



Accountability for Postsecondary Readiness

A 50-State Analysis

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Introduction

While there is an abundance of data about student performance within the kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) education system, an important question remains difficult to answer: Are students prepared for life after high school? Despite rising graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), students increasingly struggle after high school. High school graduates who move on to college need remedial help, and higher percentages of students do not complete degrees after enrolling (Jimenez et al., 2016). Employers report that high school graduates do not have the basic skills necessary to succeed and that standardized assessments do not measure skills that matter to them (Achieve, 2015). The detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic outcomes likely will exacerbate the challenges students face in preparing for postsecondary experiences (Barnum, 2022). Given the mismatch between K–12 student readiness metrics and the reality of postsecondary student outcomes, many researchers and organizations have called for states to reform and emphasize postsecondary readiness indicators (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017).

California has included a postsecondary readiness indicator in its accountability reporting since 2017. However, state leaders have continually sought to improve that indicator, seeking a balance between comprehensiveness and coherence. While the California State Board of Education (SBE) sets accountability policy, the California Department of Education (CDE) generates options for improving the accountability system, oversees data collection and analysis, reports accountability results, and produces explanatory materials. CDE staff have been particularly interested in generating suggestions for changes to the postsecondary readiness indicator but have found a lack of research and analysis in the field that identifies alternative approaches. To build an understanding of practices used in other states, CDE staff asked the Region 15 Comprehensive Center (R15CC) to explore the state-by-state landscape related to postsecondary readiness indicators in accountability systems, focusing on two main questions:

- What measures of postsecondary readiness do states use in their accountability systems?
- How much weight do these measures receive in schools' overall scores?

By increasing knowledge of the indicators currently used by other states, R15CC is building CDE capacity to identify options for California to improve and innovate its postsecondary readiness indicator.

Background

As a part of the school quality and student success (SQSS) indicator within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), most state accountability systems track education elements not measured on standardized tests, such as student attendance, school climate, and student preparation for postsecondary experiences. While much of the accountability system research and analysis has focused on academic measures of student outcomes, there is little research about SQSS indicators. This is particularly important since these indicators contribute to how states identify schools needing the most support and additional resources.

States have broad latitude in defining school quality and student success measures, and many states include postsecondary readiness as an SQSS indicator in their ESSA plans. Defining and measuring postsecondary readiness presents significant challenges in today's rapidly evolving landscape. The ever-changing demands of the job market, coupled with the increasing complexity of higher education, require a multifaceted approach to prepare students adequately (Edmunds et al., 2017). Schools play a role in helping students develop not only academic knowledge but also essential skills such as choice-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, and effective communication (Conley, 2005). Ensuring students are prepared for the next stage of their lives is crucial as it empowers them to pursue their dreams, contribute to society, and thrive in the global economy.

Since many accountability systems include a postsecondary readiness indicator in formal evaluations of schools and districts (Erwin et al., 2021), it benefits educators, families, researchers, policymakers, and other education partners to understand how postsecondary readiness is defined, measured, and used. However, relatively little literature exists that examines the details of postsecondary readiness within ESSA plans. This brief explains how states define and measure postsecondary readiness, an important step toward improving how such measures function within state accountability systems.

Methodology

The R15CC team analyzed all ESSA plans listed on the U.S. Department of Education’s website as of May 1, 2023, to identify which plans include a postsecondary readiness indicator. R15CC staff reviewed 53 ESSA plans, including all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Bureau of Indian Education. In cases where the state’s ESSA plan description of the postsecondary readiness indicator lacked specific information about measures used in the indicator, the team visited state agencies’ websites to find additional information to complete the analysis.

