

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Issue at a Glance

Despite wide disagreement about the role of schools and even the goals of education in our society, there is a growing consensus across a broad political and ideological spectrum that each student must graduate from high school prepared to meet high standards of college or career readiness. The past few years have introduced a movement among states and districts to eliminate barriers to college access and increase student preparation and college attendance. Yet according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results released in 2024, only a third of high school seniors are prepared for college-level coursework in math and reading.

There has also been an increased focus on ensuring students can effectively join the workforce immediately following their secondary education. However, according to recent polling, many employers believe that students directly out of high school are often unprepared to immediately enter a career.

Strengthening the rigor of courses taken in middle level and high schools can be an effective strategy to raise student achievement levels and ensure college and career readiness. Raising expectations for all students to enroll in rigorous courses, including Advanced Placement (AP), dual- or concurrent-enrollment courses, or International Baccalaureate (IB) is crucial—particularly for students who have historically been underrepresented in those courses, including minority students and students living in poverty. This is relevant at the middle and elementary levels as well. One study recently found that students taking less rigorous coursework at the middle level were often further behind their classmates in their ability to take more rigorous courses in high school. Too often, high-level courses are open only to a select group of high-achieving students, thus perpetuating historical inequalities in academic outcomes.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, contains a number of new provisions that can be used to advance equity and excellence throughout our nation's schools for historically underserved populations. Two key changes in ESSA that expand access to high-level coursework for all students are new measures in school performance and progress and a more substantive focus on resource equity. ESSA requires that states use multiple measures of accountability for evaluating student progress by including one or more indicators of "school quality or success." States are able to choose measures that can incentivize the expansion of access to high-quality learning opportunities for all students. Lastly, ESSA includes provisions that require states to evaluate and address resource inequities in schools. ESSA establishes incentives for districts to enrich curriculum opportunities for historically underserved populations of students.

ESSA also requires states to adopt challenging academic content standards for mathematics, reading or language arts, and science. The law specifies that these standards must be aligned with entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in a state's public higher education system and relevant state career and technical education standards. But raising academic standards alone is not enough to ensure that all students, especially low-income and minority students, will graduate from high school and succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. Supports must be in place to help schools ensure that all students achieve this goal.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association believes that all students should graduate from high school with the skills to help them succeed in postsecondary education and the workplace, and it supports challenging graduation requirements that prepare all students for postsecondary success.
- Principal leadership is critically important in ensuring the successful implementation of college and career ready standards in schools.
- Policies and practices must be implemented in schools to help close the achievement gap and better provide all students with equitable education opportunities.
- School leaders should advance new, innovative Career and Technical Education (CTE) and alternative career pathway programs in schools to ensure that students have a diverse array of career education options to pursue while they are enrolled in K–12 education.
- For new CTE and alternative career pathways programs to succeed, state and federal policymakers must provide robust new funding to support important innovations in public schools.
- National Principals Association promotes open access to rigorous courses for each student and supports ending low-level courses as these are often detrimental to whole school improvement.
- National Principals Association promotes building business partnerships to develop pathway programs in collaboration and coordination which are relevant and targeted to the community workforce.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- The federal government should create a separate funding stream to improve student achievement at the middle level and high school, reduce the number of high school dropouts, and ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills they need to succeed in college and the workforce.
- Congress should fully fund the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to help K–12 schools provide students with access to advanced courses and college and career counseling.
- Increase funding for the existing federal CTE state grant program, so schools are better equipped to expand these important career learning and training programs.
- Expand support of the Federal TRIO Programs, which serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities as they progress from middle level to postbaccalaureate programs.

- Fund a significant literacy initiative that supports students from early childhood through high school.
- Help drive student success and achievement by providing proper funding for programs under the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation Fund.
- Provide funding and tax incentives for school-to-workforce pathway programs and sustainability for a nationally and globally competitive workforce.

