



MARCH 2019

Taking Alignment to the Next Level

How K-12 and Higher
Education Can
Collaborate to Support
Student Success



Level Up for Student Success

Level Up is a collaborative of local, state, and national partners committed to measurably increasing the number of high school students prepared for and successfully transitioning to postsecondary education and training programs. Our collective mission is to make successful postsecondary transitions to two-year college, four-year college, job-training programs, or the military the new normal for all students in all communities.

Earning a postsecondary credential—a certificate with labor market value or an associate or bachelor's degree—opens doors to employment with family-sustaining wages. Every individual in this country should be able to access postsecondary education and be supported along the way to credential attainment and a meaningful career. Today, too few youth—especially students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income families—have that opportunity. That must change. Postsecondary readiness and success must be a priority for every policymaker, educator, and student to ensure that the transition between high school and higher education and training is a launch pad, not a hurdle.

Meeting workforce needs and closing postsecondary attainment gaps require partnership between K-12 and higher education leaders. Just as when a runner passes a baton in a relay race, the most successful transitions occur when both sides are working together to maintain momentum. Without cross-system alignment, students may suffer from a lack of preparation or support in the transition between systems. If we are to help millions more students find success, K-12 and higher education must not be flat-footed—we all share responsibility for accelerating students to the finish line.

The time is right to level up attention and efforts to support postsecondary transitions and engage staff, peers, and communities in this work. **As Level Up partners, we will work to leverage the highest impact actions to drastically increase the number of students prepared for and succeeding in postsecondary education and training.**

Through our efforts, we aim to level the playing field for students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income families. The prosperity of states and communities, and indeed our country, depends on significantly increasing the number of students persisting through the education and training journey.

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OUR SHARED BELIEFS

As leaders of institutions, systems, agencies, and organizations, we believe that:

- ▶ **A postsecondary credential is the best path to economic opportunity for individuals** and positively contributes to the nation's economic, civil, social, and community development goals. Our expectations for educational attainment should not end with a high school diploma.
- ▶ **Every state and community needs to prioritize postsecondary preparation and transitions.** This work requires strong K-12 and higher education partnership, high and aligned expectations, and deep supports, especially for students from low-income families, first-generation college students, and students of color.
- ▶ **Postsecondary preparation and attainment today are inequitable** and will require shifts in policy and practice to close equity and opportunity gaps.
- ▶ **Closing postsecondary preparation and attainment gaps is the shared responsibility of K-12 and higher education;** working alone is insufficient.
- ▶ **State, system, institutional, and local leaders have a critical leadership role to play** in elevating this issue and prioritizing actions to increase postsecondary preparation and success.

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OUR SHARED COMMITMENT

We are committed to:

- ▶ **Making the vision of successful postsecondary transitions a reality for every student in the nation.** We will increase the number of states and communities that prioritize postsecondary transitions through intentional policies, structures, and incentives.
- ▶ **Focusing our work on closing equity gaps.** We will work to promote postsecondary preparation and success broadly, while targeting approaches to serve the students with the greatest need.
- ▶ **Lending our voice and assistance in states and communities.** We will stand beside state and local policymakers and practitioners as they work to develop and implement cross-sector strategies to improve students' postsecondary preparation and success.
- ▶ **Encouraging and supporting state and local policymakers and practitioners as they develop, implement, and sustain their efforts.** We recognize that the hard work of supporting students occurs in the schools, institutions, and workplaces where youth explore academic and career possibilities and receive the appropriate advice and assistance to find long-term success.

OUR SHARED GOAL

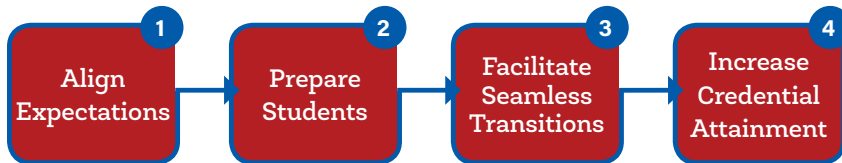
Through this work, we aspire to help states significantly increase the number of students—especially students from low-income families, first-generation college students, and students of color—who:

- ▶ **Get a jumpstart on postsecondary coursework while in high school.** We will support states and communities as they work to increase the percentage of students who earn postsecondary credit, through an industry credential or college credit, while in high school.
- ▶ **Build early credit momentum toward a degree or credential.** We will support states and communities as they work to increase the percentage of students who complete postsecondary credit-bearing math and English coursework within their first year of college.
- ▶ **Attain a postsecondary credential of value.** We will support states and communities as they work to increase the number of students annually who complete a postsecondary credential or degree.

