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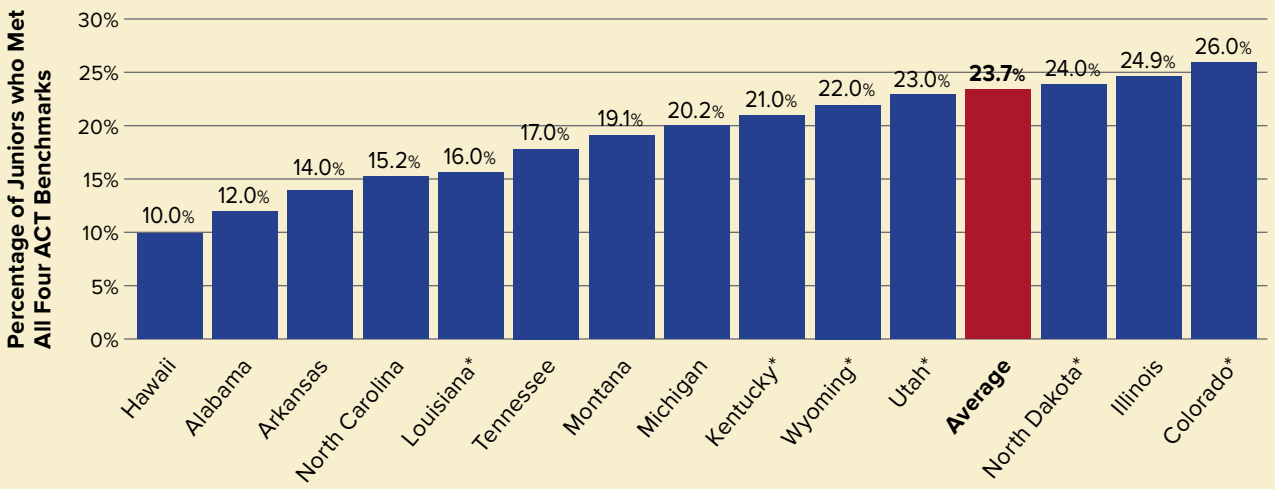
ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION

BUILDING A FAST TRACK TO COLLEGE:

An Executive Summary

BY MICHAEL DANNENBERG & ANNE HYSLOP

Good News: Overall, 1 in 4 high school juniors meet all four ACT college-readiness benchmarks. That would mean more than 850,000 students could be eligible for a Fast Track pathway nationwide.



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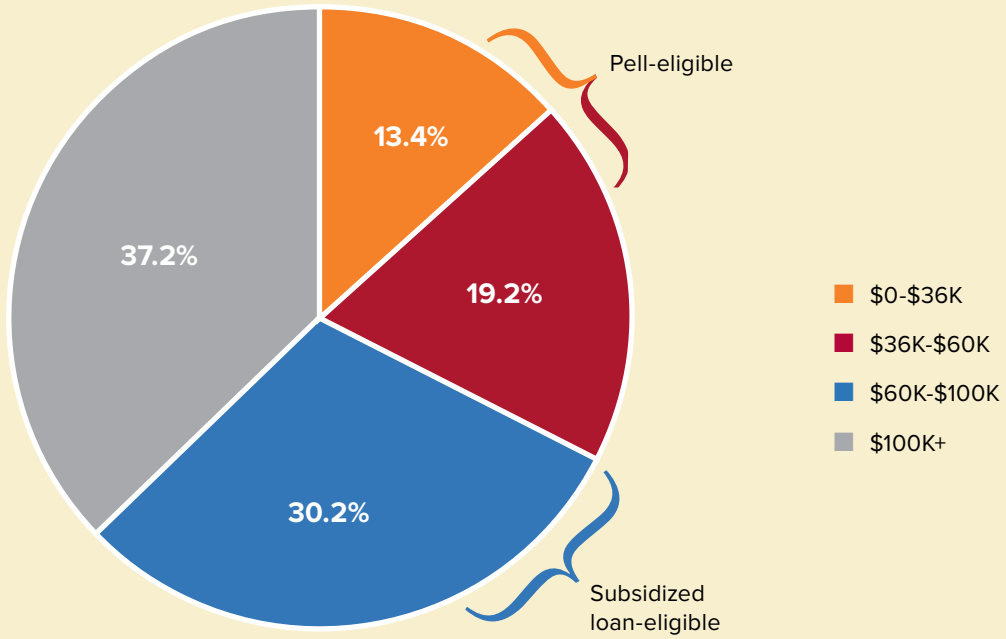
* Some states did not have ACT data limited to public schools. To produce state estimates in these cases, we used data for public and private high school juniors. In all cases (except Louisiana) the estimated proportion of juniors enrolled in public high schools among statewide exceeds 90%.

Better News: Nearly 2/3 of college-ready high school juniors come from low- and middle-income families.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senior year of high school: a coming-of-age period of such significance that there is an entire genre of television and film devoted to its rites of passage, full of characters afflicted by "senioritis"—the academic slacking off that occurs in 12th grade before students head to college. Ignored on screen are the one-quarter of students from a surprisingly wide cross-section of the population who will have to take (and pay for) remedial classes at the postsecondary level the fall immediately after high school graduation.[1] But as real world policymakers tackle postsecondary education remediation rates by looking for ways to improve high schools, they often overlook an early success — those who are already academically prepared for college *before* their senior year of high school. **According to new ACT data, one in four high school students is academically ready at the end of 11th grade to start college-level coursework *full-time*. Even better, one-third of those students come from low-income families, and 30 percent of those are racial minorities.**

Given these facts, policymakers have an opportunity to creatively rethink the transition from high school to college and save students time, money, and frustration in the process. Currently, all too many of the estimated 850,000+ academically-ready-for-college high school juniors waste much of 12th grade taking courses that fall below their capabilities, sometimes in order to meet "seat time" requirements for graduation. Senioritis is real. As an antidote and to reduce college costs for families, we recommend rethinking and reframing the transition from high school to college around one basic principle: **when students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in full-time, college-level coursework—and this choice should be encouraged with state and local funding.**

There already are established ways of allowing high school students to earn college credit, but they are underutilized and disconnected. Academically ready students can take college-level coursework during high school via Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual enrollment programs. But, even though states have been expanding these programs, the data indicates most **current early postsecondary course offerings fall short of a full-time, intensive program that consistently results in attainment of *widely transferable* college credit**.

25%

of high school students are academically prepared at the end of *11th grade* to start college-level coursework.

850,000+

students ready for college-level work waste much of their senior year taking courses that fall below their capabilities.

43%

of all college credits are lost when students transfer.

750,000+

of the 2 million dual enrollments likely result in no transferable college credit.

In other words, even when students have access to college-level coursework in high school, the promise of completing a college degree faster and with less debt is broken: Students fail to earn college credit or earned credits are lost when they arrive on campus. Of the 4.9 million AP exams taken each year, 42 percent are scored below the minimum passing level that most colleges will accept for credit (a score of "3"), and that's true for the majority of tests taken by Latinx students and nearly three-quarters of tests taken by Black students.[2] Only half of states ensure that students in dual enrollment programs earn both high school and postsecondary credits.[3] Moreover, institutions of higher education frequently make it challenging for students who do earn college credits elsewhere to apply them toward a degree. The Government Accountability Office estimates 43 percent of all college credits are lost when students transfer colleges. Some 37 percent of credits are lost when students transfer between public institutions of higher education (e.g., if dual enrollment students subsequently enroll in a different public college or university following high school graduation).[4] Even using the more conservative rate of credit transfer between public colleges, based on the number of student enrollments in dual credit courses in 2010–11, over 750,000 of the 2 million dual enrollments likely resulted in no transferable college credit.[5]

Imagine instead if advanced high school students had a choice to enter a "fast track" pathway—supported by state and local funding—that enabled them to take, free of charge, a full-time college-level course load during their senior year of high school that they could be reasonably assured would result in transferable college credit.

We envision two fast track pathways to accelerate academically ready students to and through higher education. The primary pathway would allow students to enroll in a full-time sequence of AP/IB or dual enrollment courses that enables them to graduate high school with at least the equivalent of a year's worth of college credit, crucially with the assurance that those credits will apply toward a degree at any public college statewide. A second, alternative pathway would offer students the option to graduate high school early—before 12th grade—with the reward of a scholarship that reduces their full-time college costs. In either case, rather than waiting for senioritis to take hold, academically ready students would get a head start on college—at a discount—that could enable them to complete high school and a postsecondary degree more quickly *and* incur less student loan debt in doing so. Think of it as high school in three years or college in three years, for those who are capable and so choose.

When students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in college-level coursework, full-time.

3.6 million HS juniors

1 in 4 college-ready

*Readiness determined based on **demonstrated competency** on assessments in core subjects*

FAST TRACK PATHWAYS

*College-ready student has **"vertical choice"** of where to enroll after 11th grade*

Pathway 1:

Full-Time AP/IB or Dual Enrollment

College-ready student remains in HS and enrolls full-time in college-level coursework

Savings from state higher ed aid, augmented by a portion of per-pupil K-12 aid, supports expanded **AP/IB program**, including all exam fees, and covers all student tuition & fee costs for **dual enrollment**.

Pathway 2:

Early Graduation Scholarships

*College-ready student graduates early and receives **scholarship** (i.e., a portion of per-pupil K-12 aid) to enroll in college*

COLLEGE

Our research indicates the basic building blocks to develop high-quality fast track pathways already exist. They just need to be put together in the right way. A majority of states have some mix of: college readiness assessments administered to students before 12th grade, AP/IB programs and/or dual enrollment coursework with a wide variety of credit transfer policies, proficiency-based high school graduation requirements, and early high school graduation scholarships. In addition to the millions of students taking at least one AP, IB, or dual enrollment course, we found that 34 states have an early high school graduation policy, and six states provide early high school graduates with college scholarships. But unlike AP/IB and dual enrollment, participation is low, with only 1 or 2 percent of students taking up the option to leave high school early. Current early graduation scholarships—in most cases, around $2,000—appear to be too small to convince students to participate. Plus, powerful cultural norms and social forces, including strong friendships, protective parents, sports, the senior prom, and other social activities, lead even the most academically advanced students to remain on the traditional high school track.

Few students want to graduate early—with, or without, the incentive of a scholarship. That is why it is essential that fast track pathways give academically ready high school students the chance to move on to college-level material without necessarily leaving high school. We recommend a series of steps for states to enhance their AP/IB and dual enrollment programs, prevent wasteful credit loss between high school and higher education, and tackle the shortcomings of existing early graduation scholarships. Even better, the benefits of these steps would extend beyond fast-track eligible students and also help those who are not yet on-track to graduate college- and career-ready.

34

states have an early high school graduation policy, and six states provide early high school graduates with college scholarships.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To determine if students are ready for college-level work prior to senior year, states should adopt performance-based criteria for early high school graduation based on demonstrated proficiency as opposed to "seat time."

With new policies to guarantee transfer of AP, IB, and dual enrollment credits, states can mitigate credit loss and accelerate time to degree even for students who do not pursue fast track.

1. **Fast Track Eligibility.** To determine if students are ready for college-level work prior to their senior year, all states should adopt performance-based criteria for high school graduation, including early high school graduation, based on demonstrated proficiency of academic content as opposed to "seat time" exclusively. States should consider using existing assessments (such as the SAT or ACT, state-developed assessments in core subject areas like the New York Regents exams, AP or IB exams, or a combination of these tests) to determine fast track eligibility and examine postsecondary data to ensure performance benchmarks are set at a level that corresponds with success in introductory college-level courses.

2. **State Policy, District Flexibility, & Student Choice.** States should build upon their current systems to enable all rising high school seniors meeting their state's performance-based criteria to enter one of two new fast track pathways. Our thinking is that while the policy infrastructure for fast track pathways should be statewide, a state could also incorporate local flexibility, if needed, to ameliorate concerns from districts with limited resources to offer a full suite of AP courses or dual enrollment for all eligible students, or to open new IB high schools. For example, a state could support a suite of online AP courses that meet minimum quality standards for eligible students or even permit districts that meet a hardship standard to opt-out of the primary full-time AP/IB or dual enrollment pathway and exclusively offer the alternative early graduation scholarship fast track pathway. But we believe fast track will work optimally if there are multiple pathways—maximizing student and family choice and recognizing that AP/IB and dual enrollment are popular and that early graduation scholarships are less common as well as underutilized where they do exist.

3. **Quality Fast Track Pathway Assurance for All.** States should establish parameters for at least two fast track pathways to maximize quality, success, and efficiency.

For the primary AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway, states should:

- Specify a sequence of AP courses that must be available to students and how credit would transfer to higher education.[6] Much as the IB program has already defined course criteria to earn an IB diploma, states should set parameters (i.e., number of courses and subjects that compose a typical first-year college course of study) for a full-time AP sequence for fast track students. States should also establish a corresponding policy that any student earning a "3" or higher on the associated AP exam (or a comparable score on an IB exam) must receive college credit at all in-state, public two- and four-year institutions. Likewise, states should create an articulated, full-time sequence of dual enrollment courses where credits earned in the sequence must be accepted toward degree requirements at all in-state, public two- and four-year institutions. Such moves would have the additional benefit of mitigating credit loss with early postsecondary course options generally and accelerate time to degree even for students who do not pursue fast track but still take AP/IB or dual enrollment courses.

- Ensure that the AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway is offered tuition-free to students, with any generated savings reinvested in improving instruction, coursework, programs, and support services in the feeder district's high schools. Net savings that are captured from state higher education funds associated with accelerated time to degree for fast track students should be used to improve college and career readiness for traditional students who are not eligible for fast track and need additional support.
- Require districts to allow non-fast track eligible students to participate in a district's AP/IB or dual enrollment offerings if there is space and a student demonstrates readiness for the course. This—coupled with new policies to guarantee transferability of credits—will help ensure any expansion of AP/IB or dual enrollment as a result of fast track promotes college readiness overall and has a positive impact on the district's students as a whole.

For the alternate early graduation scholarship fast track pathway, we recommend states:

- Assure a meaningful award size based on the state's share of per-pupil K–12 spending (e.g., two-thirds or $3,000, whichever is greater, with higher spending states encouraged to match the scholarship to the size of the maximum federal Pell Grant, just under $6,200 for the 2019–20 school year);
- Require that any remaining state funds be reinvested in the feeder school district to, in effect, increase per-pupil spending for those still enrolled; and
- Adopt provisions that ensure funds remain invested in public education. For example, scholarships may not be accepted at certain colleges and universities (e.g., out-of-state, private, or for-profit institutions) and must be used within one year of the student's high school graduation.

Ideally there would be an infusion of public revenue to upgrade current high school academic offerings and facilitate new fast track pathways, but it is worth highlighting that fiscally strapped states also can make aggressive use of existing resource levels. Consider that the average bachelor's degree recipient currently takes five years to complete a postsecondary program,[7] rather than four—meaning costs are 25 percent higher than they otherwise need to be. **Speeding up postsecondary education time to degree could save students, institutions, and taxpayers substantial sums—savings that could be reinvested to improve high school curricula for advanced students and help other students working to get on-track to graduate college- and career-ready.**

States should assure a meaningful scholarship award, with higher spending states encouraged to match the size of the Pell Grant:

$6,200.

State higher education costs are

25%

higher than they need to be, because the typical bachelor's degree recipient now takes five years to complete their postsecondary program, instead of the traditional four.

