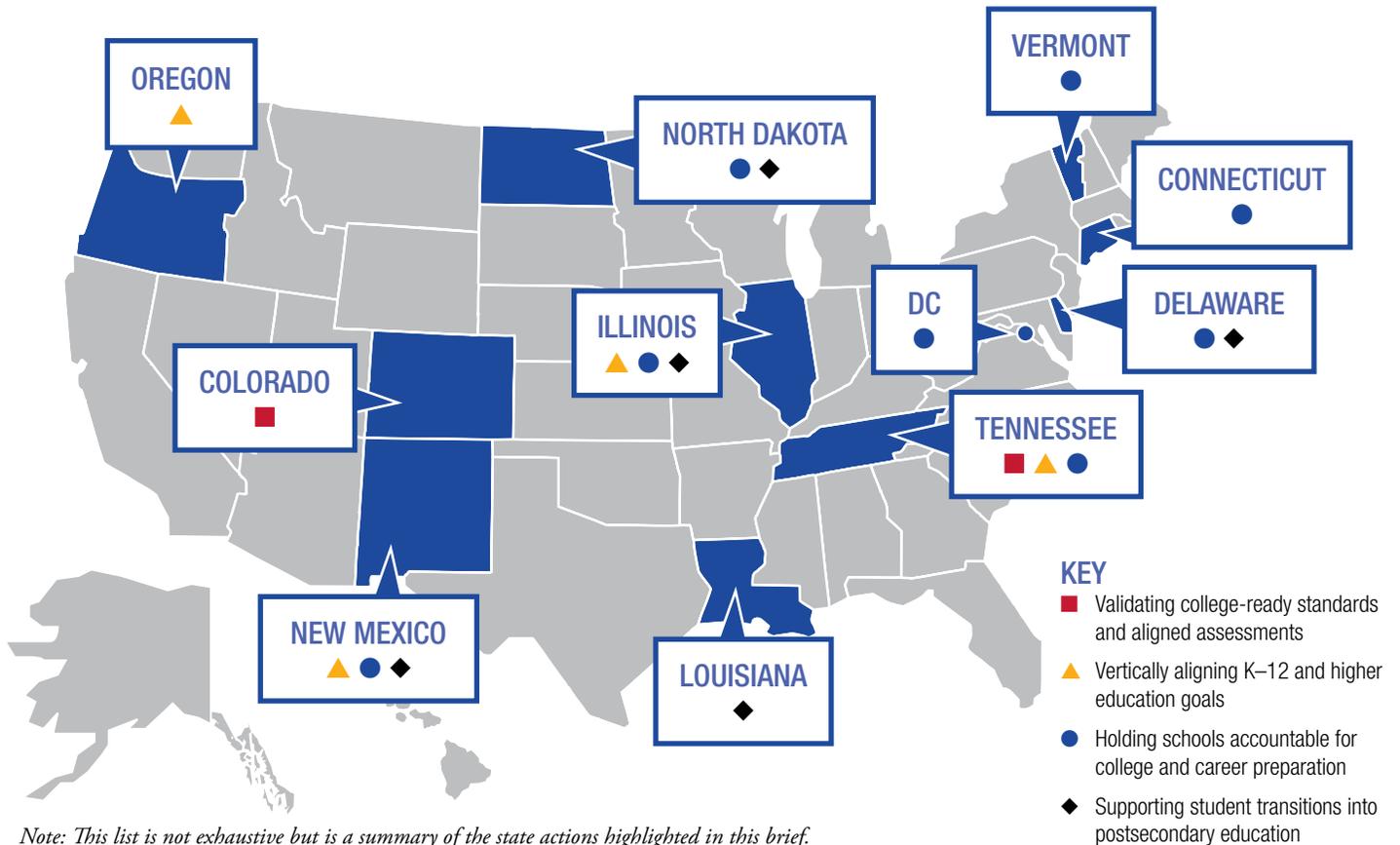


# Leveraging ESSA

## States Leading on Alignment of K-12 and Higher Education

State Approaches To Strengthen K-12 and Higher Education Alignment in Round 1 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plans



*Note: This list is not exhaustive but is a summary of the state actions highlighted in this brief.*

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# Alignment Strategies To Support Student Success

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Over the past several years, K–12 and higher education leaders across the country have partnered to make college and career readiness a priority and build seamless secondary to postsecondary transitions. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have an invaluable opportunity to double down on alignment for student success.

