



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Ready for What?

How Multiple Graduation Pathways Do—and
Do Not—Signal Readiness for College and Careers

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Acknowledgments

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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](#)

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Executive Summary

Postsecondary education is vital to thrive, not just survive. Eighty percent of good-paying jobs require postsecondary education, and 56 percent require a bachelor's degree or higher.¹ While the nation's high school graduation rate has reached an all-time high of 85 percent,² students are insufficiently prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce. About 70 percent of entering students at public two-year colleges require remediation to master academic content they should have learned in high school, including nearly 80 percent of Black students, 75 percent of Latino students, and 64 percent of White students.³

During the past several years, policymakers have updated high school graduation requirements to increase students' preparation for postsecondary education and the workforce. At the same time, they have recognized that increases in the rigor of these requirements may require greater flexibility in how students demonstrate that they are prepared for postsecondary opportunities. This Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed) report provides state policymakers and advocates with an analysis of the various graduation pathways currently in effect. It also offers recommendations to help lawmakers and others focus graduation pathway policies on equity and excellence.

This analysis finds that twenty-nine states offer multiple pathways to a high school diploma, providing students with options regarding the high school experiences they will have and, often, the postsecondary experiences for which they will be prepared.

Multiple options and choices among graduation pathways, however, also can create confusion and inequities for students and families. In many states, multiple graduation pathways have created a bifurcated system of diploma requirements, forcing students into decisions that may limit their choices for life after high school—sometimes without students even realizing these decisions would have such a long-lasting impact. Rather than opening doors to opportunity beyond high school, some pathways may close the door to postsecondary options. For example, **students in thirteen states choose between a college-preparatory pathway and a career pathway—a choice that may limit the postsecondary options available to them.**

As policymakers continue to use high school graduation requirements as a mechanism to increase college and career readiness, All4Ed offers state leaders policy considerations for graduation pathways that balance rigor, quality, and equitable access and opportunity.

Introduction

“What do I need to do to graduate from high school?” This question is top of mind for high school students and their families, but increasingly the answer is more complicated and varies by state, by district, and by student. **For students in twenty-nine states, high school graduation requirements depend on differentiated diplomas, pathways, courses of study, or demonstrations of competency.** Many of these states have created an increasingly confusing and bifurcated system of requirements and assessments, forcing students into choices that may limit their postsecondary options. Rather than opening a door to opportunity beyond high school, some **graduation pathways** may close the door to certain postsecondary choices, particularly for historically underserved students including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities.

Most states set graduation requirements—which often include required courses, credit hours, and assessments—to establish minimum expectations for students to exit high school and receive a diploma.⁴ The goal has been for the diploma to signal that students meeting the minimum requirements are ready for college or careers. During the last three decades, however, as policymakers, colleges, and employers raised concerns about the academic preparation of high school graduates, states have used various mechanisms to better align high school content with the expectations of higher education and industry leaders. Those include revamped high school graduation requirements, investments in dual-enrollment programs, and updated assessment systems.

While states have tweaked their graduation policies in various ways, this analysis explores the proliferation of graduation pathways. (See the **glossary** for definitions of key terms). For years, most high school students within a state had to meet the same set of requirements for the same diploma. While specific courses or the rigor of their paths through high school could differ, most students met minimum credit requirements in a core set of subjects and an additional set of elective credits—and, occasionally, had to pass the state's exit exam(s). However, the idea of a traditional pathway through high school is changing as states, districts, and schools increasingly recognize that many students graduate ill-prepared for postsecondary opportunities.

Research Questions

As a result of state policy choices to diversify graduation pathways, the high school experience now looks different for large numbers of students. Some experience engaging and challenging coursework in a variety of content areas. Some participate in experiential learning opportunities, such as student leadership organizations, service learning, apprenticeships, and work-based learning. Some students take multiple end-of-course exams, while others demonstrate their knowledge and competency through performance-based assessments tied to experiential learning opportunities. Some earn an advanced diploma that recognizes focused study in a specific area of interest. Some simply earn a standard high school diploma that fails to prepare them for college admissions requirements.

As states introduce more flexibility, differentiation, and personalization into pathways leading to a high school diploma, additional transparency is needed regarding the expected postsecondary outcomes that align with each pathway option.

It also is critical for all graduation pathways to represent a minimum degree of rigor; otherwise, some students may miss out on meaningful postsecondary opportunities.

This analysis examines public information on high school graduation requirements⁵ available on state websites and in state legislation or administrative code to answer the following questions:

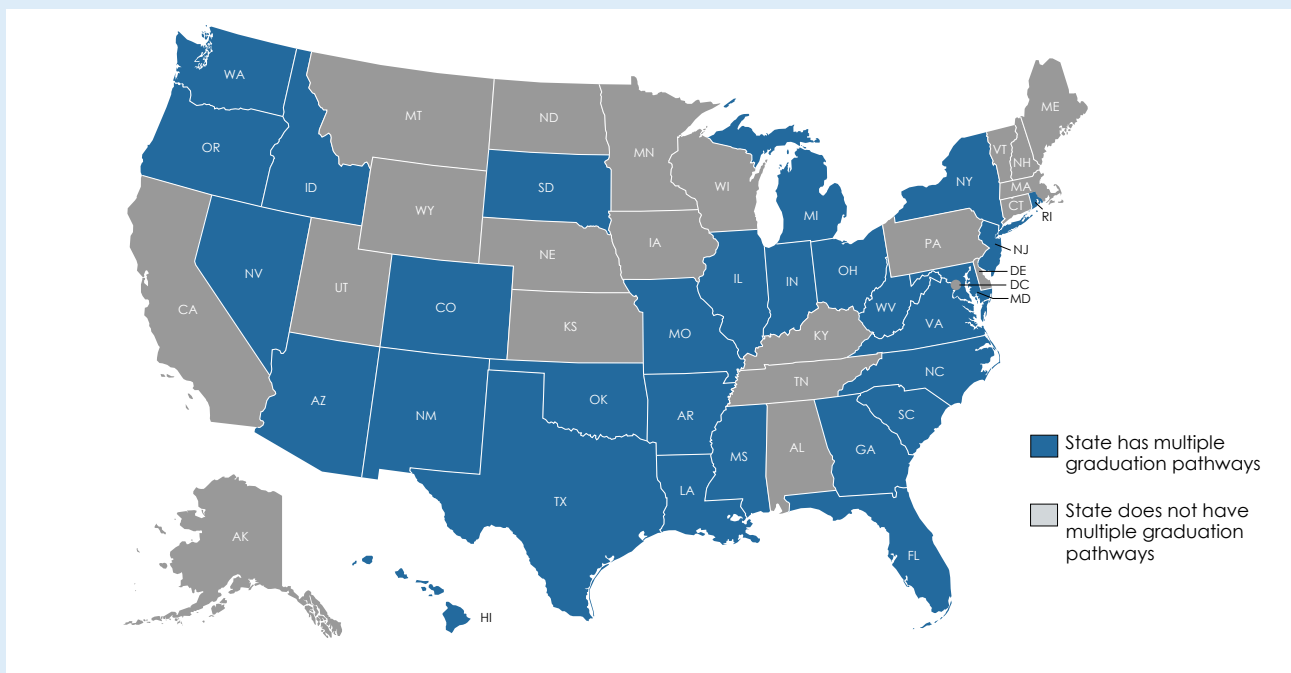
1. Do states offer multiple pathways or is only one pathway to graduation available?
2. Do states with multiple graduation pathways offer students choices about course requirements, assessment requirements, or both?
3. In states with multiple graduation pathways based on differentiated course requirements
 - a. are students required to select a graduation pathway (i.e., there is no default pathway) or is a pathway optional?
 - b. do students have pathway choices leading to both college and career readiness?
 - c. do pathways signal students are prepared for specific college or career choices?

- A **state-by-state table** of findings appears in the appendix. States regularly review and revise high school graduation requirements, and changes can take years to go into effect to avoid unfairly holding students accountable for standards not in place when they entered high school. This analysis reflects requirements in effect for the Class of 2021 and notes future changes where possible. However, the analysis does not consider temporary changes, exemptions, or waivers of graduation requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a Single Diploma to Personalized Pathways

States have taken various approaches to differentiate their graduation requirements and award high school diplomas. Some have established multiple diploma options, each with a distinct name and a distinct set of requirements. Others provide students with choices to personalize a diploma through **seals or endorsements** that recognize a focused area of study. Others modified their exit exam policies to offer students a menu of ways they can demonstrate competency in key subjects, rather than requiring all students to pass the same assessment. In some cases, these policies require a decision on the part of students—whether it is a mandatory choice to enroll in one of a number of offered graduation pathways or a proactive choice to opt into a more rigorous graduation pathway instead of the regular high school diploma. In other cases, though, students have no choice since failing to pass a required component or meet a prerequisite blocks their access to a pathway.

In 21 states and the District of Columbia, the state has a uniform set of diploma requirements for all students. In the remaining 29 states, students have options regarding their graduation pathway. Some make these options clear—for example, when a student must select a pathway from a menu. Others rely on students to seek out specialized pathways.