By accelerating time to degree for academically ready students, states could generate savings from state aid to higher education and reinvest those dollars to offer early postsecondary courses in high school.

3.6 million public HS juniors: **1 in 4 college-ready**

If 25% of them pursue the "Fast Track" Pathway

Full-Time AP/IB or Dual Enrollment Senior Year of HS

Earn a College Degree in Three Years, Not Four

Expand higher education access

Expand Fast Track pathway and offer additional early postsecondary courses, plus other college- and career-ready efforts, in HS

$1.8 BILLION =

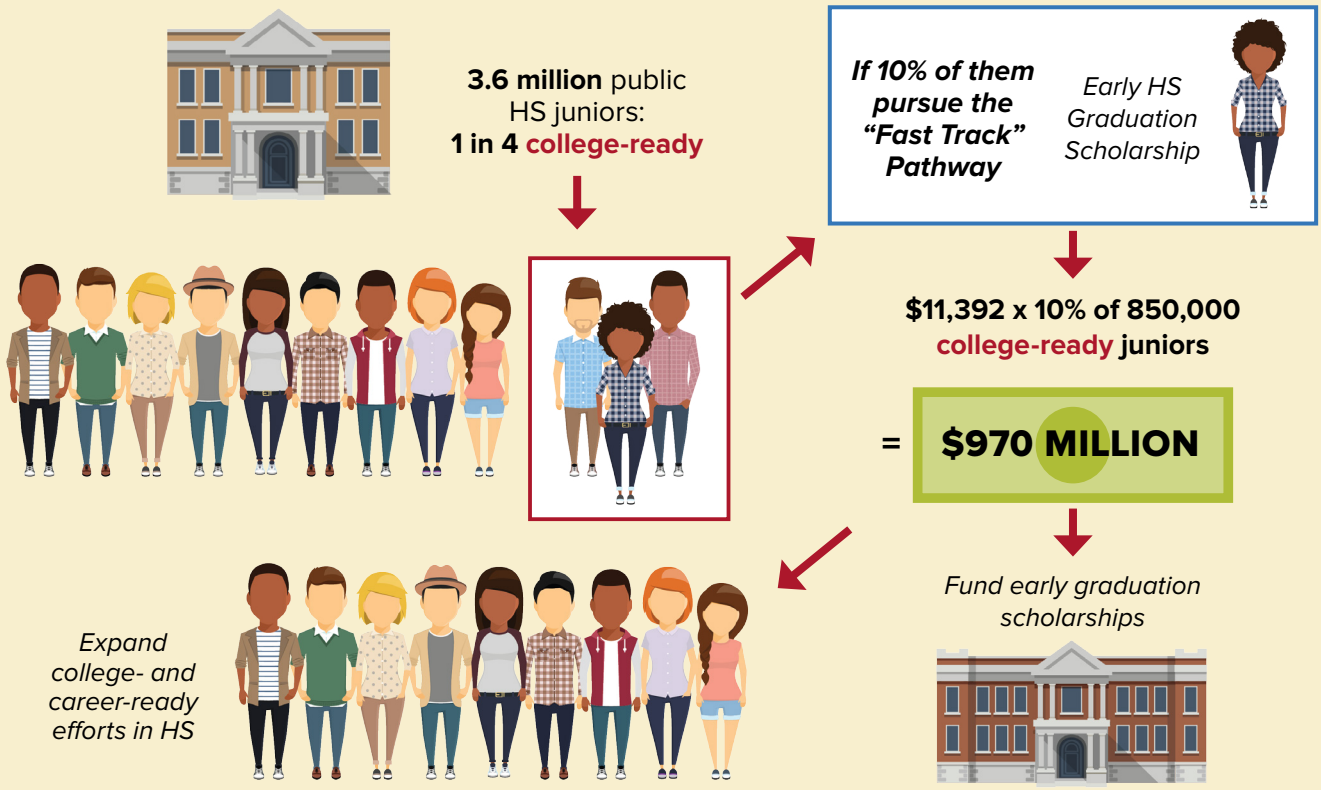
$8,406 x 25% of 850,000 college-ready juniors

Source: College readiness rates were estimated from 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Grade 11 enrollment data is from the National Center of Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2017. State postsecondary per-student spending estimated from national average institution of higher education operating support, plus grant aid.

Each year, $1.8 billion dollars from state higher education budgets could be saved and reinvested toward improving college access and K-12 preparation.

To the extent more college credit is earned in high school and applied toward postsecondary degrees, back-end savings of taxpayer spending on higher education (i.e., taxpayer spending on the final year of college before degree conferral) are available to be captured. If enrollment projections for public colleges and universities are updated to account for fast track students arriving with a year of college credit, states could generate savings from reduced institutional aid to public institutions of higher education because some entering students would be projected to attain a degree faster than traditional students. A state would only have to subsidize four or, better yet, three years of public higher education for relevant students, rather than the typical five for those who graduate. Based on average state postsecondary student spending (institution of higher education operating support plus grant aid) of $8,406, **if only a quarter of college-ready high school juniors choose a quality full-time AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track option, we estimate states could free as much as $1.8 billion from their state higher education budgets each year** as a result of students graduating in less cumulative time.[8] Further, enforcement of clear and consistent transfer policies for AP/IB and dual enrollment credits among public colleges likely would result in faster degree attainment and additional savings by even greater numbers of postsecondary students who were ineligible to participate in fast track.

By also permitting academically ready high school juniors to graduate early and fast track to college, with a scholarship, additional funds could be reinvested to help their peers become college-ready.



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Moreover, there are potential front-end savings associated with students who choose the alternative fast track option—to graduate high school after only three years with the incentive of an early graduation scholarship—that would augment back-end savings in higher education costs driven by those who pursue what we expect would be the primary fast track pathway. Consider that for every academically ready high school junior who chooses to graduate high school a year early, the typical state could repurpose the $11,000 it would have spent on that student's 12th grade education. In the highest K–12 spending states like New York and Washington, DC, the efficiency figure would reach upwards of $20,000 per fast track student who graduates after 11th grade. Multiply the more than 850,000 advanced high school juniors nationwide (based on ACT data) by the national average per-pupil expenditure and an outward bound of some $9.7 billion dollars could be spent each year on providing students early access to college and making college more affordable. **Even if only 10 percent of college-ready juniors choose the early high school graduation fast track option, nearly $1 billion could be invested.** That is more than any federal education program currently devotes to high school reform and improvement.

If only 10% of college-ready juniors chose an early high school graduation fast track option, another near $1 billion could be made available for early college scholarships and improved high school programs each year.

With both fast track pathways, "saved" funds could be garnered to support new investments in students' college and career readiness on the K–12 side of the budget—whether expanding a high school's AP or dual enrollment offerings or transforming it into an IB high school, hiring additional college counselors, or partnering with local industry to offer high-quality, work-based learning opportunities—or investments in early graduation scholarships for fast track students. Either way, the result would be a more individualized system of postsecondary preparation that's better for advanced students, traditional students, *and* taxpayers.

In sum, enabling more academically prepared students to choose a fast track to college addresses three issues that vex the transition for high school students to and through higher education.

1. **Skyrocketing college costs and student loan debt.** By increasing the number of students graduating high school with significant college credits and ensuring those credits transfer to a degree, attainment of a bachelor's degree in three years would be more possible for hundreds of thousands of students, making college more affordable for them and their families. The same holds for those who graduate from college in the traditional four-year span instead of what is now a five-year norm—not because they participated in a fast track pathway, but because the handful of AP or dual enrollment courses they took in high school actually resulted in transferable and meaningful college credits.

2. **High school reform, rigor, and remediation.** By front-loading a portion of state higher education funding into improved high school curricular offerings and reinvesting a portion of K–12 funds associated with early high school graduates (after accounting for any early graduation scholarships awarded) into high school programs, states could offer additional early postsecondary opportunities to all students, even those who are not fast-track eligible. This serves the express purpose of improving students' academic preparation, easing the transition between secondary and postsecondary schooling, and increasing per pupil-served aid to K–12 schools. Associated success in high school student achievement would in turn reduce the $1.5 billion in out-of-pocket expenses low-income and middle-class families incur for remedial coursework at the postsecondary level.[9]

3. **The senior slump.** Fast track pathways provide academically ready students greater flexibility to personalize their learning and experience challenging, relevant coursework that will be meaningful as they pursue postsecondary education. Even before senior year, fast track pathways could motivate students to work hard toward the concrete promise of a reward—the option to enroll, free of charge and full-time, in a quality AP/IB or dual enrollment program or secure a sizable scholarship to enter college—if they do well enough academically, regardless of family financial circumstances.

Nearly a million high school juniors are ready for college each year and yet most of them spend another year in high school that costs them, and the state, money and time. By using the building blocks states already have, from proficiency-based graduation policies to AP/IB and dual enrollment to early graduation scholarships, we can design a new system, with multiple pathways between high school and higher education, that's more efficient for the state, students, and families.

For a more detailed discussion, see our full white paper "Building a Fast Track to College: New Pathways to Empower Families, Improve High Schools, and Increase College Affordability" at www.edreformnow.org.

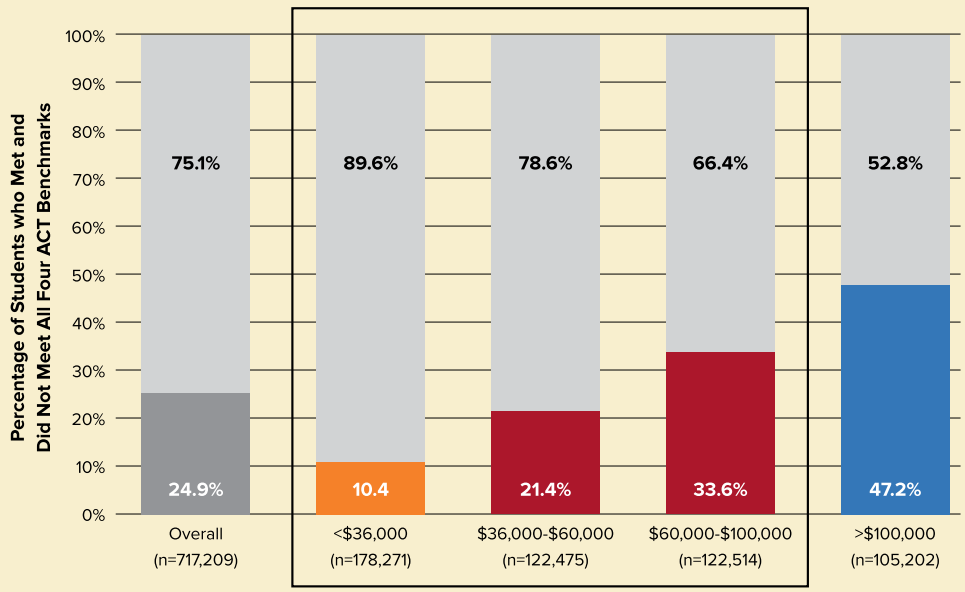
INTRODUCTION

Ever heard of "senior-itis" for high school students or on the flip side "developmental education" for those in college? They're euphemisms, respectively, for high school seniors slacking off academically and remedial education required of a surprisingly wide cross-section of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities.

Approximately one-third of students in grades 10–12 are actively disengaged from school, according to Gallup, far higher than in the earlier grades.[10] Not coincidentally, one in four college freshmen who enter postsecondary education the fall immediately following high school graduation has to take at least one—and, on average, two—non-credit bearing, remedial courses in college.[11] Over the longer-term, data show 68 percent of all students entering a two-year college and 40 percent of all students entering four-year colleges take a remedial course at some point.[12]

In other words, the pipeline from high school to college is leaky. But it doesn't have to be. Imagine a world where advancement to college is based on what students know, instead of a student's age or the number of courses they take (i.e., "seat time")—and where those ready for college-level work early can choose to fast track their postsecondary in education *and* save money in the process. A new look at new data reveals we can do it, using policies and structures already in place, while also creating a better academic experience for those who aren't yet college-ready. And the best part is, it doesn't have to involve any new taxpayer funds, nor require students or families to sign away future income to ruinous student loans.

Figure 1a. Bad News: Very few students from low- and middle-class families are college-ready at the end of 12th grade.



Source: Data represent 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Data are based on students who self-reported family income data (missing responses are omitted)

1/3

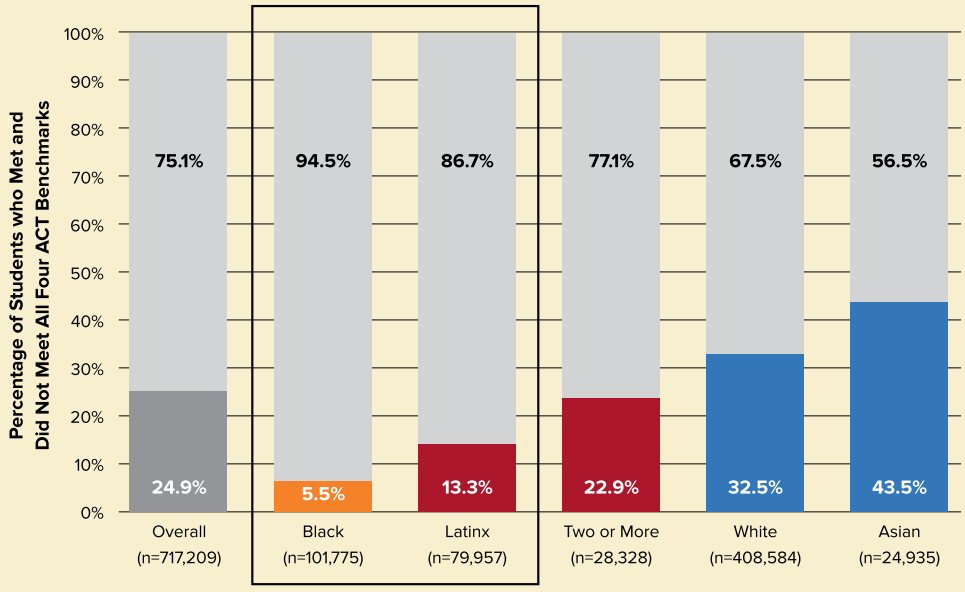
of students in grades 10–12 are actively disengaged from school, according to Gallup, far higher than in the earlier grades.

Why Build Fast Track Pathways?

- The state of college readiness among high school seniors is overwhelmingly low and particularly gut-wrenching for students of color and students from low- and middle-class families. As shown in Figure 1, **over three-quarters (75.1 percent) of high school seniors do not meet all four ACT content area college-readiness benchmarks,** and the numbers are higher for low-income students (89.6 percent) and still higher for Black students (94.5 percent); even the majority of upper-income students, including upper-income white students, fail to graduate high school ready for college.

