

FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO OPPORTUNITY

TRANSFORMING HIGH SCHOOL MEASUREMENT

The Time is Now for Expanding High School Measurement.

The Trump Administration and its U.S. Department of Education (USED) leadership is offering new flexibility to states regarding their K-12 education systems. While it is too early to know exactly what type of flexibility will be encouraged or approved, states will likely have the opportunity to put forward innovative approaches to the use of federal dollars; reshape assessment, accountability, and school improvement strategies; and, potentially change the relationship between the state education agency and local education agencies.

With the increased flexibility comes the opportunity for innovation and change, but also increased responsibility to ensure that we don't lower expectations for our students or schools. In the past two decades there has been significant work done to ensure schools and districts are regularly measuring student progress and using that information to drive improvement and accountability. While the methods and measuring sticks can and should be improved, as discussed below, it is paramount that states maintain their previous efforts of holding schools to high standards of performance.

In a time of increased flexibility, state leadership is paramount. States have the opportunity — and duty — to set forth a vision for student success that reflects the real world expectations they will face when they leave our schools and seek to build an economically viable future for themselves. This means that any new approach to measuring student and school success must be grounded in outcomes beyond high school graduation. Narrowly targeting the high school graduation stage in our policies and priorities does a disservice to students. For the vast majority of them, the path to economic opportunity and mobility requires additional training and education.

Lessons from the Past Decade of Making High School More Relevant and Effective for Students

It has been over a decade since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In that time, there has been a major shift in states' approach to high schools. In nearly every state, high schools are offering more career-connected learning. States now have a much better understanding about what policies and practices best support students' pathways to long-term success. This starts with having a clear definition of what constitutes a [high-quality pathway](#), including: connection to in-demand, well paying jobs; career awareness and exploration; an engaging series of courses; early college opportunities; work-based learning experiences; advising support; and, networks and relationships (see ESG's [Forging Futures](#) report for a complete description of a high-quality pathway, and what more must be done to scale those opportunities nationally).

States' work to help each student successfully complete a pathway that sets them up for long-term success has coincided with improvements in state and local measurement

systems. Prior to the passage of ESSA, few states produced high school feedback reports on how many and where students enrolled in postsecondary education and training after graduation. Now, nearly every state has that data, though disaggregated reporting remains a challenge. Fewer than five states had a vetted industry-recognized credential list in 2016, now more than half of states have that list and include student attainment of the vetted credentials in their high school accountability. In a number of states, cross-agency data sharing and linkages have allowed parents and policymakers to see how students fare in the workforce 10 years after high school graduation. While data hurdles — like military enlistment data — remain, the dramatic improvement over the past decade sets states up well to further experiment with high school measurement.

In the past decade, states and districts have also learned a lot more about the measures that are most predictive of long-term success. ESG found in its [From Tails to Heads: Building Momentum for Postsecondary Success](#) report, prioritization of a set of “[momentum metrics](#)” for monitoring and supporting student success along a continuum from 9th grade through postsecondary enrollment has led to positive long-term outcomes for low-income students in high schools across the country. State and district leaders can use these data to target resources and support at the individual student level, as well as to inform broader conversations at the aggregate level about advising policies and programs.

And as higher education begins to embrace the [Great Value Shift](#), there are further opportunities for states to consider how high schools contribute to students finding long-term value from their postsecondary options.

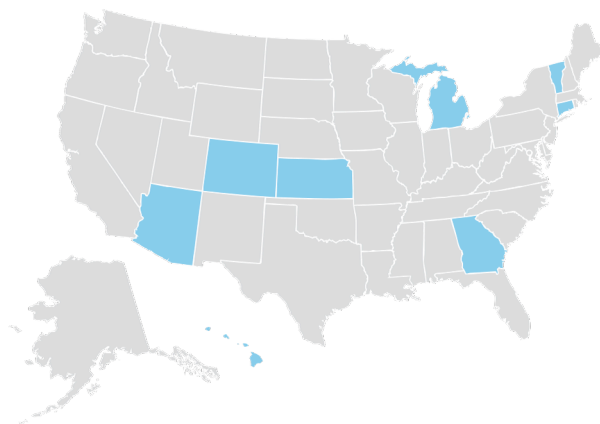
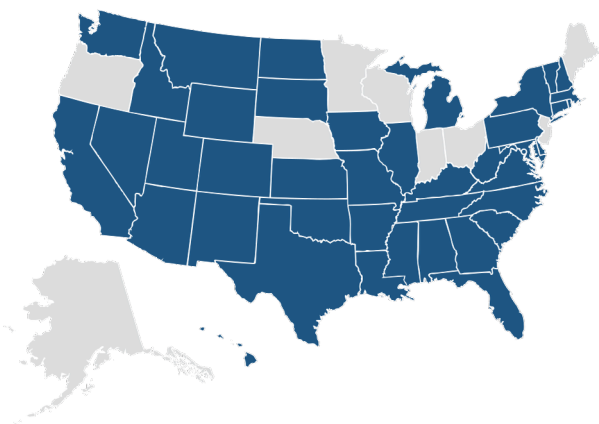
College and Career Readiness and Success is Not Currently the Major Focus of High School Accountability

As described in ESG’s 2024 *Measurement for Mobility* report, more than 40 states currently include some college and career readiness measures in their federal high school accountability system. This includes:

College and Career Readiness Metrics are captured during a student’s K–12 experience; they influence and predict students’ success in life after high school. Measures include the state’s college and career readiness indicator, advanced coursework preparation and success, high-quality CTE pathway participation and success, work-based learning, assessments, and credential attainment in high school.

