

# Leveraging ESSA

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## Aligning K–12 and Postsecondary Credential Attainment Goals To Support Success for All Students

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents a critical opportunity for state leaders to establish aligned K–12 and higher education goals to increase the number of youth who successfully attain a postsecondary credential of value. Getting more students prepared for higher education is a critical step toward meeting postsecondary completion goals and, ultimately, a state's long-term economic needs. A streamlined set of goals — all pointing in the same direction — can support and inspire collective action to deliver more youth prepared to engage with the new economy.

State policymakers and educators recognize that dramatically increasing postsecondary attainment — a two- or four-year degree or a credential with labor market value — is necessary to meet the economic needs of the country and to level the playing field for traditionally underrepresented student populations. That is why 30 states have set postsecondary attainment goals aligned to their projected workforce demand. Very few, however, have vertically aligned their K–12 system goals with the postsecondary attainment goals, which might mean that the systems are not rowing in the same direction (see page 4 for

a description of “vertically aligned” goals). Whether they are setting a new goal or mapping out a strategy to meet existing credential attainment goals, state higher education leaders have a great new opportunity to partner with their K–12 colleagues to align efforts and create mutually reinforcing goals.

This policy brief identifies clear strategies for developing aligned K–12 and higher education goals and outlines how states can use those goals to drive strategic actions to support all youth on their path to attain a postsecondary credential of value.

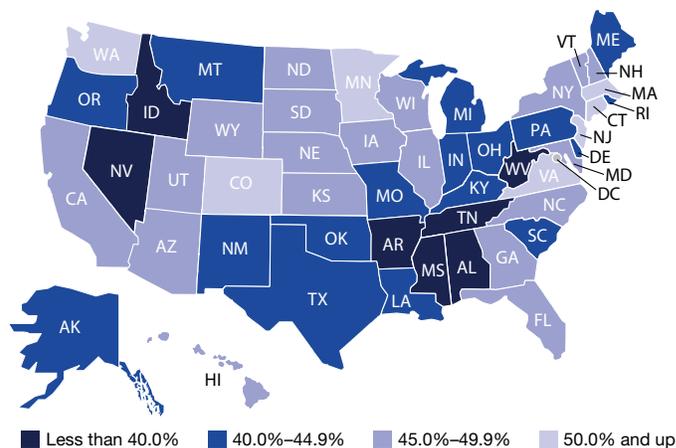


postsecondary education and training. Currently, 43 states' attainment rates — including postsecondary certificates and two- and four-year degrees — are below 50 percent. On average, each state will need to increase its rates by more than two percentage points per year through 2025 to meet the projected workforce needs nationally.<sup>2</sup> In particular, significant work is required to support students from traditionally underserved populations in attaining a certificate or degree.

While higher education is clearly on the hook for ensuring that students are retained and demonstrate timely progression toward completion, large numbers of students in all states enter postsecondary education requiring remediation. Further, misaligned expectations, financial barriers, and unstructured pathways and advising all contribute to disruptions in student transitions.<sup>3</sup>

States can leverage ESSA to bring K–12 and higher education leaders together to collaborate in establishing K–12 goals that will set the state on a

**Percentage of the Working-Age Population (Ages 25–64) with a Quality Postsecondary Credential, 2014**



Source: *A Stronger Nation: Postsecondary Learning Builds the Talent That Helps Us Rise*, Lumina Foundation, <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2016>.

path to meeting its postsecondary attainment goals. Having clearly defined goals and publicly reporting data against those goals can help identify pressure points in the system and allow educators and policymakers to target appropriate student supports.

## WHAT REQUIREMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES DOES ESSA INCLUDE?

ESSA requires every state to establish long-term goals and interim targets for all students and specific subgroups on a relatively narrow set of measures. The measures include proficiency rates on state tests, high school graduation rates, and progress toward English language proficiency for English learners. While these indicators are important, simply focusing on these measures may not be enough to put significantly more students on a path to a postsecondary credential with labor market value.

The good news is that states have considerable flexibility in implementing the ESSA requirements. The federal guidelines on goal setting are meant to serve as a “floor” — in addition to what is required, states are allowed to set goals and targets that go above and beyond those identified in the law to create coherence with their state policy vision. Further, it is clear that the U.S. Department of Education will

provide states with wide latitude to determine the measures and approaches that meet their needs.

