

National Association of State Boards of Education

FIFTH INDICATOR:

➔ Access to High-Level Course Work

By Abigail Potts

Rigorous courses and advanced learning in K-12 are vital to preparing students for college-level course work and success in the workforce. Yet not all students get the same opportunities to participate in high-level courses. As they weigh their options for a fifth indicator under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), many states are considering measures to track course access, participation, or postsecondary outcomes.

The Civil Rights Data Collection at the U.S. Department of Education reveals that less than half the high schools with high black and Latino enrollments offer physics, while two in three high schools that have low numbers of black and Latino student offer physics.¹ Even where there is opportunity to take such classes, course enrollment rates differ by race/ethnicity, English learner status, and gender. For example, Hispanic students make up 20 percent of the student body at high schools offering calculus but only 10 percent of the students taking calculus.

As part of their plans to implement ESSA, states are exploring the addition of new college- and career-ready indicators to their state accountability systems. They are exploring three fundamental questions: Do students have access to the courses they need to succeed in college and careers? Are students enrolling in these courses? And are students succeeding in high-level courses?

COURSE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Louisiana's plan includes an Interests and Opportunities indicator, which will account for 5 percent of each school's score starting

in the 2019–20 school year. The proposed new measure of school quality and student success will ascertain whether schools are providing students with access to a well-rounded education—exposing them to diverse areas of learning, including visual and performing arts, foreign language, technology, cocurricular activities, advanced course work, health/PE, and career pathways. This indicator will also measure the extent to which schools are providing students the opportunity to take courses needed to transition to postsecondary studies, including courses for college credit and those that lead to a recognized industry credential.

Massachusetts's data revealed that participation in and completion of advanced courses varied substantially within districts and across subgroups. In response, the state's ESSA plan includes a measure of completion of challenging high school course work as part of its fifth indicator. Specifically, Massachusetts proposes to capture the percentage of students that successfully complete advanced course work in a school year.² Michigan proposed a similar indicator: the percentage of 11th and 12th grade students successfully completing advanced course work.³

North Dakota's ESSA plan aims to bring transparency to whether students are equipped to pursue the option of their choice upon graduating from high school. The state's plan outlines requirements for graduating students to be considered prepared for college, careers, or the military, including participation in AP and IB courses, dual credit, algebra II, and work-based learning experiences, as well as earning of industry credentials.

Data for Tennessee's 2015 graduating

cohort revealed that students who completed at least four early postsecondary opportunities had a 50 percent chance of scoring at least 21 on the ACT, according to the state's plan. However, less than 40 percent of students in the cohort completed even one such opportunity. Tennessee's Ready to Graduate indicator addresses this problem by tracking course participation and completion (AP, IB, dual credit/enrollment, CTE) and accompanying exams.⁴ Tennessee's pathways of evidence also include industry certification and military readiness, which includes scoring at or above a designated score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery.

A few states are measuring access to high-level arts courses. Connecticut's plan includes an arts access measure that evaluates the extent to which high school students participate in at least one dance, theater, music, or visual arts course in the school year. Illinois's plan includes a measure of student participation in fine arts courses. However, Illinois will give this indicator zero weight over the next four years as stakeholders continue to refine the indicator. In both states, stakeholders were strong advocates for including access to fine arts courses in the new accountability system.

COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY EXAMS AND POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

States recognize that even if access to and participation in advanced courses is equitable, those courses can vary in expectations and quality. Thus, enrollment in these courses does not necessarily signal mastery and readiness for college and careers. Consequently, several states are also measuring the percentage of students achieving benchmark scores on college readiness exams such as AP and IB. They are also planning to track postsecondary outcomes such as enrollment in a two- or four-year institution.

Connecticut's plan aims for 75 percent of students in grades 11 and 12 attaining benchmark scores on at least one college and career readiness exam. Connecticut also will measure

SAMPLER OF OTHER STATE INDICATORS

Maryland. Performance on AP, IB, SAT, ACT, dual enrollment, postsecondary enrollment, career and technical education concentrator, and industry certification.

Michigan. Postsecondary enrollment for each high school within key periods.