Recommendations for State and District Policymakers

- States should require colleges and universities to set clear and understandable academic expectations for incoming students and make those recommendations readily available to the public.
- States should make every effort to increase the maximum compulsory age for school attendance to 18 for all students who have not already completed the requirements for a high school diploma.
- Expand statewide incentives designed to increase the number of minority and low-income students taking pre-college exams, such as AP, SAT, or ACT.
- Work with groups such as the Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, the College Board, and ACT to develop and implement a common core of standards in key subject areas.
- Implement strong, rigorous early learning requirements around base core subjects for all students to ensure that students of underserved subgroups do not fall behind early on in their educational careers.
- Ensure that offered diploma options different from a regular high school degree are equipping students with the proper knowledge and skills necessary for them to be successful after high school.
- Increase access to rigorous learning opportunities by including AP/IB or dual- or concurrent-enrollment coursework achievement in annual school performance determinations.
- States should align principal and teacher preparation programs and professional development with higher graduation requirements.
- States should offer incentives to help school districts attract and retain the most effective principals and teachers in the schools with the highest need.
- States and districts should work together to build the capacity of principals and all teachers—especially content area teachers and career and technical education teachers—to align curriculum and assessments with the expectations of colleges and employers; to offer counseling services that prepare students for high school graduation, college admission, and career success; to engage and motivate students to meet higher standards; and to create positive relationships with parents and community members.
- States and districts should implement a systemic transition plan for all students and encourage collaboration between elementary, middle level, and high schools.
- States and districts should develop graduation requirements that allow students to choose from multiple pathways to graduation, including:
 - Career and technical education courses that are aligned with higher standards and offer students credit towards an industry credential.

PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

- Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.
- Dual and concurrent enrollment programs that allow students to earn high school and college credit simultaneously, and that assist students who are overage, under credited, or returning dropouts.
- Middle college high schools that are located on college campuses and allow students to earn a high school diploma, and early college high schools that allow students to earn a high school diploma and an associate degree simultaneously.
- States and districts should target equitable resources to middle level and high schools with high student mobility rates and significant proportions of low-income students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-achieving students to help all students meet high expectations.
- States and districts should ensure that students have access to academic supports that will help them stay on track toward graduation, including:
 - Challenging core curricula at the middle level that are aligned with the high school curricula and will help students get on target for college and career readiness by the end of eighth grade.
 - Counseling services for middle level and high school students that provide information and assistance about the requirements for high school graduation, college admission and financial assistance, and career success.
 - Personalized academic plans to support completion of middle level requirements and progress toward graduation.
 - Targeted and tiered interventions for middle level and high school students who are falling behind.
 - Online learning opportunities.
 - Extended learning time during the school day, week, and year.
 - Job shadowing, internships, and community service.
 - In-school and community-based social supports, such as counselors, social workers, and mental health services.
- States and districts should allow schools to give some students, particularly English language learners and students with disabilities, more time to complete graduation requirements.
- States and districts should reward schools for increasing their promotion and graduation rates and ensuring that more students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Review student data to determine which graduates in your school are college and career ready and develop a plan to ensure students have the appropriate academic supports for postsecondary success.
- Ensure that students understand what courses are required for high school graduation in addition to the admissions requirements for various postsecondary options that are aligned with their career goals.
- Provide all students with opportunities to pursue courses, internship opportunities, and cocurricular activities that are aligned with their career goals.
- Provide open-enrollment opportunities to participate in advanced courses. Encourage enrollment of students who do not meet eligibility criteria but are committed to course success.

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

- Seek out and encourage enrollment of high-performing, low-income, and minority students including higher-scoring students who have yet to enroll in advanced courses.
- Ensure that each student is provided with their own adult advocate to help guide their educational and social experience.
- Involve each student, particularly low-income, first-generation college students and those from underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds, in precollege program learning experiences that focus on developing college aspirations and preparing students for entry into higher education. Ensure that all teachers are trained in these programs.