



## Preparing High School Students for Careers State Policies to Promote and Measure Career Readiness

With a rapidly globalizing and automating economy, there never has been a better time to have the right skills—or a worse time to have the wrong ones. The right skills include a combination of the academic, technical, and social-emotional preparation necessary to succeed in the workplace. Some students may begin careers right after high school, but the vast majority of good-paying jobs require college or postsecondary career training. Thus, school leaders, policymakers, and families are recognizing that students need to leave high school prepared for their next steps, including participating in further career preparation through certificate programs, apprenticeships, and other kinds of vocational or career and technical education training.

In response, many states have begun to adopt and revise their policies to promote and measure both college and career readiness among high school students. However, in these efforts, initiatives to improve students' career readiness often have lagged those to improve their college readiness. In this analysis, the Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed) examines three policy areas in which states have sought to advance career readiness for high school students:

1. **High school graduation pathways** designed to prepare students for careers through a combination of coursework, assessments, projects, and/or workplace experiences.
2. **Competency-based education policies** that allow students to earn course credit and demonstrate competency in nontraditional ways (e.g., by using innovative assessments that measure knowledge and skills students acquire through workplace learning or project-based experiences and not merely through seat-time requirements).

3. **Statewide accountability systems** that include measures of career readiness and encourage student participation and success in career pathways and/or workplace experiences during high school.

The data shows that **while some states are taking positive steps to advance career readiness, particularly by offering career-focused graduation pathways, not all states have found effective ways to measure whether these pathways successfully prepare students for careers.** Similarly, while the vast majority of states include an indicator of college and career readiness in their statewide accountability systems, most of the measures of career readiness used in these indicators are interchangeable with measures of college readiness. In other words, a student only needs to meet one measure of college or career readiness to be deemed "ready" by the state. Further, these indicators do not capture which students are deemed ready based on each potential measure—an omission that could obscure inequities in student access to high-quality opportunities for college and career preparation in high school.

It is clear from the policy landscape that efforts to promote career readiness in high school are gaining momentum, and there is ample opportunity to advance this important work. However, indicators that measure the quality of all students' career preparation during high school largely are absent, limiting the ability of states to ensure strong student outcomes, replicate success, and advance equity for historically underserved students. The fact sheets in this collection examine the three policy areas listed previously in greater detail and offer examples of ways individual states promote career readiness among their high school students.

## State Policies Recognizing Career Readiness in High School

KEY POLICY AREA	CAREER-READY GRADUATION PATHWAYS			COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION		CAREER READINESS IN ACCOUNTABILITY		
State	Career-Ready Pathway	Demonstration of Competency in Pathway	Work-Based Learning in Pathway	Flexibility in Graduation Credit-Hour Requirements	Flexibility in Graduation Assessment Requirements	College- and Career-Ready Indicator(s)	Career-Ready Measures in Indicator(s)	Avoids Menu of Readiness Measures
Alabama				✓		✓	✓	
Alaska				✓				
Arizona				✓				
Arkansas				✓		✓		✓ <sup>3</sup>
California						✓	✓	
Colorado	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Connecticut				✓	✓	✓		
Delaware						✓	✓	
District of Columbia				✓		✓		✓ <sup>4</sup>
Florida	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>1</sup>		✓	✓	
Georgia	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>		✓	✓	
Hawaii	✓			✓				
Idaho				✓		✓	✓	
Illinois	✓	✓		✓ <sup>1</sup>		✓	✓	
Indiana	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Iowa				✓				
Kansas								
Kentucky				✓		✓	✓	
Louisiana	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>		✓	✓	✓ <sup>3</sup>
Maine				✓				
Maryland				✓		✓	✓	
Massachusetts				✓ <sup>2</sup>		✓		
Michigan				✓		✓	✓	
Minnesota								
Mississippi	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Missouri	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Montana				✓		✓	✓	
Nebraska								
Nevada	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
New Hampshire				✓		✓	✓	

