



# Rethinking High School Graduation Requirements

*A Strategic Imperative for State Policymakers*

## INTRODUCTION

High school graduation requirements serve as both a signal of readiness and a lever for opening access and opportunity to social and economic mobility. Historically, the value of a diploma was intended to demonstrate student readiness for postsecondary education, military service, and civic participation; however, mounting evidence suggests significant gaps, with many students and subgroups not seamlessly transitioning to success. Despite students, families, institutions of higher education, and employers viewing the diploma as a sign of preparedness, it often falls short of fulfilling that promise. There are numerous factors contributing to why some students and subgroups transition seamlessly and succeed, while others do not. States offer more than 100 different graduation options, presenting multiple sets of expectations for students. While these options intend to provide flexibility, they also contribute to the lack of clarity about what it means to earn a diploma.



The future for students who enter the economy armed solely with a high school diploma continues to be increasingly stark and uncertain. As job opportunities continue to grow for those with education and training beyond high school, it is imperative that our education system evolves to prepare students not just for graduation, but for meaningful participation in postsecondary education and the workforce. High school must be seen as the critical foundation for social and economic mobility, and states bear a responsibility to leverage education as a powerful driver of opportunity. Determining high school graduation requirements is a state responsibility, critical for ensuring a consistent foundation of education across districts. While districts can build upon these requirements, it is the state's constitutional duty to set a rigorous baseline that guarantees all students receive an appropriate education.

Ultimately, high school graduation should not be viewed as the endpoint; instead, we must focus on equipping students for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, ensuring they have the skills and choices necessary to thrive. The requirements that states create are a signal to let students, and their families and educators, know that they are on the right track to success beyond high school. It is imperative that states use their policy levers to send the right signal.

# PRINCIPLES for Revising High School Graduation Requirements



State policymakers need to use their policy authority to ensure that students leave high school ready to succeed in college and career. It is critical that states move from “traditional” graduation requirements to “college- and career-ready” requirements (see next page). When designing new college- and career-ready graduation requirements, we recommend that policymakers use the following principles to guide their process:

- 1 Align your state’s diploma with college and career readiness expectations:** The high school diploma should provide a more robust signal of readiness than completion of courses alone. It should represent the state’s vision for redesigning the high school experience, with the full set of college and career experiences (and intended competencies) included. While the specific demonstrations may evolve over time, the fundamental alignment must remain constant. This approach ensures the diploma continues to signal readiness, adapting to the needs of today’s economy without losing its core purpose.
- 2 Leverage higher education and workforce leaders in the design:** It’s not enough for K-12 leaders to design high school graduation requirements in the hope that the requirements will set students up to be ready for success in college and career; higher education and workforce leaders need to be deeply engaged in the development to ensure alignment and buy-in.
- 3 Prioritize both flexibility and consistent rigor:** States should maintain a streamlined set of diploma options that uphold a consistent standard of rigor, ensuring all pathways adequately prepare students for a range of high-value opportunities after high school—from college to apprenticeships to good jobs with living wages. And students should have a variety of ways to demonstrate readiness that is inclusive of, but not solely based on, course completion and/or assessment benchmarks. States can integrate experiential learning opportunities, including work-based learning, that help demonstrate mastery of key competencies (e.g., communications, teamwork) into diploma options, providing authentic opportunity to both demonstrate and validate readiness in contexts that will engage students.
- 4 Include measures of college and career readiness:** States should consider a robust set of measures that indicate students’ readiness for continued education and training beyond high school, such as: earning early postsecondary credit (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual credit); completing a CTE pathway; earning an industry-recognized credential; completing work-based learning, including youth apprenticeship; demonstrating leadership on co/extra-curricular activities; demonstrating competency in core skills such as communication and collaboration; and/or completing community service hours.
- 5 Create and use data to monitor and continuously improve:** Develop and implement a data strategy for understanding how different student groups and geographies are meeting the graduation requirements, and report that disaggregated data publicly on an annual basis.

We also recommend that states invest in communications and implementation support following any change to their high school graduation requirements. Additional detail on how best to structure those investments and examples of state support for implementation can be found at the end of this brief.