Question 1. Do states offer multiple pathways or only one pathway to graduation?

In twenty-nine states, students have options regarding their high school graduation pathway. (See figure 1 on the previous page).

Some states make these options very clear to students—for example, when a student must proactively select a pathway or an assessment from a menu. Other states rely more on teachers, counselors, families, or students themselves to seek out more rigorous or specialized pathways. The twenty-nine states include those with a single, standard diploma that students can pair with endorsements, seals, or other designations to recognize **academic honors** or focused study, as well as states with multiple high school diploma types, each with a different set of requirements. Both approaches—a system of separate diplomas and a system with a single diploma plus optional endorsements—result in the same outcome for students: a choice of pathway to a high school diploma.

In the other twenty-one states and the District of Columbia, the state has a uniform set of graduation requirements for all students. These states do not offer additional diplomas, endorsements, or seals, nor do they offer students choice in how they demonstrate competency in key subject areas (if the state has such a requirement).⁶ Instead, graduation requirements center on a set of minimum credit hours. Students might select advanced courses or a certain **course of study** to fulfill credit requirements, but the diploma does not distinguish academic achievement or course pathways.

- **Among the twenty-one states and the District of Columbia, the standard high school diploma aligns with college and career readiness in only eight:** Alabama, Delaware, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nebraska, Tennessee, and Utah.⁷ In other words, in fourteen states the minimum course and credit requirements for a high school diploma do not prepare students for postsecondary expectations.
- **Some of the remaining fourteen states encourage students to exceed the state's minimum graduation standards through other policies** such as college admissions or financial aid. Four states (Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming) have merit-based college scholarship programs that reward students who go above the diploma's minimum requirements.⁸ North Dakota's Academic Scholarship program, for example, requires students to take more rigorous

coursework, earn college credit during high school, obtain a cumulative 3.0 grade point average (GPA), and receive a composite score of 24 on the ACT.⁹ In California, higher education admissions standards drive high school course offerings. High schools submit courses for approval to the university system so that students can get credit for meeting the A–G curriculum requirements, the minimum standard for admission into the state's four-year universities. (See **"Spotlight on California: Pathways Driven by Higher Education and Employers"** on page 5 to learn more.) Only one of these states—Massachusetts—requires students to demonstrate competency by passing an exit exam to graduate.¹⁰

Question 2. Do states with multiple graduation pathways offer students choices about course requirements, assessment requirements, or both?

Twenty-five of the twenty-nine states with multiple graduation pathways offer options for students focused on the curriculum, credits, or courses they take in high school. Some of these states also allow students to choose from a menu of assessments to demonstrate competency and meet graduation testing requirements. However, in four of the twenty-nine states (Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Oregon) the only choice or option students have is how they will demonstrate competency in core subjects prior to graduation. (See **"Demonstrating Competency in Graduation Pathways"** on page 10 for more information about these states.) The section below focuses on the remaining twenty-five states.

Flexibility and Choice of Course Sequences in Graduation Pathways

States have been changing graduation requirements to increase the number of students graduating from high school prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce, while also providing students with flexibility and course options in recognition of their different interests and different postsecondary destinations. How states structure graduation pathways and the curricular choices they build into them vary. Research by All4Ed and Achieve into how states design college- and career-ready diplomas suggests that when states enroll students automatically in pathways with higher course expectations—instead of forcing students to *opt in* to such pathways—greater numbers of students participate in the more rigorous pathways.¹¹

Spotlight on California: Pathways Driven by Higher Education and Employers

Like many states, California offers a single high school diploma, but its graduation requirements fall short of its peers with regard to rigor and alignment with college and career readiness. The state requires only thirteen credits in core subjects, below the number of credits required in most states—and fewer than what is needed to attend and succeed academically at the state's universities. Rather than establish a system of graduation pathways—like diploma endorsements or seals—to encourage students to complete more rigorous coursework, California has taken a novel approach and involves the state system of higher education directly in reviewing high school curriculum.

California's public institutions of higher education established the A–G curriculum, which outlines the high school courses students must take to be admitted to a public, four-year university. For students to receive credit toward A–G requirements, a high school course must be certified by the University of California's approval process. While completing the A–G requirements does not result in a separate diploma, the A–G course sequence is a common program of study in the state, and more than half of California school districts have aligned their local graduation requirements with the A–G curriculum.

For districts where A–G is not the default expectation, however, students must opt in if they want to be eligible to enroll in a four-year university in the University of California or California State systems. As a result, it is incumbent on guidance counselors, educators, and other school officials to build students' and families' awareness of the A–G requirements as early as possible so that students have an academic plan to meet the added requirements—including those for an additional year of English, math, and foreign language. California students who don't find out about the A–G requirements until their junior or senior year of high school may be too late for a four-year, public university to be a realistic post-graduation goal—and likely will need to attend a two-year community college before pursuing a bachelor's degree.

	Minimum Diploma Requirements	A–G Curriculum Requirements
English	3 courses	4 courses (must include or integrate reading of classic and modern literature; frequent, regular writing; and practice listening and speaking)
Mathematics	2 courses, including one year of Algebra I	3 courses (must include or integrate topics covered in elementary and advanced algebra and two- and three-dimensional geometry)
Science	2 courses, including biological and physical science	2 courses of laboratory science (must provide fundamental knowledge in at least 2 of the 3 disciplines: biology, chemistry, and physics)
Social Studies	3 courses, including U.S. history and geography; world history, culture, and geography; a one-semester course in American government and civics; and a one-semester course in economics	2 courses (must include 1 year of world history, cultures, and historical geography and 1 year of U.S. history, or 1 semester of U.S. history and 1 semester of American government or civics)
Health and Physical Education	2 courses	N/A
Fine Arts, Career and Technical Education (CTE), Foreign Language	1 course in visual or performing arts, foreign language, or CTE	1 course (dance, music, theater, visual arts) and 2 courses in the same language
Electives/Other	N/A	1 course
Total	13 credit hours	15 credit hours (all courses approved by the University of California system)

(continued)

Spotlight on California: Pathways Driven by Higher Education and Employers (continued)

While the A–G sequence is the recommended choice for students wishing to enroll in four-year universities, California has taken other steps to influence student pathways to and through high school. Following the passage of AB 2648 in 2008, the superintendent of public instruction (in conjunction with a number of entities representing higher education, industry, educators, school administrators, students, and families) drafted a report on the feasibility of establishing and expanding multiple pathway programs in California high schools to

- prepare students for postsecondary education and careers;
- connect academics to real-world applications;
- lead to a full range of postsecondary opportunities; and
- improve student achievement.

As a result, several pathway programs for high school students flourished, including California partnership academies, regional occupational centers and programs, and other career-themed small schools. California districts also created pathways through high school via approaches like Linked Learning, which integrates rigorous academics with career and technical education (CTE), work-based learning, and wraparound services. Increasingly, districts adopting the [Linked Learning](#) approach incorporate dual-enrollment coursework as well, which allows students to earn high school and college credit simultaneously. However, although California districts and high schools have made substantial investments in pathways that integrate college and career expectations, these efforts have not resulted in significant changes to the state's high school graduation requirements.

Sources: Achieve, "High School Graduation Requirements Data Explorer, 2019" <https://web.archive.org/web/20200806104846/https://highschool.achieve.org/graduation-requirements-data-explorer> (accessed January 25, 2021); University of California, "A–G Policy Resource Guide," <https://hs-articulation.ucop.edu/guide/update-your-a-g-list/submitted-courses/> (accessed January 25, 2021); Public Policy Institute of California, "California's High School Graduation Requirements," <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-high-school-graduation-requirements/> (accessed January 25, 2021); California Department of Education, "Assembly Bill 2648 Multiple Pathways," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/mpfgen.asp> (accessed January 25, 2021); ———, "California Partnership Academies (CPA)," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/cpagen.asp> (accessed January 25, 2021); ———, "Regional Occupational Centers & Programs," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/rp/> (accessed January 25, 2021); Alliance for Excellent Education, "Linked Learning," <https://all4ed.org/issues/linked-learning/> (accessed January 25, 2021).

Whether students are required to choose a graduation pathway, and if so, which choice is the default, influences how students make course decisions in high school and their postsecondary options.

Question 3a. In states with multiple graduation pathways based on differentiated course requirements, are students required to select a graduation pathway or is a pathway optional?

