

POWER OF THE QUESTION

National Association of State Boards of Education

Vol. 3, No. 1
March 2019

Five Questions State Boards Should Ask to Advance College and Career Readiness

By Kris Amundson

By 2025, 68 percent of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.¹ Since states want to graduate students who are prepared for those jobs, they must be prepared for a career and for college after high school—and “college” for the purposes of this report means either a two- or four-year postsecondary course of study leading to a degree or an industry certification.

Virtually every state has explicitly promised to work toward that goal in their state plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and in other policies. But are states really helping students become both college and career ready? And how can state board of education members tell? Here are five questions your board should ask:

1 IS YOUR STATE REALLY MEASURING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS?

As Urban Institute fellow Robert Lerman observed in 2016, “When most states say college and career ready, they just mean college ready.”² The typical state accountability system has long tracked and measured the number of students taking advanced-level courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) or scores on college readiness exams. Clearly, such measures focus on whether students are prepared for college. However, a growing

number of states are using the accountability provisions in their state ESSA plans to also emphasize the importance of career readiness. A popular approach is to reward schools whose students graduate with a demonstration of both.

One analysis found that 35 states are using ESSA to reward schools whose students are taking college-and-career coursework.³ Kentucky has been a leader in this regard. Since 2011, the state has incorporated accountability measures that track the number of Kentucky graduates who demonstrate career readiness. Schools earn credit for students who demonstrate college readiness (as measured by passing one of three college readiness exams). Schools also earn credit for graduating career-ready students, who meet similarly challenging benchmarks, including scoring well on the military ASVAB test or ACT’s WorkKeys exam or receiving an industry-recognized credential. Schools earn bonus credit for every student who graduates both college and career ready.

While many states have included dual enrollment as a measure of college and career readiness, most of the 25 states that incorporate this measure look only at dual enrollment in college classes. Delaware is a notable exception, with the state recognizing students who enroll either in an academic or a career and technical program.

Related questions your board should ask:

- What career readiness measures does our state track? How are the data disaggregated?
- Does the state accountability system reward schools for preparing students for both college and careers? How?
- What is the trend? Has our state seen an increase in students who are prepared for college and careers?

2 DO YOUR STATE’S CTE OFFERINGS INCLUDE RIGOROUS ACADEMIC CONTENT?

Career and technical education (CTE) courses have sometimes been stereotyped as watered-down versions of traditional classes. In the past, CTE classes were far too often seen as the alternative for students who would never go to college. “There are a lot of people that still think these programs are lower rigor,” says Kate Blossveren Kreamer, deputy director of Advance CTE. “I don’t think that’s inherently true, but there is a mix out there.”⁴

Today’s economy requires students to leave high school with skills that will allow them to pursue continued training, whether in a university setting or in a career training program. State accountability systems can be used to find and then replicate programs that prepare

State boards exercise policy authority that varies from state to state. Yet no matter what their level of authority, each board has the power to convene stakeholders and ask questions on matters affecting their state education system. This series is designed to present boards with a set of questions they may want to ask on key education matters before them.

HOW KENTUCKY PREPARED STUDENTS FOR UNFILLED HEALTH CARE JOBS

The Kentucky Board of Education recognized a growing need to prepare students for careers in health care. The [Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet](#) projected that health care support occupations would grow by more than 38 percent by 2024 and that registered nurses and nursing assistants would be among the fastest growing jobs in the state.^a Critical nursing shortages existed across the state.

Yet the state's high school CTE programs were not addressing this need. High school prenursing programs did not prepare students for immediate entry into postsecondary programs.

Working together, the state's public schools, technical colleges, and universities created a 120 credit-hour nursing pathway that will allow Kentucky students to secure well-paying nursing careers by earning a series of stackable credentials and degrees:

- certified nursing assistant (CNA)
- licensed practical nurse (LPN)
- associate degree in nursing (ADN) — registered nurse (RN)
- bachelor of science in nursing (BSN)

Students take high school coursework that could qualify them to leave high school with as many as 51 college credits. High school career academies offer students an opportunity for in-depth instruction and an integrated curriculum. Most students can then earn a BSN within three years of graduating from high school.

a. Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, "Kentucky Occupational Outlook to 2024: A Statewide Analysis of Wages, Employment, Growth, and Training" (Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Office of Employment and Training, Labor Market Information, 2016).

students for challenging, well-paying jobs.