R15CC staff independently reviewed each plan and other resources as necessary and documented whether the state included postsecondary readiness among the SQSS indicators in the ESSA plan. If a postsecondary readiness indicator was present, staff determined the weight given to the postsecondary readiness indicator in the state’s overall summative accountability score and identified all measures used to calculate the indicator. Staff then coded the measures, highlighting themes that emerged from the analysis. Once the data was collected and coded, the two raters identified coding discrepancies and resolved the differences by using the state’s ESSA plan and other official documents and websites. Finally, R15CC staff reached out to staff from all state and territory education agencies to verify the accuracy of the data collected and analyzed, making changes to the data set when warranted. Table 1 details the data collection and analysis timeline.

Table 1. Data Collection and Analysis Calendar

Data collection or analysis activity	Date(s)
ESSA plans collected from U.S. Department of Education website	May 1, 2023
Postsecondary readiness indicator measures data collection	May–June 2023
Data coding and analysis of postsecondary readiness indicator measures	July 2023
Data verification with state and territory education agency staff	August 2023

The R15CC team limited data collection to only federally approved state ESSA plans. During the data validation process, many state education agency staff indicated that changes to postsecondary readiness policy (via statutes, regulations, or amendments to ESSA plans) had been enacted or would take effect within the next year. Since the analysis was limited to information contained in approved ESSA plans, pending changes were not included in the dataset.

Findings

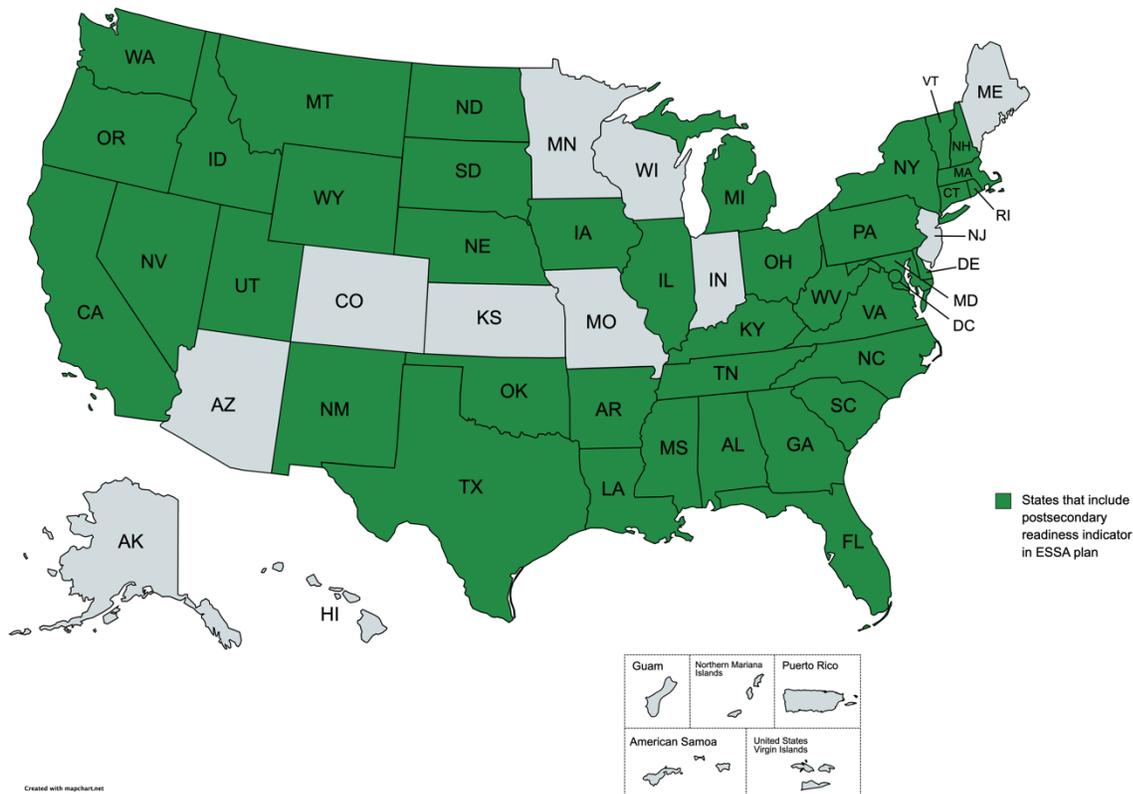
Based on CDE’s interest in understanding the basic structure and measures used in postsecondary readiness indicators across the country, R15CC staff identified four main findings about the use of postsecondary readiness indicators, the types of measures included in the indicators, and how much weight indicators are given in accountability systems.