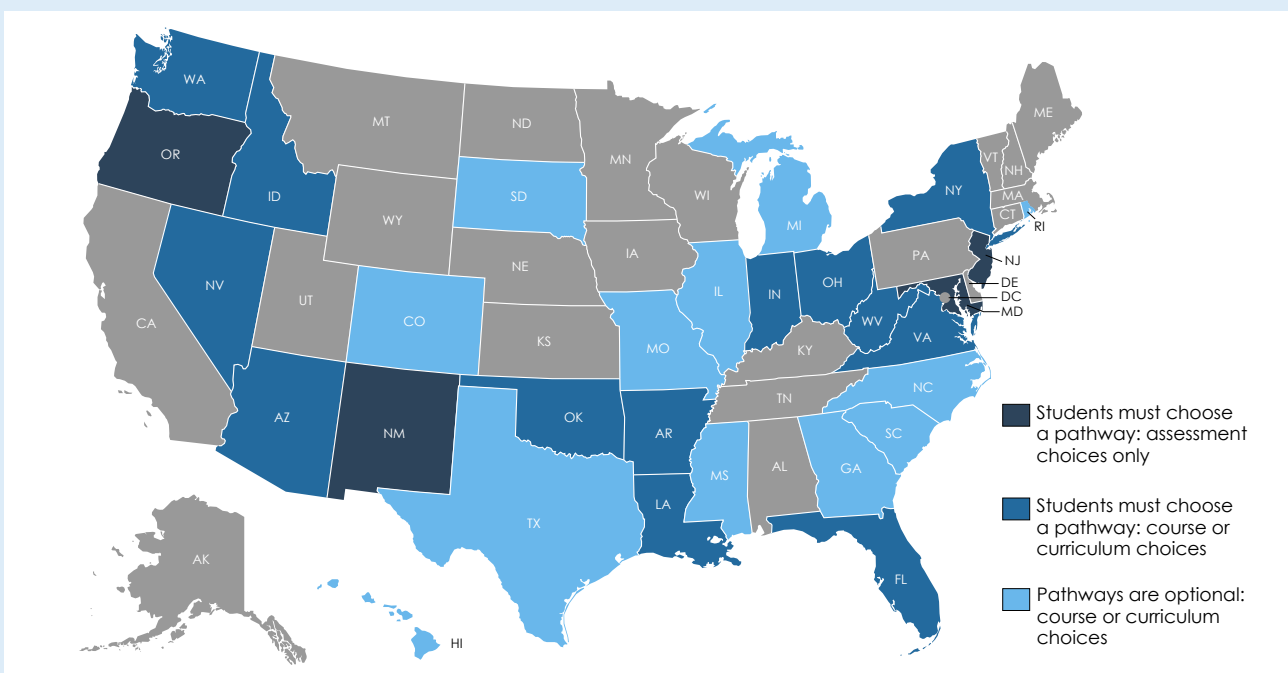
The twenty-five states are split evenly between policies that require every student to pursue a graduation pathway and

policies that present graduation pathways as options students may add on to the standard diploma. (See figure 2 on the next page).

In thirteen states, all students choose a pathway, endorsement, or diploma that affects their high school courses. In three states (Ohio, Washington, and West Virginia), students must select a diploma pathway or endorsement, and each selection requires a specific set of courses and/or assessments. The remaining ten states (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, and Virginia) offer multiple diploma types. For example, New York offers the Regents

FIGURE 2: In States with Multiple Graduation Pathways, Are Pathways Required?

In 12 of the 29 states where graduation pathways are available, students are *not required* to choose a pathway. In the other 17 states with multiple graduation pathways, all students *must choose* a pathway—whether that means selecting between multiple diplomas or endorsements or picking a graduation assessment. However, in 4 of these states, the only option students face is how they will demonstrate competency in core subject areas.



Diploma and the Advanced Regents Diploma. Students who *opt in* to the Advanced Regents Diploma must enroll in more content area courses and successfully pass additional state exams.¹² States like Arkansas, Indiana, and Oklahoma, however, make their college- and career-ready pathways the default option—meaning that students must *opt out* if they want to pursue a less rigorous pathway.¹³ This approach likely leads more students, especially historically undeserved students, to attain a college- and career-ready diploma.

The other twelve states offer multiple graduation pathways, but do not require students to choose among them. In these states, students start high school enrolled in a default sequence that will lead to a standard diploma, but have additional—and typically more rigorous—pathways available that they can add to augment their diploma. Pathways may be designed around college entrance requirements or expectations, careers or specific areas of interest, or both. Among the twelve states, Texas stands out in that students and families must *opt out* of

pursuing one of the five endorsements offered by the state—rather than *opt in* to them during high school. Texas also has two distinctions on top of its endorsements for students who take college-preparatory courses and who excel in college-level coursework, college admissions tests, or CTE.¹⁴

Question 3b. Do students choosing graduation pathways based on distinct high school course requirements have pathway choices leading to both college and career readiness?¹⁵

In the twenty-five states offering students graduation pathways with different course options, thirteen provide graduation pathways that prepare students for either college- or career-oriented opportunities: Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia. These states (see figure 3 on page 9) have distinct pathways designed to lead to college versus a career, with varying levels of rigor and

requirements—meaning that students may not be able to enroll easily in higher education if they select a career pathway or vice versa.

- **Some of these states have adopted career-ready pathways that also prepare students for college-level coursework.** For instance, the Nevada Career-Ready Endorsement builds on the state's advanced diploma (which requires more credit hours, more rigorous courses like Algebra II or a higher-level math class, and a minimum 3.25 GPA compared to the Standard diploma). The endorsement requires students to meet benchmarks on the ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate™ or Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB); earn a CTE Skills Attainment Credential; or obtain a state-approved, industry-recognized credential. Since these requirements are in addition to the already rigorous advanced diploma requirements, students graduating with the Career-Ready Endorsement are likely to be well-prepared for both college and careers.¹⁶
- **In other states, career-oriented pathways are designed with more specific destinations in mind.** For example, following their sophomore year, Louisiana students choose between the TOPS University (college diploma) or the Jump Start TOPS Tech (career diploma) pathway "based on the student's interests, capabilities, and ambitions."¹⁷ While a TOPS University diploma is designed for students planning to enroll in four-year colleges, students choosing a Jump Start TOPS Tech diploma pick a career course of study that prepares them for entry-level work (via acquisition of a recognized industry credential) and continuing education at a technical or community college. Although the state offers some newer Jump Start pathways in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) for students pursuing either diploma, with transferable course credits to Louisiana State University or Xavier University, students opting for other Jump Start pathways like Human Services or Hospitality and Tourism—by design—would not be prepared fully to pursue a bachelor's degree following high school.¹⁸ Without careful attention to the purpose and rigor of different graduation pathways, students pursuing certain pathways may find four-year college options limited should they change their minds after graduation.

- **Students completing certain graduation pathways—even those touted as college preparatory—may not meet the requirements for admission to a four-year university.** North Carolina, for example, offers one college-ready endorsement meant to signify readiness for the state's community colleges, and a second college-ready endorsement intended for students seeking admission to an in-state, four-year public university.¹⁹ North Carolina does not require students to seek an endorsement at all, so the burden may fall on students and their families—as well as their counselors, teachers, and other school leaders—to guide students to the college-ready pathway that matches their postsecondary plans and ensure their high school experience sets them up for future success.

Six of the twenty-five states offer graduation pathways intended to signal career readiness or CTE concentration, but do not offer similar choices for college readiness. Georgia offers a Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education endorsement, but no additional endorsements. However, the state's standard diploma aligns with college- and career-ready expectations. As a result, Georgia students who intend to attend four-year colleges are less likely to be hampered by the lack of an optional college-ready graduation pathway. The same is true in Mississippi, which offers a Career Pathway diploma choice and its standard diploma (additional options will be available for the Class of 2022).²⁰

On the other hand, minimum graduation requirements in the remaining states—Colorado, Illinois, Missouri, and Rhode Island—do not align with college- and career-ready expectations. That said, the career-ready graduation pathways they offer consider student achievement or assessments to some extent. Rhode Island is arguably the most flexible; its endorsements require students to pass a locally developed, performance-based assessment. Illinois's College and Career Ready Pathways Endorsement also allows for local judgment, as students must demonstrate proficiency in English/language arts and math, but districts set the benchmarks (based on exams, GPA, course completions, or other local criteria).²¹ On the other hand, Missouri students completing its CTE credential must meet a state-established score on the ACT, SAT, ACT WorkKeys®, ACCUPLACER, or ASVAB.²²

Five of the twenty-five states offer a graduation pathway intended to recognize college readiness, but do not offer a CTE or career-readiness option. Moreover, in four of these states (Arizona, Arkansas, Michigan, and Oklahoma), college-ready coursework is the default diploma option—not a specialized endorsement, diploma, honors recognition, or seal. Virginia offers its standard diploma as the default option, and students must proactively choose the more rigorous advanced studies diploma, with credit requirements that align with postsecondary readiness.²³

Question 3c. Do states' graduation pathways signal students are prepared for specific college or career choices?

