



# Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap

## *Expanding Access to a College- and Career-Ready Curriculum*

Stephen Kostyo, Jessica Cardichon, and Linda Darling-Hammond

### Abstract

This policy brief is part of a larger research report, *Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap*, that describes how states are using opportunities in ESSA to better support historically underserved students through the thoughtful selection of specific equity measures in their accountability and improvement systems. To this end, the full report suggests focusing attention on students furthest from opportunity by taking steps to

- reduce rates of student suspension;
- build a positive school climate;
- reduce rates of chronic absenteeism;
- implement an extended-year graduation rate; and
- expand access to a college- and career-ready curriculum.

This brief focuses on state efforts to **expand access to a college- and career-ready curriculum**. For the full report, go to <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise>.

### Acknowledgments

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### Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015, gives states the opportunity to create new approaches to school accountability and continuous improvement. These approaches, if informed by well-chosen indicators of school opportunity and performance, have the potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for historically underserved students.

Along with measures of academic achievement (student performance on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics, which may include growth in proficiency), graduation rates, and English language proficiency, ESSA requires states to include at least one indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS).

All indicators must provide valid, reliable, and comparable information within each state's accountability system. States then use school performance on these indicators to **identify** schools for either comprehensive support and improvement or targeted support and improvement. Districts with such schools can use data from statewide indicators to inform the needs assessments and school improvement plans required under ESSA. States can also select additional indicators to use as part of their **broader continuous school improvement efforts** across all schools, regardless of identification status.

Now that all states have received approval from the U.S. Department of Education for their plans for statewide accountability and improvement systems, a number of states are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by ESSA to measure the extent to which their students are supported and provided with equitable educational opportunities.

This brief specifies which states are expanding access to a college- and career-ready curriculum in their ESSA plans and describes how some states intend to measure and use information from this indicator to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students.

## Expanding Access to a College- and Career-Ready Curriculum

Lack of access to a meaningful, relevant curriculum affects student achievement, graduation rates, and postsecondary success.<sup>1</sup> A large body of research has shown that students have differential access to college preparatory curriculum and to high-quality career-technical programs that can lead to skilled employment in the modern economy.<sup>2</sup> For example, schools with high proportions of students of color are much less likely to offer advanced courses such as calculus, and, across schools, students of color are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and Gifted and Talented Programs—the kinds of settings in which higher order skills are most purposefully developed.<sup>3</sup> Research has also found that schools serving African American, Latinx, and Native American students are “bottom heavy”—that is, they offer fewer academic courses or high-end career technical options and more remedial and vocational courses training for low-status occupations.<sup>4</sup> By including information regarding student access to and completion of college- and career-ready curriculums in their accountability plans, states can incentivize increasing students’ curriculum opportunities and reveal whether additional resources and supports are needed.<sup>5</sup>

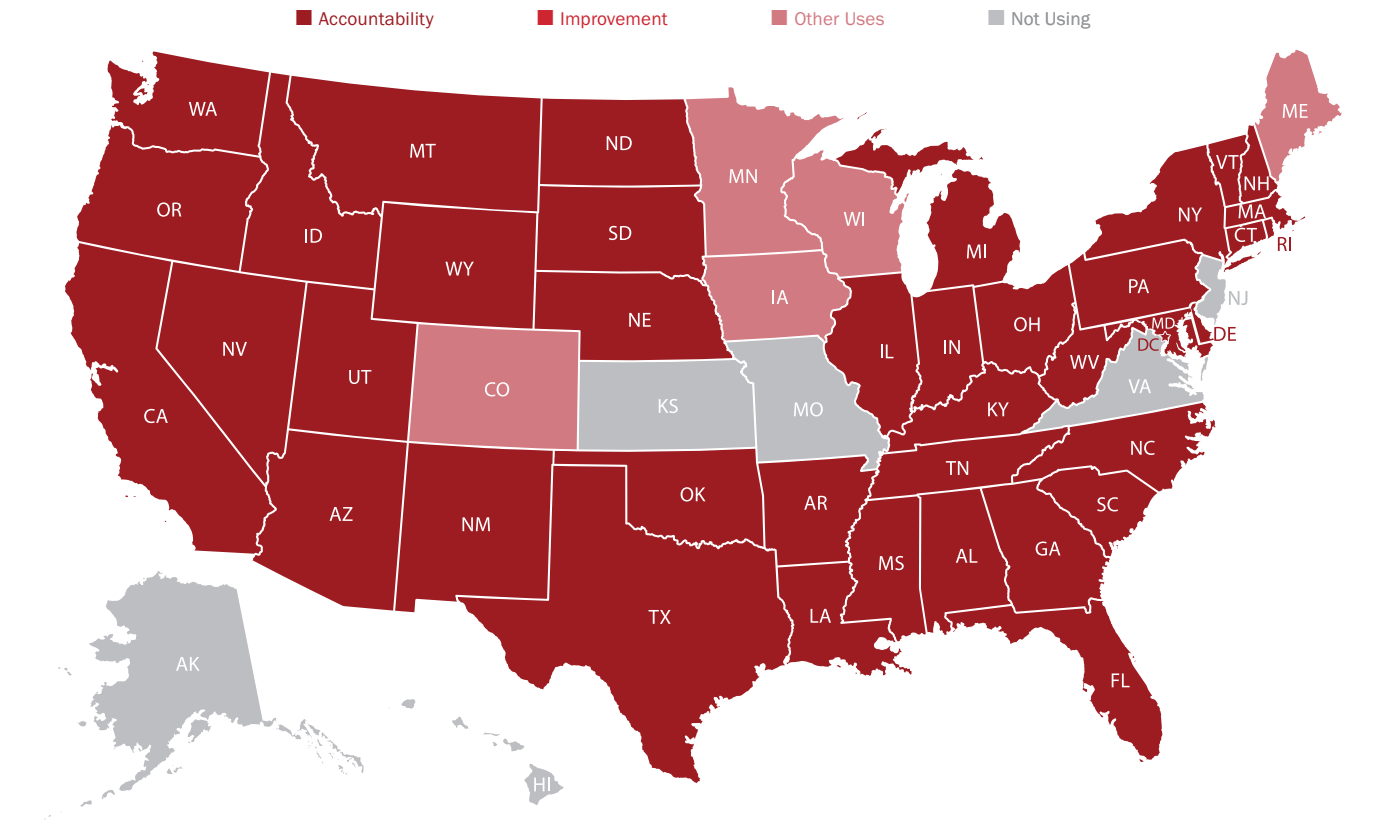
Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia are including information regarding student access to, completion of, and/or performance in a college- and career-ready curriculum in their accountability and improvement systems (see Figure 1). Five additional states are planning on incorporating indicators of postsecondary education or workforce readiness, such as completion of advanced coursework, in their accountability and improvement systems in the future. One of these states is also developing a college- and career-ready measure as part of its early warning system that will be reported in its online school dashboard.

