go in terms of really getting our standards right—while it seems like we're in this era of tough standards and accountability, it really hasn't extended all the way through to the secondary level.

There is not a state in the country that is holding 12<sup>th</sup> grade students accountable for real 12<sup>th</sup> grade standards. We've got this great mismatch between what colleges say you need to have learned and know in order to start college-level work, and what high schools say you need to know in order to leave high school. There are big differences among states in terms of what their curricular requirements are, and we don't have mechanisms in place in order to ensure the validity of those.

Part of [the solution] is again is having a sense of realism on what college and workforce standards really are. What people in the K-12 community need to understand is that they don't really have any choice in that matter, what you need to succeed in the workforce is what it is—the global economy is making that decision—and students are competing against students on the other side of the world. Our colleges and universities set their standards where they want them, unlike K-12, they are independent. So the challenge is to be realistic about what those standards are, and put mechanisms in place to guarantee students that when they come to high school and say, “I want to be in the college prep track,” that that really is the college prep track.