

Improving College Readiness & Success: A K-16 Approach

Introduction to the Report

This report summarized here¹ is a collaborative effort of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research. It is based on research that seeks to find out whether some governance structures are more effective than others in using policy levers to establish and sustain K-16 education reforms.

This study of four states (Florida, Georgia, New York, Oregon) concludes that new/revise state-level P-16 policies, governance structures, and programs are necessary to improve students' readiness for and success in postsecondary education. In each of the four states studied, researchers sought answers to K-16 education policy and governance questions such as:

- What are the main goals and objectives of current K–16 governance reforms at the state level?
- What are the organizational structures in place to support K–16 reform?
- What K–16 policies have been developed and implemented?
- Do state history and political culture support relationships and reforms among educational systems?
- What are the incentives and disincentives for improved connections?
- Who is responsible for developing and implementing these kinds of reform efforts?
- What are the main successes and failures of governance change to date?
- How do state budgetary practices impede/encourage establishment and viability of K-16 programs?
- How do cooperation and conflict between the educational systems manifest themselves?

Selected Observations Regarding State K-16 Education Policy and Governance

- The structure and organization of legislative committees in most states reinforce the divide between K–12 and postsecondary education. [NOTE: Florida, Georgia, New York, and Oregon were chosen for this study because of their varied approaches to, or governance contexts regarding, K–16 reform. Two states (NY, FL) have state education governance structures that encompass both K–12 and postsecondary education; the other two (GA, OR) have relied more on specific projects to improve student preparation and success.]
- Over 90% of high school seniors in the United States plan to attend college (including two- and four-year colleges), and about 70% of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating. Currently, many of those students are not prepared to enter postsecondary education. Nationally, 63% of students in two-year colleges and 40% of those in four-year institutions take some remedial education.
- Every state needs to increase the percentage of students who complete high school and finish some form of postsecondary education; existing governance structures and policies cannot meet this overwhelming need.
- Currently, K–12 and postsecondary education exist in separate worlds in the United States. Policies for each system of education are typically created in isolation from each other—even though, in contrast to the past, most students eventually move from one system to the other.
- State-level K–16 reform is in its infancy. States have disjointed systems with separate standards, governing entities, and policies, and a large college-going population. High school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college entrance and placement requirements. Coursework between high school and college is not connected.
- Current state data systems are not equipped to address students' progress across systems. This means that no one is held accountable for issues related to student transitions from high school to college.
- Establishing and empowering organizational structures that can transcend the barriers between educational sectors is essential in promoting K–16 reforms. These bodies should be charged with specific responsibilities, provided with the requisite resources, empowered with enough influence and authority to make real change, and held accountable for performance.

Primary Findings

State-level leadership and collaboration: *Establishing and empowering organizational structures that can transcend the existing educational sectors is essential in promoting K–16 reforms. Leadership at the state level is of crucial importance in sustaining long-term change.*

The fractured and often competitive nature of existing education governance structures can be a major impediment to K–16 reform. Some states have more than one postsecondary education system; other states have only one. Almost every state has some form of state board of higher education, but the ways these bodies interact with institutions of higher education and K–12 systems depend upon the history and culture of each state. Successful K–16 reform requires that governors and legislative committees must move beyond the traditional divide between K–12 and postsecondary education and address public education as a continuum of related issues and needs. At a minimum, states must have staff and funds that are dedicated to K–16 reform efforts.

State culture and history: *An understanding of the state’s culture and history is essential in creating lasting change. For this reason, a one-size-fits-all model will not work in developing K–16 reforms. Nonetheless, the culture and history of a state do not create insurmountable barriers to the establishment of such reforms.*

In initiating K–16 reform, a state should consider beginning with some specific policy change in a particular element of the education system (e.g., in finance, assessments and curricula, accountability, or data collection) and let the organizational and structural components evolve from that change. Sustained reform, however, will not occur if the elements of the educational system are treated in isolation. Also, a state might find it useful to initiate K–16 reform efforts by asking the following kinds of questions:

- Are the state’s K–12 academic content standards similar to the academic content in first-year courses at public colleges and universities?
- Does the state’s K–12 assessment ask students to know and be able to do the same things that are required by your state’s public colleges and universities for admission and placement into college-level work?
- Does the state have a statewide postsecondary education placement exam? If not, how do the tests of individual institutions relate to each other or to the content of the state’s high school assessment?
- Do schools have enough counselors whose main role is to advise students about college options?
- Do all students have early and repeated access to college preparation information?
- Are there course articulation agreements among the state’s public universities, community colleges, and high schools?
- Can state agencies (K–12 and postsecondary) link their databases in order to assess needs throughout the K–16 continuum?
- Does the statewide accountability system hold postsecondary education institutions accountable for graduating their students?
- Is there a stable or permanent entity or mechanism that allows K–12 and postsecondary education stakeholders to work together and overcome fragmentation concerning policy alignment, faculty interaction, and information systems across the sectors? [Engaging representatives from relevant educational sectors, business groups, and governmental agencies can be useful in discussing these kinds of issues.]

