



**David Coleman**  
President and Chief Executive  
Officer of College Board

## the NASBE Interview

**David Coleman** is president and chief executive officer of College Board. He also founded the Grow Network, which McGraw-Hill acquired in 2005, and cofounded Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit that played a leading role in developing the Common Core State Standards. Coleman was named to the 2013 list of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people and as one of its 11 education activists for 2011. He was interviewed July 18 by Kris Amundson, NASBE executive director.

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*In many other fields of endeavor, technology has led to disruptive innovations that are fundamentally changing the nature of the enterprise, but few seem to have taken hold in education. What innovations on the horizon could actually disrupt the education model we see in schools today?*

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What needs to be disrupted are those moments where privilege matters more than merit. The reason we transformed the SAT and the programs surrounding it was to reclaim its potential to disrupt privilege over merit. When the SAT started, its aim was to allow students, regardless of background, to compete on an equal playing field.

But when I began as president of the College Board years ago, we all realized that things had grown up around the college admissions process that undermined the fairness of the exam, such as the cost of test preparation. That's why, when we redesigned the exam, we announced that we were also providing free test preparation. And as a consequence of that disruption, there are now four times as many students taking free test prep than those taking all of the costly test prep in the country combined. We are seeing major drops in self-reported enrollment to costly test prep [compared with] practice for free on Khan Academy. We are disrupting the costly test preparation industry.

Much more important, we are disrupting the fabric of inequality in this country. It is very important that all students get the chance to practice and share their best work. People hoped the SAT could help locate students who might be lost in a

high school but could announce themselves through their high scores—despite low income—as ready for college. What we found is that more than half of those very low-income, high-achieving students do not apply to college. Not a single selective college, to be precise. We found that one reason is because they have to first apply for a fee waiver to apply to college, and that slows them down. So now we give four fee waivers to apply to college to all low-income students who take the SAT.

My favorite day on the job so far was when a kid posted the fee waivers we sent him on Instagram, and he said, “The College Board sent me fee waivers to apply to college because I am awesome.” He didn't say it was because he's poor. Discussions about technology disrupting how we listen to music or how we get certain luxury goods may not be nearly as important as disrupting the substantial inequality in our society today.

The solutions aren't only technological. We partnered with the Boys & Girls Club, local churches, and school districts to make sure that a caring adult is also involved. We have worked to expand the scholarships that are aligned with the PSAT, which has long been associated with the National Merit Scholarship. Scholarships can mean disruption, [but] scholarships too often depend on who you know. Does a counselor at your school know about the scholarship, and does that person know about you and link the two together? That heavily disadvantages students, often in rural environments, who may not be as aware of these scholarship competitions. We now give data to scholarship organizations

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## Assessment without opportunity is dead.

besides National Merit so organizations like the Hispanic Scholarship Fund can find students that otherwise didn't know about their scholarships. As a result, their fund may have many more rural candidates winning for the first time.

We think about disruption a little differently. We think about what patterns of inequality emerge that are unrelated to merit—are in fact hostile to it—and we look to disrupt those. As another example, we found that there are 162,000 young women in America ready for Advanced Placement computer science. But in the actual exam given in 2015, only 10,000 test takers were young women. That's something you want to disrupt. We've been reaching out to principals and other school leaders to make sure that not only young women but also African Americans, Latinos, and other underrepresented students take the opportunities they've earned.

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*It is easy for a policymaker or the public to embrace the philosophy of high standards, but when the assessment data comes in and we learn that kids are not there yet, then there's pressure on states and on state boards to lower those standards. What kinds of conversations do we need to be having to ensure that the pressure gets put in the right place?*

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Assessment without opportunity is dead. Trying to defend tests that do not give a direct benefit to students and families will not be sustainable. We've put school boards in a terrible position—defending exams where the parents and kids who take them don't feel they're getting something from them. That's why we at the College Board have tried to redesign everything we do to make sure students get concrete opportunities when they take an exam.

For example, we added \$180 million of additional scholarships to the PSAT/NMSQT. Every low-income kid who takes the exam gets fee waivers to apply to college, and every student who takes one of those exams automatically gets a free account on Khan Academy to attend to their personal needs. It's personal practice that adapts to them. If they choose to link their accounts, they get personalized learning plans. Imagine how hard it is to convince families to support high standards and demanding assessments when their children don't get personalized help as a result. Why would you do it? Why would you give a blood test or some other uncomfortable test to a large number of people

without offering personalized support and attention following it?

That's why we're in such a dilemma. I think people's frustration is not that standards are high or with what they're learning about their students. What we haven't done is given them the opportunities to make progress and to make college affordable.

