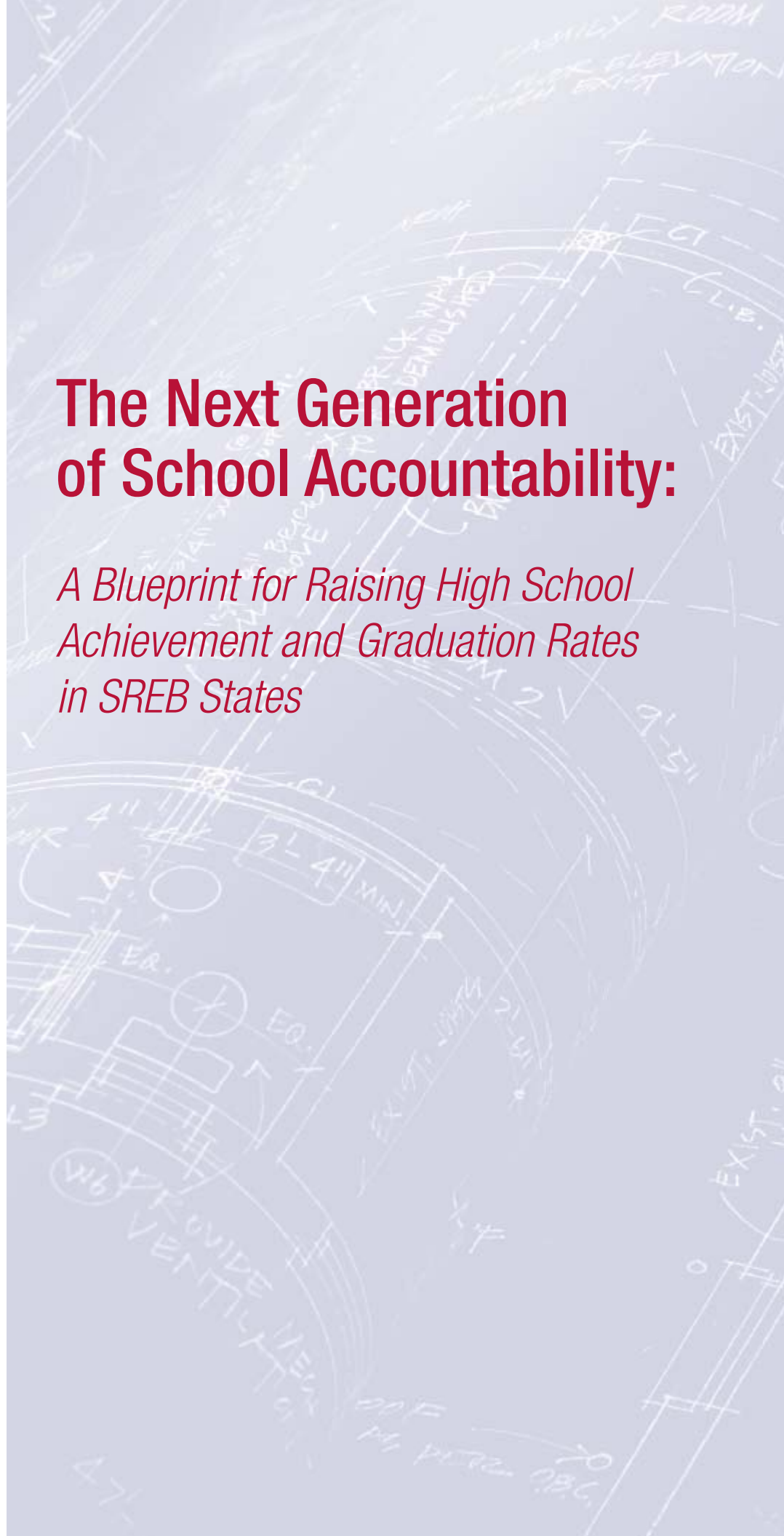




SREB



The Next Generation of School Accountability:

*A Blueprint for Raising High School
Achievement and Graduation Rates
in SREB States*

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

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SREB

The Southern Regional Education Board is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, that works with state leaders and educators to improve education. SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to help leaders in education and government work cooperatively to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. SREB has 16 member states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. Each is represented by its governor and four gubernatorial appointees. For more information, visit www.sreb.org.

This report was developed by Gene Bottoms, SREB senior vice president; Dave Spence, SREB president; and Marna Young, director of research for school improvement, in consultation with committee members and other SREB staff. It was edited by Alan Richard, director of communications; and Lisa Johnston, associate director of communications; and designed by Lety Jones, senior designer and production manager.



A Message from the President of SREB

We Know How to Make Every High School More Successful

The report you are about to read opens with a startling fact: Each school day, nearly 3,000 students in the 16-state Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) region abandon their quest for a high school diploma. Most of these young men and women will enter the work force at the lowest levels, unprepared to support themselves or their families adequately, less likely to make positive contributions to their communities, and poorly positioned to help our region continue to make progress in a highly competitive global economy.

Each time we allow a struggling or disengaged student to walk away from high school, we put the prosperity of our states and communities at greater risk. And if the fate of each single dropout isn't enough to call our states to action, our collective failure each year to prepare a half-million new graduates for life beyond high school should be.

How can our state policies take the next historic step to improve high schools — and finally address the graduation-rate problem as powerfully as we should? Government, education and civic leaders in our region must insist on two outcomes for all high schools: improved student achievement across the board, *and significant and continuous increases in graduation rates.* This was the finding of a special SREB committee led by Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia that helped address the issues.

Across the SREB region and the nation, educators in some high-poverty schools are demonstrating that high student achievement and graduation rates are possible. Some of our more advantaged schools are moving from good to great, modeling how rigorous and relevant instruction, strengthened even more by strong professional relationships between educators and students, can maximize the potential of every student.

We know how to improve high schools. That's not the problem. But we also need the political courage to link what we know about successful schools to transformative policies that leave no doubt whether student achievement and better graduation rates are major priorities in every SREB state.

Backed by two decades of research and direct service to many hundreds of schools in the SREB *High Schools That Work* program, these concepts should guide the development of effective high school reform policies:

- *High schools need more ambitious targets for improving graduation rates.* Teachers, principals and central office staff need goals that require them to abandon status-quo thinking about acceptable

dropout levels. Current state goals under the *No Child Left Behind Act* allow schools to improve graduation rates as little as one-tenth of a percent each year. This is far from good enough.

- *Don't treat every school the same.* States should challenge educators to increase graduation rates based on a school's unique data and circumstances. The policy objective should be to push educators to improve graduation rates without creating despair over the impossibility of the task before them. Improvement is possible — and even likely, given the right tools and direction.

- *Districts and states need to use many indicators of progress toward higher achievement.* Don't be satisfied with small gains on low-level standardized tests. Stress a broader range of indicators like Advanced Placement results, International Baccalaureate completions, college readiness, students earning industry certifications, and college enrollment and graduation rates. Measure what matters.

- *Recognize districts, schools and teachers who make real progress.* Investigate and learn why. Spread best practices and encourage improvement. Our current accountability systems do a good job of telling schools when they fail, but in most cases, educators in these schools already know their situation. Instead, provide a vision and models of change to help schools and districts accomplish challenging goals.

- *Draw a distinction between “lack of capacity” and “lack of will” — and address both in designing policy strategies for improvement.* Some educators know how they need to improve but lack the will to change. They need to be motivated and held accountable for improvement. Other educators simply need more knowledge and skills about effective teaching and learning. They may be wedded to outdated stereotypes about instruction and student potential. These schools need school leaders who understand how schools can improve, and they need the professional development and other types of support necessary to improve.