The U.S. Department of Education provided states two windows to submit their ESSA plans: April and September. Seventeen states submitted plans in the first “round.” This brief details the extent to which states took advantage of the approaches suggested in the previous *Leveraging ESSA* briefs to align K–12 and higher education to support long-term student success. States that will submit ESSA plans in round 2 should replicate the highlighted actions, including:

## **Validate college-ready standards and aligned assessments.** Specifically, states should:

- ✓ Commit to using higher education to evaluate the rigor of any new standards, including revisions to existing standards.
- ✓ Specify a process for higher education’s involvement in selecting, setting the readiness cut score for, and validating any new high school assessments aligned to the state’s standards.
- ✓ Have K–12 and higher education boards formally adopt the state’s shared definition of college and career readiness and aligned standards.

## **Vertically align K–12 and higher education goals.** Specifically, states should:

- ✓ Benchmark long-term K–12 goals and targets based on the trajectory necessary to meet the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, and make those connections explicit.

- ✓ Connect the goals and targets to the state’s accountability system and student support policies so that high schools are incentivized to make postsecondary readiness a priority.

## **Hold schools accountable for college and career preparation.** Specifically, states should:

- ✓ Highlight college and career readiness and postsecondary transition data on high school report cards.
- ✓ Include college and career readiness and postsecondary transition indicators in the metrics used to hold high schools accountable for improvement.

## **Support student transitions into postsecondary education.** Specifically, states should:

- ✓ Use flexible federal funds to focus on supporting student transitions into postsecondary education, such as expanding access to Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual credit, and transition courses statewide, especially for traditionally underserved student groups.
- ✓ Target “speed up” and “catch up” supports based on the vertically aligned K–12 and postsecondary attainment goals.

It should be noted that while the ESSA plans present states with an opportunity to formulate and formalize the K–12 and higher education partnership, it is simply that: an opportunity, not a requirement. Many

states took advantage of this vehicle, yet some chose to limit their responses to the minimum required by the federal plan template. That is not to say that any round 1 state that did not address K–12/higher education collaboration in its ESSA plan is not undertaking any partnership activities; rather, it is an acknowledgment that ESSA plans do not represent the full breadth of state education activity.

For the nearly two-thirds of states that have yet to submit their ESSA plans, this resource can be

a guide for promising approaches to leverage the ESSA opportunity to put more students on a path to postsecondary success. Working together, K–12 and higher education can deliver an education system that closes equity gaps, improves the earning potential of our citizens, and allows our states to cultivate a robust workforce that is capable of sustaining and building a 21st century economy.

To support state alignment efforts, Higher Ed for Higher Standards — a project of Education Strategy Group — in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers, State Higher Education Executive Officers, and National Association of System Heads has released a [series of briefs](#) detailing opportunities for K–12 and higher education collaboration to support student success through ESSA. Shared ownership for successful student transitions into postsecondary education can be achieved through:

1. Ensuring that college-ready standards and aligned assessments provide students a clear understanding of how to prepare for postsecondary, credit-bearing coursework;
2. Vertically aligning the state’s K–12 long-term student success goals and indicators with its postsecondary attainment agenda;
3. Developing student support systems that offer students opportunities to “speed up” when they demonstrate readiness for college-level coursework while in high school and “catch up” if they need more support to meet readiness benchmarks; and
4. Strengthening teacher and principal training and professional development programs.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Given the release timeline of the briefs, this document includes information from ESSA plans about only standards and assessments, accountability, and student supports. The brief focused on teacher preparation is scheduled to be released in summer 2017 and will include specific examples from round 1 ESSA submissions.