States should take advantage of this opportunity to set goals for the K–12 system that are meaningfully connected to the state’s postsecondary attainment goals. While proficiency and high school graduation rates are necessary, they are not sufficient for ensuring that students are college and career ready and, ultimately, prepared to earn postsecondary credentials. Many measures (as discussed in this brief) are more predictive of long-term success.

States can use this opportunity to formalize alignment between their K–12, postsecondary, and workforce systems to set a vision for the future. This alignment means agreeing to a shared set of priorities, developing ambitious and achievable goals that are aligned across systems, and monitoring progress against annual milestones.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s own calculations based on Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation: Postsecondary Learning Builds the Talent That Helps Us Rise*, Indianapolis, IN. Available at: <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2016>

<sup>3</sup> For more information on policies and programs to support student transitions into and through postsecondary education, see *Complete College America’s New Rules: Policies to Strengthen and Scale the Game Changers*. Available at: <http://completecollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NEW-RULES.pdf>

# What Are Vertically Aligned Goals?

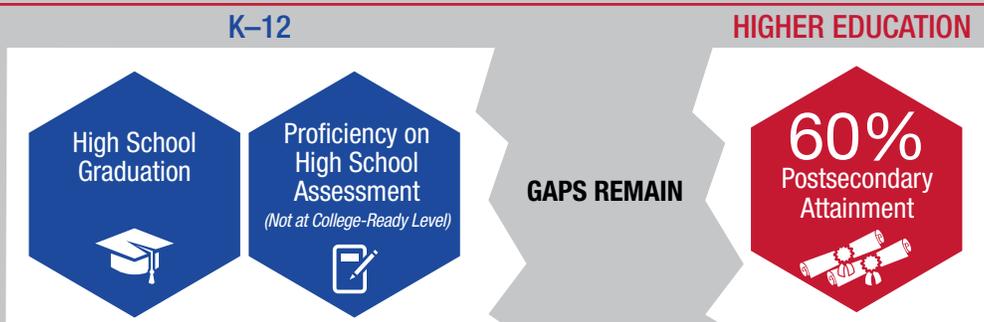
States that are taking advantage of setting postsecondary attainment goals as an opportunity to further align their K–16 education system are executing this work from varying starting points, and their current K–12 indicators may not be the best predictors of postsecondary success.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government has required states to set K–12 performance goals that are focused on two things:

“proficiency” on state tests and high school graduation rates. While important, those indicators alone do not provide sufficient insight into the likelihood that

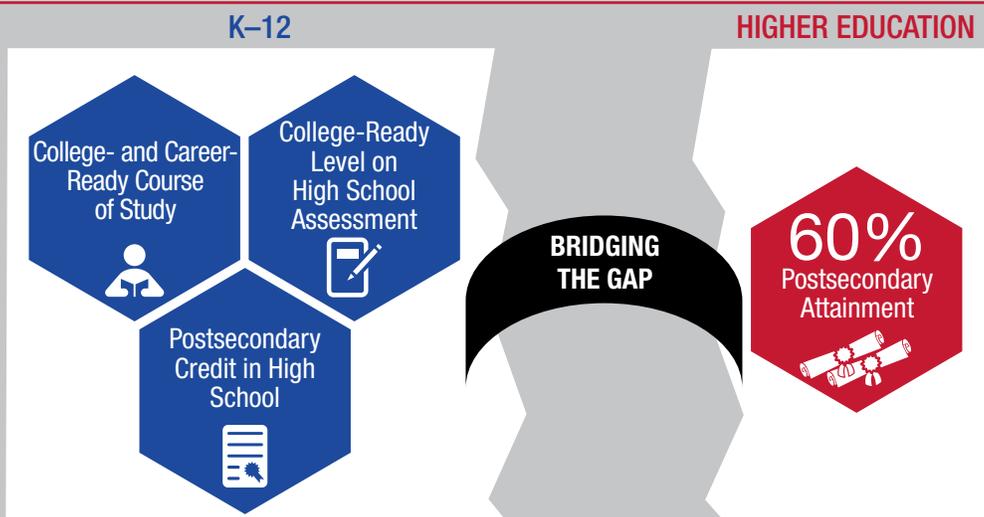
## Shifting Our Focus to the Most Predictive Indicators of Postsecondary Success

### CURRENT GOALS



Current K–12 goals are not very predictive of postsecondary success.

