

High School to College and Careers Aligning State Policies: A Useful Policy Tool

In 2002 and again in 2012, SREB states set ambitious *Challenge to Lead* goals for education progress: to lead the nation. For policymakers and education leaders, the goals encourage the implementation of policies and practices that promote these outcomes. For states, reaching these goals would mean more high school graduates and more who are ready for college and careers. In support of the goals and state efforts to reach them, SREB committed to help states achieve the goals with information, technical advice and tools to promote better decisions about developing and implementing strong policies.

As part of this commitment, SREB staff catalogued various policies in SREB states related to high school completion and postsecondary admission, plus those that intersected both high school and college — like dual enrollment and outreach programs. The result, *High School to College and Careers: Aligning State Policies* (HSCC), was first published in 2002. It proved to be a useful and popular tool, particularly among SREB policy leaders and their staff, that it has been updated and republished several times over the last 10 years, most recently in 2014-15.



SREB's first electronic version of HSCC in 2013 allowed for the large print report on the 16 SREB states to be presented in a more useful way and to be more readily updated. Each state report provides information about eight topical policy areas.

- **High school graduation requirements**
- **High school assessments**
- **College and career planning**
- **Accelerated learning opportunities**
- **College and career readiness**
- **Postsecondary admissions and placement policies**
- **Postsecondary to high school feedback reports**
- **State financial aid**

Regional Highlights

Since the report was first published, the SREB region has seen many changes on most of the policies. States have developed and reformed their assessment and accountability systems and made strides aligning high school graduation requirements with college admission requirements. Many have much more to offer in college and career planning now than they did a dozen years ago. Highlights of recent changes include the following examples, all of which can be traced in the last several editions of HSCC.

- Most SREB states offer students **multiple diploma paths to high school graduation** — some up to four paths — each state with varying course requirements. While each state has a standard diploma path, other state diploma paths offer students the option of a college or career technical focus or even graduate in three years, instead of the traditional four years. In the states with single diploma tracks, students are provided with concentration or endorsement options that allow to them to choose required or elective courses within a college or career technical focus.
- Depending on the state, students must complete from 21 to 24 units to earn a standard high school diploma. All but one state require that *all* students complete four **English courses**.
- The majority of SREB states require four math courses to earn a standard high school diploma.
- **Math course requirements** vary by state. However, every state requires students to complete an Algebra I course and a geometry course or a course equivalent.
- All but one state require that students take three **science courses** to earn a standard diploma, but not every state requires that at least one of the required science courses be lab-based.
- Most SREB states use **end-of-course tests** to measure student academic progress across a variety of courses and subjects. Each of these states requires that these exams count as some percentage of the final grade for the course.
- Eight states link **eligibility for graduation to passing certain courses and exams**. Maryland, for example, requires students to take end-of-course tests in four subjects. Students must earn passing scores on each test or earn a passing combined score on the four tests to graduate.
- Every state now incorporates **college and career measures into its state's accountability system**. State measures include, for example, the use of assessment results in various subjects, participation in accelerated learning opportunities and industry certification.
- By 2014, eight SREB states required that all high school juniors take the ACT as part of the **state's accountability program**. These states use ACT's College Ready Benchmarks as their proxy measure for college and career readiness until they adopt state assessments with college- and career-readiness measures to use within the next several years.
- While every state requires middle school and high school students to participate in **academic and career planning** activities, not every state designates specific activities or timelines.

West Virginia's pathways:

Each high school student develops a personalized education plan, which includes a four-credit concentration in academics or career and technical education. For the academic concentration, the state encourages students to take at least one Advanced Placement and/or Advanced Career course with corresponding examination, a fourth science credit and two credits in one world language course. For the career and technical concentration, the four credits must be state approved career technical education programs that provide students the opportunity to obtain an industry-recognized credential as part of the instructional program. If schools offer a concentration that is not state-approved, the four courses for the concentration must be approved by the local Board of Education and result an industry-recognized, CTE credential.

