

The Historic Opportunity to Get College Readiness Right: The Race to the Top Fund and Postsecondary Education

Passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the creation of the Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund in early 2009 provide states (SEAs) and local school districts (LEAs) with an historic opportunity to develop and implement dramatic reforms to improve the rate at which students graduate ready for college and careers. For cash-strapped states, the \$4.35 billion available through RTTT can infuse unprecedented federal resources into college readiness efforts. As colleges and universities aggressively seek to reduce expenditures, protect access and affordability, and promote student persistence and success, RTTT is a direct way to ensure more students enter postsecondary education with the knowledge and skills to succeed – thereby decreasing the amount of money spent on developmental education.

No state is guaranteed to win a grant from the RTTT Fund, and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has made clear he will evaluate states' proposals against highly rigorous standards. Successful applications will demonstrate that states have redoubled their efforts to boost high school expectations and improve assessments but also to tackle other roadblocks – such as weak use of data, inequitably distributed teachers, and chronically low-achieving schools – that have impeded progress towards college- and career-ready success. To be competitive for RTTT funding, states must demonstrate their commitment to four building blocks, or assurances: standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and leaders, and turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

States' applications must describe how the SEA and participating LEAs intend to use RTTT funds to implement comprehensive and coherent policies and practices across the four education assurances, and how these reforms are designed to increase student achievement, reduce the achievement gap across student subgroups, and increase the rates at which students who graduate from high school are prepared for college and careers.¹

While the four RTTT assurances are directed primarily at improving K-12 systems, postsecondary institutions have a unique opportunity to partner with SEAs and LEAs to ensure that the reforms implemented will help more students successfully prepare for college, as well as to provide expertise based on research and best practice. Postsecondary institutions should also seize the opportunity to provide the leadership needed to overcome historical barriers to collaboration between K-12 and higher education for the development of successful P-20 systems.

This guide is one of a series of papers Achieve has prepared to help states maximize the opportunities presented through the Race to the Top Fund (RTTT). In accompanying papers, Achieve addresses recommendations for leveraging P-20 longitudinal data systems, turning around low performing schools, and improving teacher effectiveness. Taken together, these papers offer advice to help state leaders develop comprehensive RTTT reform strategies firmly anchored in the goal of college and career readiness for all students. The full set of RTTT papers is available at <http://www.achieve.org/Racetothetop>.

¹ To read the full set of program requirements and the final application, visit www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop.

This brief is designed to identify ways in which the postsecondary education community can support states and local school districts as they develop RTTT plans that will drive dramatic reforms. As RTTT proposals are designed, collaboration amongst stakeholders will be essential to sustain broad-based support. While many of the suggestions below may seem apparent, it remains clear that, in many instances, state leaders have yet to act upon them. Many states are facing significant shortages in the capacity and expertise necessary to develop and implement innovative reforms around the four RTTT assurances. While the time for assistance in developing the proposals may be short, the availability of postsecondary institutions to support implementation is ripe. Simply put, the postsecondary community is a critical partner in ensuring the success of states’ RTTT reforms.

In the following sections, Achieve briefly outlines how the U.S. Department of Education will evaluate states on their plans in each assurance area and provides recommendations for postsecondary institutions and leaders to engage with the state’s RTTT application process – and, if successful, to implement dramatic, sustainable reform.

I. STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

RTTT Selection Criteria
<i>What the Department of Education is looking for in state proposals:</i>
1. Developing and adopting common, college- and career-ready standards
2. Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments
3. Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments
<i>The full set of selection criteria, including evidence states are required to submit and the point value assigned to each criterion, is available in the final RTTT application at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.</i>

Race to the Top challenges states to collaborate on the development of common, college- and career-ready, internationally-benchmarked content standards in English language arts and mathematics. Forty-eight states are participating in the landmark Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSI) led by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, in partnership with Achieve, ACT and the College Board. The CCSI released end-of-high-school standards in the fall of 2009, and the K-12 standards will be completed over the winter and vetted by states. Adopting common standards such as these, anchored in what it takes for students to be ready for college and careers, will provide a dramatic boost to school improvement efforts across the country and should form the foundation of all states’ RTTT efforts.