### FUTURE GOALS



Future goals include the most predictive indicators of postsecondary success.

a student will attain a postsecondary credential of value. Other indicators are more highly correlated with postsecondary readiness and success (see previous page), but by continuing to use only these more traditional indicators as goals to drive improvement in K–12, states are not aligning their incentives and assets. And they are not positioning K–12 to be an effective partner in delivering on postsecondary credential attainment goals.

Indicators such as completing a college- and career-ready (CCR) course of study, scoring at the CCR level on the state’s high school test (a level considered higher than the current “proficient” level on many

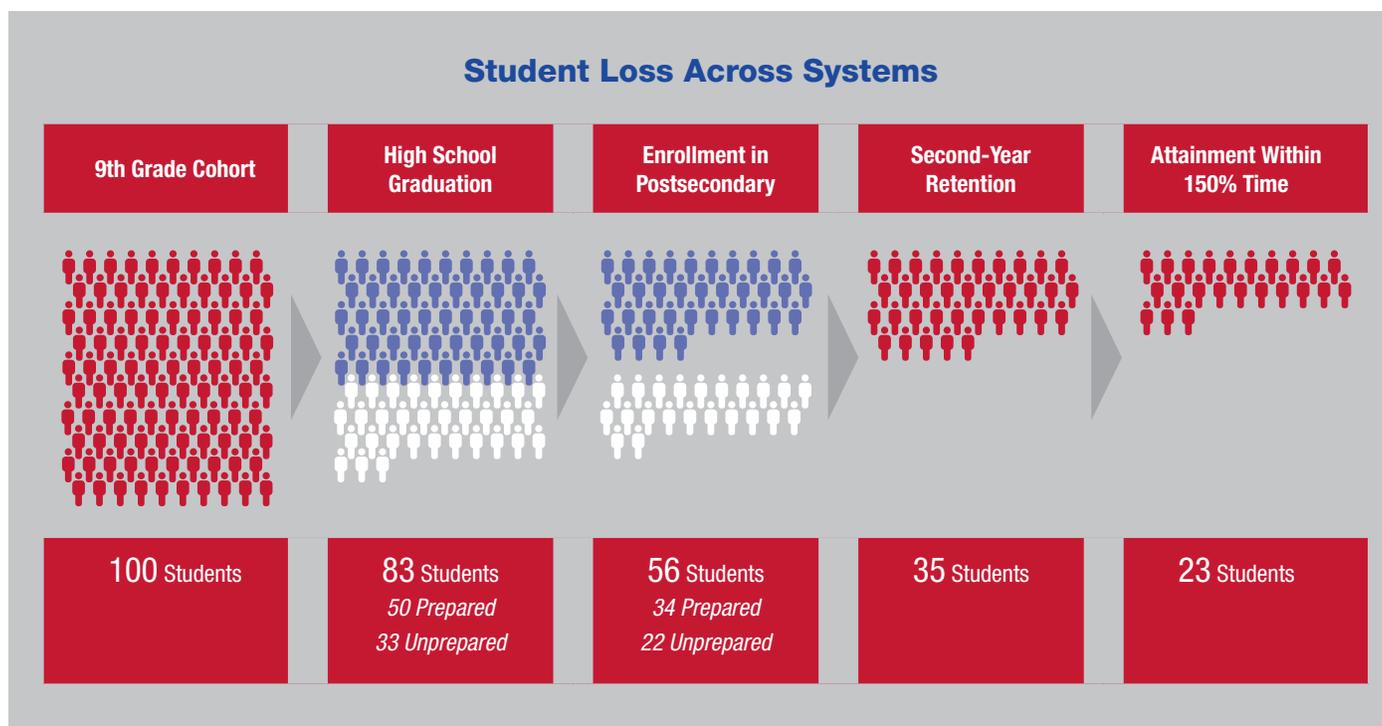
states’ tests), and earning postsecondary credit in high school are significantly more predictive of postsecondary success than proficiency and graduation rates alone. A significant number of states publicly report performance in each of the identified areas, yet very few have set long-term goals statewide for these important indicators. Establishing K–12 goals based on these readiness indicators is the best way to ensure that focus throughout the K–12 system is on the areas with the greatest potential impact. States can leverage ESSA’s flexibility and go beyond the law’s requirements to use additional readiness indicators for their long-term goals that are vertically aligned with their postsecondary attainment goal.

