

# Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion

SREB

*Policy Brief*

## Transitional Courses for College and Career Readiness

To be competitive in the 21st-century global economy, every state needs a highly skilled workforce. States need to improve public high school graduation rates dramatically and ensure that many more students are ready for college or career training programs that lead to the workplace.

SREB has found that states historically have underestimated the enormous need for remedial postsecondary courses in reading, writing and mathematics in our nation. The reality is that many high school graduates have to repeat basic academic courses that slow down — and often derail — their completion of a degree or credential. And with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other rigorous state standards, states will see student achievement gaps and college remediation rates rise even further in the near term. These factors create an urgent need to prepare more students for college-level work before they graduate from high school. Implementing specific college- and career-ready curriculum and interventions *statewide* in the junior or senior year of high school can preemptively tackle the problem.

SREB believes that a supplemental college-ready curriculum in the junior or senior year for students who are assessed as underprepared for entry-level, credit-bearing college courses can lessen the readiness gap and prevent students from needing remediation in college. This curriculum also allows our students to graduate with more options to choose a career pathway. However, transitional courses are just one piece of a statewide college-ready agenda.

SREB and other organizations, particularly Achieve, have worked with states over the past years to institute statewide policies and practices to increase college readiness. These efforts were based on a model action agenda including six steps:

1. Implement statewide college- and career-readiness standards.
2. Assess high school students for college readiness no later than the junior year.
3. Develop a high school curriculum of transitional courses to assist juniors and seniors who are underprepared for credit-bearing, college-level work.
4. Provide targeted teacher development for teachers of these transitional courses.
5. Ensure that postsecondary education recognizes and applies the state readiness standards to placement tests (not college acceptance).
6. Adjust school and college accountability systems to include meeting measures that prove an increase in students' college readiness.

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Nationally, most states have accomplished the first two elements by adopting the CCSS or redesigning their own state standards and strengthening current high school assessments. A few efforts across the country are still looking to create improved college-readiness assessments. Steps 3 and 4 are the recommendations that SREB endorses for implementing transitional curricula. Steps 5 and 6 provide measures that a state can use to ensure that the standards, assessments and new curricula are implemented effectively across the state and actually increase readiness. Only through sustained adjustments in curricula and teaching can the key areas of the readiness agenda take hold in all of a state's public schools.

Since 2007, SREB has worked with a number of states to develop and implement special 12th-grade courses built on the skill requirements of the CCSS or other rigorous state standards in disciplinary literacy (reading and writing instruction specific to academic subjects so students can read and understand complex texts) and math. The courses are modular and include tools (such as the Literacy Design Collaborative and the Mathematics Design Collaborative) to help a significantly higher number of students build the skills they need to succeed in credit-bearing, college-level courses. The work is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This paper — one in SREB's series on the essential elements of state policy to increase college completion — provides a framework to help policy-makers explore implementing high school transitional courses through legislation or other forms of statewide policy. It offers questions to consider and provides examples of existing policy and state actions. The core of the paper contains SREB's recommended essential elements of effective public policy for transitional courses to help more students prepare for and complete their postsecondary studies.

## Key Policy Questions

College- and career-readiness efforts are central to the growing effort of ensuring that students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in any postsecondary study. Policy-makers examining the potential of transitional courses should ask these questions:

- *What are the state's college- and career-readiness goals for public high school students?*

- *How do the state's readiness goals support its college completion goals?*
- *How do public high schools identify students who are not on track to be college-ready by the beginning of the senior year?*
- *How do public high schools help these students use the 11th and 12th grade to strengthen their college-readiness skills?*
- *Is state policy needed to ensure that students who are not on track to be college-ready by the end of the 11th grade have access to transitional courses in 12th grade to strengthen their math and disciplinary literacy skills?*
- *Is state policy needed to require that students who are not college-ready enroll in transitional courses?*

## Why are Transitional Courses Needed?

American high school students' performance on college admissions tests that measure college readiness continues to be grim. For example, only 67 percent of the nation's Class of 2012 met ACT Inc.'s college-readiness benchmark in English, 52 percent did so in reading, and 46 percent in math. Such low readiness levels fuel a huge demand for remedial courses in postsecondary institutions and drive up college costs for students and states.