- *We know that every student will not earn a four-year college degree, but more students need greater opportunities.* We cannot identify which students will ultimately achieve academic success once all the components of a first-class high school education are in place. This is one of many reasons why we need to challenge every student to prepare for the highest levels of education possible. We do that by creating multiple paths to college and careers that keep academic and upper-level job options open. We should establish a high threshold that we expect most high school graduates to achieve, while recognizing the need for an even higher threshold for some. Educators must challenge themselves to take each student *as far as possible* — and educators must have the support and tools they need.

- *Insist on rigorous, relevant and engaging instruction.* Studies stress the importance of keeping today's adolescents engaged in learning through instruction that is rigorous and relevant to them and their future. For many students, this means programs that involve their hands and minds — courses that require students to solve difficult problems and pursue solutions to dilemmas in the workplace and the world around them. Ironically, the high school programs with the most potential to meet this need — career/technical (CT) courses — are often the most ignored by policy-makers. **Weak state policies that fail to set intellectually rigorous standards for CT programs are severely retarding their potential to help more students enter and succeed in college and career training.** Done right, CT programs not only can engage students at risk of dropping out but can inspire all students to tackle and master more challenging courses.

Teachers, principals and central office staff need goals that require them to abandon status-quo thinking about acceptable dropout levels.

Our best CT programs today blend high-interest technical studies with engaging academics. We need to examine these successful models and create the policies and supports that will bring them to scale in all of our high schools.

The SREB region has more than its share of high schools identified by Johns Hopkins University researchers as “dropout factories.” And the lack of uniformity in the way states and districts define and count “dropouts” suggests that many more high schools have actual non-completion rates in the 40 percent range and above. While some states and school districts are facing up to the hard truth about their dropout rates, many others continue to play a numbers game — so fearful of negative publicity that they are unable to rally the community will to makes changes for the better.

Some schools and districts are returning to discredited practices from the past, re-establishing low-level vocational tracks in the hope that a few more potential dropouts will stay the course. If SREB states are to sustain the educational and economic progress we have made in recent decades, we must find ways both to graduate many more students but also help them meet high standards of achievement.

The next generation of school accountability needs to require more from our students, educators and schools — but also from state leaders who can enable positive change and monitor results. Currently, most SREB states are under-producing college graduates compared with the nation. Without more students graduating from high school — and then completing two- and four-year degrees and advanced career training — our nation’s economic future is at risk and the South’s quality of life will dwindle. Our states’ education policies will set the course.

One significant challenge policy-makers face as they step up: While the public is concerned about high school achievement and graduation rates, some people are unconvinced that educators and political leaders have real answers. We need to do a better job of showing the public what is working and why. We should push back on media messages that create a sense of hopelessness about high school reform. We need to showcase our most effective schools and the policy strategies that decision-makers are implementing to bring all schools to high levels of performance.

Finally, the racial demographics of the SREB region are changing rapidly. Within the working life of today’s high school students, people of color will come to represent nearly 50 percent of the population in the SREB region. Students of color continue — disproportionately — to have the lowest high school graduation rates, the weakest college enrollment and degree-completion rates, and the lowest average lifetime incomes.

We don’t need a demographer to show us the urgency for high school reform. We know what to do. We need the right state policies and leadership to get it done. The 10 principles presented in this report provide a blueprint for just that.



The next generation of school accountability needs to require more from our students, educators and schools — but also from state leaders who can enable positive change and monitor results.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David S. Spence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dave Spence
President
Southern Regional Education Board



I. Introduction

Nearly 7,000 students drop out of the nation's public high schools each school day, and 3,000 of them are in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states. Altogether, an estimated 1.3 million teenagers in the United States abandon high school each year without earning a diploma. In 1,700 of the nation's high schools, less than 60 percent of students even make it to their senior year on time. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 27 percent of America's Class of 2006 failed to graduate with their peers.

The future is bright for students who do persist and earn a high school diploma: High school graduates' capability to enter and succeed in a job is stronger, and their earnings and employment rates are much higher than for those who drop out. Yet national research shows that many high school graduates are not well-prepared to continue their studies because they lack the reading, writing, and math knowledge and skills for success in college courses or career training. **Unless public high schools change dramatically, "too few graduate and too few are ready for the next step" will be the national storyline in education for years to come.**

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 27 percent of America's graduating class of 2006 failed to graduate with their peers.

Moving more students successfully into postsecondary education and career training will not happen without improving both school practices *and* state policies. These goals cannot be met by high schools alone. SREB states need to enable public schools to identify and help struggling students earlier in their education. Some schools already do this, but SREB state leaders know that every school needs better tools and practices to help more students succeed. **The region's public schools need better policies, guidance and resources to raise achievement *and* to accelerate progress in graduating more students who are prepared for success after high school.**

SREB states could raise high school graduation rates simply by weakening current graduation requirements that often stress only low-level academic skills and separate, old-style vocational education tracks — but they must resist this temptation. It would leave far too many students unprepared for high school graduation, postsecondary studies, career training and work. This is an option SREB states cannot afford.

Instead, states should set incentives to motivate educators to deliver more challenging academic work that connects classroom learning to students' lives and futures. SREB research shows that such innovations can foster greater student success in school and will help many schools substantially raise both graduation rates and student achievement.

In fall 2007, SREB convened a distinguished panel of state leaders led by Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia to consider how to accomplish these goals. **The SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement** met in 2007 and 2008. Later, SREB worked directly with several members of the Committee to recommend specific strategies that states and their public schools could use to help more students succeed.

This report outlines **10 principles to guide the next generation of school accountability in SREB states** — giving equal priority to improving both graduation rates and achievement. Most states' current school accountability laws and programs do not emphasize improving graduation rates. In fact, by simply establishing and raising test-score requirements for graduation, states sometimes inadvertently discourage high schools from retaining low-performing students because they may lower overall test scores. This needs to change immediately.

“We could easily raise graduation rates by allowing students to meet very minimal academic requirements. But that won't get us where we need to go. Using the same logic, we could raise achievement by allowing our lowest-level students to leave school. Again, that's not what we want. That's why a two-pronged approach is crucial. Our challenge now is to move beyond requirements that high schools improve test scores. We need to set our expectations even higher for the levels of skill we expect students to learn. And very importantly, we need to make high school graduation a major priority — like never before in our states.”



Governor Sonny Perdue, Georgia, chair of SREB in 2008, speaking to the SREB Annual Meeting in Boca Raton, Florida



II. Compelling Reasons for States to Improve High School Graduation Rates *and* Achievement

SREB and prominent leaders from its member states agree that most states need major improvements in both graduation rates and achievement in high schools. Why is this dual focus so crucial?

States' Current Focus is on Minimum Achievement Levels, Not Graduation

Until changes in federal *No Child Left Behind* Act regulations in late 2008 — to take effect in 2011 — states had little reason to hold schools accountable for significantly improving graduation rates. Thus, most states have focused almost solely on requiring schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) test-score goals as required by the law. Unfortunately, as states have pushed schools to raise achievement to minimum levels, instruction in some schools has overdosed on boring, drill-oriented teaching and test preparation. National research indicates that failure to provide the curriculum and learning experiences that engage students in challenging and meaningful learning leads to high dropout rates.

Failure to provide the curriculum and learning experiences that engage students in challenging and meaningful learning only leads to even higher dropout rates.

This is one major reason why ninth-grade failure rates are high in most states. Too many schools ignore struggling students in hope of raising test scores as more of them drop out. States must change this trend and work to help high schools graduate more students who are prepared for a next step — college, career training, employment, the military or other options.

While SREB states are making some progress in raising high school performance and graduation rates, achievement is not improving fast enough and graduation rates remain too low. In 2006, the median graduation rate¹ for SREB states was 72 percent, compared with 73 percent for the nation. Average graduation rates ranged from 60 percent to 80 percent across SREB states. (For a thorough analysis of high school graduation rates and student achievement trends, see SREB's 2009 report *Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts*).

¹ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) averaged freshman graduation rate.