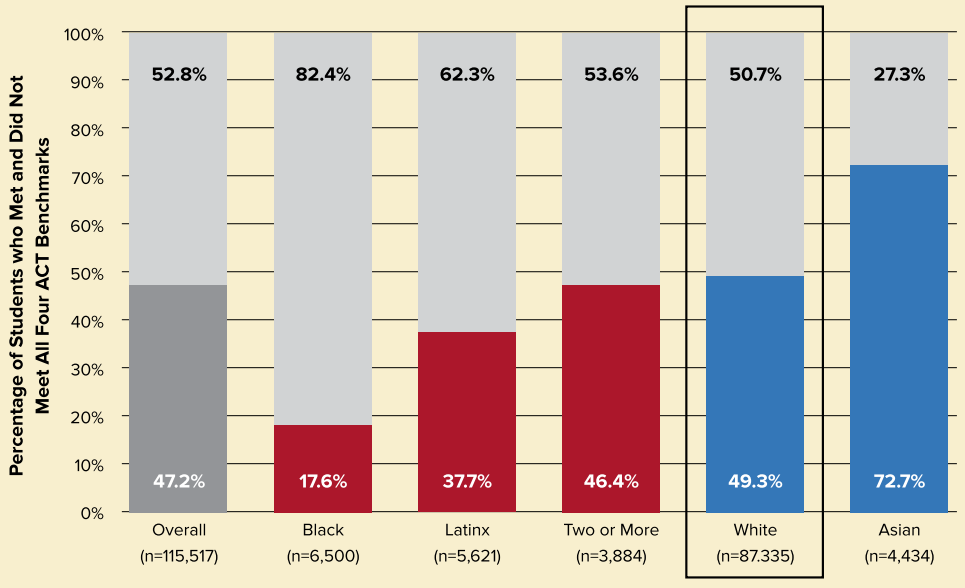
- But it's not all bad news. **Approximately 1 in 4 (23.7 percent) public high school juniors meet all four ACT college-readiness benchmarks.**[13] They are arguably ready for college-level work before 12th grade even begins. Among the 14 states that give the ACT test to all public high school juniors free of charge, the percentage of ready students varies from an estimated low of 10 percent in Hawaii to a high of 26 percent in Colorado (depicted in Figure 2).

Figure 1b. More Bad News: Very few students of color are college-ready at the end of 12th grade.



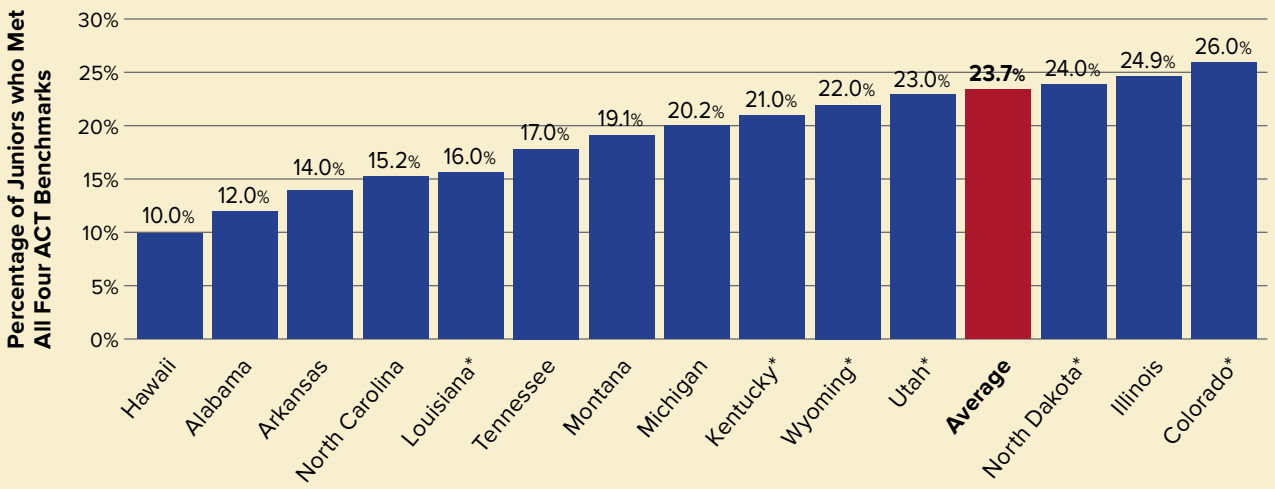
Source: Data represent 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Data are not displayed for students who did not provide their race/ethnicity (n=7,042; 43.3% met all four benchmarks).

Figure 1c. No Hiding from Bad News: Even among students from the wealthiest families, over half of white students are not college-ready.



Source: Data represent 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Data are not displayed for students who did not provide their race/ethnicity (n=7,042; 43.3% met all four benchmarks).

Figure 2. Good News: Overall, 1 in 4 high school juniors meet all four ACT college-readiness benchmarks. That would mean more than 850,000 students could be eligible for a Fast Track pathway nationwide.



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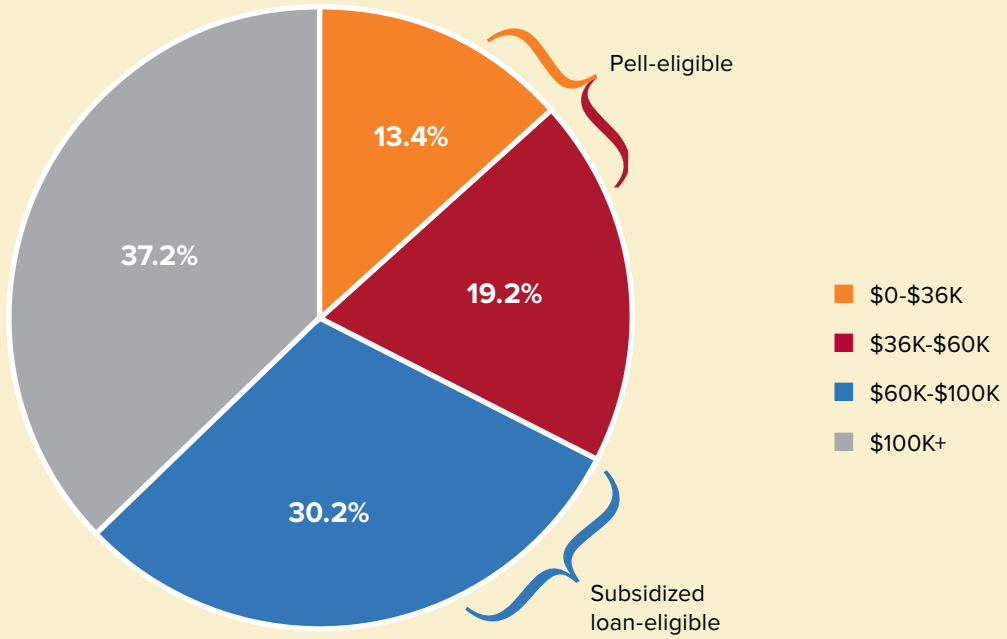
* Some states did not have ACT data limited to public schools. To produce state estimates in these cases, we used data for public and private high school juniors. In all cases (except Louisiana) the estimated proportion of juniors enrolled in public high schools among statewide exceeds 90%.

Figure 3. Better News: Nearly 2/3 of college-ready high school juniors come from low- and middle-income families.



Source: Income data and analysis provided through our partnership with ACT. ACT test score and income data represents 2013-14 public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT statewide administration states. Data are based on students who self-reported family income data (missing responses are omitted).

Even better, academically advanced students are socioeconomically diverse. Contrary to common perception, the vast majority of college-ready juniors do not come from the wealthiest households: ***Two-thirds of academically ready high school juniors come from low-income and middle-class families*—and they're not exclusively white.** Approximately one-third (32.6 percent) come from families earning less than $60,000 per year, and another one-third (30 percent) from families with incomes between $60,000 and $100,000, as illustrated in Figure 3. While most of these students will be eligible for federal Pell Grants or subsidized student loans in college, federal financial aid is not available for college-level coursework if students are still enrolled in high school.

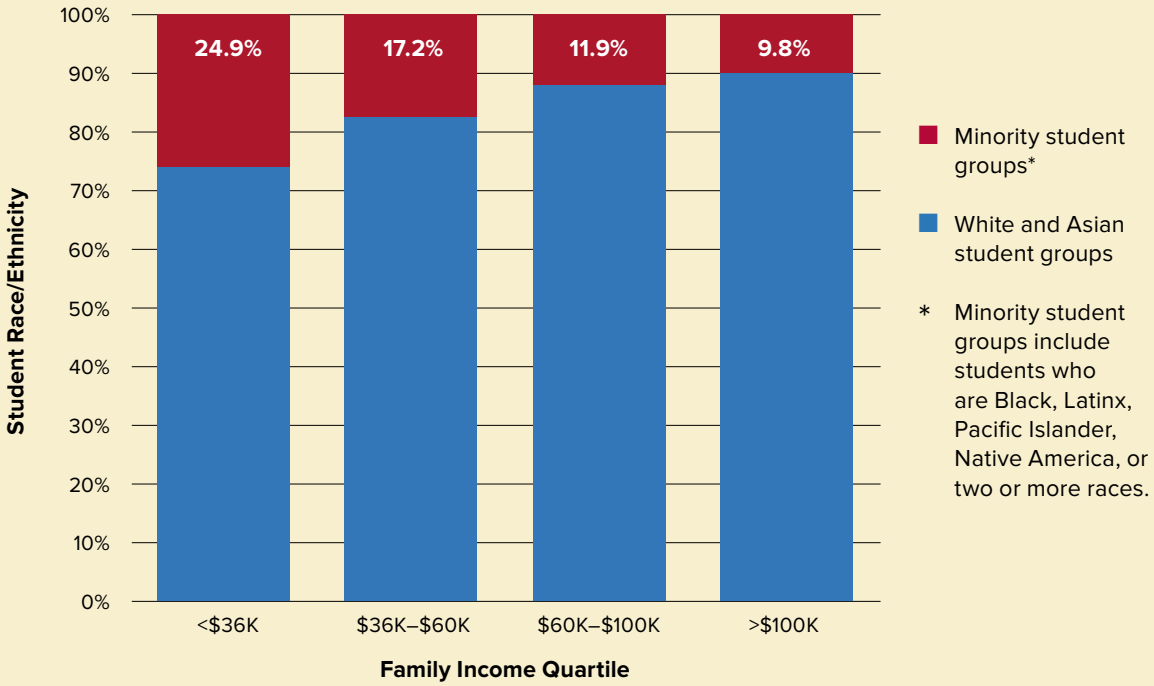
Finally, despite the paucity of college-ready students of color overall, the subset of low-income students from families making less than $36,000 who are ready for college as high school juniors is racially diverse: Nearly 30 percent are Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Native American, or two or more races (see Figure 4).

The Resources Exist to Build Fast Track Pathways

- **The early postsecondary course offerings, high school graduation policies, and scholarship programs needed to support fast track pathways already exist in many states. But they have not yet been put together as a full-time course of study or taken to scale in a way that makes the pathway a *meaningful* option for all academically ready students.** Nationally, nearly 3.6 million students were enrolled in the 11th grade in public high schools in the 2015–16 school year.[14] If we apply the proportion of high school juniors deemed to be college-ready in the 14 ACT states (23.7 percent) to the overall student population, more than 850,000 high school juniors could be ready for college a year early—each and every year—absent any improvement in student achievement (see Appendix A for a description of our data and methods).

- **To the extent we can accelerate the time to high school graduation and college degree completion combined for advanced students to seven years, states could amass substantial back-end savings in their higher education budgets**—particularly if most students opt for a fast track pathway that provides a full-time sequence of AP/IB or dual enrollment courses during 12th grade and enter their first year of college with a significant number of transferable credits. If reduced time to degree for fast tracked students were taken into account in enrollment projections for the state's public institutions of higher education, states could capture as much as $7.2 billion in gross savings from their state higher education budgets for students who do not need to enroll in a fifth or sixth year of college and reinvest those funds either in their K–12 education systems (e.g., to expand AP/IB and dual enrollment and/or to finance improved curriculum, instruction, teacher training, or wraparound supports for traditional students) or in the higher education system itself (e.g., to expand access or increase need-based student aid programs). Even if only a quarter of the students we estimate could be eligible for fast track choose to take a tuition-free, full-time, college-level course of study during 12th grade, states could still generate up to $1.8 billion in gross savings each year (as depicted on page 6).

Figure 4. Even Better News: Among college-ready juniors, those from low-income families are the most racially diverse; nearly 30% come from minority groups.



Source: Data represent 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Data are based on students who self-reported family income data (missing responses are omitted).

- **Moreover, additional front-end savings could be found from academically ready students graduating high school early, using funds that would have been spent on their senior year of high school to give them a discount on college tuition and to increase per-pupil spending for their peers still enrolled in high school.** If only 1 in 10 eligible students opted into a fast track pathway that included an early graduation scholarship, nearly $1 billion a year in K-12 spending could be reinvested to improve college affordability and academic preparation, as shown on page 7. A portion of the per-pupil expenditure amount that would have been spent on such a student's grade 12 enrollment could instead be used to make college more affordable for fast track students while the remainder could support efforts to improve instruction and postsecondary preparation for regular high school students in their senior year, if not earlier. One would expect only a small percentage of families to take advantage of the opportunity to graduate early from high school, but if all academically prepared did so, approximately $9.7 billion could be reallocated.

The bottom line: Although we think fast track pathways should be embraced even if it meant increased public spending, we believe states can create fast track pathways by tapping enormous inefficiencies in current spending and directing those funds to support improved curricula and academic offerings for all high school students and improved college affordability for those who are not challenged academically during 12th grade.

In 2016–17, more than 2.7 million students took over 4.9 million AP exams in public and private high schools—over 15 percent of the estimated 16.4 million high school students in the U.S.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS ARE IN PLACE: CURRENT POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FAST TRACK PATHWAYS

I. Building Block One: Early Postsecondary Coursework Opportunities for High School Students

- **Millions of students currently experience postsecondary coursework in high school with the vast majority taking Advanced Placement (AP) and/or dual enrollment classes.** As shown in Table 1, early postsecondary experiences vary in size, location, and design. But they all play a critical role in state and local efforts to help students meet college- and career-ready standards, boost engagement with rigorous and relevant coursework, and increase student preparedness, enrollment and success in higher education (for more, see "Defining Early Postsecondary Opportunities). These popular programs are the first critical building block a state should leverage to build new fast track pathways.

  AP is the most common early postsecondary opportunity nationally and has been expanding over time—with the number of students taking AP exams nearly tripling between 2002 and 2017. **In 2016–17, more than 2.7 million students took over 4.9 million AP exams in public and private high schools—more than 15 percent of the estimated 16.4 million high school students in the U.S.**[16] IB is significantly less popular: About 83,000 students (less than one percent of high school students), across 915 public and private high schools, were IB diploma candidates last year.[17]

Dual enrollment is second in size to AP. While the data is somewhat older, in 2010–11, 46 percent of all institutions of higher education and 82 percent of all public high schools reported that high school students took courses for college credit via dual enrollment; this amounted to nearly 1.3 million public school students in dual enrollment—almost 9 percent of all public high school students at the time—with participation likely increasing since.[18] A much smaller subset of dual enrollment students (over 80,000 in the 2014–15 school year) were enrolled in about 280 early college high schools, simultaneously earning a high school diploma and an associate degree.[19]

TABLE 1. CURRENT EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES[15]

Early Postsecondary Option	Number of Students	Number of Schools	Where Offered	Who Teaches	How College Credit Earned
Advanced Placement (AP)	2,741,426 public and private school students (2016–17)	22,169 public and private high schools (2016–17)	High Schools	High School Teachers	Earning a passing score (3–5) on the associated course exam
Dual Enrollment	1,277,100 public school students (2010–11)	Roughly 15,000 public high schools (2010–11)	High Schools or College Campuses	High School Teachers or College Faculty	Earning a passing grade for the course
Early College High Schools	Roughly 80,000 public school students (2014–15)	280 public high schools (2014–15)	High Schools or College Campuses	High School Teachers or College Faculty	Earning a passing grade for each course, up to an associate degree
International Baccalaureate (IB)	82,803 IB Diploma Candidates in public and private schools (2016–17)	915 public and private high schools (2016–17)	High Schools	High School Teachers	Earning a passing score (4–7) on the associated course exam

Sources. AP Data: "AP Program Participation and Performance Data 2017, Annual AP Program Participation 1956-2017," The College Board. Dual Enrollment Data: "Dual Enrollment Programs and Courses for High School Students at Postsecondary Institutions: 2010-11" and "Dual Credit and Exam-Based Courses in U.S. Public High Schools: 2010-11" U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Early College Data: "Early College Designs: Schools," Jobs for the Future. IB Data: "The IB By Country: United States," International Baccalaureate Organization.