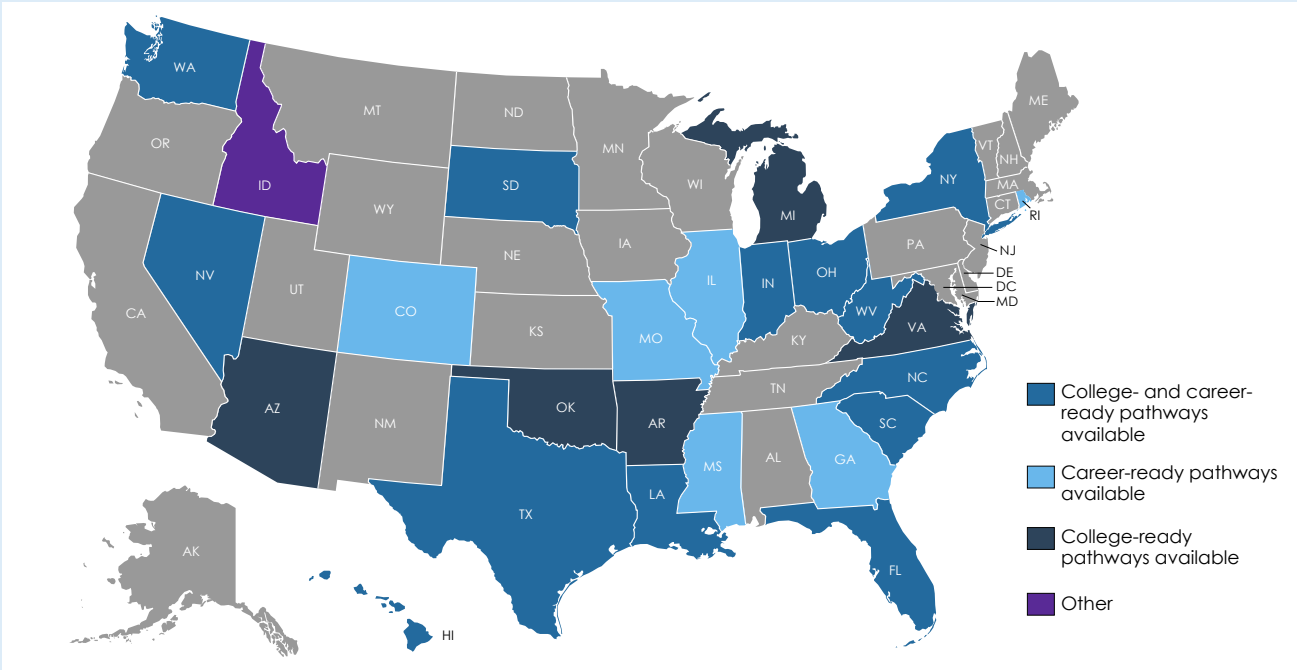
Many states have gone beyond designing graduation pathways that prepare students generally for college and careers. A majority of the twenty-five states provide students with options tailored to specific areas of academic or vocational interest.

Ten states offer a graduation pathway recognizing a STEM concentration: Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Texas. Most STEM graduation pathways require additional courses or assessments. For example, Idaho offers the Idaho STEM Diploma to recognize academic achievement in STEM. Although the total number of required credits are the same as for the state's standard high school diploma, students completing this pathway must take additional course credits in math and science.

Four states have graduation pathways that recognize student participation or interest in specified industries or career fields: Illinois, Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Texas. Instead of a generic career-ready or CTE pathway, these options require students to specify their postsecondary goals, similar to how students will select a college major or industry after high school graduation. For example, Rhode Island's diploma pathway endorsements include options for arts, business and industry, humanities and world languages, public service, STEM, and teaching. Likewise,

FIGURE 3: In States with Multiple Graduation Pathways Based on Distinct Course Requirements, Are College-Ready Pathways, Career-Ready Pathways, or Both Available to Students?

In 13 states, graduation pathways prepare students for both college-oriented and career-oriented opportunities, while 6 states offer career-ready pathways exclusively and 5 offer only college-ready pathways.



Texas offers diploma endorsements in STEM, business and industry, public service, arts and humanities, and multidisciplinary studies.²⁴

Three states offer a graduation pathway designed for students interested in a military career. While some states recognize that enlistment in the armed services is one possible postsecondary plan within their pathways, only Ohio, South Carolina, and Washington have pathways designed exclusively for students interested in the military. South Carolina, for example, offers multiple seals of distinction—including a military seal that requires students to complete four credits in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) and receive a score of 31 on the ASVAB assessment.²⁵

Demonstrating Competency in Graduation Pathways

Changes to exit exams—policies that require students to earn a passing score on a standardized assessment to graduate from high school—are another way states have incorporated flexibility and choice into graduation requirements. The number of states requiring an exit exam increased during the early 2000s, as states sought to ensure their diplomas signified postsecondary readiness. In 2002, eighteen states had exit exams,²⁶ but ten years later, that number had increased to half of states.²⁷

However, by 2014, states were adopting new college- and career-ready standards as part of the Common Core State Standards initiative. Many states began to revisit exit exams—recognizing that the new standards (and the tests states were developing to align with them) often were more rigorous than the benchmarks on their legacy exit exams.²⁸ Amid concerns that replacing old exit exams with new Common Core-aligned tests would increase the number of students—especially historically underserved students—failing to graduate, half of the states with exit exam policies abandoned them by 2017.²⁹

Yet the policy goals that led states to adopt exit exams in the first place remained unmet—to create incentives for students to graduate prepared for postsecondary opportunities and to ensure the diploma signaled that preparedness to colleges and employers. **As states turned away from exit exams, graduation pathways that include a required assessment or demonstration of competency often rose in their place.** Most states today

do not require a specific exit exam to graduate, but several continue to require students to pass at least one assessment as a signal of competency in all, or some, graduation pathways.

Question 4a. In states with multiple graduation pathways, are all students required to pass an assessment or demonstrate competency to graduate from high school?

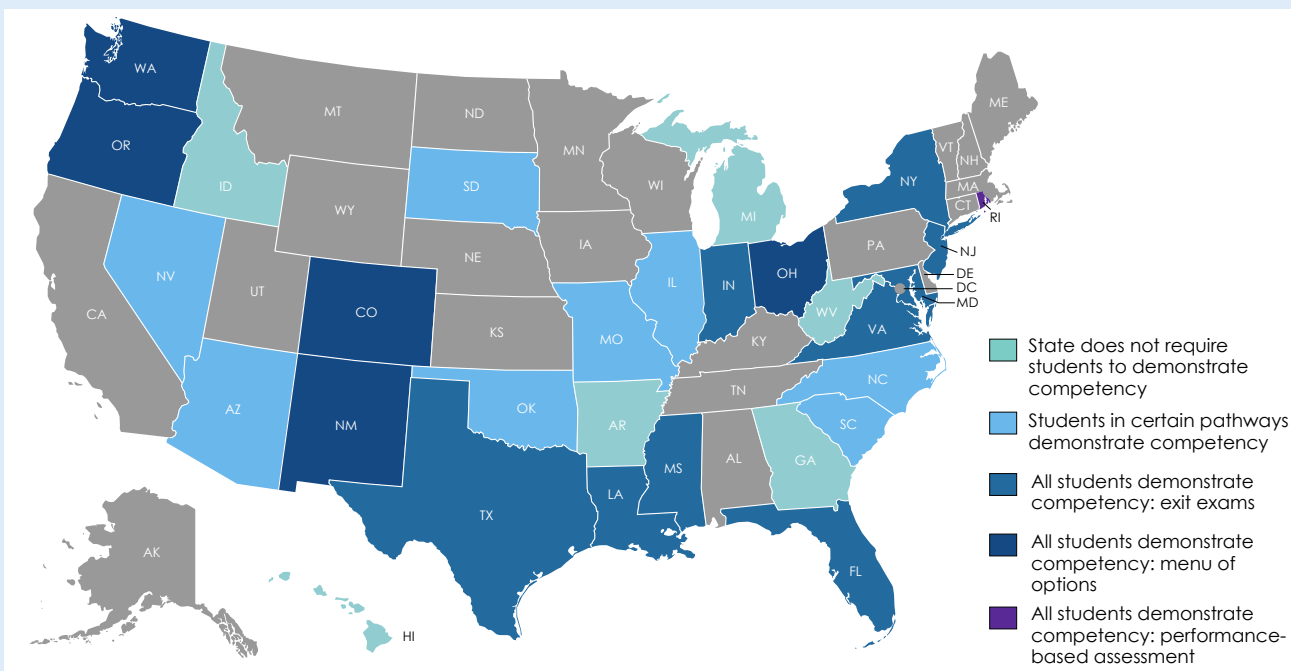
Six states with graduation pathways do not incorporate any requirements for students to demonstrate competency to receive a diploma: Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Michigan, and West Virginia. The remaining twenty-three states either require all students to demonstrate competency (most often by passing standardized tests) to earn a diploma or include assessment or competency requirements in at least one of their graduation pathways.

In fifteen of the twenty-nine states with graduation pathways, all students in the Class of 2021 must demonstrate competency in core subject areas to graduate. The states vary, however, in the flexibility of their options. Some policies more closely resemble exit exams of the past, while others accept a wider variety of evidence that students have mastered critical content:

- **Nine states require students to demonstrate competency either by passing a state high school exit exam or by achieving a minimum score on another approved, standardized test.** Of these states, Louisiana is the only one that requires a passing score on statewide end-of-course exams, with no alternative test options. The remaining eight states (Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Virginia) use scores on statewide standardized assessments as a graduation requirement but provide a list of approved alternatives (with associated passing scores) that students can use. The approved alternatives nearly always include tests designed to measure college readiness, rather than career or military readiness. The SAT and ACT are most common (six states each); Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams also are popular. While the statewide assessment is seen as the default graduation assessment in these states, students who fail to meet the benchmarks must then navigate among the alternative options to receive their diplomas—and likely will need support and guidance from their schools to do so successfully.

