



Ensuring Equitable Postsecondary Transitions

A Policy Benchmarking Tool for State Leaders

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In the new economic reality, a high school diploma is not enough for long-term economic mobility and success. All youth need some education or training beyond high school to engage in careers that pay well and provide opportunities for advancement. Yet each year, an estimated one million students do not make the transition from high school to postsecondary education. For low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students, the odds are even lower. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that students—particularly those from traditionally underserved communities—face in navigating this transition. Now more than ever, these students need tailored support to navigate the maze between K-12 and higher education.

This resource lays out the highest-leverage actions that states can take to close equity gaps in students' postsecondary preparation, access, and success. It is organized around five key themes:

- 1**
Establishing common expectations between K-12 and postsecondary
- 2**
Aligning postsecondary transitions data across sectors
- 3**
Facilitating seamless transitions
- 4**
Connecting education to the workforce
- 5**
Extending navigational supports

Each theme includes a set of targeted strategies along with accompanying foundational and advanced policy actions that will improve transitions for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college-going students.

This tool is intended to help state education leaders benchmark their current policies, programs, and initiatives against the recommended strategies and learn what each strategy looks like in action in order to support more equitable postsecondary transitions.



Establish Aligned Expectations

| STRATEGIES | POLICY ACTIONS | | EXAMPLE |
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| | FOUNDATIONAL | ADVANCED | |
| Vertically align leading indicators of progress in K-12 (i.e., Momentum Metrics) and higher education goals for student success, with a specific focus on closing equity gaps and meeting workforce needs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Set a statewide goal for postsecondary credential attainment for each student subgroup. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Adopt K-12 annual targets for increasing postsecondary preparation and seamless enrollment for students of color and low-income students aligned to the state's postsecondary attainment goal. ⊕ Require annual updates on how districts and institutions are working individually and collectively to address equity gaps. | Minnesota has set a benchmark for each student subgroup as part of its statewide postsecondary attainment goal, and it is leveraging its P-20 Partnership to identify high-impact strategies for addressing equity gaps. |
| Ensure that college-ready standards and aligned assessments provide students a clear understanding of how to prepare for credit-bearing postsecondary coursework. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Include higher education in the development and/or validation of new or revised K-12 academic standards. ⊕ Specify a process for higher education's involvement in the selection, standards setting, and validation of any new high school assessments aligned to the state's K-12 standards. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Set the state's college- and career-ready course of study as the default diploma option for students. ⊕ Have K-12 and higher education boards vote to formally adopt the state's shared definition of college and career readiness and aligned standards. | Twenty states and the District of Columbia either require or set as the default option a college- and career-ready course of study as a requirement for graduation. |
| Connect mathematics pathways across K-12 and higher education. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Remove College Algebra as the default course placement for first-year students (i.e., implement multiple gateway courses rather than a single course). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Modernize Algebra 2 or revise high school graduation requirements to allow students to graduate with an equivalent course to Algebra 2 (e.g., Quantitative Reasoning, Statistics, or Data Science) that aligns with postsecondary entry and placement into credit-bearing course requirements. | California has developed high school courses in Data Science and Statistics that meet the University of California's entrance requirements and set students up for direct placement into credit-breaking math courses. |