Of necessity, CTE courses focus on a specific career area. However, they should not limit students' options after high school. Instead, CTE classes should allow students to apply core academic knowledge and skills to their area of career interest.

Indiana addressed this problem by creating a series of graduation pathways designed to ensure that every graduate is equipped with both employability skills and also with the academic skills that will lead to success in college or a career training program. In addition to test scores and industry-recognized credentials, students can demonstrate career readiness through project-based learning, completion of a course capstone, or service-based learning.

In 2014, the **Washington** state legislature passed a bill that directed the state board to review a list of CTE course equivalency frameworks developed by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, provide an opportunity for public comment, and approve the list.

Districts identified courses as aligning with both career standards and academic core subject learning standards. For example, a course in residential carpentry that aligns with a board-approved framework also qualifies as a credit in geometry. Such courses let students meet two graduation requirements with one course. At its May 2018 meeting, the board approved two new frameworks to add to a list of three dozen it has approved since 2015.

Additional questions your board should ask:

- Is course content in CTE classes aligned with academic core learning subject standards?
- What opportunities are students given to demonstrate career readiness?
- Do your state's CTE programs meet your equity goals? Are all students given the opportunity to graduate both college and career ready? Or are some students still "tracked" into low-rigor CTE programs? Are your data disaggregated so you can see what courses different subgroups are taking?
- Do all students have access to high-quality CTE programs? Sometimes students on an academic track are discouraged from taking CTE classes. What steps are in place to open both CTE and academic programs to all students?

3 ARE YOUR CTE OFFERINGS FOCUSED ON HIGH-OPPORTUNITY CAREERS?

Preparing students with skills that are no longer relevant to today's job market, or helping them obtain credentials that the job market does not value, can create problems for students and for employers. For students, it can mean a dead-end job or unemployment.

Career programs that do not prepare students for existing jobs can mean a shortage of qualified workers for local employers. That, in turn, leads to slowed economic growth.

Many career certificate programs with high enrollments are for jobs that offer very low wages. In fact, of the 15 certificate programs with the most graduates, 10 have typical earnings of \$18,000 or less, notes analyst Ben Miller.⁵ Certificate holders in cosmetology or food service, for example, often earn less than high school students without any certificate.

Because schools have neither the schedule time nor the classroom space to offer CTE courses for every potential job, they must make decisions about which classes to place on the schedule. They should focus on the classes that open a door to the best-paying careers.

Some states are working with local employers to ensure that students are prepared for the jobs that actually exist. In **Iowa**, a grant from the National Governors Association helped the state create Future Ready Iowa. The initiative provides data and information to schools on the high-demand jobs in the state. Students can use the website to explore high-demand careers, find out what training and education they will need, and learn more about how they can pay for their education.

There are also sections designed specifically for military veterans and students with disabilities.

Starting with the class of 2023, students graduating from **Indiana** public high schools must attain one of four diplomas approved by the state board; must show that they have met a work-based, project-based, or service learning requirement; and must complete at least one of nine means for demonstrating they have “postsecondary competencies.” One of these nine options is completing a locally created pathway that has earned state board approval. The board showcased early entrants for these pathways at meetings throughout 2018, including one pathway that focuses on recreational vehicle construction through an industry certification recognized by a local employer and a local community college.

The **North Carolina** SBE regularly reviews CTE pathways to determine if the skills/job field are still economically viable for students. The board reviews CTE offerings in the state annually to ensure they are still aligned with employer needs and removes pathways that are not viable for students.

Additional questions for boards to ask:

- What CTE courses are schools offering?
- Do these pathways help prepare students for current labor employment needs? What are the annual job openings, median salary, qualified annual applicants, projected annual gap between number of jobs and number of applicants, and the projected 10-year gap for each potential pathway?
- What are the skills and knowledge that students need for successful entry into that career?
- If students will begin their job preparation in high school and complete it in a postsecondary institution, what steps have been taken to ensure that the coursework prepares students for the transition?
- Does the state need to establish other policies to make it possible for students to move seamlessly from high school through additional postsecondary training?

4 ARE YOUR COURSES PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE JOBS THAT DO NOT YET EXIST?

One key reason for moving the focus of CTE programs beyond specific job skills is the changing nature of the labor market. The World Economic Forum **predicts** that 65 percent of the children entering elementary school will work in jobs that do not exist yet.⁶ (Ten years ago, no one had heard of a “social media manager” or an “SEO analyst.”)