Finding 1: More than three of four ESSA plans contained a postsecondary readiness indicator.

In total, 41 out of 53 ESSA plans (77%) included a postsecondary readiness indicator as a scoring element that contributed to identifying schools for additional support. As seen in Figure 1, there were no apparent trends among states that did not include a postsecondary readiness indicator, with significant variation in geography and population among the 11 states.¹

¹ In addition to the 11 states in Figure 1 that do not include a postsecondary readiness indicator, the Bureau of Indian Education’s ESSA plan does not include a postsecondary readiness indicator. The U.S. Department of Education does not require territories to submit ESSA plans, and most territories (Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, and the United States Virgin Islands) have not officially submitted plans.

Figure 1. States That Include a Postsecondary Readiness Indicator in Their ESSA Plan



Finding 2: States included three main types of measures in postsecondary readiness indicators: academic, career, and military.

The R15CC team found substantial variation in the data states use to measure postsecondary readiness. Three main types of measures were identified: academic, career, and military. Each type had several different measures, detailed below.

Academic measures

- **Advanced course completion:** Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment courses offer students the opportunity to engage in college-level coursework while still in high school. Students who complete these courses demonstrate readiness for higher education and potentially earn college credits.

- **SAT and ACT assessment score thresholds:** Many colleges use the SAT and ACT as factors in admission decisions. States using this measure identify a score threshold determining whether a student has met the minimum proficiency level expected for college readiness.
- **On track to graduate:** Some states assess if a student is on track to graduate, either as part of their postsecondary readiness indicator or as a separate measure. States have developed various ways to measure this but usually consider how many credits a student has earned by 9th- or 10th-grade completion.
- **Advanced diplomas and multilingual certificates:** Advanced diplomas signify that a student completed requirements beyond the baseline requirements for graduation. Multilingual certificates recognize students who demonstrate proficiency in multiple languages. Every state that offers advanced diplomas and multilingual certificates sets its standards to achieve those credentials.
- **College enrollment and remediation:** Some states use enrollment at a higher education institution or the need for remediation upon enrollment in higher education as a postsecondary readiness measure. States connect student-level data from the state’s K–12 and university systems to calculate this measure.

Career measures

- **Industry credential:** This indicator recognizes students who have obtained industry-specific credentials. Professional organizations award these credentials to students who demonstrate mastery of skills and knowledge relevant to a particular field or industry.
- **Career Technical Education (CTE) course completion:** Many states provide CTE courses, often in a series or pathway connected to specific types of careers. States set the minimum number of courses students must complete to be deemed “career-ready.”
- **Work-based learning experience:** Some states recognize students who complete approved internship experiences or apprenticeship programs as career-ready within their postsecondary indicators.
- **ACT WorkKeys assessment score threshold:** The WorkKeys assessment attempts to identify skills relevant for students entering the workforce. Some states include meeting a threshold score on the assessment as a measure in their postsecondary readiness indicator.

Military measures

- **Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) assessment score threshold or military enlistment:** All military branches require recruits to achieve a minimum ASVAB score to enlist. Some states use these standards (or simply enlistment in a military branch) as a measure in their postsecondary readiness indicator.

Finding 3: Postsecondary readiness indicators focused most heavily on academic and career measures and less on military measures.

