



Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High Schools: A Guide for State Policymakers

Executive Summary

The global economy has literally transformed the nature of opportunity in America. But most students continue to leave our high schools ill-equipped to pursue postsecondary education and training, even as such preparation is increasingly essential for success. To close the gap between what is expected of a high school graduate and what the world beyond high school demands, state leaders will need to develop coherent policies that equate earning a high school diploma with being prepared for the demands of college and the workplace. Whether by adopting statewide college- and career-ready graduation requirements or developing assessments and accountability systems aligned with those goals, state policymakers will need to identify clear expectations and document progress to districts, schools, parents, and students. An organizing framework with a common goal—college and career readiness for all—can ensure that all efforts throughout the system are geared toward this goal. Such a foundation will ground all programs and efforts by enabling teachers, administrators, and policymakers to determine whether students are leaving high school ready for college and the world of work.

Although most states already have made some progress toward this goal, no state has yet done all the necessary work. In almost every area of needed activity, in almost every state, important steps remain unaddressed. To assist states in this critical policy work, Achieve and The Education Trust have published *Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High Schools: A Guide for State Policymakers*. The guide was developed to help states consider the various issues in developing a coherent college- and career-ready policy framework. The major recommendations in the report call on state policymakers to do the following:

Align High School Standards with the Demands of College and Careers

- State standards should be college- and career-ready and reflect the expectations of colleges and employers. To ensure that all students are prepared for college and careers, state standards must reflect the necessary content and skills students need to succeed in college and on the job. Standards must be clear, focused, and easy for educators to translate into classroom instruction.

Ensure all Students Enroll in a College-and Career-Ready Course of Study

- **States should set high school course-taking requirements to ensure all students are prepared for college and careers.** Preparation for college and the workplace has converged, and state graduation requirements must reflect that reality. It no longer is enough to “track” some students for college and other students for something else. *All* students must have access to rigorous academic courses. This is especially important for low-income and minority students, who too often lack equitable access to the rigorous curriculum they need to succeed. For high school graduates to be prepared for college and good jobs, they need to take four years of challenging mathematics—at least through Algebra II or its equivalent—and four years of rigorous English. But math and English alone will not prepare students for success after high school. Students need a well-rounded curriculum that also includes courses in science, social studies, arts, and foreign languages.

Provide High-Quality Curriculum and Teacher-Support Materials

- **States no longer can leave the development, selection, or alignment of curricula with standards to chance.** Simply placing students in more advanced courses without paying sufficient attention to the quality of the course content and consistency of teaching will not be enough to get students ready for college and careers. States need to actively monitor the consistency and level of rigor and design mechanisms to ensure a high-quality curriculum in all schools. States must provide greater leadership and support in making outstanding standards-based materials and teaching tools available to teachers.

Build Better Assessments to Measure Student Learning

- **Proficiency on the state assessment should mean a student is prepared for college and the workplace.** State testing systems should be anchored in college and career readiness. State assessments at the high school level must do a better job measuring real-world knowledge and skills. Most existing high school tests measure material students should learn in middle school or early high school. Students can score “proficient” but be unprepared for their next steps in life. That is why states need to equate proficiency with readiness for credit-bearing coursework in college and ensure that high school tests measure what matters to employers and colleges. In addition, the rest of the assessment system must be aligned with these high school assessments so that *proficient means prepared* from elementary school through high school.
- **High school test results should open doors for students to higher education and good jobs.** As states establish more meaningful and challenging assessments, postsecondary institutions and employers should value the results by tying incentives to examination results. For example, in California the state university system will waive the placement tests for students who score “college ready” on the statewide 11th-grade exam. In New York, CUNY and SUNY use scores on the Regents exams for admissions and placement into credit-bearing courses. These incentives send powerful messages to students about the importance of taking rigorous courses and studying hard, and they also make the transition to higher education more seamless for graduates.
- **Assess the full range of college-and career-ready standards. Some of the essential skills that college faculty and employers value in high school graduates are difficult to measure via pencil-and-paper tests.** States should supplement their summative high school tests with performance assessments for such elements as engaging in teamwork or performing contextualized tasks that involve extended analysis, research, or communication.
- **Testing should support good teaching and become a tool for instructional improvement.** Supporting instruction should be a high priority of assessment systems. States need to strike a better balance between tests that are mostly useful for accountability and tests that are useful for improving teaching and learning.

- **Testing should be streamlined—more testing is not the goal; smarter testing is.** States and districts must expand their vision of testing systems while being careful not to increase the amount of testing students and teachers experience in schools. Before adding new assessments, state leaders should take a hard look at how many tests students currently take—at both the state and local levels—and what those tests seek to measure. This will help point out gaps and redundancies in the assessment system.

Establish Information and Accountability Systems That Value and Incentivize College and Career Readiness

- **Ensure all stakeholders have the information they need to support college and career readiness.** At the core of a good accountability system is information—the right information provided to the right people at the right time. As states rethink their high school accountability systems, they should start by determining what information is most important for the people whose efforts are necessary to improve student readiness.
- **Accountability systems should reflect the goal of college and career readiness for all students.** Without high expectations for performance, our school systems will not be pushed to improve. At the same time, states need to find ways to build capacity and support so that meeting higher expectations is possible in all schools, especially those serving the most disadvantaged students. States will need to adopt “stretch goals” that reflect ambitious expectations for the percentages of students who will graduate college- and career-ready and then establish progress targets that communicate a clear path for students, schools, and districts to follow.
- **Accountability indicators should be expanded while maintaining focus on college and career readiness.** States should adopt three types of indicators: those reflecting *curriculum participation and success*, those reflecting *achievement*, and those reflecting *attainment*. States should design the indicators in a manner that reflects a continuum of whether students are *progressing toward*, *achieving*, and *exceeding* college and career readiness. This represents a new vision of the kind of information states should collect, report, and enable schools and districts to use; no state has such a system in place today.
- **States need to establish metrics for meeting expectations and progress toward them.** States should develop accountability systems that consider a combination of status and improvement/growth metrics because both are important. Looking at status gives a picture of where students are currently performing, an especially critical measure for those students about to leave high school. Looking at growth/improvement ensures that all students—from those far below to those well above the standard—are expected to progress academically.
- **States need a broader vision of accountability, one that empowers educators as much as it holds them accountable for performance.** States need to think about accountability more broadly; too often accountability has been thought of as punitive, but it need not be. Rethinking accountability includes considering it as a way to target assistance to schools in need, use data more effectively, and reward and incentivize progress. Positive incentives are important for creating an environment in which accountability goals are meaningful and motivate exemplary performance.

This ambitious policy agenda will require significant and sustained leadership. While the challenges to realizing such an agenda are real, the consequences of inaction are far greater. Sending young people unprepared into the world beyond high school is taking a huge toll on them and on our economy and society as a whole. To prompt the changes we need in our high schools, states need to establish a policy framework that properly aligns the fundamentals of standards, course requirements, curriculum and teacher support materials, assessments, and information/accountability systems.

The full report is available at www.achieve.org/measurthatmatter or www.edtrust.org.