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Making a Difference

Eight State Legislative Policy
Recommendations for Improving
America's High Schools



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INTRODUCTION

Bringing the American high school system into the 21st century is one of the greatest challenges facing our nation. If America is to compete in the information-age economy, young people must be prepared for success in postsecondary education and a labor market that is increasingly based on complex knowledge and skills beyond those acquired through a high school curriculum.

Since the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, state legislators have been at the center of a movement to improve high schools. In making these issues legislative priorities, state lawmakers are increasing the level of public attention to and understanding about the need to dramatically change our system of public high schools.

Major accomplishments include the following.

- States and school districts moving toward more accurate dropout and graduation rate reporting, with states learning more about how their high school performance compares nationally and internationally;
- A nationwide movement toward more rigorous, meaningful high school graduation requirements intended to elevate the high school diploma to a college- and work-ready standard; and
- An increased level of attention, focus and urgency among state legislators to find solutions to problems plaguing the American high school system.

The next generation of policies aimed at improving high school performance and better preparing students for college and careers views the issues on a K-20 scale; looks to college completion as an important milestone for states, high schools, and institutions of higher education; and includes consideration of international variables to ensure that American students can remain competitive. To continue this momentum, the four organizations that represent major education stakeholders within each state (the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Association of State Boards of Education) collaborated in 2008 and 2009 to develop a jointly authored report, *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools*, to help policymakers accelerate development of a college- and career-ready policy agenda. The report analyzes state progress to date and provides guidance to help states continue to move forward toward college- and career-readiness for all students.

Making a Difference: Eight State Legislative Policy Recommendations for Improving America's High Schools

1. Elevate academic standards and course requirements to college- and career-ready levels.
2. Help every student to plan through high school graduation and beyond.
3. Develop effective career and technical education programs.
4. Expand college-level learning opportunities.
5. Use a variety of online learning options.
6. Identify and support struggling students.
7. Develop dropout recovery programs to reengage out-of-school youth.
8. Provide structures and incentives for high schools and colleges to work together to improve college readiness.

State legislatures are on the front lines of developing bold new strategies to bring American high schools into the 21st century. To help state legislators' continued progress, NCSL has expanded the recommendations in the jointly authored *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools* to call attention to important legislative achievements and showcase innovative legislation that has the potential to dramatically improve high school performance and better prepare high school students for success in college and careers. State legislative action in the eight policy areas identified in this report can have a real and lasting effect when developed in conjunction with broad, statewide coordinated plans for high school improvement. Each of the recommendations includes specific examples of promising and innovative legislative actions in state legislatures nationwide.

ELEVATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS TO COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY LEVELS

1

Leaders in both education and economic policy agree that, in the coming years, nearly all students will need some form of postsecondary education—technical certification, an associate’s degree, a four year degree, or beyond—to prepare for a well-paying, secure job. Although not every student will enroll in college immediately upon graduation from high school, research shows that the skills needed for jobs that pay enough to support a small family, provide potential for career advancement, and are projected to grow in the future—such as electricians, construction workers and plumbers—are the same skills needed for success in college.¹ Elevating high school academic standards and course requirements to college- and career-ready levels is an important step toward ensuring that students graduate with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college and the workplace.

The most common criterion for awarding a high school diploma continues to be course requirements. More states recently have attempted to set high school requirements to ensure that graduates are prepared for success in college and the workplace. Twenty states now require all students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum. Of these, 14 require students to automatically enroll in the “default” college- and career-ready curriculum but allow them to opt out of the requirements if their parents sign a waiver. The remaining six states have set mandatory course requirements without an opt-out provision.²

States are making strides toward improving high school students’ preparation for college and work by aligning high school standards with the skills employers and colleges say are needed for success. Despite significant progress, however, too many high school students still are not adequately prepared for postsecondary education or training, nor are they prepared for a competitive workplace. In efforts to improve high school students’ readiness for college and careers, several states have recently begun the challenging task of incorporating college and career readiness standards into their entire K-12 system by developing goals, objectives, strategies, indicators and benchmarks from prekindergarten through grade 12 and beyond.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Texas HB 1 (2006)**, 3rd Called Session of the 79th Legislature, directs the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and its K-12 counterpart, the Texas Education Agency, to collaboratively:
 - Recommend college readiness standards and expectations that address what students must know and be competent in to succeed in entry-level courses offered at institutions of higher education;

