

THINKING LONG TERM: STATE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GOALS UNDER ESSA



Student academic achievement is an important indicator of how well students are performing and how well schools are serving *all* students. Yet, until the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, many states did not know whether the achievement of low-income students in a school differed from the achievement of their more advantaged peers, or measure, in a regular and comparable way, whether students with disabilities were performing similarly to other students in key academic areas. New federal requirements in NCLB established statewide, annual testing in English language arts (ELA)/literacy and mathematics in grades 3-8 and once in high school, required results to be disaggregated by each subgroup of students, and created goals that expected all students and subgroups of students to be proficient in both subjects by 2013-14. NCLB not only highlighted the size of achievement gaps, but also created a system of holding schools accountable for meeting annual goals to help close those gaps.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in 2015, continues to require that each state administer an assessment to all students in ELA/literacy and mathematics in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school. And states must include proficiency on these tests in school accountability systems as a measure of student achievement. Under ESSA, states are also required to set “ambitious” long-term goals for achievement on their annual assessments in ELA/literacy and mathematics in grades 3-8 and high school both for “all students” and for individual subgroups of students.¹ But unlike NCLB, states have complete autonomy over where to set their goals and how fast to get there.² The timeline, the number and timing of the interim progress measures, and the end point itself are all left to states. ESSA requires that the long-term goals, if met, help close achievement gaps, but does not require the goals to completely eliminate gaps or to expect all students to reach proficiency. Importantly, states also decide whether to attach consequences for schools that do not meet their goals.

A clear set of student performance goals can serve as the central driver of not only a state’s accountability system, but also the entire education system. Well-articulated goals serve numerous critical purposes, including clarifying the state’s aspirations and priorities for its students, schools, and the future of the state more broadly; focusing policy, practice, and resources on the most effective strategies to achieve their goals; and signaling the need to adjust course along the way if a state is not meeting its trajectory. Goals can be used by state leaders to rally support; bring stakeholders together for a common purpose; and communicate that what matters most is real, measurable improvement in student outcomes.

This brief examines state-defined long-term goals for improving achievement in states’ ESSA plans as of January 2018; for states whose plans were approved by the U.S. Department of Education at the time of publication, the analysis is based on the long-term goals in their final plans.³ It offers early insights into the varied approaches states have taken in setting long-term goals, timelines, and trajectories to reach their goals. It also compares the baselines states are working from in determining their long-term goals, and given states’ increased autonomy for setting goals under ESSA, compares differences in the approaches states have used to establish their goals per their ESSA plans. Then we take a closer look at how states’ achievement goals vary for different subgroups of students and for different grade levels. And finally, we lay out a set of recommendations for states as they turn to the difficult task of making their academic achievement goals into a reality.

¹ ESSA requires data disaggregation for accountability purposes by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and English language learners (ELLs). States must also publicly report (but not necessarily use for accountability) disaggregated data for students with homeless status, students with a parent in the military, and students in foster care.

² States must also set goals and timelines to increase graduation rates and progress toward English language proficiency. These topics will be the subject of additional forthcoming briefs.

³ Achieve created a tool that summarizes states’ long-term goals for student achievement and graduation rates, along with the accountability indicators and weighting included in states’ plans submitted under ESSA. For more information, see <https://states.achieve.org/essa-tracker>.

Where should states sets long-term goals?

State goals should be ambitious enough to stretch and motivate actors throughout the education system but achievable enough to be legitimate and meaningful to all.⁴ Goals and measures of interim progress should be based in the reality of historical performance data and improvement trends. Our review of states' ESSA plans found that most states did not call on historical data or trends to make the case for why they set their goals and measures of interim progress where they did. And while states should require greater growth and/or faster improvement than has occurred in the past, especially to help close gaps between subgroups of students, goals should not be so much greater than what has been accomplished in recent years to make them unrealistic. The timeline for reaching the goals should also not be so far into the future that they're seen as lacking urgency. Finally, achievement goals should be connected in a meaningful way to the broader accountability system for identifying and improving low-performing schools, lest they end up merely as a federal compliance exercise for states.

How do states set long-term goals?

In order to set long-term goals, states must consider how well students are performing now (the **baseline**), where the state wants student performance to be (the **goal**) and by when (the **timeline**), and the path to set to reach the goal (the **trajectory**). The baseline level of performance defines how students performed based on the most recent year's data. The level of performance of each target in the trajectory communicates that student performance should improve to a specific number, by a specific point in time. In reviewing states' ESSA plans, Achieve found wide variation among states in the timelines they have adopted to reach their goals, **ranging from three years to 22 years** into the future. The trajectory is the path that a state expects student performance will take from the current level of performance to the long-term goal.

The trajectory is essential for monitoring progress and deciding when and where mid-course corrections need to be made. In reviewing states' interim measures of progress, **nearly all states** have developed linear trajectories for setting academic achievement goals in their ESSA plans, requiring steady, incremental progress of schools.

