

SREB

State Policies to
Support a Statewide
Postsecondary
Readiness Agenda

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

DRAFT COPY

State Policies to Support a Statewide Postsecondary Readiness Agenda

State policy is needed to make increasing college readiness a statewide priority. Such policy must address both K-12 and postsecondary education and bring each sector together in joint pursuit of the same readiness goals. These state-level, statewide policies can be legislative, interagency or both.

The policies need to establish each step of the readiness action agenda and embody shared understandings on a number of crucial points and issues on which effective statewide readiness initiatives are based. Lack of mutual understanding or interpretation of fundamental terms, definitions and goals dilute the concerted efforts required.

State policy should address directly the following *essential* elements of the statewide readiness agenda: standards, assessments, postsecondary application, transition course work and accountability.

Postsecondary Education Readiness Standards

State policy should:

1. Recognize that two forms of academic preparation in high school contribute to readiness: success in postsecondary preparatory course work and development of the postsecondary learning readiness skills in reading, writing and mathematics.

Why Policy is Needed: It cannot be assumed that taking and passing the “right courses” will result in the skills needed to learn after high school.

2. Define the postsecondary education readiness skills as the academic skills needed to succeed in all credit-bearing, first-year course work in associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs in non-mathematics-based majors. Until the readiness standards needed for non-degree programs also are empirically defined, postsecondary education will decide on the applicability of the degree-based standards to non-degree programs.

Why Policy is Needed: Empirical studies to date have focused on the impact of the readiness skills on degree programs; mathematics-based majors will require higher math- readiness skills. Postsecondary education generally applies lower readiness standards in most certificate and diploma programs, although empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of these standards is sketchy.

3. Establish that the readiness standards are not intended to affect admissions to open-door or broad-access two-year and four-year institutions; selective-admission institutions will continue to use related but more competitive criteria (grades, SAT/ACT, etc.).

Why Policy is Needed: Admission to open-door or broad-access institutions should be continued, with readiness determined independently. Access needs to be protected.

4. Require that, within a state, the public schools and postsecondary education as a whole identify and agree on a specific set of postsecondary-readiness standards in reading, writing and mathematics-related skills. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide College and Career Readiness anchor standards that are a sound set of readiness skills around which both sectors can coalesce; moreover, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) are developing high school assessments that will establish empirically based postsecondary-readiness performance levels to be shared by states and by postsecondary institutions within states.

Why Policy is Needed: All public schools in a state need a single set of readiness standards on which they can focus — with confidence that all postsecondary institutions have committed to the standards’ value and use.

5. Set performance levels for the readiness standards at levels that strongly predict postsecondary success.

Why Policy is Needed: The readiness standards must strongly predict postsecondary success or else the basis will not be laid to enable greater postsecondary completion. Phasing the new standards in gradually only delays purposeful action to increase postsecondary success and is misleading to students and their families.

6. Not require, at least in the near term, that achieving the new postsecondary-readiness standards is a criterion for high school graduation.

Why Policy is Needed: The aspiration that high school graduation should guarantee postsecondary readiness emerged recently, in a time when postsecondary-readiness standards were unclear, not universally applied, and lower than predictive of college success. Moreover, the new readiness standards and their associated assessments will highlight a wide achievement gap between what reasonably can be expected for threshold high school graduation and for postsecondary readiness. Immediately requiring that the standard high school diploma equates to college readiness is unrealistic and would have a minimizing effect on the level of the college-readiness standards.

7. Establish the mission of high school and threshold high school graduation requirements.

The mission of high school is to help all students be ready for as many and as wide a range of postsecondary education and career options as possible. All students should pursue the standard high school diploma, requirements for which should include college-preparatory academic core courses. Threshold literacy and mathematical skills diploma requirements should reflect performance levels that at least signify readiness to begin some form of non-degree postsecondary education.

Why Policy is Needed: While it is unrealistic in the near term to expect that high school diploma requirements will reach postsecondary-readiness skill levels, it is

important that the diploma have substantial meaning for future careers and postsecondary study.