Incentives for K-16 reform: *As states seek to engage K–12 and higher education systems in more ambitious levels of K–16 reform, they should consider and put in place broad-based and deeply embedded incentives to achieve this aim.*

None of the four study states had created major positive incentive structures—that is, carrots instead of sticks—for collaborative work between K–12 and higher education. Public finance and accountability mechanisms traditionally are focused on either K–12 schools or postsecondary education: they rarely span both systems. However, successful K–16 reform requires creation of incentives for K–12 and postsecondary education systems to collaborate more effectively to meet the needs of students.

Recommendations: Four Policy Levers to Create Change

1. Alignment of curricula and assessments: *States need to make sure that what students are asked to know and do in high school is connected to postsecondary expectations—both in coursework and assessments. Currently, students in most states graduate from high school under one set of standards and face a disconnected and different set of expectations in college. Many students enter college unable to perform college-level work.*

The National Governors Association has recommended that states: (1) define a rigorous college preparatory curriculum for high school graduation; (2) give college readiness assessments in high school; (3) create common course agreements so that college-level work in high school counts toward a postsecondary credential; (4) provide financial incentives for economically disadvantaged students to take Advanced Placement exams and college preparatory courses; (5) expand college-level learning opportunities in high school to students who are traditionally under-represented in postsecondary education; (6) design literacy and math recovery programs; and (7) develop and fund supports to help students pass their high school exit exam(s).²

2. Finance: *State education finance systems must become K–16; this includes the legislative committees and staff functions that oversee finance and budgetary decisions. If education finance can span education systems, it has the potential to drive change in many other policy arenas as well.*

The report notes four models of performance funding for postsecondary education currently in use, none focusing on connecting K–12 and postsecondary funding streams: (1) “skimming” for marginal funding; (2) rewarding excellent programs; (3) doing all or nothing (providing funds on the basis of achieving purposeful goals); and (4) “pretending” to connect budget and performance. It suggests that postsecondary institutions and systems need financial incentives for student completion and retention, additional resources for “difficult-to-serve students,” and rewards when students finish their individual courses and their full courses of study.

3. Data systems: *States must create high-quality data systems that span the K–16 continuum. K–16 data systems should identify good practices, diagnose problems, provide information about all education levels, provide students with diagnostic information to help them prepare better, assess and improve achievement, and track individual students over time across levels. Without such systems, it is impossible to assess needs effectively, understand where the problems are, gain traction for changes needed, and evaluate reforms.*

Effective K–16 data and accountability systems should: (1) identify good practices; (2) diagnose problems; (3) inform people about the condition of education at all levels; (4) help students master necessary material to prepare for college; (5) help assess and improve achievement; and (6) follow individual students across levels and over time.

4. Accountability: *States need to connect their accountability systems for K–12 and postsecondary education. Currently, accountability systems are usually designed for either K–12 or postsecondary education without much attention to the interface between the two.*

There are very few accountability systems in place for postsecondary education, and even fewer that connect K–12 and postsecondary education. At the postsecondary level, students have been viewed as responsible for their own success or failure in completing their educational programs. Given inequities and systemic problems regarding persistence and completion rates in colleges and universities, it makes sense to establish and monitor performance based on measurable goals for higher education, and to require K–12 and postsecondary education to work together toward common objectives. The National Governors Association has called for governors, business leaders, and secondary and postsecondary educators and officials to collaborate in setting measurable goals for improving the performance of high schools, colleges, and universities.

About the Publisher

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPE), established in 1998, is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high-quality education and training beyond high school. It defines higher education to include all education and training beyond high school, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions. NCPPE receives continuing, core financial support from a consortium of national foundations that includes The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and The Ford Foundation. Its board is chaired by former Governor James B. Hunt Jr. of North Carolina.

Caveat Emptor

This summary was prepared by Bob Kansky (robk@tribcsp.com). It's one of a series of summaries offered to business, education, and policy leaders who are interested in the systemic improvement of mathematics and science education. The summary does not critique the report's assumptions, methods, or conclusions. It simply uses a somewhat standardized format to provide a brief introduction to the content of the report. This particular summary includes some phrases taken directly from the report without specific attribution (but with care not to misrepresent the intent of the report). Readers are encouraged to consult the original document for further information.

¹Venezia, A., Callan, P.M., Finney, J.E., Kirst, M.W., & Usdan, M.D. (2005). *The governance divide: A report on a four-state study on improving college readiness and success*. San Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. 68 pages. <http://www.highereducation.org>

²National Governors Association. (2005). *Ready? Set? Go!: Redesigning the American high school*. <http://www.nga.org>