



Honoring Progress

An Update on the NGA Center Honor States

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This bimonthly newsletter provides information about the progress of the Honor States Grant Program, a \$23.6 million, governor-led effort to improve college-and work-ready graduation rates. Launched at the 2005 National Education Summit, this initiative includes 26 states and is supported by a consortium of eight foundations.

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In this issue we explore the strategies that governors and state policymakers are using to define and assess college and work readiness. We also highlight the progress three states have made on the assessment front and list some resources for state policymakers interested in learning more about best practices supporting college-and work-ready high school graduates.

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Facts at a Glance

- Presently, the majority of states only require their high school students to pass exit exams measuring 8th, 9th, and 10th-grade skills — not the higher level skills students will need to compete in college and the workplace (*Achieve Inc., 2006*).
- Forty percent of students at four-year institutions and 63 percent of students attending two-year colleges require remedial education coursework (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2004*).
- Every year these under-prepared high school graduates cost taxpayers \$1 billion to \$2 billion in funding for remedial education courses at public universities and colleges. Moreover, shortfalls in basic skills cost businesses, colleges, and under-prepared graduates as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity (*The Manhattan Institute, 2000*).
- College students who enroll in a remedial reading course are 41 percent more likely to drop out (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2004*).
- Fewer than one-fifth of all 9th-graders finish high school in four years, go on to college after graduation, and complete either an associates degree within three years or a bachelor's degree within six years (*National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006*).
- Twelve states now have sophisticated data systems that allow policymakers to track student performance data between their state's secondary and postsecondary institutions (*Data Quality Campaign, 2006*).

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Creating 21st Century Assessments: Michigan, Maine, and California Re-tool Exams to Measure College and Work Readiness

Promoting seamless transitions for high school graduates requires that employers and colleges provide students with a clear indication of the skills necessary for postsecondary success. Today, far too many first-year college students require remedial coursework because the skills they are required to master in high school do not match the expectations of their future postsecondary school. Moreover, the skills that are tested by most states' high school exit exams only measure low-level math and literacy skills, not the knowledge required to succeed in first-year college courses.

While one out of two first-year college students requires remedial non-credit bearing courses, readiness deficiencies are equally problematic for those students who plan to head directly into the workforce after completing high school. According to a recent Jobs for the Future report entitled, *Hitting Home: Quality, Cost, and Access*



Challenges Confronting Higher Education Today, data compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that high-skill jobs that require advanced learning will make up almost half of all job growth in the United States¹.

Only when the K–12 and postsecondary systems work together to align standards and expectations will all students have the opportunity to succeed in a competitive 21st century economy. In an effort to address the misalignment between the K–12 system and postsecondary expectations, states have pursued three main policy options to better assess readiness:

- A handful of states now require all high school students to take an off-the-shelf exam — usually the ACT or SAT — to gauge their students' level of readiness (e.g. Maine, Michigan). Minnesota expanded upon this strategy by giving 8th grade students the option to take ACT Explore — an early college readiness assessment designed to support a student's transition into high school.
- Other states, such as Indiana, create their own end of course assessment exams aligned to state standards in core subject areas.



- Finally, California is at the forefront of an emerging trend in which states require that their postsecondary system collaborate with K–12 representatives in creating and managing an assessment tailored to the expectations of the state's university system.

While these three policy trends constitute the most recent experimentation around 21st century-calibrated assessments, the majority of states continue to push students toward comprehensive exit exams assessing only 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade skills. Worse yet, a handful of states require no readiness assessments at all.

Fortunately, several states are leading the way through the creation of rigorous, well-aligned assessments that allow states to closely monitor all students' postsecondary readiness. Michigan, Maine, and California have each made dramatic changes in their assessment policies in an effort to better prepare their graduates for success in college and the workplace.

Michigan

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm has made improving college and work readiness among high school students a top priority. In 2005, the governor successfully led the effort to require all 11th-grade students to take a new ACT-based assessment.