FIGURE 4: In States with Multiple Graduation Pathways, Must Students Demonstrate Competency to Graduate?

In 6 states, graduation pathways do not incorporate assessment requirements. Among the remaining 23 states, 15 require all students to demonstrate competency: 9 have an exit exam (typically with alternatives if students do not pass the exam), 5 provide a menu of assessment options, and 1 uses performance-based assessments. In 8 states, only students in certain pathways must demonstrate competency to graduate.



- **In five states, all students choose from a menu of options to demonstrate competency to meet graduation requirements.**
- In other words, in Colorado, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington, there is no default or preferred exam that students must take.³⁰ In Washington, the menu of assessment choices aligns with a student's graduation pathway. The state's three pathways each have distinct options for demonstrating competency: the Postsecondary Education pathway allows students to use ACT or SAT scores; AP, IB, or Cambridge exams; state Smarter Balanced assessments; dual credit (by passing a college-level course); or completion of a college transition course. Meanwhile the Military Career Interest pathway requires a certain score on the ASVAB and the Career/Technical Field pathway requires students to earn an industry-recognized credential or earn dual CTE credit.³¹ In the other states, like New Mexico, the menu of choices does not relate to any particular pathway and includes a range of options from the SAT and AP exams to the ASVAB and ACT WorkKeys®. For example, a New Mexico student

may meet the math assessment requirement by receiving a 2 on her AP Calculus exam or a composite score of 31 on the ASVAB.³² Allowing such an expansive menu of options creates flexibility, but also complexity. In addition, with such a variety of measures accepted, the meaning of the diploma to colleges or future employers can be muddled if those exams are not equally rigorous or measure different knowledge and skills.

Two of the five states, Colorado and Oregon, do not require districts to use all of the state's suggested options for how students may demonstrate competency and districts have greater flexibility to determine the benchmarks students must meet to receive a diploma.

- **One state—Rhode Island—eschews standardized tests altogether and instead considers performance-based, locally designed assessments to measure competency for graduation.** Rhode Island's proficiency-based graduation

requirements are slated to take effect for the Class of 2021. According to the state's website

"This means that diplomas must be issued based on demonstrated proficiency in the six core content areas of mathematics, English language arts, science, the arts, social studies, and technology. The level of proficiency in the six core content areas for graduation purposes is determined locally. For the purposes of graduation, proficiency is not based on a particular test, but rather demonstrated through successful completion of coursework and the performance based diploma assessment (senior project, portfolio, capstone product, or exhibition)."³³

Such policies provide substantial flexibility for districts to use measures tailored to students' interests, specific course experiences or projects, and local curriculum. However, unlike states that rely on standardized exams, it will be more challenging to ensure comparability across districts and to guarantee that all students are assessed on similar skills—and held to similar expectations. While Rhode Island is the only state relying on performance-based assessments alone, other states like Colorado and Oregon, which provide choices for how students demonstrate competency, have these kinds of options on their menus for districts to consider.³⁴ For example, Colorado's graduation guidelines allow students to use a "collaboratively developed, standards-based performance assessment." With many of these performance-based assessment options taking effect in 2021, further research and analysis of implementation will be helpful in determining whether other states should adopt similar strategies.

Question 4b. In states with multiple graduation pathways, are students in certain pathways required to pass an assessment or demonstrate competency to complete the pathway?

Sixteen states have at least one graduation pathway that requires a pathway-specific demonstration of competency to earn the diploma, endorsement, or distinction. Honors pathways and college-preparatory pathways often require students to meet a minimum score on a college entrance exam (e.g., SAT or ACT), state high school assessments in core subjects (e.g., end-of-course tests), or AP or IB exams that result in college credit. In states with CTE and career pathways, students often are expected to demonstrate career readiness by earning

an industry-recognized credential, passing ACT WorkKeys®, or reaching benchmarks on the ASVAB.

- **Nine states require students in both their college-ready and career-ready graduation pathways to demonstrate competency—and all of these states provide options for how students can do so.** Because these assessment requirements link to a specific (but optional) graduation pathway, the menu of choices often is more limited than those in states where all students must pass an assessment to graduate. For example, Florida students receive the Scholar Diploma Designation—a pathway that signals college readiness—based on state end-of-course exam results or AP, IB, or Cambridge tests. As the pathway is designed with postsecondary education in mind, there is less need to consider career readiness assessments or credentials. Instead, those measures are options for students to demonstrate competency in Florida's career-ready pathway, the Merit Diploma Designation.³⁵
- **Five states have pathway-specific demonstrations of competency only for career-ready graduation pathways.** Three (Louisiana, Missouri, and South Dakota) expect students in career-oriented pathways to earn industry-recognized credentials or pass industry-specific or workforce readiness assessments. South Dakota's Advanced Career Endorsement accepts both: acquisition of an industry-recognized credential or a National Career Readiness Certificate™ (based on the three ACT WorkKeys® assessments) at the Silver level or higher.³⁶ On the other hand, Colorado's Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Endorsement includes a menu of assessments similar to those in states where all students must demonstrate competency to graduate, with a broad range of options from AP exams to ASVAB to ACT WorkKeys®.³⁷ Illinois's College and Career Pathway Endorsement embraces local flexibility, with benchmarks established by school districts and colleges based on assessment scores, GPAs, coursework, or other criteria.³⁸
- **Two states require students to demonstrate competency as part of a college-ready pathway, but not a career-ready pathway.** Oklahoma's Academic Scholars program requires students to earn benchmark scores on either the ACT or SAT, among other provisions.³⁹ Arizona students opting for the state's Grand Canyon Diploma may graduate high school early or use what would have been their last year of

high school to focus in-depth on college preparatory or CTE courses. Even though Grand Canyon Diploma recipients may have career options in mind, students must pass a series of Cambridge exams to earn the diploma—which typically are perceived as assessments of college, not workforce, readiness.⁴⁰

- **Eight states with pathway-specific assessment requirements also require all students to demonstrate competency to graduate from high school:** Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Washington. Some of these states require higher benchmarks and/or more assessments within certain graduation pathways, but rely on the same tests already on their menu of assessment choices for all students. For example, New York requires students earning an Advanced Regents diploma to pass more Regents exams than students in the traditional Regents diploma pathway (eight, instead of five), while New York students earning Honors designations on either a traditional or Advanced Regents diploma must receive higher scores (an average of ninety, instead of the typical sixty-five passing benchmark).⁴¹ Similarly, Colorado's PWR Endorsement, currently under development, would expect students to demonstrate a higher level of competency in English/language arts and math (compared to state graduation guidelines for all students). The menu of options for the PWR

Endorsement is the same, except students may not show competency through "district capstones" or "collaboratively developed, standards-based performance assessments."⁴²

Other states have distinct requirements for students in particular pathways, using different assessments than those required of all students. Louisiana's Jump Start career diploma, for example, requires students to earn an industry-recognized credential, in addition to meeting benchmarks on state end-of-course exams in key subjects, the state requires of all students.⁴³

Policy Considerations

Increasingly, state leaders and educators are aware that they must do more to prepare students for postsecondary education, and that all students do not need to follow the same path or end at the same destination. However, systems that prioritize choice and flexibility also force students to face a complex landscape of diplomas, endorsements, course requirements, and assessments that may not achieve their intended outcome—preparing students for postsecondary education or workforce training. (See "[Spotlight on Ohio: Rigorous and Flexible—But Highly Complicated—Graduation Pathways](#)" for a case study about how one state attempted to balance these priorities.)



Photo by Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action

Spotlight on Ohio: Rigorous and Flexible—But Highly Complicated—Graduation Pathways

What does it look like when states embrace multiple graduation pathways with choices for students to explore their interests and show their academic strengths? Ohio is one notable example of a state where policymakers have adopted a variety of approaches to meet two, often competing, priorities:

1. **Rigor**—ensuring all students graduate with the knowledge and skills to be ready for college and careers, and
2. **Flexibility**—allowing for structured options in how students achieve that goal, demonstrate readiness, and earn a diploma.

While the state's policies seek to balance flexibility and rigor across all pathways, the approach has resulted in arguably one of the most complicated set of graduation requirements in the country for students to navigate.

Historically, Ohio required students to earn a minimum of twenty credits and pass the Ohio Graduation Test. But Ohio, like other states, soured on its exit exam. Starting with the Class of 2018, Ohio planned to offer graduation pathways, requiring students not only to meet credit requirements but also to choose a pathway to demonstrate postsecondary readiness, with flexible options for demonstrating competency. Under this system, students could

1. earn points based on seven state end-of-course exams or on a related AP or IB exam;
2. earn an industry-recognized credential and earn a work-readiness score on the ACT WorkKeys®; or
3. earn remediation-free scores in math and English/language arts on the ACT or SAT.