HOW WE WILL GET THERE

We owe it to all students to not add burdens, frustrations, and inefficiencies to their pursuit of something our society very much needs them to do: complete high school, earn a high-quality postsecondary certificate or degree, and enter the workforce with the skills necessary to meaningfully contribute.

The prosperity of states and communities, and indeed of our country, depends on students persisting through this journey—many more students than currently do. To make this vision a reality, we need to:



K-12 and higher education leaders in every state and community should jointly develop and execute a postsecondary transitions plan to measurably increase the preparation and success of all students, with an explicit focus on students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students.

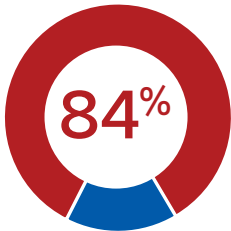
Level Up will help states and communities develop and scale policies and programs that will have the most impact in facilitating seamless transitions for students moving to the next level in their education and training journey. Level Up will also help states and communities build sustainable supports that will extend beyond the tenures of current K-12 and higher education leaders to make sure that alignment across systems remains a priority.

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CONTEXT

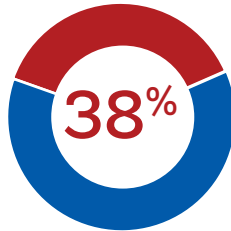
Our education system is the cornerstone of our democracy and our economy. At its best, it has the power to lift up all students and provide seamless transitions from K–12 to higher education to careers. The country’s social and economic prosperity are directly tied to the number of youths who successfully complete high school and go on to earn high-quality postsecondary credentials because those credentials open the doors to a productive life.

Expectations do not meet reality on high school assessments



of students report that **they want to go to college**

Source: Youth Trust Student Survey



of students are **able to score college-ready**

Source: ACT

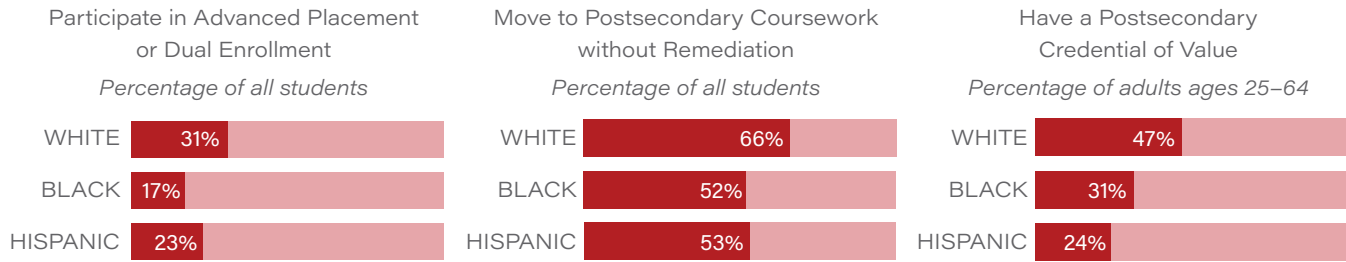
Over the past 10 years, through both K–12 and higher education policy, states and communities have made enormous investments to increase expectations and expand access to additional education and training. That work has shifted the landscape of American education, resulting in higher academic expectations, more meaningful standardized tests, expanded access to community and four-year college, and a greater emphasis on job training and 21st century skills.

There is real progress worth celebrating in American education. Still, across even greatly improved systems, misalignments in expectations and outcomes persist. Too many students, despite their best efforts, stumble at the key transition point of moving from high school to postsecondary education or training. They stumble again when they move from those programs into the workforce. This misalignment is discouraging for students. It is inefficient for our education system. It is costly to our economy and society. And if we address it, we can accelerate our country’s prosperity.