The "readiness gap" is especially significant among students at public two-year community and technical colleges with open-access admissions requiring only a high school diploma or its equivalent. Typically, at least 70 percent to 80 percent of students admitted to public two-year colleges require remedial work in English, math or both. In public four-year colleges and universities, over one-half need or would need additional preparation if appropriate readiness standards were applied statewide. In most states, these two sectors of higher education serve from 70 percent to 80 percent of the undergraduate students in public institutions. The 2010 SREB report *Beyond the Rhetoric* notes that only at those institutions with highly selective admissions policies is the readiness gap nominal.

Not only are the vast majority of students not prepared for college-level study, but many high school graduates also lack the reading comprehension, writing and math skills required for success in entry-level jobs. The Con-

ference Board's 2006 *Workforce Readiness Report Card* indicates that far too many new high school graduates are inadequately prepared to succeed in the workplace. According to a 2005 National Association of Manufacturers report, many employees have inadequate problem-solving skills and lack basic employability traits such as consistent attendance, timeliness and a strong work ethic. Fifty-one percent of manufacturers reported that many employees were deficient in math and science skills, and 38 percent pinpointed employee deficiencies in reading and comprehension.

Clearly, the need to better prepare students in literacy and math in high school is well-documented. As more students move through the elementary and middle grades and into high school, states should expect to see the positive impact of the stronger CCSS and specific state performance standards on student readiness for college and careers over time.

In the short term, however, states need to be proactive to ensure that students correct deficiencies in math and disciplinary literacy before they graduate. It is important to recognize that, as states implement higher standards and better assessments, the need for developmental education will rise in the near term as initially students will fail to meet the rigorous standards, but it will decline in the long term as more students receive college-ready instruction. The 11th-grade assessments being developed by the states through the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) will identify greater numbers of students who need developmental education because they cannot perform at the higher levels required by the CCSS.

The state actions taken and the lessons learned by states participating in the SREB college- and career-readiness initiative can provide immediate guidance to policy-makers who are deciding how to help many more students successfully transition into postsecondary education and the workforce.

## State Actions to Implement Courses

Under a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation titled *Advancing Common Core Standards, Educator Effectiveness and College Readiness in SREB States*, SREB

has been working with teams of state and local educators from K-12 and postsecondary education from Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Tennessee to develop model transitional courses in disciplinary literacy and math. Recently, eight additional states joined this consortium upon the recommendation of PARCC. These states include Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York and Ohio. This initiative includes the writing of professional development guidelines to prepare teachers to teach these courses. Both the literacy and math courses will utilize the teaching tools developed through the Gates-supported Literacy Design Collaborative and Mathematics Design Collaborative, which develop practices that help teachers interpret and teach the CCSS effectively. SREB will work with states to ensure that there is a process for measuring the extent to which students emerge from these courses college-ready. In each state, both K-12 and postsecondary education will be engaged in the development and application of the courses.

### The SREB consortium is:

- establishing the model courses and field-testing them in states that do not have such courses
- working with policy-makers on policies that support the statewide implementation of the courses, and
- assisting states where this work already is under way in updating their material to reflect the model course characteristics and encourage full statewide implementation.

As mentioned above, this work continues SREB's effort with individual states to implement a comprehensive college-readiness agenda — one piece of which is the development and implementation of transitional courses. Florida, Kentucky, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia developed their own state transitional courses in math, English or both. Florida and Kentucky implemented math and English transitional courses statewide and have seen positive initial results in various school districts where students received higher test scores after the transitional courses; West Virginia has done so with math, while Texas and Virginia are piloting both courses. Kentucky is partnering with SREB again to realign its previously developed courses with the CCSS.

It was reported at the Kentucky Board of Education meeting in December 2012 that through the College and Career Readiness Delivery Plan, which includes student interventions and transitional course completion by those tested as below college and career readiness (CCR) levels, Kentucky has exceeded its goal for student readiness. The state's goal for CCR was 40 percent for the senior Class of 2012, up from 34 percent in 2010. State data results show that 47.2 percent of seniors were CCR in 2012. The state's next goal is for 49 percent of high school

seniors to be CCR in 2013. (Available online at: [http://portal.ksba.org/public/Meeting.aspx?PublicAgencyID=4388&PublicMeetingID=8154&AgencyTypeID=.](http://portal.ksba.org/public/Meeting.aspx?PublicAgencyID=4388&PublicMeetingID=8154&AgencyTypeID=))

Each state is choosing a state or national test to assess students' readiness in the courses. Most plan to use the PARCC or SBAC 11th-grade assessment that will be implemented nationwide during the 2014-2015 academic year. (For details of the five states' efforts, see the SREB report *State College and Career Readiness Initiative: Statewide Transitional Courses for College Readiness*.)