*(continued)*

## State Policies Recognizing Career Readiness in High School (continued)

KEY POLICY AREA	CAREER-READY GRADUATION PATHWAYS			COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION		CAREER READINESS IN ACCOUNTABILITY		
State	Career-Ready Pathway	Demonstration of Competency in Pathway	Work-Based Learning in Pathway	Flexibility in Graduation Credit-Hour Requirements	Flexibility in Graduation Assessment Requirements	College- and Career-Ready Indicator(s)	Career-Ready Measures in Indicator(s)	Avoids Menu of Readiness Measures
New Jersey				✓				
New Mexico				✓	✓	✓	✓	
New York	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ <sup>3</sup>
North Carolina	✓	✓		✓ <sup>2</sup>		✓	✓	
North Dakota						✓	✓	
Ohio	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oklahoma				✓		✓	✓	
Oregon				✓	✓			
Pennsylvania				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>4</sup>
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
South Carolina	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
South Dakota	✓	✓		✓ <sup>1</sup>		✓	✓	✓ <sup>3</sup>
Tennessee						✓	✓	
Texas	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Utah				✓ <sup>1</sup>		✓	✓	
Vermont				✓		✓	✓	
Virginia				✓				
Washington	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
West Virginia	✓					✓	✓	
Wisconsin				✓				
Wyoming						✓	✓	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19 / 51</b>	<b>17 / 19</b>	<b>8 / 19</b>	<b>41 / 51</b>	<b>8 / 18</b>	<b>36 / 51</b>	<b>31 / 36</b>	<b>6 / 36</b>

**NOTES:** A ✓ indicates the policy supporting career-ready pathways exists in the state. Shaded boxes represent states in which the policy in question does not apply.

<sup>1</sup> In these states, only certain students (e.g., students with disabilities or students attending schools participating in a pilot program) may meet graduation credit-hour requirements in more flexible ways beyond seat time.

<sup>2</sup> In these states, the only flexibility students have to bypass seat time-based credit-hour requirements for graduation is to take an exam in lieu of the full course.

<sup>3</sup> These states have a college- and career-ready indicator using an index to value certain measures of readiness more highly than others.

<sup>4</sup> These states have a college- and career-ready indicator that includes only one measure of postsecondary readiness.





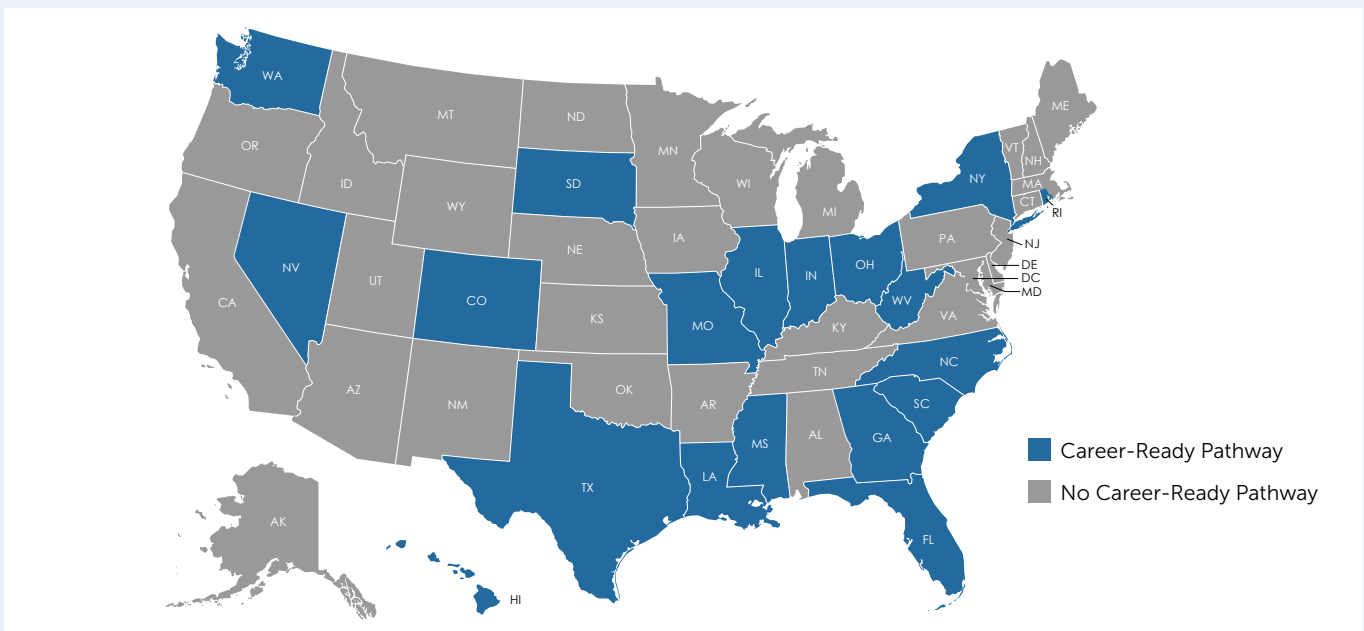
## Preparing High School Students for Careers Career-Ready High School Graduation Pathways