Most states did not reference historical assessment data to set baselines, trajectories, and goals in their ESSA plan. One notable exception is [New Hampshire](#), which used data spanning from 2006–2014 on the state's previous assessment (NECAP) and the spring 2015 and 2016 Smarter Balanced administrations. The timeline for long-term goals was set through the 2024–2025 school year in alignment with the state's goal for 65 percent of adults to have a postsecondary credential by 2025. Historically, academic performance gains on statewide assessments have been volatile, but averaged around 1.4 percent in reading and 0.375 percent in mathematics annually. Analyzing the historical trend data, New Hampshire was able to extrapolate proficiency targets under current conditions through 2025: 67 percent in ELA and 49 percent in mathematics. Armed with this information, the state elected to establish stretch goals that reflect average annual increases of 1.7 percent in ELA and 0.85 percent in mathematics – gains that exceed historical improvement in the state – which translate into state-level, long-term goals of approximately 74 percent proficiency in ELA and 54 percent proficiency in mathematics by 2025.

⁴ Achieve and U.S. Education Delivery Institute. (March 2012). *Implementing Common Core State Standards and Assessments*. <https://www.achieve.org/publications/common-core-implementation-workbook>.

Long-term academic achievement goals in mathematics and ELA

As part of their ESSA plans, all states submitted long-term goals for improving academic achievement for all students and each subgroup of students in mathematics and ELA/literacy, including baseline data, measures of interim progress, and a date to reach their goals (see Figures 1 and 2 below for a state-by-state look).

Most states opted to set long-term goals to increase the percentage of students who met a proficiency benchmark on their state assessments, but a few states took more unique approaches. For example, Connecticut and New York created a performance index, awarding points for student performance based on their assessment scale scores. The state then set goals for groups of students to achieve a particular value on the performance index. Connecticut, for instance, set its long-term goal at the level on its performance index that means students, on average, perform at grade level. And states like Michigan and Wyoming set long-term goals based on the current distribution of assessment results, aiming to increase typical achievement from the median to a higher point on the current distribution over time. For example, Michigan's long-term goal is for statewide average achievement to reach the 75th percentile on the 2016-17 distribution of proficiency rates in mathematics and ELA by 2026, which equates to 60 percent and 47.5 percent proficient, respectively. Still other states like Missouri and Ohio set goals using both a performance index and proficiency rates.

Different starting lines and ending points

Of the 43 states and District of Columbia that used a percent proficient metric to set goals, our review found that states' **baseline proficiency levels on their assessments range from 14 to 83 percent proficiency in mathematics and 18 to 80 percent proficiency in ELA**. Differences in the assessments administered among states – particularly differences in the rigor of the achievement standards used to determine whether students are proficient – should be taken into account when trying to understand the great variation in students' "starting point." These baselines are generally not comparable; our intent was to show what the baselines are, based on state-specific tests, in order to better understand variation in where students must end up, based on each state's specific trajectory on its state-specific tests. These numbers will also change in many states; **at least 18 states indicated in their ESSA plans that they used placeholder baseline data** and would be submitting new data once more recent assessment data became available. See Appendix A for state-specific baselines and goals.

