

P-16: Fostering Preparation From Preschool to College

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Increasingly, the transition between Grades K-12 and postsecondary education has become a major policy issue for state education agencies (SEAs) and policymakers. The United States has a comprehensive mass education system that serves early childhood, Grades K-12, and postsecondary sectors. As this system evolved, indicators of college readiness and subject matter proficiency deteriorated and were replaced by aptitude tests. At the same time, higher education grew to include community colleges, regional and satellite campuses, and research institutions that strayed further from contact with state, local, and district schools. As a result, a high school diploma was no longer a guarantee of readiness for postsecondary education.

Few states have entities in education or legislative or executive branches that are able to encompass P-16 practices and policies. There is little data and information on accountability measures for P-16 performance, and there are no incentives in place for preschool, Grades K-12, or higher education to consider what each side of the education spectrum can do collectively to advance the needs of students throughout the system. Nevertheless, many states are interested in creating an integrated system for education that is designed to raise the achievement of students at all levels of the system.

SEAs and other state policymakers can gain a thoughtful understanding of P-16 progress and collaboration by considering the history and progress of the public education system from early childhood to postsecondary preparation.

P-16 and the Challenge of the American Education System

The modern American education system consists of three clearly defined areas of education focus: early learning, Grades K-12, and postsecondary. These three focus areas have historically operated independently of one another. Today, each area faces similar challenges because of the increased focus on accountability for raising student achievement and engagement for all students. Achievement gaps, low participation rates, and remediation are concerns threaded throughout the American education system, and many states and state policymakers have grown to understand the importance of bringing these separate education focus areas together to comprehensively elevate student learning.

Moving a divided education system to a more integrated one is an ambitious endeavor. States continue to face challenges in trying to bring together the resources and divisions of authority of what were previously separate education focus areas with different indicators of student success or failure. States that have demonstrated success in their integration efforts share three common policy goals:

- Integration of policies and practice across the three focus areas (early learning, K-12, and higher education).

- Commitment from key stakeholders across the system and within the policy and business community to foster unity.
- Dedication to cooperative long-term reform.

States that are able to gain support from the governor, the state legislature, and the SEA as well as representation from early learning, Grades K–12, higher education, and business build the political infrastructure to create conditions for success of a statewide system.

Developing these collaborative relationships often requires bringing together individuals who do not normally interact with one another. Research suggests that coordinated state work to address mutual interest in a state-level education policy initiative shows more promise of sustainability than multiple individual initiatives.

P–16 Implementation Strategies and State Initiatives

A major challenge for measuring effectiveness of P–16 implementation is that the standards for holding Grades K–12 and higher education accountable are not the same. States are increasingly recognizing that strong data systems are vital to understanding the pipeline of kindergarten through college. Linking preschool data to Grades K–12 and postsecondary in a meaningful way can advance state policy knowledge regarding future questions to support P–16 accountability, authority, and implementation. Like other education reform efforts, P–16 is a long-term process that requires a long-term commitment from the state. Long-term success strategies require thoughtful consideration to funding, staffing, priorities, and policies that support a sustainable P–16 statewide system.

Although more than 38 states have implemented some form of P–16 activity, some have made more progress than others in aligning standards and assessments, smoothing transitions, and raising student achievement. Some states have historical and notable state education reform legislation and have demonstrated more than a decade of strong statewide P–16 system development. Early leaders of the P–16 movement include Georgia, Maryland, and Oregon.

- Georgia P–16 Initiative (www.usg.edu/p16/)
- Maryland Grades K–16 Partnership for Teaching and Learning (<http://mdk16.usmd.edu/>)
P–20 Leadership Council of Maryland
- Oregon PK–20 Redesign (www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=85)

Many states have P–16 initiatives, councils, or working groups that have been mandated through legislation. Others have formed through voluntary commitments and concerns made by influential members of different stakeholder groups. Rarely have states approached the challenge of better coordinating P–16 in the same way. Some states, such as Indiana, have focused on early learning policy changes, whereas others, such as North Carolina and Wisconsin, are trying to make policy changes that address the problematic transitions between high school and college.

