

# Leveraging ESSA

## Strategies To Support Students' K–12 to Postsecondary Transitions

With its focus on supporting state efforts to prepare all students for college and career, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents K–12 and postsecondary systems the opportunity to invest in meaningful partnerships that provide targeted supports and acceleration opportunities to help more students graduate high school prepared to succeed in college. State K–12 and higher education leaders together must harness this opportunity to build and scale programs proven to increase college readiness and success.

All states are in the process of designing plans for implementing new systems of supports for schools and students under ESSA, and those plans need to be completed by mid-2017. This policy brief identifies clear strategies for introducing students to postsecondary expectations and coursework while they are still in high school to ensure that all students graduate college ready and transition seamlessly to higher education.

To effectively support student transitions in these ways, states must have aligned high school and postsecondary entrance expectations, including college-ready K–12 standards and assessments that

provide early signals about students' readiness. With this alignment in place, states can provide students a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in credit-bearing college coursework, and K–12 and postsecondary educators can work together to address questions such as:

- ◆ What can be done to *speed up* those students who are ready for college-level coursework while in high school through strategies such as dual credit and early college?
- ◆ How can we bring intervention strategies and developmental education content into high schools to support students who need to *catch up* before they graduate?

## BOTTOM LINE

Providing students who have mastered the content required for college and career readiness the opportunity to *speed up* by earning college credit before they leave high school while offering students

who need to *catch up* the chance to fill gaps in their learning in 12th grade holds tremendous promise for improving student transitions.



This brief is part of a series that Higher Ed *for* Higher Standards, in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of System Heads, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, is releasing to support K-12 and higher education partnerships on state strategies for increasing college readiness and success through ESSA. This resource provides proven approaches to student supports that states can incorporate into their ESSA plans to help students transition successfully from high school to postsecondary education.



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# K–12 and Higher Education Speed Up, Catch Up Partnership Opportunities through ESSA

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To ensure successful transitions between K–12 and postsecondary education, all high school students need access to speed up and catch up interventions, and cross-sector partnership is essential for these strategies to be successful. ESSA provides new opportunities for educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers to work together to identify gaps in the education pipeline and fill those holes so that all students can succeed in college, career, and life.

## WHAT REQUIREMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES DOES ESSA INCLUDE?

ESSA calls upon states to set college- and career-ready expectations for all students. But high expectations alone are not enough. K–12 and higher education need to partner to provide meaningful supports to ensure that students can successfully navigate the transition between the education systems. ESSA provides states great authority and flexibility to deliver those supports.

### Strategies to facilitate successful transitions

In its ESSA plan, each state K–12 agency must describe its strategies, rationale, timelines, and proposed use of funds to ensure that all students can meet the state’s standards and attain a regular high school diploma. Funds can support strategies for smoothing student transitions, including those from high school to postsecondary education, and the state must explicitly consider traditionally underserved student populations when formulating these strategies.

Specifically, to receive federal funds, ESSA requires local education agencies to submit a consolidated plan to the state that details, among other things,

*“how the local educational agency will implement strategies to facilitate effective transitions for students from middle grades to high school and from high school to postsecondary education including, if applicable—*

*(A) through coordination with institutions of higher education, employers, and other local partners; and*

*(B) through increased student access to early college high school or dual or concurrent enrollment opportunities, or career counseling to identify student interests and skills.”*

### Ability to use federal funding for speed up and catch up courses

ESSA creates a new Direct Student Services program that allows states to reserve money under Title I to support student access to advanced courses (i.e., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment) and academic acceleration courses for struggling students. Districts are also required to spend a portion of their Title IV (Student Support and Academic Enrichment) dollars on activities that support student access to a well-rounded education. K–12 and higher education should work together to

develop these courses and activities to ensure that they (1) are clearly aligned to the state’s K–12 standards and (2) align to the expectations students will encounter in postsecondary credit-bearing coursework.