# Moving to Next Generation High School Graduation Requirements

Traditional High School Graduation Requirements	College and Career Readiness Aligned High School Graduation Requirements
Emphasizes mastery of academic content standards and high school diploma attainment	Prioritizes both the mastery of academic content and experiential learning to support college and career readiness
Provides a foundational set of core courses in English, mathematics, science, and social studies	Enhanced core courses aligned to college admissions requirements and college and career readiness competencies
Offers a limited selection of electives	Integrates electives to enhance college readiness and career exploration
General credit accumulation for diploma attainment	Specific credit requirements, including in advanced coursework opportunities, aligned with college and career readiness standards

## LANDSCAPE of High School Graduation Requirements



States have adopted different approaches to embedding college and career readiness into high school graduation requirements. These strategies range from creating greater alignment between high school diploma credit and course requirements with college admissions criteria, exploring alternatives to traditional testing methods, and integrating opportunities for practical skill development through project and work-based learning experiences. Additionally, there are a growing number of states who are mandating access and support efforts, such as individualized career and academic plans, and requiring the completion of the FAFSA. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these strategies, the following section outlines the various types of strategies states are pursuing.

## Types of College and Career Ready High School Graduation Requirements

### COURSEWORK, CREDITS, AND EXAMS

#### CREDIT AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students typically need to earn a certain number of credits in various subjects to graduate with a high school diploma. These subjects often include English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and a set of electives. Enhancing college and career readiness involves aligning high school diploma criteria with college admission standards. Research reveals that most state colleges mandate the completion of a minimum high school curriculum as a prerequisite for admission eligibility, underscoring the significance of high school coursework in determining eligibility. This alignment is achieved when students are required to complete the same or more rigorous courses as those mandated for college admissions.

- ➔ Currently, among the 47 states with established statewide minimum high school graduation requirements, only 18 have achieved full or partial alignment between their diploma requirements and the minimum admissions criteria for higher education statewide. (Center for American Progress, 2018)
- ➔ Five states (i.e., Louisiana, Michigan, South Dakota, Tennessee, Rhode Island) have advanced college and career readiness by aligning course requirements in both high school graduation and college admissions policies.
- ➔ Financial literacy courses are required in Florida, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, and Virginia.
- ➔ Alabama, Delaware, New Mexico, and Rhode Island mandate Career Preparedness courses.
- ➔ Taking a specific college and career readiness course is required for students in Mississippi and Nevada. In Hawaii, students need to take a transition planning course to earn a diploma.
- ➔ In Arizona, Arkansas, California, DC, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Virginia, Career and Technical Education (CTE) participation is provided as an option for meeting a specific high school graduation requirement. However, in Montana, New Jersey, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia, CTE is required.

## APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

### TESTING REQUIREMENT(S)

High school exit exams have traditionally served as a means to evaluate students' proficiency in core academic subjects and determine whether students are meeting state academic standards. These tests may cover academic subjects such as mathematics, reading, writing, history, and science, and can include college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT. In recent years, some states have sought to expand options for students to demonstrate readiness beyond assessments.

- ➔ In eight states (Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Ohio, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming), a high school graduation test is required for students to receive a diploma. Four states (Tennessee, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Georgia) have replaced high school graduation tests with end-of-course exams that factor into a student's course grades.
- ➔ In 2019, Washington state eliminated the state assessment mandate for graduation, and opted to provide a range of graduation pathway options to assess and better prepare students for college and career. These pathways include meeting graduation scores in Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBA) or WA-AIM, earning credits through dual enrollment programs, achieving certain scores on AP/IB/Cambridge exams, meeting SAT/ACT graduation scores, completing transition courses, exploring performance-based options, combining multiple pathways, achieving standard on the ASVAB, or completing a sequence of Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses.

In advancing college and career readiness, states have incorporated applied learning experiences into high school graduation requirements. Some states mandate additional criteria, such as performance-based, service-based, or work-based learning projects, aiming to equip students with practical skills essential for success in post-secondary education and the workforce. For instance, students may undertake capstone or research projects to demonstrate their mastery of academic content, engage in community service initiatives to foster civic engagement and leadership skills, or pursue work-based learning opportunities to support their career goals.

