

Leveraging ESSA

To Increase College Readiness and Completion

Dear Colleagues:

Over the past several years, K–12 and higher education leaders across the country have partnered to build seamless transitions from K–12 into postsecondary institutions. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), we believe states have an invaluable opportunity to double down on alignment for student success.

The Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Association of System Heads (NASH), and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) have worked in partnership with Higher Ed for Higher Standards (HEHS) to develop an overview of key windows of alignment opportunity in ESSA. These include: (1) ensuring that college-ready standards and aligned assessments provide students a clear understanding of how to prepare for postsecondary, credit-bearing coursework; (2) developing student support systems that offer students opportunities to speed up and catch up; (3) strengthening teacher and principal training and professional development programs; and (4) aligning long-term student success goals and indicators with the state's postsecondary attainment agenda. Over the next several months, HEHS will take a deeper dive into several of these areas, publishing resources to support cross-sector ESSA plan development and execution.

Many states have already seen vast improvements in student transitions through efforts to ensure that all students are college and career ready. We believe that

through extending these efforts — to develop aligned K–12 and higher education goals, validate college- and career-ready standards and assessments, expand speed-up and catch-up opportunities for high school students, and strengthen educator preparation programs and professional development — we can accelerate the achievements to date.

We recognize there is still much work left to do to close persistent college and career preparation gaps. Efforts to support students in their transitions from K–12 to higher education should remain paramount in ESSA plans. As educators, we realize the tremendous opportunity for student success when we align our work, and we should use the ESSA planning opportunity to develop and strengthen our K–12/higher education partnerships. Together, we can work to deliver an education system that closes equity gaps; improves the earning potential of our citizens; and allows our states to cultivate a robust workforce, capable of sustaining and building a 21st century economy.

We encourage you to take advantage of the ESSA opportunity to strengthen partnerships with your cross-sector colleagues, and we stand ready to support your efforts.

Thank you in advance for your commitment to your students as partners in their success. This is an important milestone in our collective efforts to help prepare more students for college, for careers, and for life.

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With the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), higher education has a unique opportunity right now to partner with K–12 to set students on the path to success in college and careers. The new legislation explicitly focuses on improving the college and career readiness of all students, including requiring states to set high standards that are aligned to state higher education entrance requirements.

As states are developing their plans to meet these requirements, higher education and K–12 leaders clearly need to work together to ensure that the standards are set at the right level — and that other policies and practices are aligned to support the attainment of higher education goals such as improved completion rates.

The time to act is now. Under proposed ESSA regulations, state plans are due to the U.S. Department of Education in either March or July 2017. The plans will take effect at the start of the 2017–18 school year and will likely govern the policies and practices in schools across the country through 2023.

This brief is part of a series that Higher Ed *for* Higher Standards, in partnership with the Council of Chief State

School Officers, National Association of System Heads, and State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, is releasing to support K–12 and higher education partnerships on ESSA plans. The briefs will provide concise, targeted approaches in specific areas that states can incorporate into their plans to ensure the alignment of K–12 and postsecondary goals and expectations.

This document provides an overview of each area and identifies some additional questions that K–12 and higher education leaders can address in their discussions to develop robust ESSA plans that support college and career readiness for all students. Over the next several months, Higher Ed *for* Higher Standards and our partners will release additional papers that dive deeper into each subject and include promising state examples that may be ripe for replication.

Why Higher Education Needs To Act Now

MUTUAL BENEFITS OF K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION ALIGNMENT

The alignment of K-12 and higher education policies and practices is paramount for the success of students, and this alignment should occur in all states. ESSA provides a unique opportunity for K-12 and higher education to work together to improve student outcomes. Through local and state collaboration and aligned policies and practices, K-12 and higher education could:

- ◆ Increase K-12 graduation rates;
- ◆ Reduce the amount of remedial coursework students are required to take in college, saving students, families, and taxpayers millions of dollars in tuition and fees;
- ◆ Improve the educational attainment of underserved populations;
- ◆ Open new doors for students through dual credit and dual enrollment while in high school;

- ◆ Raise postsecondary retention rates, shorten time to degree, and accelerate entry into the workforce; and
- ◆ Provide businesses the qualified workers they need to meet local, state, and national needs.