Figure 1: Mathematics academic achievement baselines and goals

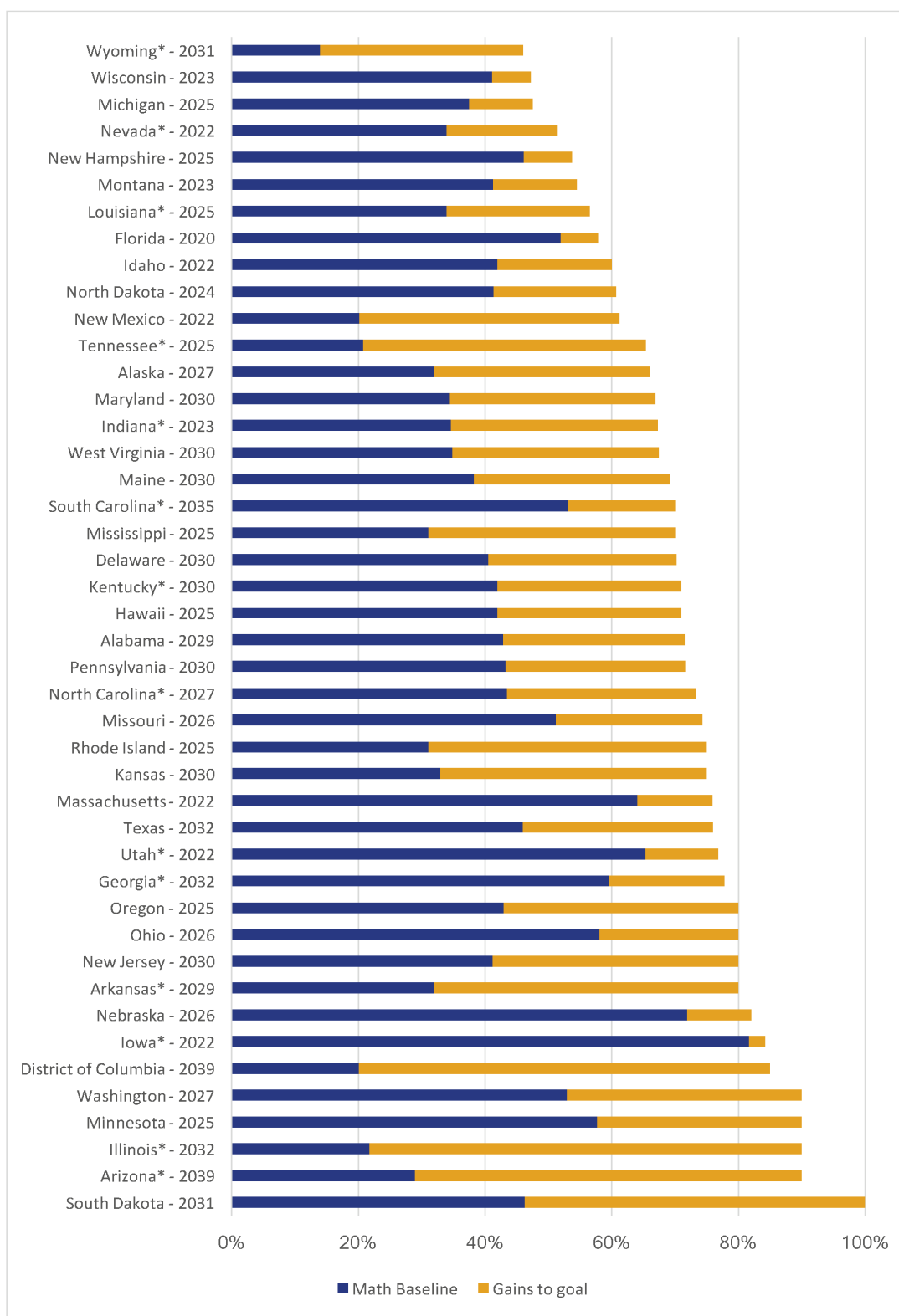


Table note: Wyoming’s long-term high school math goal – set for 2031 – is that all schools will perform as well or better than schools that performed at or above the 65th percentile in math during the baseline year (2015-16) within 15 years. In 2015-16, a school in the 15th percentile had a baseline of 14 percent proficiency and a long-term goal of 46 percent proficiency in mathematics.

*These states did not set an aggregate long-term goal for “All Students” across all grades, so for purposes of this analysis a high school goal was used, if available. If no high school goal was available, a middle school goal was used.

Note: Seven states are not included in the chart because they set mathematics scale score goals (CO, CT, NY, VT) or did not provide baseline and/or goal proficiency data (CA, OK, VA).