DEFINING EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES[20]

Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and the related standardized end-of-course tests are designed by the College Board and International Baccalaureate organizations, respectively. The 38 AP courses and exams are developed by college faculty and AP teachers. High schools offer any number of AP courses—the most popular include Calculus, English Language, English Literature, U.S. History, and Biology.[21] In contrast, students in high schools with IB diploma programs complete a specific sequence of IB classes and exams over two years, culminating in the receipt of an IB diploma—an internationally recognized designation intended to signal that students mastered the IB curriculum and are well-prepared for higher education.[22] While enrollment in AP or IB is free for students, there are fees to take the exams—the basis used to determine whether students receive college credit.

Dual enrollment includes many different types of programs where high school students enroll in college-level courses and earn postsecondary credits that will appear on a transcript provided by a partner institution of higher education (typically a local community college) and that can be applied toward a degree or credential at that institution. Dual enrollment may also apply toward course or credit requirements for high school graduation. States or districts often pay part of, or all, tuition and fees for dually enrolled students, but some states have policies limiting which students can participate—often to ensure students are ready for college-level work. In 2010–11, *63 percent of all public high schools with dual enrollment used eligibility criteria.* Among them, 81 percent limited enrollment to certain grades, 77 percent required approval from a school administrator or counselor, 49 percent required a minimum GPA, 46 percent required a teacher recommendation, and 43 percent required students to pass a college placement test.[23]

Where dual enrollment occurs varies, as does who teaches relevant courses; classes may be held on a college or high school campus, or online, and may be taught by college faculty or high school teachers. Data show, however, that dual enrollment is often occurring through a **concurrent enrollment** model where students are exclusively taught by high school teachers in high schools. In 2010–11, *more than three-quarters of enrollments in dual credit courses occurred in high schools,* while 17.7 percent occurred at postsecondary institutions and 5.6 percent via distance education.[24] Just three states and Washington, DC limit in-person dual enrollment to postsecondary institutions.[25] Among high schools offering academic dual enrollment courses on their campuses, *61 percent reported courses were taught solely by high school teachers.*[26]

Early college high schools are a specific type of dual enrollment program. Instead of an à la carte approach, where students enroll in any number of college courses, early college high schools deliberately integrate college-level courses into a school's design so that all students graduate with a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit or an associate degree. Some schools enroll students for four years, while others require five or six years to fulfill the requirements for both a high school diploma and associate degree. Early college high schools—unlike most early postsecondary opportunities—often target students who have not been traditionally given access to rigorous, college-preparatory work. To date, 73 percent of enrolled students are minorities, 61 percent are low-income, and 56 percent would be the first in their family to graduate college.[27] As a comprehensive, whole-school model, early colleges must closely partner with institutions of higher education to ensure that graduates meet the necessary course requirements to earn an associate degree or other postsecondary credential upon graduation—and not just receive credit for a single course or two. Many also provide additional supports, counseling, financial aid and college application help, and other services. These additional supports can increase the program cost; for example, in North Carolina, early college high schools receive supplemental funding (ranging from $180,000 to $310,000 per school each year) from the state legislature.[28]

II. Building Block Two: AP/IB and Dual Enrollment Credit Transfer Policies

Access to early postsecondary opportunities for students is only the first step. For students to reap the full benefit of these opportunities, they must also be able to earn college credit from them and apply that credit to their postsecondary degrees. Although far from perfect, **twenty states have policies requiring public institutions of higher education to accept AP exam results for credit,** as of 2016, according to the Education Commission of the States.[29] Likewise, **25 states and Washington, DC require that dual enrollment students earn both high school and postsecondary credit**.[30]

- **Model state AP/IB policies go further than require institutions of higher education to accept AP/IB credit, they also specify the score on the associated exam that is needed and apply that score uniformly,** rather than permit different public colleges to set different standards. For example, in the summer of 2018, New Mexico's Higher Education Department adopted a new statewide AP policy for all of its public colleges and universities. The necessary score ranges from a "3" to a "5," depending on the course.[31] In other states, like Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, South Dakota, and West Virginia, all public colleges and universities must accept a score of "3" on an AP exam for credit.

- Even in these model states, however, the type of credit earned is typically left to the discretion of the college or university—in some cases, a score of "3" may only satisfy general education requirements or may only be used for elective credit. Alternatively, some states will provide students with a greater number of course credits for a higher score—for example, a "4" or "5"—than they will for a score of "3."[32] Colorado, for example, is one state where a "3" is typically accepted for credit, but the number of credits can increase for higher scores.[33]

- For dual enrollment, states need to adopt statewide policies and statewide articulation agreements to facilitate the transfer of credits from one college—typically, a local community college near a student's high school—to the college where the student enrolls full-time after high school graduation. **Twenty-five states require all of their public colleges and universities to accept dual enrollment credits, even if the student did not earn those credits at the institution where he or she is now enrolled,** but fifteen states and Washington, DC do not. Further, there are sometimes caveats or additional criteria that must be met in order for dual enrollment credit to transfer—such as a limited list of courses for which the guaranteed transfer policy applies.[34]

Florida has taken particular care to ensure dual enrollment credits transfer from high school to higher education, and between public colleges and universities—though there are some exceptions for the state's flagship campuses. The state has a uniform, statewide course numbering system that is required in all Florida public institutions of higher education, and any course with the same number must be accepted for credit (even if that course was not taken at the student's current institution of higher education). This policy applies both to dual enrollment credits, as well as to credits a student may earn toward an associate degree at a community college that he or she wants to subsequently apply toward a bachelor's degree at a public four-year university. All dual enrollment students must be provided information up-front in high school about whether the course is likely to result in credits that can only be used as electives.[35] Florida has also established statewide general postsecondary education core course requirements that are accepted at all public colleges and universities—essentially a statewide articulation agreement that clarifies an associate in arts graduate from any public institution has met the general education requirements for all public four-year institutions in the state and must be admitted into upper-level courses at those institutions if accepted—and a reverse transfer policy whereby students at in-state four-year institutions may request to receive an associate in arts degree if they have successfully completed the minimum requirement, including 60 academic semester hours.[36]

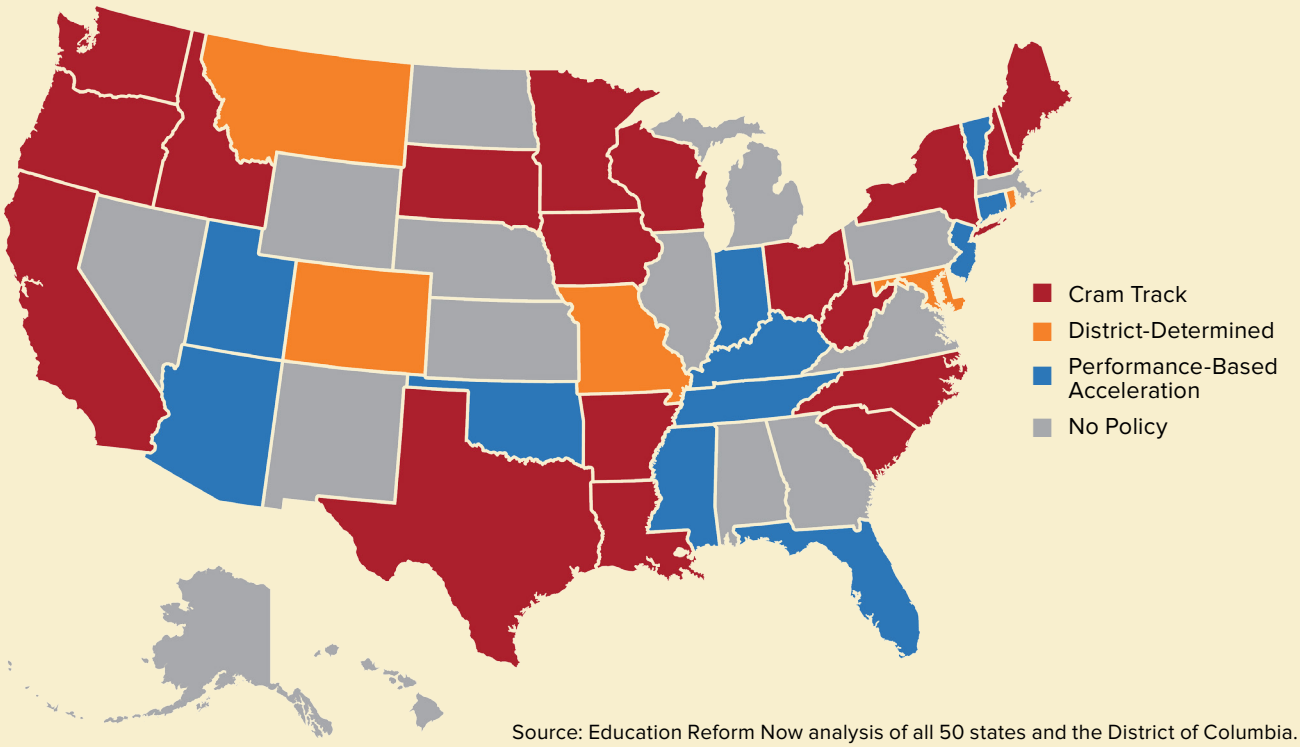
III. Building Block Three: Early High School Graduation Policies

While we expect most students and families will prefer to take advantage of a fast track pathway that includes a full-time course load of AP/IB or dual enrollment classes, a more direct way for college-ready high school students to advance to college-level work would be for them to graduate early and enroll in higher education. But very few students currently graduate high school in less than four years. In a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of high school sophomores in 2001–02, **less than 3 percent of students surveyed graduated high school in three years**.[37] Roughly speaking, that would amount to fewer than 117,000 of the 4 million students entering public high schools each year and just over one-eighth of those who we estimate are college- and career-ready nationally by the end of 11th grade based on ACT data.

Despite the low prevalence of early graduates, however, we found that **34 states have a statewide policy supporting early high school graduation**—another key building block to create a system of fast track pathways. As shown in Figure 5, 29 states have a comprehensive statewide policy or guidance permitting early graduation, while five states permit districts to make early graduation decisions.[38]

- Among the 34 states in Figure 5, **there is a divide between whether states or districts require students to meet standard graduation requirements in a condensed time-frame—what we call a "cram track"—or are more innovative and permit graduation based on demonstrated competency or proficiency**—what we call "performance-based" acceleration.

Figure 5. Two-thirds (34 states) have a statewide policy addressing early high school graduation.



Source: Education Reform Now analysis of all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Figure 6. Kentucky: a Model Early High School Graduation Policy

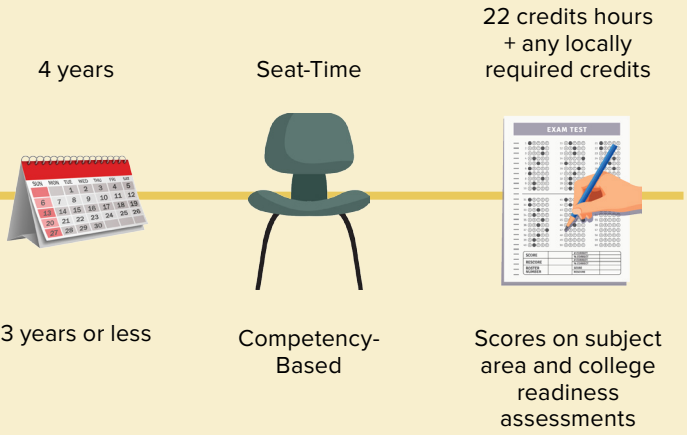
TRADITIONAL PATHWAY

4 credits Language Arts
3 credits Math
3 credits Social Studies
3 credits Science
½ credit Health, ½ credit Physical Education
1 credit Visual and Performing Arts
7 credits Academic / Career Interests
Performance-Based Technology
Competency

EARLY GRADUATION PATHWAY

Proficient on statewide end-of-course exams in English II, Algebra II, U.S. History, and Biology

College-ready benchmark score in math, English, and reading on ACT, as determined by the state Council for Postsecondary Education



> **18 states permit some form of "cram track:"** Students in these states must meet standard, credit-based graduation requirements to graduate early, but on an accelerated timeline. Typically, this involves taking more courses per semester, forgoing electives, or completing summer, night, or online classes. Four of these states (Louisiana, Ohio, South Carolina, and West Virginia) require districts to establish a way for students to complete high school requirements on an accelerated timeline and graduate early.

> **Five states permit school districts to develop an early graduation policy:** Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, and Rhode Island lack a uniform statewide policy for early graduation, but have policies that permit districts to develop their own, if they choose.

> **11 states have a "performance-based" mechanism for early graduation,** though some still rely, in part, on course requirements. Four of these states (Connecticut, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Vermont), however, have policies to award diplomas based solely on an assessment of students' mastery—the kind of innovative policy that would best enable fast track pathways for college- ready students. Figure 6 depicts key differences between the traditional and performance-based graduation pathway in Kentucky. For more information on all 11 states' early graduation policies, see Appendix B.

- **24 states allow students in public colleges and universities to receive credit based on prior learning assessments.**[39] While such policies are distinct from early high school graduation policies, these states are similarly moving away from some "seat time" requirements in higher education by permitting students to earn college credit on the basis of previous learning or work experiences, which students can demonstrate, for example, via exam or a portfolio. These policies could boost the benefits of fast track by giving students who take fast track AP/IB or dual enrollment courses in high school, but did not pass the associated course exam, a second chance to earn those credits in college and continue on an accelerated pathway.