“To restore value to the high school diploma, states need to raise academic standards for all high school students and tie graduation requirements to the skills that colleges and employers expect.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 7

- Evaluate whether the state high school curriculum requirements prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work;
 - Recommend how public school curriculum requirements can be aligned with college readiness standards and expectations;
 - Develop instructional strategies for teaching courses to prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work; and
 - Establish minimum standards for curricula, professional development materials, and online support materials in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies that are designed for students who need additional help to prepare to successfully perform college-level course work.
- **Colorado SB 212 (2008)** enacts the Preschool to Postsecondary Education Alignment Act, ensuring that a student who enters school ready to succeed and achieves the required level of proficiency on standards as he or she progresses through elementary and secondary education will have achieved postsecondary and workforce readiness upon graduation from high school. It requires various state education agencies to collaborate to create a seamless system of public education standards, expectations and assessments.
 - **West Virginia SB 595 (2008)** creates the statewide Vision 2020: An Education Blueprint for Two Thousand Twenty. Vision 2020 sets forth the premise that an educational system in the 21st century should be seen as a continuum from prekindergarten through postsecondary education. It includes goals, objectives, strategies, indicators and benchmarks for prekindergarten through grade 12, postsecondary education, and workforce investment initiatives. Vision 2020 contains several components:
 - Rigorous 21st century curriculum and engaging instruction for all students;
 - Leadership recruitment, development and support;
 - Equitable access to 21st century technology;
 - Statewide balanced assessment; and
 - A 21st century accountability and accreditation system.
 - **Texas HB 3 (2009)** adds college readiness as an element of the state public school accountability system through changes in assessment standards and requirements, including:
 - Requires districts and campuses to increase the number of students performing at the college readiness level;
 - Establishes a college readiness standard on the English III and Algebra II end-of-course exams and guarantees students who meet this standard are placed in credit-bearing courses in higher education for that subject;

- Requires students to demonstrate knowledge on the end-of-course exams in each content area to graduate;
- Provides for districts and campuses to earn recognized and exemplary designations for higher percentages of students who meet postsecondary readiness standards;
- Allows campuses to earn distinctions for outstanding academic achievement in the core subject areas, growth in student achievement, closing the gaps, fine arts, physical education, 21st Century Workforce Development and second language learning;
- Allows student growth to count toward meeting the passing and college readiness standards;
- Provides districts with a safety valve in meeting accountability indicators so long as the exceptions to meeting the standard are atypical and not persistent; and
- Establishes timelines for interventions.

HELP EVERY STUDENT TO PLAN THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND BEYOND

“Academic preparation matters greatly, and states need to ensure student supports are available in all high schools... Some supports, such as an individual learning plan, serve all students and have statewide effects.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda, 14-16*

A strong body of research indicates that personalized learning is most successful. Personalized learning opportunities provide students with an opportunity to plan and prepare for life after high school and to understand how their school work is related to postsecondary and career goals. Personalized learning means designing a blend of courses and experiences that match the needs and interests of each student, includes quality mentoring, and emphasizes career and academic planning.³

Research suggests that many of America’s middle and high school students need more help from schools to effectively plan for the future. Many students postpone consideration of their post-high school plans; those who do plan ahead may not be enrolled in the classes that will prepare them to meet their goals. Taking the right courses is one of the most important elements for middle and high school students as they prepare for the future. According to the ACT report, *College Readiness Begins in Middle School*, one reason students do not plan properly is that they do not rely on their schools for guidance. The report recommends that school districts set up a formal program, starting in middle school, to help students develop a college readiness plan.⁴

According to the Education Commission of the States, at least 23 states and the District of Columbia require students to create some form of long-term education plan through an individual graduation plan, career major or other activity.⁵

