

# Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion

SREB

*Policy Brief*

## State Policies to Support a Statewide College- and Career-Readiness Agenda

Since 2006, the Southern Regional Education Board has supported statewide college- and career-readiness initiatives in many states across the region. SREB has worked side by side with states as they implemented policies and practices. This hands-on experience, including deep discussions with state policy-makers, educational leaders and state legislators, has led to clarifications and conclusions about the purpose and focus of these readiness initiatives and the kinds of state policies needed to support them.

Although the readiness of high school graduates to succeed in postsecondary education or career training has been an issue for many years, increasing readiness did not become a major priority for states until the early 2000s for a number of reasons:

- It was popularly assumed that while students should have broad access to enter postsecondary education, many students would not or did not need to succeed in higher education; postsecondary education was considered more discretionary than it is today.
- States recognized the readiness problem but greatly underestimated the true extent of it. No statewide, shared view of readiness existed, because postsecondary agencies and institutions applied varied and ineffective standards and assessments in evaluating entering students. Those uneven practices masked the size of the readiness problem, and this is still true today.

Over the past eight to 10 years, the priority of postsecondary readiness has grown. Most fundamentally, states are recognizing the need for larger percentages of young adults to complete some form of postsecondary education to fuel economic development as well as to provide opportunity for individuals to enter the economic middle class, which increasingly depends on having some postsecondary attainment. So *success* has joined *access* as a priority for postsecondary education policy. Degree completion depends in large part on a student's readiness to learn at the college level — which places a premium on readiness and pressures public schools to make it a higher priority.

The increased focus on postsecondary readiness also has been reinforced by states' implementation of the Common Core State Standards and other rigorous standards for college and career readiness. Agreement on these standards by both K-12 and postsecondary education lends force to the readiness concept. As assessments for these readiness standards are put into place over the

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## SREB's College- and Career-Readiness Action Agenda

SREB's College- and Career-Readiness Action Agenda includes five essential components across the educational pipeline:

1. **Adopt statewide readiness standards.** Establish statewide postsecondary readiness standards for literacy and mathematics skills; ensure that those skills are emphasized in course work; and have both K-12 and postsecondary education agree on the specific standards.
2. **Assess high school juniors.** Assess students in 11th grade to determine their progress in achieving the readiness standards.
3. **Offer transitional readiness courses.** Offer supplemental transitional postsecondary-readiness courses, and require juniors assessed as underprepared to take the classes in 11th or 12th grade.
4. **Apply the standards in college.** Ensure that public postsecondary institutions apply the readiness standards agreed to with K-12 in deciding whether students need additional learning support after admission and, if so, the form of such support.
5. **Hold schools accountable.** Include increasing postsecondary readiness as an important criterion in school accountability systems.

next few years, the early rounds of results will likely reveal a more severe readiness problem than heretofore was recognized, further increasing state interest in the readiness issue.

SREB, Achieve and other organizations have worked with states to develop and implement statewide college- and career-readiness initiatives, using a comprehensive series of policy actions to help *all* of a state's public schools and postsecondary institutions increase the readiness of high school graduates. A number of states have put into place some or all elements of such an action agenda.

This is detailed, comprehensive and collaborative work that brings together public K-12 and postsecondary education to agree on expectations, in essence aligning requirements and narrowing the readiness gap between what students learn in high school and the skills they need to do well in college and complete certificates or degrees.

SREB strongly believes that each and all of these steps are needed to establish and sustain an effective statewide initiative to significantly increase the percentages of high school students who graduate ready to earn a college degree or career certificate. *Strong state policy is required to initiate the actions statewide and bring all public schools*

*and postsecondary education together in common purpose and action.* States that support these comprehensive actions with strong state policy will be better prepared to withstand resistance that is likely to emerge over the next several years as the higher standards and new, more rigorous assessments reveal a deeper readiness problem than was recognized in the past.

### Policy Issues Considered: Refining the Focus of the Readiness Agenda

The purpose of a statewide college- and career-readiness agenda is to signal clearly and universally to all K-12 schools in a state what knowledge and learning skills or readiness standards are essential for students to succeed in a substantial majority of postsecondary education programs. To be effective, *all* of postsecondary education in a state need to send these signals. Schools need to be confident that asking students to meet readiness standards will mean they are academically ready for entry-level, credit-bearing courses in most postsecondary education programs. The standards need to be reinforced by a series of additional steps that include assessment, supplemental course work, and school accountability.

In developing the statewide readiness agenda presented in this report, SREB worked with state leaders through a number of issues and, in some cases, obstacles that impeded consensus. Several of the more fundamental issues are described here with clarification and resolution.