Increasingly, states are creating opportunities for students to tailor their high school experience to their interests and future goals by offering different **graduation pathways**. A graduation pathway is a collection of courses, experiences, assessments, and other requirements that culminate with a high school diploma. A graduation pathway includes the standard high school diploma and the endorsements, seals, more advanced diplomas, and other options offered on top of that diploma. For example, North Carolina students can earn optional endorsements with their diploma recognizing career readiness, college readiness, or distinguished academic scholarship.

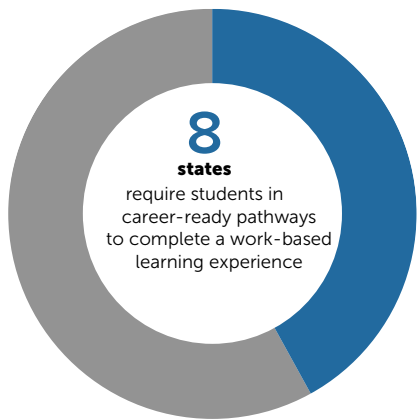
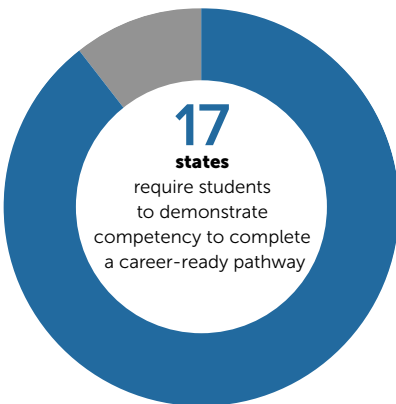
Meanwhile, Louisiana students choose a TOPS University diploma (aligned with college readiness) or a Jump Start TOPS Technical diploma (aligned with career readiness).

**Nineteen states currently offer a graduation pathway designed to prepare students for careers and recognize career readiness.** Some of these states offer a pathway specific to completion of a career and technical education (CTE) program (e.g., a pathway for CTE concentrators), while others offer recognition of students' career-ready skills that does not require them to enroll in or complete a CTE program.

### Career-Ready Graduation Pathways in States



## Key Requirements in States' Career-Ready Graduation Pathways



Career-ready graduation pathways vary from state to state in terms of how, or whether, students' learning and acquisition of career-ready skills and knowledge is evaluated beyond merely completing required coursework.

**Seventeen of the nineteen states with a career-ready graduation pathway require students to demonstrate competency to complete the pathway:** Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington. The states typically measure competency with a career-related standardized assessment, such as ACT WorkKeys®, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), or an industry-recognized credentialing exam, although a few states use more innovative, performance-based assessments.