Figure 2: ELA academic achievement baselines and goals

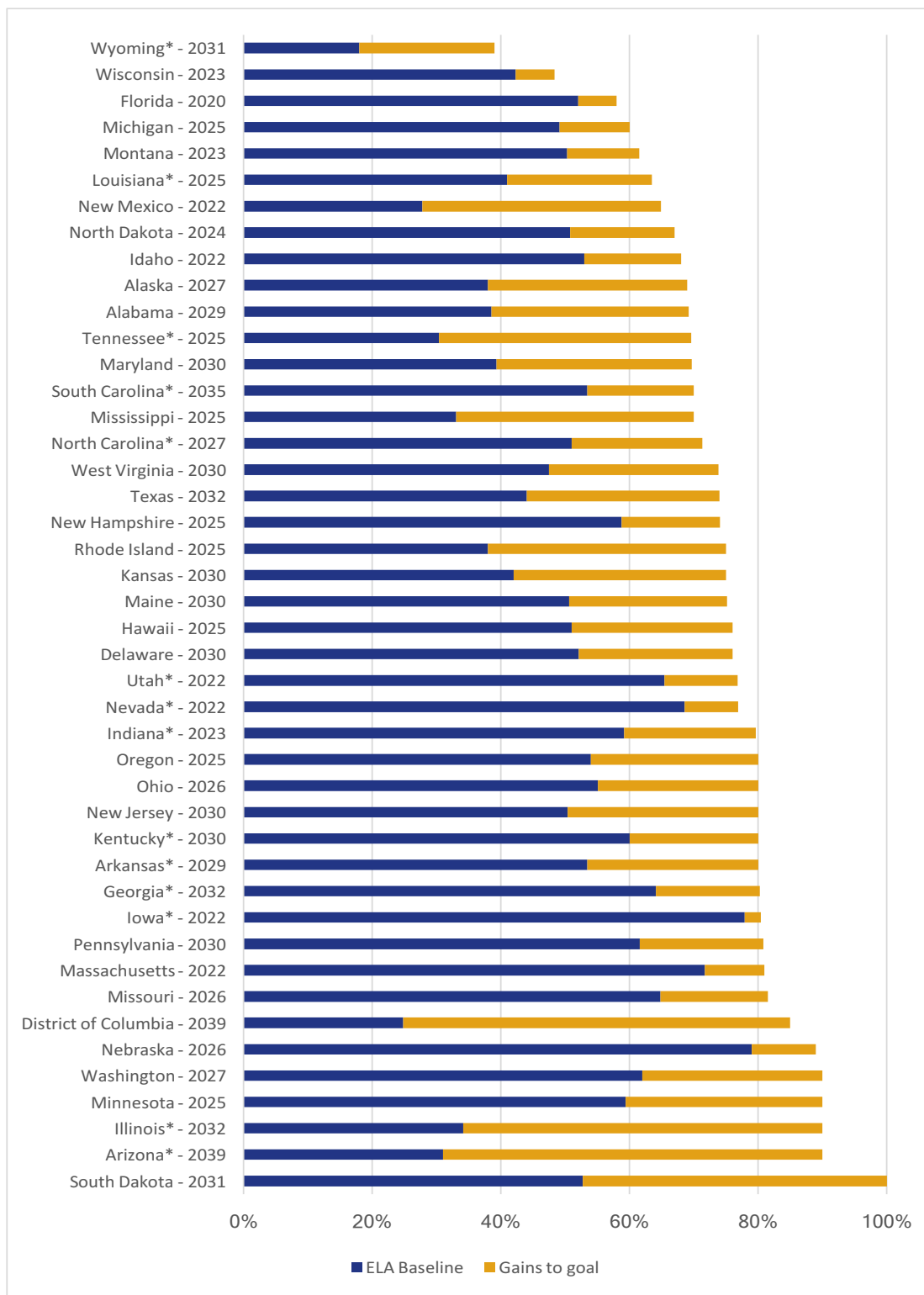


Table reads: Wyoming’s long-term high school reading goal – set for 2031 – is that all schools will perform as well or better than schools that performed at or above the 65th percentile in reading during the baseline year (2015-16) within 15 years. In 2015-16, a school in the 15th percentile had a baseline of 18 percent proficiency and a long-term goal of 39 percent proficiency in reading.

*These states did not set an aggregate long-term goal for “All Students” across all grades, so for purposes of this analysis a high school goal was used, if available. If no high school goal was available, a middle school goal was used.

Note: Seven states are not included in the chart because they set ELA scale score goals (CO, CT, NY, VT) or did not provide baseline and/or goal proficiency data (CA, OK, VA).

Beyond states' baseline proficiency rates and how much they want to move the proficiency needle, we used the timelines they provided to reach their long-term goals to compare states' goals for increasing mathematics and ELA proficiency rates (see Figures 3 and 4 below). Of the **43 states and District of Columbia that used a percent proficient metric to set goals**, on average, their **mathematics achievement goals would require 2.7 percentage point increases** each year in the rate of students scoring proficient each year, assuming they set annual measures of interim progress in a linear fashion between the baseline and long-term goals. These states' **ELA achievement goals would require 2.3 percentage point increases**, on average. However, there is considerable range in the annual gains in proficiency rates states will need to achieve to meet their long-term goals in mathematics (from 0.4 to 6.8 percentage points annually) and ELA (from 0.4 to 6.2 percentage points annually).

Figure 3: How much do state proficiency rates in mathematics need to increase each year to meet goals?