- ➔ In Idaho, students must complete a senior project to earn their diploma, demonstrating their ability to analyze, synthesize, and communicate information effectively. It includes research, thesis development using experiential or integrated project-based learning, and project presentation. Additional requirements may vary by district. Completion of a postsecondary certificate/degree or participation in an approved pre-internship/internship can also meet this requirement.
- ➔ Rhode Island students must successfully complete at least one performance-based diploma assessment. Successful completion of performance-based diploma assessments include demonstrations of both applied learning skills and proficiency in one or more content areas. Performance-based assessment may include work based learning, a capstone project, a student portfolio, community service, project-based learning, and other strategies that support applied learning.

Several states incorporate experiences aimed at better preparing students for higher education or the workforce into their graduation requirements or “diploma pathways.” These experiences may include partaking in opportunities such as dual enrollment, industry credential programs, financial literacy courses, or career preparation courses<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, some states require or provide the option for students to complete financial aid applications, such as the FAFSA, to facilitate access to higher education. Furthermore, a select few states are mandating the development of individualized learning plans tailored to students’ academic and career goals, alongside requiring transition-related tasks such as resume preparation or career exploration activities. These efforts collectively aim to bridge disparities in access and support, empowering all students to thrive in both their academic and professional journeys.

- ➔ Colorado, Kentucky, Washington, Rhode Island, and DC require each student to have individualized career and academic plans (ICAPs).
- ➔ States with FAFSA requirements include Illinois, Alabama, Texas, California, and New Hampshire. Beginning with the 2024-2025 graduating class, students in Connecticut, Indiana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, and Oklahoma will also be required to complete the FAFSA.
- ➔ Rhode Island mandates resume completion.
- ➔ Alabama, Louisiana, Washington DC, and Virginia provide diverse college and career readiness pathways for students to choose from, enabling them to fulfill their diploma requirements based on what experiences fit their needs.

<sup>1</sup> For further details on which states include specific courses, refer to the “Coursework, Credits, and Exams” section of this table.

# Examples of Recent Changes / Proposals to Prioritize CCR in High School Graduation Requirements

The following section provides examples of states that recently updated/are in the process of updating their high school graduation requirements to better prepare students for college and career.

## Rhode Island



### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

#### REQUIRED FOR THE CLASS OF 2028:

- ➔ 4 years of English
- ➔ 4 years of mathematics
- ➔ 3 years of physical/natural sciences
- ➔ 3 years of history/social studies
- ➔ 2 years of world languages
- ➔ 1 year of additional college preparation course
- ➔ 1 year each of arts, computer science, and physical education, and health

### CCR FOCUS

In addition to the credit requirements:

- ➔ Each graduating senior shall be provided information on postsecondary opportunities including, but not limited to, college, career, apprenticeship, and the Military.
- ➔ Each graduating senior shall be encouraged to complete one of the following to support a successful transition to postsecondary education and/or career training.
- ➔ High schools shall be required to provide students information pursuant to state statute on how to complete and submit to the U.S. Department of Education a free application for federal student aid; and complete and submit to the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner a free application for state student Aid.
- ➔ Each graduating senior shall complete a resume prior to high school graduation.
- ➔ Students shall successfully complete at least one performance-based diploma assessment. Successful completion of performance-based diploma assessments shall include demonstrations of both applied learning skills and proficiency in one or more content areas. All performance-based diploma assessments shall be evaluated utilizing an LEA-defined scoring criteria aligned with applicable state standards, applied learning standards, and the expectations of employers, and postsecondary education. Performance-based assessment may include work-based learning, community service, project-based learning, and other strategies that support applied learning.
- ➔ Students shall successfully demonstrate proficiency in the following subject areas to provide them real-world relevant skills that will develop skills and support their success in participating in society, thriving in the 21st century economy, and in securing their own financial security.
  - Civics beginning with the Class of 2028.
  - Computer Science beginning with the Class of 2028.
  - Financial Literacy beginning with the Class of 2024

Students can earn a Guided Pathways endorsement in one of 7 discipline areas by successfully completing three components: (1) academic study; (2) work-based learning; and (3) application of skills demonstrated through the performance-based diploma assessment.