Previously, high school students in Michigan took a minimum-competency test — generally an assessment that only requires that students demonstrate proficiency in 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade

¹ http://www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/wp-content/file_uploads/Hitting_Home_030107.pdf

skills. Now, beginning with the class of 2008, all 11th-grade students will take the Michigan Merit Exam (MME) as a prerequisite to graduation.

The Michigan Merit Exam features ACT-based sections identical to the ones used nationwide in the postsecondary admissions process. The exam also includes science and social studies sections aligned with state standards. It concludes with an ACT career readiness assessment known as WorkKeys, designed to help educators identify gaps between student skills and employment needs.

The switch to the nationally recognized ACT college entrance exam embraces a key recommendation of the Governor's Cherry Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth. And while "off-the-shelf" exams were never designed to drive K–12 instruction, research does show that broad use of an ACT assessment in Illinois and Colorado increased student ACT scores and significantly raised enrollment of ACT-tested students in those two states' university systems².

To achieve similar results, Michigan has tied successful completion of the ACT to college scholarship rewards. Beginning with the class of 2008, students who pass the mathematics, reading, and science components of the MME with a score of 1100 or more will qualify for \$4,000 scholarships at in-state postsecondary institutions.

By making the MME available to all high school students at no cost and tying successful completion of the exam to scholarship opportunities, Michigan now provides every student with access to a cornerstone of the college admissions process.

Maine

Governor John Baldacci has made Maine the first state in the nation to integrate the SAT into the state's high school assessment system and require that all high school juniors take the exam. As a result, 95 percent of Maine's 11th-grade students completed the SAT test in critical reading, writing, and mathematics this year.

While Maine's innovative approach to assessing readiness aligns well with the college admissions process, one significant drawback to using an "off-the-shelf" test like SAT is the narrow focus on math and reading skills and the exclusion of both social studies and the natural sciences.

Nevertheless, Maine's new SAT requirement promotes readiness by expanding access to and awareness of the postsecondary admissions process. Because the SAT is used by nearly every postsecondary institution to predict college performance, all rising high school seniors in Maine will have a better sense of their readiness for college-level work.

Finally, Governor Baldacci has obtained grant funding to give every 11th-grade student complementary access to an online SAT test prep course. By logging onto their home computer, students will be able to access a valuable coaching tool that previously cost them several hundred dollars. Maine's expansion of test prep access and its requirement that all rising seniors take the SAT represents a unique state policy approach to raising awareness of the need for universal postsecondary readiness.

² <http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2006/03/28/act>, and <http://www.act.org/path/policy/pdf/co.pdf>

California

In California, the state university system (CSU) addressed its alarming remediation rates by creating a unique voluntary assessment that enables students to monitor their level of preparedness for postsecondary training while still in high school. Like Michigan and Maine, California's forward-thinking assessment plan allows high school students to gauge their progress compared with the type of expectations they will likely encounter as first-year college students.



CSU collaborated with the state's K–12 system to design assessments tailored to expectations for freshman college students in the state so that all high school students will have the opportunity to understand the expectations for first-year students in the state university system.