### Selected State Approaches: Delaware, New York, and South Carolina

**Delaware** uses a number of measures of college and career preparedness in grades 9–12 in its statewide accountability system. Delaware’s college preparedness options include completing an AP test with a 3 or better, completing an International Baccalaureate (IB) test with a 4 or better, and postsecondary education credit attainment with a B or better in a course that goes beyond the state course of study for high school. The state’s career preparedness options also include completing an approved industry credential, demonstrating proficiency in an additional language to qualify for a Certificate of Multiliteracy, postsecondary credit attainment with a B or higher within a state-approved program of study, successful completion of an approved cooperative education and/or work-based learning extension, or an Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) General Technical score of 50 or higher. Delaware tracks postsecondary education outcomes, which are reported and calculated based on the percentage of students who enroll in a postsecondary institution within 1 year after completing high school. These data are included in the state’s College and Career Preparedness indicator in an effort to ensure students are prepared after leaving high school.<sup>6</sup> Delaware also uses a 9th-grade on-track indicator, which measures the percentage of high school freshmen earning full credits in English, mathematics, science, and social studies classes by the end of the school year.

**New York** is using a College, Career, and Civic Readiness Index as a measure of SQSS. The state gives credit to schools for students who pass high school courses in the college-preparatory Regents course of study and additional credit for students who achieve specified scores on nationally recognized exams such as AP and IB tests associated with those courses. Schools are also rewarded for students who participate and earn credit

**Figure 1**  
**States Incorporating a College- and Career-Ready Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



in dual-enrollment courses. Additional elements of the indicator include successful completion of a career technical course of study, receipt of an industry-recognized credential, and completion of the Seal of Biliteracy. New York will be looking for ways to integrate civic readiness into this indicator.

The state supports college- and-career-ready efforts for students who are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education through state-grant-funded pathways, including the [Smart Scholars Early College High School Program](#), in which institutions of higher education (IHEs) partner with public school districts to create Early College high schools. These schools provide students with the opportunity to accelerate the completion of their high school studies while earning transferable college credits. In addition, [New York State Pathways in Technology](#) is a state-funded initiative in which IHEs and industry partners work with schools to enable students to graduate with a high school diploma and associate degree, as well as an offer of employment, in 6 years. Moreover, New York is aligning teacher leadership efforts with its goal of preparing each student for success in college, career, and citizenship. These teacher leadership programs will create opportunities for distinguished teachers, principals, and other school leaders to share their expertise with their colleagues in areas such as designing student performance assessments. High-quality student performance tasks, when used consistently throughout a student’s career, can support the development of the higher order skills valued by postsecondary institutions and employers.<sup>7</sup>