## ACADEMIC STUDY

Students must successfully complete three (3) independent, connected courses, characterized by:

- Increased complexity, and complementary or cumulative content
- Deep learning with increased level of specialization that builds coherence of the topic through coursework
- One or more courses must be advanced or experiential
- Two of three courses should be outside of the typical courses for a particular content area or area of study suggested for all students.

## WORK-BASED LEARNING

Students must successfully complete a work-based learning experience, characterized by:

- Acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the pathway;
- Meaningful contact with and opportunities to work alongside professional practitioners in the field; and
- Responsibilities, impact, and/ or opportunities to practice in the area of interest or career field that deepens learning of the content area.

## DIPLOMA ASSESSMENT

Students must successfully complete a performance-based diploma assessment by aligning their demonstration of knowledge to the topic that they studied. Students must apply and demonstrate the knowledge and skills gained through their pathway coursework and chosen work-based learning experience and reflect on the pathway experience.

# Ohio



### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

#### REQUIRED FOR THE CLASS OF 2023:

- 4 units of English
- 4 units of mathematics
- 3 units of science
- 3 units of social studies
- 0.5 unit of physical education
- 0.5 unit of health
- 5 units of electives
- 1 unit of fine arts
- Economics and financial literacy

### CCR FOCUS

State law created 12 diploma seals for students to demonstrate academic, technical and professional readiness for careers, college, the military, or self-sustaining professions. Each seal allows students to demonstrate knowledge and skills essential for future success in their chosen post-high school paths. Students will demonstrate readiness by earning at least two diploma seals, one of which must be state defined.

#### MILITARY ENLISTMENT SEAL

- Provide evidence that a student has enlisted in a branch of the U.S. Armed Forces; or Participate in an approved JROTC program

## TECHNOLOGY SEAL

- ➔ Earn a score that is at least equivalent to proficient on an appropriate Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam;
- ➔ Earn a final course grade that is equivalent to a “B” or higher in an appropriate class taken through the College Credit Plus program; or
- ➔ Complete a course offered through the district or school that meets guidelines developed by the Department.

## INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIAL SEAL

- ➔ Earn a 12-point approved industry-recognized credential or group of credentials totaling 12 points in a single career field

## CITIZENSHIP SEAL

- ➔ Earn a score of proficient or higher on both the American history and American government end-of-course exams;
- ➔ Earn a score that is at least equivalent to proficient on appropriate Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams; or
- ➔ Earn a final course grade that is equivalent to a “B” or higher in appropriate classes taken through the College Credit Plus program.

## OHIO MEANS JOBS READINESS SEAL

- ➔ Meet the requirements and criteria established for the readiness seal, including demonstration of work-readiness and professional competencies

## STATE SEAL OF BILITERACY

- ➔ Meet the requirements and criteria, including proficiency requirements on assessments in a world language and English

## COLLEGE-READY SEAL

- ➔ Earn remediation-free scores on the ACT or SAT

## SCIENCE SEAL

- ➔ Earn a score of proficient or higher on the biology end-of-course exam;
- ➔ Earn a score that is at least equivalent to proficient on appropriate Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams; or
- ➔ Earn a final course grade that is equivalent to a “B” or higher in an appropriate class taken through the College Credit Plus program.

## HONORS DIPLOMA SEAL

- ➔ Earn one of six Honors Diplomas



## COMMUNITY SERVICE SEAL (LOCALLY DEFINED)

- Complete a community service project aligned with the guidelines adopted by the school district's local board of education or school governing authority

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SEAL (LOCALLY DEFINED)

- Participate in extracurricular activities such as athletics, clubs or student government to a meaningful extent, as determined by guidelines adopted by the school district's local board of education or school governing authority

## FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS SEAL (LOCALLY DEFINED)

- Demonstrate skill in the fine or performing arts according to an evaluation aligned with guidelines adopted by the school district's local board of education or school governing authority

# Washington



## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### BEGAN FOR THE CLASS OF 2020:

- 4 years of English
- 3 years of mathematics
- 3 years of science
- 3 years of social studies
- 1 year of art
- 2 years of health and fitness
- 1 year of CTE
- 4 elective credits
- 3 personalized pathway credits

## CCR FOCUS

Complete a "High School and Beyond" plan and complete a graduation pathway, which is defined as one of the following:

- CTE Sequence: Complete 2.0 or more CTE credits in the same CTE program area that either include a dual credit course, or lead to an industry recognized credential OR Complete a Core Plus program (Manufacturing, Construction and Maritime available)
- Military Career Interest: Score 31+ on ASVAB
- ELA & Mathematics Pathways (can use any combination of the following): minimum score on college admissions exam, completion of 1 dual credit course, passage of 1 dual credit exam, minimum scores on the state assessment, or completion of a transition course

## ONE TO WATCH: INDIANA



As part of a major initiative to redesign the high school experience, Indiana's education leaders are reimagining what the high school diploma should include and signify in the 21st century to represent the knowledge, skills, and competencies that matter most in helping students achieve their unique future goals. This includes:

- Redesigning high school graduation requirements to maintain academic rigor while maximizing flexibility for students to personalize learning pathways and experiences;
- Expanding high-quality work-based learning experiences, especially internships and modern youth apprenticeships; and
- Increasing attainment of credentials that provide currency for the student.

This high school redesign effort aims to streamline diploma options available to students to make the high school experience more learner-centric and future-focused. The new proposed requirements are streamlined and simplified to include one base diploma, with the opportunity to earn readiness seals aligned with their unique path.

The new diploma and readiness seals are driven by Indiana's commitment to ensuring that students are well-prepared for education and training beyond high school and, ultimately, for rewarding career opportunities. Students will be able to earn readiness seals in (postsecondary) enrollment, employment, and enlistment and service and are designed to help students focus their personalized credits into a pathway that more seamlessly connects them to their college and career aspirations. The seals incentivize students to complete a work-based learning experience, as well as a credential like an industry-recognized credential, a CTE certificate, an apprenticeship, and/or college credits.

The new diploma offerings are set to be approved by the State Board of Education by the end of 2024 and will take effect with the class of 2029. Schools may also opt-in beginning with the 2025-2026 school year.

# QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER When Updating High School Graduation Requirements



For state leaders interested in redesigning high school graduation requirements, we suggest considering the following:

## **What is the state's vision for student success beyond high school?**

- ➔ How well do the current graduation requirements align with the current and future high-value career opportunities in the state or region? What would need to change to better align with these opportunities?
- ➔ What have you heard from higher education and workforce leaders about students' readiness for education, training, and work following graduation?
- ➔ To what extent do the current graduation requirements allow for flexibility, personalization, and experiential learning based on students' interests and goals? Are there specialized pathways or endorsements available?
- ➔ What competencies do all students need to demonstrate by the end of high school? What competencies may be necessary based on students' interests and goals?

## **How can state leaders ensure that equity is at the forefront of consideration, addressing factors such as access, opportunities, and outcomes for historically marginalized or underserved student populations?**

- ➔ How will community members, employers, educators, and stakeholders be involved in developing graduation requirements? How will their feedback be used?
- ➔ What needs to be put in place to help students meet an expanded array of options to demonstrate readiness? Will students be allowed to earn credit through demonstrations of mastery? What does state policy currently allow?
- ➔ What steps are being taken to mitigate potential disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and support systems that may affect students' ability to meet the graduation requirements?
- ➔ How are educators and school staff being trained and supported to effectively meet the needs of diverse student populations and ensure equitable access to college and career readiness programs and resources?
- ➔ How will data be collected and used to monitor students' progress towards meeting the graduation requirements? How can data be leveraged to identify areas for improvement and allocate resources effectively?
- ➔ What role will community partnerships, including employers, postsecondary institutions, and civic organizations, play in shaping and supporting the state's vision for high school graduation requirements? How will these partnerships be leveraged to align educational outcomes with the needs of the local economy and community?
- ➔ How will the state facilitate a shift in focus from not only helping all students meet high school graduation requirements but planning for and matriculating to high-value postsecondary options?