We have a long way to go to (1) close postsecondary preparation, enrollment, and success gaps between traditionally underserved student populations and their peers and (2) meet the workforce demands of the new economic paradigm. Nearly every state has set a goal to increase the percentage of adults with a postsecondary degree or credential that aligns with workforce projections. Those projections indicate that for most individuals, some postsecondary education or training is necessary for family-sustaining employment.

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Too few students have the preparation and support to make successful transitions



Sources: Community College Research Center, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau

Today, the national average for postsecondary attainment hovers in the 40 percent range, with attainment rates for students from low-income families and students of color significantly below those of their peers. The only way that states and the nation will meet the projected workforce needs is through a concerted effort to dramatically increase postsecondary opportunities and success for students from traditionally underserved student groups. Specifically, to close the gaps, states will need a robust set of strategies in three key areas: improving high school students’ postsecondary preparation and access, increasing the retention and completion of currently enrolled students, and helping returning adults find success in the postsecondary system. **Our work will take aim at the first—ensuring that K-12 and higher education have a common agenda to address this challenge.**

Presently, too many youths lack support in their transitions from high school to postsecondary education and training. Substantial numbers of students leave high school unprepared for the rigors of postsecondary coursework. Far too many are placed into sequences of remediation in higher education that have serious negative academic and financial consequences for the student and the state. Further, too often students do not receive appropriate guidance to navigate major decisions about institutions and pathways that can have long-term repercussions for their success. Students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students are the most likely to experience hurdles in their transitions from high school to higher education, and they are the least likely to have the institutional supports to overcome those obstacles. Whether through lack of opportunity, misaligned expectations, or nonexistent connections between systems, youths suffer—and our country suffers.

Across the country, there are bright spots where individuals, groups, schools, or regions are making progress. We must not only put a spotlight on these islands of excellence, but we also must level up collaboration and alignment between the K-12 and higher education sectors to develop and scale solutions to create a country of excellence.

With strong partnerships—among educators and policymakers alike—and deep alignment between K-12, postsecondary, and workforce, progress can be made. State, community, and institutional leaders must work together to create systems that help students navigate the transitions—directing and supporting them along the way. K-12 and higher education must level up their efforts to create seamless transitions so that all students can accelerate on their paths to college, career, and life.

To close the gaps, states will need a robust set of strategies to improve high school students’ postsecondary preparation and access, increase the retention and completion of currently enrolled students, and help returning adults find success in the postsecondary system.

ELEMENTS OF A STRONG POSTSECONDARY TRANSITIONS PLAN

A robust state or community plan for igniting student momentum from high school to higher education will include two components: (1) postsecondary transitions success strategies and (2) K-12 and higher education joint leadership strategies. The leadership strategies form the foundation of cross-sector collaboration upon which the policies and programmatic actions to support successful postsecondary transitions can flourish.

A strong postsecondary transitions plan will, at a minimum, promote key policies and programmatic supports in the following three ways:

Align expectations



Facilitate seamless transitions



Extend navigational supports



Actions in these areas must be targeted to support students of color, students from low-income families, and students who are the first in their family to attend college. Closing equity gaps stands at the heart of this coalition—and at the heart of the nation’s attainment challenge. As states and communities craft policies and programs, specific efforts must be taken to ensure that appropriate supports are in place to serve the students who have traditionally been underserved in higher education. And much work remains to be done to create the right conditions—such as quality teachers, strong school leaders, and access to rigorous curriculum—for students to succeed.

It will be up to each state and locality to determine the specific high-leverage strategies that make the most sense for their unique context, yet attention must be paid to all three areas to truly ignite student momentum. The following provides a collection of strategies that states can consider as they level up their efforts to accelerate students’ transitions into and through postsecondary education.



Align expectations

Establishing high and aligned expectations sends clear signals to students about the level of preparation necessary for postsecondary success. These expectations set the stage for increasing the number of youths who enroll in postsecondary education ready to engage in credit-bearing coursework.

