Student Expectations in a Standards-Based Learning System

By Stephen Prociw

All 50 states, territories, and the District of Columbia have adopted college- and career-ready standards (CCR) in English and mathematics. However, most states fall short of developing a coherent set of policies to ensure that all students graduate from high school college and career ready.

Adopting more rigorous standards is not enough: State boards of education should align a range of education policies to their CCR standards for them to boost student achievement. Evidence abounds for why this work is critical. Since the 1970s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores of American high school students in math and reading have remained relatively unchanged.1 Performance levels on the Program for International Student Assessment, an internationally administered test, show US students lag well behind students in other developed countries.2 Current college graduation rates are not keeping pace with the country’s projected workforce needs.

Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the University of Kentucky’s Center for Innovation in Education and past head of the Council of Chief State School Officers, thinks state boards should ask, “What makes one successful and truly ready for college and careers?” A student can be academically prepared, Wilhoit suggests, and yet not equipped for success in life or the workplace. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, hiring employers rank these skills as most important for college graduates: critical thinking and analytical reasoning, complex problem solving and analysis, written and oral communication, the application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings, the ability to organize and evaluate multiple sources of information, and innovation and creativity.3 College- and career-ready standards must encompass all of these skills to ensure that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills they will need across a range of academic and employment settings.

An essential task for state boards is to align CCR standards with high school graduation requirements and thereby ensure that students complete CCR courses in order to earn a diploma. Roughly a third of American students who enter college now need remedial education. More rigorous course offerings are needed to prepare students for college-level material and help them avoid remediation. Less than half of states have aligned their graduation requirements with college- and career-ready standards.4 State boards should promote mandatory CCR graduation requirements instead of default requirements that let students choose minimum-requirement tracks.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION

State boards can go further, supporting multiple pathways for students to earn credit toward high school graduation and avoid the outdated adherence to seat-time hours. Focus should be placed instead on competency, such as basing graduation requirements on student proficiency or mastery of CCR content. States can define competency-based pathways using measures such as explicit, measurable, and transferable learning outcomes; learning outcomes emphasizing the application and creation of knowledge; and student advancement based upon demonstrated mastery of CCR content.5

State boards can also strengthen and expand programs that allow high school students to earn college credit by completing college-level courses while in high school. Such programs expose students to the rigor of college-level material and introduce them to the associated academic and behavioral expectations. Dual enrollment programs complement other credit-based transition initiatives such as Tech Prep, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Middle College high schools.6 AP and IB students can pass an end-of-course exam, which colleges often accept for credit.

If states do establish multiple pathways to
Wilhoit describes ESSA as “cascading with opportunity” for SBEs. He notes, however, the potential to falter. He emphasized the importance of states maintaining high standards, and he encourages SBEs to focus on policies that drive improvement. In a changing economy, there is no static set of knowledge and skills that will guarantee that students excel in college and the workplace. Setting high standards was a positive but preliminary step. SBEs must now create opportunities and environments that allow each student to achieve them. 

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NOTES
6. The Middle College Program, a high school alternative program first established in New York, is a collaboration between a high school district and a community college and is designed for high school students who desire a more independent learning environment.

**ALIGNED ASSESSMENTS**
Assessments that are aligned to state CCR standards will generate scores that reflect a student’s readiness for college credit–bearing courses in ELA and math. States can determine whether a student is on track by adopting performance standards that use evidence-based approaches like benchmarking. Cut scores should accurately represent levels of proficiency in CCR content standards and improve the comparability of student proficiencies across states. The data can inform states’ accountability policies and guide school and district strategies for improving college and career readiness.

Preparing students for postsecondary success requires that SBEs account for the entire pre-K-12 continuum. Student expectations at the elementary school level should focus on the incremental progression of learning. Expectations must be clearly articulated so both parents and students understand them. SBEs should monitor this progress closely to improve intervention strategies for students who fall behind and push students who are ready to move ahead more aggressively.

The passage of the Every Student Achieves Act (ESSA) in 2015 affords state boards the opportunity to revisit policies related to student expectations. For instance, states may now use access to and completion of advanced coursework as measures in their accountability systems. New flexibility around teacher evaluation systems allows SBEs to promote a well-rounded approach that is less punitive and more supportive.

**States Aligning Policies to Competencies**

 graduation, they will then also need a more comprehensive approach to assessment, designed to identify and correctly measure the various dimensions of readiness throughout the pre-K through career continuum. State boards can monitor and report on the implementation and effectiveness of their graduation requirements policies and make changes when it becomes clear that there are pathways and courses that do not prepare students for postsecondary life. A data-driven monitoring system can alert decision makers to gaps across race, gender, family income, and other demographic subgroups. Public reporting of these data creates transparency in the education system and informs parents about their child’s progress.