



# Advancing a Statewide College- and Career-Readiness Agenda

## Issue Briefs



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## SESSION I

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# Elements of a Statewide College- and Career-Readiness Agenda

Up to two-thirds of high school students graduate without the knowledge and skills needed to enter credit-bearing coursework in college, and not enough students are earning degrees or career certificates to meet workforce demands. Despite much attention over the last decade, the gap between college ambition and college readiness persists. Strong alignment of K-12 and higher education—including seamless transition from high school to college—is essential to closing the readiness gap and has been a goal of many policymakers and education leaders over the last decade.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has long worked to strengthen the link between K-12 and postsecondary institutions. Supported by a 2008 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, **SREB launched the *Strengthening Statewide College/Career Readiness Initiative (SSCRI)* with the goal of helping states firmly establish and forward their own statewide college-and career-readiness initiatives.** From 2008 to 2011, SREB worked with six states, all participants in Achieve’s *American Diploma Project (ADP)*: **Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.** These states created unique but similar “action agendas” to accelerate and deepen the work started through *ADP*.

Each of the *SSCRI* states established unambiguous goals, involved key education and political stakeholders, created a clear plan for implementation, and designed supporting state policies. **Though each state used different policy levers and partnerships, all needed strong leadership to make the readiness agenda a statewide priority and to engage and sustain the involvement of key constituencies in the initiative.**

*Through this work, SREB has developed a model statewide readiness agenda, which includes the following six elements:*

**ELEMENT ONE: *Statewide College- and Career-Readiness Standards***

States should define and adopt readiness standards that are aligned to competencies expected of first-year college students. States should then determine characteristics of student performance that signal the standards have been met. Public schools and postsecondary institutions within each state need to work together to meet these steps.

**ELEMENT TWO: *Readiness Assessments in High School***

Effective assessments will provide actionable data on student progress toward college- and career-readiness. Using these assessment results, teachers can tailor instruction to address identified deficiencies and help students meet the readiness standards before high school graduation.

**ELEMENT THREE: *Postsecondary Application of the Standards***

Postsecondary standards need to align specifically with those used by K-12. Postsecondary institutions often set their own qualifying scores for assessments to determine whether students need remediation or can be placed into credit-bearing courses. In effect, this allows each institution to set its own standards for what it means to be college ready. Statewide adoption of common metrics for postsecondary placement decisions can help overcome the confusion of varied expectations.

**ELEMENT FOUR: *School Curriculum and Transitional Courses***

The K-12 curriculum should be aligned with the readiness standards to ensure students develop the required knowledge and skills by high school graduation. Of particular importance is the development of supplemental curriculum in the senior year for students who are identified as not on track to meet the readiness standards.

**ELEMENT FIVE: *Teacher Professional Development***

States will need to ensure that teachers are prepared to use instructional strategies and materials to help students achieve the readiness standards. Teachers of transitional courses will need additional support as they take on the task of helping students overcome what could be significant gaps in knowledge and skills over a short period of time.

**ELEMENT SIX: *School and College Accountability***

States need to hold public schools accountable for increasing, over time, both the percentages of students graduating from high school and the proportions of students who meet the readiness standards.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. Does my state have a specific action plan or agenda for implementing a college-and career-readiness initiative? If yes, does it include the six elements previously outlined? Do state leaders and educators understand the initiative to be statewide, involving all public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions?
2. Which organizations, officials, and stakeholders need to be involved in creating or advancing a statewide initiative in my state?
3. What state-level policies in the form of legislation, legislative oversight, governor's direction, or action by the state board of education, state education agency, or statewide higher education agency are needed to advance the various steps of a readiness agenda in my state?



## SESSION II

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# A Shared Definition of College- and Career-Readiness for K-12 and Higher Education

Meeting the college- and career-readiness challenge requires a comprehensive action agenda with specific goals, involvement of key education and political stakeholders, a plan for implementation, and supportive state policies. **The first step of creating a readiness initiative is defining and adopting statewide standards with clear performance expectations; each component of the agenda should be connected to these standards and assessments.** Both K-12 and higher education need to develop and use the same set of standards and related student assessments to send clear signals about the specific skills and knowledge students need to succeed in postsecondary work. They should drive college preparation in public schools and placement procedures and decisions in higher education.

In some states, legislation has been a significant driver of the policy changes needed to create an agenda, though other states rely on action through the state board of education, the department of education or higher education agency. **Regardless of the policy lever used to make necessary changes, states need to ensure readiness is a statewide priority with strong leadership support.** Building upon strong state-level leadership, **Kentucky** used legislation to establish one of the best general outlines of a statewide initiative in the nation.

When the Commonwealth of Kentucky joined SREB's *Strengthening Statewide College/ Career Readiness Initiative (SSCRI)* in 2008, the Kentucky Department of Education, with support from Governor Steve Beshear and the state legislature, worked with the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System to improve students' postsecondary preparedness. Like many other states, Kentucky could not point to one set of standards that provided a clear understanding of content and performance expectations. K-12 was unable to identify a set of state-adopted standards needed to prepare students for postsecondary work, and higher education did not have a common set of performance expectations.

