

Let's Measure Ready

Executive Summary

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Governors and other state leaders know that the future economic competitiveness of their state depends on the strength of their education system. As Colorado governor Jared Polis made clear in announcing the Let's Get Ready initiative, graduating students equipped with the knowledge and skills they need for lifelong success is imperative for all state leaders.¹ But how are states measuring whether their high school graduates are ready for what comes next?

For years, college and career readiness (CCR) has been the mantra of many education leaders. States adopted higher standards, aligning expectations in K–12 schools with what their public colleges require incoming first-year students to know (Level Up 2019). States developed new “portraits of a graduate” to articulate the skills, competencies, and knowledge today’s students need to thrive (Atwell and Tucker 2024). States broke down silos and linked their education and workforce data to better understand students’ pathways to postsecondary education and careers—and where they faced roadblocks and barriers.² And using these data, states began not only *measuring* whether their high school students graduated ready for college or a career but also holding their high schools *accountable* for it. The adoption of CCR indicators in states’ school accountability systems sends a strong signal to district and school leaders that their focus should be on preparing students for postsecondary success (Council of Chief State School Officers and Education Strategy Group 2017; Zhou 2023).

Forty-two states currently use at least one CCR indicator for federal or state high school accountability requirements, and 16 states have multiple indicators. (Alaska, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, Oregon, and Wisconsin do not use CCR indicators, though Illinois’s indicator is in the final stages of development.) Although there are trends across states, state leaders continue to make distinct choices, based on their own priorities and goals, about how to design and deploy these indicators:

- **Thirty-six states design their indicators so that all the measures in the indicator are interchangeable**, even if they emphasize different areas of readiness or the measures are not equally predictive of long-term student success. Typically, in these states, students are considered ready or are given credit in the indicator by completing one of any number of state-selected college-ready or career-ready measures, even when those measures are dramatically different (e.g., earning college credit through dual or concurrent enrollment versus completing a work-based learning opportunity). On the other hand, six states use an index that weighs certain measures more heavily. And in eight states, CCR indicators are based on a single measure, so there is no debate over which measures are prioritized or whether different measures are interchangeable.
- **Thirty-nine of the 42 states include both college and career readiness measures**, and 20 of these states also measure military or civic readiness. That said, only North Dakota requires students to be ready in multiple areas (i.e., college *and* career ready or career *and* military ready).
- **Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework and exams are the most common college readiness measures** (used by 35 states), followed by dual or concurrent enrollment (34

states). There is more variance in career-ready measures, but the most popular option is student attainment of industry-recognized credentials (23 states), despite evidence that the value of many of these credentials in the labor market might be limited (Schneider et al. 2025). And although fewer states measure military or civic readiness in their indicators (20 states), 13 states include student scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) portion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Civic readiness is the area where new CCR measures might be most needed.

- **Twenty-six states with CCR indicators exclusively rely on input measures** collected while students are in high school that predict future postsecondary success (e.g., ACT or SAT scores) rather than outcome measures (e.g., college enrollment or employment and earnings) that more directly measure whether students were ready.
- **Thirty of the 42 states use their CCR indicators to provide incentives for student success in activities related to postsecondary readiness** (e.g., earning college credit through dual or concurrent enrollment), while four states instead use indicators to promote student access to those activities (e.g., enrolling in dual credit); eight states do both.
- **Although many CCR measures are common across states, the benchmarks state leaders set on those measures vary**, particularly for measures based on state-determined course sequences or pathways as opposed to test-based measures or measures validated by external parties. That said, there is more variation in what score is considered “good enough” on tests used for military readiness (e.g., the AFQT) than for career or college readiness (e.g., ACT WorkKeys).
- **Just 12 states publicly report how students demonstrated readiness among the various CCR measures included in their states’ indicators.** Although states have made progress disaggregating their CCR indicators by key student groups, most states do not break down their CCR indicators to report how students achieved readiness among the various college-ready, career-ready, and military- or civic-ready measures.

The inclusion of CCR indicators in nearly every state’s accountability system is worth celebrating, but our findings reveal there are still areas for growth and state leadership. These include publicly disaggregating CCR indicators by each specific measure through which readiness was demonstrated, for all students and for student groups, and building an integrated P-20W data system—including upgraded employment wage records and links to military enlistment data from the US Department of Defense—to report postsecondary retention, degree attainment, employment, earnings, and military outcomes. Enhanced data and reporting would enable governors and other policymakers to guide education and workforce investments. Throughout our analysis, we also provide key considerations for state leaders as they continue to improve and refine their CCR indicators, including trade-offs between various approaches and examples from innovative or leading states.

Notes

- ¹ National Governors Association, “Colorado Governor Jared Polis Elected Chair of National Governors Association, Launches ‘Educating All Americans for Success’ Initiative,” press release, July 12, 2024, <https://www.nga.org/news/press-releases/colorado-governor-jared-polis-elected-chair-of-national-governors-association-launches-educating-all-americans-for-success-initiative/>; and “Let’s Get Ready,” National Governors Association, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.nga.org/letsgetready/>.
- ² “From Education to Workforce,” Data Quality Campaign, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/our-work/policy-areas/from-education-to-workforce/>.

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