However, before the new requirements took full effect, Ohio revised its policy to offer even more flexibility and choice. With that added flexibility, however, came potential confusion. Ohio's new graduation requirements take effect with the Class of 2023. The policy update also created a transition period in which students can access temporary alternatives before the new policy takes effect. In other words, while the pathways above are being phased out, additional choices will be available. There's a catch, though: the new choices depend on the year in which a student plans to graduate, meaning graduation requirements in Ohio will shift nearly every year for five years:

- Ohio students graduating in 2018, 2019, and 2020 could earn a diploma through the three pathways above or through alternative criteria, such as earning a 2.5 GPA, completing a capstone project, or doing 120 hours of community service or work-based learning. Originally, this flexibility was offered only for students in the Class of 2018, but the legislature extended the policy in the middle of the 2018–19 school year—providing students in the Class of 2019 with new options mere months before they were set to graduate.
- Students graduating in 2021 and 2022 face a different set of requirements. They can either show they are ready for college and careers through one of the three pathways above—but without the temporary, additional alternatives offered to the Classes of 2018 through 2020—or meet the new graduation requirements that will apply starting with the Class of 2023.

Those new graduation requirements are not any less complicated and include three prongs:

- “cover the basics” by completing twenty credit hours;
- “show competency” by passing Ohio's state assessments in Algebra I and English II; and
- “show readiness” by earning two diploma seals that demonstrate professional and social-emotional learning, in addition to academics.

(continued)

Spotlight on Ohio: Rigorous and Flexible—But Highly Complicated— Graduation Pathways (continued)

Unlike the prior three pathways, which did not preference state assessments over other testing options, the new policy for the Class of 2023 requires students to meet the second prong by taking state exams first and retaking them if they do not meet benchmarks. Only then can students access a menu of options for demonstrating competency, which includes successfully completing two career-focused activities (such as career-ready assessments, industry credentials, apprenticeships, and work-based learning); enlisting in the military; and attaining college credit in math or English through dual enrollment.

While the new graduation assessment requirements are stricter, Ohio is incorporating more flexibility within the third prong—the twelve diploma seals, which include options to earn locally defined seals (though at least one of a student's seals must be state defined). Some seal requirements also overlap with options for students to demonstrate competency in the second prong (if they cannot pass state exams). However, the flexibility and variety of ways to earn seals also can breed uncertainty. Some seals still are in development, even though students in the Class of 2023—and those in the Classes of 2021 and 2022 who choose to meet the new requirements—already are high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Ultimately, Ohio's system relies on a set of requirements that allows students to choose among pathways, while maintaining rigor based on students' abilities to demonstrate their readiness regardless of pathway. However, guiding students through this maze of options—twelve seals, each with distinct requirements and with caveats on which seals students can combine, and a series of options for demonstrating competency if students cannot pass state tests—will not be easy. Moreover, as requirements continue to shift, Ohio students and those who support them may well question whether the requirements will change again, especially given disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sources: Ohio Department of Education, "Earning an Ohio High School Diploma: Class of 2020" (Columbus: Author, 2018) <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/News/Two-additional-graduation-options-available-to-1/GradReq20.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>; L. Hancock, "Ohio General Assembly Passes Bill Easing High School Grad Requirements for 2019, 2020," *Cleveland.com*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2018/12/high-school-graduation-requirements-for-2019-2020-eased-as-state-undergoes-overhaul.html>; Ohio Department of Education, "Ohio's High School Graduation Requirements: Classes of 2021 and 2022," (Columbus: Author, 2019) <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Earning-an-Ohio-High-School-Diploma-for-the-Cl-2/GradReq2021.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>; ———, "Ohio's High School Graduation Requirements: Class of 2023 and Beyond," (Columbus: Author, 2019) <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Sections/Classes-of-2023-and-Beyond-Graduation-Requirements/GradReq2023.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>.

As states grapple with designing graduation pathways, there are several issues they must address to ensure all students have access to high school programs that prepare them for postsecondary success in college and careers.

State high school graduation requirements and all graduation pathways should align with college- and career-ready expectations. There are several ways to do this, but the clearest way is to establish a default set of graduation requirements that align with college and career readiness. One approach would be policies like those adopted in Arkansas, Indiana, and Oklahoma, where more rigorous course requirements are the default pathway and students must proactively opt out if they want to pursue a diploma that does not align with

postsecondary expectations. This approach avoids diluting the rigor of college- and career-ready pathways while still offering all students alternative options. Adopting general graduation requirements aligned with college and career readiness also does not preclude a state from adopting diploma seals, honors distinctions, or endorsements that recognize specific student interests like STEM, performing arts, CTE, or distinguished academic achievement. For example, states can take Georgia's approach—offering an optional CTE endorsement on top of its default diploma, which aligns with college-ready expectations.

When adopting multiple pathways and diploma options, states should ensure that institutions of higher education and employers value those options. Partnering with institutions of higher

education, employers, and other stakeholders will be critical to ensure that the requirements and the courses included in a graduation pathway align with the expectations set by external institutions or partners who will work with high school graduates. North Carolina is a state that delineates its graduation pathways by postsecondary expectations—with endorsements leading to career/industry training programs, as well as admissions at two-year colleges and four-year universities. Critically, the pathways recognize the different admissions and placement standards established by the North Carolina Community College System and University of North Carolina System of public higher education. Likewise, California's A–G requirements have been vetted by higher education institutions, with universities approving high school courses that meet the standards to ensure they prepare students for four-year colleges and universities in the state. However, California has not taken steps at the state level to adopt the A–G sequence into its high school diploma requirements, though some districts have done so.

States should require all districts and schools to offer every diploma option and endorsement to all students, including advanced coursework that prepares students for college.

Creating a system of graduation pathways that prepares students for the full spectrum of postsecondary opportunities will be less meaningful if many pathways are unavailable to students because of where they live. For example, Colorado's graduation guidelines do not require local districts to use all of the options on the state's menu of choices. Because these are new requirements, it is not yet clear which districts will choose some options and which will embrace them all. Instead of an ad hoc, local approach, states could require—and provide funding and resources—for all districts to offer AP or IB classes or courses that lead to industry-recognized credentials, ensuring that the full menu of college- and career-ready options is available statewide. Given that access to advanced course offerings is lacking in many high schools—especially those that enroll students of color⁴⁴—states should prioritize resources to expand equitable course offerings.

States with multiple graduation pathways or diploma choices should regularly evaluate the rigor of available pathways to ensure that all options lead to successful postsecondary outcomes and to ensure that students have equitable access to all pathways. One tension in adopting graduation pathways is that different postsecondary opportunities have different

prerequisites. Some states, like Louisiana, have chosen an approach that distinguishes pathways that prepare students for college from those that prepare students for careers—and have made efforts to make both choices rigorous, given the different demands on students entering higher education compared to those on students entering workforce training programs. The trade-off, however, is that Louisiana students choose which track to take during their junior year of high school—and may not be able to switch easily to the other if they change their minds. Alternative approaches to designing pathways that incorporate authentic readiness for both college and careers can suffer from other drawbacks. Namely, such a pathway—like the College- and Career-Ready Endorsement Nevada offers for Advanced Diploma recipients—may be rigorous, but out-of-reach for some students. This is where it becomes critical for states to consider how students choose pathways. States can make a rigorous, college- and career-ready pathway the default option, with ways for students and families to opt out if another pathway better fits their postsecondary goals.

Regardless, states should track and publicly report graduation pathway data, including postsecondary outcomes, disaggregated by diploma/pathway type and by student group. For example, Virginia's School Quality Profiles show, for each high school, district, and statewide, the percentage of students earning the more rigorous Advanced Studies Diploma (aligned with college and career readiness), the Standard Diploma, and a General Equivalency Diploma or other certificate of completion. The data also is disaggregated by students' race/ethnicity, family income, and English learner and disability status.⁴⁵ This can inform policymakers if students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and other historically underserved populations are concentrated or over-represented in less rigorous graduation pathways. Further, if Virginia linked its data to postsecondary data, it would enable policymakers and the public to know whether pathways are achieving their intended result. For example, if a low percentage of students securing a college- and career-ready diploma enroll in higher education without remediation, this may signal that the pathway is misaligned with the college-ready portion of its moniker and should be revamped. In addition, this type of data can help states pinpoint school districts to learn from if certain schools are doing a better job than others in graduating diverse groups of students in their pathways.

When providing students with a menu of options to demonstrate competency as part of graduation requirements, states should ensure students' options are rigorous and align with the pathway's intended goals. A qualifying score on the ASVAB signifies students are ready for a different postsecondary experience than earning an industry-recognized credential or receiving a college credit-bearing score on an AP exam. Yet, some states will accept any of these as measures of students' readiness for graduation. This often is the case when states develop general graduation requirements, meant to apply to all students, as opposed to pathway-specific ones. As states develop and refine graduation options, they should ensure that the options available to students align with the intended postsecondary outcome of the diploma or pathway—and be transparent with students and families about to what their high school experience is leading them. For instance, in Washington state each graduation pathway—Postsecondary Education, Military Career Interest, and Career/Technical Field—requires a unique demonstration of student readiness. By contrast, New Mexico does not distinguish between students demonstrating readiness for military enlistment and those demonstrating readiness to enroll in a four-year degree program.