IV. Building Block Four: Early High School Graduation Scholarships

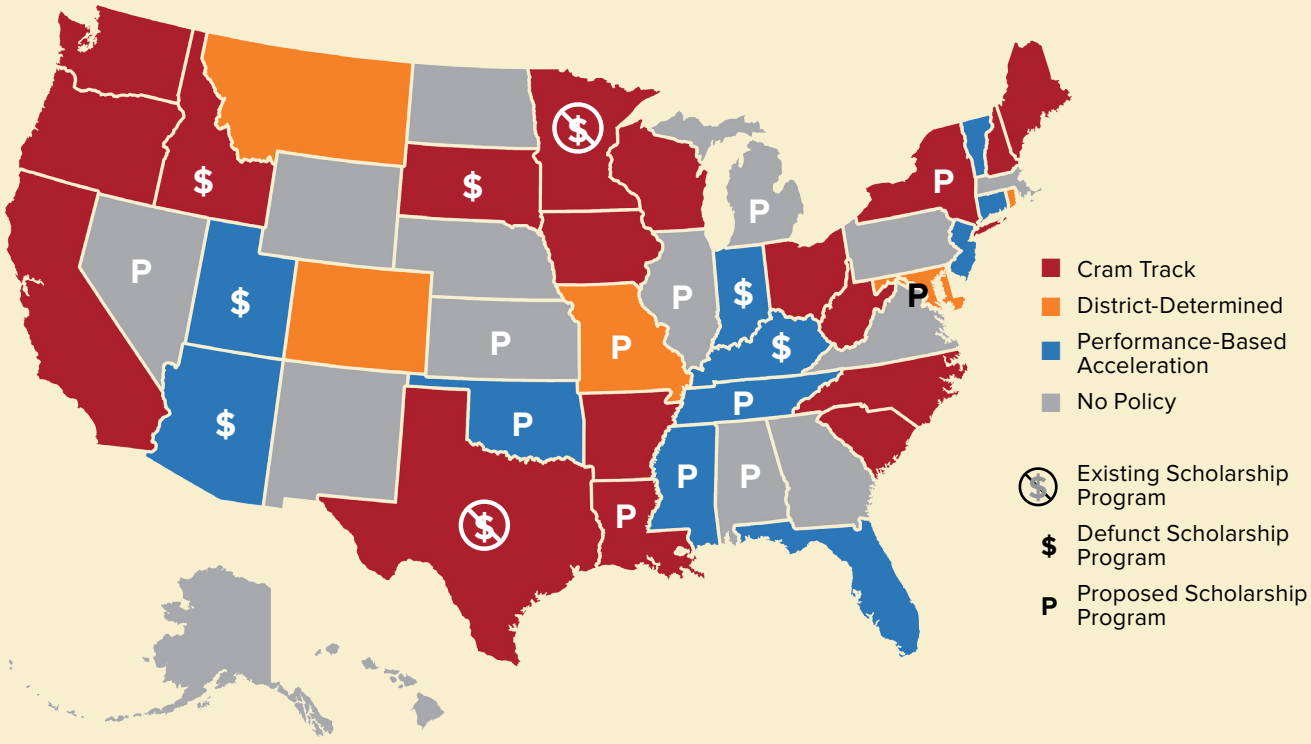
Several states (see Figure 7) go further by providing students with a financial incentive—a college scholarship—to graduate early, the final component for a system of fast track pathways. Six states **(Arizona, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, South Dakota, and Utah) have early high school graduation scholarship programs.**[40]

> **Two additional states (Minnesota and Texas) had early graduation scholarship programs in the past** but repealed these programs due to budgetary concerns.[41]

> Legislators in at least **12 states have proposed legislation to create an early graduation scholarship program** (Alabama, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, and Tennessee).

- Across states that have (or have had) them, **early graduation scholarship programs vary in design,** with different scholarship sizes and mechanisms for setting award sizes, eligibility requirements, and limits on participating institutions of higher education, as summarized in Table 2.

Figure 7. Eight states have, or have had, an early high school graduation scholarship program. 12 states have proposed one.



Source: Education Reform Now analysis of all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

TABLE 2. KEY DESIGN FEATURES OF EARLY GRADUATION SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS

State	Student Eligibility Requirements	College Enrollment Requirements	Participating Colleges	Scholarship Size
AZ[42]	Must attend high school offering a Grand Canyon Diploma and complete additional course-work and meet other college admission requirements	Must enroll full-time in four-year university; no timeframe specified	Any in-state, public four-year university	Function of state per-pupil spending 17% of the amount each school district, receives from state per-pupil funding; varies by district
ID[43]	Must graduate in three years, and can receive greater award for graduating even sooner	Enrollment in participating college within 28 months of graduation	Any in-state, public college or university	Function of state per-pupil spending 35% of the state's share of average per-pupil base funding; roughly $1,500
IN[44]	Must graduate in three years or less; must be state resident, U.S. citizen, and attend Indiana high school for two semesters prior to graduation	Full-time college enrollment no later than the fall semester immediately following graduation	Any in-state, four-year college or university	Pre-determined size $4,000
KY[45]	Must graduate in three years or less	Full-time or part-time college enrollment in the academic year immediately following graduation	Any in-state, public college or university and in-state, four-year private colleges	Based on per-pupil spending 50% of the state's share of average per-pupil base funding; roughly $2,000
MN[46]	Can graduate during senior year of high school, but receive greater award for graduating sooner	Must apply within two calendar years of graduation, and use within six years	Any college or university in any state	Pre-determined size $2,500 per semester of skipped, up to $7,500
SD[47]	Must graduate in three years or less; must be state resident and attend South Dakota high school for the two semesters prior to graduation	Full-time college enrollment in the fall and spring semester within one year of graduation, excluding any time spent on active military duty	Any in-state college or university	Function of state per-pupil spending 75% of state's per-student allocation, multiplied by the percentage of statewide local need paid with funds appropriated for state aid to general education; roughly $1,500
TX[48]	Can graduate during senior year of high school, but receive greater award for graduating sooner; must be state resident, U.S. citizen, and continuously attend Texas high schools	Enrollment in college within six years of graduation	Any in-state college or university, but private colleges must match the scholarship	Pre-determined size $3,000 maximum: up to $2,000 based on time to graduate, plus $1,000 for graduating in 3 years with 15 college credits or for graduating in less than 4 years with 30 credits
UT[49]	Can graduate during senior year of high school, but receive greater award for graduating sooner	Enrollment in participating college within one calendar year of graduation	Any in-state college or university	Pre-determined size $1,000, pro-rated if students graduate during their senior year

See Endnotes for sources.

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS: CHALLENGES STANDING IN THE WAY OF FAST TRACK PATHWAYS

Despite the number of states that have the essential building blocks in place, **there are several issues policymakers will first need to address to expand them into effective, meaningful fast track pathways** for high school students.

I. Challenges to Fast Track Pathway #1: Expanding Early Postsecondary Opportunities for Students who Choose to Remain in High School

1. **Mitigating credit loss.** Students today often take AP/IB or dual enrollment only to find out later that their college will not accept the credits—negating one of the primary benefits of these courses. For these programs to be part of a meaningful, effective fast track pathway, the rate of students earning college credits will need to increase.

   > **Only 58 percent of AP tests were scored as a "3" or higher,** the minimum score many colleges will consider for awarding credit. In other words, four out of ten exams paid for and taken by students—or 2.9 million AP tests—likely result in no transferable college credit. Even worse, **the majority (58 percent) of tests taken by Latinx students and almost three-quarters (70 percent) of tests taken by Black students are scored below a "3."**[50] Black and Latinx students are under-represented in AP test-taking and overrepresented in AP test failure.

   > Even for students that score a "3" on an AP exam, there is no guarantee it will lead to college credit: **Only 20 states have policies requiring public institutions of higher education to accept AP exam results for credit.**[51] Moreover, many states' have policies that give significant leeway to colleges and universities regarding AP credit acceptance. For example, in some cases, colleges can choose to have credits from AP applied only as elective credits—requiring students to retake classes if they plan to major in that subject.[52] Worse, some states go no further than requiring each college to have a policy for accepting AP, a far cry from expecting, across the board, that students will receive college credit if they score at least a "3" on the exam. And state policies usually only apply at *public* institutions; private colleges and universities typically have discretion to set their own standards. Similar problems plague the IB program.

   > Likewise, students face hurdles getting credits earned via dual enrollment accepted by colleges, especially if they enroll in an institution other than that which awarded the dual credits. **Only 25 states and Washington, DC require that dual enrollment students earn both high school and postsecondary credit.** In 11 states, the credit a student receives varies depending on which dual enrollment program a student participates in, and 11 states have no policy at all.[53] Nationally, the Government Accountability Office estimates that **nearly half (43 percent) of all credits students earn are lost if they transfer colleges**. Even when transfers occur between public institutions of higher education—those most likely to have shared policies or articulation agreements—**over one-third (37 percent) of credits do not transfer.**[54] If we apply this rate to the number of student enrollments in dual credit courses in 2010–11, over 750,000 of the 2 million current dual enrollment classes will not result in transferable credit.[55]

2. **Limited intensity.** Most high school participants take an insufficient number of AP or dual enrollment courses to equate to full-time college enrollment, and the courses students take are selected at random—rather than aligned to a meaningful sequence that builds toward a college credential. While the IB diploma program does not suffer from this problem, it is much less prevalent (only 83,000 students compared to more than 2.7 million students taking AP exams).

> **The majority (54 percent) of test-takers only take one AP exam per year,** while about a quarter of students (24 percent) take two AP exams. The remaining 22 percent take three or more.[56]

> Similarly, outside of the small number of early college high schools, few students take a thoughtful sequence of dual enrollment coursework that correlates with a specific degree or credential pathway. Among colleges offering dual enrollment in 2010–11, **the majority (62 percent) reported that students took one or two dual credit courses per term, and 44 percent reported that students took only one dual credit course per term**.[57]

3. **Staffing.** High schools often face difficulties in finding faculty to teach AP/IB and dual enrollment courses, especially in hard-to-staff subjects, which could limit expansion. Additionally, given that the promise of dual enrollment relies on the courses leading to college credit, the interaction of credit transfer requirements with dual credit faculty requirements may also undermine efforts to help students amass college credits more quickly and affordably via fast track.

> **The qualifications high school teachers must meet to teach dual enrollment vary widely,** which can create barriers to expanding these programs.[58] Twelve states have no policies for dual enrollment instructor qualifications. Others have enacted a hodge-podge of requirements, including for high school teachers to meet the same requirements as other college faculty (35 states), have qualifications that are consistent with the requirements of the higher education accreditor (10 states), hold a master's degree (9 states), or earn a particular number of graduate credits in the subject area they teach (1 state).[59]

> Quality standards are needed to ensure dual enrollment programs serve their purpose of exposing students to college-level work. **Whether staffing requirements serve that purpose—ensuring quality and rigor in dual enrollment—remains an open question.** Research is inconclusive on whether student outcomes are better when dual enrollment is taught by college faculty vs. high school faculty, but at least one study has found that some benefits of dual enrollment participation—like increased college enrollment—disappear if only dual enrollment taken at high schools is considered.[60] Unsurprisingly, there is also anecdotal evidence that colleges are less likely to accept dual enrollment for credit when courses are taught at high schools, by high school teachers—believing that these courses are not as rigorous as those offered on their own campuses.[61] With no standardized assessment at the end of the course, there are few quality control measures to validate whether students have mastered college-level material. Passing a dual enrollment course at one high school could signify a very different learning outcome than completing a similar course elsewhere.

4. **Cost and inequitable access.** AP/IB and dual enrollment comes at a price—for students and families, the state, school districts, colleges and universities, or all of the above. Further, there are large inequities in current AP/IB opportunities, calling into question how well all students eligible for fast track could be served through existing programs.

> While student fees to take **AP** exams are relatively modest ($94 per exam[62]), they can create challenges if students do not receive support from the College Board and their state or district—programs that have been in limbo since the elimination of the federal program subsidizing AP/IB exam fees.[63] And fees aren't the only hurdle; many students have no access to advanced coursework. According to the 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection, **38 percent of enrolled students in schools offering AP courses are Black or Latinx, but these students make up only 29 percent of students enrolled in at least one AP course.**[64] As the College Board reported in 2014, disparities are most acute for Black students, who were the most underrepresented group in the class of 2013 taking and scoring well on AP exams: Black students made up 14.5 percent of the graduating class, but only 9.2 percent of AP test takers and 4.6 percent of students scoring at least a "3."[65] In 2013, the Education Trust estimated that AP access gaps were most acute within schools; their analysis found that if all groups of students within schools offering AP classes were equally represented, low-income and minority AP enrollment would increase by over 640,000.[66]

- Likewise, **when students and families are charged tuition and fees for dual enrollment courses, participants are deemed ineligible for federal financial aid** (see, "Dual Enrollment Pell Experiment"). In 2010–11, 29 percent of higher education institutions offered zero discount in tuition for dual enrollment students, and 14 percent offered a tuition discount for only some participants.[67] State dual enrollment programs also handle the cost of tuition and fees differently. In 9 states, parents and families are responsible for all costs, while in 13, the cost of tuition is primarily paid for by the state (5 states), the school district (4 states), or a combination of families and the state or district (4 states). In 13 states and Washington, DC tuition arrangements are determined locally (e.g., between the district and community college), and 12 states offer multiple dual enrollment programs with different mechanisms for covering tuition.[68] In sum, whether tuition and fees are covered likely depends on where you live, and federal financial aid is not an option to cover the cost for low-income students—which stymies efforts to achieve equitable access.

- **Some states subsidize tuition and fees—but end up paying more overall for dual enrollment students because they provide some aid to the feeder school district and additional aid to the partner college.** This approach avoids creating disincentives to enrolling students in the program on either the secondary or postsecondary side. But one recent analysis of three states found that while dual enrollment may save students and families money by lowering costs for earning college credit, it did not translate into savings for states. The Brookings Institution noted that "much of the extra public costs stem from state policies that wind up 'double funding' students who are simultaneously counted as being in high school (and funded accordingly) while also being counted at the college (where they are subsidized with state support like any other public college student). States are effectively paying for high schoolers to be educated in two places at once."[69]

- **School districts can lose revenue if dually enrolled students no longer factor in to their enrollment counts for state funding.** In 30 states and Washington, DC, there is no financial penalty for districts that serve dually enrolled students, as they receive the same level of funding for traditional high school students and dual enrollment students. Seven states, however, condition funds for districts on certain factors, such as the number of hours dual enrollment students spend in high school classes vs. dual enrollment courses. One state (Minnesota) provides bonus funding, rewarding districts for increased dual enrollment, while two states (New Hampshire and Ohio) provide reduced funding for each dually enrolled student in the district.[70]

Dual Enrollment Pell Experiment

In states and districts that do not subsidize tuition and fees, costs for dual enrollment programs can be prohibitive for academically advanced, low-income students. Because they have not yet graduated high school, dual enrollment students are ineligible for federal financial aid, including Pell grants—help other low-income college students can access to make college affordable. Given this dilemma, in 2016, the U.S. Department of Education invited 44 institutions of higher education in 23 states to participate in an experimental site, waiving the Higher Education Act rules preventing dual enrolled students from receiving Pell grants in order to "learn about the impact of providing earlier access to financial aid on low-income students' college access, participation, and success." No findings from the experiment, which could expand access for about 10,000 high school students, have been publicized to date, but there is bipartisan interest in the program from Members of Congress, who have written to Secretary Betsy DeVos to continue the experiment and evaluate its impact.

See: "FACT SHEET: Expanding College Access through the Dual Enrollment Pell Experiment," U.S. Department of Education, 2016.

II. Challenges to Fast Track Pathway #2: Facilitating Early High School Graduation and Expanding Early High School Graduation Scholarship Programs

1. **Determining readiness.** States have taken divergent approaches in their policies for early high school graduation—a critical precondition for any scholarship (and therefore, fast track) program—and many states' high school diploma requirements are not well-aligned to college and career readiness.