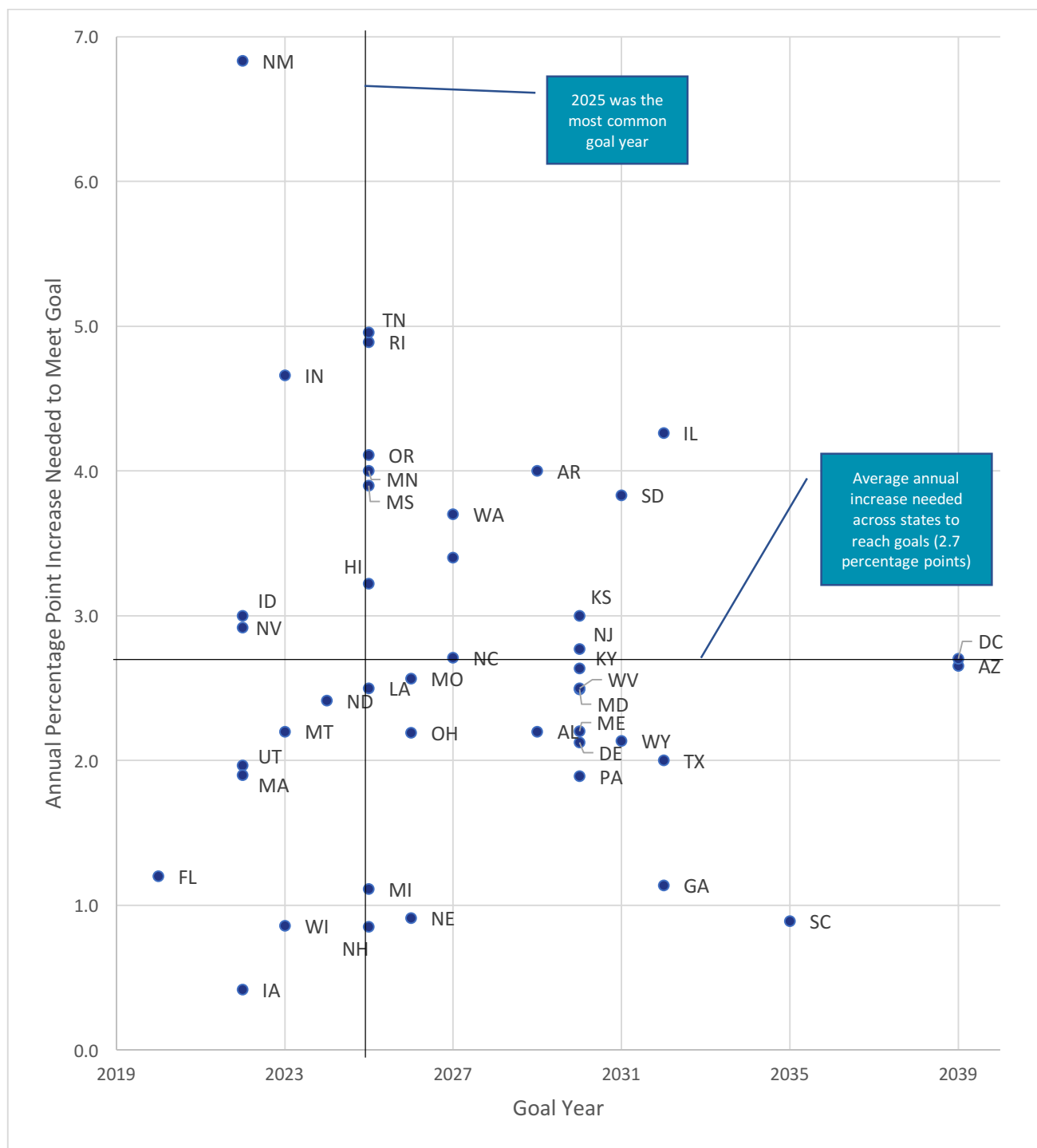


Table reads: Florida’s long-term mathematics goal – set for 2020 – would require, on average, an annual 1.2 percentage point increase in the rate of students scoring proficient on the state assessment.

Note: Seven states are not included in the chart because they set mathematics scale score goals (CO, CT, NY, VT) or did not provide baseline and/or goal proficiency data (CA, OK, VA).

Figure 4: How much do state proficiency rates in ELA need to increase each year to meet goals?

