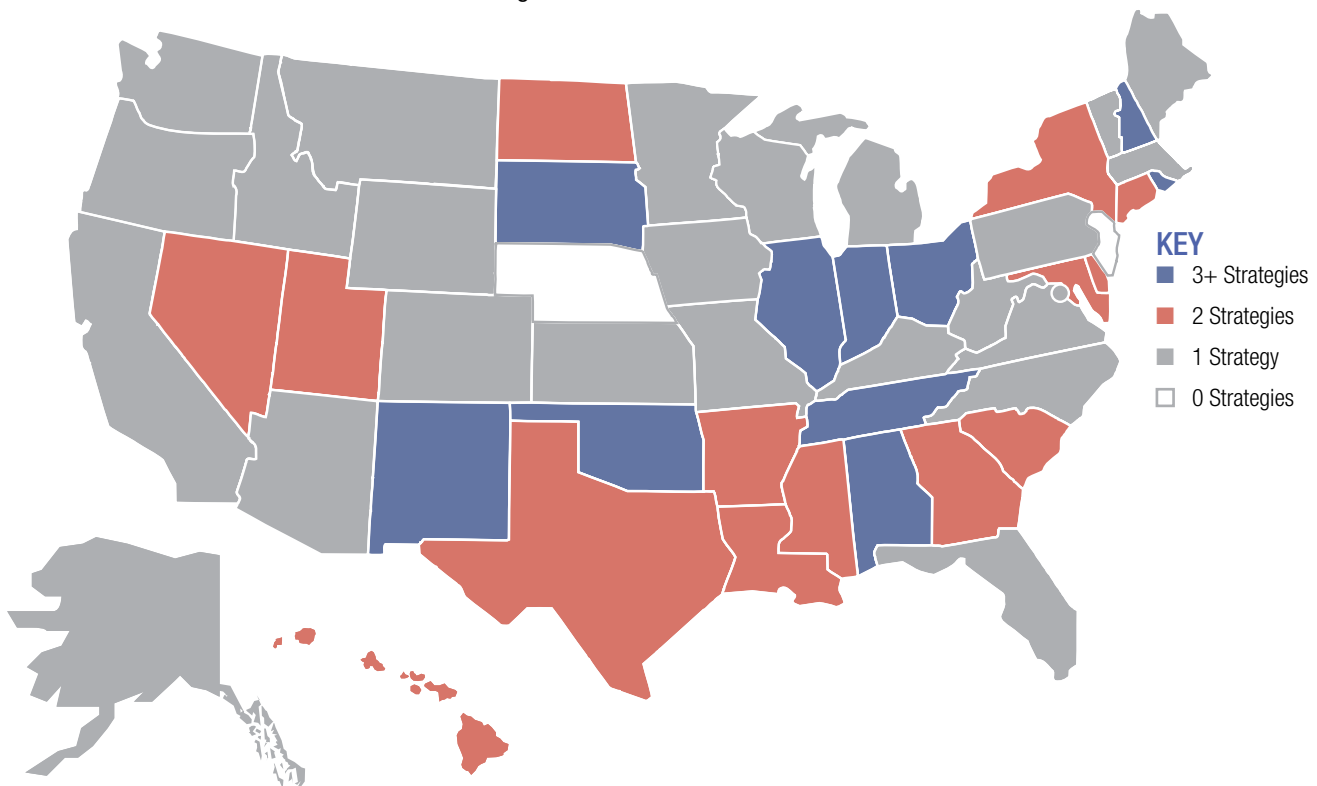


Leveraging ESSA

Shining a Spotlight on K-12 and Higher Education Alignment

States Leading on K-12/Higher Education Alignment Through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Number of Strategies Included in Round 1 and Round 2 State Plans



Alignment Strategies To Support Student Success

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presented a vital collaborative opportunity for K–12 and higher education leaders to make college and career readiness a priority and build seamless postsecondary transitions. After reviewing ESSA plans from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, it is apparent that states — to varying degrees — took advantage of this opportunity to double down on alignment for student success. True success will be determined by how states execute their planned alignment strategies.

Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia included at least one of the recommended K–12/higher education alignment strategies put forth by a partnership of Higher Ed for Higher Standards, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), State Higher Education Executive Officers, and the National Association of System Heads. Ten states demonstrated significant alignment, including three or more of the recommended strategies. These states can and should serve as a model for others seeking to build and expand activities to support student transitions from high school into postsecondary.