P–16 for College Readiness and Workforce Development

To facilitate better alignment between high school and workforce or college readiness, it is important to understand that states vary with respect to high school graduation requirements and admissions requirements of higher education. In a recent study conducted by the National Association of System Heads, it was found that Grades K–12 and higher education are more closely aligned with respect to number of courses required than on topics to begin college-level study. The lack of alignment between high school and college suggests that a high school diploma does not guarantee college readiness.

Most states determine courses that are required for a high school diploma. Extensive variation in state high school graduation requirements also exists. Surprisingly, only 30 states have established consistent minimum requirements for admission to public colleges and universities. In a few states, high school graduation requirements are left entirely to local school districts. In rare cases, course requirements for high school graduation are more rigorous than college entry requirements. Knowledge of state policy on high school graduation requirements serves as a base for a better understanding of alignment challenges between high school and postsecondary education. Higher education can encourage alignment by finding consensus on a common definition of the skills students need for college credit-bearing courses.

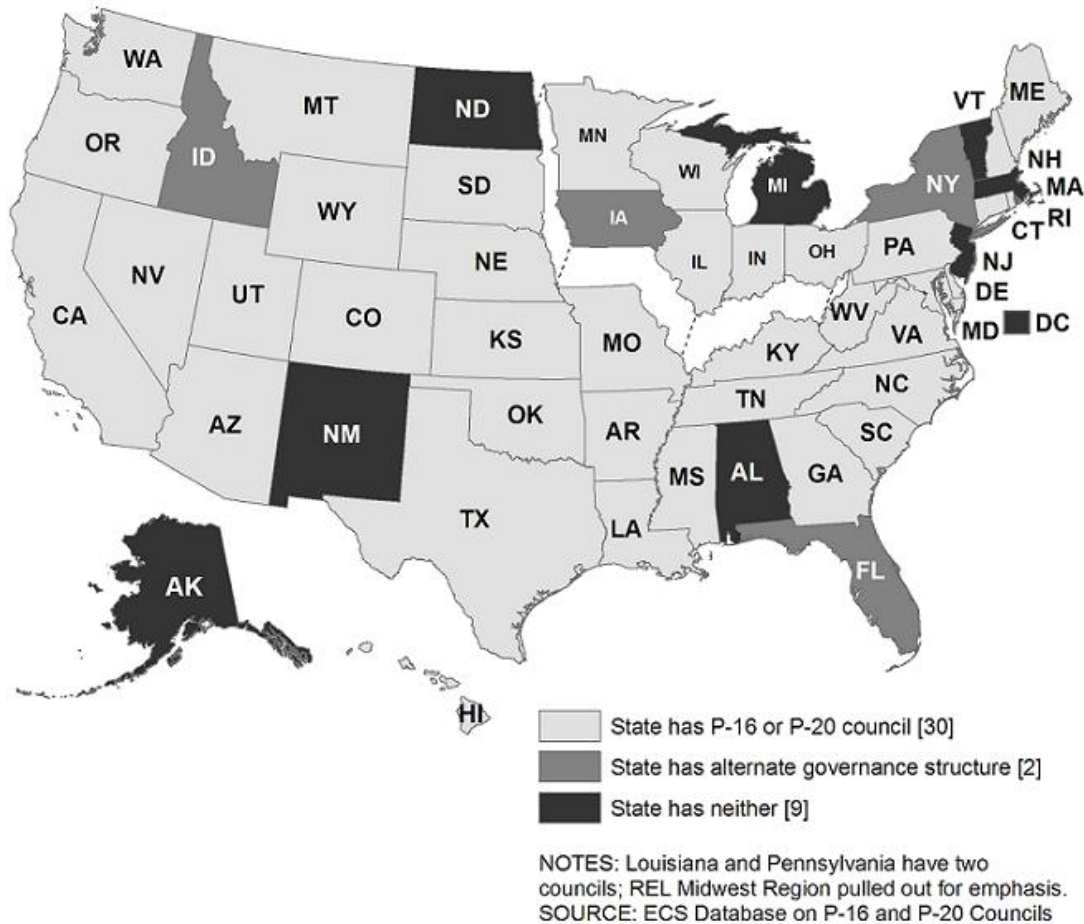
P–16 Initiatives and the Importance of Utilizing Data and Systems Thinking