**Eight of the nineteen states with a career-ready graduation pathway require students to complete a work-based learning experience or a workplace internship:** Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington. Some of the remaining states require some type of experience to demonstrate career-ready skills, but they do not require a formal work-based learning experience. Those that do have work-based learning requirements have different ways of evaluating their quality and value—and some states do not evaluate them at all.

## Indiana: Career-Ready Expectations for All Students

Indiana is unique among states. All high school students—not just those in CTE programs—must demonstrate employability skills to graduate. In 2017, a state panel charged with creating new graduation guidelines recommended replacing the high school exit exam with a **graduation pathways requirement**. Under the new guidelines, students must meet academic credit requirements to earn a diploma, but also demonstrate employability skills and postsecondary-ready competencies from a menu of potential graduation pathways. Students may demonstrate employability skills by completing a project-based learning experience, a service-based learning experience, or a work-based learning experience. Students may demonstrate postsecondary-ready competencies by earning an academic or technical honors diploma, meeting benchmarks on college admissions tests, earning a qualifying score on the ASVAB, passing multiple advanced courses (like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual credit), passing multiple CTE courses within a program of study, earning a state- or industry-recognized credential, completing a federally recognized apprenticeship, and other similar options.





## Preparing High School Students for Careers Policies Supporting Competency-Based Education

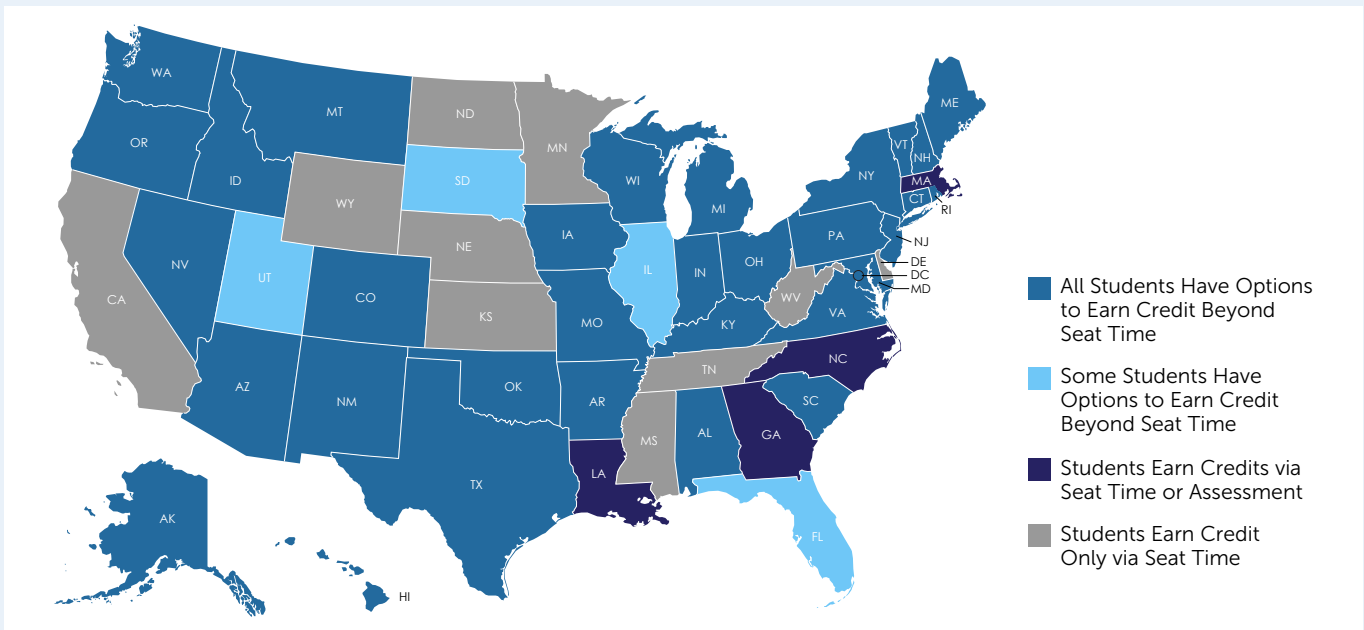
### Earning High School Credits

The best career-ready pathways offer students high-quality workplace experiences and project-based learning alongside rigorous academics. However, state policies that recognize only traditional course completion to award students credits toward graduation can make it difficult for students to participate in these kinds of career pathways and discourage states and districts from creating them. More flexible policies that allow students to earn credits by demonstrating competency (often through portfolios or performance-based assessments) in addition to seat time can help. This enables states to allow students to earn high school credit for career-focused courses, experiences, and assessments.