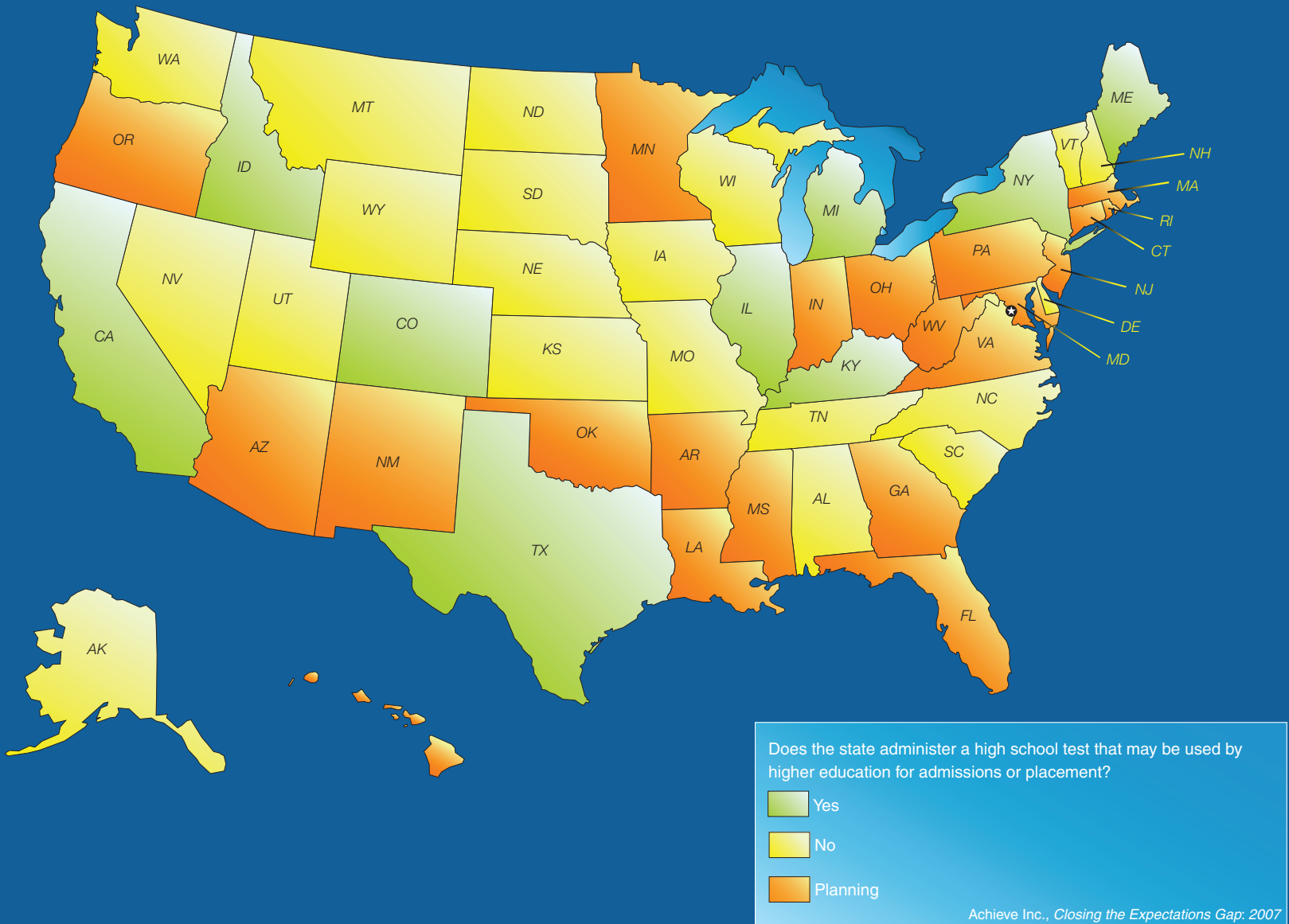
One benefit from California's assessment is that it includes features that both the secondary and post-secondary systems have agreed are important to gauge readiness. For example, the exam includes a writing section that was added to prepare students for the demands of college level writing.

Developing this K–12 early assessment required broad input from the legislature, the California State Board of Education, the CSU Department of Education, the University of California, California Community Colleges, CSU faculty, and organizations of K–12 teachers and administrators. These collaborative efforts go a long way toward ensuring the skills high school students master are aligned with state university standards and expectations. Finally, by giving students exams in the 11th-grade, the state can proactively utilize the senior year for those students whose test results indicate that they need additional skills to achieve college readiness.

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A Bird's-Eye View: Assessment Models Utilized in the 50 States



Source: Achieve Inc., *Closing the Expectations Gap: 2007*

Presently, states use the high school assessment exam for a variety of evaluative purposes. Some states use assessments to gauge a student's readiness for college, while others calibrate their assessments to a vocational or technical track. Still others use an exit exam as their sole assessment vehicle and only require students to demonstrate competency in lower-level skills.