Districts and schools should educate parents and students about the pathway options available to students and where those pathways lead. It may seem obvious, but with the proliferation of flexibility within state graduation requirements and student choice between multiple graduation pathways, students and their families must be made aware—at multiple times leading to and throughout high school—about the intended postsecondary destinations of various pathways and the actual, long-term postsecondary outcomes of students who select those pathways. As Ohio's experience demonstrates, one trade-off in embracing flexibility and choice in graduation requirements is that the requirements become more complicated to navigate. Students and their families need and deserve to understand the likely outcomes from all graduation pathway options. States adopting graduation pathway policies should evaluate whether schools have sufficient school counselors and, if not, how they will increase the number of counselors per student; develop training and professional learning materials for those

advising students about graduation pathway choices; and adopt communications and outreach strategies intended to reach diverse groups of students—like students who would be first-generation college students or whose families may not speak English as their primary language.

Conclusion

High school graduation pathway options are increasingly common and range from expansions of strong, career-focused pathways that lead to industry credentials to pathways that build on individual student interests and those that recognize students meeting standards for placement in college-level courses. More and more states are changing their graduation requirements and creating multiple pathways to a high school diploma, with the intention of aligning student pathways with different interests and creating more flexibility and choice depending on students' long-term goals and postsecondary plans. However, without deliberate planning and careful consideration of the trade-offs, supports, partnerships, and resources needed to build graduation pathways, these policies could unintentionally create different—or lowered—expectations for certain students or limit their postsecondary opportunities. These new opportunities require the attention of educators, policymakers, postsecondary education institutions, the business community, and other stakeholders to ensure that all students—especially students of color, those living in historically underresourced communities, students with disabilities, and English learners—have access to rich, engaging, and challenging high school pathways that prepare them for success beyond high school.

Endnotes

- ¹ A.P. Carnevale et. al, *Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs: High School, Middle Skills, and Bachelor's Degree* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018), <https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/3ways-FR.pdf>. A “good job” is defined as paying a minimum of \$35,000 annually for workers between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four years and at least \$45,000 annually for workers between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four. This results in 2016 median earnings of \$56,000 for workers with less than a bachelor's degree or \$65,000 for workers with a bachelor's degree or higher.
- ² Data about the national high school graduation rate obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, Common Core of Data, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2017-18.asp (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ³ X. Chen, *Remedial Coursetaking at U.S. Public 2- and 4-Year Institutions: Scope, Experiences, and Outcomes* (NCES 2016-405) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf>.
- ⁴ Colorado, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania currently leave high school graduation requirements to local districts. Colorado and Massachusetts both have a single course requirement, but the majority of graduation requirements are established at the district level. However, Colorado and Pennsylvania are implementing some state-level graduation requirements that take effect for the Class of 2021 and Class of 2022, respectively.
- ⁵ In several cases, states set minimum high school graduation requirements, but districts have the option to establish their own additional graduation requirements. This analysis focuses solely on graduation pathways and requirements established by states. In addition, some states allow districts to offer performance-based alternatives to some graduation requirements. This analysis does not include such district options and focuses instead on the standard set of diploma requirements and the options available statewide for students to earn diplomas. Finally, this analysis did not review or account for alternative diploma options provided to students with disabilities who receive an alternative diploma based on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), which do not typically fully align with state academic standards.
- ⁶ This analysis does not include the following when counting states that offer multiple graduation pathways: (1) alternate diplomas awarded to students with disabilities who receive an alternate diploma based on the student's IEP that does not typically fully align with state standards; (2) the Seal of Biliteracy, which recognizes student proficiency in more than one language and is offered in forty-two states and the District of Columbia; or (3) Pennsylvania, which will be implementing new graduation requirements for the Class of 2022 that allow students to choose from a menu of options to demonstrate competency in core subject areas.
- ⁷ Achieve reviewed the requirements of the default, standard high school diploma in each state to assess alignment with college- and career-ready expectations (i.e., based on course and credit hour requirements). This analysis relies on Achieve's determination in all references of whether minimum graduation requirements align with college and career expectations. For more, see Achieve, “High School Graduation Requirements Data Explorer, 2019” <https://web.archive.org/web/20200806104846/https://highschool.achieve.org/graduation-requirements-data-explorer> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ⁸ Kansas also has a state scholarship program with eligibility requirements that encourage students to take more rigorous coursework during high school, but the program is need based and available only to students from low-income backgrounds.
- ⁹ North Dakota also offers a scholarship for career and technical education (CTE). For more, see North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, “Diploma and Scholarship Information,” <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/parentscommunity/students/academic-and-cte-scholarship/diploma-and-scholarship-information> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ¹⁰ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “MA Graduation Requirements and Related Guidance,” <https://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/graduation.html> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ¹¹ For more, see Achieve, “State Expectations for Graduation Matter—and Differ—More Than You Think,” (Washington, DC: Author, 2018) <https://www.achieve.org/graduation-requirements-matter> and M. Almond et. al, *Paper Thin? Why All High School Diplomas Are Not Created Equal*. (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2017) <https://all4ed.org/diplomapathways/>.
- ¹² New York State Education Department, “New York State Diploma Requirements Applicable to All Students Enrolled in Grades 9–12,” (New York: Author, 2020) <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/currentdiplomarequirements.pdf>.
- ¹³ For more, see Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Arkansas Minimum Graduation Requirements Smart Core Waiver Form” (Little Rock: Author, 2019) https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gU2rslMSIFGjAHL2ccZ4zn-FmA8_cFYX4WUAGfuKMY/edit; Indiana Department of Education, “Opt-Out Process for Indiana's Core 40 Graduation Requirements” <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/student-assistance/opt-out-process-07-11-2017.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2021); and Oklahoma State Department of Education, “College Preparatory/Work Ready Parental Curriculum Choice Letter” (Oklahoma City: Author, 2020) https://sde.ok.gov/sites/default/files/parental-curriculum-choice-letter-feb-20_0.pdf.
- ¹⁴ Texas Education Agency, “Foundation High School Program Endorsement Opt-Out Agreement,” (Austin: Author, 2014) <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/FHSP%20Endorsement%20Opt%20Out%20Agreement.pdf> and ———, Graduation Toolkit (Austin: Author, 2020) <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/14Grad-toolkit-booklet.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Unless otherwise specified, a graduation pathway identified as college or career ready for this analysis indicates that the state or another state entity has deemed the pathway aligns with college or career readiness. This analysis does not evaluate the number of credits by content area or other requirements to determine whether states' graduation pathways align with college- and career-ready standards, admissions requirements, or other criteria.
- ¹⁶ Nevada Department of Education, “2019–2022 Nevada Graduation College & Career Ready Credit & Assessment Requirements,” http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/High_School_Graduation/GRADREQ1920.pdf (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ¹⁷ Louisiana Department of Education, “Graduation Requirements,” <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/courses/graduation-requirements> (accessed January 25, 2021).