### WHY THIS MATTERS

As the figure below demonstrates, the pipeline of students from 9th grade through postsecondary credential attainment shrinks quickly. While no single point in the system is responsible for all of the loss, the loss is greater in some areas than elsewhere, such as student readiness upon high school graduation, seamless enrollment in postsecondary education, and second-year postsecondary retention. In each of those areas, fewer than 70 percent of students are successfully transitioning to the next step in the path.

States will not meet their postsecondary attainment goals unless specific actions are taken to minimize student loss in those areas.

States have a great opportunity to examine their own data and determine what trajectory of students’ readiness and transitions is necessary to meet their postsecondary attainment goals. That trajectory should serve as the state’s “aligned” K–12 and postsecondary goals.



Goals are only a starting point — states will need to take the next step to identify appropriate supports and acceleration strategies to prepare more students for postsecondary success. Postsecondary systems will not be able to meet their attainment goals unless far more students are prepared for the rigors of college from day one. Ensuring that students are prepared

means helping them fill content gaps while they are still in high school. For more information about strategies to “speed up” and “catch up” students to meet postsecondary attainment goals, see Higher Ed for Higher Standard’s previous *Leveraging ESSA* brief, [\*Strategies To Support Students’ K–12 to Postsecondary Transitions\*](#).

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM PREVIOUS GOAL-SETTING EXPERIENCES?

Research suggests that setting clear and attainable goals can stimulate individual and system performance;<sup>4</sup> however, states have had limited guidance or flexibility on the process for setting education goals. On two occasions, the federal government has expected states to set education goals. In one instance (the No Child Left Behind Act), a goal was established that many felt was unachievable, and no guidance was provided to states on how to establish interim targets. As a result, many stakeholders dismissed the goal entirely, and many states set targets that delayed the majority of performance improvements until the final years of the goal term. In the other instance (Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waivers), the federal government significantly restricted state options for setting long-term goals. This lack of

options led many states to select their goals and targets without engaging in a deep discussion about what performance would be achievable. Neither instance should be replicated.

Under ESSA, states can establish goals in ways that make sense for their citizens, their workforce, and their future. States should establish goals for the measures that have the greatest predictive value for students’ long-term success and are most directly connected to the state’s long-term economic needs. The goals of the K–12 system should be grounded in the performance necessary to meet the state’s postsecondary attainment goals. This alignment can help the state gain the greatest return on investment and, more important, help students successfully transition beyond high school on a path that leads toward long-term economic success.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Locke and Gary P. Latham, “Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation: A 35-Year Odyssey,” *American Psychologist* 57(9) (2002). See also, Gerard H. Seijts and Gary P. Latham, “The Construct of Goal Commitment: Measurement and Relationships with Task Performance,” in *Problem and Solutions in Human Assessment*, eds. Richard D. Goffin and Edward Helmes (New York, N.Y.: Springer, 2000), 315–332.

# Aligning State Goals To Support Student Success

The strategy is clear: All states can and should align K–12 ESSA goals with their postsecondary attainment goals. Executing that strategy is the challenge. States that do not have a postsecondary attainment goal should bring the K–12, higher education, and workforce sectors together to establish one. For the majority of states that do have postsecondary attainment goals in place, K–12 and postsecondary leaders can work together on the following action steps.

## ☑ **Determine priority indicators for goals and targets.**

Determine which indicators in both K–12 and higher education have the greatest impact on the flow of students from high school into postsecondary education and training and then to successful credential attainment. This effort may require reviewing or conducting research to narrow down the most influential leading indicators of postsecondary enrollment and attainment. A substantial research body does exist regarding the key elements for student preparation and success. For instance, the academic intensity of a student’s high school curriculum is one of the most important components in predicting whether a student will succeed in college, so the state may choose to focus its goal on students’ completing a rigorous CCR course of study. Typically, this course of study includes at least four years of rigorous, grade-level English and three years of mathematics (through the content generally found in an Algebra II or an integrated third-year math course), science, and social studies, with some states requiring four years of each content area. CCR courses of study should be validated by higher education systems, and ideally employers, to have credibility as a valued measure of readiness. Twenty states and the District of Columbia

report on the percentage of students completing a CCR course of study.<sup>5</sup>

Further, students are more likely to complete a credential on time when meeting certain “momentum points”<sup>6</sup> in higher education. Students who take 15 credits in their first semester in college are substantially more likely to graduate than those who enroll in 12 or fewer credits.<sup>7</sup> So, at the higher education level, the state may focus one of its indicators on semester-to-semester credit accrual. In some states, the higher education system may have already identified critical leading indicators to monitor the performance of its institutions; however, this step should not be assumed. In both K–12 and higher education, states should choose two to four indicators for goal setting that can move the needle on the long-term attainment goal.