Moreover, states administer their assessment exam at different grade levels, often attaching high-stakes consequences — or none at all. The map below provides an overview surrounding current state policies related to high school assessments by showing whether a state uses their existing high school assessment(s) for college admissions or placement purposes.

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Blogging for Change: Michael Kirst's Effort to Create Seamless Transitions for all High School Students

Dr. Michael Kirst leads the Bridge Project at Stanford University — a collaborative effort between researchers and policymakers designed to strengthen K–16 transition policies. More recently, Professor Kirst began his own blog, “The College Puzzle,” which he uses as a forum to discuss the importance of promoting readiness for high school graduates. Earlier this spring, *Honoring Progress* spoke with Dr. Kirst about the growing attention that governors and policymakers are paying to the issue of readiness.



HP: Are the skills required for success in college and the workplace really the same?

MK: *They are similar but not identical for all students. Community college 2-year vocational graduates do not need all of the academic skills of a 4-year college graduate. Yet these graduates (e.g. electronics technicians) can succeed in the workforce. About 50 percent of first time freshman students who go to college go to a community college, so governors need to keep a strong focus on this large and growing population as they think about policy.*

HP: Would you say that policymakers are thinking too narrowly about post-secondary readiness?

MK: *Policymakers focus too much on course labels and years (i.e. 3 years of math), and not enough on what content and skills should be taught in those courses. High school teachers need to know more about the content needed in their courses to meet college readiness standards. Readiness standards for 80 percent of college students are embodied in first-year placement exams which policymakers and teachers know little about. More than half of first-year college students go to open enrollment institutions such as community colleges where placement tests are the real standards.*

HP: What strategies can states take to ensure that students understand the level of preparation they will need for postsecondary success?

MK: *The 80 percent of students who go to broad access postsecondary educational institutions have vague and unclear signals about college readiness. So the [state] K–12 standards must be linked from “grades” 10–14. Minimum high school graduation standards rarely include the content college students need.*

HP: How should state policymakers evaluate the various tradeoffs between different assessments of readiness?

MK: *High school students and their teachers know very little about college placement test standards. Governors need to align high school standards with state postsecondary placement standards, but only a few do, such as California State University.*

HP: How can state policymakers create a more seamless transition for students between the K–12 and postsecondary system?

MK: *Before one even thinks about governance, a governor should focus on four key levels of reform:*

- *Standards alignment in grades 8–16;*
- *Financial incentives for secondary and postsecondary education to work together;*
- *A K–16 data system to track performance for every student; and,*
- *Accountability systems that require K–12 and postsecondary representatives to work together to accomplish joint objectives (e.g. a reduction in remediation).*

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Federal Update: *Innovation America: A Partnership*

America's continued economic prosperity and growth will be driven by the nation's ability to generate ideas and translate them into action. Under the leadership of Governor Janet Napolitano of Arizona (NGA Chair), the National Governors Association together with the Council on Competitiveness, developed a federal legislative proposal to complement federal legislative activity and encourage state efforts to accelerate the rate of U.S. innovation and economic prosperity. The NGA federal package, entitled, *Innovation America: A Partnership*, proposes a federal policy framework to assist states in developing collaborative efforts between public, private and education sectors.

Innovation America contains three broad areas for reform: Education, Workforce Development, and Regional Investment. In the education section, governors propose a series of recommendations to create a targeted, but flexible and coordinated education system designed to build a strong foundation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and foreign languages.

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Resource Box

Best practice research can help guide states seeking to improve the college and work readiness of all students. This section highlights resources devoted to developing comprehensive readiness campaigns, creating reliable K–16 data systems, and promoting seamless transitions for all students.

Closing the Expectations Gap

This report from Achieve Inc., synthesizes the most promising state practices related to defining and measuring college and work readiness. The report focuses on what states are doing to address the large gap between what high schools expect and what colleges and employers demand. While the report looks at broad topics ranging from Academic Standards, Graduation Requirements, Data and Accountability Systems, and High School Testing, it also presents the trends in state assessment models paying particular attention to the progress states are making in aligning high school standards with the demands of college and the work place.