Postsecondary’s most important role in helping states compete in RTTT is communicating to students, parents, educators, and policymakers a clear definition of college readiness. This clarity will help the state to: 1) adopt common standards designed to prepare more students for postsecondary success; 2) help align K-12 and postsecondary curriculum with the common standards; and 3) support the development and use of assessments that are aligned to the standards and the curriculum. Without a clear articulation from higher education of what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses at two- and four-year institutions, common, college- and career-ready standards may fail to take root in ways that make meaningful differences in students’ high school educations.

How Can Postsecondary Help States Meet the RTTT Challenge?

Given the postsecondary community's unique position to communicate the importance of college readiness standards, Achieve recommends that higher education leaders partner with state and local officials to support the adoption and implementation of common, college- and career-ready standards and assessments. Postsecondary leaders might do this in three important ways:

1. Help states get common, college- and career-ready standards right.

- ***Collaborate with SEA officials, the State Board of Education, and other key state K-12 leaders to clarify and clearly articulate college-ready expectations.*** Higher education leaders and faculty should specifically identify, at a minimum, the academic knowledge and skills high school graduates need in reading, writing and mathematics to succeed in entry-level, non-remedial courses at the state's two-year, four-year and technical institutions. That information should be shared with a variety of stakeholders – including students, parents, teachers, and administrators – in clear and understandable language. The Common Core Standards Initiative provides a strong foundation for postsecondary institutions to communicate with the public about college readiness, and higher education leaders should work with SEA officials to review, validate, and build support for common, college- and career-ready standards.
- ***Collaborate with K-12 leaders to increase the percentage of high school students taking and successfully completing a rigorous high school curriculum.*** Simply adopting common, college- and career-ready standards will not guarantee all students will be enrolled in a course of study that ensures they will successfully acquire the knowledge and skills needed for success after high school. Requiring students to complete a course of study that reflects the rigorous content included in the standards – and not just numbers or names of required courses – will provide them with the foundational preparation needed to enter and successfully complete entry-level, credit-bearing college courses, training, and apprenticeship programs. Higher education should work with K-12 leaders to align high school coursetaking requirements with the requirements for entering credit-bearing postsecondary courses so that students can move seamlessly from graduation to their next step. In addition, states can target merit-based financial aid to low-income students who successfully complete a college- and career-ready course of study. This type of incentive will help open doors to students and give them the real-world incentive they may need to complete more rigorous high school graduation requirements.
- ***Share more accurate and usable information about college readiness to students, parents, and others providing guidance to students.*** Clearly articulating what it takes to succeed in entry-level postsecondary courses will go a long way towards helping parents, high school counselors and others who are gatekeepers of information about colleges to guide students towards postsecondary education options that will help them meet their education and career goals. Critically, it will also help counselors and administrators guide students to enroll in the courses in high school they need to be prepared for postsecondary success.

2. Support the development of aligned curriculum.

- **Evaluate current course offerings across grades, particularly in high school, to determine their rigor and appropriateness for new college-ready common standards.** Postsecondary and K-12 faculty should collaborate to evaluate how well existing courses and course sequences match the rigor, depth, and progression of the common, college- and career-ready standards, as well as to develop new courses for K-8 and high school students to help them achieve college and career readiness by high school graduation.
- **Develop and expand dual enrollment opportunities that allow students to take more rigorous coursework that goes beyond high schools' current curricular offerings.** This may be particularly important for schools – such as those in rural areas – where high schools lack the capacity to offer a wide range of advanced coursework.
- **Develop pathways that expand community college and technical college access for students who seek degrees or training that do not require four-year degrees.** While earning a bachelor's degree is an increasingly important prerequisite for many career paths, growing numbers of well-paying jobs require students to complete associate's degrees, apprenticeship programs, or other postsecondary certificates or training. In many cases, it's no longer possible for young people to enter good careers with family-sustaining wages and opportunities for career advancement with only a high school diploma. Higher education leaders can help SEAs and LEAs develop pathways to postsecondary programs to help prepare students for success in postsecondary education or training that does not lead to a traditional baccalaureate degree but that will still allow them to pursue good careers.
- **Develop partnership agreements with SEAs, LEAs, and schools to share lab resources for students and teachers to meet the more rigorous expectations of higher-level math courses.** As states raise their standards to meet the demands of college and career expectations, some schools may lack sufficient resources to provide the kinds of rigorous and contextualized learning experiences students may need. Postsecondary resources – both physical and intellectual – can be marshaled to ensure high school students have access to cutting-edge instruction and technology.