The passage of *Senate Bill 1* ushered in a new era of reform in standards and assessments. The comprehensive bill was designed to bring about immediate and far-reaching changes to the state's college- and career-readiness efforts. The centerpiece of *Senate Bill 1* was the mandate to align academic standards from K-12 to higher education—the cornerstone of the SREB model agenda—in its call for revised content standards.

In accordance with the legislation, Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core State Standards in February 2010. *Senate Bill 1* directed public schools and postsecondary institutions to work together to align and integrate the revised standards. Kentucky has a strong culture of regionalism and local and institutional autonomy—a characteristic that has complicated previous reform efforts—including efforts to unite public colleges and universities around state-level policy initiatives. *Senate Bill 1* forged joint participation by recognizing existing statutory governance responsibilities and clearly stating expectations of accountability and collaboration.

In recent years, Kentucky has served as an example of effective collaboration between K-12 and higher education around standards and performance expectations. Nearly two years ago, the Commonwealth created a statewide system of regional leadership networks that facilitate monthly discussions among teacher leaders, content specialists, and college faculty on the revised standards. The Commonwealth's education sectors also worked together to create Kentucky's new college-readiness indicators. All public universities and colleges will use these sets of cutoff scores on the ACT, SAT, or state-designed placement assessments to determine placement in credit-bearing, college-level work. Critical to such partnerships and initiatives is an agreement on the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in postsecondary work.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using legislation, agency policy, or both, to advance a comprehensive readiness agenda?
2. What strategies can be used to encourage institutions to work together and agree on readiness standards and performance expectations?
3. How can my state demonstrate and maintain strong leadership support?

## SESSION III

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# Setting the Readiness Bar and Using It

Students are often unaware that they are not prepared for college-level courses until they do not pass college placement exams and are assigned to remedial classes. To give students feedback on their progress toward college readiness while they are still in high school, some states test students in the sophomore or junior year. Students who do not meet the readiness benchmarks can take courses in the senior year to prepare them for college-level work. These courses help decrease the chance they will need remediation, and can be used for placement decisions at the postsecondary level. The success of these assessments and their use in student support decisions requires **setting qualifying scores high enough that they equate to the readiness performance levels expected for first-year college students to succeed academically.**

The two assessment consortia—**the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)**—are creating assessments based on the Common Core State Standards. These assessments will be implemented during the 2014–2015 school year. The assessments are being designed to provide a measure of college- and career-readiness, and higher education institutions are being encouraged to use the PARCC and SBAC results in course placement decisions.

As states plan for implementation of PARCC and SBAC assessments, they might find it helpful to consider the challenges and strategies that have emerged in parallel efforts. For example, in 2009, the Texas legislature passed legislation that called for more rigorous assessments, including measures to determine students' preparedness for college-level work. As a result, the state created an accountability system that incorporates readiness data from the *State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness*, or *STAAR*. *STAAR* assessments were implemented in 2011–2012, including assessments for grades 3–8 and a series of end of course (EOC) assessments in high school: Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, biology, physics, English I, English II, English III, world geography, world history, and U.S. history. The EOC assessments count for 15 percent of a student's final grade in each tested subject. The English III and

Algebra II EOC assessments are used to determine whether students have achieved threshold levels of the college-readiness standards.

Texas legislation directly addressed a critical requirement for college-readiness assessments by requiring qualifying scores to yield an empirically strong prediction that students will succeed in first-year postsecondary coursework. In response, Texas now requires that the public school and postsecondary education systems conduct studies to indicate which performance levels on the college-readiness assessment correlate with postsecondary success. Texas has also established two performance levels for *STAAR* assessments: “satisfactory,” which must be achieved to graduate from high school, and “advanced,” the performance level that signifies college readiness. From 2012 to 2016, Texas intends to close the gap between the satisfactory and advanced benchmarks by incrementally raising the proficiency cutoff score by 14 percentage points.

**It is essential that states include both K-12 and higher education in the accountability system, sending a message that all schools and colleges should make postsecondary readiness a priority.** Some states have established accountability systems that include assessments widely recognized as indicators of readiness by higher education institutions. States such as **Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina,** and **Kentucky** now require high school juniors to take the ACT to determine students’ college- and career-readiness. Texas’s new accountability system incorporates *STAAR* data, including student progress toward high school graduation standards and college readiness.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. How can K-12 best assess students’ progress in achieving the college-readiness standards? What kinds of assessments are most effective?
2. Can high-stakes high school graduation tests also be used to assess college readiness?
3. What do states need to consider as they incorporate measures of college readiness into their high school accountability systems?
4. How can postsecondary institutions be held accountable for college- and career-readiness?