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# Highlighting Alignment Strategies in Round 1 ESSA State Plans

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The following section details promising examples of K–12 and higher education alignment in the 17 submitted ESSA state plans and offers suggested actions in the following areas for states that have yet to submit: standards and assessments; accountability, including long-term goals and targets and college and career readiness measures in school ratings; and student postsecondary transition supports.

## VALIDATE COLLEGE-READY STANDARDS AND ALIGNED ASSESSMENTS

ESSA requires that states have academic content and achievement standards that align with the entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the state’s system of public higher education and with applicable state career and technical education standards. States are also required to assess students on their mastery of those standards in grades 3–8 and in high school. These requirements set the stage for cross-sector collaboration to ensure rigorous expectations for all students. Specifically, the ESSA plan can be a vehicle for state K–12 and higher education leaders to publicly commit to collaborate on any effort to update standards or select new assessments aligned to those standards so that the measures are validated as college and career ready.

While standards and assessments are clearly the bedrock upon which all state approaches to support student learning rest, the U.S. Department of Education ESSA plan template does not require states to detail how K–12 and higher education leaders collaborate to validate the rigor of the state’s standards or assessments. Nonetheless, two states — Colorado and Tennessee — recognized how important it was to specify the process used to align

expectations across K–12 and higher education, an approach that can and should be replicated by other states that have yet to submit their ESSA plans.

**Colorado’s** plan clearly details its commitment to the use of challenging academic standards that are aligned to the expectations of postsecondary education. In 2008, the state passed legislation requiring the development of a postsecondary and workforce readiness definition and academic standards aligned to that definition. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) collaborated to develop the state’s initial postsecondary and workforce readiness definition and standards. In 2016, the state re-examined its definition of postsecondary and workforce readiness to ensure that the definition — and aligned standards — continued to meet the demands of the economy. In partnership with the Colorado

Colorado and Tennessee recognized how important it was to specify the process used to align expectations across K–12 and higher education, an approach that can and should be replicated by other states that have yet to submit their ESSA plans.

Workforce Development Council, CDE and CDHE facilitated meetings across the state with representatives from K–12, higher education, business and industry, and civic groups. This process led to a new definition of postsecondary and workforce

readiness that was formally adopted by the State Board of Education and Colorado Commission on Higher Education in December. Through its updated definition of readiness and ongoing work to align standards to that definition, the state has created a bridge to success beyond high school.

In **Tennessee**, board regulation requires a review of state standards at least once every six years. This requirement enables the state to make adjustments to ensure that meeting the rigorous standards helps prepare students to be successful in higher education and the workforce. The state's plan clearly outlines

the steps in the standards review process to ensure broad public feedback and specific validation by higher education. During its review of the English language arts (ELA) and math standards, the state convened a higher education faculty workgroup composed of representatives from each of the state's university systems to provide feedback on the rigor of the standards and their ability to prepare students for postsecondary success. As a result, changes to both the ELA and mathematics standards will be implemented in the 2017–18 school year, including restructuring fourth-year math courses to better reflect expectations for postsecondary readiness.

### Suggested Actions for States Submitting ESSA Plans in Round 2

- ✓ Commit to using higher education to evaluate the rigor of any new standards, including revisions to existing standards.
- ✓ Specify a process for higher education's involvement in selecting, setting the readiness cut score for, and validating any new high school assessments aligned to the state's standards.
- ✓ Have K–12 and higher education boards formally adopt the state's shared definition of college and career readiness and aligned standards.

For more information about this issue, see *Aligning Expectations: Partnering with K–12 To Ensure College Readiness*.