### **Option to use postsecondary readiness and enrollment indicators to meet accountability requirements**

ESSA also calls on states to incorporate at least one “school quality or student success” indicator

in high school accountability determinations. The law identifies access to and completion of advanced coursework and postsecondary readiness and enrollment as potential measures for that indicator. Including measures of students’ preparation for postsecondary education can be another powerful motivator for increasing access and success in speed up and catch up programs.

## **WHAT STRATEGIES CAN K–12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION USE TO LEVERAGE ESSA TO IMPROVE STUDENT TRANSITIONS?**

### **☑ Develop and invest in a statewide strategy for scaling speed up and catch up programs in all high schools, starting with those educating large numbers of underserved students.**

K–12 and higher education leaders should develop a statewide transition strategy that targets gaps in student transition supports and specifies a long-term plan for scaling supports statewide. The plan should be grounded in data analysis — examining and addressing gaps in specific content areas, regions of the state, and groups of students — and set specific short-, medium-, and long-term goals for the number of students served. States will need to invest time and resources — from new technologies to educator training to tuition and materials for postsecondary coursework — to scale these strategies, so it is critical that the plan identifies a sustainable funding strategy. ESSA’s **Direct Student Services program creates a new funding opportunity to support the expansion of these programs.**

### **☑ Create incentives and remove barriers for K–12 districts to partner with local colleges to build speed up and catch up programs.**

States have considerable leverage through the district consolidated application for Title I funds to emphasize strategies to support student transitions to postsecondary education. In designing the application for funds, K–12 and higher education leaders should collaborate to create a list of high-quality options for student supports from which districts can select. Further,

states can establish competitive grants or designate matching funds for districts and institutions willing to pilot speed up and catch up programs. **ESSA funding provisions support both strategies.**

To remove barriers to the transfer of student credit, state leaders should also work to develop statewide articulation agreements between K–12 and postsecondary for all speed up and catch up coursework. The successful completion of dual enrollment coursework should result in postsecondary credit at the state’s institutions of higher education, with a specific focus on credits that meet core course requirements. Similarly, students who successfully complete foundational math and English courses in high school to catch up on their skills should automatically place into credit-bearing coursework when enrolling in the state’s colleges and universities.

### **☑ Use college-ready assessments for early identification of student needs.**

States should use assessments validated by higher education to identify students who (1) are ready for college-level coursework in high school or (2) need additional supports to be college ready. All students who score at the college-ready level on the state’s high school summative assessment should have the opportunity to enroll in dual credit courses in 12th grade. States can also look at assessments prior to 11th grade to identify student potential for success in advanced coursework. Similarly, all students who score

below the college-ready level on the assessment should receive the opportunity to enroll in courses in 12th grade that solidify their knowledge in core areas and expose them to the skills necessary for success in higher education.

☑ **Communicate with students and families about the status of student transitions and the availability of supports.**

Students and parents need timely and actionable information on students' readiness for postsecondary coursework. Too often, preparation perceptions do not align with the reality of student performance. This lack of alignment can lead to students — especially first-generation students — internalizing that they are “not college material.” K–12 and higher education leaders must educate students and parents about the expectations for college readiness, the realities of student performance, and the availability of supports to help all students make a successful transition to postsecondary education. Whether to encourage a student who has shown potential

to enroll in advanced coursework or to identify a path for a struggling student to transition into higher education, broad communication is paramount.

☑ **Incorporate college readiness into high school accountability systems so schools get credit for increasing the number of prepared students.**

What gets measured gets valued. States have the opportunity to incorporate student transition measures into their state accountability systems as ESSA's required indicator of school quality or student success. A number of states currently include student participation or success in dual enrollment courses in their accountability system, and a handful of states include measures of student enrollment in postsecondary education without the need for remediation. Developing approaches to report on student transitions may incentivize the local expansion of speed up and catch up supports.



## HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT TO A STATE'S ESSA PLAN?

The most direct and immediate way for states to use ESSA to support their student transition strategies is through the law's new funding opportunities. States should expect local education agencies to expand access to advanced coursework for students and can play a meaningful role in facilitating that coordination at a regional or state level. Further, states should take advantage of the Direct Student Services program to

increase access for traditionally underserved students to speed up and catch up courses.

Additionally, states should aim to solidify their partnership commitments to deliver transition supports to students through the inclusion of specific strategies in the state ESSA plan. Sample language is provided below:

*“STATE is committed to offer all high school students supports to facilitate the successful transition from K–12 to postsecondary education. STATE’s K–12 and higher education leaders collectively recognize that to meet the state’s postsecondary attainment and workforce goals, significantly more students need to improve their preparation for higher education and receive opportunities for exposure to college coursework while in high school. Supports are especially critical for students who are the first in their families to navigate the transition between education systems.*

*To meet the state’s goals for increasing the college and career preparation — and long term, the postsecondary attainment — of its students, the STATE Department of Education, Department of Higher Education, and STATE college system will do the following:*

- ◆ *Develop a statewide transition strategy by the end of 2017 that targets gaps and outlines a plan to scale supports for every public high school statewide, using the state’s Direct Student Services set aside;*
- ◆ *Incorporate the transition plan into the strategic plan of the state’s P–20 Council, and establish a subcommittee of that council to develop statewide articulation agreements;*
- ◆ *Share data among systems to create a public report card on students’ readiness for postsecondary coursework, and meet annually to review the information and recommend necessary programmatic and policy changes; and*
- ◆ *Host an annual conference on student transitions between K–12 and postsecondary education and develop a communications plan for making students, parents, and educators aware of the state’s transition supports.*

*Additionally, the state’s new system for meaningfully differentiating school performance will include two measures of student transitions: successful completion of articulated dual enrollment coursework and successful transition to postsecondary education without the need for remediation within 12 months of graduation. We believe including these measures in accountability will encourage local expansion of transition supports.”*

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# Leading the Way: Promising Practices To Support Student Transitions

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As states consider how to use these strategies to leverage ESSA to improve student transitions, they do not need to start from scratch. Already, leading higher education institutions and high schools are stepping up their partnerships to emphasize and prioritize college readiness by developing programs and resources to help students speed up and catch up. States should start by looking at ways to build and scale promising practices like these so more students are ready for and successfully transition to postsecondary education.

## SPEED UP INTERVENTIONS

For several years, school districts across the country and their partnering colleges and universities have worked together to use college-ready standards and assessments to identify students who are ready for college-level coursework. They then provide opportunities for these students to speed up by getting postsecondary experience while still in high school. These postsecondary opportunities, in the form of dual enrollment and early college programs, are based on the needs and resources within schools' local communities. Results show that the programs have been particularly beneficial for students who are traditionally underrepresented in college, such as those from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students. With ESSA, states have the opportunity to scale these programs to improve outcomes for students who need the support most. Examples include:

### El Paso Community College's Early College High Schools

Ten years ago, Texas' El Paso Community College (EPCC) began partnering with local schools on the Early College High School program (ECHS) to ensure that more students, particularly from traditionally underrepresented groups, are prepared for and enroll in postsecondary education. Through this program, students are able to obtain a high school diploma and an associate degree (60 fully transferable college credit hours in a variety of fields) in the years they would have spent earning a high school diploma.

EPCC's early college programs are making progress on closing the achievement gap for low-income and minority students. Without this program, these students may never have entered or successfully completed an associate degree in a traditional track. The schools enroll more than 80 percent first-

### ECHS Gets Results

[www.epcc.edu/earlycollegehighschool/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.epcc.edu/earlycollegehighschool/Pages/default.aspx) • [www.epcc.edu/dualcredit/Pages/FAQs.aspx](http://www.epcc.edu/dualcredit/Pages/FAQs.aspx)



**Thousands** of students have been served at eight high schools with two more locations opening by 2017.

More than **1,550** students have received their associate degrees at the same time as their high school diploma.



generation students, and 87 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

Aligned expectations and strong collaboration between the community college and high schools are key factors. Another key factor is ensuring that students do not carry the cost of the program: EPCC waives tuition and fees, and instructional materials are provided by the school district. Especially for first-generation students, the confidence and motivation that this program provides are unmistakable. And since students take college courses both in their high school classroom and on the college campus, the exposure to campus alone can address some of the barriers these students often confront.