## Academic Readiness

This statewide readiness agenda addresses only students' academic preparation: the development of the knowledge and learning skills needed to succeed at higher levels. To be sure, their success in postsecondary education involves other critical attributes: motivation, knowing how to apply to college, financial knowledge and support, tenacity or grit, and others. Schools need to play an important role in developing these qualities. However, without diminishing the importance of these other key factors, the focus of a statewide readiness agenda is the *academic content and learning skills* necessary for postsecondary success: a content knowledge base and the skills to read, write and think at higher levels.

## Learning Skills

Focusing on the literacy and mathematics-related skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education does not diminish the need for students to engage in course work with content that encourages and even requires the development of these learning skills. Students must take courses with the appropriate level of challenge and complexity.

However, SREB's statewide readiness agenda asserts that just taking the right courses does not always result in students developing the critical reading, writing and mathematics *learning* skills that they need to continue learning successfully in college and careers. Therefore, the agenda presented here primarily emphasizes the development of learning skills in reading and writing and in thinking abilities in mathematics. The statewide readiness agenda is based on the view that in addition to content, such learning skills must be explicitly taught and assessed.

## Readiness for the Vast Majority of Degree Programs

Empirical evidence and practice now provide a substantially clearer picture of what reading, writing and mathe-

matics skills are needed for most postsecondary degree programs, both associate's and baccalaureate. However, this single set of readiness standards for the great majority of degree programs will not reach the math levels needed to prepare for most STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programs.

In addition, there is not enough empirical evidence about the academic skills needed to be ready for non-degree career-preparation programs. Most likely, the same standards for non-STEM degrees would ensure readiness for non-degree programs as well. In short, one set of readiness skills will not guarantee preparation for all possible postsecondary programs, but it will ensure readiness for a vast majority of them.

While clarifying that the readiness standards do not necessarily apply to certain STEM postsecondary programs, it is important that K-12 embrace the goal of preparing all students to achieve at least the core set of statewide readiness standards related to non-math-based degree programs. This will prepare students for the widest set of postsecondary options in degree and certificate programs.

## Critical Postsecondary Role

While the focus of the readiness initiative lies primarily with K-12, postsecondary education across a state has an important role as well, in two ways. First, postsecondary education as a whole needs to work with K-12 to identify and embrace the readiness standards and their importance. Second, postsecondary education statewide needs to reinforce the K-12 emphasis on the readiness standards by using the standards to help determine whether incoming students need further learning support. A number of policies and practices will be needed to ensure postsecondary education's full support of and alignment with the postsecondary standards.

Postsecondary education can cement its alignment with the specific readiness standards in two critical ways. First, it can ensure the effective and consistent use of the results of the junior-year Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) readiness assessments (and similar assessments used in other states). Second, postsecondary education can adjust its own placement/readiness assessments to reflect the performance standards eventually set and validated in the

junior-year assessments. The recommendations below outline specific statewide policies and practices for this.

## Importance of Teacher Development

How well students achieve the readiness standards depends fundamentally on the teacher. While not addressed in detail in the policy recommendations below, it is absolutely essential to refocus both pre-service and in-service teacher development statewide on effective teaching of the postsecondary readiness standards; this agenda assumes that states will make this a priority in policy and action. Additionally, teacher evaluation systems need to emphasize effective teaching of the new standards. In essence, all of the steps in the statewide postsecondary readiness agenda in this report depend on successful teacher development.

## Preparation in High School

The recommendations below focus heavily on high school and the transition to postsecondary study. However, the teaching and learning of the postsecondary-readiness standards must begin in the earliest school years. When this is done effectively, over the next seven to 10 years more students will enter high school with increasingly solid foundations in these standards. In the meantime, schools must address the needs of students who have reached the upper high school years without achieving the readiness standards.

## State Policies to Support a Readiness Agenda

State policies are needed to make increasing college and career readiness a statewide priority. Such policy must address both K-12 and postsecondary education and bring both sectors together in joint pursuit of common readiness goals. These state-level, statewide policies can be legislative, interagency or both.

The policies need to establish each step of the readiness action agenda and embody shared understandings on a number of crucial points and issues on which effective statewide readiness initiatives are based. Lack of mutual understanding or different interpretations of fundamental terms, definitions and goals can dilute the effectiveness of these concerted efforts.

State policy should address directly the following essential elements of the statewide readiness agenda: school standards and curriculum, readiness assessments, transitional course work, postsecondary application of the standards, and accountability.