   > For fast track pathways to gain traction, stakeholders must believe that students who are eligible for them are ready for the rigor of college-level work. In other words, the **eligibility requirements must include valid measures of college readiness to convince skeptics that students will be able to succeed in higher education or college-level courses after three years of high school.**

   > Recent reports have documented wide gaps between high school graduation requirements and college readiness or entrance standards in most states. For example, the Center for American Progress found that **only four states have aligned their high school graduation requirements to match admissions requirements for the state public university system.**[71] Similarly, Achieve reported that 16 states failed to offer any high school diploma aligned with college- and career-ready expectations, and only 7 states and Washington, DC required all graduating students to take a course of study that is aligned with college and career readiness.[72]

   > Most graduation policies (including early graduation policies) attempt to ensure validity and student mastery of academic content by verifying "seat time"—the number of credits a student has earned in each subject area—as opposed to using a measure of competency, like states with performance-based acceleration policies for early graduation. **Rather than credit hours and course descriptions that could vary significantly between high schools, states can use (in full, or in part) standardized, valid, and reliable assessments of students' proficiency in each subject area.** For example, ACT's college-readiness benchmark scores have been empirically derived, based on the actual performance of students in college credit-bearing courses; students reaching ACT benchmarks have a 50 percent chance of earning a "B" or better in the corresponding college course and a 75 percent chance of earning at least a "C." We also confirmed—with a new analysis conducted by ACT at our request—that their benchmarks align with actual student *placement* into credit-bearing classes.[73] In both math and English, 97 percent of students meeting the ACT college-readiness benchmark are placed into credit-bearing classes. These analyses suggest validity with respect to ACT's benchmarks as a worthwhile predictor of college readiness skills that could serve as part of a state's early graduation policies and eligibility requirements for fast track pathways.[74] Similar analyses can be conducted, if data is not already available, to validate other assessments, such as the SAT and statewide assessments students are required to take in high school.

2. **Small scholarships and low take-up.** In general, we find that **early graduation scholarship sizes are likely too small**—around $2,000—**to drive meaningful behavioral change** and encourage students to graduate early and pursue higher education. Participation in existing programs is limited, even in states with relatively larger scholarship amounts.

   > Across states that have or have had early graduation scholarships, **awards range from as little as $1,000 in Utah to as much as $7,500 in Minnesota.** On the low end, the early graduation scholarship might barely cover the cost of books, let alone tuition, fees, or room and board. And it is far less generous than the size of the federal Pell Grant for low-income students—$6,195 per year as of 2019–2020. Low-income students may be most persuaded by larger scholarship sizes—as the increased aid makes a larger difference in their ability to afford college than their wealthier peers. That said, even though the ACT data show that students who are college-ready before their senior year are not exclusively upper-income, over one-third come from families making more than $100,000 annually, and these students are less diverse than the general population.

- **In Indiana, one of the more generous programs, only about 1,000 students were awarded the $4,000 scholarship after five years.** Given that Indiana enrolled about 80,000 juniors in public schools in the fall of 2015 alone, the limited participation rate (< 1 percent) is clear.[75] **When Texas' program was de-funded, over 6,000 students per year had received scholarships—only about 2 percent of enrolled high school juniors at the time.**[76] Low take-up was also cited by the Governor as one reason for eliminating Minnesota's program only a few years after it was enacted.[77]

- There are many reasons why students may choose not to pursue an early graduation scholarship. Students may wish to attend colleges where the scholarships won't be accepted, or they may not be aware of the program soon enough. If a state uses a "cram track" approach, some students may not be able (or motivated) to take additional classes during the school year or over the summer. Or, the scholarship size may not be significant enough given the costs of higher education to convince higher-income students to forego their senior year—a coming-of-age period of such significance that there is an entire genre of television and film devoted to its rites of passage. Parents may be reluctant to have their children leave home too soon for college. Even though these students are ready academically, their families, teachers, and mentors may not be convinced they are ready socially and emotionally for college.[78] **Those seeking to expand early graduation scholarships must overcome these cultural barriers.**

3. **Resistance from school districts.** Increasing scholarship sizes is one way to mitigate the cultural forces keeping academically advanced students in high school and incentivize students to take advantage of them. But doing so increases the impact on district finances, which may raise opposition from local administrators—who in turn dissuade students or simply don't make known the option. Programs can face resistance from district leaders when states recoup all of the district's per-pupil aid from the state in order to pay for both the scholarship and capture associated cost savings—in essence, penalizing a school district if a student leaves early.

- Of the eight states that have or have had operational programs, all fund their scholarships from state K–12 aid to districts, but they vary in the degree to which districts' projected state 12th grade aid associated with the early graduate is affected. **Three—Indiana, Minnesota, and South Dakota—have programs where school districts do not keep any state money associated with the early graduate.** While some argue that this makes sense on a per-pupil basis—the district should only get state dollars for the actual number of students served—districts have countered that there are certain fixed costs (e.g., staffing, facilities, maintenance) that need to be maintained even in the absence of the early graduate.

- **The other five states allow school districts to retain some portion of state funds associated with the early graduate, but the amount retained varies.** In Arizona, the district retains one-third of state aid per early graduate. In Idaho, Kentucky, and Utah, the amount of money a school district retains is based on the scholarship amount—either equal to the scholarship size (Idaho and Kentucky), or half of it (Utah). Texas gave districts a one-time credit of $1,000 for every student who graduated in 3 years or less, and $250 for every student who graduated in between 37 and 41 months.

- The fate of early graduation scholarships in Minnesota and Texas demonstrates that the cost of these programs—especially when coupled with a relatively low take-up rate—limits the political base supporting them. **When state budgets are tight, lawmakers can be reluctant to support early graduation scholarships for students who are academically advanced if the alternative would be to maintain, or increase, state aid to districts for students who are struggling.** This was one of several points of opposition from lawmakers to the early graduation scholarship program established via Executive Order by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, which has yet to receive funding from the state legislature.[79]

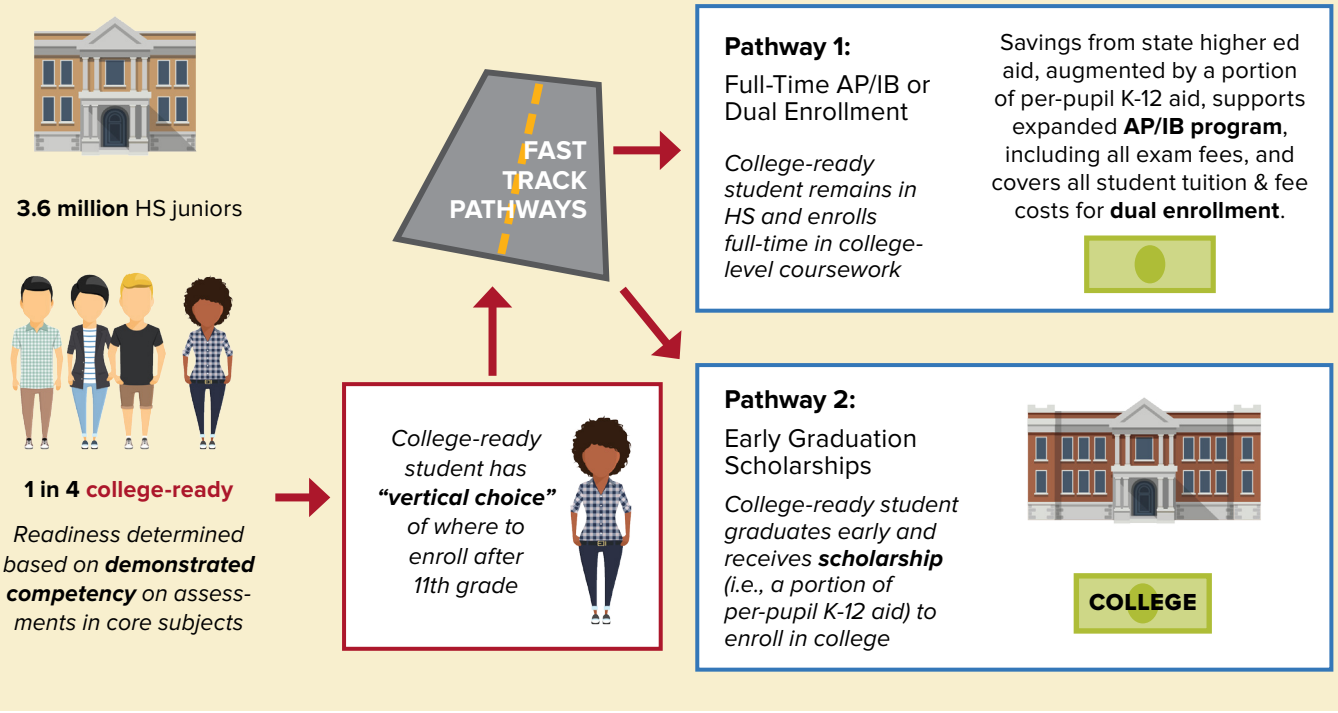
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING FAST TRACK PATHWAYS

Given what we know—that there are likely hundreds of thousands of students academically prepared for higher education by the end of their junior year of high school with inefficient or underutilized opportunities to move on to college-level work—**we recommend rethinking and reframing the transition from high school to college around one basic principle: When students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in college-level coursework, full-time—and this choice should be encouraged with state and local funding.**

Under our recommended approach (shown in Figure 8), high school students who demonstrate readiness should have two fast track pathways to choose from, each allowing them to complete high school and a bachelor's degree in seven years total. The primary pathway would allow students to remain in high school for 12th grade but enroll in a *full-time* course load of AP/IB classes or a full-time dual enrollment program associated with a local college—a 4+3 model. The alternative pathway is a 3+4 approach, where fast-track eligible students graduate from high school early and receive a scholarship to enroll at a postsecondary education institution full-time.

To make access to fast track pathways a reality for all students and families, current policy building blocks need to change so they work better together as part of a meaningful and universal system of "vertical" school choice between high school and higher education.

Figure 8. When students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in college-level coursework, full-time.



Step 1. Establish Fast Track Eligibility.

States should revise graduation requirements in order to establish uniform criteria for determining which students are eligible for a fast track pathway. Eligibility criteria should be the same for both fast track pathways; in other words, a student eligible for fast track should have to meet the same requirements everywhere in the state, whether they choose to remain enrolled in high school for their senior year or accept an early graduation scholarship.

We recommend that states consider data on students' postsecondary outcomes in determining their eligibility criteria; students meeting benchmarks to be eligible for fast track should be unlikely to need remediation in related introductory college courses

- **Rather than the "cram track" early graduation policies most states rely on, fast track eligibility criteria should be based on demonstrated competency with regard to the state's academic content standards in core subject areas**—like English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Since the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all states to adopt college- and career-ready standards and aligned assessments, all states have the potential to adopt a performance-based acceleration policy based on student mastery, whether they use assessments developed by a consortium of states (like Smarter Balanced assessments) or a statewide test they developed (like the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System or MCAS).

- Given that fast track eligibility criteria would be used for high-stakes purposes (i.e., determining which students may receive a high school diploma and financial incentives to start college-level work), we recommend they be based on standardized assessments with demonstrated validity, reliability, and technical quality to measure students' mastery of state academic content standards—as opposed to a portfolio of work, teacher recommendations, or GPA requirements.

- **States should consider using their existing high school assessment systems as part of these criteria,** particularly if they already administer end-of-course assessments (like the New York Regents exams) or a college admissions test (like SAT or ACT) to all students. States should also consider policies that provide options for which assessment a student can use to meet the eligibility criteria, so long as there is a minimum expectation for achievement across all possible test options. For example, a student could be eligible for a fast track pathway based on their score on the state's end-of-course exam in a particular subject or based on their score on an AP or IB exam in the same subject area.

- Whenever possible, we recommend that states **consider data on students' postsecondary outcomes in determining their eligibility criteria;** students meeting benchmarks to be eligible for fast track should be unlikely to need remediation in related introductory college courses. Because different assessments are designed for different purposes, states may want to include multiple requirements in their criteria. Among the states, we believe Kentucky comes closest to striking the right balance. The state's policy emphasizes mastery, rather than "seat time," and relies on high school end-of-course tests aligned with the state's standards in English II,

Algebra II, U.S. History, and Biology, as well as a component based on students' ACT scores (though it should be noted that Kentucky has chosen to set requirements below the ACT college-readiness benchmark in math and reading, but not English, and does not consider ACT science results).[80]

- States should also consider admissions requirements for the state's two- and four-year colleges and universities in establishing their fast track eligibility criteria, partnering with higher education to ensure that students need not complete additional course or testing requirements in order to enroll in those institutions. In fact, **state policy should specify that all fast-track eligible students will be able to enter directly into college-level, credit-bearing courses in any participating institution of higher education.**

Step 2. Embrace State Policy that Ensures Student Choice & District Flexibility.

- We recommend states establish the parameters for two fast track pathways—one creating free, full-time AP/IB or dual enrollment in college courses for 12th grade students and a second providing early college scholarships directly to students. States could **finance fast track pathways from savings in state aid for public higher education and with existing state and local funding dedicated to students for their senior year of high school, *with any remaining funds reinvested* in the district to improve curriculum and instruction, support services, and other efforts that promote academic preparation and college and career readiness of students enrolled in the regular high school program.** Critically, in order to promote equitable access to advanced coursework and postsecondary preparation for *all* students, we recommend states require districts to permit any student who is ready for a particular course—even if he or she has not yet met all of the fast track eligibility criteria—to enroll in that course as AP/IB and dual enrollment options expand under the fast track program, so long as there is space after all fast track students are served.

- We recognize **most students and families will prefer a fast track pathway that enables students to remain in high school and take advantage of popular AP/IB or dual enrollment programs,** as opposed to attending a residential college away from home or enrolling in a local community college. With millions of students and thousands of schools already participating in AP/IB and dual enrollment, fast track pathways are also likely to gain more traction and political support by building on these well-established programs as opposed to the smaller early graduation scholarships operating in just six states. Further, districts may be reluctant to encourage students to take part in an early graduation scholarship program (where they would no longer be included in district enrollment figures) and more open to promoting and expanding current AP/IB or dual enrollment offerings. That may be especially true in districts with lower state per-pupil aid and higher local per-pupil aid, as local funds—in addition to all state funds—would likely need to be transferred to the student in order to provide him or her with an early graduation scholarship.

- However, we know that remote or resource-strapped districts may not be able to offer a full-time sequence of AP/IB or dual enrollment to all fast-track eligible students—even in partnership with other districts. **In cases where there is pushback from rural, small, or resource-poor school districts, we recommend states consider a special exemption for local hardship.** Districts would need to demonstrate to the state that they do not have the resources to expand AP/IB or dual enrollment, including by making use of courses offered online or in consortia with nearby districts, and provide evidence of how they would communicate and promote the early graduation scholarship pathway option to students in the district to ensure equitable opportunity to fast track. States should both support expansion at online early postsecondary course options and set narrow criteria to receive a hardship exemption in order to maximize the number of students who benefit from the expansion of AP, IB, and dual enrollment and who have access to both pathways. States could even eliminate the need for a hardship exemption policy entirely if they established, set quality standards for, and funded an online AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway.

Step 3. Make the Two Fast Track Pathways Meaningful.

Pathway 1: Full-Time AP/IB or Dual Enrollment. States should redesign AP/IB and dual enrollment programs to offer fast-track eligible students a guided pathway of full-time, college-level courses for their senior year of high school. We envision this pathway (shown in Figure 9) would be the more popular of the two new fast track pathways and effectively function as the "default" option (except in cases where states permit a hardship exemption for certain districts to only offer scholarships).