The Problem Starts Early: Many Students Enter High School Unprepared

Too many eighth-graders in SREB states are unprepared to succeed in challenging high school courses. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 29 percent of eighth-graders in SREB states scored *below* the Basic level in reading, and 33 percent were *below* the Basic level in mathematics. These students will have extreme difficulty succeeding in high school.

Plus, a large portion of the 45 percent of the region's eighth-graders who scored at NAEP's Basic level in reading and the 41 percent who did so in math also will struggle with high school studies unless they receive special help. **Simply put, fewer than half of the region's eighth-graders are academically prepared to enter ninth grade and succeed in college-preparatory high school courses.** Clearly, state leaders and educators need to seek new directions for improving students' transition into high school.

Helping students build stronger literacy skills is one key to helping them reach higher levels of learning in *all* subjects. The **SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools** noted in its 2009 report, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, that reading instruction often stops after the elementary grades. The report shows that eighth-grade NAEP reading scores are stagnant in many states and that students need more intensive reading instruction throughout the middle grades and high school. It urges states to identify the specific reading skills students need in key middle grades and high school subjects, add those skills to the curricula, provide teachers with better training in literacy instruction, and give struggling students the extra help they need to catch up.

Math also needs attention. The National Mathematics Advisory Panel's 2008 report indicates that states are making only modest improvements in math achievement in the middle grades. Before middle grades students can succeed in pre-algebra or algebra, they need to have a deep understanding of arithmetic, positive and negative numbers, fractions and decimals. More eighth-graders need to master these concepts, so that more high school students can complete Algebra II — a proven gateway to college success. **Research shows that students who complete Algebra II in high school are more than twice as likely to graduate from college as students who do not.**

The pathway to failure is well-defined: Students who enter high school with poor reading and math skills are more likely to struggle and not stay in school long enough to take higher-level courses or state graduation exams. States need to help improve students' reading and math skills if they expect to raise graduation rates.



A landmark SREB report calls for the improvement of reading instruction in the middle grades and high school to become the top priority in public education.

Many High School Graduates Are Unprepared for College and Work

Even with a high school diploma or GED certificate in hand, too many students are not ready for college. Only 67 percent of the nation's Class of 2009 met ACT Inc.'s college-readiness benchmark in English, 53 percent in reading, and 42 percent in math. **At a minimum, two-thirds of these students are not ready for college-level work in at least one of these areas.**² Such low levels of college readiness fuel a huge demand for college-level remedial studies.

The Conference Board's Workforce Readiness Report Card indicates far too many new high school graduates also are inadequately prepared to succeed in the workplace. It shows that many graduates lack the reading comprehension, writing and math skills required for success in entry-level jobs that lead to career advancement opportunities. 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.

Dropouts Are Costly to SREB States

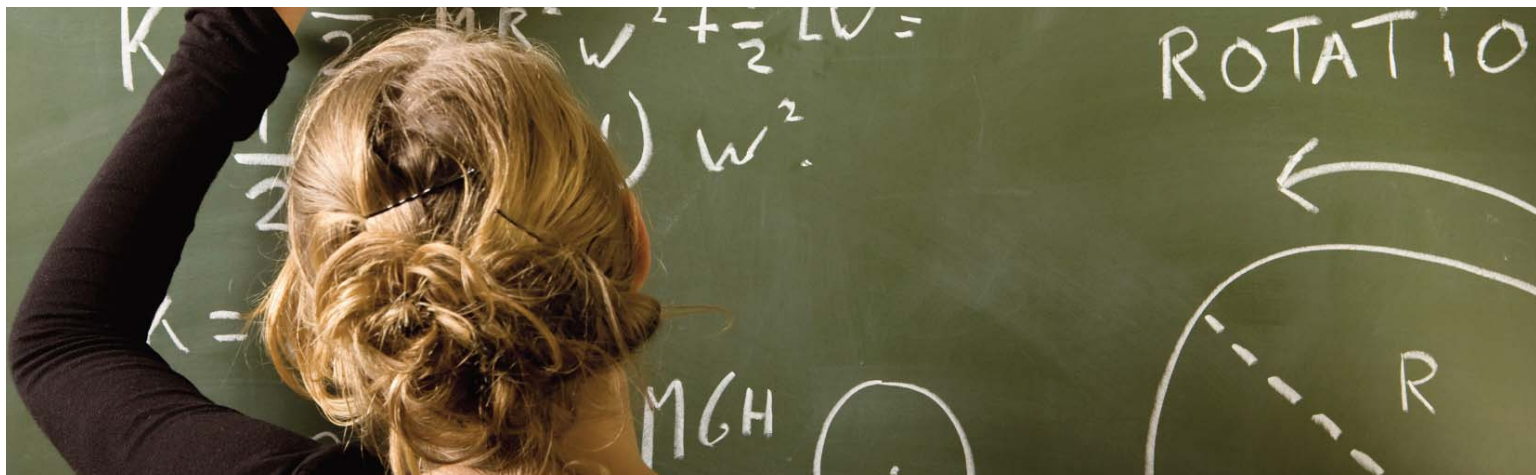
SREB states have more than half of the nation's "dropout factories" — high schools in which no more than 60 percent of freshmen make it to their senior year, as determined by Johns Hopkins University researchers. While many of these schools are in large cities, *Education Week* reported in 2004 that "in the South, unlike other parts of the country, the 'dropout factories' also tended to be in rural areas and to enroll more white students."

Dropouts from the high school
Class of 2008 alone will cost
SREB states more than
\$140 billion in lost wages over
the course of their lifetimes.

Graduating more students from high school not only makes sense for those students whose future is at stake — it makes economic sense. Dropouts from the high school Class of 2008 alone will cost SREB states more than \$140 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes. And many dropouts face a lifetime of limited opportunities and lower earnings: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the 2008 median weekly earnings of non-high school graduates was \$426, compared with \$591 for high school graduates. Moreover, the unemployment rate in 2008 for non-high school graduates was 9 percent, compared with 5.7 percent for high school graduates.

The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that higher levels of education also can save states money in health care costs and reduced crime. High school graduates are healthier and have lower medical costs than high school dropouts, and they are far less likely to go to prison.

² ACT special analysis of Class of 2009 provided to SREB: 34.1 percent of the students met the ACT benchmarks in English, reading and mathematics.



III. Setting Stronger Goals for Graduation and Achievement

Increasingly, the purpose of high school is not only to graduate students, but to prepare them for responsible citizenship and their next step — a bachelor's or associate's degree, transfer study, a career/technical degree or certificate, a career program, employment or the military.

Defining College and Career Readiness

The depth and level of math, reading and writing knowledge, and analytical skills that high school students need vary according to the options they choose after they graduate. However, the SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement agreed there is a **threshold level** of knowledge and skills in reading, writing and math that *all* high school graduates must reach. This includes the ability to:

- read, comprehend and apply complex written materials for continued learning and success in a job.
- use math to solve multi-step problems, estimate, plan and set priorities, and read and understand numerically based information.
- acquire and apply academic and technical knowledge and skills in both education and work settings in order to complete assignments and tasks and solve problems.
- communicate orally and in writing to a variety of audiences.
- demonstrate the skills and habits of responsible students and citizens.

Being **college-ready** means a high school graduate has the reading, writing and math knowledge and skills to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing, college-degree courses without the need for remedial classes. Similarly, being **career-ready** — ready to enter and advance in a job or succeed in training for a good job — means that high school graduates can read, comprehend, interpret and analyze complex technical materials, can use mathematics to solve problems in the workplace, and can pass a state-approved industry certification or licensure exam in their field.

Some education policy groups assert that the readiness thresholds for all post-high school options are the same. But to date research has identified only **the basic skills that students need in order to begin bachelor's and associate's degree programs** — and that yardstick often has been set too low to ensure a high probability of student success in first-year college work. In fact, low college

graduation rates confirm that readiness standards are set too low in states that have them. Future studies may show that reading, writing and math skill levels need to be set even higher than they currently are in most states for students who are headed for a two- or four-year degree.