- 1. Link K-12 and higher education goals:** The K-12 goals should connect to and support the state in meeting its postsecondary attainment goals, which are aligned with future workforce needs. The goals should be both broad for all students and targeted to close equity gaps. For instance, in its Every Student

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Succeeds Act plan, **Tennessee** aligned its long-term goals for K–12 schools with the state's *Drive to 55* postsecondary attainment goal, specifically looking to increase the percentage of students enrolling directly in higher education prepared for success after high school graduation.¹

2. **Use standards and assessments that have been validated by higher education:** The expected knowledge and skills for high school graduates should align with the expectations for entry into postsecondary credit-bearing coursework without the need for remediation.² For instance, high school students who score at the college-ready level on the **Washington** state summative assessment or earn a B in selected transition courses can place directly into credit-bearing coursework in the community and technical colleges.
3. **Require a college- and career-ready course of study that aligns with postsecondary entrance expectations:** High school course completion is one of the most powerful predictors of postsecondary success. All high school students need preparatory coursework that sets them up to transition directly into credit-bearing courses in higher education, regardless of whether the student intends to enroll in a postsecondary certificate or a two- or four-year degree program. All high school students need to have the option of entering college—whether immediately after high school graduation or later in their lives—without needing remediation. States such as **Delaware** and **Louisiana** stand out for their alignment between students' high school course requirements and expectations for college entrance.³
4. **Prioritize postsecondary transitions metrics in K-12 and higher education accountability systems:** High school success should be based, in part, on how well students are prepared for their next step. More than 40 states now include some metric of college and career readiness in their accountability system.⁴ States are continually working to ensure that these metrics are high quality and that outcomes are reported transparently. The success of higher education also should be based on students' successful enrollment, course-taking, and retention beyond their first year.
5. **Use multiple measures for placement into credit-bearing coursework in higher education:** A growing number of systems and institutions are going beyond using a single assessment to determine students' placement into remedial or credit-bearing coursework.⁵ For instance, all community colleges in **California** and **North Carolina** are now required to use multiple indicators when making placement decisions.

All high school students need preparatory coursework that sets them up to transition directly into credit-bearing courses in higher education.

1 <http://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HEHS-ESSA-Goal-Alignment-4092017.pdf>

2 <http://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Aligning-Expectations-Toolkit-Final-0216.pdf>

3 <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/04/02/447717/high-school-diplomas/>

4 <http://edstrategy.org/resources/>

5 <https://www.ecs.org/moving-from-single-to-multiple-measures-for-college-course-placement/>



Facilitate seamless transitions

From 12th grade through the first year of postsecondary education, opportunities abound between systems to accelerate student momentum toward a postsecondary credential. Having clear pathways and academic supports can propel students into and through higher education.

1. Promote articulated pathways that start in K-12 and culminate in a postsecondary credential of value that opens doors to the workforce:

States and communities should strengthen and accelerate the career readiness of all students so that they can earn credentials that have value in the labor market. For example, **Kentucky** created a nursing career pathway that begins in high school and enables students to build credits and credentials on the way to earning a bachelor of science degree.⁶

2. Offer multiple postsecondary credit opportunities in high school to “speed up” and “catch up” students before high school graduation:

Students who earn postsecondary credit in high school are more likely to enroll in and complete higher education in a timely fashion. And students who are likely to need remediation upon matriculation can use the 12th grade year to receive additional academic supports.⁷ Seventeen states currently offer “transition” curricula statewide to help students catch up before they transition to postsecondary education.⁸

3. Put an end to traditional remediation:

Postsecondary institutions should enroll students directly into credit-bearing courses and provide additional academic supports alongside their regular classes (e.g., co-requisite remediation). **Georgia** saw a fourfold increase in students’ success in introductory higher education courses following the switch from traditional to co-requisite remediation.⁹

4. Restructure mathematics pathways:

College Algebra has become the default mathematics experience for most students in higher education, despite the majority of students not needing an algebra-intensive curriculum for their chosen field. Recognizing this disconnect, higher education institutions and systems across the country have begun to reformulate mathematics pathways to better serve students and, in so doing, have increased retention and completion.¹⁰ States now have the opportunity to rethink students’