Figure 9. Key Recommendations for States to Establish a Full-Time AP or Dual Enrollment Fast Track Pathway

Pathway 1: Full-Time AP/IB or Dual Enrollment

Statewide AP/IB Policy for Credit Transfer. States should set the minimum number of classes and subjects for Fast Track AP participation and adopt a policy for all in-state, public colleges that any student receiving a "3" on the AP exam (or similar score on the IB exam) will receive college credit.

Articulated Dual Enrollment Course Sequences, with Guaranteed Credit Transfer. States should create a full-time, general education course sequence for Fast Track dual enrollment, with associated credits accepted for degree requirements at all in-state, public colleges.

Tuition and Fees. States should:

- Ensure participation is free for students, with costs covered by existing K-12 per-pupil funds and savings from state higher education aid.
- For purposes of calculating state education aid, count dual enrollment students once.

Remaining Funds.
Any excess state funds that remain after supporting Fast Track participation should be treated like other state aid for K-12 education, increasing per-pupil spending in the district.

Staffing. Districts should offer dual enrollment taught by college faculty – either in-person or online – and should limit concurrent enrollment (courses taught by high school faculty, at high school campuses). AP courses could also be offered online to expand access.

- **We recommend states develop a full AP course load and AP credit policy,** just as there is a defined sequence of classes in the IP diploma program. To build a fast track pathway that consists of a significant and worthwhile set of AP courses during a student's senior year, **states should set a minimum number of AP classes and subject areas in which all fast track eligible students must have the opportunity to enroll.** For example, a state could decide that districts must offer participating students a minimum of five AP courses during their senior year, which must include two AP math, science, or computer science courses (e.g., Biology, Chemistry, Statistics, Calculus AB), one AP English course (e.g., English Literature and Composition, English Language and Composition), and two additional AP courses, either the AP Capstone or a traditional AP course in history and social sciences, world languages and culture, or the arts (e.g., Microeconomics, World History, Spanish Language and Culture). Likewise, a state's policy could specify that IB diploma requirements (even though they are taken over two years) meet the course load requirements.

To ensure that students participating secure all of the benefits from the fast track pathway, in consultation with higher education leaders, **the state should establish a policy for all in-state, public colleges and universities that any student receiving a "3" or better on the associated AP exam (or a corresponding score on an IB exam) will receive college credit for a related semester-long course.** This policy should also clarify when credits from AP/IB courses will apply to a degree program in that subject (vs. elective credit). In other words, the state policy should prevent any student who has succeeded in the AP/IB course and passed the relevant exam from retaking a similar course in college. For example, a student earning a "4" in AP Biology should receive college credit for an introductory Biology course, including any credits associated with laboratory coursework. If a state also established uniform course descriptions and numbering for its public colleges and universities, as recommended below, the state could be even more specific regarding which courses and credits students receive for passing each AP/IB exam. Such a policy would not only benefit fast-track students, but also any *student statewide* who takes AP/IB courses in high school—helping prevent credit loss, reduce college tuition costs, and accelerate time to degree.

- **Articulated dual enrollment course sequences.** States, in partnership with community college and university systems, should also create at least one articulated course sequence for students participating in fast track via full-time dual enrollment. With such a sequence, students would not take a random assortment of classes—rather, much like the early college high school model, students would enroll in a thoughtful series of courses that lead to a recognized credential, including an associate degree. By developing a series of articulated courses, states can create a consistent, relevant, and high-quality fast track dual enrollment experience—even offering courses online for students who do not live near a community college or whose district has difficulty offering a course.

  An articulated course sequence approach would help solve the largest issue with dual enrollment programs: credit transfer between institutions. Creating a clear dual enrollment fast track course sequence, in conjunction with established or newly established statewide articulation agreements, would ensure that fast track coursework would be accepted, for credit, at all in-state, public institutions of higher education. At a minimum, **states should establish at least one general education course sequence for fast track dual enrollment students where credits earned will be accepted toward degree requirements at all public two-year and four-year institutions in the state.** Adopting uniform course descriptions and numbering across the community college system will help in this effort.[81] Other sequences may need to be more specialized (i.e., those that are associated with specific career opportunities), and thus, accepted at fewer institutions. Critically, states and districts should provide eligible fast track students clear information about credit transfer policies up-front, so that they have a full understanding of how these credits can be used toward their degree and make an informed choice about which course sequence to pursue.

Such a policy would not only benefit fast-track students, but also any student statewide who takes AP/IB courses in high school—helping prevent credit loss, reduce college tuition costs, and accelerate time to degree.

- **Staffing requirements.** For districts choosing to offer a full-time AP/IB fast track option taught by high school teachers, no additional teacher certifications would be required, but districts should consider providing professional development and other opportunities for teachers of AP/IB classes to increase their understanding of the curriculum, course content, and exams. **Online AP/IB classes could also be considered, in order to maximize the number of students who can participate from small or rural high schools, where offering a full suite of AP classes or an IB diploma program is not cost effective or feasible. To ensure online course options are comparable to the traditional program, states may want to consider setting parameters to ensure course quality or providing additional oversight of online offerings.**

  Although the research is inconclusive, we recommend states, with very limited exceptions, **require districts to offer dual enrollment courses within this fast track pathway taught by college faculty,** ideally on a community college campus (to get a more authentic higher education experience), or alternately at relevant high schools or online. Given issues with credit transfer and evidence that institutions are less likely to accept dual enrollment courses for credit if they are taught by high school teachers, maximizing the number of fast track dual enrollment courses led by college faculty would help institutions of higher education feel more confident in accepting the articulated course sequences for credit. Creating an online version of the articulated dual enrollment course sequence as an alternative approach could help ensure that all eligible fast-track students can participate.[82] For example, California is creating an online community college for all postsecondary students. In the very rare cases where a district demonstrates it can only offer fast track dual enrollment using a concurrent enrollment model (e.g., due to lack of technological infrastructure to offer the online option), states should adopt quality measures and conditions for districts, such as requiring high school teachers to hold the same qualifications as college faculty teaching the same course.

- **AP/IB course availability and test costs.** Students should be able to participate in the AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway free of charge. **All AP/IB course costs and exam fees should be covered with state funds.** We believe this is feasible because of back-end higher education budget savings associated with fast track (relevant students will complete college in three or four years instead of four or five, necessitating lower state higher education budget expenditures overall); those funds can and should be plowed into K–12 schools to help cover additional college coursework costs associated with AP/IB programs in particular.

  We also recommend states require districts enable *non-fast-track eligible* students to participate in the district's AP/IB offerings if there is space and the relevant student demonstrates readiness for a course. Expansion of AP/IB as a result of fast track can promote postsecondary preparation and rigorous academic instruction in general and have a positive impact on the district's student population as a whole.

Expansion of AP/IB as a result of fast track can promote postsecondary preparation and rigorous academic instruction in general and have a positive impact on the district's student population as a whole.

- **Tuition and fees. States should also cover community college tuition and fees costs for fast track dual enrollment students.**[83] The national average annual tuition and fee price at public two-year colleges is $3,570 (ranging from as low as $1,430 in California to a high of $7,980 in Vermont).[84] That's a fraction of what is spent annually on K–12 education per pupil. For purposes of calculating state aid to K–12 school districts and public institutions of higher education for fast track dual enrollement students, we recommend states count participating students once with a residual allocation to feeder school districts for fixed costs.

  Tuition and fees for a fast track student enrolled full-time in dual enrollment courses on a college campus, for example, could be paid directly by the state to the institution of higher education with the feeder district receiving 100 percent of the remaining portion of state per-pupil K–12 aid. Districts could choose how to spend the leftover funds that would be associated with that student in a traditional 12th grade setting, reinvesting them to enhance instruction, course offerings, or student supports and help more students get and stay on-track to graduate college- and career-ready.

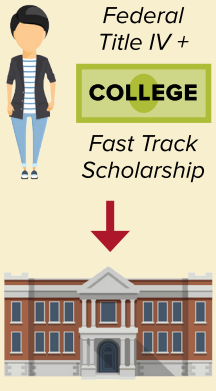
  Funding arrangements may also depend on where dual enrollment occurs—in a high school or on a local college campus. In districts that demonstrate they can only offer the dual enrollment course via a concurrent enrollment or online model, states may want to establish a different payment rate to the relevant community college, enabling the district to receive closer to their full share of the state's per-pupil K–12 funding.

Pathway 2: Early Graduation Scholarships. To provide an alternate pathway for students who may prefer to enroll directly in college or for districts unable to offer a full-time course load of AP/IB or dual enrollment, states should establish statewide early graduation scholarship programs for any student meeting fast track eligibility criteria—with a number of critical design features needed (see Figure 10) to ensure a strong incentive for students to participate and foster cooperation from school districts and institutions of higher education.

Figure 10. Key Recommendations for States to Establish an Early Graduation Scholarship Fast Track Pathway

Pathway 2: Early High School Graduation Scholarships

Scholarship Size. States should provide a scholarship that:
- Is large enough to provide a meaningful incentive;
- Reflects the state's typical per-pupil spending;
- In general, is at least two-thirds of the state share of per-pupil expenditures or $3,000, whichever is greater; and
- Where possible, is as generous as a federal Pell Grant.



Remaining Funds. State funds that do not support the scholarship should be treated like other state aid for education, increasing per-pupil spending for students that remain in the district.

College Enrollment. Students should enroll full-time in the academic year following early high school graduation.

Participating Institutions. Enrollment should be limited to in-state public colleges and universities.

We encourage higher-spending states to consider making their early graduation scholarships as generous as a federal Pell Grant (increasing to $6,195 in the 2019–2020 academic year.

- **Scholarship Size.** An early graduation scholarship should be large enough to provide a meaningful incentive to students, but also reflect the state's typical per-pupil spending—a high-spending state should consider providing a more generous award than a low-spending state. Determining the right scholarship size is a balancing act: A generous award may encourage more students to take up the option, while a larger award size could increase opposition from school districts that otherwise would receive those funds from the state. We recommend states consider average per-pupil funding provided from state sources (vs. local ones) prior to determining an early graduation scholarship award size—either setting the scholarship amount as a set percentage of the state share of per-pupil spending (so that the absolute amount of the scholarship would increase or decrease in size as state funding levels change) or setting a flat award that takes the current amount the state spends per pupil into account.

  While additional field research should be conducted to determine an appropriate award size that would balance these trade-offs, **we believe that states should, in general, aim to provide an early graduation scholarship that is at *least* two-thirds of the state share of per-pupil expenditures or $3,000, whichever is greater.** This way, most districts would still receive some state funding for fast tracked students, without sacrificing a meaningful award size. Nationally, the average state provides $6,238 in revenue per pupil, ranging from $3,204 in South Dakota to over $18,000 in Vermont. Using the national average, a 66 percent share of state revenues would equate to a scholarship of about $4,100.[85] Considering the meager size of most early graduation scholarships today and because spending per pupil is generally lower than revenue per pupil, we believe a minimum award equal to the greater of $3,000 or two-thirds of state per-pupil funding is a good starting point.

  Given variation among states in terms of how much they spend per pupil and the share of total education spending derived from state funds, we encourage states to examine their own data to determine if this guideline works in their specific context. In addition, to the extent possible, we encourage higher-spending states to consider making their early graduation scholarships as generous as a federal Pell Grant (increasing to $6,195 in the 2019–2020 academic year). Because fast track scholarship students would graduate high school, they would also be eligible for federal financial aid, including the Pell Grant, to finance their college education. In other words, for low-income fast track students, we envision scholarship aid for the first year of college totaling near, if not in excess of, $10,000 (i.e., the early graduation scholarship plus Pell).

- **Remainder Funds.** Because many school districts would recoup a portion of the state aid (as much as one-third) that they would have received for enrolling each fast track scholarship student, state policy should specify that these **funds must be treated similarly to other state aid for K-12 education, helping to increase per-pupil spending on students that remain in the district.** Districts would have flexibility, however, regarding how to spend any local aid that would have been spent on the fast track scholarship student. We recommend that districts reinvest these 'fast track success' funds in their K–12 education system to improve academic programs, student supports, and other services in the district, especially in its high schools for students ineligible for fast track.

- **Participating Institutions of Higher Education.** Early graduation **scholarships should be able to be used at any accredited, in-state, public institution of higher education.** Given that fast track scholarships would be funded using a portion of the per-pupil expenditure that would have been spent educating the student in 12th grade in public schools, we do not recommend allowing the scholarship to be used at out-of-state public institutions or any private nonprofit or for-profit institutions—dollars should remain invested within the state's public education system and be used to help increase the educational attainment of adults in the state.

- **College Enrollment**. States will also need to determine whether to place any stipulations on student enrollment in higher education besides the institutions that accept early graduation scholarships. Given that the program is designed as an alternative to a traditional senior year for students who demonstrate college readiness early, we recommend requiring **full-time college enrollment in the academic year following the student's early high school graduation.**

CONCLUSION

States and districts spend billions each year to educate high school students who are, most likely, ready to move on—students who are ready to fast track to a full-time, college-level course load. Currently, these students may take a dual enrollment course or two, or a handful of AP courses. But we could do so much more to help them start earning credits toward their college degrees. And we can do it using existing policies, systems, and resources.

APPENDIX A. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Through a partnership with ACT, we obtained national-level data on the proportion of high school junior and senior ACT test-takers who met all four ACT-defined college readiness benchmarks in the 14 states that assess all public high school juniors.[86] These data come from the 2015 graduating class (alternatively viewed as the 2013–14 class of high school juniors). ACT has defined college-ready benchmark scores in its four tested subject areas at a level where the likelihood of students earning a "C" or higher in a corresponding college credit-bearing, introductory-level course is 75 percent or higher—with a 50 percent likelihood that the student will receive a "B" or higher.[87] Those benchmark scores are as follows:

College Course	ACT Test	Benchmark Score
English Composition	English	18
Algebra	Mathematics	22
Social Sciences	Reading	22
Biology	Science	23

Because the 14 states where ACT was administered to all students are generally demographically similar to the country as a whole—in terms of free and reduced price lunch enrollment, special education identification, and average per-pupil expenditure[88]—we applied the percentage of college-ready high school juniors on the ACT in the sample (23.7 percent) to the national population of public high school juniors enrolled in school year 2015–16 (3.6 million) to estimate the total number of academically advanced, college-ready high school juniors—over 852,000.

Among public K–12 enrollment	ACT Census States	Nation
Overall public school enrollment	10,628,096	49,235,065
Pct. Black	19.2%	15.6%
Pct. Latinx	14.0%	24.8%
Pct. White	59.2%	50.3%
Pct. Free/Reduced Price Lunch	52.1%	52.0%
Pct. English Learners	6.1%	9.3%
Pct. Special Education (IDEA)	12.7%	12.9%
Average Per-Pupil Expenditure	$10,799	$11,392

Source: U.S. Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics 2015 for the 2013–14 school year. Original data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2013–14. Average per-pupil expenditure data for the 2014–15 school year from the U.S. Census Bureau, "Public Education Finances: 2015."

Where we provide state-level estimates, they are derived from ACT test data pulled directly from each state education agency's website (to determine state-level rates of college readiness) and from state enrollment data produced by the National Center for Education Statistics. We have sought to identify and estimate data only for public school juniors.[89] For example, the table below demonstrates how front-end savings from the alternate pathway (early graduation scholarships) were estimated nationally, and for each of the states administering the ACT to all public high school juniors.