8. Require that high schools be accountable both for increasing the percentages of students meeting the postsecondary-readiness standards and for increasing the percentages of students graduating from high school.

Why Policy is Needed: SREB supports the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's goal of having 80 percent of high school students graduate and meet the postsecondary-readiness standards. Most estimates peg the current rate at below 40 percent (a 75 percent graduation rate and only 50 percent meeting readiness standards).

9. Ensure that all pathways to the standard high school diploma include the core college-preparatory course work and college-readiness skills expectations.

Career/technical pathways should require students to take both the academic core courses and a series of career/technical education courses that also include the literacy and mathematics college-readiness standards.

High School Assessments of Readiness for Postsecondary Education

State policy should:

- 1. Require that all students' status on achieving the statewide postsecondary-readiness standards be assessed by statewide, common readiness tests no later than the junior year.**
- 2. Require that the same assessments be applied in all high schools statewide.**
- 3. Require that these readiness assessments be based on the exact readiness standards adopted and shared by the public schools and postsecondary education.**
- 4. Require that the postsecondary performance benchmarks be set at levels that empirically predict success in first-year degree course work.**

Why Policy is Needed: These statewide assessments will focus instruction in all schools on the postsecondary-readiness standards and will enable all schools to help students meet the standards before graduation.

Postsecondary Application of Statewide Readiness Standards and Assessments

State policy should:

- 1. Require that all postsecondary institutions statewide base their readiness or placement evaluation procedures and instruments on the same readiness content standards, assessments and associated performance benchmarks used in the public schools' readiness strategies.**
- 2. Require that high school students who are assessed as meeting the readiness standards on the readiness assessments (during junior year) be afforded the following benefits:**
 - a. Students will not be required to undergo further readiness (placement) testing when admitted to postsecondary education after high school graduation.**
 - b. Students may begin postsecondary course work immediately while still in high school (through early admissions, dual credit and other acceleration options).**

Why Policy is Needed: For high schools and their students to make achieving the postsecondary-readiness standards a high priority, postsecondary education must speak with one statewide voice in support of the standards and their importance.

Transitional (12th-Grade) College-Readiness Courses

The following state policy recommendations support the offering statewide of 12th-grade transition courses to help students achieve the readiness standards before high school graduation. These courses are needed urgently to address the significant percentage of students who are not meeting current readiness standards and, especially, to anticipate and mitigate the imminent spike in the proportion of students who will not meet the new, higher statewide readiness standards due to be implemented through the Common Core state readiness assessments in 2015. Without the provision of these courses statewide to help students before high school graduation, postsecondary remedial rates could double.

The following state policies will ensure that these crucial courses are a priority and are offered to and taken by all students needing them:

- 1. Require that postsecondary-readiness transition courses be provided by all schools statewide.**
- 2. Require that courses be based on the CCSS College and Career Readiness anchor standards adopted by the public schools and all postsecondary institutions statewide.**
- 3. Require that all students be assessed (no later than the junior year) for college readiness based on the statewide postsecondary-readiness standards and assessments.**
- 4. Require that all students assessed as not meeting the readiness standards take the appropriate 12th-grade transition courses.**

- 5. Ensure that students assessed as meeting the readiness standards will not have to take entrance placement exams once admitted to postsecondary education (with certain conditions or exceptions, such as taking a senior-year math course).**
- 6. Ensure that the math transitional course is creditable as a fourth-year math course in high school.**
- 7. Ensure that the transitional courses carry high school credit and are eligible to be funded through the public school funding formula.** This provision is needed to give high priority to these courses.
- 8. Provide professional development to all high school teachers of the transitional courses.** Collaborative opportunities with postsecondary and high school faculty should be maintained to ensure that transitional courses are targeting gaps in students' readiness skills.

School Accountability for Increasing Readiness

State policy should:

- 1. Require public school accountability to be based both on increasing the percentage of students who meet the standard high school graduation requirements *and* on increasing the percentage of high school graduates who meet the state-adopted postsecondary-readiness standards (as determined by the statewide school-based postsecondary readiness assessments and related postsecondary placement tests).**