## ☑ **Back map from the state’s postsecondary goal to set statewide goals for college and career readiness and student transitions into higher education.**

Start with the state’s postsecondary goal and identify the trajectory of student progress from high school into and through the postsecondary education and training

5 *Achieve*, How States Got Their Rates, 2015, Washington, D.C., 2016. Available at: [http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve\\_StateGradRate\\_1.20.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve_StateGradRate_1.20.pdf)

6 *D. Timothy Leinbach and Davis Jenkins*, Using Longitudinal Data to Increase Community College Student Success: A Guide to Measuring Milestone and Momentum Point Attainment, *Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University*, 2008. Available at: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/longitudinal-data-momentum-point-research-tool.pdf>

7 *Clive Belfield, Davis Jenkins, and Hana Labr*, Momentum: The Academic and Economic Value of a 15-Credit First-Semester Course Load for College Students in Tennessee, *Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University*, 2016. Available at: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/momentum-summary.pdf>

necessary to meet that goal. For instance, if the state postsecondary attainment goal is 60 percent, how many more students does the state need to help successfully transition from high school into higher education institutions to set the state up for success? Once the trajectory is identified and specific targets are established for the state's priority indicators, the state should take steps to make the goals come alive for educators, administrators, and system leaders, including:

- ◆ **Establishing targets for each school, district, and higher education institution in the state.** Establishing these targets can make the desired improvement tangible and help identify where to tailor student support strategies. To take this step, the state would map out the trajectory of students moving from high school to postsecondary — establishing common goals in areas such as college and career readiness, seamless transitions, remediation, and retention — to provide a cross-sector vision for the state. The state would then break those goals down into tangible numbers. For instance, for the state to meet its postsecondary attainment goal, High School A needs to help 20 additional graduates each year enroll directly in postsecondary education or training. This process can help both K–12 and higher education leaders better understand the type and extent of preparation necessary for the state to meet its goals and can illuminate areas where the state may want to make policy or programmatic changes (e.g., graduation requirements, incentives for completion of advanced coursework, restructuring placement and remediation, etc.).
- ◆ **Incorporating goals in strategic plans for K–12 and higher education.** Goals should be consistent across all strategic planning processes in the K–12, higher education, and workforce sectors. As an example, Rhode Island produced an educationwide strategic plan that set specific “shared outcome” targets that K–12 and higher

education are jointly responsible for meeting.<sup>8</sup> The Future Ready Iowa Alliance was created by Governor Branstad to develop a plan for meeting the state's postsecondary attainment goal, including metrics across K–12 and higher education to monitor performance.<sup>9</sup> Whether the plans are state or federally required — such as ESSA — it is important for priorities and timelines to be consistent. If goals live outside a single plan, they are less likely to sit on a shelf.

☑ **Use goals to direct targeted supports for student transitions between K–12 and higher education.**

Merely establishing the aligned goals will not lead to action; rather, the goals need to be used as a guide for tailoring policies and programs to support student success. For example, a state could use individual school, district, and institutional performance targets to drive resources and supports to areas with the greatest challenges and opportunities. In K–12, taking this step could mean 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.

For example, Florida<sup>10</sup> offers teachers and districts and Wyoming<sup>11</sup> offers students financial incentives for completion of advanced coursework, including dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and industry-recognized credentials. Alternatively, states including Delaware, Hawaii, and Washington have begun pilot programs to enroll students in “bridge” courses while in high school that help prepare them for the rigors of postsecondary education.<sup>12</sup> For more information on speed up and catch up models, see the previous *Leveraging ESSA* brief, [Strategies To Support Students' K–12 to Postsecondary Transitions](#).