Postsecondary Outcomes are captured after students leave the K–12 system; they are linked to where students attended high school and directly measure students’ progress and success in postsecondary education, military, and the workforce. Measures include postsecondary enrollment and persistence, degree attainment, job placement and employment rates, wages, and military enlistment.

WHICH METRICS ARE USED IN ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS?



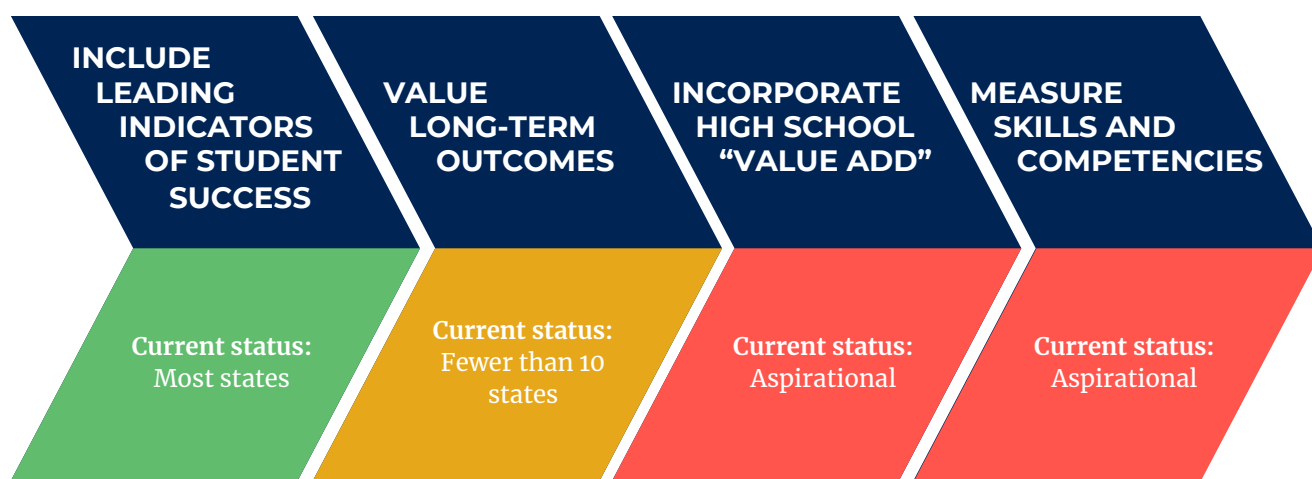
And yet:

- **Fewer than 10 states** include students' long-term outcomes in accountability systems
- Critical measures of high-quality career pathways, such as the number of students participating in work-based learning, are **absent from most state calculations**
- **Fewer than five states** assign college and career readiness metrics 25 percent or more weight in their high school accountability calculations

Opportunities abound to improve high school measurement, making it more aligned with our updated understanding of what leads to long-term economic opportunity and mobility for students.

State Opportunities to Evolve High School Measurement Systems

In this time of flexibility, states have the opportunity to build more sophisticated and innovative approaches to high school measurement. Each state should work to improve their systems; however, the steps to take will differ based on the state's starting point. The following are four ideas — in order of increasing sophistication — that states can implement immediately to better align high school measurement and accountability with the goal of supporting each student succeed on their path to long-term economic success.



Include Leading Indicators of Student Success.

There are a host of college and career readiness measures that states should include in their accountability systems, given the value these experiences provide for students. This includes: 9th grade on-track, early postsecondary options (including AP, IB, and dual credit), career pathway completion, work-based learning, industry-recognized credential attainment, and FAFSA completion. [Research](#) confirms that these measures are predictive — to varying degrees — of higher educational enrollment, persistence, attainment, employment and earnings.

There are 10 states that do not have at least one of these measures in their high school accountability system, and far more who do not publicly report on the full set, let alone include them in their calculations. These measures should be foundational in every state.

For more information on how states include these college and career readiness measures in their accountability systems, see [Measurement for Mobility](#) and [Let's Measure Ready](#). It is important to also consider how the actual high school indicator is constructed and how much weight is attributed to it in a school's rating. Both papers provide a good overview of those considerations.

Value Long-Term Outcomes.

If the goal is to prepare all high school students for success beyond graduation, it is time that we start holding schools accountable for those outcomes. Fewer than 10 states currently include long-term success outcomes in their accountability systems. States should collect, report, and hold schools accountable for enrollment, in a broad set of programs, including apprenticeships; employment, at specific family-sustaining wage levels; and, enlistment.