Nearly every ESSA plan that included a postsecondary readiness indicator incorporated an academically-focused measure, such as meeting a minimum score on the SAT or ACT or completing advanced or dual enrollment coursework. Pennsylvania was the only exception, including the Career Standards Benchmark as its plan's sole postsecondary readiness measure. More than four of five plans include a career-focused measure, such as earning an industry credential or completing career and technical education classes. However, only 27 percent of plans explicitly had a military-focused measure, such as achieving a threshold score on the ASVAB exam or enlisting in a military branch (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of Types of Postsecondary Readiness Measures

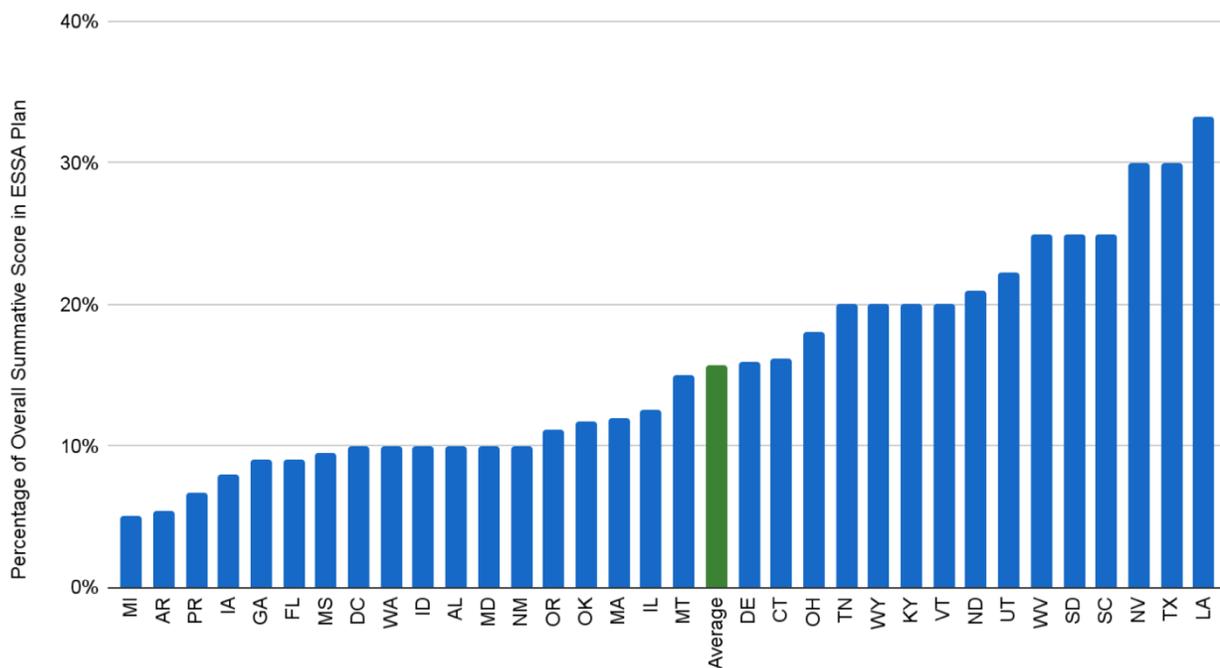
Indicator	Type	States	Percent of States with Indicator
Any academic measure	Academic	40	98%
AP, IB, or dual enrollment course completion	Academic	36	88%
SAT or ACT exam score threshold	Academic	24	59%
On track to graduate	Academic	10	24%
Advanced diploma	Academic	9	22%
Multilingual certificate	Academic	5	12%
College acceptance or enrollment	Academic	3	7%
College remediation needed	Academic	1	2%
Any career measure	Career	34	83%
Industry credential	Career	25	61%
CTE course completion	Career	25	61%
Work-based learning experience	Career	13	32%
WorkKeys	Career	7	17%

Indicator	Type	States	Percent of States with Indicator
Any military measure	Military	11	27%
ASVAB score threshold	Military	9	22%
Military enlistment	Military	3	7%

Finding 4: Weighting of the postsecondary readiness indicator varies widely from state to state.

Among ESSA plans that included a postsecondary readiness indicator and provided weights for the various accountability indicators in the state’s system (33 states),² the indicator carried an average weight of 16 percent of the summative accountability score for high schools (see Figure 2). Weighting ranged from a high of 33 percent in Louisiana to a low of five percent in Michigan. The weight of the postsecondary readiness indicator was 10 percent or more of the summative accountability score in 26 of the 33 states that provided weights (79%).