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*The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) calls on state education agencies and state boards to ramp up outreach to stakeholders in a way that is "timely and meaningful." From parents to teachers to civil rights organizations and the business community, you're doing that in conjunction with some of your redesigned programs. What advice would you give state boards and departments as they undertake stakeholder engagement?*

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Skip talking about test scores and start talking about concrete opportunities for young people. Talk about young women in computer science who are given the opportunity and are taking it to do advanced work in computer science and earn their future. Talk about how many students there are in your state who have great potential based on the PSAT/NMSQT and are not taking that opportunity. If you increase those numbers, you don't just improve test scores, you get more kids ready and able to earn credit in college. Talk about the number of young students in that state earning scholarships. Talk about how much productive practicing they're actually doing on Khan Academy. And talk about the kids who used to fail or suffered a crisis of confidence who found that through practice they could get better.

If you talk about the number of schools that are failing and the test scores that are rising or decreasing without faces—without stories of young people—you're going to lose the public. Second, talk about concrete opportunities kids can take. Keep your eye on all kids. What I mean by that is a little different from what it usually means: It must extend to the rural, white poor. It must extend to the working class, the working poor, as well as the middle class, who are finding the cost of college really overwhelming.

Some asked, "Why don't you make Khan Academy and test prep free for low-income families but not all families?" And I said no. The middle class is feeling so much pressure in unnecessary application fees; we've got to give them relief. We've got to look at military young

people, who are moving all the time. We should pay attention to their needs.

An agenda requires taking a broad look at the dynamics of opportunity. Are young women taking opportunities in certain hard sciences and computer science? What's happening to Latinos and African Americans in terms of claiming the opportunities they've earned? What about the isolated, rural white poor? What are those dynamics, and how can we make sure they have opportunities? In sum, think about engaging a wider pallet of groups.

I've spent a lot of time as College Board president reaching out to the community, including families who choose to educate their children at home, Christian schools, and evangelical colleges. It's a grave mistake [not to be] in a deep conversation with those communities about the future of education in the state. Regardless of what the law requires, I urge NASBE members to take a broader outreach strategy.

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*ESSA has been described as the most data-reliant piece of education legislation ever passed. Are there data we need that we are not gathering or data that are languishing that we could be translating into actionable steps to help kids?*

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The first step, as you talk about these matters, is to make sure state boards are leading on the idea that families and students own their data and they only share data with their full consent and engagement. Otherwise, ESSA won't realize the opportunity that is hoped. What we want to do is have the data open up opportunities that never put kids too much in a box.

Let me give you an interesting example: We've looked at a different way of answering questions on the SAT. Rather than ask them what college is their choice, which puts them in a bit of a box, we can ask, "Are you interested in attending a faith-based institution or college?" which opens up an opportunity to find things they might have otherwise not have found.

We often use data to say "this or that student requires intervention." What about using data as early intervention for opportunity? What about data that says "this young person, or this young woman, did very well on PSAT/NMSQT and is qualified for Advanced Placement, but they're not thinking about it." What will it take to propel them into this opportunity?

We spend a lot of time on data for students who are behind, but we spend far less time on the data that suggest where students might go if they are pushed a little further. Those data often languish when it comes time for scholarships. Are we getting those data out to scholarship organizations to propel those kids forward?

Another way data languishes is in access to personalized practice. I don't think any young person in this country needs to be told that they are behind. What is much more helpful is working with a partner to give them a personal platform to advance. The power of data alone has been overestimated.

One group that we've been talking to is a group called the College Advising Corps. A lot of kids need advice in addition to data. The human element is so important.

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*When President Lyndon Johnson signed the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, he said the twin aims of both the bill and federal intervention in education ought to be to ensure quality and equality for all students. How do we move that agenda forward?*

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ESSA offers a great opportunity for boards to continue to lead and advance equity and excellence. I'm excited for the opportunities it provides for NASBE members. It's going to be a very exciting time. What's sad is that many people assume equity and excellence face off, but if you expand access to something, you don't necessarily diminish its quality. At the College Board, we have a great counterexample. During the last 10 years, we added over a million students to Advanced Placement. It went from being a small, elite program to a program that serves twice as many students. A researcher at the American Enterprise Institute called it the "single happiest education story of the century" because he found that even with the dramatic expansion of AP, there was no reduction in quality, even though many more students—and many more students from diverse backgrounds—were taking and passing AP. There are models to advance both equity and excellence, and I know that NASBE is interested in doing those two things together. What Advanced Placement is really all about is a shared sense of community and standards for excellence in those classrooms. ■

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