Other postsecondary options present a very different picture. Research provides little guidance about the needed readiness levels in reading, writing and math **for success in postsecondary technical certificate and diploma programs, military training and work**. Education leaders and policy-makers need more empirical and specific research to guide decisions about setting readiness levels for these options. Further research may conclude that one set of reading, writing and math standards can apply to all options. Much more likely, however — especially if research shows that two- and four-year degree-readiness standards need to be raised — the reading, writing and math skills needed for postsecondary certificates and programs for advanced training will differ some in kind and level.

Defining Graduation in New Ways

The high school curriculum needs to prepare each student for one or more next steps after high school. For some students, graduation will mean completing a classic, college-preparatory course of study; for others, it will mean completing a program of study that joins solid academic studies with career/technical courses. Both paths should enable students to acquire the knowledge and skills — in reading, writing and mathematics — and the habits required to succeed beyond high school.

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

Virginia is a national leader in developing effective school accountability strategies, stressing both **higher achievement and graduation rates** in high schools. In early 2009, the state Board of Education made high school graduation rates more of a factor in the progress schools are required to make each year. The state has improved career/technical courses and now counts career-certification exams among those that students may complete to graduate. Plus, Virginia's Project Graduation gives students extra help in passing end-of-course exams that are required for graduation. "Just passing our Standards of Learning tests is not sufficient" for the state's graduates, said **Mark Emblidge**, the president of the Virginia state board and the SREB Board vice chair. *All* high school students need to prepare to continue their education or career training after graduation, he said.



Mark Emblidge



IV. Revisions to High School Accountability

The next generation of school accountability in SREB states should ensure that more students graduate from high school and that more of them graduate ready for one or more next steps in education and for productive citizenship. SREB recommends that new state school accountability systems include these 10 key principles:

1. Give equal weight to graduation and achievement in determining school performance.
2. Set ambitious goals for improving graduation rates.
3. Set high school achievement goals beyond minimum competency and hold schools accountable for significant annual improvement in the percentages of students who meet them.
4. Stress improvement, provide rewards and assistance for districts and schools to make expected progress, and focus sanctions on districts and schools that fail to improve even after receiving state assistance.
5. Strengthen middle grades students' transition into high school and reduce ninth-grade failure rates.
6. Recognize that one path to graduation does not fit all students.
7. Broaden the definition of academic rigor to include career/technical programs of study that join a "ready" academic core with a coherent sequence of quality CT courses.
8. Bring dropouts back into the education system.
9. Target schools with the lowest achievement levels and graduation rates for major improvements.
10. Make better use of the senior year to prepare students for graduation and give students a jump-start on college and careers.

Principle 1

Give equal weight to graduation and achievement in determining school performance.

The next generation of accountability rules in SREB states should give equal attention to improving *both* high school graduation rates and student achievement. Progress in either area should not compensate for deficiencies in the other.

A new accountability system should remedy most states' current lack of emphasis on improving high school graduation rates. Graduation should be a parallel goal to higher achievement, not a secondary goal. **States, districts and schools must have a plan to help more students achieve at levels required for graduation and to graduate better prepared to begin college or career training.**

Principle 2

Set ambitious goals for improving graduation rates.

Ambitious goals for improving graduation rates should be the foundation of the next generation of school accountability in SREB states. The new rules should prevent the unintended consequences of many states' current school accountability systems, putting an end to low-level goals for achievement and graduation rates.

States should set ambitious — but realistic — graduation rate goals for the state, school districts and schools. Too many states currently set only modest goals for improving graduation rates. Even with the 2009 changes in federal regulations, states can set their own graduation rate goals and targets for improvement. States need to set higher goals for student achievement and graduation, rather than low benchmarks designed to minimize negative sanctions against schools.

SREB states should set a goal of having an average statewide graduation rate of 90 percent, require districts and schools to set annual and long-range targets toward the goal, and approve these annual incremental targets for each high school provided the goal represents significant improvement. While all high schools should have the same goal for graduation rates and achievement, schools will start at different levels and arrive at the goal at different times. The system should



Sandy Kress

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

Sandy Kress, a consultant in Austin, Texas, and formerly President George W. Bush's chief education policy adviser, endorsed this report in his remarks at the 2009 SREB Annual Meeting. A key architect of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* and many state reforms in Texas, he noted that a 2009 state law that revamps school accountability in Texas

addresses many of the issues in this report: “The report does a good job of balancing an emphasis on graduation and academic achievement ... and getting at a balance between academics and a career focus,” he said. It also emphasizes “getting more students prepared to succeed in higher education. ... If we don't get them [students] to graduation, they're lost. If students aren't ready for what comes next, then we're not doing much better. The two [graduation rates and achievement] go together.”

recognize these differences. Schools that meet or exceed the statewide goal should be given special recognition, while others can be recognized for exceptional gains in graduation rates and achievement.

Progress should be rewarded. A school that increases its graduation rate from 50 percent to 60 percent over three years needs to be recognized and rewarded similarly to a school that raises its rate from 85 percent to 90 percent. This type of system would recognize schools and school districts for developing and successfully implementing strategic plans for improving both graduation rates and student achievement.

States should approve both graduation rate and achievement targets for high schools that reflect continual and substantial progress from the prior year and toward the state's goal of 90 percent, and they should report outcomes publicly. In approving schools' annual and long-range goals, the state should consider:

- the current graduation rate and levels of student achievement in each school.
- the relative difficulty of making improvements, recognizing that a smaller absolute increase in high-performing schools may be as challenging as larger gains in low-performing schools.
- the similar levels of effort required to meet each school's challenges, while varying the goals and expected rate of improvement.
- the adequacies of the proposed interventions and changes in school and classroom practices for achieving the goals.

High schools with exceedingly low graduation rates will need mandates, incentives and capacity-building assistance from the state to make progress toward the graduation rate goal.

Principle 3

Set high school achievement goals *beyond* minimum competency and hold schools accountable for significant annual improvement in the percentages of students who meet them.

States should publicly recognize improvements in student achievement in schools that have helped more students achieve *beyond* the minimum levels required for graduation, increasing the percentage of students who meet college- and career-readiness standards. To be ready for college and careers, students need to achieve at levels higher than the minimum achievement levels required by most states for high school graduation. Today, most high school graduates need to be prepared for some type of postsecondary education and training to have good career opportunities.

States should recognize schools when a higher percentage of students reach achievement levels that signal college and career readiness, through Advanced Placement courses as well as improved career/technical studies that lead to employer certifications and advanced training.



States should set a goal of having an average statewide graduation rate of 90 percent.



Gene Bottoms, SREB senior vice president

“Continuing current accountability systems will get you minimum gains. It will not get you what you want. States need to encourage schools to help students meet higher standards than only the minimum academic standards measured by many state exams.”

While SREB states continue to raise high school graduation requirements, states need to be clearer about the level of knowledge and skills students need — particularly in reading, writing and math — to graduate from high school; to pursue a bachelor’s degree, an associate’s degree or career training; or to pass an employer certification exam. The SREB Committee agreed that **there is a threshold level of knowledge and skills required in reading, writing and math to graduate from high school, and higher thresholds necessary for success after high school.**

Less research exists on the readiness levels required to pass an employer certification exam for a high-demand, high-wage technical field and to succeed in postsecondary technical certificate and diploma programs than on readiness levels for two- and four-year degree programs. Further study, however, may disprove that one set of readiness standards for all types of postsecondary study and career training may be justified, particularly in light of the view of many that most college-readiness standards are too low.