While it may be too early for the field to move in this direction for accountability, states can and should begin to consider how they will evolve their reporting on postsecondary enrollment with an eye toward “value.” That will mean reporting on enrollment of high school students into programs demonstrating the greatest return on investment for the student and state.

Incorporate High School “Value Add.”

The notion of growth, or value add, has become commonplace in education over the past fifteen years. Parents, educators, and policymakers understand that the goal of schooling is to take a student from their starting point and improve over time, and hopefully help those that are starting behind their peers catch up by improving at a faster rate than others. In education, this notion has applied almost exclusively to assessments, and in grades K-8. Growth in high school has often been dismissed because (1) students are only federally required to be assessed once in high school and (2) at the end of their K-12 career, the focus should be purely on proficiency.

While those are valid criticisms, it does not mean that growth has no place in high school. States may simply need to think differently about what growth means for high school. An approach called “[promotion power](#)” — piloted in Louisiana and Washington, DC — shows promise for calculating how much schools “add” to students’ chances for long-term

success. This indicator looks at every student’s academic background heading into 9th grade and predicts the likelihood of them enrolling in postsecondary education four years later. A school’s promotion power is calculated based on how that predication changes over time based on students’ participation in high-quality coursework, work-based learning, and other critical college and career preparation measures. In the future, this measure could and should incorporate a broader variety of post-high school outcomes in its measurement of student growth toward long-term success. Most states have the data available to update the model in this way, so implementation could occur in the near term.

Measure Skills and Competencies.

The movement toward greater career preparation for all students has solidified what it takes for students to meet that expectation. Students need a mixture of academic, technical, and professional skills for long-term success. Unfortunately, the vast majority of measurement systems focus on the first, some exist in sporadic ways for the second, and the third is largely untapped. And yet, states should begin working toward measurement of all three for the most accurate understanding of how high schools are preparing students for the future.

To move forward, states will need to take three actions. First, they must determine which skills framework to use. There are a number of different frameworks that currently exist in the field (e.g., Durable Skills, 21st Century Skills, Human Skills Matrix), and they generally measure the same things, with slightly different language to describe them. States should use the framework that best aligns with the skills identified in their state-defined Portrait of a Graduate.

The next step is to implement valid measurement tools of those skills at scale. For instance, many communities — such as [Hamilton County, TN](#) — have begun to experiment with the use of student portfolios

and microcredentials to capture student experiences and demonstrations of work as proxies for skill acquisition. Alternatively, there is a pilot underway led by ETS and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that is field testing skills-based assessment tools in five states. [Skills for the Future](#) initially seeks to measure skills and competencies in the areas of collaboration, communication, and critical thinking, with additional skills to be developed in the future.

Finally, once these tools become more ubiquitous, states can then work to report on

the data and over time build more robust measures of readiness into high school accountability.

While this evolution may seem like it is decades away — given that state leaders have been talking about competency-based education for over two decades — the rise of generative artificial intelligence will likely shrink that development period considerably. This could be the time to begin to build the reporting and accountability architecture to take advantage of that seismic shift in education.

Toward Better Work-Based Learning Measurement

Currently, there is limited sophistication in the way states define, measure, and report work-based learning. The incomplete or even non-existent measurement approaches make it exceedingly difficult to incorporate a valuable set of student experiences into consideration for high school performance. Or worse, including work-based learning in accountability without regard to rigor or quality may inadvertently encourage experiences that are unaligned to a students' pathway and do not result in meaningful learning or professional connections. States need to establish or refine work-based learning metrics to better track and disaggregate by type, setting up clear definitions, measures, and data collections for employer-designed challenges, youth apprenticeships, and internships. And they should measure more than just participation and completion. Measurement should focus on the components that matter most — building skills and competencies, aligning experiences to students' individual goals, and strengthening social capital.

High School Accountability for the Future

It is time for state leadership to seize the opportunity and transform high school accountability systems to focus primarily on whether graduates are truly prepared for success in college and the modern workforce. Prioritizing the measures most predictive of long-term success will incentivize schools and districts to equip every student to thrive in the future.

As states work to evolve their accountability systems, it will be critical to keep three core principles in mind: (1) celebrate all steps after high school, whether that is enrollment in a two- or four-year college, apprenticeship or employer-led training program, enlistment in the military, or securing a job with family sustaining wages; (2) include all students in indicator calculations, so that the full cohort is

represented when reviewing outcomes, not just those who graduated or who took certain courses; (3) disaggregate all data by student groups to clearly understand areas of success and those for improvement.

The U.S. Department of Education is actively encouraging states to leverage existing flexibilities and seek waivers from federal legislation, providing an unprecedented opportunity to innovate. This is a clear signal that the time for incremental change is over. By embracing this flexibility, states can champion accountability that is meaningful, equitable, and ultimately transformative for our students and our economy. Let us act decisively to build a future where every high school graduate is truly ready for what comes next.