STATE EXAMPLES

- **South Carolina HB 3155 (2005)** requires career awareness counseling for students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, allowing them to identify career interests and abilities. Eighth grade students select a preferred cluster of study and develop an individual graduation plan in preparation for high school. During high school, students receive guidance and curricula to help them successfully complete their individual graduation plans and focus on preparation for a seamless transition to relevant employment, further training or postsecondary study.
- **Georgia HB 1027 (2006)** appropriates funds for a graduation coach in each of the state’s public high schools whose primary responsibility is to identify at-risk students and help keep them on track academically before they consider dropping out. In 2007, the legislature expanded the program to include middle schools.
- **New Mexico SB 561 (2007)** provides that, at the end of grades eight through 11, each student must prepare an interim next-step plan that sets forth the coursework for

the grades remaining until high school graduation. Each year's plan must explain any differences from previous interim next-step plans and be signed by the student, the student's parent and the student's guidance counselor. Directs school boards to ensure that next-step plans are based on reports of college and workplace readiness assessments, as available, and to ensure that high school students are reasonably informed about curricular and course options, including honors or advanced placement courses; dual-credit courses; distance learning courses; career clusters; or remediation programs that the college and workplace readiness assessments indicate to be appropriate.

- **California SB 890 (2008)** establishes the Early Commitment to College Program that requires schools to provide pupils in grades six through nine the opportunity to sign a pledge declaring a commitment to finish high school and prepare for, and enroll in, college. The law also requires participating districts to provide college information and preparation events for pupils.
- **Colorado HB 1370 (2008)** significantly increases school based counseling services at Colorado middle and high schools, to help increase the graduation rate and prepare students for postsecondary success.
- **Arkansas HB 1808 (2009)** requires that, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, public middle schools will administer EXPLORE to each eighth-grade student and each public high school shall administer PLAN or the PSAT to each 10th-grade student so they can explore a broad range of options for their future and focus not only on high school coursework but also on post-high school choices.
- **Nevada AB 487 (2009)** requires development of an academic plan for pupils enrolling in their initial year at a middle or junior high school, requires small learning communities in larger middle schools and junior high schools, requires a program of peer and adult mentoring for pupils initially enrolling in middle school or junior high school, and requires ways to increase involvement in their children's education of parents and legal guardians of pupils enrolled in their initial year in a middle school or junior high school.

DEVELOP EFFECTIVE CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

“States can create career technical education programs that feed into high-wage, high-skill occupations. Career technical education (CTE) offers students alternative pathways to meet academic standards through real-world learning opportunities.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 9

Research shows that students who participate in high-quality career and technical education programs are less likely to drop out of high school, more likely to improve their test scores, have increased earning power in the workforce, and are more likely to pursue postsecondary education.^{6,7} Career and technical education can engage students who have various learning styles in hands-on, practical ways. Among the skills students gain are problem solving, teamwork and management.

The most successful career and technical education programs are integrated with rigorous academic instruction and aligned with industry certification. These programs—focusing on high-demand, high-paying jobs that states want to attract and retain—can help states fill workforce gaps and create a supply of competent workers in areas including biotechnology, environmental sustainability, agriculture, health, engineering and information technology.⁸

State legislatures have recently made some policy changes that can more effectively integrate career and technical education programs into high schools, including ensuring that the career and technical education programs align with state workforce demands; developing public awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of such programs as high-quality education pathways; strengthening internship and work-study programs; developing opportunities for these students to earn college credit; and establishing curriculum requirements to ensure that career and technical education programs are integrated with rigorous college- and career-ready expectations.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Florida SB 1232 (2007)** enacts the Florida Career and Professional Education Act, requiring school boards, local workforce boards and postsecondary institutions to develop a rigorous, relevant curriculum that leads to industry-recognized certification in high-demand careers, a high school diploma, and opportunities for high school students to simultaneously earn college credit.
- **Mississippi HB 975 (2008)** requires the State Board of Education to develop and establish a pilot program to redesign the state’s secondary schools to function not only as curriculum and educational entities but also as workforce development centers.
- **Washington SB 6377 (2008)** directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to produce a public awareness campaign to highlight high-quality career and technical education programs as a positive education pathway. The office must

approve preparatory career and technical education programs that lead to industry certification or that allow students to earn dual high school and college credit and also must collaborate with the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, the Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Council of Presidents to develop career and technical education models in high-demand career fields.