What's at stake?

The well-being of our states and local communities is at stake. A well-educated citizenry is the key ingredient that helps states attract high-wage employers, improves the livelihood of our poorest communities, and generates more wealth for local and state governments. These benefits, in turn, maintain and advance our country's global competitiveness, improve local and state infrastructures, and allow states to invest more dollars into strategies and programs that increase student success.

Workforce Success Requires Postsecondary Success



65%

Proportion of jobs that will require at least some postsecondary education by 2020



99%

Proportion of all jobs created since the bottom of the recession that have gone to workers with at least some college education



85%

Proportion of middle- and high-skill jobs created in the recovery filled by those with bachelor's degrees

Sources: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/recovery2020>, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf>

ESSA: A POWERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO DEEPEN AND CATALYZE PARTNERSHIPS

The recently enacted ESSA reauthorizes the nation's K–12 education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESSA maintains the focus on common expectations for all students and transparency around student performance, and it builds on the previous law to create a more explicit focus on supporting state efforts to prepare all students for college and careers.

State ESSA plans provide a powerful opportunity for higher education and K–12 to work together because:

- ◆ All states are required to set high standards aligned to the entrance requirements of their state's higher education system, assess all students on those standards, and set long-term student preparation goals for meeting the standards.
- ◆ Through ESSA, states may also incorporate measures of students' college and career readiness in their accountability systems and use federal dollars for strategies to support student preparation for and transition to postsecondary education.

- ◆ ESSA gives states significant authority and flexibility to design a full education system that best meets the needs of their students and the demands of their workforce. Deep partnership from both K–12 and higher education, among others, will be necessary to address critical issues such as standards, assessments, accountability, and student supports.
- ◆ Proposed regulations require states to describe how they engaged in timely and meaningful consultation with specified stakeholder groups to develop their plan. The proposed regulations require a state education agency to conduct outreach at more than one stage of plan development so that stakeholders have an opportunity to ensure that the concerns raised through public comment are adequately considered and addressed prior to submission.

Bottom line

With the passage of ESSA, states have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to reset policies and supports to prepare all students for both college and careers.



How K–12 and Higher Education Can Work Together

To ensure that state ESSA plans will support students' success in college and careers, higher education leaders can partner with their K–12 colleagues in four main areas:

1. Alignment of K–12 and higher education goals;
2. Validation of college- and career-ready standards and assessments;
3. Strategies to support student transitions to postsecondary education and training; and
4. Strengthening of educator preparation programs and professional development.

ALIGNMENT OF K–12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION GOALS

What does ESSA require?

As part of the ESSA accountability requirements, all states must set long-term goals and interim measures of progress toward those goals for academic achievement, graduation rates, and progress toward English language proficiency. However, the law and subsequent proposed regulations open the door for states to go beyond the narrow confines of assessments and graduation to set forth a more meaningful vision for the state.

What does this mean?

Given that the focus of ESSA is on college and career readiness for all students, and many states set college and career readiness goals in their previous ESEA waiver plans, including these goals and aligning them to the state's higher education goals would meet the letter and spirit of the law.

Most states have publicly committed to improving the number of students that attain a postsecondary credential of value. To meet these goals, such as Oregon's 40/40/20 or Tennessee's Drive to 55, students need to enter postsecondary prepared to succeed, which means that K–12 cannot set long-term system goals in isolation from higher education. Alignment of goals creates a north star around which policies and programs across K–12 and postsecondary can be developed and expanded and

communicates to the public and industry that preparing all students for long-term workforce success is paramount.

What key questions should K–12 and higher education leaders address?