The Resource Guide for Action: Transforming High School for All Youth

This new online resource by the National High School Alliance provides advice to policymakers and practitioners on how to best take action around college and work readiness. For each of the Alliance's core principles outlined in A Call to Action, the Resource Guide for Action provides:

- Recommended strategies that drive the transformation of high schools;
- Indicator protocols designed to collect, organize, and review observations about school and district level practices;
- Resources for practitioners, including case studies, frameworks, toolkits, and other strategies; and
- Resources for policymakers on all levels, including position papers and policy case studies.

Assess 21: Partnership for 21st Century Skills

Assess 21 is a unique repository created by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills — a non-profit organization that promotes the development of critical skills for students in the 21st century. This online resource serves as a central hub for policymakers, educators, researchers, and others seeking background information on the current assessment landscape.

The Assess 21 database highlights all of the K–12 assessments currently available that are geared toward 21st century skills. Once logged onto the site, Assess 21's database enables interested parties to find the most relevant assessments targeted to their student populations.

P–16 Data Systems: An Alignment Status Report

P–16 data systems signal which students and schools may require intervention based on stored data broken out by student-level indicators. This paper, presented by the Data Quality Campaign — an organization specializing in providing best practices advice on K–16 data systems — reviews the record on statewide data systems and highlights successful approaches states are using to align expectations between the K–12 and postsecondary systems. Through its work the campaign hopes to encourage and assist states in developing better data systems that allow educators to match a student’s P–12 and postsecondary record.

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Foundation Corner: The James Irvine Foundation Pushes to “ConnectEd”

In response to the increased demand for high schools to provide their students with multiple pathways to readiness, The James Irvine Foundation funded ConnectEd. A California-based program, ConnectEd provides strategic support to high schools to help them blend relevant career and technical education skills into a challenging core academic curriculum.

Founded on the premise that students need multiple pathways to the same destination, ConnectEd seeks to ensure that all students obtain success in college and career, not one or the other. The Foundation believes that if multiple pathways focus on rigor and relevance, high school graduates will be prepared for college and career.

Presently, ConnectEd is collaborating with six model programs at high schools across California that utilize career and technical education programs tied to the demands of today’s most relevant economic sectors.

For example, ConnectEd’s Health Careers Academy Program connects students to the healthcare sector by enabling them to spend their morning at a hospital learning to administer electrocardiograms and their afternoons in an academic setting studying the human cardiovascular system. The capstone experience is the program’s clinical internship during the student’s senior year. Initial results are promising as virtually all of last years participants went on to attend postsecondary schools.

The Lumina Foundation Launches “KnowHow2Go”:

The Lumina Foundation for Education, in partnership with the American Council on Education, has launched a national campaign to promote college readiness. Termed, “KnowHow2Go,” the campaign concentrates on educating students 8th through 10th grade about the steps they need to succeed in college.

The campaign utilizes public service announcements and colorful print media directing youth to the campaign’s Web site. From there, students can obtain practical advice on preparing and planning for college, and navigate state specific resources.

KnowHow2Go targets youth who dream of college but may not know how to attain their dreams. It encourages them to adopt the following strategies:

- Be a pain — in a good way. Find an adult who can help you with the steps to college. Let everyone know you want to go to college. And don't stop until you find the adult who can help.
- Push yourself. Colleges require you to take certain classes in high school. Find out which classes and sign up!
- Find the right fit. Think about interests and activities that you enjoy. Explore colleges with programs that suit your interests.
- Get your hands on some cash. There's money out there to help pay for college. Apply for it!

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Sponsors Readiness Research:

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has released a report titled, *All Students College Ready: Findings from the Foundation's Education Work 2000-2006*, which highlights findings from the first seven years of the foundation’s education grantmaking efforts that seek to prepare every student for college, work, and citizenship.