- **Louisiana SB 259 (2009)** provides for a high school career option program of an academic major and a career major and provides that students enrolled in such major can participate in dual enrollment with an institution under the management and supervision of the Board of Supervisors of Community and Technical Colleges or participate in an internship or work-study program.
- **New Mexico SB 46 (2009)** allows qualified high school juniors and seniors who are at least age 16 to participate in industry-taught or -guided pre-apprenticeship programs in high school. Pre-apprenticeship programs established by local school districts will focus on student completion of courses that are counted toward high school graduation and acceptance into a paid apprenticeship program upon graduation, thereby increasing opportunities for well-paying careers in needed industries.
- **South Dakota SB 185 (2009)** requires the State Board of Education to establish standards and procedures for career and technical education and to establish curriculum requirements for a recommended high school program for all public and nonpublic schools within the state. The recommended high school program must include a rigorous high school curriculum in both academic and career and technical courses, aligned to the academic content standards.
- **Washington SB 5676 (2009)** expands career and technical education opportunities to middle school students in science, technology, engineering or mathematics. Before this law was enacted, only high school student could participate in career and technical education classes.

“Dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs enroll high school students in college-level courses. States can expand these collaborative agreements that offer early exposure to the academic demands of college, increase the rigor of the high school experience, and strengthen linkages between secondary and postsecondary systems.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 11

Offering high-quality, college-level learning opportunities in high school can increase the academic quality and rigor of high school classes, lower the need for postsecondary remediation, reduce the high school dropout rate, reduce student costs of attending postsecondary institutions, and prepare young people to succeed in college.⁹ States offer a variety of college-level learning opportunities, including dual enrollment programs, middle and early college high schools, Advanced Placement courses and International Baccalaureate programs.

Dual enrollment is commonly used by states to provide college-level opportunities to high school students. Courses can take place on the high school or college campus or both. In comprehensive programs, students pay little or no tuition or fees, receive both high school and college credit, and are able to enroll in a wide selection of courses. Research indicates that students who start dual enrollment programs are less likely to drop out of high school, even if they are considered to be at risk, and are more likely to continue their college education at a postsecondary institution and graduate with a degree.¹⁰ Key aspects of a high-quality dual enrollment program include ensuring that courses meet high academic standards and are available to a wide range of students.

Other accelerated learning options for high school students include middle college high schools, situated on community college campuses, that offer high school and postsecondary credits; early college high schools, which integrate high school and college programs and allow students to graduate from high school in five years with both a high school diploma and an associate’s degree or two years of credits toward a bachelor’s degree; advanced placement courses, which allow high school students to take college-level courses and earn college credit through national College Board exams; and the International Baccalaureate Program, a demanding high school curriculum that leads to final exams where students can earn postsecondary credits.

Promising state policy actions to improve access to college-level learning opportunities for high school students include strengthening dual enrollment programs; improving access to advanced placement programs; providing students with incentives and opportunities to graduate early from high school and immediately enroll in college; helping students plan for and enroll in college; and developing outreach campaigns to help more students and families understand and participate in college-level learning opportunities.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Arkansas HB 1154 (2003)**, Second Extraordinary Session of 2003, compels all high schools to offer students the opportunity to enroll in advanced placement courses in the four core content areas of English, math, science and social studies.
- **New Mexico SB 561 (2007)** requires each school district in the state to provide opportunities for students to earn dual enrollment credits.
- **Arizona HB 2736 (2008)** provides students with early graduation scholarships. Students who graduate at least one year early receive up to \$1,250, or the actual cost of tuition, books and fees, whichever is less, for the first academic year and up to \$750, or the actual cost of tuition, books and fees, whichever is less, for the second academic year.
- **California SB 890 (2008)** establishes the Early Commitment to College Program, requiring schools to provide pupils in grades six to nine the opportunity to sign a pledge declaring a commitment to finish high school and prepare for, and enroll in, college. The law also requires participating districts to provide college information and preparation events for pupils.
- **New Mexico SB 31 (2008)** provides for dual credit courses to be taken in the summer term and expands dual credit opportunities through distance learning and other methods. The law also requires schools to inform students and parents about opportunities to participate in dual credit programs.
- **Colorado HB 1319 (2009)** requires students, parents and guardians to be notified of the opportunity for concurrent enrollment and states that funding for concurrent enrollment is permissible because it goes to class size reduction, school accountability and meeting standards. The law gives students a chance to earn a college degree while finishing high school.
- **Georgia HB 149 (2009)**, the Move on When Ready Act, provides a program for 11th and 12th grade students to attend postsecondary colleges and schools for high school credit, notifies parents and students of the program, and sets requirements for course credit and testing.