# STATE EFFORTS to Support High School Graduation Requirement Implementation



Policymakers must recognize that designing policy parameters is only the beginning. The real challenge lies in effective implementation, where the true impact of well-intended policies will be determined. High school graduation requirements are not just benchmarks; they are commitments to students' futures and the state's economic and workforce development. Success hinges on clear roles, cross-sector leadership, and intentionality in aligning efforts. Policies must not only set rigorous expectations but also ensure equitable support and meaningful access for all students, as the potential impact of these policies will ultimately be determined by how well they are executed.

The passage of new high school graduation requirements will likely require new or redirected investment to ensure successful implementation. Specifically, this investment should lead to:

- 1** Clear guidance for implementation, shared broadly through the state's professional development infrastructure and educator/administrator associations, with a specific focus on preparing counselors and advisors;
- 2** Coordinated statewide communications campaign to ensure that students, families, educators, and administrators are aware of and can prepare for the changes;
- 3** Expansion in the number of opportunities (courses, experiences, etc.) to demonstrate readiness available to students statewide, and direct strategies to engage and support underrepresented and underserved student populations in meeting the new graduation requirements; and,
- 4** Robust data infrastructure to track students' completion of requirements and report disaggregated data on key performance indicators such as course completion rates, adherence to graduation requirements, performance on standardized assessments linked to these requirements, participation in mandated experiential learning opportunities, and access to support services.

The following examples highlight how three states approached implementation support after the passage of new high school graduation requirements.

## Rhode Island



Rhode Island stands out as a model for strategically planning the implementation of College and Career Readiness (CCR) high school graduation requirements. Beginning in 2021, the state convened the Reimagining High School Working Group, composed of various stakeholders (i.e., school and district administrators, state leaders, educators, students, and families) to inform their recommendations for new diploma requirements. In December 2021, the proposed readiness-based graduation requirements were presented to the Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. The new readiness-based graduation requirements were grounded in the skills and experiences young people need to be college and career ready. The proposed recommendations focused on four key priorities:

- ➔** Prepare graduates to create their future by providing a financial literacy course and requiring schools to offer support with financial aid applications.
- ➔** Increase student engagement through real-world relevant learning experiences.

- ➔ Change how Rhode Island Department of Education system leaders and educators support students and families, such as Implementing policies that enable student caregivers to earn community service hours or have flexible class schedules.
- ➔ Move towards competency-based requirements and eliminate all requirements surrounding institutional minutes.

Through an extensive public comment period in Spring 2022, Rhode Island garnered widespread engagement and buy-in, ensuring that concerns and insights from administrators, educators, students, and families were considered. To support the implementation of CCR requirements, Rhode Island developed a five year action plan that focuses on six key areas:

- ➔ Expanding partnership and collaboration
- ➔ Reimagining learning
- ➔ Developing a statewide approach to comprehensive school counseling
- ➔ Preparing Rhode Island kids to create their futures
- ➔ Increasing engagement in Rhode Island schools by increasing real-world relevant learning experiences
- ➔ Changing how Rhode Island supports their students and families

Rhode Island’s approach is comprehensive and includes clear guidance for stakeholders impacted by the changes, offering answers to frequently asked questions and centralized information on the department of education website. Additionally, the state leveraged private donations and partnered with organizations like XQ Institute and technology platforms like Always Be Learning (ABL) to provide support for successful implementation. For instance, partnering with ABL enabled high schools to analyze their schedules effectively to align with readiness-based graduation requirements. Districts also have access to XQ Institute’s resources to conduct an Educational Opportunity Audit of all high schools, aiding school leaders in understanding students’ experiences comprehensively.

## Illinois



In Illinois, a recent mandate stipulates that starting from the 2020-2021 academic year, public high school students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or, if eligible, the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid, to qualify for a high school diploma. While the Illinois State Board of Education is tasked to lead the implementation of these efforts, they strategically partnered with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission’s (ISAC) to support implementation recognizing ISAC’s extensive experience in statewide college planning and financial aid application assistance.