### 1. Statewide Standards for Readiness

*State policy should:*

- a. **Establish a statewide default high school curriculum that includes content through which the postsecondary-readiness standards can be taught and learned.** Immersing students in the appropriate kind and level of course work to require development of readiness skills is fundamental.
- b. **Place strong and specific emphasis within the curriculum on teaching and learning the literacy and mathematics-related readiness skills.** While taking and passing the right courses are necessary parts of academic preparation for postsecondary education, this does not ensure, without special emphasis, the skills needed to learn after high school.
- c. **Require public schools and postsecondary education, as a whole within a state, to identify and agree on a specific set of postsecondary-readiness standards in reading, writing and mathematics-related skills.** All public schools in a state need a single set of readiness standards on which they can focus with confidence that all postsecondary institutions have committed to the standards' value and use. The Common Core State Standards, and similar readiness standards in other states, provide College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards that are a sound set of readiness skills around which both sectors can coalesce. Moreover, PARCC and SBAC are developing high school assessments that will establish empirically based postsecondary-readiness performance levels shared by states and by postsecondary institutions within states.
- d. **Define the postsecondary education readiness skills as the academic skills needed to succeed in all credit-bearing, first-year course work in associate's and bachelor's degree programs in non-mathematics-based majors.** Empirical studies to date have focused on the impact of the readiness skills on degree programs; mathematics-based majors will require higher

math-readiness skills. Postsecondary education generally applies lower readiness standards in most certificate and diploma programs, although empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of these standards is inconclusive. Until the readiness standards needed for non-degree programs also are empirically defined, postsecondary education will decide on the applicability of the degree-based standards to non-degree programs.

- e. **Establish that the readiness standards are not intended to affect *admission* to open-door or broad-access, two-year and four-year institutions.** Access needs to be protected. Selective-admission institutions will continue to use related but more competitive criteria (grades, SAT/ACT, etc.). Admission and readiness will continue to be determined independently.
- f. **Set performance levels for assessments on the standards that strongly and empirically predict postsecondary success.** Otherwise, the standards will not be effective in laying the groundwork for higher levels of success in postsecondary completion. The PARCC and SBAC assessment performance standards will be validated by 2015.
- g. **Set and apply the performance levels on the new readiness standards immediately upon their validation.** Avoid phasing in these higher readiness standards over time.
- h. **Recognize that, at least in the near term, achieving the new postsecondary readiness standards cannot realistically be a criterion for high school graduation.** The aspiration that high school graduation should guarantee postsecondary readiness emerged recently, in a time when postsecondary readiness standards were unclear, not universally applied, and lower than predictive of college success. The new readiness standards and their associated assessments will highlight a wide achievement gap between what reasonably can be expected for threshold high school graduation and for postsecondary readiness. Immediately requiring that the standard high school diploma equate to college readiness is unrealistic and would have a minimizing effect on the level of the readiness standards.

- i. **Establish the high school mission as helping all students prepare for the broadest and highest postsecondary academic and career-preparation options.** All students should be encouraged and guided to pursue a standard, default high school diploma, the requirements for which should include college-preparatory core courses. Students opting out of the default diploma curriculum should complete a curriculum based on literacy and mathematics-related standards that prepare students to begin some form of non-degree postsecondary education. While it is unrealistic in the near term to expect that minimum high school diploma requirements will reach postsecondary degree-readiness skill levels, it is important that the diploma have substantial meaning for future careers and postsecondary study.
- j. **Ensure that all career-technical pathways to the standard high school diploma include core college-preparatory course work and college-readiness skills expectations.** Career-technical pathways should require students to take both the academic core courses and a series of career-technical education courses that also include the literacy and mathematics-related college-readiness standards.

## 2. Junior-Year Assessments of Progress

*State policy should:*

- a. **Require that students' status in achieving statewide postsecondary-readiness standards be assessed by statewide, common readiness tests no later than the junior year.**
- b. **Require that the same assessments be applied in all high schools statewide.**
- c. **Require that these readiness assessments be based on the readiness standards adopted and shared by the public schools and postsecondary education.**
- d. **Require that postsecondary performance benchmarks be set at levels that empirically predict success in first-year degree course work.**
- e. **Recognize that students will not be required to achieve the readiness performance levels on the readiness assessments as a requirement for earning a high school diploma.** The new readiness standards are empirically based to prepare students to succeed

in college and careers. The new assessments for them will reveal a wide achievement gap between these new expectations and current threshold requirements for the high school diploma. It is not reasonable to expect, in the near term, that a high proportion of students will meet the higher standards. It will take time to bring minimum diploma standards closer to the postsecondary-readiness standards.

