

POLICY PLATFORM

K-12 EDUCATION



ACT's Policy Platform

K-12

EDUCATION





Our nation's prosperity
requires states to respond
to the challenge of **ensuring**
all students are prepared
for postsecondary education
and the workforce.



For well over a decade, ACT research has defined college readiness as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution without remediation.

In 2013, just 53 percent of high school graduates who took the ACT[®] college readiness assessment (commonly known as “the ACT”) **met at least two of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in English, reading, mathematics, or science.**¹ And although the percentage of students meeting all four Benchmarks increased slightly between 2009 and 2013, it is still only just over one in four (26 percent).

The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks reflect the standard that all high school graduates need to reach to be prepared for success in postsecondary education, work, and life.² Specifically, a student who meets the ACT College Readiness Benchmark on any of the four ACT subject-area tests **has a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher, or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher**, in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses in that subject.³

In addition, ACT research also shows that career readiness requires the same level of knowledge and skills in mathematics and reading that college readiness does: the majority of jobs that do not require a bachelor’s degree, pay a living wage for a family of four, and are projected to increase in number in the 21st century require levels of knowledge and skills in reading and mathematics comparable to those expected of first-year college students.⁴

Our nation’s prosperity requires states to respond to the challenge of ensuring all students are prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.

Driven by its mission of helping people succeed in education and the workplace, and leveraging more than 50 years of empirical evidence related to postsecondary readiness and academic achievement, ACT has identified specific opportunities to improve existing policies and craft new ones that can help improve students’ preparation for postsecondary education and the workforce.

While this platform does not cover the entire spectrum of challenges faced in K–12 education, it presents areas where ACT’s research on and experience with vital education and workforce development issues provide relevant and compelling evidence to inform policy decisions.

READINESS
in numbers



A student who meets the ACT College Readiness Benchmark on any of the four ACT subject-area tests has a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher, or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in each subject.

ACT's K-12 education policy platform focuses on three main issues:

1 Focus on Readiness for All Students

Ensure that federal policies focus on the goal of college and career readiness for all students.

2 Support the Implementation of a High School Core Curriculum and Rigorous Coursework

Ensure that all students have access to a core curriculum and rigorous high school courses.

3 Promote the Use of High-Quality Student Assessment Systems

Support policies, practices, and research toward the effective adoption and use of high-quality assessment data and other information to improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

In the following pages, each issue is explained and then followed by a set of related policy recommendations. While these recommendations are directed toward federal policymakers, greater coordination and collaboration with state legislatures, institutions of higher education, and leaders in the business and philanthropic communities are necessary to implement these recommendations in ways that achieve sustainable and systematic results.

1 FOCUS ON READINESS FOR ALL STUDENTS



Ensure that federal policies focus on the goal of college and career readiness for all students.

The promise of K–12 education in the United States is that each generation will have the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college, work, citizenship, and life after high school graduation. For years, student academic progress has been stagnant, with standards that varied from state to state and often reflected low expectations that did not translate to college and career readiness. To address this problem, a majority of states have adopted challenging academic content standards such as the Common Core State Standards or other state standards that explicitly prioritize college and career readiness as the end goal. In addition, some states have attempted to vertically align their performance targets in K–12 to college and career ready expectations that indicate whether students in early grades are on target for later success.

The implementation of higher academic standards such as the Common Core State Standards represents a watershed moment in U.S. education, and therefore serves as an opportunity for all stakeholders to develop and implement innovations that will best serve students as they respond to the higher academic expectations embedded in the Common Core and other state-developed college and career readiness standards.

ACT's research and data on college and career readiness helped establish both the general priorities and specific expectations of the Common Core State Standards. In particular, ACT's College Readiness Standards served as one of the foundations upon which the Common Core standards were based.

Once the state standards were developed and approved, states began the work of implementing them to raise expectations for what students should know and be able to do by the end of high school. A critical component of implementation is gaining an understanding of the current level of college and career readiness of today's students and using data to inform decisions aimed at increasing it.