### State University of New York: Smart Scholars Early College High School Program and Dual Enrollment

Launched in late 2009 by the New York State Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department, the Smart Scholars Early College High School (ECHS) Program is working to enable more traditionally underrepresented high school students to earn college credits. The State University of New York (SUNY) contracted with EDWorks to provide

technical assistance for the initial planning and implementation of this program. The program's goal is to motivate students to not only graduate high school but also pursue higher education. The Smart Scholars program provides students the opportunity to earn between 24 and 60 college credits at no cost.

The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching at Columbia University's Teachers College praised the Smart Scholars program for its effectiveness in targeting underserved populations. An average of **71 percent of participants are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 84 percent are from racial/ethnic minority groups, and 51 percent are male.**<sup>1</sup>

SUNY is also pursuing additional strategies to improve access and smooth transitions for traditionally underrepresented students. In addition to partnering with the New York State Education Department on early college programs, SUNY is part of a national experiment that began in summer 2016 to enrich dual enrollment programs at local community colleges, expanding access to the neediest of students through Pell Grant eligibility.

### Smart Scholars Gets Results

[www.highered.nysed.gov/kiap/SmartScholarsEarlyCollegeHighSchool\\_000.htm](http://www.highered.nysed.gov/kiap/SmartScholarsEarlyCollegeHighSchool_000.htm)

AS OF 2014:



More than  
**5,100**  
students have earned more than  
**8,723**  
transferable college credits.



**87%**  
of participants have  
graduated high school.



**87%**  
of these high school graduates  
have enrolled in higher education,  
with almost half enrolling in a four-  
year institution.

<sup>1</sup> Barnett, E., Maclutsky, E., & Wagonlander, C. (2015, Spring). *Emerging early college models for traditionally underserved students*. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 169, 39–49.



## CATCH UP INTERVENTIONS

Leading K–12 and higher education institutions also are partnering to help students fill gaps in their learning through catch up programs. These programs use results from college-ready assessments to identify any areas where students might need additional support to ensure that they are ready to succeed in entry-level postsecondary coursework. The goal is to get more students college ready before they graduate, which will reduce the need for remediation and improve completion rates. ESSA provides opportunities for states to build and scale promising practices like the following, which are already in place:

### Tennessee SAILS

In 2011, Chattanooga State Community College launched the Tennessee SAILS (Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support) program to deliver remedial mathematics courses to seniors in high school who need to catch up to be ready for college-level math. SAILS is part of the governor's Drive to 55 initiative, which seeks to get 55 percent of Tennesseans equipped with a college degree or certificate by 2025.

Through SAILS, students who receive a score lower than 19 on the ACT in 11th grade receive the Learning Support Math curriculum, designed and endorsed by community colleges. Upon their successful completion, students may enter directly into credit-bearing coursework when they enroll in the community college. As the state moves to a new high school assessment system in 2017, those tests may be used for this purpose.

The SAILS model uses a hybrid format of blended learning so students work online but have a teacher on hand for guidance and individual support when they encounter difficulty. Software is used to provide continuous assessment and instant feedback, allowing teachers to focus on individual student needs. By incorporating a diagnostic assessment into the program, students receive an individualized program of study, which allows them to concentrate on filling gaps in their learning needed for college readiness.

### SAILS Gets Results

[www.chattanoogaastate.edu/sails](http://www.chattanoogaastate.edu/sails)



More than **17,000** students in **239** high schools are expected to participate in 2015–16.

Tennessee has saved an estimated **\$12 million** in tuition and fees for remedial coursework since 2013.