**Forty states and the District of Columbia allow students flexibility in earning high school credits.**

- In the vast majority of these states, students may receive course credit by earning a specific score on a standardized assessment, meeting criteria on a performance-based assessment, participating in nontraditional learning experiences such as work-based learning, or submitting a portfolio of work.
- In four states (Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and North Carolina), the only flexibility offered to students (outside of meeting seat-time requirements) is credit by exam. In other words, students may earn credit by

### State Policies for Earning High School Credit Toward Graduation



meeting benchmarks on a standardized assessment approved by the state.

- In another four states (Florida, Illinois, South Dakota, and Utah), *some* students can earn high school credits toward graduation requirements outside of a traditional course, but that option is not available to all students. All four states are piloting proficiency-based credit programs that allow flexibility for students in participating schools. In addition, Florida provides some proficiency-based credit options to students with disabilities.

**In the remaining ten states, students can earn high school credit only by “seat time”** (California, Delaware, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wyoming). Students in these states accumulate credits toward their diplomas by enrolling in and passing a set of courses aligned with high school graduation standards.

### Innovative High School Exit Exams

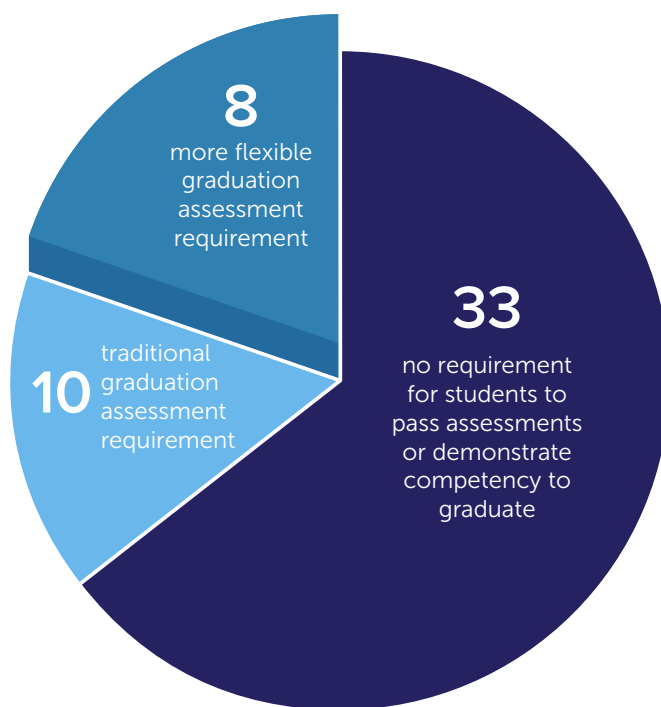
While all states have built high school graduation guidelines around credit-hour requirements in core subject areas, several states also have used high school exit exams as a second mechanism to signify the postsecondary readiness of graduates and ensure students master the academic content necessary to succeed beyond high school. Historically, exit exam policies relied on traditional, statewide standardized assessments. However, exit exams have shifted as many states eliminated or updated their graduation assessment requirements. Indeed, thirty-two states and the District of Columbia do not require all

students to pass assessments or demonstrate competency for high school graduation.

**Of the eighteen states with graduation assessment requirements, ten states have more traditional—and less flexible—options:** Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. These policies function similarly to exit exams of the past that require all students to meet benchmarks on statewide standardized assessments to graduate from high school with states offering students some alternatives, like completing college entrance exams or earning dual credit, if they cannot meet the benchmarks.