The most direct link to postsecondary preparation in state ESSA plans can be found in their proposed indicators for school ratings. **Forty-one states** included a college- and career-ready indicator in their high school accountability system. An **additional five** plan to include a college- and career-ready indicator in the near future or in a separate state accountability system. **Twenty-three states** identified specific strategies or funding to support students' preparation for higher education, often through expanded access to early postsecondary options while in high school. **Seventeen states** directly linked their long-term K–12 goals in ESSA to the state's higher education attainment goal. Only **three states** included information about higher education's involvement in the creation or validation of high-quality standards and assessments.

In particular, states have committed to strengthen K–12 and higher education alignment through their ESSA plans in the following ways:

- ◆ **Validating college-ready standards and aligned assessments**, including:
 - ✓ Using higher education to evaluate the rigor of new or revised standards.
 - ✓ Specifying 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 standards.
 - ✓ Having K–12 and higher education boards vote to formally adopt the state's shared definition of college and career readiness and aligned standards.
- ◆ **Vertically aligning K–12 and higher education goals**, including:
 - ✓ Benchmarking long-term K–12 goals and targets based on the trajectory necessary to meet the state's postsecondary attainment goal and making those connections explicit.
 - ✓ Connecting the goals and targets to the state's accountability system and student support policies so that high schools are incentivized to make postsecondary readiness a priority.

◆ **Holding schools accountable for college and career preparation**, including:

- ✓ Highlighting college and career readiness and postsecondary transition data on high school report cards.
- ✓ Using college and career readiness and postsecondary transition indicators to hold high schools accountable for improvement.

◆ **Supporting student transitions into postsecondary**, including:

- ✓ Using flexible federal funds to focus on supporting student transitions into postsecondary, such as expanding access to Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual credit, and 12th grade transition courses statewide, especially for traditionally underserved student groups.
- ✓ Targeting supports to “catch up” students while they are still in high school so that they can enroll in postsecondary credit-bearing coursework without the need for remediation.
- ✓ Supporting teacher preparation and professional development activities to expand the number and reach of effective teachers in advanced coursework.

While the ESSA plans presented states with an opportunity to formulate and formalize the K–12 and higher education partnership, it was simply that: an opportunity, not a requirement. Many states took advantage of this vehicle, yet some chose to limit their responses to the minimum required by the federal plan template. That is not to say that any state that did not address K–12/higher education collaboration in its ESSA plan is not undertaking any partnership activities; rather, it is an acknowledgment that ESSA plans do not represent the full breadth of state education activity.

Planning is the easy part. The real work must now begin in states to bring their plans to life through implementation. That work includes ensuring that teachers are prepared to help their students reach the high expectations; expanding access to early postsecondary options for all students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations; and removing barriers in the high school to college transition. Ultimately, it means ensuring that every student is ready to succeed in college, careers, and life upon high school graduation.

Working together, K–12 and higher education can 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.

To support state alignment efforts, Higher Ed for Higher Standards — a project of Education Strategy Group (ESG) — in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers, State Higher Education Executive Officers, and National Association of System Heads has released a [series of briefs](#) detailing opportunities for K–12 and higher education collaboration to support student success through ESSA. This final brief in the series highlights promising alignment strategies proposed in round 2 ESSA state plans. For additional information about the series, and ways that K–12 and higher education leaders are working together to promote student success, visit www.higheredforhigherstandards.org.

Highlighting Alignment Strategies in Round 2 ESSA State Plans

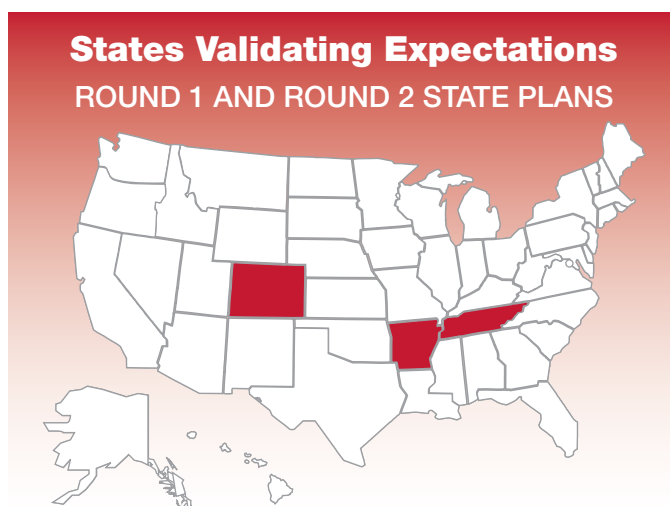
The following details promising examples of K–12 and higher education alignment in the 34 state plans submitted in round 2 of ESSA and offers suggested next steps to strengthen alignment through implementation of the plans in each of the following areas: standards and assessments; accountability, including long-term goals and targets and college and career readiness measures in school ratings; and student postsecondary transition supports.