## VERTICALLY ALIGN K–12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION GOALS

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, including proficiency rates on state tests, high school graduation rates, and progress toward English language proficiency for English learners. While proficiency and high school graduation rates are important, they are not sufficient to ensure that students successfully transition into postsecondary education and training. Fortunately, ESSA provides states wide latitude to promote indicators that better support their state vision.

More than 30 states have set postsecondary attainment goals aligned to their projected workforce demand, yet very few have vertically aligned their K–12

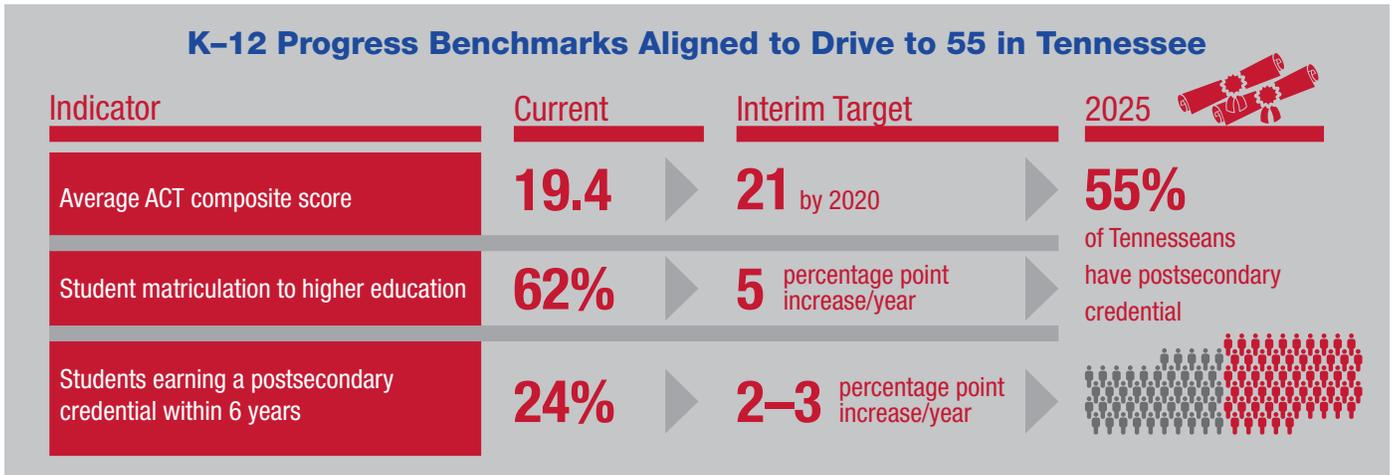
More than 30 states have set postsecondary attainment goals aligned to their projected workforce demand, yet very few have vertically aligned their K–12 system goals with those postsecondary goals.

system goals with those postsecondary goals. Through ESSA, states have a great opportunity to examine their own data, identify the indicators most predictive of successful postsecondary transitions, and determine what trajectory of students' readiness and transitions is necessary to meet their postsecondary attainment goals. In linking K–12 goals to an external benchmark — the postsecondary attainment goal — the state can bring coherence across multiple systems and ensure that ownership for student success is shared from

K–12 to postsecondary education and training.

Four states took advantage of the ESSA opportunity to go beyond the federal floor to establish robust, aligned K–12 and higher education goals.

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



**Tennessee’s** “Drive to 55” postsecondary attainment goal is the driving force behind the state’s entire ESSA plan. All of the state’s strategic goals point toward meeting that vision — even including a goal for the majority of the high school class of 2020 to earn a postsecondary credential or degree. The state recognizes that to reach its Drive to 55 goal, it will need to ensure that more students enter postsecondary education prepared to persist and succeed. As a result, Tennessee established targets to increase (1) the average ACT score statewide to the college readiness benchmark and (2) seamless student matriculation into higher education. These ambitious goals and targets lay the groundwork upon which the state can build supports to prepare significantly more students for postsecondary attainment.