Existing jobs are also changing. Auto mechanics has shifted from a primarily mechanical to a primarily technical occupation, for instance. A new name—automobile repair technician⁷—and a higher salary accompanied this shift.⁸

For many students, the high school counselor is their primary source of information about postsecondary options. But in most cases, counselors focus on helping students think about institutions, not pro-

grams. Students also are likely to focus on current jobs and current job skills, rather than jobs and skills that will be needed in the future.

What if counselors added information on program-level labor market returns to their counseling? In this way, they could help students make more informed choices about the return they are likely to receive from their investment.

They are also able to differentiate between the results offered in similar programs in other institutions. If students entered college with a clear idea of what career they wanted to pursue, they might be more likely to graduate on time. It is worth emphasizing that low-income students and first-generation college students probably do not have a clear idea of the options available to them. Boards should thus ask whether counselors have access to labor market data to share with students.

Collaboration on these issues is one of the innovations of the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In some areas, industry-led partnerships already exist, thus offering employers meaningful input. Boards should ensure that where these partnerships exist, they are included as part of the development and implementation of CTE curricula. It is worth noting that ESSA funding for career counseling can be used both to help students identify viable career pathways and to establish partnerships among school districts, businesses, and other stakeholders.

Additional questions for boards to ask:

- What does your state project its workforce needs will be?
- Is there a way to provide that information to counselors and CTE teachers?
- Is your board leveraging Perkins-WIOA partnerships?

5 DO YOU TRACK OR MEASURE WHAT STUDENTS DO AFTER THEY GRADUATE?

Postsecondary education and training beyond high school can include earning a certificate, an associate’s degree, or a four-year degree. Students who enroll in a college program but do not complete it are at a particular disadvantage. They have spent money (and perhaps taken on loans) for a program that conveyed no advantage to them in the job market. According to Complete College America, just 5 percent of high school graduates complete an associate’s degree within two years, and 19 percent of students complete a bachelor’s degree within four years.

Because so few students are following the traditional two- or four-year path, education statistics now consider that students have graduated “on time” if they complete their degree or program within 150 percent of the normal time required. Even by those measures, there is cause for concern. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 60 percent of students who started at a four-year college in 2010 completed their degree within six years. At

two-year degree-granting institutions, only 30 percent of students who began a certificate or associate's degree in 2013 completed it within three years.

Already, Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Texas, and Vermont are including measures of the transition beyond high school in their ESSA plans. Georgia is tracking whether students enroll in postsecondary education and whether or not they need remediation when they get there. Connecticut, Michigan, and Vermont are also looking at postsecondary enrollment.

Boards ought to ask for information about the state's high school graduates. Try to determine why students enroll but do not complete a degree or certificate. Examine the racial and ethnic disparities, if any, in your completion results and work with schools to close gaps. Then work with high schools and postsecondary institutions to address these issues. You might consider these options:

- high school career academies, which give students real-world experience;
- dual enrollment options, which shorten the time between high school graduation and completion of a degree or certificate; and
- better information on the cost of completing a program and ways to pay for school. [Iowa's Future Ready program](#) has a helpful and informative website.

States have a real opportunity to expand opportunities for students by ensuring that they do graduate ready for college and a career. These questions can support state board members as they help their state move toward that goal.

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NOTES

1 Anthony Carnevale et al., "Recovery: Job Growth and Requirements through 2020" (Washington, DC: Georgetown Public Policy Institute, 2013).

2 Emmanuel Felton, "A State Embraces the Idea That Not Everyone Needs to Go to College," *The Hechinger Report* (June 5, 2016).

3 Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group, "Career Readiness & the Every Student Succeeds Act: Mapping Career Readiness in State ESSA Plans" (Washington, DC, 2016), https://cte.careertech.org/sites/default/files/files/resources/Mapping_Career_Readiness_ESSA_FULL_2017.pdf.

4 Felton, "A State Embraces the Idea."

5 Peter Riley Bahr et al., "From College to Jobs: Making Sense of Labor Market Returns to Higher Education" (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2015).

6 World Economic Forum, "Executive Summary: The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills, and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (Geneva, Switzerland: author, 2016), http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FOJ_Executive_Summary_Jobs.pdf.

7 Sarah Halzack, "How Innovation Has Changed the Job of an Auto Repair Technician," *Washington Post* (May 26, 2013).

8 The occupation's mean average salary is over \$47,000. ZipRecruiter, "How Much Do Automotive Technician Jobs Pay Per Year?" <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Automotive-Technician-Salary>.

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