1st RECOMMENDATION

DEFINE READINESS: *To better assess and monitor student achievement, adopt a common definition of college and career readiness.*

Supporting students' progress towards college and career readiness is a paramount goal of federal education policies from early childhood through postsecondary learning. However, there is not always common agreement among stakeholders about the definition of college and career readiness. Federal legislation should include an explicit definition representing a clear and verifiable standard of what it means to be ready for college and career, to ensure that every state, district, and school is working toward the same goal.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS STANDARDS: *Continue to support states' implementation of college and career readiness standards in K-12 education to better prepare students for college and career success.*

Many students arrive at college academically unprepared to do college-level work. As states continue to define and implement more rigorous college and career readiness standards, including the Common Core State Standards, ACT research confirms the urgent need for such standards:

- Falling short overall:** ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks indicate likely success in credit-bearing, first-year postsecondary courses in English, mathematics, science, and the social sciences.⁵ In 2013, 53 percent of students met at least two of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks on the ACT. However, just 26 percent of the 1.8 million ACT-tested high school graduates met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.
- Stark situation for underrepresented students:** In 2013, 20 percent of African American graduates⁶ and 37 percent of Hispanic graduates⁷ met at least two ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. Approximately 33 percent of low-income⁸ and 29 percent of first-generation students,⁹ respectively, met at least two Benchmarks. In comparison, 53 percent of graduates overall¹⁰ met at least two ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, and 71 percent of Asian students¹¹ met at least two Benchmarks.
- Slipping behind early:** Students who score higher on college and career readiness assessments in eighth grade are more likely to meet college and career readiness standards by the time they graduate from high school. These students also more frequently pursue and succeed in postsecondary education.¹² Meanwhile, those who fall behind college and career readiness targets in eighth grade have a very difficult time catching up. ACT research has also shown that a substantial percentage of fourth graders from all demographic groups were far off target (defined as missing target scores by more than one standard deviation) in mathematics, reading, and science, validating a need to begin the move to standards in earlier years.¹³
- Long-term lag:** In 2009, 56 percent of students met at least two ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, compared to 53 percent in 2013. This means that while the number of students who took the ACT increased, during the past four years, overall performance on this metric has decreased by 3 percentage points.¹⁴ The lag must be rapidly reversed and the pace of improvement accelerated for more students to enter postsecondary programs without needing developmental coursework.

Recent efforts incorporated by the U.S. Department of Education through the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility application process have supported states in continuing the work of transitioning students, teachers, and schools to a system aligned to college and career readiness standards. But until more students meet these higher academic standards in K-12 education, we will see the above trends persist.

PORTRAIT OF THE CLASS OF 2013

1.8 MILLION ACT-TESTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES



met at least **2** of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.



met all **4** of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.

UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS

who met at least 2 ACT College Readiness Benchmarks

AFRICAN AMERICAN GRADUATES



HISPANIC GRADUATES



LOW-INCOME GRADUATES



FIRST-GENERATION GRADUATES



3rd RECOMMENDATION

LOOK BEYOND GRADES: *The federal government should invest in supporting programs targeted at developing the academic behaviors that aid students' academic success.*

Monitoring students' academic performance is critical, but academic behaviors also contribute to student persistence and success. For example, low levels of student motivation—the interest and drive to complete their schoolwork—is one of the issues teachers struggle with most.¹⁵ If students are to be successful in meeting a core set of academic standards, they first need to be sufficiently motivated to persist at their work. The behavioral habits that contribute most directly to student postsecondary success include motivation, social engagement, and self-regulation.¹⁶ Measuring these and other academically related factors is possible, and doing so can assess risk at important points in students' academic trajectories and identify areas of need and support.¹⁷ Among these behaviors are:

- **Motivation:** Personal characteristics that help students succeed academically by focusing and maintaining energies on goal-directed activities. Middle school students with higher motivation scores earned higher grades and had higher persistence rates in high school.¹⁸
- **Social engagement:** Interpersonal factors that influence students' successful integration into their environment. Middle school students who scored high in social engagement were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities. Students who participated in more extracurricular activities had higher postsecondary retention rates.¹⁹
- **Self-regulation:** The thinking processes and emotional responses of students that govern how well they monitor, regulate, and control their behavior related to school and learning. Student self-regulation—as expressed, for example, in numbers of disciplinary events and suspensions—is an important indicator of student conduct in school.²⁰

ACT research shows that a combination of academic achievement and behavioral characteristics from middle school to college is the best predictor of postsecondary persistence and success.²¹ Students often fall short of their potential in college not because they lack the requisite intellectual capacity, but because they have not developed

behaviors and habits that would help them successfully navigate college coursework and life. Similarly, low retention and degree attainment rates observed at U.S. postsecondary institutions affirm the importance of persistence and commitment.²² Academic behaviors can contribute to general work attitudes and conduct, such as diligence on the job, persistence to task completion, cooperation, teamwork, and rule compliance; are frequently noted as critical behaviors expected by employers;²³ and are important in overall job effectiveness.²⁴ Cultivating behavioral habits that contribute to postsecondary and workforce achievement can have a noticeable impact on students' achievement and persistence levels.

4th RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION: *Encourage federal funding toward early childhood education programs from prekindergarten to third grade so that more children are ready to learn.*

Improving college and career readiness for all students needs to begin as early as kindergarten—where gaps between low-income students and their more advantaged peers already exist. Large numbers of disadvantaged students enter kindergarten behind in early reading and mathematics skills, oral language development, vocabulary, and general knowledge. Gaps also exist in the development of academic and social behaviors such as listening, following instructions, and resolving conflicts. Getting students off to a good start in the early grades is vitally important for several reasons:²⁵

- learning takes time;
- learning is cumulative;
- student interests often develop at an early age;
- the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate from high school than anything that happens academically in high school;²⁶ and
- empirical evidence shows the difficulty of catching students up in middle and high school.

Further, ACT research shows that early learning facilitates later learning—students who already know more about a topic

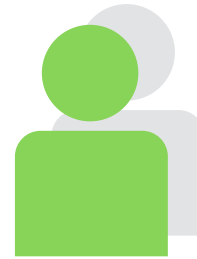
BEHAVIORAL HABITS THAT CONTRIBUTE MOST DIRECTLY TO STUDENT POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS INCLUDE:



MOTIVATION



SOCIAL
ENGAGEMENT



SELF-
REGULATION

have an easier time learning additional information about the same topic.²⁷ ACT applauds the federal government’s recent \$1.4 billion investment to support states and communities in expanding the availability of high-quality early learning and development opportunities so that more children from low-income families can develop and learn at an early age. Investment in expanding access to early learning opportunities for all students will begin to address learning gaps well before eighth grade, by which time they become much more difficult to reverse.

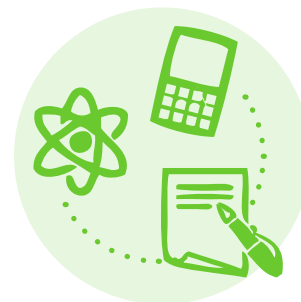
5th RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT STATES’ DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF ROBUST TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEMS: *Enable states to continue development and use of teacher evaluation systems that include multiple measures of performance—including student growth data—to identify effective teaching and focus teacher professional development and support.*

A key component in ensuring that students are ready for college and career is teacher quality. Teachers are an essential part of student learning and have long-term and substantial impact on students. But teacher evaluation systems designed

to identify effective teaching have traditionally relied on occasional, brief classroom observations by school principals or other administrators.²⁸ (One consequence of this approach is that nearly all teachers received the highest ranking, irrespective of the academic progress of their students.) Through the Race to the Top competition and ESEA flexibility waiver, the U.S. Department of Education has incentivized the development of teacher evaluation systems that move beyond classroom observations and include data on students’ growth toward college and career readiness as a component. **To help ensure that teachers have access to relevant feedback about their effectiveness at preparing all students for college and career, continued support for developing and implementing robust teacher evaluation systems that include multiple measures of performance is critical.** Such development and implementation must proceed thoughtfully and be accompanied by education and communication about the appropriate use of student growth data in these systems.