ISAC offers comprehensive guidance to students and families regarding the complexities of financial aid. Additionally, ISAC employs the ISACorps, composed of recent college graduates trained as near-peer mentors to high school students. These Corps members play a pivotal role in assisting students and families in navigating college application processes, including financial aid. Through outreach initiatives, ISACorps collaborates with local schools, businesses, and nonprofit organizations to deliver free career and college planning services. This includes workshops, presentations, and one-on-one mentoring sessions, covering aspects like career exploration, college selection, test preparation, scholarship searches, application completion, and financial aid assistance.

Simultaneously, the Illinois State Board of Education collaborates with ISAC to provide clear guidance to administrators and families regarding the graduation requirement, ensuring awareness and understanding among stakeholders. By combining ISAC's expertise in financial aid support with ISBE's guidance dissemination efforts, Illinois is striving to ensure that all students are equipped with the necessary resources and knowledge to both meet their high school diploma requirements and pursue higher education successfully.

## Washington



Following adoption of a new graduation diploma pathway, Washington mandated an evaluation report to study implementation. The three-year project was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, providing the Board with comprehensive feedback from those impacted by these new graduation pathways, including students, educators, the education community at large, and families. The year-two data collection focused on district stakeholders' perceptions of the current graduation pathway options, exploring suggestions for changes, perceived barriers, equitable access, and more. Information obtained from the year-one findings informed the project design and areas of deeper focus in the second year. Data from the first two years provided additional insights in the final year, helping to identify potential strategies for addressing key findings. In summary they found:

- ➔ **Need for Additional Opportunities:** Students, parents, caregivers, and educators agree on the need for pathway options that offer students more opportunities to develop life and employability skills and to engage in mastery-based learning (MBL).
- ➔ **Flexibility within Pathways:** Many educators communicated that more flexibility within the pathways was needed to allow students to explore academic, personal, and career interests. This includes the need for more flexibility within the Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway to offer it as a viable graduation option and to allow students to fully utilize it.
- ➔ **Barriers to Offering Pathways:** In districts or schools unable to offer all graduation pathways, the Bridge to College and CTE pathways were most frequently associated with barriers such as staffing and qualification issues. The CTE pathway, being the only option with specific requirements that some students can utilize to graduate, highlighted the crucial need to offer it widely.

In response to these findings, Washington aimed to 1) clarify the purpose of graduation pathways, 2) add a performance-based option, and 3) establish ongoing data and monitoring requirements to ensure these options are equitably offered. By prioritizing evaluation and continuous feedback, Washington has shown a commitment to refining and improving their graduation pathways to better serve students. This approach underscores the importance of ongoing assessment and adaptation in educational policy, ensuring that all students have access to meaningful and equitable graduation options.

# CONCLUSION

High school graduation can no longer be the end point of students' journey toward careers; but that does not mean that states should set low expectations for what students should know and be able to do when they cross the high school graduation stage. As state leaders increasingly look to redesign the high school experience—making it more relevant to students' interests and the talent needs of employers—establishing a flexible and rigorous approach to high school graduation requirements is necessary. All states should incorporate demonstration of college and career readiness into their expectations for high school graduates.

## Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Ryan Reyna and Janice Le. The authors wish to extend gratitude to the following individuals who provided invaluable insight on graduation requirements efforts in their states:

- **Timberly Deville**, Louisiana Department of Education
- **Linda Drake**, Washington State Board of Education
- **Marci Johnson**, Illinois State Board of Education
- **Clarissa Leong**, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington
- **Alissa Muller**, Washington State Board of Education
- **Edith Njuguna**, Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University
- **Stephen Osborn**, Rhode Island Department of Education
- **Emily Rusca**, Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University
- **Ernise Singleton**, Louisiana Department of Education
- **Olivia Smith**, Rhode Island Department of Education
- **Erica Thieman**, Illinois State Board of Education
- **Jessica Vallelungo**, Louisiana Department of Education

Additional thanks to Lauren Norton, Marie O'Hara, and Alissa Peltzman for their content expertise, Kelly Van Beveren for editorial and communications leadership, and Kathy Ames and the Next Chapter Communications team for their design work.