3. Collaborate on assessment development and standard-setting to ensure alignment.

- **Engage with K-12 in the development of college-ready anchor assessments at the high school level, and provide support to ensure that rigorous achievement standards and cut scores are set across assessments.** In most states, current high school assessments measure knowledge and skills students learn early in high school or even middle school. Without a much greater emphasis on the advanced high school content students need to be successful in postsecondary education and training opportunities, state assessments will not provide the critical information that teachers, parents, and students need to evaluate students' progress towards college and career readiness. For high school assessments to measure and signal whether students are likely to succeed in entry-level college courses, postsecondary leaders and faculty must collaborate with K-12 from the first stages of test development through the conclusion of the standard-setting process and beyond.

These anchor assessments should be given to all students statewide and, unlike today’s crop of high school exams, “proficient” on the tests should mean students are prepared for success after high school. But their primary purpose should be to determine if students have met the college- and career-ready standards in reading, writing and mathematics for the end of high school.

- **Support the development of interventions based on assessments aligned to college- and career-ready standards.** California’s Early Assessment Program (EAP) provides a good example: The California Department of Education (CDE) and California State University (CSU) co-developed EAP in order to address high rates of remediation at CSU campuses. The EAP items augment the state’s 11th grade mathematics and English assessments to determine if students are prepared for college coursework. If the EAP identifies gaps in students’ knowledge, they can adjust their senior year coursework. High school teachers also receive substantial support through professional development, pre-service, and in-service programs about college readiness and the EAP. Early evaluations of the EAP indicate that remediation rates have decreased among students who have taken the EAP in high school relative to their peers who did not.

II. DATA SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT INSTRUCTION

RTTT Selection Criteria
<i>What the Department of Education is looking for in state proposals:</i>
1. Fully implementing a statewide P-20 longitudinal data system
2. Accessing and using state data to inform and engage stakeholders
3. Using data to improve instruction
<i>The full set of selection criteria, including evidence states are required to submit and the point value assigned to each criterion, is available in the final RTTT application at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.</i>

Postsecondary is an essential partner to states both in the development and use of statewide P-20 longitudinal data systems. It can join with K-12 leaders to develop and strengthen such data systems, and it can help states and others leverage data to drive instructional improvement.

How Can Postsecondary Help States Meet the RTTT Challenge?

1. **Partner with K-12 leaders to develop and strengthen statewide P-20 longitudinal data systems.**
 - **Collaborate with the SEA and lend technical expertise to strengthen statewide P-20 longitudinal data systems,** through assistance with data system development, cross-sector data system integration, conversion to a single student ID across the P-20 system, data quality assurance, and participation in data system contract award processes to ensure consideration of P-20 needs.
 - **Provide student-level data on remediation, including course taking patterns and student characteristics, to high schools.** This information can help administrators and teachers identify important patterns regarding students’ readiness, persistence, and success in college and to use that information to improve curriculum and develop professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers.