“Virtual schools can deliver rigorous high school curriculum, increase access to Advanced Placement courses, and offer remedial courses... Virtual schools also play an important role in equalizing access to advanced classes, because more than a quarter of U.S. high school students still have no advanced courses available at their home school.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 14

Online learning options—often referred to as virtual schools—can ensure access to quality required and specialized courses, including advanced placement and foreign language courses, schools cannot or do not provide. This is particularly important in rural or small schools, where it may be difficult to retain teachers or where it may not be cost effective to offer a course to only a few students. Online options are increasingly used to provide a low-cost alternative that can help struggling students catch up on coursework. For students who are struggling to succeed in traditional settings, online learning options offer an alternative path to high school graduation.

State and district online learning approaches vary. State-led online programs are created by legislation or a state agency and are directly funded by a state appropriation or grant to provide online learning statewide. State-led online initiatives typically offer online tools and resources for schools statewide by combining courses from outside sources. Full-time online programs, also known as cyberschools, allow students to enroll and earn academic credit based on successful completion of courses provided by the online school. Single-district programs serve students who reside within the district that provides the online courses. Multi-district programs can be state-led, run by a consortium or network, or operated by one district that offers an online program to students from other districts.¹¹

Online learning is becoming more popular, as are state efforts to ensure that the programs are high-quality and meet state standards. State legislative efforts to date have focused on policies that evaluate enrollment limits and funding sources for online learning; establish statewide virtual schools; evaluate state regulations and policies to ensure proper accountability and transparency of online learning; and evaluate laws and policies that prevent students from enrolling in online learning, such as seat-time requirements.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Florida SB 1522 (2003)** grants parents the right to public school choice and lists Florida Virtual School as an option. The law defines full-time equivalent students for purposes of the Florida Virtual School based on “course completion and performance” rather than on traditional seat time, allowing Florida Virtual School to be funded through the state public education formula.
- **Colorado SB 215 (2007)** creates the Division of Online Learning within the Department of Education. It allows a school district, a group of school districts, a board of cooperative services, or the state charter school institute to authorize an on-

line educational program; sets forth the criteria for such programs; and specifies which students a district can count in the online program pupil enrollment.

- **Pennsylvania HB 1067 (2008)** establishes a Virtual High School Study Commission within the Pennsylvania Department of Education to examine the feasibility of and costs associated with creating a state-operated, Internet-based high school. The Pennsylvania Virtual High School would provide secondary students statewide with:
 - Expanded curriculum offerings such as higher level math and science, foreign language and advanced placement courses;
 - SAT preparation programs;
 - Summer enrichment and tutoring courses;
 - Increased instructional options for at-risk, home-bound and alternative education students;
 - Expanded offerings for gifted and talented students;
 - Links with prospective employers, including those that offer high school internships and apprenticeships; and
 - Opportunities for students who have dropped at or are at-risk of dropping out to earn a high school diploma.
- **Washington HB 3129 (2008)** requires the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to compile information about online learning programs for high school students to earn college credit and to place the information prominently on its web site. The law also directs high schools to ensure that teachers and counselors have information about such programs.
- **Missouri SB 291 (2009)** provides that school districts offering virtual courses to resident students who are enrolled in the school district are to receive state school funding. To calculate and distribute funding, attendance of a student enrolled in a district virtual class will equal, upon course completion, 94 percent of the hours of attendance for such class delivered in the non-virtual program. Charter schools also can offer virtual courses for enrolled students and receive state funding. Nothing in the act precludes a private, parochial or home-schooled student who lives within a school district that offers virtual courses from enrolling in the school district in order to participate in virtual courses. School districts and charter schools must ensure that courses purchased from outside vendors are aligned with state curriculum standards and comply with state requirements for teacher certification.