Regardless, states should broaden the range of achievement indicators for high school beyond minimum proficiency to include both college-readiness indicators and career-readiness indicators, including the percentages of high school students:

- academically ready to begin college, based on the state’s definition of college and career readiness.
- ready to begin work, as judged by industry certification or other measures of career preparedness, such as completing a coherent sequence of career/technical courses or meeting readiness standards for acceptance into postsecondary study or training, in addition to a standard high school diploma.
- succeeding in academically challenging course work such as Advanced Placement courses and International Baccalaureate programs.
- passing exams in reading and math at levels that demonstrate readiness for high school graduation and for continued education and career training.
- meeting ACT or SAT college-readiness benchmarks.
- meeting eligibility requirements for merit scholarships at the state’s two- and four-year institutions.
- earning postsecondary education and training credit early through dual credit or joint enrollment programs in academic and career fields.

Principle 4

Stress improvement, provide rewards and assistance for districts and schools to make expected progress, and focus sanctions on districts and schools that fail to improve even after receiving state assistance.

The next generation of school accountability should ensure public understanding of states' goals for improving high school achievement *and* graduation rates and of how schools' progress toward the goals is measured. Year-to-year changes in the percentages of students meeting each goal should be the basis for measuring improvement.

School accountability should emphasize improvement, using funding incentives, awards and special recognition to acknowledge schools that make significant progress in raising achievement and graduation rates for all groups of students. **Such recognition should be accompanied by documentation of the changes made in school and classroom practices that contributed to the improvements.**

States should focus sanctions on schools and districts in which low performance in both categories persists — and only in schools where school leaders and teachers show little evidence of having implemented effective improvement strategies after extensive assistance from the district and state.

In creating a system of incentives, states need to recognize that high schools face different challenges serving students who enter high school with varied educational backgrounds and levels of preparation. Adequate support for at-risk students may require more resources. States must provide technical assistance, coaching and professional development to build educators' capacity to improve school and classroom practices and to build support among students, parents, teachers and administrators.

The accountability system also should establish an ambitious but realistic timeframe in which to expect improvements in achievement and graduation rates before sanctions are applied. The accountability system should drive the transformation of low-performing schools.

In addition, states should make accountability rules clearer and simpler so that educators will know the exact performance levels the state expects. **Overall, high school graduation and achievement should be measured as the percentages of students in each class who graduate and the percentages who graduate ready for college and careers.**

Florida Adds Graduation Rates, Postsecondary Readiness to School Accountability

Florida has expanded the focus of its school accountability system, from grading high schools based on students meeting minimum standards on the state test to include graduation rates and “accelerated learning.”

In September 2009, the State Board of Education approved a new formula for calculating the annual school grades. It gives similar weight to student performance on state exams and improvement in high school graduation rates for all groups of students. And the formula requires schools to show that more students are prepared for college, advanced training or work, using a variety of measures. Indicators of accelerated learning as defined in the rules include advanced courses, earning college credit and industry certifications, and meeting postsecondary-readiness standards. The Board's action was required by state law enacted in June 2008.

To accurately measure high school graduation rates, all states are required by 2011 to adopt the four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, defined by the U.S. Department of Education as the official state dropout rate. This rate measures the percentage of entering, first-time ninth-graders who graduate four years later with a regular diploma, adjusted for transfer students. But to accurately measure such a rate will require states to develop longitudinal student-data systems that can track students from ninth grade through high school, which most SREB states currently are developing.

School accountability policies and systems alone are inadequate to build the public's confidence that states have a plan to enable schools to improve both graduation rates *and* achievement. The challenge is unprecedented and requires a comprehensive and focused set of state and local initiatives to:

- prepare students for success in the ninth grade and high school.
- help students and parents plan a program of study for high school that leads to a specific future goal.
- make a successful transition from high school to college, training and work.
- make success in high school, rather than failure, the option for more students.
- develop the capacity of low-performing schools to improve student learning substantially.



Andy Womack

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

Tennessee's high school graduation rate improved by 11 percentage points from 2002 to 2006, according to federal data. SREB Board member and former State Senator **Andy Womack** attributed this significant progress to several policy developments in the past decade or more. "Nothing occurs in just five years," he said. Tennessee passed an educational improvement law in the early 1990s and fully funded it by 1996. The Tennessee Department of Education also implemented several of the strategies recommended in a 2000 SREB/*High*

Schools That Work report on transforming the state's low-performing schools, including placing a distinguished educator in each of those schools to support and lead the school faculty. The state has reduced class sizes and eliminated popularly elected county school superintendents in favor of better-qualified, hired leaders. A 2001 driver's license law that requires students under age 18 to stay in school and make satisfactory progress to have a driver's license conveys to students and parents the importance of finishing high school.

The state has a "feeder-to-receiver school" initiative designed for middle grades schools to help more students transition into their neighboring high school. Tennessee also has helped school districts start freshman and career academies to create small learning communities that provide students with extra attention. The Hamilton County and Memphis schools have stressed small learning communities and have made some of the greatest progress on graduation rates in the state. **Overall, the keys to improvement have been "setting a 90 percent statewide graduation goal and keeping it important,"** Womack said.

Principle 5

Strengthen middle grades students' transition into high school and reduce ninth-grade failure rates.

Too many students enter the ninth grade unprepared for high school, leading to high ninth-grade failure rates — and many students never recover. **If states are to hold high schools more accountable for raising achievement *and* graduation rates, state policies should call for middle grades schools to improve students' readiness for ninth grade and to address the academic and behavioral factors that can lead to failure.** Ninth-grade enrollment in 2006 was 14 percent higher than eighth-grade enrollment the previous year in the SREB median states, indicating high student-failure rates. Students who are held back a grade are more likely to drop out than students who are not, based on findings from the California Dropout Research Project. Students fail the ninth grade when they do not pass one or more courses and earn enough credits to advance to the next grade.

State accountability policies also need to recognize the readiness levels of incoming high school students and credit high schools for helping more students succeed. The next generation of accountability rules should recognize the percentages of students who:

- enter ninth grade ready to succeed in high school courses.
- earn enough credit as first-time freshmen to be classified as sophomores the next year.
- earn enough credits as sophomores to be classified as juniors the following year.



State policies should call for middle grades schools to improve students' readiness for ninth grade.

Ninth-Grade Readiness Standards

States should identify the most essential knowledge and skills students need — at least in reading, writing and math — to succeed in the ninth grade, and states should describe in sufficient detail the levels of work expected of students by the end of grade eight. States should work to have fewer, well-developed standards rather than many poorly defined standards. School districts, school leaders and teachers will need samples of student assignments, exam items and classroom scoring guides that show the expected levels of work for students who are prepared for high school. Professional development will need to focus on building the capacity of district and school leaders to help teachers benchmark their lessons, assignments and classroom assessments to the state ninth-grade readiness standards.

These three SREB *High Schools That Work* guides identify readiness indicators for succeeding in college-preparatory high school courses:

Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors English: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do

Getting Students Ready for Algebra I: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do

Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors Science: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do

States can help to improve students' readiness for high school and success in school accountability programs by:

- developing statewide ninth-grade readiness standards in reading and mathematics that indicate the performance levels students need for success in challenging high school courses.
- revising the eighth-grade assessment to measure students' readiness for ninth grade and use the results to identify students who need extra help to succeed in grade nine.
- providing information and professional development to middle grades schools on how to adjust their curricula and instruction to reduce annually the number of students unprepared for high school.

The accountability system should require middle grades schools to increase the percentage of students meeting these standards annually and reward schools that make progress among all student groups. A recent SREB report, *Keeping Middle Grades Students on the Path to Success in High School: Increasing Engagement and Achievement in SREB States*, outlines many policies and programs to ensure that middle grades students are engaged in school and excited about learning.

States should require districts and schools to identify early in the middle grades the students who are at risk of being unprepared for high school, and provide them with accelerated grade-level instruction and support in reading and math *before* the ninth grade. Johns Hopkins University researchers have found that most sixth-grade students with *at least one* of the following characteristics will not graduate from high school without intensive help:

- failed a sixth-grade English or math course.
- missed 36 or more days of school.
- had an “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in at least one class.