Align Data Systems

| STRATEGIES | POLICY ACTIONS | | EXAMPLE |
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| | FOUNDATIONAL | ADVANCED | |
| Connect cross-sector data systems to monitor performance and target supports. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish agreements between K-12 and higher education agencies to share individual student records to facilitate disaggregated data reporting, identifying barriers in the transition, and targeting of student supports. Develop a cross-sector data governance structure to ensure a coherent approach to data collection, storage and reporting, and defining key statewide equity-focused research questions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect workforce data systems to K-12 and higher education data systems to provide more meaningful data on student outcomes. Convene a cross-sector leadership body to regularly set goals, monitor progress on student transition outcomes, identify racial/ethnic and income gaps, develop targeted strategies to improve, and oversee data governance. | Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have built robust longitudinal data systems that capture data across early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and the workforce. Each of these systems has public-facing reports and dashboards that disaggregate outcomes by student subgroup. |
| Capture data on high-quality pathway participation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use labor market information to identify in-demand pathways to scale, as well as low-demand pathways to phase out. Analyze and report on pathway enrollment and success data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and geography for in-demand occupations. Inform the public about the in-demand occupations and related skills and credentials associated with those (i.e., through a public-facing online tool). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicly report on postsecondary and workforce outcomes of students that complete specific pathways and postsecondary programs to identify inequities in access and success for students of color and low-income students. | Kentucky has systematically analyzed labor market information to identify priority industry sectors that meet rigorous skill, demand, and wage thresholds. This data is shared across K-12, higher education, and workforce stakeholders to guide the development of career pathway programs that meet the needs of those industries. The state also tracks student participation in those pathway programs. |
| Transparently and regularly report on disaggregated student outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish an annual high school feedback report that provides disaggregated data on postsecondary enrollment and gateway course completion at the school and district level. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce interactive public dashboards that include disaggregated data on other postsecondary outcomes, such as military enlistment, apprenticeship programs, and employment at family-sustaining wage levels. Report postsecondary outcomes on the high school accountability report cards. | North Carolina , as part of the statewide attainment work, has built a public dashboard that reports progress on 18 leading indicators across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce and has developed county profiles to drive action at the local level. |
| Integrate the most predictive indicators of postsecondary transitions and success into K-12 and higher education accountability systems, with a focus on low-income students and students of color and/or students from underrepresented districts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide high schools with accountability and/or financial incentives for increasing college and career readiness rates for students of color and students from low-income families and/or students from underrepresented districts. Provide higher education institutions with financial incentives for increasing enrollment, persistence (e.g., gateway course completion) and attainment of students of color and students from low-income families and/or students from underrepresented districts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide high schools with accountability and/or financial incentives for increasing postsecondary enrollment rates of students of color and students from low-income families. | Texas passed HB3, which requires districts to adopt college, career, and military readiness (CCMR) plans, set five-year performance goals for each campus, and monitor progress towards meeting those goals at least annually. It also established CCMR Outcomes bonuses paid for each graduate that meets certain thresholds, with increased bonuses for low-income students and students with disabilities. |



Facilitate Seamless Transitions

| STRATEGIES | POLICY ACTIONS | | EXAMPLE |
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| | FOUNDATIONAL | ADVANCED | |
| Catch up students academically before college enrollment to ensure they are prepared to enter credit-bearing coursework upon entering college. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Implement statewide 12th-grade transition courses in math and/or ELA that guarantee placement into credit-bearing coursework. ⊕ Allow 12th grade transition course(s) to meet graduation requirements or accountability demonstration. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Implement a statewide college bridge program accessible to students after high school graduation, with a focus on first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color. | Tennessee hosts a three-week summer bridge program as part of its Promise scholarship program in which students can test out of learning support courses at the college they plan to attend. |
| Expand opportunities for students to earn early postsecondary credit. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Set an explicit equity goal for improving access (especially within designated high-quality pathways) and outcomes for early postsecondary opportunities (e.g., AP, IB, and dual enrollment). ⊕ Publicize a statewide, centralized resource that lists program availability, steps to enroll, and information about student cost and eligibility. ⊕ Include participation and/or success in early postsecondary credit opportunities as a high school accountability measure. ⊕ Require public colleges and universities, and encourage private institutions, to accept early postsecondary credit just as any other transferable credit. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Use multiple measures for dual enrollment eligibility, to potentially include projects, portfolios, and performance assessments (or, remove assessment requirements for entry). ⊕ Cover all tuition and fees for early postsecondary credit for students of color and students from low-income families. ⊕ Develop an academic acceleration policy that automatically enrolls eligible students in advanced coursework and is reinforced through academic advising. | Washington adopted an automatic enrollment policy for advanced mathematics, English, language arts, and science classes in all high schools, known as Academic Acceleration, that is particularly aimed to support students who have been historically underrepresented in advanced coursework. |
| Adopt evidence-based reforms to avoid remediation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Use multiple measures beyond assessment for course placement (e.g., GPA). If considering assessment, prioritize an assessment aligned to the state's K-12 standards. ⊕ Implement co-requisite courses and academic supports. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Standardize requirements (e.g., multiple measures) across the state's public higher education systems for entrance into credit-bearing coursework. ⊕ Provide incentive funds or hold institutions accountable for gateway course completion and/or early credit accrual. | The North Carolina Community Colleges system has implemented a policy that establishes a hierarchy of multiple measures to be used for course placement, starting with a 2.6 GPA, followed by ACT or SAT scores, followed by placement tests (e.g., ACCUPLACER). For students who place into developmental education, the state has implemented corequisite courses, and an early analysis shows that the corequisite model reduces equity gaps. |