VALIDATING COLLEGE-READY STANDARDS AND ALIGNED ASSESSMENTS

ESSA required states to have K–12 academic content and achievement standards that align 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. States are also required to assess students on their mastery of those standards in grades 3–8 and in high school.

While standards and assessments are clearly the bedrock upon which all state approaches to support student learning rest, the U.S. Department of Education ESSA plan template did not require states to detail how K–12 and higher education leaders collaborated to validate the rigor of the state’s standards or assessments. **Nonetheless, among round 2 states, Arkansas recognized how important it was to highlight the involvement of faculty from institutions of higher education to ensure alignment when it revised its English language arts and mathematics standards.** Many other states included higher education faculty in standards review and revision processes prior to ESSA.

Standards and assessments must have credibility with higher education to have impact. Regardless of whether it was specified in the state’s ESSA plan, higher education must be at the table to validate the rigor of K–12 expectations. Working together in the future, 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 the 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.



Recommended Next Steps

To align K–12 and postsecondary expectations through implementation, states should:

- ✓ Include higher education in any process to review or revise content standards. Higher education can provide input on the rigor and/or alignment of the high school standards to college entrance expectations.
- ✓ Create a policy across public institutions that recognizes students' scores on the high school assessments as evidence of readiness for credit-bearing coursework.
- ✓ When selecting any new assessment, include higher education representatives in the selection process, and partner to establish appropriate validation studies to ensure that the high school assessments include a strong benchmark of college readiness.

For more information about this issue, see *Aligning Expectations: Partnering with K–12 To Ensure College Readiness*.

VERTICALLY ALIGNING K–12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION GOALS

ESSA presented a critical opportunity for state leaders to establish aligned K–12 and higher education goals to increase the number of youth who successfully attain a postsecondary credential of value. Given the high priority many states are placing on reaching ambitious postsecondary credential attainment goals, this ESSA goal-setting window was very well timed. A streamlined set of goals — all pointing in the same direction — can support and inspire collective action to deliver more youth prepared to engage with the new economy.

While nearly every round 2 plan presented a vision for the state's K–12 system that supported all students demonstrating college and career readiness, only 12 states directly connected their K–12 goals to success beyond high school, often referencing the state's postsecondary attainment goal as the ultimate benchmark. Two states in round 2 stand out for taking advantage of the ESSA opportunity to go beyond the federal floor to fully incorporate postsecondary readiness and transitions into their long-term K–12 goals.

To build a globally competitive workforce, **Oklahoma** set a goal for 70 percent of residents to attain a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025. Recognizing that nearly 40 percent of first-year college

students require remediation, creating a significant barrier to meeting the attainment goal, the state's ESSA plan aims to reduce remediation by 50 percent by 2025. Further, the state will work to ensure that students develop a clear and workable pathway to postsecondary success through the completion of a “useful and meaningful” Individual Career Academic Plan. Addressing the barrier of remediation — one that costs Oklahoma families \$22.2 million yearly — will help the state close lingering achievement gaps between K–12 and postsecondary.



South Carolina Sets Aligned Long-Term Goal and Benchmarks

Indicators

Postsecondary

- % of graduates earning a living wage 5 years after graduating
- % of South Carolinians with a postsecondary degree
- % of freshmen in credit-bearing courses

High School

- % of students graduating in 4 years college and career ready

Kindergarten–Grade 8

- % of 3rd, 5th, and 8th graders meeting or exceeding expectations in English language arts and mathematics

Birth–Age 4

- % of kindergarten students who enter ready to learn

Beginning with the graduating class of 2020 ... 