SREB states should help prepare teachers and school leaders to embed reading skills and engaging literacy practices into each middle grades subject — not just in English/language arts — through teacher preparation, certification/licensure and professional development. Middle grades students need direct, explicit instruction in how to read, learn and analyze information in the core academic areas — to transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

“This report succinctly lays out facts and challenges” states must face as they develop new school accountability systems, said **Valerie Woodruff**, a former longtime Delaware secretary of education and former vice chair of the SREB Board. Schools need to set indicators that help them measure when elementary grades students are ready for the middle grades, and when middle grades students are ready for high school, she said. States also “must attend to the data in all of this. There are data elements that we can use to track students to see how they are doing at each level of education.”



Valerie Woodruff

The 2008 SREB/*High Schools That Work* report *Redesigning the Ninth-Grade Experience: Reduce Failure, Improve Achievement and Increase High School Graduation Rates* shows how schools can change the ninth grade to improve student achievement and help raise graduation rates. States need to make the redesign of ninth grade a statewide educational priority so that students who are behind can catch up, particularly in reading and math. Students' ninth-grade experiences can determine whether they will thrive in high school and prepare for college and careers. The following school practices foster those experiences and should be incorporated into state policy:

- Assign experienced and effective teachers to grade nine and keep the student-teacher ratio at or below the ratio in other grades.
- Use proven instructional strategies to engage students in learning.
- Allow flexible scheduling to provide the intensive support many students need to succeed.
- Teach study skills and other habits of success.
- Design career/technical courses that require students to use reading and math skills to complete authentic projects.

Also, beginning in eighth grade, students need **individual graduation plans** that can be tailored with parental involvement and support to the specific interests, skills and aspirations of each student. States can assist schools in providing students in the middle grades and early in high school with experiences to help them connect school to future educational and career opportunities. Each student's individual graduation plan should be reviewed annually by the student, parents and the school and revised annually as needed.

Principle 6

Recognize that one path to graduation does not fit all students.

States' school accountability programs should recognize a range of paths to high school graduation, all of which would have high standards and lead students to a standard or higher-level diploma. **Accountability programs should assign values to each graduation path and reward schools for keeping struggling students in school, on track to graduate, and ready for one or more options in postsecondary education and career training.**

The next generation of school accountability also should recognize that some students earn a high school diploma outside the traditional setting, schedule and time. Graduation rates should include students who:

- graduate in four years or less with a standard or higher-level high school diploma.
- graduate in more than four years with a standard or higher-level high school diploma.
- earn a standard diploma through adult education.
- return after dropping out to earn a standard diploma.
- meet diploma requirements early and enter college.
- earn a GED credential coupled with a state-approved industry certification or credential.

States' school accountability programs should recognize a range of paths to high school graduation, all of which would have high standards and lead students to a standard or higher-level diploma.

State policies need to recognize that students have varying interests, talents, learning styles and circumstances. Students must have access to a *range* of opportunities and instruction to finish high school and be prepared for further education and work.

State accountability systems should recognize students who need extended time to earn a diploma. A more flexible and comprehensive approach to tracking high school completion — one with quality controls and widely understood by the public — would benefit SREB states. Most students can complete graduation requirements within four years at a regular high school. But some take five years, and others need to complete credits online as they work and care for their families. Those who drop out might return later to finish. Some might graduate in adult education programs in their late teens or early twenties. **Whatever the path, all should be counted. Over time, at least 90 percent of all students who enter high school should graduate.**

State accountability systems should require and support district-level, second-chance programs to help students who do not graduate from a traditional high school to earn a diploma, or to earn a GED credential and state-approved certification. While states may elect to give less credit to districts and schools that graduate students in the GED credential/employer certification option, the intent is to encourage schools to provide another opportunity for students who will not earn a traditional diploma. Such an option should be acceptable in the state and nation’s definition of a high school graduate. This may involve different ways of delivering education to students and setting a different pace for their learning, including early-college schools; full-time, choice technical high schools;³ and small academies within or separate from existing schools.

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

Full-time, choice technical high schools can foster higher graduation rates. “States need to think seriously about converting some of their shared-time technology centers into full-time, choice technical high schools. Do not underestimate the power of these schools to provide an alternative high school option and increase graduation rates. I was part of an effort to convert a shared-time center into a full-time technical high school. Twenty years ago as a shared-time center, this school was one of the lowest achieving in the SREB *High Schools That Work* network. Now as a full-time technical high school, it’s one of the top-performing schools in the network, with a graduation rate exceeding 95 percent. This school was built on the ideas of this report that link academics and quality CT studies to improve students’ achievement and readiness for college and careers, and raise graduation rates.”



Patrick Savini

Patrick Savini, Superintendent, Sussex Technical School District in Georgetown, Delaware, and SREB Board member

³ An early-college school offers a blend of high school and college courses that support the completion of high school graduation requirements and two years of college during a program of five years or less. A full-time, choice technical high school is a school that combines a “ready” academic core with in-depth career/technical studies. Students can choose to attend this school at the end of grade eight or grade 10.

States also should assist districts and schools in developing credit-recovery opportunities through Web-based, online and traditional classroom instruction to help students who have failed a course to graduate on time. Credit recovery allows students to retake a course during the year and complete it when they can demonstrate proficiency. This strategy can help more students stay on track toward graduation.

In addition, states should require all school districts and high schools to provide alternative paths to graduation for students who drop out for personal and educational reasons. These young people should have the option of attending high-quality and convenient adult education classes that lead to a standard high school diploma. Adult education can provide a more personalized and flexible approach to completing a high school diploma, while helping these students acquire the knowledge and skills for a career or college.

For students who are 17 or 18 years old and stuck in the ninth or 10th grade with few credits, states need to help these students enter a GED program, combined with career/technical (CT) studies that can lead to an employer-recognized credential. This combination should result in a high school diploma and add to the school's graduation count under the state accountability system.

Principle 7

Broaden the definition of academic rigor to include career/technical programs of study that join a “ready” academic core with a coherent sequence of quality CT courses.

Because of SREB states' current focus on pure academics, the expectation often is that most or all students will be enrolled in a classic, college-preparatory program of study. This narrow concept of rigor has resulted in too many students taking a weak college-prep curriculum geared toward minimum-level state high school tests, with many instructional days devoted to having students take practice exams. For many students, this approach seems irrelevant to their future and has greatly reduced their motivation and engagement in school. A rigorous curriculum or instructional approach is not necessarily more work — but more thoughtful, purposeful, intellectually demanding work.

The next generation of accountability rules should include a broader definition of rigor that promotes high-quality CT studies and the learning of academic content through authentic problems, projects and activities that are meaningful to students. States need to broaden the concept of rigor beyond:

- test-based rigor that requires higher scores on conventional paper-and-pencil tests.
- course-based rigor that requires more credits in demanding academic courses in English, math, science, social studies.

This broader definition of rigor will allow academic classes to be taught in ways that connect the content to students' lives and future. When students learn academic knowledge through project-based and applied methods, they are able to use it in new situations, as well as in the context in which they originally learned it. Students also are more interested in mastering academic content when they have opportunities to use knowledge and skills in authentic projects.

States that design career-focused programs of study can help more students meet graduation requirements and prepare them to pursue one or more postsecondary options. A 2008 SREB report, *Crafting a New Vision for High School: How States Can Join Academic and Technical Studies to Promote More Powerful Learning*, outlines how state leaders can realize the potential of CT education in high school reform by joining high-quality CT studies with academics and intellectually demanding assignments.