Connect Education and the Workforce

| STRATEGIES | POLICY ACTIONS | | EXAMPLE |
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| | FOUNDATIONAL | ADVANCED | |
| Build articulated pathways aligned to the labor market that span grades 11-14. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Establish a statewide definition for high-quality pathways, consistent across Perkins and WIOA. ⊕ Provide incentives to districts to offer high-quality pathway programs, with a particular focus on expanding access for low-income students and students of color. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Stop funding pathways that do not align with labor market needs or provide viable paths to jobs with family-sustaining wages (and potentially redirect funding to in-demand pathways). | The Tennessee Pathways designation recognizes and rewards districts that meet three levers for ensuring students are college and career ready: (1) high-quality advising, (2) rigorous early postsecondary and work opportunities, and (3) seamless vertical alignment between K-12 and postsecondary programs created as a result of effective partnerships. |
| Prioritize credentials that provide currency in the workforce. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Establish a cross-sector body with responsibility for the initial identification and ongoing updates to a prioritized list of credentials that meet specific demand, skill, and/or wage thresholds. ⊕ Provide districts and/or institutions with accountability and/or financial incentives for increasing the number of students completing credentials on the prioritized list. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Provide financial support to students of color or students from low-income families to complete prioritized credentials. ⊕ Enable students to earn postsecondary credit for prioritized credentials. | Florida has developed incentives to promote attainment of high value credentials, including awarding postsecondary credit, offering financial support, and building into accountability and reporting systems. |
| Provide high-quality work-based learning experiences. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Develop a coherent, statewide definition of work-based learning and apprenticeship that is integrated into state plans (e.g., ESSA, Perkins V, WIOA, etc.). ⊕ Set clear quality standards and program approval processes for work-based learning and apprenticeship programs. ⊕ Incentivize districts, employers, and intermediary organizations to offer high-quality youth apprenticeship and internship programs that prioritize access for low-income students and students of color. ⊕ Establish transfer agreements with postsecondary institutions to facilitate advanced education or training for youth apprentices. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Offer work study opportunities that are integrated with degree programs. ⊕ Fully fund the cost of internship and/or youth apprenticeship programs, including wages, tuition for any relevant coursework, and cost of living expenses. | In Colorado , CareerWise has developed a youth apprenticeship model that provides students with meaningful work experience, a nationally recognized industry credential, and an opportunity to earn early postsecondary credit across multiple in-demand pathways. |



Extend Navigational Supports

| STRATEGIES | POLICY ACTIONS | | EXAMPLE |
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| | FOUNDATIONAL | ADVANCED | |
| Provide early and aligned academic and career advising. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Establish an integrated statewide strategy for advising students to and through postsecondary education and training that braids federal and state funds. ⊕ Develop a statewide framework that defines the knowledge, skills, and experiences all students should receive for postsecondary advising. ⊕ Require that districts support all students in completing individualized college and career readiness plans. ⊕ Set a common job description and/or revise state credentialing requirements for high school counselors to integrate college and career readiness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Launch a statewide advising network to dedicate capacity to supporting students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. As appropriate, connect this network to state-run Promise program, summer bridge program, or other activities. ⊕ Revise the K-12 funding model to enable districts to provide advising support to students during the transition between high school and postsecondary. | The ACES program is a joint advising program in Maryland of Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, and the Universities at Shady Grove that targets high school students prior to matriculation and connects them with mentors and supports them through the transition from two- to four-year transfer through attainment. |
| Develop an outreach and support campaign to guide first-generation college students, students of color, and those from low-income families towards seamless enrollment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Launch a statewide texting campaign (or chatbot) to address “summer melt” targeted towards college-ready students of color and students from low-income families. ⊕ Use GEAR Up or other federal funding streams to prioritize additional navigational supports for students from traditionally underserved groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Institute a policy for direct admissions to the state’s public higher education institutions for all students that demonstrate college readiness. ⊕ Develop an electronic transcript that transfers information about students’ academics as well as connects to specific support needs. | Idaho instituted a direct admissions program that sends a letter offering admission to all eight of the state’s public postsecondary institutions for any high school student who meets set benchmarks for GPA and SAT or ACT scores. The policy has reduced the gap in seamless enrollment for low-income students and students of color at higher rates than White students who received a letter. |
| Help students afford postsecondary education and training. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Set a statewide goal for increasing FAFSA completion, with specific equity targets. ⊕ Launch a statewide FAFSA completion campaign (with specific incentives) to catalyze local action. ⊕ Create or expand state need-based aid programs or Promise programs, with a focus on supporting students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Require the FAFSA for high school graduation. ⊕ Institute common award and appeal letter formats across the state’s public postsecondary institutions. ⊕ Implement emergency aid programs for students facing an unexpected economic hardship. | Oregon Promise has increased the perception of college affordability in the state, especially for first-generation college students. The program also provides a minimum award amount, ensuring that low-income students receive funds from this last-dollar grant. |