### 3. Transitional College- and Career-Readiness Courses

The following policy recommendations support offering senior-year transitional courses statewide to help students achieve readiness standards before high school graduation. These courses are urgently needed to address the significant percentage of students who are not meeting current readiness standards and to mitigate the imminent spike anticipated in the proportion of students who will not meet the new, higher readiness standards on the common readiness assessments due to be implemented in 2015. In the next few years, students will be taking new tests with higher standards as schools move to full implementation of the Common Core and similar standards. States that do not provide these courses statewide to help students before high school graduation could see postsecondary remediation rates increase substantially in the short term.

The following state policies will ensure that these crucial courses are a priority and that they are offered to and taken by all students needing them.

- a. **Require that all high schools statewide provide postsecondary-readiness transitional courses.**
- b. **Require transitional courses to be based on the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards or similar standards adopted by the public schools and all postsecondary institutions statewide.**
- c. **Require that all students be assessed for college and career readiness no later than the junior year, based on the statewide postsecondary-readiness standards and assessments.**
- d. **Require that all students assessed as *not meeting* the readiness standards take the appropriate high school transitional courses.**

- e. **Ensure that the math transitional course is creditable as a fourth-year math course in high school.**
- f. **Ensure that the transitional courses carry high school credit and are eligible to be funded through the public school funding formula.** This provision is needed to give high priority to these courses.
- g. **Provide professional development to all high school teachers of the transitional courses.** Collaborative opportunities among postsecondary and high school faculty should be maintained to ensure that transitional courses continue to target gaps in students' readiness skills.

### 4. Postsecondary Application of Statewide Readiness Standards and Assessments

*State policy should:*

- a. **Require that high school students who *meet* the readiness standards on the readiness assessments (during the junior year) be afforded the following benefits.**
  - Students will not be required to undergo further readiness or placement testing when admitted to postsecondary education after high school graduation. The junior-year assessment should be used to determine students' *placement* in postsecondary study but not their *admission* to a college or university.
  - Students may begin postsecondary course work while still in high school, through early admission, dual credit and other acceleration options.
- b. **Require that students entering postsecondary education who have *not met* the readiness standards on the junior-year assessments be treated as follows.**
  - Students should have their literacy and mathematics-related readiness skills assessed through new readiness assessments based specifically on the same readiness content and performance expectations (standards) as the junior-year assessments. This will entail, across and within states, development of a new, common placement or readiness assessment that parallels the junior-year assessments and is based on the same perfor-

mance standards. Another option is to use the same readiness assessments employed in the junior year.

- Entering students who do not meet the readiness benchmarks on the placement assessment should be evaluated further to determine the kind of monitoring or learning support they need. Additional measures of student readiness should be used, such as course grades or other evidence of academic success. To the extent they reflect the readiness standards included in the junior-year assessments, scores on the standardized achievement or admission tests (ACT and SAT) could be used. In these cases, the validated college-readiness benchmarks recommended on these assessments should be applied.
- Based on this further evaluation, students should be guided to one of the following paths.
  - ◆ Students begin degree-credit course work without learning support, and their performance is monitored.
  - ◆ Students undertake some form of learning support in parallel with degree-credit course work, or embedded in the degree-credit courses. The performance of these students should be monitored carefully and the results collected and analyzed to empirically determine effective practice.

For high schools and their students to make achieving the postsecondary-readiness standards a high priority, postsecondary education should speak and act with one statewide voice in support of the standards and their importance.

## 5. School Accountability for Increasing Readiness

State policy should require public school accountability to be based both on increasing the percentage of students who meet the standard high school *graduation* requirements and on increasing the percentage of high school graduates who meet the state-adopted *postsecondary-readiness* standards. This can be measured by performance on the statewide, school-based postsecondary-readiness assessments and related postsecondary placement tests. SREB supports the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation goal of having 80 percent of high school students graduate and meet postsecondary-readiness standards. Most estimates gauge the current rate at below 40 percent (a 75 percent graduation rate with less than 50 percent of graduates meeting readiness standards). Holding schools accountable for increasing both graduation and readiness is essential to meeting the goal.

### Building Statewide Policy Support to Increase Readiness

From its founding in 1948, SREB's mission has been to help states improve education to grow their economies. Getting more students ready for college and careers is a critical priority at a time when postsecondary degrees and credentials drive jobs and prosperity. Many states, with the adoption of college- and career-readiness standards, are on their way to real progress. The steps in this readiness agenda will help build the statewide infrastructure for students, teachers and schools to reach the standards and for states to stay the course so that the region sees a new generation of students graduate ready to do well in postsecondary education and equipped with learning skills relevant to the workplace.

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