How We Estimated Fast Track's impact	Student Enrollment in 11th Grade	Estimated College-Ready 11th Grade Students	Average Per-Pupil Expenditure	Impact (thousands)
Nation	3,597,832	852,686	$11,392	$9,713,801
ACT Census States	767,347	150,203	$10,799	$1,606,653
Alabama	53,318	6,398	$9,128	$58,402
Arkansas	34,862	4,881	$9,694	$47,313
Colorado	62,230	16,180	$9,245	$149,582
Hawaii	11,925	1,193	$12,855	$15,330
Illinois	148,362	36,942	$13,755	$508,139
Kentucky	47,937	10,067	$9,630	$96,943
Louisiana	45,115	7,218	$11,010	$79,475
Michigan	114,899	23,210	$11,482	$266,493
Montana	10,300	1,967	$11,028	$21,695
North Carolina	109,180	16,595	$8,687	$144,164
North Dakota	7,533	1,808	$13,320	$24,081
Tennessee	69,650	11,841	$8,726	$103,320
Utah	45,588	10,485	$6,575	$68,940
Wyoming	6,448	1,419	$16,055	$22,775

Source: U.S. Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics 2016 for the 2015–16 school year. Grade 11 enrollment in Original grade 11 public school enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2015-16. Average per-pupil expenditure data for the 2014–15 school year from the U.S. Census Bureau, "Public Education Finances: 2015."

APPENDIX B. DEEP DIVE: EARLY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION POLICIES

The 11 states with early graduation policies based on student performance or proficiency, and not only on seat time, can be categorized into three overarching groups,

- **Two states permit students to graduate based on proficiency, but students must demonstrate proficiency in each of the same courses needed to graduate via traditional "seat time" requirements.** Though not technically "cram track," policies in **Indiana** and **Utah** operate much in the same way given the focus on course requirements.[90]

- **Five states require completion of an abbreviated course sequence if the student also demonstrates mastery of required content on an assessment.** The design of these options varies, including whether they are available statewide, whether students completing the abbreviated sequence also meet all college admission requirements, and whether students remain in high school or enroll in college upon earning their diploma.

  > **Florida** students can pursue a three-year, 18-credit "Academically Challenging Curriculum to Enhance Learning" diploma, which requires a cumulative 2.0 GPA and meeting benchmarks on state tests; it does not require five elective credits in the standard diploma, nor completion of physical education or an online course.[91]

  > In **Tennessee**, if students complete 18 credit hours (including two AP, IB, or dual enrollment courses), have a cumulative 3.2 GPA, and meet benchmarks on a series of exams, they are exempt from additional graduation requirements (which typically requires 22 credits). Students can enter any public two-year college, or—at the discretion of the admitting institution—enroll in a public four-year college.[92]

  > **Mississippi** permits students in state board-approved "innovative" programs to earn a diploma if they complete 17.5 credits (instead of 21–24) and meet college or career readiness benchmark scores on one of multiple exams. Students may then continue in high school to take AP or dual credit, enroll in a career-technical education (CTE) program, or enroll in community college. The 17.5 credit diploma does not meet admission standards for four-year, in-state public universities.[93]

  > **Arizona's** "Grand Canyon Diploma" is offered in about two dozen high schools that participate in the Move on When Ready initiative. To graduate early, students must receive college-ready scores on a set of Cambridge International exams (similar to AP/IB), and complete courses in economics and Fine Arts or CTE. Students can then choose to continue in high school with advanced classes, enroll full-time in a CTE program, or enroll in community college. Students seeking to attend a four-year university under the Arizona Board of Regents must take additional coursework to meet admissions requirements.[94]

> In **New Jersey,** students can, upon request, receive a diploma from their school district if they demonstrate proficiency on state tests in English language arts and Algebra 1 and provide official transcripts showing that they have earned at least 30 general education credits toward a degree at an accredited institution of higher education.[95]

- **Four states have policies to award high school diplomas based strictly on an assessment of mastery,** coming closest to performance-based acceleration policies. **Connecticut, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Vermont are the most innovative** by providing students a pathway to graduation that relies on a demonstration of their proficiency as opposed to completed courses or credit hours.

  > **Connecticut's** academic advancement program requires districts to permit students in grades 11 and 12 to substitute the achievement of a qualifying score on a nationally-recognized exam (e.g., SAT), a minimum cumulative GPA, and 3 letters of recommendations for traditional graduation requirements. The state board of education grants successful students a program certificate, and in-state public colleges must equate the certificate with a diploma for enrollment.[96]

  > **Kentucky** permits students to graduate early if they meet the qualifying readiness benchmark on four end-of-course exams in key subject areas and state-defined readiness benchmarks on the ACT.[97]

  > **Oklahoma** permits students who attain required competency levels on statewide assessments (as set by the state board of education) to earn a high school diploma.[98]

  > **Vermont** will implement a proficiency-based graduation policy with the class of 2020. Districts will determine how to measure proficiency, relying on methods such as assessments, papers, presentations, or projects. Because Vermont already requires districts to allow any student meeting academic requirements of his or her high school to graduate early, students who demonstrate mastery under the new policy will be able to exit high school early.[99]

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71 Laura Jimenez and Scott Sargrad, "Are High School Diplomas Really a Ticket to College and Work?: An Audit of State High School Graduation Requirements," Center for American Progress, April 2018. Available at: https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/04/02/447717/high-school-diplomas/.

72 "How the States Got Their Rates, Class of 2015," Achieve, November 2016. Available at: https://www.achieve.org/how-the-states-got-their-rates-2015-graduates.

73 ACT analysis of nearly 400,000 students across three states using course placement data from the fall of 2005 to spring of 2015. An ACT analysis comparing course placement by reading benchmark score was not possible, because there is no comparable intro-level remedial course for reading or social sciences. In addition, although credit-bearing placement rates were high among students who passed the ACT science benchmark, we omitted them here, as few colleges offer remedial biology and as intro-level biology is not typically required of college students.

74 College course-taking data suggest that ACT scores—for those scoring college-ready on against its benchmarks—could be used as a substitute for currently required placement tests, such as ACCUPLACER.

75 Ovette Wiggins and Nick Anderson, "Hogan offers scholarships for students who graduate early," The Washington Post, January 27, 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/hogan-creates-a-scholarship-for-students-who-graduate-early/2016/01/27/4a3175e0-c513-11e5-9693-933a4d31bcc8_story.html; and "Table 203.40. Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level, grade, and state or jurisdiction: Fall 2015," Digest of Education Statistics 2016, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, July 2017. Available at: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_203.40.asp?current=yes.

76 Sommer Ingram, "Texas' early high-school graduates lose state scholarships," Dallas Morning News, June 2012. Available at: https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2012/06/07/texas-early-high-school-graduates-lose-state-scholarships; and "Table 37. Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level, grade, and state or jurisdiction: Fall 2010," Digest of Education Statistics 2012, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, May 2012. Available at: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_037.asp.

77 "2014-15 Revised Budget: Education," Minnesota Department of Management and Budget, accessed March 27, 2018. Available at: http://www.mn.gov/mmb-stat/documents/budget/updates13/education/index.pdf.

78 See, for example, Kimberly Railey, "Early high school graduation programs gain traction," USA Today, July 28, 2013. Available at: https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/27/early-high-school-graduation/2518817/; Sue Shellanbarger, "High School, Only Shorter," Wall Street Journal, April 10, 2012. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304750404577321561583186358; Ovette Wiggins and Nick Anderson, "Hogan offers scholarships for students who graduate early," The Washington Post, January 27, 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/hogan-creates-a-scholarship-for-students-who-graduate-early/2016/01/27/4a3175e0-c513-11e5-9693-933a4d31bcc8_story.html.

79 Ovette Wiggins and Nick Anderson, "Hogan offers scholarships for students who graduate early," The Washington Post, January 27, 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/hogan-creates-a-scholarship-for-students-who-graduate-early/2016/01/27/4a3175e0-c513-11e5-9693-933a4d31bcc8_story.html; and "Maryland Early Graduation Scholarship," Maryland Higher Education Commission, accessed April 2, 2018. Available at: http://mhec.maryland.gov/preparing/Pages/FinancialAid/Maryland-Early-Graduation-Scholarship.aspx.

80 For more, see "Early Graduation," Kentucky Department of Education, accessed April 4, 2018. Available at: https://education.ky.gov/educational/AL/earlygrad/Pages/default.aspx.

81 For example, Florida's Statewide Course Numbering System (available online at https://flscns.fldoe.org/) and other Florida policies to promote transfer and articulation between institutions of higher education (see Lexi Anderson, "50-State Comparison: Transfer and Articulation Policies," Education Commission of the States, April 2016. Available at: http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbprofallRT?Rep=TA14A).

82 For example, California Community College's Online Education Initiative (http://ccconlineed.org/) enables students to enroll in online courses across multiple college campuses, so that they can register for, and access, courses even if they are not offered or are overenrolled at their home campus. In addition, the California Virtual Campus (https://cvc.edu/) helps online students, an online-only degree program with guaranteed transfer to the California State University system. For more, see: Ashley A. Smith, "Online and Homegrown," Inside Higher Ed, October 13, 2016. Available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/10/13/californias-online-education-initiative-connects-community-college-classes-across; and Ashley A. Smith "Catalog to Completion," Inside Higher Ed, June 9, 2015. Available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/09/california-community-colleges-redesign-listing-online-courses-smooth-pathways-four.

83 Our preference is to extend Title IV Higher Education Act student aid eligibility to these students as well.

84 "Trends in Higher Education: Average Published Undergraduate Charges by Sector and by Carnegie Classification, 2017-18," The College Board, accessed March 20, 2018. Available at: https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/average-published-undergraduate-charges-sector-2017-18; and "Trends in Higher Education: Tuition and Fees by Sector and State over Time," The College Board, accessed March 20, 2018. Available at: https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/tuition-fees-sector-state-over-time.

85 U.S. Census Bureau, Public Education Finances: 2015, G15-ASPEF, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2017. Available at: https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/2017/econ/g15-aspef.html.

86 In these states, ACT 11th grade participation rates are not necessarily 100 percent, because some students have permissible exemptions (e.g. they are students with disabilities who have an IEP), or they may have been absent, opted-out, or failed to complete the exam for other reasons. In addition, a few states offer a district choice model, where individual districts may opt-out of the required testing.

87 ACT's benchmarks were derived from a sample of 214 institutions of higher education and over 230,000 first-year students across the United States, and were weighted to be representative of two- and four-year postsecondary institutions nationwide. Because the benchmark scores were set using data that reflect the diversity of the nation's colleges and students, the benchmarks represent a criterion for success for a typical student at a typical college. For more, see: "Information Brief: What are the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks?," ACT Research and Policy, September 2013. Available at: http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/benchmarks.pdf.

88 Though there is a considerable difference (10+ percentage points) in the percentage of Hispanic students within ACT states and the nation as a whole, this is primarily because the states with the largest Hispanic enrollments—e.g., California, Florida, Texas—are not among the states administering the ACT assessment to all students.

89 We used public school 11th grade enrollment data, combined with state-specific data on ACT performance, to produce state-level estimates for the number of advanced high school juniors. For states that did not have college-readiness performance data isolated for just public-school students (Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming), we used performance data for both public and private school students in the 2015 high school graduating class. In those cases, however, public school enrollment still accounted for more than 80 to 97 percent of all ACT test-taking students statewide.

90 For example, "demonstrated competence" for early graduation in Utah is defined as subject mastery as determined by school district standards and review and can include methods and documentation such as: tests, interviews, peer evaluations, writing samples, reports, or portfolios. See: Utah Admin. Code r. 277-705 (February 26, 2018) and r. 277.703 (October 10, 2017). Available at: https://rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-705.htm and https://rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-703.htm. Indiana legislation specifies that "high ability" students—students designated as such by the local school corporation—may graduate early from a "nonstandard course program" that is granted a waiver by the Indiana State Board of Education. Conversations with several state officials, however, reveal that there is little awareness of what that "nonstandard course program" might entail and how it differs from standard graduation requirements in the Core 40 diploma. See: Ind. Code § 21-12-10-4. Available at: http://iga.in.gov/static-documents/4/f/4/b/4f4b24f7/TITLE21_AR12_ch10.pdf.

91 Both routes to a high school diploma in Florida can be completed in less than eight semesters and require the student to earn a cumulative GPA of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale and meet additional statewide assessment requirements. The 18-credit ACCEL option, however, requires five fewer elective credits and does not require physical education or an online course. See: FLA. STAT. §§ 1003.4282 (2017) and 1002.3105 (2016). Available at: http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=1000-1099/1003/Sections/1003.4282.html and http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.3105.html.

92 Specifically, Tennessee students must achieve benchmark scores on 1) all mandatory end-of-course exams, 2) the ACT or SAT, and 3) a world language proficiency exam. See: Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-8303 (2016).

93 In order to qualify receive an Early Exit Diploma, students must meet college and career benchmarks scores in all core content areas on a series of End of Course exams and/or the required benchmarks for college readiness on the ACT or Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) approved college entrance exam. See: "Mississippi High School Graduation Pathways," Mississippi Department of Education, accessed April 1, 2018. Available at: http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/dropout-prevention-and-compulsory-school-attendance-library/mississippi-high-school-nbsp-graduation-pathway.pdf?sfvrsn=0.

94 Email correspondence with the Executive Director of the Center for the Future of Arizona, the nonprofit charged by the Arizona State Board of Education with leading the Move on When Ready initiative. For more, see "What is the Grand Canyon High School Diploma?," Center for the Future of Arizona, accessed March 29, 2018. Available at: http://www.arizonafuture.org/mowr/grand-canyon-diploma/. In addition, Arizona State University has approved a performance-based admissions option for students earning a Grand Canyon High School Diploma, beginning with freshman entering in Fall 2018.

95 N.J. Admin. Code §§ 6A:8-5.2(e). Available at: http://www.state.nj.us/education/code/current/title6a/chap8.pdf.

96 Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-5c (2013). Available at: http://search.cga.state.ct.us/r/statute/dtsearch_form.asp.

97 704 Ky. Admin. Regs. 3:305 (2014). Available at: http://www.lrc.ky.gov/kar/704/003/305.htm. For more, see "Letter of Intent to Apply for Early Graduation 2017-18," Kentucky Department of Education, accessed April 4, 2018. Available at: http://education.ky.gov/educational/AL/earlygrad/Documents/Early_Graduation_Intent_Form.pdf.

98 70 OK Stat § 70-11-103.6 (2015). Available at: http://www.oklegislature.gov/osstatuestitle.html.

99 16 V.S.A. § 563.19. Available at: https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/16/009/00563. Beginning with the class of 2020, Vermont students may demonstrate mastery though multiple measures, as determined by local policy. This may include, but is not limited to: teacher-designed assessments, written papers, presentations, portfolios, and projects. School districts must have proficiency-based graduation requirements that are aligned with the state's academic standards to determine the progress and graduation readiness of students. For more, see: "Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements: An Introduction to the AOE Sample Graduation Proficiency Documents," Vermont Department of Education, accessed April 2, 2018. Available at: http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-proficiency-based-education-introduction-to-aoe-sample.pdf.

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