8 Rhode Island Council on Elementary & Secondary Education, 2020 Vision for Education: Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for PK-12 & Adult Education, 2015-2020, 2015. Available at: <http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Board-of-Education/Strategic-Plan/2020VisionForEducation.pdf>

9 State of Iowa, Executive Order Number 88, August 29, 2016. Available at: <https://governor.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Executive%20Order%2088.pdf>

10 <http://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2011/1011.62>

11 <https://edu.wyoming.gov/beyond-the-classroom/college-career/scholarships/hathaway/2016-2/>

12 Nancy Brynson, et al., “How Five States Are Boosting College Readiness in Twelfth Grade,” Fordham Institute, Flypaper, December 9, 2015. Available at: <https://edexcellence.net/articles/how-five-states-are-boosting-college-readiness-in-twelfth-grade>

In higher education, this step could include creating financial incentives for students who take full course loads to speed their path toward completion. For instance, Indiana set a standard for students enrolling in 30 credits per year for its need-based 21st Century Scholars financial aid program. In just two years, the state experienced greater than 20 percentage point gains in Scholars completing 30 credits at both two- and four-year institutions.<sup>13</sup> Goal setting — and the connected process to monitor annual performance — is the foundation upon which states, institutions, and districts build improvement and support strategies.

**☑ Establish and strengthen performance management processes in K–12 and higher education.**

The K–12 and higher education sectors should have individual and collective processes to review, reflect on, and communicate progress. States have considerable ability and authority to establish performance management routines to spur system improvements. An ongoing public process — through P–20 councils, state boards, or coordinating commissions — should be in place to discuss performance, shine a light on promising practices,

and troubleshoot apparent weaknesses. In particular, these bodies should determine the scale necessary to meet the state’s long-term goals and develop a strategy for bringing additional policy, programmatic, and financial supports to bear.

**☑ Broadly communicate the alignment between K–12 and higher education sectors.**

Shared ownership for action starts with broad communication and engagement. It is critical that states deeply engage with stakeholders so that they understand what the goals are; why the goals were chosen; and perhaps most important, what is being done to meet them. Goals become especially powerful when shared commitments are in place to meet them and data about performance are publicly available. The state’s goals — and any goals established at the school, district, or institutional levels — should be prominently displayed on public data reports. Further, the state could encourage, incentivize, or even require schools, districts, or institutions to begin tracking and publicly reporting additional leading indicators that the state has identified as critical levers for meeting its long-term goals.

*13 Complete College America.*

# Leading the Way: Tennessee Lays New Groundwork for Drive to 55

In 2013, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam brought together stakeholders from K–12, higher education, and industry to develop a postsecondary attainment goal aligned to the state’s future workforce needs. The goal, known as Drive to 55, has become a rallying point for the state’s efforts to prepare more Tennesseans for entry to and success in higher education. For example, a group of business and nonprofit leaders formed the Drive to 55 Alliance to help generate greater private-sector awareness and ownership for meeting the state’s goals.

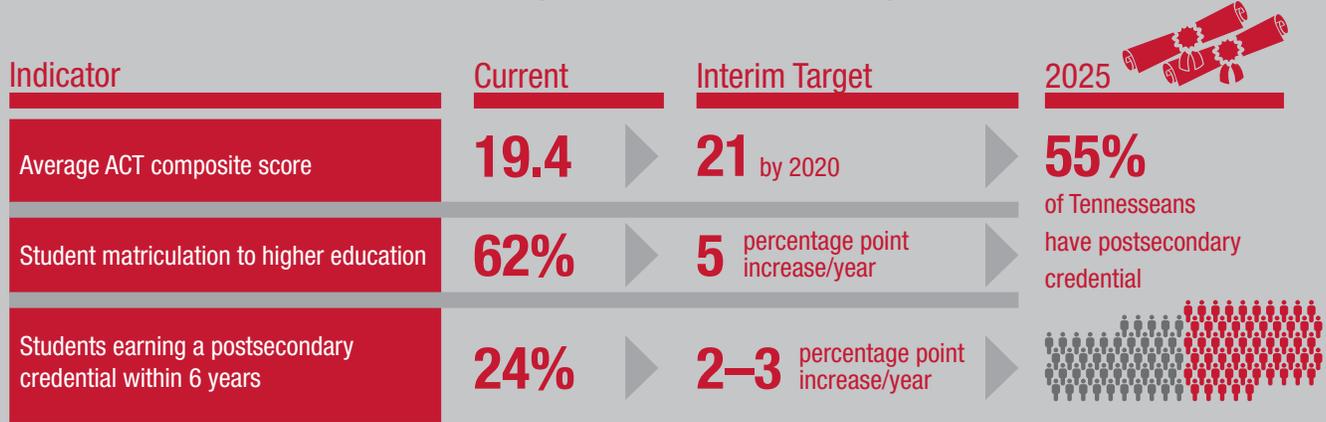
The goal is also a driving force behind the K–12 system’s vision for education in the state. Tennessee’s proposed ESSA plan includes four ambitious goals for the K–12 system, including two that directly connect to the state’s goal of 55 percent of working-age Tennesseans having a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025: (1) The average ACT composite score will be 21 by 2020; and (2) the majority of high school graduates from the class of 2020 will earn a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree.