A Broader Definition of Rigor

A broader definition of rigor would move beyond a pure academic approach to learning, to include:

- application-based learning of academic knowledge and skills through authentic problems, projects and tasks in career fields of interest.
- problem-based learning that develops students' ability to learn and use academic knowledge in the context of a problem that interests them.
- depth-based learning that provides opportunities for students to explore certain topics of interest and gain greater depth of understanding.
- blended programs of academic and CT studies that graduate more students and graduate them prepared for college and careers, including the combination of work and further study that has become common for more and more students.
- alternative assessments — in subjects other than reading, writing and math — that measure how well students handle complex materials, including approved industry-certification exams, readiness assessments for post-secondary study, school-evaluated senior projects, or portfolios evaluated using a state-developed scoring guide.

These programs of study can help states reach the significant percentages of students who drop out because they fail to find a clear path through high school toward a meaningful career. Programs of study should include a “ready” academic core, including:

- four years of challenging language arts courses that engage students in reading a variety of materials and writing short and long papers about a range of literary and non-literary topics.
- four years of mathematics, with **schools receiving special recognition in state accountability systems for helping more students successfully complete Algebra II.**
- three or four years of inquiry- and lab-based science.
- at least four courses in a planned sequence of CT courses that feature challenging assignments with embedded academic content.

Accountability systems should give equal credit to schools when students complete a career-focused program of study (and qualify for a two- or four-year college or pass a state-approved employer certification exam) as they do when students complete the traditional college-preparatory program of study.

States need to provide **applied academic courses** in math and science and lead the development of hybrid courses that combine the essential content from college-preparatory courses with content in a closely related technical field — such as biology/animal science, geometry/computer-aided design or physics/auto mechanics. States should establish policies and procedures to ensure that:

- academic standards for these courses are **equivalent** in content and complexity to traditional academic courses.
- teachers are qualified and have special training in *both* content and the pedagogy for using more applied strategies.
- students achieve in such courses at a level comparable with student achievement in traditional academic courses.
- academic and CT teachers have time to work together in planning and teaching such courses.

Making Career/Technical Courses Intellectually Demanding

In addition to designing new courses, states need to make existing CT courses more intellectually demanding by embedding reading, writing and mathematics standards that are essential for students who will pursue college or career studies and advancement in specific careers. This requires the development of instructional materials and a syllabus for each course, blending academic and technical content through authentic projects, and aligning course content with college- and career-readiness standards. Redesigned CT courses would require students to:

- do substantial reading and reflective writing in the career field.
- describe orally what they learn through class projects, problem-solving activities and laboratory work.
- develop analytical thinking skills.

Redesigned courses would provide students numerous opportunities in the context of their career field to: develop trouble-shooting and problem-solving skills; develop research and organizational skills to address a problem or task; use math to support decisions and complete a class project or authentic work outside the school; and learn the habits of the mind for invention, experimentation and design.



David Rainey

Perspective from a State Policy Leader

From 2002 to 2006, Arkansas consistently exceeded the national average graduation rate, improving its rate from 75 percent in 2002 to 80 percent in 2006, federal data show. Career-focused programs of study have contributed to this above-average performance. Arkansas State Representative **David Rainey** described at the 2009 SREB Board meeting how Arkansas has raised its high school academic requirements for graduation in recent years

and requires six career-focused elective courses. “This allows [students] to pursue their interests ... and keeps them engaged, keeps them focused and keeps them in school,” he said. Students can fulfill these career-focused credits with CT courses, with higher-level academic courses germane to their career interests, or a combination of career and academic courses.

“States should define in policy what intellectually demanding career/technical studies look like.”

Gene Bottoms,
SREB senior vice president

CT teachers need training to help them embed academics and intellectually engaging instruction and lessons into CT courses. States will need to develop a professional development system to prepare teachers to deliver redesigned courses. While many CT teachers have extensive technical knowledge, they often lack expertise in academics and instructional practices to lead intellectually engaging lessons.

As states develop career-focused programs of study that join a “ready” academic core with CT studies that are more intellectually demanding and embedded with academics, they need to recognize that existing statewide assessments often poorly measure students’ knowledge and skills. States will need to search for and encourage research on alternative assessments that are better suited than standardized tests to the broader definition of rigor in career-focused programs of study. Such assessments could include, but are not limited to, portfolios and senior projects administered according to state-developed guidelines by trained evaluators.

SREB’s Curriculum and Product Development for CT Studies

In the 2009-2010 school year, SREB’s *High Schools That Work* school improvement program will launch a three-year initiative to work with states to develop career-focused programs of study that join a “ready” academic core (see Page 22) with a sequence of CT courses embedded with academic content. Each state in the project will develop at least one career-focused program of study — linked to the economic and employment needs of the state — with course syllabi and related instructional materials. States will have access to the course syllabi and curricular materials developed by other states in the project. For each participating state, the project will produce:

- recommendations to better join academics and CT studies to realize the potential of CT education in improving high school achievement and graduation rates.
- a process for aligning CT courses with the most essential college- and career-readiness standards.
- course syllabi and instructional materials for a sequence of CT courses for a given career path, with sample authentic projects and assignments and sample end-of-course assessment items.
- a sequence of academic and CT courses for each career path that encompasses the academic and technical knowledge and skills essential for students to pass employer certification exams and enter some type of postsecondary education (e.g., associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree programs, career training or an apprenticeship).
- training materials to assist CT teachers in implementing CT courses embedded with essential college- and career-readiness standards and intellectually demanding assignments.
- a repository of tested, proven materials for new and redesigned CT courses.

Principle 8

Bring dropouts back into the education system.

To improve graduation rates and build a better-educated work force, states need to recover young adults who have dropped out of high school and help them earn a diploma. States need intervention strategies for at least two groups of students who are failing to complete high school. One group includes students who drop out in ninth grade or earlier and who have accrued few, if any, high school credits. The second group is students who have accrued a number of credits but drop out in 11th or 12th grade for family or other reasons.

Recovering these two groups of students will require states to have multiple intervention strategies. States should require all school districts to offer programs that invite students back into the traditional high school. States should encourage collaborative efforts between school districts and other entities to develop recovery systems, including regional technical centers, community colleges and high-quality adult education programs supported by the state. States need to ensure that state and local funding can be used for programs supporting those students.

Principle 9

Target schools with the lowest achievement levels and graduation rates for major improvements.

To improve student achievement *and* graduation rates, SREB states need to lessen the flow of dropouts from their lowest-performing high schools. The first step is to identify these schools. The state can use a number of criteria, such as maintaining a graduation rate below 70 percent for three consecutive years, high failure rates in grades nine and 10, and failure for three consecutive years to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on test scores as required by federal law.

Adult High School in Delaware Adds Graduates

James H. Groves Adult High School, a multi-campus school for out-of-school youths and adults who seek to acquire a regular Delaware high school diploma, adds nearly 5 points annually to the state's graduation rate: Its graduates made up 4.5 percent of the state's 2007 graduating class and 4.6 percent of the 2006 class, producing more than 400 graduates a year.

The school is state-funded and administered by the Delaware Department of Education.

The school serves 16- and 17-year-old students who have officially withdrawn (not been expelled) from school, and adults 18 and older who live or work in Delaware. The majority of its students are ages 16 to 23 and have dropped out of high school because of personal circumstances — becoming pregnant, falling behind in course work, needing to work, or caring for their family. Although schedules are flexible, students must attend at least 85 percent of the course hours and earn a C to receive course credit.

Dropout Recovery Strategies in Texas School Districts

The Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program grew out of Texas legislation that passed in 2007, and it focuses on the recovery and re-entry of dropouts.⁴ The goal is to support students who want to ready themselves for postsecondary education, training or work by attaining a high school diploma, achieving a passing score on a Texas Success Initiative test, obtaining a GED credential, or earning college or advanced technical credit.

The state law allows school districts to offer a flexible school year and permits schools to give students a more flexible schedule based on the number of minutes they spend in school, rather than the time of day.

The Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) in Texas is an example of a school district using the law to begin full-scale outreach to pull dropouts back into school. CCISD has formed a partnership (Operation KEYS: Keeping Every Youth in School) with the City of Corpus Christi and the Diocese of Corpus Christi to take ownership of the dropout problem. The district used its dropout recovery resources to create the Office of High School Completion to focus on the recovery of dropouts.