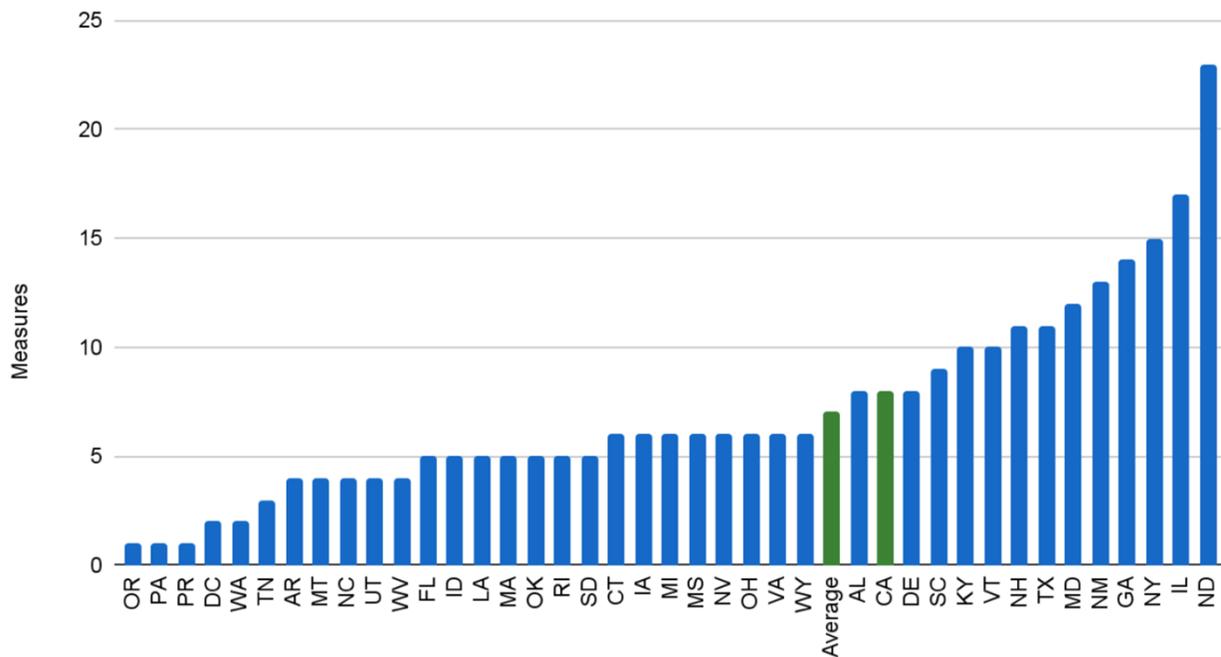
Figure 2. Weighting of Postsecondary Readiness Indicator in ESSA Plans



² States that did not provide a weight for the postsecondary readiness indicator either did not include the indicator in their ESSA plan (see Figure 1 above) or included more complex rules for calculating the summative accountability score that did not allow the identification of the exact percentage the indicator accounted for in the final score. States using these more complex rules include California, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia.