The state recognizes that to reach its 55 percent postsecondary attainment goal, it will need to ensure that more students enter postsecondary education prepared to persist and succeed. To accomplish this,

it has set annual targets under each goal to inspire collective action in this direction. Interim targets include:

- ◆ Currently, 27 percent of Tennessee students meet the college-ready benchmark in math, and 35 percent meet the benchmark in reading, with only 17 percent meeting the benchmark in all four subject areas. The state has proposed interim targets to push the statewide average on ACT from 19.4 to the college readiness benchmark score of 21 by 2020.
- ◆ Of spring 2015 high school graduates, 62 percent matriculated into postsecondary in fall 2015. The state has proposed interim targets for a 5 percentage point annual increase in student matriculation into higher education.

## Tennessee Sets K–12 Progress Benchmarks Aligned to Drive to 55



## VERTICALLY ALIGNED GOALS IN STATE ESSA PLANS

In addition to Tennessee, other states have included vertically aligned goals in their ESSA plans, including:

**ILLINOIS:** To set the state on an appropriate trajectory to meet the state’s postsecondary attainment goal of 60 percent by 2025, the state expects 90 percent of its students to graduate from high school college and career ready.<sup>14</sup>

**NEW MEXICO:** To ensure the state’s progress toward meeting its “Route to 66” postsecondary attainment goal, one of the K–12 system’s goals is for no more than 25 percent of college enrollees to require remediation.<sup>15</sup>

**VERMONT:** The state’s newly set postsecondary attainment goal of 70 percent will require a significant increase in the number of high school graduates transitioning to higher education. Thus, the state’s ESSA plan includes two related long-term goals: 75 percent of high school graduates demonstrating college and career readiness through an array of demonstrations and 75 percent of high school graduates pursuing postsecondary education or training, military enlistment, or full-time employment within 16 months.<sup>16</sup>

- ◆ As of fall 2015, 24 percent of the class of 2008 had earned a postsecondary credential within six years. The state has proposed interim targets for a 2 to 3 percentage point annual increase in the number of students earning a postsecondary credential within six years.

These ambitious goals and targets lay the groundwork upon which the state can build key priority supports to prepare significantly more students for postsecondary completion. The state’s ESSA plan outlines a number of strategies that the state will create or scale to deliver on this key priority, such as ACT preparation courses, Tennessee Promise scholarships, early postsecondary opportunities, and work-based learning opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

To push local communities forward in meeting the preparation goals, the Tennessee Department of Education also released a report that offers steps that districts, schools, and community stakeholders can employ to help students take advantage of postsecondary opportunities:

1. Foster collective responsibility among middle and high school faculty and staff for the postsecondary preparedness of their students;
2. Communicate with students about their postsecondary and career options early and often;
3. Ensure that all students have equitable access to course opportunities to increase postsecondary readiness and success; and
4. Leverage external partnerships and resources for added capacity, expertise, and influence.

Dramatically increasing postsecondary attainment is necessary to meet the economic needs of states and level the playing field for traditionally underrepresented student populations. But increasing attainment requires K–12 and higher education goals to be vertically aligned — so that the systems are rowing in the same direction. ESSA provides state higher education leaders a critical opportunity to partner with their K–12 colleagues to align efforts and create mutually reinforcing goals.

<sup>14</sup> *Illinois State Board of Education, State Template for the Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2017. Available at: <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ESSAStatePlanforIllinois.pdf>*

<sup>15</sup> *New Mexico Public Education Department, State Template for the Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2017. Available at: [http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA\\_docs/NewMexicoStatePlanDraft\\_ESSA.pdf](http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA_docs/NewMexicoStatePlanDraft_ESSA.pdf)*

<sup>16</sup> *Vermont Agency of Education, Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan, 2017. Available at: <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/Vermont%20ESSA%20State%20Plan.pdf>*

<sup>17</sup> *Tennessee Department of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, Nashville, TN, 2016. Available at: [https://tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/ESSA\\_Draft\\_Plan\\_Full.pdf](https://tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/ESSA_Draft_Plan_Full.pdf)*