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6 <https://www.sreb.org/news/kentuckys-new-nursing-career-pathway>

7 <http://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HEHS-ESSA-postsecondary-transitions-111816.pdf>

8 <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/ccrc-research-brief-how-states-implementing-transition-curricula-results-national-scan.pdf>

9 <https://completecollege.org/spanningthedivide/>

10 <https://dcmathpathways.org/sites/default/files/resources/2016-11/The%20Case%20for%20Mathematics%20Pathways.pdf>

mathematics preparation in K–12 to better align with significant changes in higher education’s math pathways so that high school can serve as a launch into credit-bearing coursework.

- 5. Increase the financial accessibility of higher education:** States should develop financial aid programs, including College Promise programs, that enable more students to participate in higher education. For example, **Indiana’s** 21st Century Scholar program covers up to four years of undergraduate tuition for students from low-income families who complete 12 critical postsecondary preparation requirements while in high school.¹¹ Recipients of the scholarship outperform their nonscholar peers, and perform at nearly the same rates as all other students, in postsecondary grade point average, retention, and on-time graduation.



Extend navigational supports

Far too often, even with adequate academic preparation, students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students fall off track trying to navigate the high school to higher education maze. States and communities need to expand their notion of supports beyond academics to help students traverse the myriad barriers that stand in their path to postsecondary access, enrollment, and persistence. Meeting this goal means rethinking and systematizing approaches to advising and programmatic supports across both K–12 and postsecondary levels.

- 1. Provide early and aligned academic and career advising:** States and communities should promote a framework for college and career readiness that supports student exploration and identifies activities that will prepare students for postsecondary success, starting well before the 12th grade. And they should work to bridge K–12 and postsecondary advising systems so that students have a seamless experience to and through college. For example, Shark Path at Miami Dade College in **Florida** is an advising program that targets high school students prior to matriculation, connects them with college mentors, and supports them from the transition through attainment.
- 2. Support students’ college application and selection process:** States and communities should encourage students to apply to and select institutions that best fit their academic profile. In particular, students from low-income families and first-generation college students are more likely to “undermatch”—or select less rigorous schools than match their academic profile—when applying to and selecting institutions. For example, **Delaware’s** College Scholars program connects mentors with students from low-income families as they identify, apply, and select postsecondary institutions that perform comparatively well in helping students of similar backgrounds graduate.

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¹¹ <https://scholars.in.gov/>

3. **Prioritize Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) completion:** States and communities should make sure that all students can access appropriate financial aid supports, and that effort starts with supporting completion of the FAFSA. A number of states and communities are now organizing FAFSA completion competitions and events to raise the profile of this key step in the college financing process. **Louisiana** even added FAFSA completion as a high school graduation requirement.¹²
4. **Freeze summer melt:** In some communities, more than 20 percent of students leave high school planning to enroll in higher education and never show up at the end of summer. States and institutions need novel approaches to bridge advising supports across K–12 and higher education to ensure that students matriculate prepared for first-year success. For example, there is growing research that a simple texting campaign can reduce summer melt, especially for first-generation college students.¹³
5. **Guide student pathways in higher education:** Higher education institutions and systems can simplify programs so that students know exactly what they need to do to prepare for education and training in their field of study, and these institutions and systems should provide targeted supports to help them achieve that goal. These pathways should connect with academic and career pathways in K–12. More than 250 community colleges across the nation are committed to this work, and more can be done to strengthen alignment with the K–12 system.¹⁴

Realizing the vision of all students successfully transitioning to postsecondary education will take collaborative, sustained leadership.

WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO MEASURABLY IMPROVE OUTCOMES

Simply passing legislation or creating new programs is not enough. Realizing the vision of all students successfully transitioning to postsecondary education will take collaborative, sustained leadership. K–12 and higher education leaders need to:

Mutually commit to student success



Formalize collaboration



Ensure sustainability



Mutually commit to student success

Ownership for student success must be shared across the K–12 and postsecondary systems. Through united system goals and mutually reinforcing measures of success, leaders can demonstrate their focus on and commitment to smoothing student transitions. This work starts with a common vision for

¹² <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/courses/financialaid>

¹³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2332858417749220>

¹⁴ <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/what-we-are-learning-guided-pathways.html>

success—defined through shared goals—and a joint approach for articulating a shared sense of urgency. Whether through a united resolution of the state’s K–12 and higher education boards or the development of a collective strategic plan, K–12 and higher education leaders need to make public their commitment to a common agenda. The state superintendent and commissioner for higher education in **Indiana** recently organized a Postsecondary Transitions Steering Committee to help them formulate a joint set of priority actions for improving K–12 and higher education alignment. The recommendations were adopted by both the State Board of Education and the Commission for Higher Education and have been shared broadly across the state.¹⁵



Formalize collaboration

Collaboration cannot be happenstance; clear structures and routines need to be in place to ensure that this work remains a priority. The collaboration must be grounded in data to identify and close gaps. Under former Governor Haslam’s leadership in **Tennessee**, the K–12 commissioner and the executive director of higher education met regularly to discuss their joint efforts to better align systems and support student transitions. The governor maintained a *Drive to 55* office that coordinated efforts across systems and publicly reported on the state’s progress to meet its goals. Staff from the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission continue to meet biweekly to discuss their efforts to increase FAFSA completion.



Ensure sustainability

Long-term success requires long-term commitment. The vision of successful student transitions cannot be the initiative of one leader, one term, or one party. That means broadening stakeholder commitment to this work and building capacity and structures to ensure that transitions strategies take root. Engagement from third-party advocacy groups, such as Advance Illinois, Educate Texas, and Ed Trust–West, can help advance strategic priorities and maintain stability through times of political leadership turnover. It is critical that state leaders make concerted efforts to bring advocates, employers, students, and families into decisions and implementation efforts to close postsecondary preparation and attainment gaps. Further, it is important to remember that state-level policies and programs are simply the first step in addressing these gaps. Ownership for implementation takes place at the local and regional levels. School and district educators and administrators and campus faculty and administrators change students’ lives every day, and they need the support and capacity to create even more opportunities for students—especially those from traditionally underrepresented student groups—to realize postsecondary success.

The vision of successful student transitions cannot be the initiative of one leader, one term, or one party.

¹⁵ <http://edstrategy.org/esg-featured-work/developing-state-level-plan-improve-postsecondary-transitions/>

HOW WE WILL HELP

To meet the end goal, the individuals and organizations that compose Level Up are partnering across organizations and with state and local leaders to bring our collaborative forces to bear in the following ways:



Elevating the conversation: Engaging local and state policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and business leaders in discussions about how to improve student transitions into postsecondary education and the workforce.



Researching and promoting best practices: Placing a spotlight on high-impact policies and practices that can close equity gaps in postsecondary preparation, transitions, and success.



Convening key leaders: Bringing together chief state school officers, higher education executive officers, legislators, governors' advisors, school and district administrators, postsecondary institutional leaders, civil rights groups, advocates, and others to identify gaps and develop common solutions.



Offering technical assistance: Providing on-the-ground assistance to help states and communities develop, implement, and scale high-impact transitions policies and practices, with a specific focus on ensuring that students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income families benefit equally from the policies, interventions, and alignment.



Supporting implementation of high-impact policies and programs: Partnering with states, communities, and institutions to facilitate high-quality implementation in ways that specifically help students from low-income families, first-generation college students, and students of color access and succeed in higher education.

As K–12 and higher education representatives, we owe it to students to ensure the possibility for a seamless transition between systems.

CONCLUSION

As K–12 and higher education representatives, we owe it to students to ensure the possibility for a seamless transition between systems—one that guides and supports **all** students, especially students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income families, on their unique paths to and through postsecondary education and training and beyond. We must level up our efforts to turn the vision of postsecondary readiness and success for all into a reality.

To learn more about Level Up, our partners, and additional successful alignment strategies, visit levelupcoalition.org.