

MEASURING CAREER READINESS

In today's economy, high-quality career preparation is more important than ever to ensuring students are equipped with the right skills to tackle the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that the future holds. Although career preparation has been a focus of states and districts for many years, a number of existing and historical factors — including the stigma of career and technical education, history of diverting students of color and students with disabilities away from college preparatory courses, lack of quality outcome data, and the absence of accountability across education and workforce systems — have made it difficult for states and districts to institute meaningful career preparation programs and measures of success. Furthermore, states and districts have often lacked the necessary employer engagement and leadership they need to successfully implement career-preparation programs (What credentials do employers actually value? Do career course sequences actually line up with today's workplaces?) or develop outcome metrics, with most engagement at the K-12 level being insufficient, unsustainable, and non-scalable.

The option to include measures of career readiness as part of schools' accountability ratings under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a new opportunity for states to define what it means to be career-ready and to better align what is taught in schools with the need for a skilled and competitive workforce. As states look to the design and implementation of new accountability systems, meaningful engagement of business leaders and civil rights and education advocates is crucial to ensuring that students are offered meaningful learning opportunities that maximize, rather than limit, the range of options available to them after high school.

What are the most common approaches to measuring career readiness? What are the limitations/challenges associated with these approaches?

The idea of measuring career readiness is not a new concept. Currently, 34 states publicly report having some form of career-focused measure. But while existing and historical approaches have informed a deeper understanding of career readiness, each comes with certain limitations and challenges when considered for inclusion in a statewide accountability system.

One key challenge is that states have often treated measures of career readiness separately from other indicators of academic preparation. State assessment results, or success in advanced courses like Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), are rarely included in state career readiness definitions, even though employers believe that these indicators are critically important signals of student preparedness for the workforce. Moreover, most careers today require a college degree, so being career-ready often necessitates being ready for college. True measures of career readiness must include both measures of academic skills and additional high-quality measures of career preparedness.

Below are the types of measures that states are currently or should consider using. As discussed in the Limitations/Challenges section for each measure, however, none of these metrics alone are sufficient for measuring career readiness.

- **Assessments**

- Assessments such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced, which are aligned with college- and career-ready standards, provide key information on whether students have attained the necessary math and reading proficiency to be successful in both college and the workplace. Assessments such as ACT WorkKeys and the NOCTI 21st Century Skills Assessment home in on workplace skills by posing contextualized questions to students that demonstrate a student's ability to apply their learning in a workplace setting.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Assessments, although valuable for understanding academic proficiency, often don't address other skills desired by employers such as effective communication, teamwork, and professionalism.

- **Courses With Dual Credit Opportunities**

- Student acquisition of dual or articulated college credit has been seen as a validation of college and career readiness. For college readiness specifically, this includes student participation in AP or IB courses, which satisfy high school graduation requirements and are recognized by many colleges and universities for college credit. For career readiness, the dual credit model is often pursued in combination with CTE courses and programs of study in a career and technical education-related field and, to some extent, in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)-related courses. While participation and success in AP and IB

courses have historically been thought of as measures of college readiness, employers believe that student participation and success in such classes is also a meaningful indicator of readiness for the workplace.

- **Limitations/Challenges:** Not all advanced courses will be relevant to a given career field, and completion of any one class will not, on its own, demonstrate career readiness. Furthermore, career-preparation courses have historically been subject to criticism that they track students — especially low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities — into a less rigorous pathway that limits, not expands, opportunity. (See Advanced Coursework fact sheet for more on this.)

- **Industry-Recognized Credentialing**

- States and districts are attempting to better connect students to additional credentialing opportunities as a part of career readiness. Examples of career credentials include industry-recognized credentials such as those offered by the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council (MSSC), diploma endorsements in a career field or program of study, and micro-credentials (e.g., digital badges).
- **Limitations/Challenges:** There is no consistent understanding of how credentials are valued by employers and whether or not they provide good labor market returns. In addition, not every industry offers credentials that can be attained at the K-12 level. Employers in the state must be involved if these are to be meaningful.

- **Work-Based Learning**

- Employers — as well as states and districts — have emphasized the importance of work-based learning as a critical component of career awareness and preparation. Work-based learning is often embedded as part of course concentrations in a career pathway or is affiliated with a STEM program. In many cases, these experiences are place-based and include internships, cooperatives, and — more recently — youth apprenticeships.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** While high-quality, work-based learning experiences are highly valuable both for students and employers, low-quality placements are not. They may, in fact, result in wasting valuable student time. Managing quality consistently in work-based learning can be challenging as can assessing what a student actually learned through their experience. As states and districts work with employers to develop meaningful career pathways moving forward, they should ensure that quality work-based learning experiences are part of that process.

Moving forward: The need for an integrated approach

To truly measure career readiness, states must develop an integrated approach that considers both academic skills and additional high-quality, career-preparation experiences. Many states are already taking an integrated approach. For example, California and Illinois, through the Pathways to Prosperity Network, are encouraging the implementation of career pathways that embed work-based learning and the attainment of industry-recognized credentials as part of a course sequence in an in-demand career field. Employer involvement and leadership is critical for development both of meaningful preparation programs and measures of success. Without validation from employers, states and districts risk wasting large amounts of money — and more important, students' time.

If your state is considering including a career-readiness measure in its accountability system, what questions should you ask? What should you watch out for?

- **Does the state include measures of academic preparation as part of its career-readiness indicator?**

Watch out for any attempts to count students as career-ready if they do not meet state reading and math standards. Meeting such academic content standards should be a minimum requirement for career readiness. Moreover, if states do not include reading and math proficiency as part of the definition of career readiness, schools and districts may react by tracking struggling students into meaningless career pathways so that they can get “credit” for these students in their school rating without providing them with appropriate academic supports.

- **How will the state ensure that any career pathway course sequences or credentials are rigorous and meaningful for students?**

Any career pathway that schools get credit for in their school ratings must provide students with a meaningful opportunity to learn that prepares them for post-high school success. This means that all pathways must be developed with employer input and result in credentials that are recognized by employers. States should be able to provide a list of employers/employer associations that have validated the pathways and credentials. Moreover, since most careers today require a college degree, no student should be placed in career pathway course sequences that don't also prepare them for college or that prevent them from taking a college-prep course of study.