5%

Annual increase across the state and in each district and each high school in South Carolina in the percentage of students who **graduate ready to enter postsecondary education** to pursue a degree or national industry credential **without the need for remediation** in mathematics or English language arts

By 2035 ... 

90%

Percentage of students who will **graduate “college, career, and citizenship ready”** as outlined in the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*

South Carolina’s vision for all children — the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate* — outlines the knowledge, skills, and characteristics necessary for success in the global marketplace. In alignment with this vision, South Carolina set a long-term goal that by 2035, 90 percent of students will graduate “college, career, and citizenship ready” (see figure above). The state used that goal to back map a target of a 5 percent annual increase in the percentage of students graduating ready to enter postsecondary education without the need for remediation. Additionally, the state intends to track other critical success

measures across the P–20 continuum, including the postsecondary attainment rate and the percentage of graduates earning a living wage five years after graduation.

Beyond ESSA, states can and should work to align their K–12 and postsecondary visions for success. Linking K–12 goals to the postsecondary attainment goal can bring coherence across multiple systems and ensure shared ownership for student success from K–12 to postsecondary education and training.

others. Assessment of readiness includes scoring at the college- and career-ready level on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium exam, ACT, or SAT; earning a career readiness certificate; or completing a 12th grade transition course.

Wyoming will use a “Post-Secondary Readiness” indicator to account for 20 percent of a high school’s rating. This indicator will measure the percentage of 12th grade students who meet the state’s definition of postsecondary ready based on one of the following options:

◆ Option 1: Completion of a college-preparatory curriculum (e.g., four years of math, English, and science; three years of social studies; and two years of foreign language, fine/performing arts, or career and technical education) and one or more of the following: a college-ready score on a standardized college entrance exam or eligibility to earn college credits through AP, IB, or dual/concurrent courses.

- ◆ Option 2: Completion of a career and technical education pathway (minimum of a three-course sequence) and one or more of the following: a passing score on a state-approved career and technical education exam or industry-recognized certification.
- ◆ Option 3: Completion of a college-preparatory curriculum or a career and technical education pathway and a military-readiness score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery.

Under ESSA, states are required to publish postsecondary enrollment information for each high school. Some states, like New York, plan to go beyond enrollment to provide a more robust picture of post-high school transitions. New York intends to report student outcomes on the need for remediation, college persistence, and employment after graduation. Public reporting on students’ postsecondary preparation and transitions is critical. It helps narrow focus on the ultimate outcomes of the K–12 system and identify gaps for schools, districts, and the state to close.

Recommended Next Steps

To promote college and career readiness and postsecondary transitions through implementation, states should:

- ✓ Create user-friendly public reporting tools focused on students’ college and career readiness and postsecondary transitions without the need for remediation.
- ✓ Measure students’ access to early postsecondary opportunities across regions and demographics, and use the data to target supports and highlight best practices.
- ✓ Conduct research to confirm that indicators of college and career readiness are predictive of students’ postsecondary entry and success.

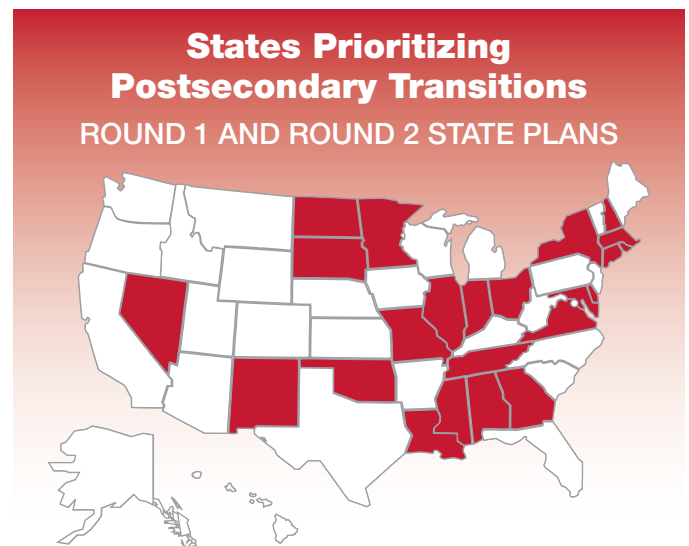
For more information, see *Destination Known: Valuing College and Career Readiness in State Accountability Systems*.