**The remaining eight states have, to varying degrees, adopted more innovative, flexible, competency-based approaches to high school graduation assessment requirements:** Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. Some of the innovative policies, like those in New Mexico, allow students to demonstrate competency for graduation purposes by meeting benchmarks on a standardized test selected from a menu, by demonstrating their knowledge through a local proficiency-based assessment or portfolio of work, or another alternative. Rhode Island, on the other hand, uses only performance-based assessments—eschewing traditional standardized assessments altogether. In most of the eight states, students may demonstrate competency for graduation on exams that measure career readiness, such as an industry-recognized credentialing exam, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), or ACT WorkKeys®.

### Number of States with Graduation Assessment Requirements



## Colorado: Creating Options for Demonstrating Graduation Readiness

Colorado's Menu of College and Career-Ready Demonstrations is an example of how one state provides students multiple ways to demonstrate college and career readiness (CCR) for high school graduation, including through a number of career-ready options like the National Career Readiness Certificate on ACT WorkKeys®, the ASVAB, and an industry certificate or credential. The menu also suggests a number of competency-based options, including capstone projects (evaluated by a portfolio of student work) and a "collaboratively developed, standards-based performance assessment" that would require students to create a complex product or presentation.

The graduating Class of 2021 is the first cohort required to meet the state's new graduation guidelines. However, in Colorado, local school districts ultimately are responsible for establishing their own high school graduation requirements. Under the new rules, local school boards are required to adopt a local menu of CCR demonstrations from the state-provided list. They may adopt some, or all, of the options on the menu—and may choose to raise the benchmarks students must meet in math and English language arts to earn a diploma.







- meeting benchmarks on a general career readiness assessment, like the ACT WorkKeys®;
- earning a military-ready score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB); and
- participating in a state-approved apprenticeship training program.

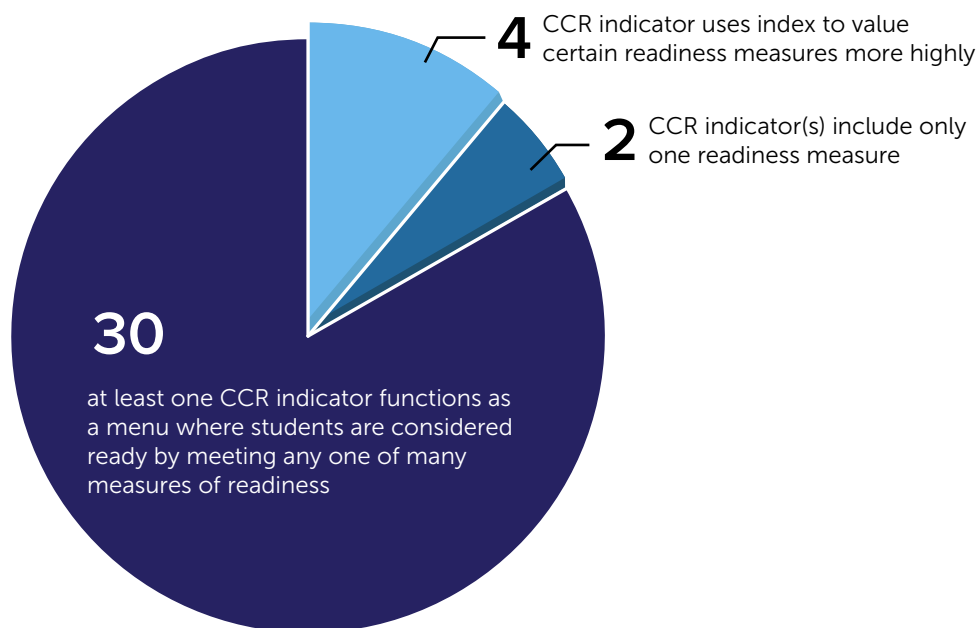
However, **just five states and the District of Columbia avoid using CCR indicator(s) that function as a menu, where students demonstrate postsecondary readiness by meeting one of many potential measures.** The District of Columbia and Pennsylvania use CCR indicators that consider student achievement against a single CCR measure, but these indicators fail to consider students’ readiness for both college *and* careers. In Pennsylvania’s case, the state measures only whether students are likely to be career ready, while the District of Columbia measures only if students are likely to be college ready. The other four states (Arkansas, Louisiana, New York, and South Dakota) use a CCR index to value certain measures of CCR more highly than others, which enables them to consider a broad range of measures inclusive of both college readiness (e.g., attainment of college credit via dual enrollment) and career readiness (e.g., acquisition of an industry-recognized credential or CTE endorsement).