The vision, mission, and goals included in the **Illinois’** ESSA plan directly align to the statewide postsecondary credential attainment goal that 60 percent of residents will hold a high-quality degree or credential by 2025. To reach “60 by 25,” Illinois set an ambitious long-term goal that 90 percent of its students graduate from high school college and career ready. The state is also holding high schools accountable for this level of preparation

(see the next section), creating a strong incentive to deliver on the goals.

**New Mexico’s** ESSA plan aligns K–12 targets to the state’s attainment goal of 66 percent of working-age residents earning a college degree or postsecondary credential by the year 2030 (“Route to 66”). Besides establishing proficiency and graduation rate trajectories aligned to that goal, the state also included a goal to reduce the percentage of postsecondary enrollees requiring remediation. Including a postsecondary goal in its plan is a powerful tool for ensuring cross-system commitment to improvement and alignment. Achieving this goal will put the state on a path to meet its long-term education and economic needs.

**Oregon’s** postsecondary credential attainment goal (“40-40-20”) calls for 40 percent of residents to earn a bachelor’s degree, 40 percent to earn an associate degree or certificate, and the remaining 20 percent to earn a high school diploma by 2025. The state’s K–12 goals in its ESSA plan vertically align to this vision. For instance, Oregon expects 80 percent of students will achieve a score indicating college readiness on statewide assessments of ELA and mathematics.

### Suggested Actions for States Submitting ESSA Plans in Round 2

- ✓ Benchmark long-term K–12 goals and targets based on the trajectory necessary to meet the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, and make those connections explicit.
- ✓ Connect the goals and targets to the state’s accountability system and student support policies so that high schools are incentivized to make postsecondary readiness a priority.

For more information, see *Leveraging ESSA: Aligning K–12 and Postsecondary Credential Attainment Goals To Support Success for All Students*.

## HOLD SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATION

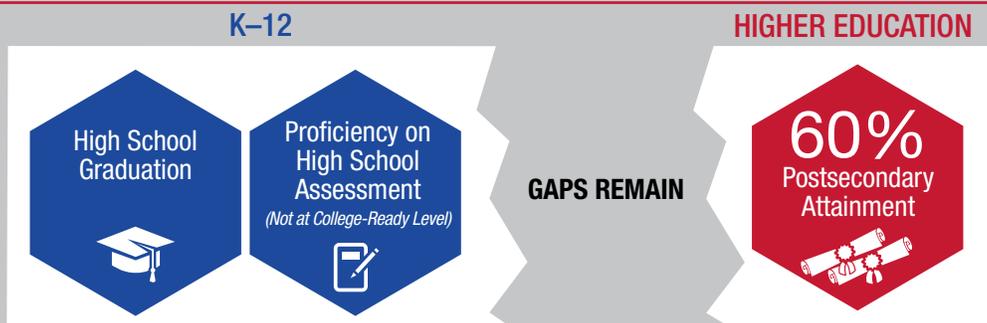
The most direct link to postsecondary preparation in state ESSA plans can be found in the proposed indicators for school ratings. Nearly all of the submitted state plans included measure(s) of college and career readiness in the high school accountability system. While important, proficiency on state assessments and high school graduation alone do not provide sufficient insight into the likelihood that a student will enroll in and successfully complete postsecondary education and training. Indicators such as scoring at the college- and career-ready level on state assessments (which is often a higher bar than the typical passing score), accrual of postsecondary credit while in high school, and seamless

transitions into postsecondary education are much more predictive of long-term postsecondary success. Using these indicators creates shared accountability across K–12 and higher education to meet states’ long-term attainment and equity goals.