- Every SREB state offers **accelerated learning opportunities** that allow high school students to earn college or career technical credits through a variety of programs such as dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, Early College and competency-based credit.
- All SREB states have developed **postsecondary to high school feedback reports**, through which the state notifies districts and schools about their graduates' postsecondary enrollment performance.
- While some SREB states have **linked high school graduation requirements to college admission** requirements, other states allow institutions to set admission requirements independently.
- Six SREB states require that 11th grade assessments be used for **postsecondary placement**. Five of these states exempt students who pass the assessments from postsecondary institutional placement testing.
- The majority of **state financial aid** in the SREB region is provided to students based on merit. But, all 16 SREB states have need-based scholarship programs to increase educational access for students from low- and middle-income families.
- Nine SREB states use state lottery funding to support merit-based aid programs.
- Almost all of SREB states have established minimum high school grade point averages between 2.5 and 3.0 that students must meet to be eligible for state need- and merit-based financial aid.
- Thirteen SREB states require that students receiving state financial aid maintain a minimum grade point average to continue receiving aid.
- In addition to minimum grade point average requirements that may apply, seven SREB states also tie continuing eligibility for state financial aid to specific credit hour requirements, either by semester or year.
- Six SREB states require students to complete a specific number of credits hours per semester or year.
- One SREB state stipulates that students must complete 75 percent of credits attempted to retain their financial aid.

SREB states have made strides in aligning policies and programs related to high school graduation and college admission since 2002. In recent years, state efforts have focused on policies that ensure more high school graduates are college and career ready, so they can be successful in whatever careers they choose after high school.

Report Methodology

What's the cycle for review for the state policies in HSCC each time it is revised? SREB compiles the information included in these state profiles over the summer and fall each year, so it can include enacted legislation and state board action that impacts the upcoming school year. Once SREB's research is completed and thoroughly documented, it forwards drafts to state K-12 and higher education agencies for review and comments — with ample time for feedback before the each state profile is published to its website.

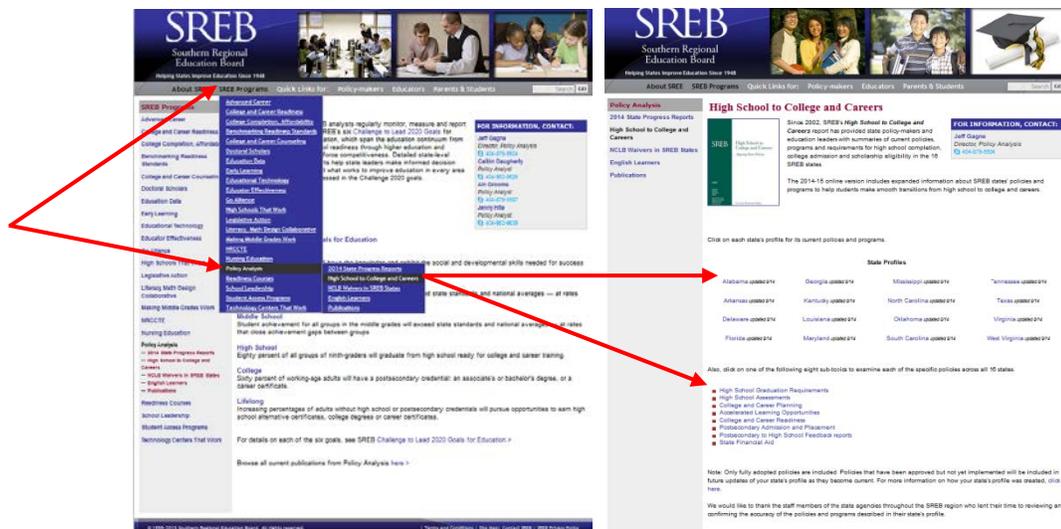
SREB includes policies in the listing only after they are fully implemented. Policies that are proposed but not adopted, approved but not yet implemented, adopted but not fully phased in may be mentioned in notes once they affect current ninth grades, but are not reflected in tables until they are implemented for seniors. (This practice makes it possible for policy leaders to make state-to-state comparisons on a set of comparably current policies.)

How can I use the report? Because HSCC provides timely information that is comparable for the 16 SREB states, it can help policymakers answer key questions.

- Are state policies on high school standards, assessments and college readiness in my state aligned and do they promote smooth transitions from secondary to postsecondary education?
- Do the high school standards, courses and assessments in my state prepare students for success in college courses when they enroll as freshmen?
- Are high school assessment results in my state used to make postsecondary placement decisions in state college and universities?
- Do state policies encourage high school students in my state to use the senior year productively, or do these policies allow many seniors to waste the last year of high school?
- Does my state recognize more than one path to graduation, including an option for students who plan to pursue careers after high school?
- How does my state compare in the way it provides financial aid to students?

How does the website version work?

For ease of use, HSCC can be accessed from the SREB home page with just one click by going to “SREB Programs” drop-down list and selecting Policy Analysis. Then just click on “High School to College and Careers.” You will find the state profiles and sub-topic reports on the HSCC page.



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