In 2008, Operation KEYS called and visited more than 400 dropouts who had not returned to school by mid-September, and recovered 215 students. Of these, 150 completed the school year and 47 earned a diploma or GED credential.

Today, the district's alternative high school, Solomon M. Coles, offers a flexible schedule to help students who have failed the state exit exam or require additional credits but need to work or care for their families to earn a diploma or GED credential.

States should assist low-performing districts and schools in outlining their problems, setting ambitious but realistic achievement and graduation goals, and implementing a set of strategic actions for reaching those goals. **School and district staffs need to work smarter and together** to use proven practices that motivate and engage students to learn at higher levels.

Most states' school accountability systems use frequent measurements of student performance — coupled with rewards and sanctions — to push school districts, schools, educators and students to perform at higher levels. This strategy is ineffective for many low-performing schools because some educators may not have the *will* or the professional *capacity* to improve the school. Instead, states need to work to build the long-term capacity of low-performing schools to improve what and how students are taught — and to which level — and to connect curriculum and instruction with students' interests and goals. This is essential for high schools in SREB states that have been labeled “dropout factories.”

⁴ Texas defines a dropout as any student enrolled the previous school year who does not enroll the following fall during the school-start window (the first day of school through the last Friday in September) and who cannot be identified in the student accounting system.

Practices to Help Students Stay in School

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance's 2008 practice guide on dropout prevention recommends research-proven actions to help low-performing schools improve achievement and graduation rates. SREB's *High Schools That Work* research on school practices provides further support for these promising practices. More students are likely to graduate and succeed when district, school and teacher leaders take the following actions:

- Create optional programs of study for grades nine through 12 that join challenging academic and CT studies around broad career themes, better engage students in learning and provide the skills they need in order to graduate.
- Create supportive relationships between students and mentors to help students meet readiness standards for graduation, college and careers.
- Work with parents and students to set career and educational goals and assign adult mentors to follow students' progress and provide assistance.
- Create a grading and support system in grades nine and 10 that requires students to redo their work and receive high-quality instruction until they meet standards — and provide the support students need to improve academic performance.
- Use data to identify students at high risk of dropping out and provide interventions to help them stay in school and graduate.
- Support teachers by providing common planning time and useful professional development.

States should support districts and schools that commit to a proven school-reform model with coaching, professional development and technical assistance to help them better engage and motivate students to learn.

Principle 10

Make better use of the senior year to prepare students for graduation and give students a jump-start on college and careers.

Incoming high school seniors arrive with varying levels of skills, and many do not use their senior year to prepare for postsecondary studies or career training. Some students enter the 12th grade struggling with their studies, disengaged and at risk of leaving high school. Some are looking for the easiest courses and electives. Some arrive on track for graduation but unprepared for college or career training. Others may be ready for college and want to earn college credits. An improved senior year will allow more students to strengthen their academic skills and to earn employer certifications or college credits. **The senior year does not have to be a lost year.**

Most states have assessments that enable schools to determine students' level of readiness for graduation, college and careers prior to their senior year. However, districts and schools often do not use this information to plan a more meaningful senior year for each student.

SREB states can use several strategies to strengthen and customize the senior year to prepare more students for graduation and their next step. They can encourage schools to:

Identify students entering the senior year who are at risk of not graduating because of too few credits or failure to pass required state exams. SREB's 2009 report on graduation rates, *Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts*, shows that nearly one in 10 high school seniors in SREB states does not graduate — and even more in states with high-stakes graduation exams. Some students lack the credits required for graduation. Others have failed one or more parts of the state graduation exam. States need to study this problem and develop strategies for improvement.

Help less-prepared students become better-prepared for college. States should require students who plan to attend college but have not demonstrated college readiness by the end of the junior year to use the senior year to become much better prepared for college reading, writing and math to avoid remedial courses in their first year of college. To help these students become ready for college, states' secondary and postsecondary systems need to:

- identify essential skills that students most need in English, reading, writing and mathematics to meet readiness standards and pass college placement exams.
- design transitional senior-year courses in reading, writing and math.
- train teachers to teach the courses.
- allow the transitional courses to count toward high school graduation, in lieu of the typical senior English course or a math course required for graduation.

Collaborating to Help More Students Pass High-Stakes Exams

In a pilot effort in 2008 to help more students graduate from high school, the Georgia Department of Education developed the ExPreSS program — a nine-day summer course targeting students who fail to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) in social studies and science. About 2,000 seniors who had not graduated because they had not passed the GHSGT and students who had failed the exam in 11th grade enrolled in the first round of this program.

On the 10th day of the summer program, the students retook the exam. The Georgia Department of Education hired some of the state's best teachers and provided a clear focus for instruction. It also gave bonuses to teachers who saw good results. Georgia State Superintendent of Schools **Kathy Cox** said the ExPreSS program allows “the state to collaborate with schools to help students take a big step closer to graduation day.” As a result, more than 1,400 students passed the high-stakes social studies and science exams.

The SREB College- and Career-Readiness Project

SREB is working with several states individually to help more high school graduates become ready for college and careers. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, SREB is helping states develop or expand statewide college- and career-readiness initiatives. This work is helping states establish statewide college- and career-readiness standards that most high school graduates will be expected to meet. The standards will help guide high school curriculum and instruction. The project calls for states to assess students' readiness in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of grade 11. If students are not well-prepared to continue their education in college or career training, states will provide senior transitional courses in reading, writing and math based on the readiness standards — so that more students can succeed in postsecondary education and career training.

Findings from a three-year SREB/*High Schools That Work* pilot project to design senior English and math courses that target less-prepared students strongly suggest that these transitional courses can reduce by up to one-half the percentages of students who need remedial reading, writing or math in college. The 2008 SREB report *Getting Students Ready for College and Careers: Transitional Senior English* and its forthcoming companion for mathematics provide recommendations for schools in the development of such courses.

Give college-ready students an early start. Allow students who show college readiness in grade 12 to earn at least nine semester hours of college credit during the senior year through dual-credit courses and joint-enrollment programs — or to graduate early and attend college full time.

Help career-bound students become ready for work. Schools can help students who do not plan to attend college to use the senior year to prepare for work, using the resources of the local high school, shared-time technology centers, employers, and community and technical colleges. Further, schools need to help these students work toward employer certification or continued preparation at a community or technical college.



V. In Conclusion

Giving equal priority in SREB states' school accountability systems to raising student achievement *and* high school graduation rates will improve the economic outlook for students, the region and the nation.

The next generation of school accountability should help states reach beyond minimum improvements in both achievement and graduation rates. It should set college and career readiness as the gold standard for achievement, while recognizing that “one size does not fit all” and that there are multiple paths to a high school diploma. It should expand the definition of rigor to include career-related academic skills essential to students' future success. It should emphasize recognition and rewards for schools that improve — and focus more help on those that do not.

Accountability should begin in the middle grades, when early signs of students' disengagement in school begin. **To keep more students engaged in their studies, states should broaden the ways students can earn a high school diploma and become ready for college and careers. Students should be allowed to complete a program of study that joins a “ready” academic core with intellectually demanding CT studies — or complete high-level academic courses germane to their career interests.**

Improved accountability systems should call for states to identify college- and career-readiness standards and to set goals for meeting those standards. States need to target the lowest-performing schools and build their capacity to improve achievement and graduation rates. Most importantly, improved accountability demands setting ambitious goals for improving both graduation rates and student achievement.

Creating the next generation of school accountability — **and improvement** — is a monumental undertaking, but failure to pursue higher standards and graduation rates will have long-lasting consequences.

Unless SREB states begin to meet these ambitious goals, too many students will be destined to face limited opportunities for lifelong success and states will lose their economic competitiveness.

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