**South Carolina** is measuring college and career readiness using two student success indicators—the College and Career Readiness indicator and the Prepared for Success indicator. The College and Career Readiness indicator is based on whether the student completes or earns one or more of the following nine metrics: (1) an AP test with a 3 or higher; (2) an IB test with a 4 or better; (3) a composite score of 1020 or higher on the SAT; (4) a composite score of 20 or higher on the ACT; (5) at least 6 credit hours in dual-credit courses with a grade of C or higher; (6) a Career and Technology Education (CATE) Work-Based Certification program with a state- or nationally recognized industry credential; (7) a Silver, Gold, or Platinum National Career Readiness Certificate on WorkKeys assessments; (8) a scaled score of 31 or higher on the ASVAB; and (9) a registered apprenticeship through a state-approved program. For transparency, graduation rates for each of the nine metrics are reported separately. The student success indicator is calculated by dividing the number of students who have met at least one of the nine metrics by the number of students in the grade 12 cohort.<sup>8</sup>

South Carolina is also aiming to reduce the percentage of students who need to take remedial courses at the college level by 5% per year by analyzing and reporting the percentage of high school graduates enrolled as college freshmen in credit-bearing courses.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the state developed the “Profile of the South Carolina Graduate,” which includes life, academic, and career skills—such as knowing how to learn, collaboration and teamwork, and critical thinking and problem solving—that students should have before they graduate. South Carolina’s goal is to have, by 2035, 90% of its students graduate with these skills.<sup>10</sup>

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can expand college and career readiness by:

- Facilitating access to high-quality materials, aligning curricula across grade levels, and providing professional development for teachers so they can support college- and career-ready courses of study.<sup>11</sup> Professional development can also help teachers design and use performance assessments, including projects, portfolios, and extended-performance tasks, that are encouraged under ESSA and allow students to apply what they are learning to real-world situations.
- Addressing teacher shortages in fields essential to college- and career-ready courses and creating recruitment and retention strategies that ensure all students are taught by a qualified educator. These may take the form of initiatives such as service scholarships and teacher residencies, especially in shortage fields such as mathematics, science, and career-technical education.<sup>12</sup>
- Increasing youth success in college preparatory coursework by offering supports, such as [AVID college-readiness programs](#), that train educators in providing academic and psychological supports to students.<sup>13</sup>
- Increasing support for programs such as Early College or career academy initiatives that promote successful transitions to postsecondary education.<sup>14</sup>
- Establishing sufficient and stable funding streams to promote equitable access to college- and career-ready programs of study. For example, states can increase the proportion of students from low-income families and students of color participating in advanced coursework by ensuring there is no tuition burden or barrier for dually enrolled students, and by paying for textbook and testing fees for AP and IB courses.<sup>15</sup>

- Disaggregating and reporting progress on individual measures within a composite indicator that is based on multiple measures of college and career readiness. This allows districts and schools to know which areas they are succeeding in and in which they have additional work to do. Transparency is also important for equity purposes, so that it is clear which students are getting various opportunities and where there may be a need for proactive measures to close opportunity gaps.
- When calculating college- and career-readiness outcomes—such as pass rates on AP tests and IB tests, dual-enrollment completion rates, work-based learning opportunities, and industry-recognized credentials—the denominator for each measure should be based on all students and not just the students enrolled in these courses in order to provide a more accurate measure of overall access and success and to incentivize the inclusion of all students.

## **Resources on College- and Career-Ready Courses of Study**

### **Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond**

#### **(American Youth Policy Forum)**

This report is designed to help policymakers and practitioners learn about effective programs supporting college and career readiness. These programs help diverse youth to improve their academic performance, identify career aspirations, build employer-desired skills, plan for postsecondary education, and develop the personal resources necessary to achieve their goals.<sup>16</sup>

### **Building Early College Pathways to STEM Careers**

#### **(Jobs for the Future)**

This brief outlines how school and community leaders in Bridgeport, Connecticut, partnered to prepare students in low-income communities for STEM careers through early college pathways.<sup>17</sup>

### **Personal Opportunity Plans**

#### **(Engaging Schools)**

This report describes how Personal Opportunity Plans (POPs) in grades 6–12 can foster students’ college and career development.<sup>18</sup>

### **Paper Thin? Why All High School Diplomas Are Not Created Equal**

#### **(Alliance for Excellent Education)**

This brief evaluates how the different types of high school diplomas given out across the country prepare students to be college- and career ready.<sup>19</sup>

### **Preparing 21st Century Citizens: The Role of Work-Based Learning in Linked Learning**

#### **(Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education)**

This brief describes how schools can create work-based education programs that blend real-world problems with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college and the workforce and explains how policymakers can support them.<sup>20</sup>

### **Using Dual Enrollment Policy to Improve College & Career Readiness: A Web Tool for Decision Makers**

#### **(Jobs for the Future)**

This brief and web tool analyze dual enrollment policies in all 50 states to determine each state’s progress in creating conditions that support early college strategies for youth from low-income families. It identifies six model policy elements that define a new dual enrollment policy framework.

## Endnotes

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