- **Develop a single system of postsecondary course coding.** Doing so will provide high school students, college students, K-12 educators, and others with more clarity about postsecondary course sequences, helping to improve student success through key transfer and transition points from high school into college and through postsecondary education.
 - **Support the development of a single statewide set of common data requirements.** Common data standards will facilitate data sharing among K-12, higher education, and other state agencies; allow states’ systems to connect and talk to one another; help share information more easily between district and state systems; and improve data quality by providing better information about student transitions through the system and mobile student and teacher populations.
- 2. Help states, districts and schools leverage their P-20 data systems to drive instructional improvement through research and development.**
- **Collaborate with states and districts on research to strengthen the development, implementation, and use of growth models.** As states expand the use of growth models to evaluate student progress towards college- and career-ready standards and to help evaluate educators, it’s increasingly important for higher education leaders to lend their research capacity and expertise to ensure these models are reliable, valid, and fair – and help students, parents, and educators get a clear and accurate view of students’ progress towards college readiness.
 - **Work with SEAs to identify the strongest indicators of students’ college success.** Postsecondary institutions and SEAs can collaborate on joint research initiatives that identify the indicators of students’ K-12 achievement that best demonstrate their likelihood for postsecondary success. This research can help states and districts develop and strengthen early warning data systems, undergird the use of student success data in accountability systems, and identify points of leverage to which positive incentives should be attached (such as automatic entry into credit-bearing college courses for students who meet a specific threshold on high school assessment).

III. GREAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS

RTTT Selection Criteria
<i>What the Department of Education is looking for in state proposals:</i>
1. Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals
2. Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance
3. Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals
4. Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs
5. Providing effective support to teachers and principals
<i>The full set of selection criteria, including the evidence states are required to submit and the point value assigned to each criterion, is available in the final RTTT application at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.</i>

The postsecondary community has historically played the central role in preparing the teacher workforce. In recent years, postsecondary has also become increasingly responsible for developing and providing on-going

professional development for teachers and other school professionals to improve student achievement, particularly in key academic disciplines and schools serving low-income and other marginalized populations. Race to the Top raises the stakes for both K-12 and postsecondary institutions: winning states will need to dramatically improve a wide range of policies impacting the training, recruitment, evaluation, support, and distribution of teachers and principals – as states simultaneously raise standards and expectations for both students’ and educators’ performance. To help states meet the challenge of preparing more students for postsecondary success, higher education can support states’ efforts in two key areas: improving the preparation of future and current teachers, and providing incentives for students to teach in high-needs subjects and schools.

How Can Postsecondary Help States Meet the RTTT Challenge?

1. **Improve the preparation of future educators and strengthen professional development for current educators.**
 - ***Ensure that teacher preparation program requirements give future educators the content-area knowledge needed to teach rigorous, common, college- and career-ready standards.*** Postsecondary institutions should review education degree requirements in order to map teacher credentials to the increased rigor of common standards and, in particular, ensure that teaching candidates have strong content-area knowledge in the subjects they plan to teach.
 - ***Ensure that teacher preparation program requirements include pedagogical training to prepare educators to teach rigorous standards to all students.*** Postsecondary education programs should develop classroom strategies that help teachers overcome the challenges of high poverty and low achievement and help all students meet more rigorous expectations, and provide remediation and professional development strategies for struggling teachers.
2. **Help state policymakers provide strong incentives for educators to work in high-needs subjects and schools.**
 - ***Map teacher mobility with broader labor data to understand teacher employment choices.*** This data will help both postsecondary institutions and SEAs better understand which schools and districts face the greatest gaps in the supply of highly effective teachers and for which subjects and grades – a critical first step to developing incentives to get the right teachers in the right classrooms. In particular, the postsecondary community can harness its data and research capacity to share information on the distribution of teachers across a state to help leaders identify where there are shortages of high school educators prepared to teach advanced math and science courses that will help all students meet college and career readiness standards. Postsecondary education programs should provide stronger incentives for students to teach in these high-needs subjects, including through alternate paths to certification and employment.