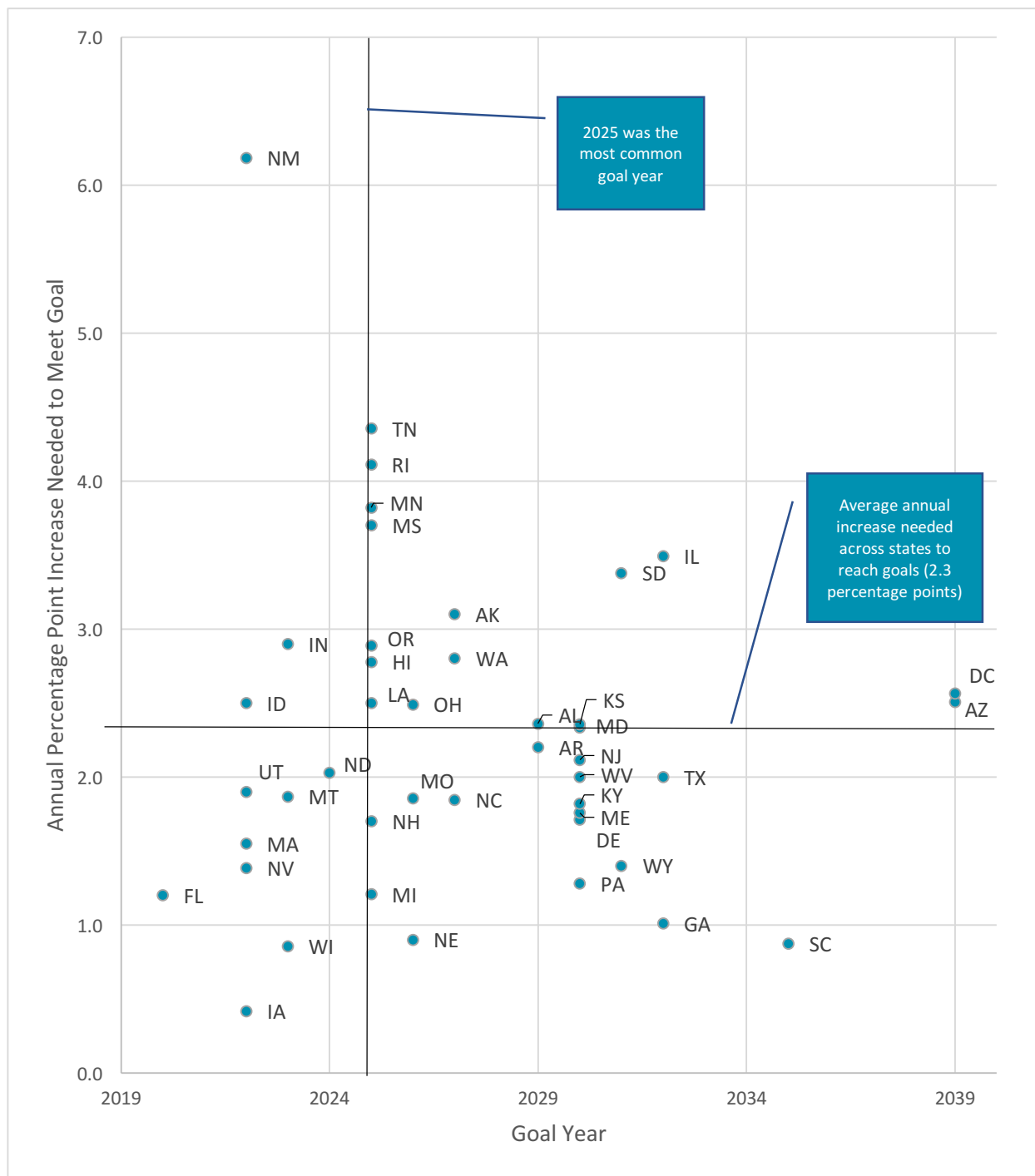


Table reads: Iowa's long-term ELA goal – set for 2022 – would require an annual 0.4 percentage point increase, on average, in the rate of students scoring proficient on the state assessment.

Note: Seven states are not included in the chart because they set ELA scale score goals (CO, CT, NY, VT) or did not provide baseline and/or goal proficiency data (CA, OK, VA).

Setting goals by grade band or grade level

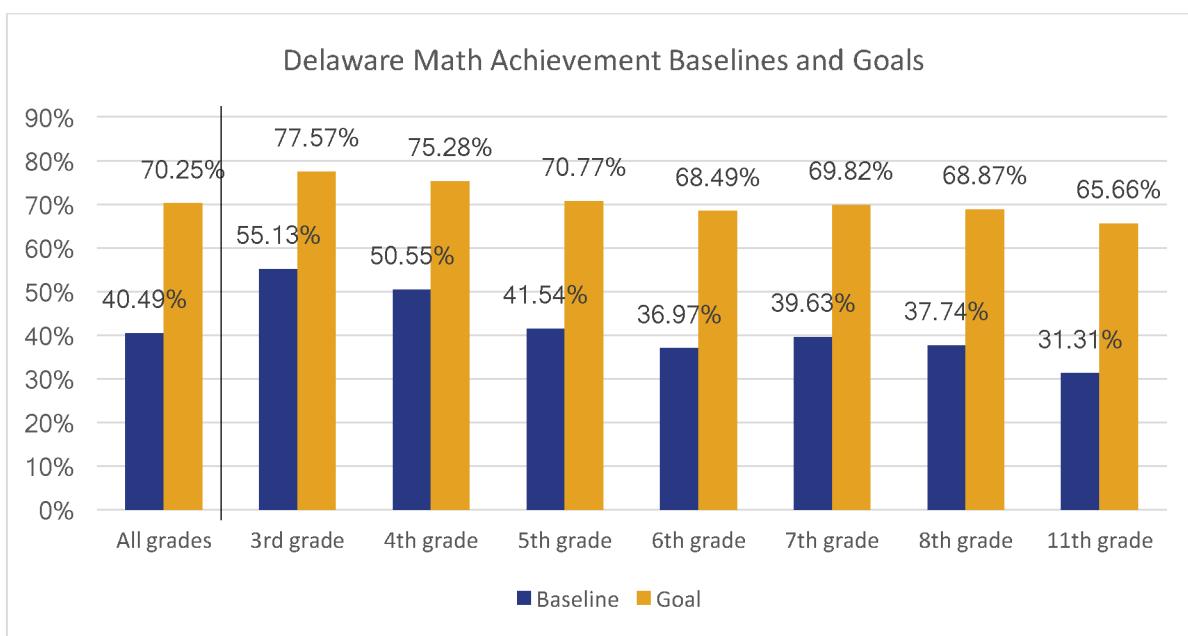
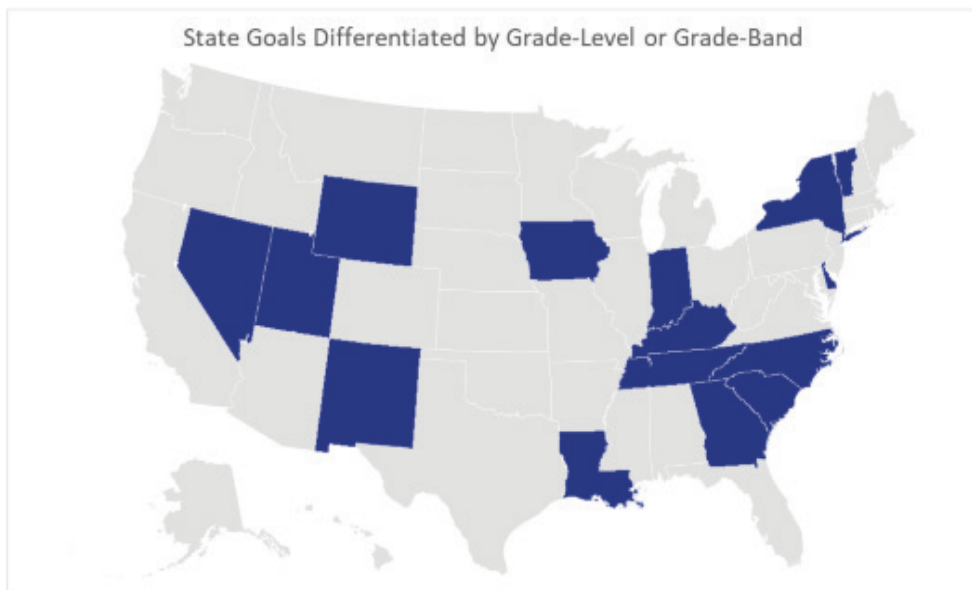
Just as subgroups' present-day proficiency rates vary, so too do student proficiency rates between individual grade levels.