- ¹⁸ For more information on Jump Start pathways, see Louisiana Department of Education, "Jump Start Brochure," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/jumpstart/jump-start-brochure.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2021); ———, "Jump Start Graduation Pathways," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/jump-start-graduation-pathways> (accessed January 25, 2021); and ———, "New STEM-Focused Jump Start Pathways to Provide High School Students with Advanced Skills, College and Career Credentials," news release, August 13, 2019, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/newsroom/news-releases/2019/08/13/new-stem-focused-jump-start-pathways-to-provide-high-school-students-with-advanced-skills-college-and-career-credentials>.
- ¹⁹ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "High School Diploma Endorsements," <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/high-school-graduation-requirements/high-school-diploma-endorsements> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ²⁰ For more on Mississippi's new graduation pathways, see Mississippi Department of Education, "Mississippi Diploma Options," (Jackson: Author, 2018) https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/Offices/MDE/OAE/OEER/New%20Diploma/mississippi-diploma-options_20180627103755_285594.pdf.
- ²¹ Illinois State Board of Education, "College and Career Pathway Endorsement," <https://www.isbe.net/pathwayendorsements> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ²² Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Career and Technical Education Certificate: Certificate Criteria," (Jefferson City: Author, 2019) <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/cte-certificate-criteria.pdf>.
- ²³ Starting with the Class of 2022, Virginia will add credentials to both diploma types that recognize if students take Advanced Placement (AP), honors, or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses or CTE. The state's current CTE graduation policies only permit modifications of graduation assessment requirements, not course requirements. For more, see Virginia Department of Education, "Graduation Requirements," <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/index.shtml> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ²⁴ Students in CTE programs in many states often select a concentration area or industry focus, but their diploma or endorsement does not signify a specific interest area or industry/field. Students in these states may receive only a generic CTE endorsement. For more on graduation pathways that are oriented around specific interest areas or industries, see Rhode Island Department of Education, "The Rhode Island Diploma System & Graduation Requirements: Pathway Endorsements," <https://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/RIPublicSchools/DiplomaSystem.aspx#41611692-pathway-endorsements> (accessed January 25, 2021) and Texas Education Agency, "Graduation Toolkit."
- ²⁵ M. M. Spearman, "SC Diploma Pathway Project," PowerPoint presentation, South Carolina Department of Education, April 2019, <https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/standards-learning/diploma-pathway/sc-diploma-pathways-presentation-2019/> and South Carolina Department of Education, "South Carolina Diploma Pathways Overview," <https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/career-and-technical-education/programs-and-courses/cate-programs/personal-pathways-to-success/diploma-pathways-seals-template-updated/> (accessed January 25, 2021).
- ²⁶ N. Chudowsky et. al, *State High School Exit Exams: A Baseline Report* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2002) https://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent_file.cfm?Attachment=CEP%5FHSEE01Report%5F080102%2Epdf.
- ²⁷ S. McIntosh, *State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2012) <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=408>.
- ²⁸ A. Hyslop, *The Case Against Exit Exams* (Washington, DC: New America, 2014) <https://www.newamerica.org/documents/741/the-case-against-exit-exams>.
- ²⁹ C. Gewertz, "Which States Required an Exam to Graduate in 2016-17?," *Education Week* 36, no. 21 (2017) <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/which-states-required-an-exam-to-graduate.html>.
- ³⁰ Beginning with the Class of 2023, Ohio will have transitioned fully to new graduation requirements, which require students to first attempt to meet the assessment requirements for graduation by taking the statewide assessment. Similarly, for the Class of 2023, new graduation pathways will be available to Indiana students, which have additional options for students to demonstrate competency to graduate. For more, see Ohio Department of Education, *Ohio's Graduation Requirements: Long-Term Requirements 2023 and Beyond* (Columbus: Author, 2020) http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements_Long-term-Requirements-2023-and-Beyond.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US and Indiana State Board of Education, "Graduation Pathways Panel" (Indianapolis: Indiana Department of Education, 2018) <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/student-assistance/graduation-requirements.pdf>.
- ³¹ Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Graduation Pathways: Class of 2021" (Olympia: Author, 2020) https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/ossi/k12supports/pubdocs/Class_of_2021_Grad_Pathways_One%20Pager_FINAL.pdf.
- ³² New Mexico Public Education Department, "Cohort 2020 Graduation Requirements: Menu of Options to Demonstrate College and/or Career Readiness" (Santa Fe: Author, 2020) https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Cohort_2020_Graduation_Requirements_1.31.20.pdf.
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- ³⁸ Illinois State Board of Education, "College and Career Pathway Endorsement," <https://www.isbe.net/pathwayendorsements> (accessed January 26, 2021).
- ³⁹ Oklahoma State Department of Education, "Oklahoma Academic Scholar Recognition Program," <https://sde.ok.gov/academic-scholar-recognition-program> (accessed January 26, 2021).
- ⁴⁰ Center for the Future of Arizona, "Move on When Ready," <https://www.arizonafuture.org/mowr/grand-canyon-diploma/> (accessed January 26, 2021).
- ⁴¹ New York State Education Department, "Endorsements and Seals," <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/endorsements-and-seals> (accessed January 26, 2021).
- ⁴² Colorado Department of Education, "Menu of College and Career-Ready Demonstrations" and ———, "Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness."
- ⁴³ Louisiana Department of Education, "All Things Jump Start," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/courses/all-things-jump-start> (accessed January 26, 2021).
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Glossary

academic honors or distinction. A designation offered as an endorsement on top of a regular diploma or as a separate diploma. In some states, a student may be able to achieve both academic honors and an endorsement in a course of study, like STEM. Regardless of the state's particular diploma structure, academic honors indicate that students have exceeded the standards required for graduation—for example, by completing additional advanced coursework, passing a college readiness or industry-recognized assessment, or earning a high GPA. This analysis considers academic honors or distinction a graduation pathway when the state recognizes these distinctions as part of the diploma.

course or program of study. Refers to the combination of courses in which a student enrolls in high school. Many states offer defined courses of study in specific areas of interest, such as a college-preparatory track aligned with admissions requirements at state colleges and universities or in CTE, that still culminate in the standard high school diploma. However, this analysis only considers a course or program of study a graduation pathway if it leads to a distinct diploma or endorsement for the purposes of high school graduation. For example, all states offer courses in CTE that provide students with knowledge and skills specific to an industry or career. In some states, CTE is a course of study that leads to the regular diploma, but other states offer CTE as an endorsement or graduation option, recognizing concentration in CTE as part of the high school diploma.

demonstration of competency. Refers to requirements that students earn a certain level of achievement—typically on standardized tests in English language arts, mathematics, and core subject areas—to receive a diploma, endorsement, seal, or other distinction. Historically, states adopted a single, statewide exit exam to serve this purpose, but today states are increasingly flexible and often accept performance from a menu of assessments. This analysis considers policies that require students to attain a certain score or achieve a certain standard of proficiency to receive a diploma demonstrations of competency. By contrast, this analysis does not consider graduation requirements for students to take (but not pass) certain assessments or to factor assessment results into course

grades to be demonstrations of competency. Likewise, this analysis does not consider requirements for students to pass a civics assessment, but no other assessments, to graduate from high school.

diploma endorsement, seal, or concentration. A special designation that indicates that students have completed a specific set of courses in a focused area of study. Some states offer endorsements or seals in areas such as college readiness, career readiness, STEM, or specific career fields. In this report, diploma endorsements, seals, and concentrations function as graduation pathways because they signal that students concentrated—and often excelled—in a specific course of study and are recognized as part of the diploma. This analysis does not include the Seal of Biliteracy as a graduation pathway since it does not consistently require a specific course of study and/or is not recognized as part of the diploma.

graduation pathway. The collection of courses, experiences, assessments, and other requirements that, when combined, culminate with a high school diploma. A graduation pathway includes the standard diploma and any other pathways, endorsements, advanced diplomas, and other options offered. States have different names and formats for these pathways, but this report concentrates on the student experience to graduation and what each pathway signals to colleges and employers—rather than the name or form of the pathway.

Appendix

TABLE A1: Graduation Pathway Options Available to Students, By State

PATHWAY REQUIREMENTS		GRADUATION PATHWAYS INCLUDING COURSE REQUIREMENTS						GRADUATION PATHWAYS INCLUDING COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS			
State	Coursework, Competency, or Both	All Students Must Choose a Pathway	Pathway for College Readiness	Pathway for Career Readiness or CTE	Pathway for STEM Interest	Pathway for Specific Careers/ Industries	Pathway for Military Interest	All Students Required to Demonstrate Competency	How Students Demonstrate Competency	Students in Certain Pathways Demonstrate Competency	Graduation Pathway(s) that Require Competency
Arizona	Both	✓	✓							✓	College Ready
Arkansas	Coursework	✓	✓								
Colorado	Both			✓	✓			✓	Menu	✓	Career Ready
Florida	Both	✓	✓	✓				✓	Exit Exam	✓	College and Career
Georgia	Coursework			✓							
Hawaii	Coursework		✓	✓	✓						
Idaho	Coursework	✓			✓						
Illinois	Both			✓		✓				✓	Career Ready
Indiana	Both	✓	✓	✓				✓	Exit Exam	✓	College and Career
Louisiana	Both	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	Exit Exam	✓	Career Ready
Maryland	Competency							✓	Exit Exam		
Michigan	Coursework		✓		✓						
Mississippi	Both			✓				✓	Exit Exam		
Missouri	Both			✓						✓	Career Ready
Nevada	Both	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	College and Career
New Jersey	Competency							✓	Exit Exam		
New Mexico	Competency							✓	Menu		

(continued)

Appendix

TABLE A1: Graduation Pathway Options Available to Students, By State (continued)

PATHWAY REQUIREMENTS		GRADUATION PATHWAYS INCLUDING COURSE REQUIREMENTS						GRADUATION PATHWAYS INCLUDING COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS			
State	Coursework, Competency, or Both	All Students Must Choose a Pathway	Pathway for College Readiness	Pathway for Career Readiness or CTE	Pathway for STEM Interest	Pathway for Specific Careers/ Industries	Pathway for Military Interest	All Students Required to Demonstrate Competency	How Students Demonstrate Competency	Students in Certain Pathways Demonstrate Competency	Graduation Pathway(s) that Require Competency
New York	Both	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	Exit Exam	✓	College and Career
North Carolina	Both		✓	✓						✓	College and Career
Ohio	Both	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	Menu	✓	College and Career
Oklahoma	Both	✓	✓							✓	College Ready
Oregon	Competency							✓	Menu		
Rhode Island	Both			✓	✓	✓		✓	Other ¹		
South Carolina	Both		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	College and Career
South Dakota	Both		✓	✓						✓	Career Ready
Texas	Both		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Exit Exam	✓	College and Career
Virginia	Both	✓	✓					✓	Exit Exam		
Washington	Both	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	Menu	✓	College and Career
West Virginia	Coursework	✓	✓	✓							

Notes: This table includes only those states with multiple graduation pathways.

¹ Rhode Island requires all students to demonstrate competency in core subject areas using locally developed, performance-based assessments.



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