## DELAWARE GOES TO COLLEGE

K–12 and higher education leadership in Delaware have doubled down on both speed up and catch up strategies over the past few years to increase successful student transitions between high school and higher education. As a result, the state has seen dramatic increases in the number of students who are prepared for, apply to, and enroll in postsecondary education. The state’s work — developed through robust K–12 and higher education partnerships — has focused on four actions to drive change:

**ESTABLISH TRANSITION OUTCOME GOALS:** The state’s higher education office seeks to increase the percentage of high school graduates seamlessly enrolling in higher education to 60 percent by 2018 and maintain the current postsecondary graduation rates as enrollees increase. K–12 and higher education leaders meet regularly to monitor “leading indicators,” such as percentage of students succeeding in college-level courses in high school and percentage of students completing financial aid applications.

**EXPAND ACCESS TO SPEED UP AND CATCH UP COURSEWORK:** Some examples of this effort include the state’s pilot of a Foundations of Math course for high school seniors with low SAT math scores who had demonstrated success in prior math courses. Developed in partnership with six institutions of higher education, the courses use Common Core-aligned curriculum and guarantee placement into credit-bearing coursework for any student who successfully completes them. The state has also worked to expand access to speed up opportunities through nontraditional means, such as incorporating dual enrollment offerings

into nearly all of its career and technical education programs. Students across the state also can enroll in an AP Computer Science course online free of charge.

**INCORPORATE TRANSITION DATA INTO ACCOUNTABILITY:** The state includes data on whether students meet the college-ready benchmark on the SAT and student completion of transferrable dual credit courses in its K–12 school rating system. The state also produces a feedback report for each high school that examines student enrollment and remediation in higher education.

**LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY TO TARGET STUDENT SUPPORTS:** For the class of 2013, data indicated that 18 percent of students who scored at the college-ready benchmark on the SAT did not apply to college. To drive that percentage down to zero, the state created the “Getting to Zero” campaign. The campaign includes college tours, supports for filling out applications and financial aid forms, counselor training, data dashboards for tracking the application progress of identified students, and celebration opportunities. As a result of this campaign, 100 percent of the last three cohorts of college-ready students have applied to college, and 98 percent have enrolled. The state also recognized that significant numbers of students who were accepted into college did not matriculate in fall. To address this “summer melt,” the state also launched a texting campaign to connect with high school seniors and their parents on college-going topics such as college selection and financial aid. In the first year of the campaign nearly 4,000 seniors and 425 parents signed up for the text messages.



### Long Beach College Promise

In 2008, leaders from the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD); Long Beach City College (LBCC); and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) came together to create the Long Beach College Promise. This program helps LBUSD students prepare for, enter, and succeed in college. The Promise builds on the foundation provided by the state's Early Assessment Program — an evaluation of students' readiness for entry-level, credit-bearing courses at California State University and participating California community colleges that is administered in the spring of 11th grade using the Smarter

Balanced assessments. Students then receive early feedback on potential remedial needs, which they can address before they finish high school and have the opportunity to be exempt from developmental education based on their test scores.

In addition, the program helps ease transitions and remove barriers by ensuring that all LBUSD high school graduates who enroll in LBCC within one year receive a tuition-free semester and students who complete minimum college preparatory or community college transfer requirements receive guaranteed admission at CSULB.

### Long Beach College Promise Gets Results

[www.longbeachcollegepromise.org](http://www.longbeachcollegepromise.org)

Through 2015, nearly **12,000** students have received a free semester at LBCC, and the Promise is seeking to expand to cover costs of the full first year.



CSULB admission rates increased **43%** for LBUSD students between 2008 and 2013, even as CSULB admitted fewer students overall.

ESSA provides a tremendous opportunity for states to catalyze and deepen the partnerships between their K–12 and higher education systems to support student transitions across the K–16 pipeline. With more intentional partnerships focused on providing speed up and catch up opportunities aligned with college-ready expectations, more students will graduate high school, complete their postsecondary education, and enter the workforce successfully.