However, our review found that just **15 states** (shaded blue in the map) **set long-term achievement goals differentiated by grade band or grade level**. These states' goals reflect the reality that baseline student proficiency rates vary by grade.

If achievement goals are not differentiated, as is the case in the remaining **35 states and the District of Columbia** (shaded gray in the map), it could lead to unrealistic and unattainable goals that cannot be met during the timeframe – or goals that may not be ambitious enough. Even though ESSA no longer

requires that missing goals for all students or for an individual subgroup of students determine whether schools require interventions, performance against the long-term goals and measures of interim progress must still be reported to parents and the public. In these states, it is likely that, for many schools, student progress against the goals may be a confusing or misleading metric of school performance.

For example, Delaware sets differentiated goals based on the baseline for different grade levels, working to decrease the percentage of non-proficient students by 50 percent by the end of the 2030 school year no matter the starting point. The state's data illustrate the range in baselines between grades: 55 percent of 3rd graders are proficient in mathematics, while just 31 percent of 11th graders are proficient. While using the same methodology to set goals across all grade levels, the method allows the state's long-term goals to reflect each grade's starting point, making them more relevant.



Contrast Delaware’s approach with the approach of the 35 states and the District of Columbia who have set a percent proficiency goal for all students in all grades – which may require a doubling of proficiency rates for one grade level, but only modest increases in another. Approaches for setting goals that fail to take into account differences in starting points between grade levels lend themselves only to the most global strategies for reaching the goals; getting more students to be proficient in early numeracy requires very different strategies than are needed to teach more students to be proficient in algebra, and these simpler goal-setting methods could fail to detect when each strategy is needed.

Grade-level differentiation allows states to monitor school progress in a more nuanced way than using long-term goals based on “all grades” data, more precisely identifying grade levels or grade bands that need additional supports or interventions. It also communicates more clearly and accurately where students are and where they need to go.

Now what? The role of goals in states moving forward

It remains to be seen how meaningful these goals will be in states – or whether they will be lost in an environment filled with competing priorities and distractions. States have had academic performance goals in the past, including those established under NCLB, but most leaders recognize that these goals of the past were not realistic and therefore, not front and center. States received a new opportunity under ESSA to establish meaningful goals and meaningful benchmarks for student achievement. However, setting goals and the trajectory to meet them is only the first step in the process. States must own and manage their goals, developing and communicating a clear strategy to stakeholders for achieving them.

Regardless of where individual states have set their goals, states – and their districts and schools – share a set of next steps:

- *Communicate and, whenever possible, celebrate:* These goals should be widely known and understood across the state; state leaders should communicate their achievement goals broadly to educators, school principals, district leaders, parents, and the public. States can use incentives and rewards to drive progress on goals – providing a forum for schools that have made great progress to share their strategies with other schools, or recognizing success through the media, banners, or other mediums.
- *Decide how to intervene and support:* Leaders can use the goals to drive a performance management process to ensure that individual districts and schools are making progress toward the goals and making mid-course corrections along the way when needed. However, states’ plans rarely specify the strategies and interventions that will be implemented to meet their interim targets and make progress against long-term goals. It is unrealistic to think that trajectories will change if strategies and interventions do not.
- *Translate state goals into district, school, and student goals:* State-level goals are just that – at the state level. State goals cannot be met if districts and schools do not improve – particularly those districts and schools that are performing below the state average. And districts and schools need to understand their own baseline data and be able to map out an ambitious and achievable trajectory to begin to drive progress towards their goals. This includes subgroup-specific goals, which typically require greater gains at a faster pace than the “all students” measure.
- *Articulate how the state’s goals factor into the accountability system:* Most states’ ESSA plans do not connect student achievement goals with how schools will be held accountable and supported if they are low-performing. It is not clear in all states how schools’ meeting – or missing – the interim measures of progress or long-term goals factor into the accountability system.