One significant component of building Grades K–16 partnerships is to collect and analyze the state's data. State policymakers and SEAs that have access to student enrollment, achievement, and degree attainment data in high school and higher education are best able to examine resource allocation (which includes money, time, and personnel) and distribution. Ideally, systems are set up for tracking of student courses and test success so that this information can be compared with performance in postsecondary education. State data systems that are set up to track students beyond high school and into the workplace present multiple possibilities to use state data to inform richer policy grounded in data-driven decision making.

Despite many promising innovations among the states, no state has a fully developed, well-integrated education system extending from birth through postsecondary education. Strong goals toward a common vision of such a system, a common commitment to implement the vision, and a venue for collaborative effort are instrumental to the sustainability of P–16 coordination. Although governance and structure are important, a common vision and commitment to state policy goals are equally important. States with many different governance structures have made progress toward an integrated, well-functioning system. In these states, leadership and relationships among leaders have been most important in generating real progress toward setting and meeting well-articulated goals.

As shown in Figure 1, 38 states are engaged in some kind of P–16 active council. Twenty-nine states have councils that meet at least quarterly; only 21 states have an employee working full time on P–16 issues. Twenty-six states have secure financing to support the councils. Most P–16 councils have business and community involvement, which is important as states increasingly seek to link education to economic development.

Figure 1. State P-16 Activity



Colorado

The Colorado P-20 Education Coordinating Council was created by Governor Bill Owens' executive order in 2005 and established in 2007. Part of the council's mission is to benchmark Colorado's high school and college requirements against national research on student achievement to determine the areas in which current state standards fall short of college and workforce needs. Members also will establish standards for the knowledge and skills that students are required to gain at the postsecondary level and ensure that these standards meet the expectations of employers in the state.

Georgia

The state of Georgia was one of the early adopters of systems thinking. Since 1995, Georgia has drawn money and support for P-16 through several line items within the university system budget. In addition, the state has brought in more than \$78 million dollars in external funding to support research and development projects, including the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, which was established in 2006. This Alliance has P-16 performance goals of increasing

graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates, decreasing dropout, strengthening teaching and leadership in schools, improving SAT/ACT scores, and bolstering workforce readiness skills.

Indiana

Indiana's Education Roundtable has existed since 1998. Originally formed voluntarily, it was formalized by legislation in 1999. The ongoing goal of the Education Roundtable is to improve student achievement by focusing on academic standards and assessment. Indiana is well known for its "core 40" curriculum, which requires rigorous college preparation in high school.

Guiding Questions for Shaping a State P–16 Initiative

Common Mission and Vision

- What is the goal of the state's P–16 agenda?
- Is this goal shared by stakeholders throughout the P–16 system?

Stakeholder Collaboration

- Is there representation from early childhood, Grades K–12, and postsecondary education?
- Who else needs to be involved to realize P–16 goals?
- Are there existing education partnerships or initiatives that can be leveraged?

Policy Development

- Are there existing policies in the state that address a P–16 agenda or part of one?
- Could changes be made to these policies that would further enhance their contribution to the state's P–16 agenda?
- Which existing policies are barriers to the state's P–16 agenda?
- Can these policies be changed to meet the goals of the state's P–16 agenda?
- Should any policies be eliminated or altered?

Suggested Reading

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