**Tennessee** plans to use the percentage of “ready graduates” as its main indicator of school quality or student success for high school accountability. Readiness is defined through scoring at the college readiness benchmark on the ACT/SAT or a combination of early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs). Through research, the state found that students who enrolled in four or more EPSOs —

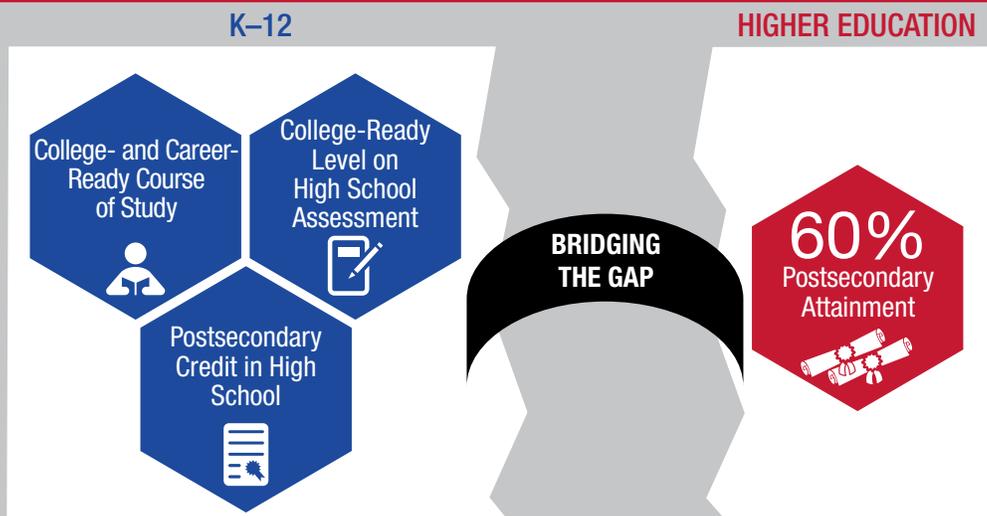
### Shifting Focus to the Most Predictive Indicators of Postsecondary Success

#### 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.

such as dual enrollment, AP, or IB courses — had a 50 percent chance of meeting the college readiness benchmarks on the ACT. As a result, the state has included the percentage of graduates enrolling in four or more EPSOs as an alternative indicator instead of a student’s score on the ACT. Students can also meet that measure through a combination of EPSOs, career readiness activities, and preparation for the military. The **District of Columbia** and **Delaware** also intend to award schools points in their respective accountability systems for the percentage of students that meet the college readiness benchmark on the SAT or ACT,<sup>2</sup> going beyond a measurement of proficiency.

Staff from the state education agency in **North Dakota** collaborated with higher education representatives and other stakeholders to develop the state’s profile of a “choice-ready” graduate. Nearly a quarter of a high school’s accountability rating will be based on the percentage of students that meet that designation. At a minimum, students have to meet the North Dakota University System placement policies (i.e., specific scores on the SAT, ACT, or state assessment or

Using indicators such as scoring at the college- and career-ready level on state assessments, accrual of postsecondary credit while in high school, and seamless transitions into postsecondary education creates shared accountability across K–12 and higher education to meet states’ long-term attainment and equity goals.

passage of a postsecondary “bridge” course) and essential skills (e.g., community service and cocurricular or extracurricular activities). Thereafter, students have options for demonstrating their readiness depending on chosen paths into college, career, or the military. **Illinois** will use a similar model for measuring the percentage of “ready” graduates.

Both **Connecticut** and **Vermont** will hold high schools accountable for the percentage of students that make successful postsecondary transitions. Connecticut has a goal of 75 percent of its students

enrolling in higher education within 12 months of graduation, and schools will earn points in the accountability system based on how close they are that goal. Vermont will use a similar approach and expand its definition of successful transition to include enrollment in postsecondary education, training, and the workforce. **New Mexico** is also interested in incorporating college enrollment and remediation in its system when the state revisits its indicators for the 2018–19 school year.

### Suggested Actions for States Submitting ESSA Plans in Round 2

- ✓ Highlight college and career readiness and postsecondary transition data on high school report cards.
- ✓ Include college and career readiness and postsecondary transition indicators in the metrics used to hold high schools accountable for improvement.