K–12 and higher education leaders should partner to answer the following questions:

- ◆ To what extent is the state's current rate of preparation of its K–12 students for college and careers aligned with its higher education attainment goal(s)? How would those rates need to change/improve to help meet the goals?
- ◆ What is the estimated effect of policies or programs targeted at increasing the percentage of students who are college and career ready and/or are successfully transitioning to higher education?
- ◆ How can goals for K–12 schools be more explicitly aligned with higher education attainment goals? What specific measures or metrics can be added to strengthen alignment?
- ◆ What opportunities exist to publicly communicate the state's aligned goals? How can the state incorporate the goals into other strategic documents?

VALIDATION OF COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

What does ESSA require?

ESSA continues the previous requirement that states have academic content and achievement standards in English/language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science. These standards must be the same for all students in the state. However, ESSA further requires that the standards be aligned with the entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the state's system of public higher education and with applicable state career and technical education standards. This represents a major step forward and a significant opportunity for states to improve student preparation for postsecondary success.

ESSA also continues the requirement that states administer assessments aligned with their standards. ELA and mathematics assessments must be administered each year in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Science assessments must be administered once in each of three grade spans (3–5, 6–9, and 10–12). Because the high school standards must be aligned with college-level entrance expectations, it follows that the state high school assessments should measure college readiness skills.

What does this mean?

College-ready standards and aligned assessments are the foundation for the entire K–16 pipeline. They are the necessary underpinning of education reform, though they are not sufficient on their own to improve student outcomes. Working together, K–12 and higher education can ensure that high school graduates are prepared for college credit-bearing coursework by validating that (1) K–12 standards reflect expectations of the state's

postsecondary institutions and (2) the assessments taken by high school students accurately measure college-ready knowledge and skills and provide students with timely, substantive feedback.

What key questions should K–12 and higher education leaders address?

K–12 and higher education leaders should partner to answer the following questions:

- ◆ When are the state's K–12 standards scheduled for review/revision? How will higher education be involved in the process to ensure that the resulting standards are aligned with college-ready expectations?
- ◆ How will the state ensure that the assessments students take in high school are aligned to state standards, measure college readiness, and are used to improve student transitions into postsecondary institutions? How well do the state's current assessments serve these purposes? Who was involved in conducting the research to confirm postsecondary alignment?
- ◆ Are the high school assessments used by public higher education institutions in the state as indicators of college readiness (e.g., used for placement decisions)? If this is not happening today, what can be done to position the assessments to be used this way in the future?
- ◆ Are the high school assessment results being used to close college readiness gaps and accelerate students into dual enrollment opportunities?

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT TRANSITIONS

What does ESSA require?

In its ESSA plan, each state K–12 education agency must describe its strategies, rationale, timelines, and proposed use of funds to ensure that all students can meet the state's standards and attain a regular high school diploma. Funds can explicitly support strategies for smoothing student transitions, including those from early childhood education to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to postsecondary education and careers. The state must

explicitly take into consideration traditionally underserved student populations when formulating these strategies.

What does this mean?

A key element to improving student success is making the most of all four years students spend in high school — particularly the senior year. Because high school assessments are generally administered in 11th grade, the information they reveal about students' knowledge and skills provides an opportunity for higher education to work with high schools to make the most of 12th grade.

Two strategies that can be leveraged through ESSA are:

1. Provide students who have mastered the content required for college and career readiness the opportunity to *speed up* by earning college credit before they leave high school; and
2. Provide students who need to *catch up* the chance to fill their gaps in their learning in 12th grade so they are ready for credit-bearing college courses, ultimately eliminating the need for remediation and improving the chance that they will go on to earn a certificate or degree.

What key questions should K–12 and higher education leaders address?

K–12 and higher education leaders should partner to answer the following questions:

- ◆ Are high school to college transitions explicitly targeted in state ESSA plans, with specific resources and programs required or encouraged?
- ◆ How can ESSA plans facilitate partnerships between colleges and high schools to create 12th grade transition courses and other interventions to help students reach college readiness levels by the end of high school?
- ◆ How can dual enrollment opportunities be expanded so that greater numbers of students earn college credit by the time they graduate high school, especially in underserved communities?
- ◆ What structures are in place or can be put in place to facilitate greater cooperation between K–12 and higher education?