- **Montana HB 459 (2009)** creates the State Virtual Academy as a unit of the Montana university system to make distance learning opportunities available to all school-age children through public school districts in the state; offer high-quality licensed instructors and courses that comply with relevant education and distance learning rules, standards and policies and emphasize the core subject matters required under the accreditation standards; offer advanced courses for dual credit in collaboration with the state university system; and offer enrichment courses.
- **Washington SB 5410 (2009)** requires development of a process for approving multi-district online providers, requires accreditation of providers that offer online courses, requires creation of an office of online learning, requires school district boards of directors to develop policies and procedures regarding student access to online courses and online learning programs, and provides for funding to school districts.

Research clearly indicates that dropping out is not so much an event as it is a longer process that results in a student leaving the system before graduating. Years before dropouts actually leave high school, most send warning signals that they are having difficulty. In fact, evidence from a study in one large school district suggests that almost half of eventual dropouts sent warning signals as early as sixth grade. It is particularly crucial to address chronic absenteeism and student academic struggles in the middle grades, given their association with failure to graduate on time.¹²

Schools and districts have an additional opportunity to identify struggling students in the freshman year of high school. Research from a study of Chicago public schools finds that two crucial indicators—grades and absences—can be used by schools to predict graduation. More than 95 percent of students with a B average or better in their freshman year graduate; freshmen who earn a B average or better have an 80 percent chance of finishing high school with at least a 3.0 GPA; and freshmen with less than a C average are more likely to drop out than graduate. Nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, regardless of their eighth grade test scores; freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school flunk, on average, at least two classes, no matter whether they arrive at high school with top test scores or below-average scores.¹³

State efforts involve early identification and support for struggling students to help them remain in school to graduate. Effective statewide plans for dropout prevention focus on developing and using data to accurately target schools and students with the most need to ensure that proper strategies are used to address specific problems.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Rhode Island HB 5351 (2007)** requires the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to work with school districts that have the lowest high school graduation rates and incorporate progressive support and intervention with specific dropout prevention strategies and targeted resources. The department is to develop or identify specific methods of targeted intervention for school districts that have a dropout rate higher than 15 percent. These interventions can include:
 - Early intervention for students who fail Algebra I or any ninth grade math class and have insufficient credits to be promoted;
 - Alternative programs designed to reengage dropouts, including dual enrollment courses at community colleges;
 - Increased availability of advanced placement courses;
 - Offering full course fee waivers for students who are eligible for free and reduced lunches when they enroll in dual credit courses;

“An effective statewide support system can improve student performance by tailoring interventions to students’ needs. The first step is to gather data that help educators identify academic trends and enable policymakers to target resources more efficiently. Such data should not only describe the academic proficiency of students, but also foretell their high school outcomes long before they enter ninth grade.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda, 15*