For more information, see *Destination Known: Valuing College and Career Readiness in State Accountability Systems*.

2 The District of Columbia will use scores from either the SAT or the ACT, while Delaware will use scores only from the SAT.

## SUPPORT STUDENT TRANSITIONS INTO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

K–12 and postsecondary leaders should work together to provide targeted supports and acceleration opportunities to help more students graduate high school prepared to succeed in college. States can use this opportunity — and the financial flexibility afforded through ESSA — to build and scale programs proven to increase college readiness and success. Students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations, should have increased opportunities to earn postsecondary credit in high school (“speed up”) and “catch up” on any skill gaps early so that they can directly enroll in credit-bearing coursework when they transition to postsecondary education.

ESSA created a new Direct Student Services (DSS) program that allows states to reserve money under Title I to support student access to advanced courses (e.g., AP, IB, and dual enrollment) and academic acceleration courses for struggling students. Further, ESSA combined multiple funding streams in Title IV to provide districts flexibility in spending to support the “whole child,” including increased access to advanced coursework. The K–12 agency can influence district spending by (1) defining the areas to be addressed when conducting a needs assessment that is required for funding and/or (2) identifying particular activities, if implemented by a district, for which the state would contribute matching funds to help enhance or scale up the activity.

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**New Mexico** will take advantage of the DSS opportunity to provide competitive grants around dual credit and AP course access, including courses offered through the state’s virtual platform, with preference given to schools classified as being in need of support and improvement. New Mexico also plans to use funding from Title IV and other sources to support smooth transitions by increasing funds for dual credit programs, continuing financial support for AP exam fee waivers for low-income students, and providing additional professional development for AP and dual credit instructors. **Louisiana** also plans to use DSS funds to support student access to advanced coursework statewide.

**Delaware** intends to braid multiple funding sources — including Title I, Title IV, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the College Access Fund, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and private philanthropy — to support student transitions from K–12 into postsecondary. The state intends to strengthen and expand a number of activities, such as increasing access to AP and dual enrollment courses, facilitating statewide college application and Free Application for Federal Student Aid campaigns, and developing high school to college “bridge” courses to support students who indicate a need for remediation.

### Improving Transitions To Increase College Readiness and Success



The state's focus on providing supports to “catch up” students while in high school, rather than waiting to enroll them in developmental education at the postsecondary level, seems like a particularly promising approach that other states might replicate. Both **North Dakota** and **Illinois** also plan to support the expansion of transition courses. Each state includes passage of a state-developed transition

course as one aspect of “readiness” in its college- and career-ready indicator for high school accountability. As states incorporate into their accountability systems more measures of college and career readiness based on advanced coursework and transition courses, ensuring equitable access to those opportunities statewide will be important.

### Suggested Actions for States Submitting ESSA Plans in Round 2

- ✓ Use flexible federal funds to focus on supporting student transitions into postsecondary education, such as expanding access to AP, IB, dual credit, and transition courses statewide, especially for traditionally underserved student groups.
- ✓ Target “speed up” and “catch up” supports based on the vertically aligned K–12 and postsecondary attainment goals.

For more information, see *Leveraging ESSA: Strategies To Support Students' K–12 to Postsecondary Transitions*.

### The Opportunity Remains

K–12 and higher education leaders must work together to help all students attain a postsecondary credential or degree. ESSA presents a clear opportunity for leaders from both sectors to formalize their shared ownership for long-term student success.

For state leaders that have yet to submit their ESSA plan, drawing upon the examples outlined in this brief is important to strengthen their approaches to K–12/higher education collaboration and support student success. For those that have already submitted their plans, it is time to collaborate on implementation, identifying opportunities to develop, align, and scale transition strategies.

Regardless of where a state is in the ESSA plan process, opportunities abound to support student transitions into postsecondary education and training. The time to act is now.