## SESSION IV

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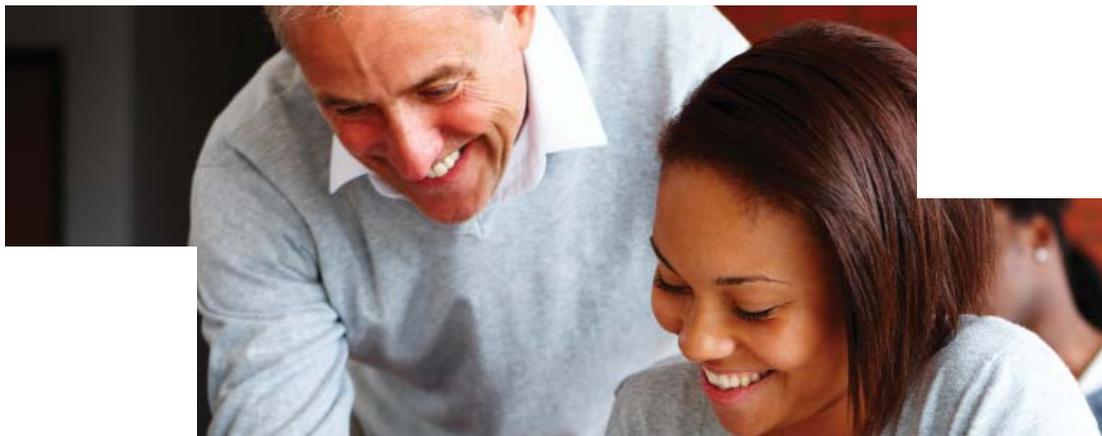
# Strategies for Supporting Students

As states apply new, more rigorous college-readiness standards and assessments, a much higher percentage of students will initially graduate from high school having not met their state's college-readiness performance level. In the near term, this means more students will be required to take developmental education courses prior to pursuing a postsecondary credential. States can proactively mitigate this effect by implementing college-readiness curricula and interventions statewide in the junior or senior year of high school.

Transitional courses are an essential element of a statewide readiness agenda. Most of the states involved in the *Strengthening Statewide College/Career Readiness Initiative (SSCRI)* designed, developed, and delivered transitional courses based on their state-adopted readiness standards. The course content, assessments, and methods of delivery were developed by members from K-12 and higher education agencies, policymakers, and education leaders.

**To create successful transitional courses, states must first ensure open communication between high schools and higher education institutions.** In 2008, **Florida**, one of the *SSCRI* states, required secondary and postsecondary institutions to work together to develop transitional courses with the passage of *Senate Bill 1908*. Subject-area faculty from school districts and community colleges partnered to develop the curriculum for the transitional 12<sup>th</sup>-grade courses and established expected student outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics. After the initial development and implementation phase, state-led advisory and review committees were formed to represent all regions of the state in the creation and development of test items and exams.

**Transitional courses can be delivered in a variety of formats, including traditional semester courses, targeted units, or online tutorials.** Florida created two types of transitional 12<sup>th</sup>-grade courses. The first type, *College Success*, are one-semester, one-half credit courses in mathematics, reading, and writing designed for students scoring below a 19 on the ACT.



These courses incorporate the same competencies embedded in the highest level of developmental education courses in Florida's colleges. The second type, *College Prep*, includes a pair of one-year, one-credit courses aligned with entry-level, credit-bearing college courses. The mathematics and English courses count for required high school credit and are considered college preparatory. Successful completion of these courses while in high school exempts students from further placement assessments and remedial coursework requirements.

**Legislation in 2010 required Florida school systems to offer transitional courses to all students who are identified as falling short of the college-readiness benchmark.** The course numbers, titles, and descriptions for these classes are common statewide. Instructional standards and assessment benchmarks are established in the statewide descriptions, but districts can choose the method of course delivery.

Transitional courses require intensive, targeted instruction, and teachers need to develop the skills and tools they need to effectively deliver the instruction that is needed. The Florida Department of Education has held a statewide workshop and a series of one-day, regional college- and career-readiness workshops. Plans are underway for the development of online resources for transitional course teachers and students.

As states implement more rigorous standards and assessments, it is anticipated that a greater number of students will fail to meet the higher expectations in the short term. Higher education institutions can address this transition situation by developing innovative and efficient strategies for remediation. **For example, through the *Developmental Education Initiative (DEI)*, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) is working to increase student success and credential completion. Based on a state policy team’s analysis, it was discovered that many students did not enroll in remedial courses after being required to do so via placement tests.** Additionally, a significant number of students chose to not enroll in subsequent remedial courses after completing their initial course requirement. In response to this identified leak in the college readiness and completion pipeline, the *DEI* redesigned developmental courses to make them more streamlined and flexible, delivered in targeted modules rather than full-semester courses. Using diagnostic testing tools, students are given a better understanding of their precise needs and can take—and more quickly complete—course modules accordingly. This innovative effort by the NCCCS could be a model to consider as states look to develop their own senior year transitional courses.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. How can your state’s K-12 and higher education systems proactively address the short-term growth in numbers of students who do not meet college-readiness standards?
2. What state policies are needed to ensure that students have access to high school courses or other interventions that help them meet college-readiness standards before high school graduation?
3. What policy levers can be used to ensure that K-12 and higher education participate in the creation of transitional courses that will prepare students for postsecondary success?
4. How can these transitional courses be fit into the high school curriculum and schedule?