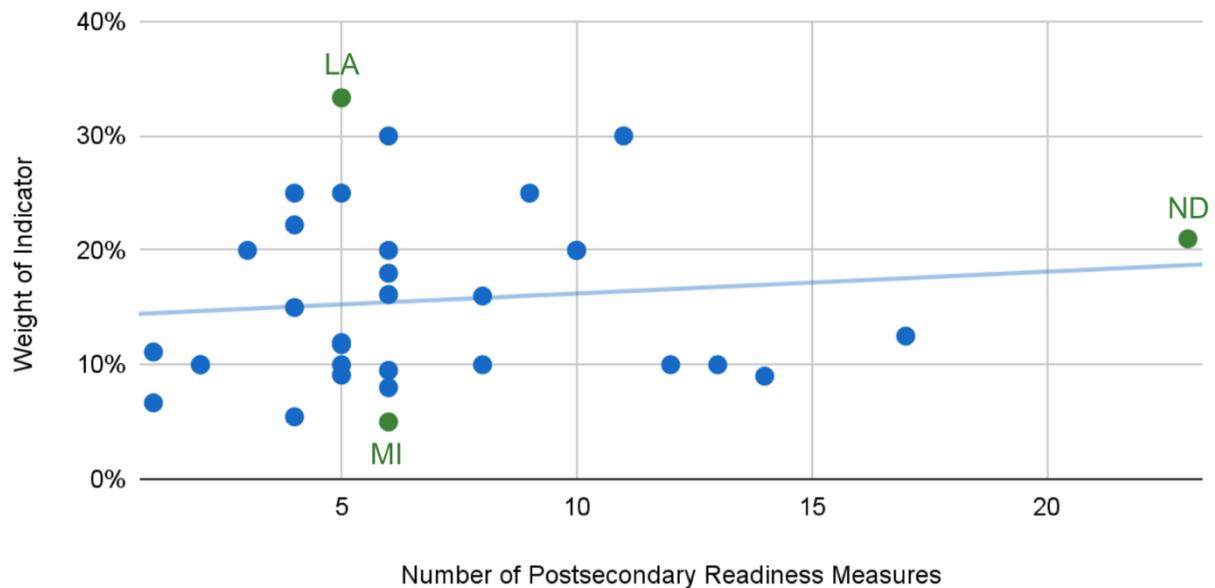
Postsecondary readiness indicators also varied in complexity, with states including anywhere from 1 (Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico) to 23 (North Dakota) separate measures to calculate postsecondary readiness (see Figure 3). Among the state plans from which the number of postsecondary readiness measures could be determined (40 states), plans averaged just under seven measures within the indicator. Twenty-nine plans (73%) reflected five or more measures, and ten plans (25%) included ten or more.

Figure 3. Number of Postsecondary Readiness Measures in ESSA Plans



While there was significant variance in both the weighting and the number of measures included in the indicators, there is no apparent relationship between the two (see Figure 4). In other words, states with more measures in their postsecondary readiness indicator do not necessarily weight the indicator more than those with fewer measures. Figure 4 highlights Louisiana (highest postsecondary readiness indicator weighting), Michigan (lowest postsecondary readiness weighting), and North Dakota (most postsecondary readiness measures).

Figure 4. Weight of Postsecondary Readiness Indicator by Number of Measures



Conclusion

As part of ongoing monitoring of accountability indicators, the CDE staff sought to understand how other states hold schools and districts accountable for preparing students for life after high school. While most states include a postsecondary readiness indicator in their ESSA plans, there is significant variation regarding the weighting of this indicator and what measures it includes. This variation highlights the multitude of approaches states take to understand whether graduates are ready for life after secondary education. Included measures skew toward more easily measured ones, such as assessment results, course completion, and achievement of credentials. While these indicators provide straightforward and readily available measurement compared to more complex measures, whether these measures accurately quantify students’ chances of postsecondary success remains an open question. In generating options and preparing information for the California SBE, CDE staff continue to think through the tradeoffs between broader understandability and more nuanced information. As the experience of other states shows, using more straightforward measures can make the indicator easier to understand for a wider audience and minimize data collection burdens on schools and districts.

On the other hand, more complex measures may provide greater detail and nuance about school and district performance.

However California and other states choose to measure postsecondary readiness, there is ample room for innovation in defining what it means to be ready for life after high school and how to measure those outcomes. The lack of research connecting the current postsecondary readiness indicators to longer-term student outcomes presents an opportunity for states to play a vital role in exploring and evaluating innovative approaches to measure postsecondary readiness. The flexibility granted by ESSA within the SQSS measures allows states to take novel approaches, provided there are resources and motivation to devote to the cause.

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