STRENGTHENING OF EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What opportunities does ESSA provide?

K–12 and higher education have long worked together to prepare teachers and principals who create effective learning environments that lead to student success in college and careers. The long-term success of education reform is ultimately rooted in postsecondary education preparation programs. The Title II funding streams within ESSA provide a new opportunity to build on this historic partnership. With this funding, states should strengthen alignment across the sectors and improve teacher and principal effectiveness by:

- ◆ Developing and expanding teacher, principal, or other school leader preparation academies that produce educators who can demonstrate increases in student academic achievement.
- ◆ Reforming teacher residency programs and requiring prospective teachers to teach alongside highly qualified K–12 faculty for at least one year while also completing coursework in related content areas.
- ◆ Revising educator preparation program standards to ensure that prospective educators have the necessary subject matter and pedagogical knowledge that have been predetermined by the state, are measured, and are aligned to the state's academic standards.

What key questions should K–12 and higher education leaders address?

K–12 and higher education leaders should partner to answer the following questions:

- ◆ When are the states' standards for all educator preparation programs scheduled for review/revision? How will K–12 and higher education partner to ensure that the resulting standards are aligned with the states' evolving academic standards?
- ◆ What is the process for K–12 and higher education to identify and close workforce gaps to ensure that school districts have teacher candidates in high-need areas such as English language learners; special education; and science, technology, engineering, and math? How can high-quality residency and innovative pathway programs be used to diversify the teaching profession as well as meet rigorous standards of teaching?
- ◆ How do educator preparation programs value and promote inclusive learning environments to ensure that all teachers and leaders have greater cultural competency?
- ◆ What is the process for K–12 and higher education to develop evidence-based professional development opportunities that address educator knowledge, skills,

and dispositions? How do states ensure that these opportunities are based on student achievement outcomes that align with college and career readiness standards and assessments?

- ◆ How do K–12 and higher education evolve data systems to inform educator effectiveness that improve both preparation programs and professional development offerings?

HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As states begin to draft their ESSA plans and solicit feedback, there will be multiple opportunities for higher education engagement. Over the next six to 12 months, higher education leaders should engage with their K–12 colleagues in the following ways.

- ◆ **Participate in ESSA work group(s).** Most states have assembled stakeholder work group(s) to develop recommendations for and gather feedback on the state’s plan to address ESSA requirements. Participation in a work group is the most direct method for higher education to ensure that its perspectives are represented in the state’s plan. The chief state school officer and state higher education executive officer should meet to determine appropriate higher education membership on the work group(s).
- ◆ **Submit comments through public and private forums.** As states begin to assemble their ESSA plans, there will be numerous opportunities, in public and private, to react to the ideas. States are required to solicit feedback on their plans and demonstrate meaningful engagement across multiple stakeholder
- groups. Higher education leaders should request a specific briefing from K–12 leaders on the state’s plan to identify areas for alignment and support.
- ◆ **Make explicit commitments in ESSA plans.** More than simply participating in the feedback process, higher education leaders can make explicit commitments to support the K–12 system in meeting its college- and career-ready goals (e.g., a commitment to participate in assessment validation or guarantee placement in credit-bearing courses if students meet certain thresholds on the assessment). Those commitments should be included in the language of the state’s ESSA plan and be identified in a letter of support from the state’s higher education leaders.
- ◆ **Build or strengthen structure for addressing transition issues.** Having an ongoing structure that supports K–12 and higher education alignment conversations is crucial. Both K–12 and higher education system leaders should use this partnership structure as a megaphone for publicly communicating the importance of smooth student transitions to and through postsecondary education.

ESSA provides a tremendous opportunity for states to deepen and catalyze the partnerships between their K–12 and higher education systems. With aligned goals across the education system, states can ensure that all students graduate high school prepared for college and careers and transition seamlessly into higher education, ultimately reducing the need for remediation and increasing postsecondary completion rates.