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## Several states have passed legislation to require the implementation of transitional courses or college-readiness courses:

*Georgia* - House Bill 186 (2011) requires the state Board of Education, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, and the Board of Technical and Adult Education to develop course standards that ensure the core curriculum of all Georgia public high schools will be accepted at any institution of higher education in the state, beginning with students entering high school in fall 2011. This coordination ensures the readiness of students and lessens the need for remedial classes in Georgia's public colleges and technical schools. Additionally, the legislation requires students on the Career, Technical, and Agriculture Education (CTAE) pathway to take academic core subject courses and pass end-of-course assessments. These assessments allow CTAE students to receive credit upon demonstration of proficiency, rather than attendance of a mandatory number of classes.

*Florida* - Senate Bill 1908 (2008) and House Bill 1255 (2011) comprise Florida's existing college-readiness state laws. The first piece of legislation requires the state Department of Education to establish transitional courses for high school students who are underprepared based on multiple state test scores. The bill also requires the department to analyze the assessments and develop teacher development for the courses. House Bill 1255 (2011) now requires all districts and high schools to offer the five college-readiness and success courses for all high school seniors who do not test as ready for college-level work on the P.E.R.T.

*Kentucky* - Senate Bill 1 (2009) is a comprehensive piece of legislation designed to bring about immediate and far-reaching changes to achieve college- and career-readiness goals. Its mandates include:

- alignment of the revised academic standards from elementary through postsecondary education, so that students can be successful at each level
- requiring schools to provide a transitional course or monitored intervention to every student not meeting college-readiness (ACT) benchmarks in English/language arts or math, and
- requiring the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to provide for the training of teachers and administrators on integrating the revised standards and assessments into instruction.

# Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion: *Transitional Courses*

SREB recommends 12 essential elements of state policy that specifically address what is needed to develop and implement high school transitional courses in literacy and math. These policy elements — grouped into three topical categories of standards, assessments and course implementation — are based on the organization’s experience and practice in this area, vetted through groups of SREB state legislators, state agency and board members, practicing educators and other experts.

SREB recommends that every state that is planning implementation of transitional curricula consider these elements:

## Standards

1. **Ensure that transitional courses or modules are based on the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards that are in the CCSS.**

SREB’s current grant for developing model transitional courses bases its course construction entirely on the Readiness Anchor Standards and also encompasses further standards in literacy and other disciplines in the CCSS. The College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards correspond to the K-12 anchor standards (grade-specific) by number. The CCR and grade-specific standards correlate to each other, with the first providing broad standards and the second providing additional specificity that together define the skills and understandings that all students must demonstrate.

2. **Ensure that all public postsecondary institutions recognize and apply the same standards in their student placement processes statewide.**

Public institutions of higher education, including technical and community colleges, must incorporate the CCSS into the processes for student placement after acceptance. States that have adopted these standards must not only adopt them in K-12, but also in higher education, assessing students on those standards that align with readiness for that institution.

Without simulation by all education levels, states will have no consistency in learning objectives for high school graduates.

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SREB believes that a supplemental college-ready curriculum in the junior or senior year for students who are assessed as underprepared for entry-level, credit-bearing college courses can lessen the readiness gap and prevent students from needing remediation in college.

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## Readiness Assessments

3. **Ensure that all students (or a certain range of students based on achievement) be assessed for college readiness no later than the junior year.**

One or more methods of assessment must be employed no later than the junior year to properly communicate with students whether they are prepared for college-level work or not, and to give them at least one year in high school to improve on weaknesses in math and literacy. States that do not properly assess students on the readiness standards through the best testing methods available will be doing a disservice to students and parents by not properly identifying students who could benefit from the readiness curriculum.

4. **Ensure that the qualifying scores on assessment(s) used to identify students who need the courses are strongly associated with success in first-year, credit-bearing courses in college.**

States may use one test or multiple methods to determine student preparedness levels. However, the assessment must have a highly valued, data-driven

cut score that accurately indicates whether students are prepared for first-year, credit-bearing courses in literacy and math. All education levels should be consulted and mutually agree on what it means for students to be labeled “college-ready” by the state high school readiness assessment(s).

5. **Ensure that students assessed as meeting the readiness standards will not have to take a placement exam for entry-level courses once admitted to postsecondary education, although additional testing may be required to determine specific courses that are beyond basic, entry level.**

Students who reach or surpass the appropriately placed qualifying score on the readiness assessment should not be subject to further testing by the postsecondary institution to make sure they do not need developmental education.