The primary goal of the Foundation’s education related investments is a significant increase in the number of students who graduate from high school with the skills needed to succeed in college and work. Toward this end, the Foundation has recently commissioned several other research pieces. These include:

- An instructive piece on how to define readiness (Dr. David Conley, University of Oregon).
- A summary of the costs and future implications of college remediation (Dr. Bridget Terry Long, Harvard University).
- An essay that describes the elements of college going environment in public school settings (Dr. Barbara Schneider, Michigan State University).

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Articulating the Message: State Communications Plans Bring Awareness to Readiness

As part of the NGA Honor States' commitment to *Getting it Done: Ten Steps to a State Action Agenda*, each of the Phase I Honor States agreed to implement an aggressive communications campaign to encourage high expectations for all kids. Effective communications campaigns articulate key messages, target relevant audiences, and evaluate the extent to which youth take note of the opportunities available to them after earning their high school diploma.

Arkansas, Maine, and Massachusetts have each established innovative communications campaigns that bring awareness to the importance of readiness for all students.

Arkansas' communications campaign is designed to build public support for the adoption of new state-wide college and work-ready standards. In September 2006, then-Governor Mike Huckabee and Education Commissioner Kenneth James launched "*Next Step for Arkansas' Future*" to emphasize that all students must be prepared for life after high school. The initiative includes a state-wide media campaign to help students and parents understand the importance of staying enrolled in school and in the Smart Core college ready curriculum. The campaign includes a Web site, television ads, radio public service announcements, newspaper editorials and state-wide and regional summits to build support among school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

While Arkansas' campaign focuses on building public support for its rigorous core high school curriculum, Maine's "*Readiness Campaign*" focuses heavily on the transition to postsecondary schools. Maine's campaign seeks to prepare every high school graduate for college, career, and citizenship. Through the development of a creative media campaign, the state hopes to raise awareness of the importance of graduating ready for college and work. The campaign reaches out to parents, students, and other key community stakeholders using a variety of media including radio, television, and the internet.

Like Maine, Massachusetts' campaign includes an array of clever advertisements that draw attention to the importance of college readiness. Massachusetts' campaign advertises on buses, radio, in movie theaters, and on television, as well in every high school, calling student attention to the state's campaign website: www.readyssetgotocollege.com. All of the ads conclude with the catchy tag line, "Think College isn't for you? Think again." The web-based tool enables students to access information about what courses are required for Massachusetts' public universities and informs them on how to go about registering for an SAT or ACT exam.



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What's Next? How States Can Seal the Education Pipeline between the K–12 and Postsecondary Systems

The current system of high schools, second-chance institutions, and public colleges and universities leave too many young people unprepared for success as adults, at an unacceptable cost to states' civic, social, and economic well-being. As many as 30 percent of entering high school freshmen leave school without a regular diploma, and gaps in college completion for Hispanics, blacks, low-income adults, and students with disabilities have not narrowed in 30 years.

States have a powerful incentive to plug the leaks in the education pipeline. To better promote postsecondary readiness among all students, states should rally around the following core policy reforms:

- 1) Alignment of Coursework and Assessments:** States should encourage their K–12 and postsecondary education systems to align coursework and assessments. Policymakers should align high school curricula, assessments, and graduation standards with the expectations of colleges and employers.
- 2) State Finance:** States should develop financial incentives and support to stimulate K–12 and postsecondary education to collaborate to improve college readiness and success. Most existing state finance systems perpetuate the divide between K–12 and postsecondary education.
- 3) Statewide K–16 Data Systems:** States should develop the capacity to track student performance data and create a warehouse pipeline in which the K–12 and postsecondary systems use that data to identify those policies that create the most seamless transitions for students from K–12 into postsecondary institutions.
- 4) Fiscal Incentives:** States should consider providing incentives to the higher education system to administer its placement test to local high school students for diagnostic and potential placement purposes.

These recommendations were adapted from the existing NGA Center publication, *A Guide for Governors, Ready For Tomorrow: Helping All Students Achieve Secondary and Postsecondary Success*.

The NGA Center for Best Practices is the nation's only consulting firm dedicated to governors and their key policy staff. The Center's mission is to develop and disseminate innovative solutions to public policy challenges.

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