- *Track progress against these goals:* Under ESSA, states and districts must include a description of their long-term goals and interim measures of progress for all students and for each subgroup as part of their annual state and district report cards, though it is unclear how prominent or in what detail these must appear. Most states' plans do not address how they will comment on public reporting with a few exceptions. Arizona noted that *"School and district report cards will display progress toward these goals on an annual basis."* And Arkansas promised that, *"Enhanced reporting will be used to provide transparent information about the progress of student groups relative to the checkpoints along the trajectory to the long-term goal."* States should present performance data against their goals, using data visualization tools or dashboards to show where performance has been, where it's expected to go, and if the school or district is on-track to reaching the goal.
- *Translate percentages into real numbers:* Goals are typically set and reported in terms of percentages, but reporting the number of students as well makes the data more real and increases the sense of urgency. For example, instead of saying only that proficiency rates on the state's ELA assessment increased by 0.25 percentage points, report that over 1,000 more students are reading at grade level.

Appendix A: State Academic Achievement Baselines and Goals

State	Goal Year	Math Baseline	Math Goal	ELA Baseline	ELA Goal
Alabama	2029	42.9%	71.5%	38.5%	69.2%
Alaska	2027	32.0%	66.0%	38.0%	69.0%
Arizona*	2039	29.0%	90.0%	31.0%	90.0%
Arkansas*	2029	32.0%	80.0%	53.4%	80.0%
California	2023	24.8% of schools would currently meet or exceed this goal	High (Status) and Maintained (Change)	28.1% of schools would currently meet or exceed this goal	High (Status) and Maintained (Change)
Colorado	2023	50th percentile	53rd percentile	50th percentile	53rd percentile
Connecticut	2030	67.7	75 (index value)	61.4	75 (index value)
Delaware	2030	40.5%	70.3%	52.1%	76.1%
District of Columbia	2039	20.1%	85.0%	24.8%	85.0%
Florida	2020	52.0%	58.0%	52.0%	58.0%
Georgia*	2032	59.6%	77.8%	64.1%	80.2%
Hawaii	2025	42.0%	71.0%	51.0%	76.0%
Idaho	2022	42.0%	60.0%	53.0%	68.0%
Illinois*	2032	21.8%	90.0%	34.1%	90.0%
Indiana*	2023	34.7%	67.0%	59.2%	80.0%
Iowa*	2022	81.7%	84.0%	77.9%	80.0%
Kansas	2030	33.0%	75.0%	42.0%	75.0%
Kentucky*	2030	42.0%	71.0%	60.0%	80.0%
Louisiana*	2025	34.0%	56.5%	41.0%	63.5%
Maine	2030	38.3%	69.2%	50.6%	75.2%
Maryland	2030	34.5%	66.9%	39.3%	69.7%
Massachusetts	2022	64.1%	75.9%	71.7%	81.0%
Michigan	2025	37.6%	47.6%	49.1%	60.0%
Minnesota	2025	57.8%	90.0%	59.4%	90.0%
Mississippi	2025	31.0%	70.0%	33.0%	70.0%
Missouri	2026	51.2%	74.3%	64.8%	81.5%
Montana	2023	41.3%	54.5%	50.3%	61.5%
Nebraska	2026	72.0%	82.0%	79.0%	89.0%
Nevada*	2022	34.0%	51.5%	68.6%	76.9%
New Hampshire	2025	46.1%	53.8%	58.8%	74.0%
New Jersey	2030	41.2%	80.0%	50.4%	80.0%
New Mexico	2022	20.2%	61.2%	27.8%	64.9%
New York*	2022	151 (performance index)	161 (performance index)	177 (performance index)	182 (performance index)

Appendix A: State Academic Achievement Baselines and Goals (Continued)

State	Goal Year	Math Baseline	Math Goal	ELA Baseline	ELA Goal
North Carolina*	2027	43.5%	73.3%	51.0%	71.3%
North Dakota	2024	41.4%	60.7%	50.8%	67.0%
Ohio	2026	58.1%	80.0%	55.1%	80.0%
Oklahoma	2025	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified
Oregon	2025	43.0%	80.0%	54.0%	80.0%
Pennsylvania	2030	43.3%	72.0%	61.6%	81.0%
Rhode Island	2025	31.0%	75.0%	38.0%	75.0%
South Carolina*	2035	53.1%	70.0%	53.4%	70.0%
South Dakota	2031	46.3%	100.0%	52.7%	100.0%
Tennessee*	2025	20.8%	65.4%	30.4%	69.6%
Texas	2032	46.0%	76.0%	44.0%	74.0%
Utah*	2022	65.4%	76.8%	65.4%	76.8%
Vermont*	2025	2564 (scale score)	2619 (scale score)	2580 (scale score)	2617 (scale score)
Virginia*	2024	Not Specified	70.0%	Not Specified	75.0%
Washington	2027	53.0%	90.0%	62.0%	90.0%
West Virginia	2030	34.8%	67.4%	47.5%	73.8%
Wisconsin	2023	41.2%	47.2%	42.3%	48.3%
Wyoming*	2031	14.0%	46.0%	18.0%	39.0%

*These states did not set an aggregate long-term goal for “All Students” across all grades, so for purposes of this analysis a high school goal was used, if available. If no high school goal was available, a middle school goal was used.