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## **Transitional Course Implementation**

6. **Ensure that all public high schools statewide offer transitional courses and that students take the courses if they do not perform at or above the cut scores.**

All students who are underprepared should have access to this curriculum; therefore, statewide implementation of transitional courses is necessary.

7. **Ensure that the transitional courses carry high school credit and are eligible to be funded through the public school funding formula.**

If these courses are not for credit and are not properly funded, success of implementation will vary across the state.

8. **Ensure that the math transitional course is creditable as a fourth-year math course in high school.**

This course is a stand-alone, one-semester course, which can be taught after Algebra II and covers essential math practices from grades eight through 12 that must be mastered to be successful in college.

9. **Ensure that all public postsecondary institutions and agencies are partners with K-12 in developing, testing, evaluating and revising transitional courses.**

Successful application of the standards and the curricula greatly depends on whether all levels of education participate in this effort.

10. **Ensure that public postsecondary institutions statewide recognize that the successful completion of a transitional course means readiness to begin credit-bearing, college-level courses without remediation.**

After a state has collected data proving that students completed a transitional course with a specified grade or end-of-course test score, institutions of higher education should not put them into developmental education courses after acceptance. It may take two or three years for a state to retest its high school seniors after completion of the transitional course with the same junior-year assessment in order to properly collect and analyze comparable data to determine what performance level proves student success in the course.

11. **Provide professional development on the transitional courses to all high school teachers.**

New and current teachers must be properly trained to teach transitional courses in order to develop the innovative, motivating and conceptual teaching skills they need to reach targeted students and to ensure that transitional courses adhere to CCSS skills and target academic gaps in students’ college-readiness skills. Collaborative opportunities between postsecondary and high school faculty can be utilized as a cost-effective method of providing training for high school teachers. Without proper professional development, teachers may not be teaching transitional courses with the new conceptual instruction methods, rigor or contextual practices that the standards require.

12. **Develop a statewide system for evaluation of the transitional courses and professional development activities to determine their effectiveness and impact on increasing the numbers of students leaving high school college- and career-ready.**

Without this evaluation, states will not be able to provide accurate data to validate the qualifying cut scores that indicate college readiness. These data are also important as states continue to make improvements on the college-ready curriculum and professional development.

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The transitional courses being developed with SREB's partner states throughout the region will provide a tool that all states can use as part of their college-readiness efforts.

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## Fiscal Implications

States will experience some additional cost in implementing the transitional courses, primarily for professional development, as current math and literacy teachers will need additional training to teach the new courses. However, the state should see cost savings to higher education budgets because of the potential reduction in the number of students needing and taking remedial courses in postsecondary institutions. Moreover, the transitional courses can and should be funded through existing K-12 revenue, since these courses will be creditable to the high school diploma.

For the states participating in the SREB project supported by the Gates Foundation, a large part of the funding has been provided by the grant. The intent of SREB's state-appointed curricular teams is to develop two modular-based transitional courses, one each in disciplinary literacy and math. The teams also will help develop teacher guidelines and evaluation criteria for each module. The states have made great progress in developing these transitional courses for high school juniors or seniors who test as underprepared for college-level studies.

## Overlapping Policy

Policy-makers need to identify and revise or eliminate board policies or regulations that conflict with new state policy concerning transitional courses. These could include, but are not limited to:

- high school graduation requirements that prevent, or present a barrier to, students taking transitional courses or receiving readiness interventions
- outdated or ineffective college-preparatory curricula
- assessments or assessment procedures that do not successfully predict students' readiness for postsecondary education, and
- teacher development rules that prevent professional development for current teachers teaching the new transitional courses or that present barriers to incorporating updated standards or curriculum to new teacher preparation programs.

## Conclusion

For nearly a decade, SREB has engaged states in improving college- and career-readiness policy, curriculum and implementation. This work has centered on helping them make significant progress through a concrete, comprehensive model agenda with six key elements. (See Page 1.) Transitional courses for high school students who are not on track to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing postsecondary courses are a critical part of the statewide college-readiness agenda. This paper recommends 12 essential elements of state policy that specifically address what is needed to develop and implement high school transitional courses in literacy and math.

The transitional courses being developed with SREB's partner states throughout the region will provide a tool that all states can use as part of their college-readiness efforts. Transitional course curricula and teacher guidelines will be available for use by any state in the nation, free of cost, in fall 2013.

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