SUPPORTING STUDENT TRANSITIONS INTO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

K–12 and postsecondary leaders can work together to provide targeted supports and acceleration opportunities to help more students graduate high school prepared to succeed in college. **Fourteen states in round 2 proposed using ESSA’s funding flexibility to scale programs that have been proven to increase college readiness and success.** Scaling these programs can enable students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations, to have increased opportunities to earn postsecondary credit in high school and “catch up” on any skill gaps early so that they can directly enroll in credit-bearing coursework when they transition to postsecondary education.

Many states, including **Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Virginia,** plan to take advantage of this opportunity to offer subsidies or supports for advanced coursework, such as AP or IB courses, dual enrollment/credit, or other early postsecondary opportunities. **Minnesota** will fund specialists to help districts align their student support and academic enrichment activities to the state’s college and career readiness expectations for students. **Alabama** plans to scale academic and career counseling, with a specific focus on students’ postsecondary planning.

Rhode Island intends to make expansion of advanced course opportunities and postsecondary guidance and counseling programs two of its funding priorities in district grant applications. **Mississippi** will use state-level funds to promote access to accelerated learning opportunities, including AP or IB, dual or concurrent enrollment programs and early college high schools, and college and career counseling, including providing information on opportunities for financial aid and early completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.



Recommended Next Steps

To support student transitions into postsecondary through implementation, states should:

- ✓ Create a K–12 and higher education collaborative action plan to ensure that every student seamlessly transitions into college, career, and life.
- ✓ Develop and scale “catch up” courses in the 12th grade for students who have not yet demonstrated college readiness. If completed, these courses should allow students to enroll directly into credit-bearing coursework upon matriculation.
- ✓ Use data to allow early identification of students for enrollment in advanced coursework and to trigger supports when they fall off track toward college and career readiness.
- ✓ Scale college advising and bridge supports for first-generation students to ensure that they have the “college knowledge” and support systems to succeed upon postsecondary transition.
- ✓ Include postsecondary transition supports as one area for districts to address when conducting their needs assessment for school improvement or to access funds.

For more information, see [*Leveraging ESSA: Strategies To Support Students’ K–12 to Postsecondary Transitions*](#).

Collaboratively Strengthening Educator Preparation and Development

Educator preparation and development is one of the clearest intersections between K–12 and higher education. Policies aiming to improve student success must include the preparation of new teachers as well as professional development for those already in the classroom. Without addressing the individuals working most closely with students, the long-term success of any given reform will be limited. The Title II funding streams within ESSA provided an opportunity to build on this critical partnership.

Many states incorporated K–12 and higher education collaboration activities focused on educators in their ESSA plans. For instance, **Hawaii, Indiana, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia** specified that higher education partners will engage in professional development efforts designed to support

K–12 instruction in advanced coursework, such as AP or IB, dual enrollment/credit, or other early postsecondary opportunities. **Indiana, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota** included information around collaboration with preservice teachers through existing educator preparation pipeline programs. **Maryland** will establish regional hubs at higher education institutions to facilitate collaboration among colleges and universities to expand the reach of clinical field and internship experiences. These examples, and many others, confirm that states recognize that simply setting high expectations and holding schools accountable for meeting them is not enough. Strategies must be in place to ensure that educators are prepared to help students meet and exceed expectations.

For more information, see CCSSO's [Transforming Educator Preparation: Lessons Learned from Leading States](#).

Conclusion

K–12 and higher education leaders must work together to help all students attain a postsecondary credential or degree. The research is clear that attaining this credential or degree is the best guarantee of success in the economy. ESSA presented a clear opportunity for leaders from both sectors to formalize their shared ownership for long-term student success, and many states took advantage of this opportunity. States must now shift from plan to action and ensure that alignment is sustainable into the future.

From now into the future, state K–12 and higher education leaders are in the driver's seat to create policies and programs that lead to postsecondary preparation and success. As each sector works to institutionalize high expectations and deep supports for students, cross-sector partnerships will remain critical. Neither sector can be successful on its own. Students' preparation for careers hinges on this alignment. Working together, K–12 and higher education can propel the escalator of upward mobility for millions of youth and strengthen our nation.

Find Out More

To find out more about the specific examples from round 1 state plans, see [Leveraging ESSA: States Leading on Alignment of K–12 and Higher Education](#).