2 SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A HIGH SCHOOL CORE CURRICULUM AND RIGOROUS COURSEWORK



Ensure that all students have access to a core curriculum and rigorous high school courses.

ACT research has long documented that taking a core curriculum in high school—defined as four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies—provides benefits for academic achievement, college and career readiness, and college success. For example, high school graduates who took at least a core curriculum were more likely to meet ACT College Readiness Benchmarks than graduates who took less than a core curriculum.²⁹

But just mandating a core curriculum is insufficient—it must be accompanied by better teacher support, along with focused attention on instruction and improving academic behaviors.³⁰ Ideally, preparing students to have the necessary prerequisite skills by the time they reach high school—as well as identifying and intervening with high school students who still lack these skills³¹—will also increase the effectiveness of the high school core curriculum.

1st RECOMMENDATION

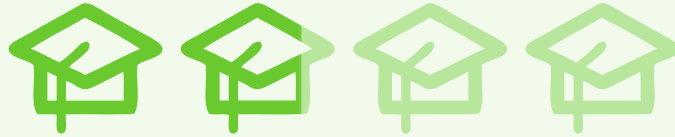
SUPPORT THE MOVE TO A HIGH SCHOOL CORE CURRICULUM: *Encourage the implementation and adoption of a rigorous high school core curriculum to better prepare students for college and career.*

In the absence of rigorous high school graduation requirements, too many students are not taking either the right number or the right kind of courses they need in order to be ready for college and career. While ACT supports the efforts of the federal government to improve high school graduation rates, more must be done to support a core curriculum that emphasizes the type and quality of courses that will move students toward college and career readiness. All states, therefore, should specify the number and kinds of courses that students need to take to graduate academically ready for life after high school. ACT research has demonstrated the benefits to student academic performance of a minimum core curriculum that includes the following:

- Four years of English
- Three years of mathematics, including rigorous courses in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II
- Three years of science, including rigorous courses in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics
- Three years of social studies

Specifically, ACT research shows that:

- Students who take the ACT-recommended core curriculum in high school achieve higher ACT scores than those who do not. **Compared to graduates who do not take the core curriculum, graduates who take the core curriculum earn composite ACT scores that are, on average, three points higher.**³²
- More than 43 percent of ACT-tested 2013 high school graduates who completed the ACT-recommended core



More than **43%** of ACT-tested 2013 high school graduates who completed the ACT-recommended core curriculum met three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.



In comparison, about **22%** of students who did not complete the core curriculum met three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.

curriculum met three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. In comparison, about 22 percent of students who did not complete the core curriculum met three or four Benchmarks.³³

- **Low-income students who completed the ACT-recommended core curriculum were twice as likely to meet three or four benchmarks than low-income students who did not complete a core curriculum.**³⁴
- Students who take the recommended core curriculum enroll in college at a higher rate than those who do not (72 percent vs. 60 percent for the total group).³⁵
- ACT-tested students who take the core curriculum in high school are less likely than those who do not to take remedial English or mathematics courses in college (10 percent vs. 16 percent for English, and 15 percent vs. 25 percent for mathematics).³⁶

- Compared to high school graduates who do not take the recommended core curriculum, graduates who take the core are more likely to be ready for workforce training programs. **In a state where all public school juniors take ACT WorkKeys®, the average Applied Mathematics score of students who took the core curriculum was higher than the Workforce Training Readiness Benchmark for Applied Mathematics**, while the average score of students who did not take the core curriculum was lower than this Benchmark.³⁷

ACT research also supports the benefits of incorporating reading expectations across the curriculum so that, as students progress through the grades, they are introduced to increasingly complex reading materials in English, mathematics, science, and social studies.