Nevada. Five measures of college and career readiness contributing 25 percent to high school scores.

New Mexico. Aligned ESSA long-term goals to New Mexico Department of Higher Education's Route to 66 initiative for 66 percent of students earning a college degree or postsecondary credential by 2030.

Vermont. Percentage of graduates that have met an externally validated assessment of career and college readiness.

Washington. Participation in a course that could result in attaining college credits, such as AP, IB, College in the High School, and Cambridge programs.

the percentage of the graduating class that enrolled in a two- or four-year postsecondary institution any time during the first year after high school graduation.

Delaware's plan includes a measure of the percentage of students who have successfully completed advanced course work or demonstrated technical skills necessary for postsecondary success and careers after high school.⁵ Based on feedback from the Delaware Governor's Advisory Committee, the state is also developing a measure that will include college, postsecondary education, apprenticeship, military service, and entrance into the workforce one year after graduation.

The **District of Columbia** provides multiple perspectives on ACT/SAT and AP/IB exams in its ESSA plan. It proposes two looks at AP and IB exams for high schools: 1) the percentage of students taking at least one exam

and 2) the percentage of students scoring a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam and/or 4 or higher on at least one IB exam.

Louisiana's Strength of Diploma Index tracks student participation and performance in rigorous course work through measures of AP, IB, and dual enrollment, as well as receipt of rigorous career credentials. According to Louisiana state plan, "This indicator recognizes the benefits to students when schools provide an array of opportunities for advanced course work and credentials that promote a successful transition to college or a career."⁶ For example, graduating seniors who have passed an AP exam are much more likely to succeed in college.

OTHER OPTIONS

As ESSA plans are approved and implemented, state boards of education should expect refinements and improvements. They have many levers available to address gaps in access and success in advanced course work beyond those outlined in ESSA's state plan provisions: state reporting requirements, Title IV funds, and Direct Student Services (DSS) set-aside.

Data Reporting. By publicly reporting on rigorous course offerings, state boards can increase transparency about who has access to courses and where schools are providing that access. Access to such data can help ensure that school communities are engaging in meaningful conversations about equity and may help states and districts identify schools and students for greater supports to improve student outcomes. As part of its commitment to equity, Oregon proposes to report access to diverse learning opportunities such as courses in science, technology, engineering, and math; art; music; expanded learning; and other advanced opportunities.

Title IV. State boards can leverage Title IV of ESSA to expand access and reduce barriers for economically disadvantaged students to participate in AP exams. For example, New Mexico aims to continue its AP fee waivers for students from low-income communities—students pay only \$3 per test—a practice that has contributed to a

90 percent increase in the number of New Mexico students taking AP exams, according to the state's plan.

DSS. State boards can consider use of the ESSA provision that allows states to reserve up to 3 percent of their Title I funds to distribute to districts interested in providing DSS. For example, Louisiana proposes to use DSS to address findings from 2013, which were detailed in its plan, that 61 percent of students required developmental or remedial math courses and 42 percent required developmental or remedial English during their freshman year in college. Louisiana districts can use DSS funds to support enrollment and participation in academic courses not otherwise available at a student's school, including advanced courses, career and technical education courses, and dual enrollment courses to address development and remedial needs.

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NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013–14.

2. In Massachusetts's plan, advanced coursework is defined as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), honors, and others.

3. Defined in the Michigan plan as dual enrollment, early middle college, career and technical education, AP, and IB.

4. Defined in the Tennessee plan as the graduation rate multiplied by the percentage of students meeting one of these options: 1) scoring 21 or higher on the ACT/SAT equivalent; 2) completing four early postsecondary opportunities; 3) completing two such opportunities and earning industry certification; or 4) completing two early postsecondary opportunities and scoring above the ASVAB benchmark.

5. Indicators include a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam, 4 or higher on an IB exam, postsecondary credit attainment with a B or higher, and achieving SAT college- and career-readiness benchmarks.

6. Louisiana's plan outlines points awarded for graduates who earn associate's degrees, passed AP/IB/CLEP exams, earned credit in AP/IB/dual enrollment courses, earned industry credentials, graduated within five or six years, or completed a HISET high school equivalency diploma.