- Flexible programs for older students who currently are not enrolled;
 - Comprehensive coaching for middle school students who are below grade level in reading and math;
 - Teacher advisories and other supports that are designed to specifically address the needs of youth who are most at risk of dropping out of school; and
 - Strategies that are specifically designed to improve the high school graduation rate for teens who are at the highest risk for dropping out, including those in the foster care system, pregnant and parenting youth, English as a second language learners, and teens with special education needs.
- **Louisiana HB 1091 (2008)** provides for the circumstances under which certain students can withdraw from school, provides for collecting and reporting related data, requires an exit interview, provides that information about training and employment opportunity programs be available, and relates to parental consent for withdrawal from school before graduation. The law also provides for comprehensive coaching for middle school students who are below grade level in reading and math.
 - **Washington SB 6673 (2008)** creates the extended learning opportunities program for students in 11th and 12th grade who are not on track to meet local or state graduation requirements and for eighth grade students who may not be on track to meet the standard on the Washington assessment of student learning or who need additional assistance to successfully enter high school. Provisions include extended learning opportunities before or after the regular school day, on Saturday and beyond the regular school year.
 - **Colorado HB 1243 (2009)** creates the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement in the State Department of Education to collaborate with local education providers to reduce the student dropout rate and increase student graduation and completion rates. The office must develop a report of best practices for reducing the dropout rate and increasing student engagement. It will identify school districts with high dropout rates and provide assistance to them. School districts will assess their practices and create plans to increase graduation rates. The law also creates a student re-engagement grant program to fund district efforts to provide educational services for student engagement and re-engagement in school.
 - **Texas HB 2263 (2009)** extends the high school innovation grant initiative to middle and junior high schools for reform, dropout prevention and postsecondary coursework or employment preparation.

DEVELOP DROPOUT RECOVERY PROGRAMS TO REENGAGE OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH

7

The social and economic costs of high school dropouts are staggering. Not only do dropouts earn significantly less—the average annual income for a high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299, compared to \$26,933 for a high school graduate—but they also are most vulnerable to a struggling economy. While the unemployment rate for individuals of all education levels has significantly increased since December 2007, high school dropouts have had the most difficulty finding jobs. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts in July 2009 was 15.4 percent, compared to 9.4 percent for high school graduates, 7.9 percent for those with some college credits or an associate’s degree, and 4.7 percent for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.¹⁴

Research indicates that high school dropouts eventually want to earn a diploma and that they will work hard to get it. As adults, high school dropouts recognize the importance of a high school diploma. In a 2006 national poll of 16- to 25-year-old dropouts, the overwhelming majority of poll participants (81 percent) say as adults that graduating from high school is important to success in life. Three-fourths (74 percent) say that if they were able to relive the experience, they would have stayed in school, and 76 percent say they would definitely or probably re-enroll in a high school for people their age, if they could. Forty-seven percent say that not having a diploma makes it difficult to find a good job.¹⁵

States are trying to help students who already have dropped out of school earn a traditional high school diploma or alternative credential. These policies offer a safety net, providing dropouts another chance to successfully graduate. The most successful dropout recovery programs are flexible, link to postsecondary education and employment, and provide strong systems of student support.¹⁶

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Texas HB 1 (2006)** enacts the Optional Flexible School Day Program, providing for an optional school day program for students in grades nine through 12 who are dropouts or are at-risk of dropping out. The law allows school districts flexibility in the numbers of hours per day or the number of days per week a student attends classes.
- **Texas HB 1137 (2007)** authorizes school districts to admit anyone who is at least age 21 and younger than age 26 who wants to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The student’s attendance is eligible for state funding.

“States can support high-quality dropout recovery programs that reengage out-of-school youth and ultimately confer a high school diploma or an alternative credential...Many students take advantage of their second chance, with more than half of those who drop out of school eventually earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 16

- **California SB 1251 (2008)** adds five-year and six-year graduation rates to the four-year graduation rates that are to be included within the Academic Performance Index of schools, and specifies how to calculate the new graduation rates. The legislation provides that schools are to receive half credit for pupils graduating in five years, compared to full credit for pupils graduating in four years; and that schools are to receive one quarter credit for pupils graduating in six years, compared to full credit for pupils graduating in four years.
- **Colorado HB 1243 (2009)** creates the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement in the State Department of Education to work with local schools to reduce the student dropout rate and increase student graduation and completion rates. The law also creates a student re-engagement grant program to fund district efforts to provide educational services for student engagement and re-engagement in school. The State Board of Education must adopt rules for identifying high-priority and priority education providers, implement the grant program, and define parameters for student truancy, graduation and dropout rates.
- **Illinois SB 1796 (2009)** establishes the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education Program to develop a comprehensive system to re-enroll more high school dropouts in programs that will enable them to earn their high school diploma, including year-round classes, summer school, evening courses and community college courses.
- **New Mexico HB 333 (2009)** provides that any student who passes the state graduation examination and completes all other requirements within five years of entering ninth grade, including a final summer session if completed by August 1, can be counted as a high school graduate for the year in which completion and examination occur and can receive a high school diploma.