In contrast, **an accountability indicator based on a menu of CCR measures (used by thirty states) can recognize a wide range of student outcomes related to college and career preparation, but may suffer from three key shortcomings:**

1. These indicators often are structured in ways that treat all measures of college readiness and career readiness the same—regardless of whether those measures are equally rigorous or indicate students are prepared for certain, but not all, postsecondary options. In many cases, students can be deemed “college and career ready” even if they never demonstrate achievement on a measure related to career readiness.
2. Many measures used in CCR indicators are based on student participation in programs or courses, rather than on the rigor or quality of those experiences or—ideally—actual evidence of successful postsecondary outcomes beyond high school, like enrollment in nonremedial college courses, job placement, or military enlistment.
3. CCR indicators designed as menus often fail to recognize which students are deemed ready by which measures. This can mask disparities faced by students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities in accessing the courses and experiences needed to prepare for postsecondary opportunities.

Although the widespread inclusion of CCR indicators indicates a growing recognition of the importance of expanding access to high-quality college and career pathways, work remains to refine these indicators to include measures that truly reflect skill attainment and student outcomes (i.e., job placement, postsecondary enrollment and retention) and identify equity gaps in students’ high school experiences.

### How States’ College- and Career-Ready Indicators Consider Multiple Measures



## Louisiana: Recognizing the Strength of the Diploma

The strength of diploma index (detailed on page 57 of Louisiana’s approved ESSA plan) is one of the most innovative CCR indicators in the country. High schools receive points in the Louisiana accountability system based on whether students graduate on time and earn a diploma (up to 100 points) and the credentials students earn while in high school (up to sixty additional points). The more valuable the credential, the more points a school receives. For example, schools receive 160 total points for students who graduate in four years with a high school diploma as well as an associate’s degree, 150 points for students who earn a diploma plus a passing score on an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exam, 110 points for those with a diploma and a passing course grade for an AP or dual-enrollment class, and 100 points for students who graduate in four years with no additional credentials. Similarly, high schools receive fewer than 100 points for students who graduate in more than four years, or through a less rigorous pathway than a traditional high school diploma.

## South Dakota: Valuing Multiple Measures of Students’ Readiness

South Dakota uses a college- and career-readiness indicator that considers two sources of data on students’ preparedness for college and careers during high school: assessments and coursework (see page 57 of the state’s 2018–2019 *Accountability and School Performance Index Technical Manual*). For readiness based on assessment results, the state examines student performance in English language arts and mathematics on statewide standardized assessments, the ACT, ACCUPLACER, and the National Career Readiness Certificate/ACT WorkKeys®. For readiness based on course experiences, South Dakota considers whether students are CTE concentrators (i.e., earning two credits within a single career cluster), earn dual credit by completing a college-level course with at least a C grade, or attain a score of 3 or higher on an exam associated with an Advanced Placement (AP) course. Students who demonstrate they are college and career ready by assessments or coursework receive half a point in the index, while students who demonstrate readiness on both assessments and coursework receive a full point.



The **Alliance for Excellent Education** (All4Ed) is a Washington, DC–based national policy, practice, and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those underperforming and those historically underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. [all4ed.org](http://all4ed.org)

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