IV. TURNING AROUND THE LOWEST-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

RTTT Selection Criteria
<i>What the Department of Education is looking for in state proposals:</i>
1. Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs
2. Turning around the lowest-achieving schools
<i>The full set of selection criteria, including the evidence states are required to submit and the point value assigned to each criterion, is available in the final RTTT at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.</i>

The postsecondary community’s intellectual and other resources offer important tools for SEAs and LEAs to build the capacity and expertise to take on the challenging work of turning around their lowest-achieving schools – which are responsible for producing a disproportionate number of students who graduate unprepared for life after high school. At the same time, many individual students in better performing – but still mediocre – high schools do not graduate ready for college and careers. The postsecondary community can help SEAs in their efforts to mobilize different interventions to match each school’s circumstances so that all students – no matter where they go to school – can graduate prepared for success in college and careers.

How Can Postsecondary Help States Meet the RTTT Challenge?

1. **Encourage states and districts to broaden the indicators used to assess school performance so they paint a more comprehensive picture of college and career readiness.**
 - **Help both SEAs and LEAs focus attention on the fundamental goal of preparing students for postsecondary success.** Postsecondary leaders need to clearly articulate what students should be able to know and do to successfully enter, persist in, and complete postsecondary education and training. This work includes validating the common, college- and career-ready standards, as well as helping SEAs develop assessments that determine if students have met the college- and career-ready standards in reading, writing and mathematics for the end of high school. Doing so will send strong signals about what students need to do to be prepared for college.
 - **Value these indicators of college and career readiness in admissions and placement decisions.** Provide strong incentives for students, teachers, and schools to strive for college- and career-ready performance by using results from college- and career-ready high school assessments for placing students into credit-bearing entry-level courses and/or admissions.
2. **Provide technical expertise and research support on school interventions and turnaround strategies.**
 - **Provide technical expertise to SEAs on turnaround strategies and develop differentiated intervention strategies and toolkits.** States will need to develop a complete strategy that identifies and segments schools based on their level of underperformance and then applies appropriate interventions or turnaround strategies. Postsecondary institutions can provide technical expertise as states develop research-based plans for turning around their lowest-achieving schools and supporting middle-tier schools, while helping keep their long-term focus on

the ultimate goal of preparing all students for postsecondary success.

- ***Develop better diagnostic tools and strategies to support turnaround efforts.*** State officials and district administrators need better tools to help them monitor progress and identify specific areas for improvement as they undertake challenging turnaround efforts. Likewise, organizations working to increase the number and quality of schools in high-needs locations need tools to help monitor quality and progress.
- ***Partner with charter organizations and communities to expand high quality schools into high-needs locations.*** Postsecondary institutions can serve as ideal partners in developing high quality school options that will help more students graduate high school prepared for success in postsecondary education. Through the Middle College National Consortium, for example, 19 colleges have partnered with school districts, parents and community-based organizations to develop Early-Middle College High Schools in underserved communities, offering a combination of high school and college classes that culminate in an associate's degree or up to 60 transferable college credits.

WHAT IS THE RTTT TIMELINE?

- Final Notice Published: November 18, 2009
- Deadline for Notice of Intent to Apply for Phase 1: December 8, 2009

- Technical Assistance:
 - Informational Conference Calls: November and December 2009
 - Technical Assistance Workshops: December 3 in Denver, CO; December 10 in Washington, D.C.
 - Other Events: TBD

- Phase 1:
 - Applications Due: January 19, 2010
 - Deadline for Intergovernmental Review: March 18, 2010
 - Awards Announced: April 2010

- Phase 2:
 - Applications Due: June 1, 2010
 - Deadline for Intergovernmental Review: August 2, 2010
 - Awards Announced: September 2010

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

1. To learn who to reach out to in your state to connect with the RTTT proposal-drafting process, contact Nevin Brown at Achieve (202-419-1540) or nbrown@achieve.org.
2. The final Race to the Top regulations: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.
3. More information about the U.S. Department of Education's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 can be found at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/programs.html>.
4. Achieve has developed four *Race to the Top: Accelerating College and Career Readiness* guides to help state leaders take advantage of this exceptional competition. The guides are available at <http://www.achieve.org/Racetothetop>.