Many students and their parents are not aware that high school graduation requirements often differ from the requirements for admission to a four-year college or university. In addition, remediation rates among first-year students in both two- and four-year postsecondary institutions are high, suggesting that existing state and local graduation requirements are not adequately aligned with postsecondary expectations.

Research indicates that there are concrete differences in what colleges expect and what high schools produce. Although a college course may have the same name as a high school course, the expectations often are fundamentally different. College instructors pace their courses more rapidly, emphasize different aspects of material taught, and have different goals for their courses than do high school instructors.¹⁷

Some states are developing structures and incentives for colleges to work more closely with high schools to ensure that course work is aligned with postsecondary expectations and requirements.

STATE EXAMPLES

- **Florida SB 20 (2002)** standardizes postsecondary feedback of information to high schools by requiring the commissioner of education to report annually on the performance of each first-time-in-postsecondary education student from each public high school in the state who is enrolled in a public postsecondary institution or public career center, including:
 - Student performance in regular and preparatory courses and students referred for remediation;
 - The number of students whose scores on the common placement test indicated the need for remediation through college-preparatory or vocational-preparatory instruction;
 - How well students do on admission tests; and
 - How they have fared after enrolling in college courses.

The legislation instructs the State Board of Education to ensure that each school district and high school develops strategies to improve student readiness for the public postsecondary level based on annual analysis of the feedback report data.

- **Indiana SB 200 (2005)** approved the Core 40 as the default high school curriculum for all students. Beginning with the class of 2011, students must take three years each

“States can insist that the secondary and postsecondary education systems share responsibility for college- and career-readiness. This can be done by tying postsecondary entrance requirements to high school graduation expectations, expanding college access and outreach, and revising financial incentives and admission requirements to encourage high school students to take rigorous courses.”

—*Accelerating the Agenda*, 25

of math (including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II), science, and social studies, and four years of English. In addition, beginning in fall 2011, the Indiana Core 40 will be required for admission to public four-year colleges and universities in the state.

- **South Carolina HB 3155 (2005)** requires the Commission on Higher Education to convene the Advisory Committee on Academic Programs to address articulation agreements between school districts and public institutions of higher education in South Carolina so that high school graduates can enroll directly in colleges and universities. The committee is to review, revise and recommend secondary to postsecondary articulation agreements and promote development of measures to certify equivalency in content and rigor for all courses included in the agreements.
- **Virginia HB 2866 (2005)** grants public postsecondary institutions greater autonomy and financial incentives to realign their goals with the state's call for improved readiness of high school graduates. Participating postsecondary institutions commit to the governor and the General Assembly to actively cooperate with elementary and secondary school administrators, teachers and students in public schools and school divisions to improve student achievement, upgrade teachers' knowledge and skills, and strengthen school administrators' leadership.
- **Colorado SB 32 (2009)** creates the Education Innovation Institute within the University of Northern Colorado to collaborate with institutions to align the public education system from preschool through postsecondary and workforce readiness to ensure universal proficiency for all students.
- **Vermont HB 405 (2009)** requires the state colleges, in consultation with various organizations, to study and recommend strategies for expanding educational opportunities for students to succeed in elementary and secondary school and to be prepared to succeed in postsecondary education.

CONCLUSION

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STATE LEGISLATORS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Recognizing that high schools play a key role in preparing the United States to compete in the 21st century information economy, state legislators are moving forward with promising and innovative strategies to improve high school performance and better prepare students for college and careers. The legislation highlighted in this report exemplifies the ability of state legislatures to lead important and innovative reform by enacting policies that prepare students for success in college and the jobs of the future.

Legislative action in the eight areas recommended in this report can have a real and lasting effect when it is implemented as part of a larger statewide plan to improve high schools. For more information, visit the NCSL website at www.ncsl.org.

NOTES

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