2st

RECOMMENDATION

PROVIDE MORE STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO RIGOROUS STEM COURSEWORK: *Increase support for the development of STEM-related courses for students with expressed and/or measured interests in STEM to meet the coming demand for a larger STEM workforce.*

Education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is vital to the ability of the United States to maintain its position of global leadership and economic competitiveness.

With more than 8.6 million STEM-related jobs anticipated by the year 2018, preparing and encouraging our students to pursue STEM majors and careers becomes even more important. Unfortunately, on average, ACT-tested students are struggling to succeed in STEM-related subjects—even students interested in pursuing these subjects.

While almost half (48.3 percent) of the ACT-tested high school graduating class of 2013 indicated some interest (expressed, measured, or both)³⁸ in STEM majors or occupations, too few students are meeting college and career readiness

benchmarks in these subjects. For example, only 51 percent of those students who indicated both an expressed and a measured interest in STEM met the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in science, and only 58 percent met the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in mathematics.

Given the rapid rise of STEM jobs compared to non-STEM jobs in the last ten years,³⁹ a more rigorous offering of STEM courses is critical to bridging the gaps between students' interests and preparedness and the demands of the present and future economy. Communities, states, and the federal government need to better prepare students with an increase in STEM course opportunities to meet workforce demands.

3 PROMOTE THE USE OF HIGH-QUALITY STUDENT ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS



Support policies, practices, and research toward the effective adoption and use of high-quality assessment data and other information to improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

A high-quality assessment system measures and provides timely and actionable information about student performance. High-quality assessments must strike a balance between innovation and sustainability, taking into consideration challenges faced by educators at the local and state levels: financial and human resources, access to necessary technology for computer-based testing, and educational practice. ACT subscribes to the following principles:

- A high-quality assessment system should monitor growth over a student’s educational experience, starting in elementary school and through high school, so that educators can make timely instructional decisions and interventions based on reliable information.
- Assessments should be aligned, linked, and longitudinal in nature to be an effective tool for students, teachers, administrators, and parents in monitoring student progress.
- State assessments should be mindful of and incorporate the unique accessibility needs of English Language Learners and students with disabilities and be constructed in deep consultation with experts on these populations.
- Assessment formats should vary according to the type of standards that need to be measured. These multiple measures can be used to offer more comprehensive evaluations of student achievement, from multiple-choice and constructed-response assessments to performance tasks and project-based learning.
- Assessments should be offered through multiple platforms. While computer-based testing is highly applicable to formative assessments that can be conducted on an on-demand basis, paper-and-pencil testing may be a reality for states and districts with less technological capacity. Until computer and broadband access for such large groups of students is more available in schools, both platforms must be available.
- Wherever feasible given the chosen platform, assessments should offer multiple stakeholders—especially teachers—ongoing, real-time, interactive reporting and access to assessment results and other related data.

These principles are consistent with the goals of other principles for high-quality college and career readiness assessments set forth by experts in the field. For example:⁴⁰

- Raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps.
- Transforming teaching and learning, in part through the thoughtful implementation and valid use of new assessments.
- Implementing high-quality, internationally benchmarked assessments that align to college and career readiness standards, assess deeper learning, cover the full range of cognitive complexity, and are valid and reliable for all intended uses.

1st RECOMMENDATION

ENCOURAGE VERTICAL ALIGNMENT OF STATE ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS: *Maintain federal support under ESEA for each state’s implementation of vertically aligned, high-quality, statewide assessment systems that are longitudinal, comparable, and secure to monitor student progress toward achieving college and career readiness.*

As college and career readiness standards are implemented, assessment systems must accurately measure and provide insights at various points along the continuum from kindergarten to career. ACT research has shown the importance of elementary and middle school learning and their impact on college and career readiness.^{41,42} Aligning systems to monitor student progress will assist educators in adapting instruction as well as enable them to react more quickly to student needs and better prepare students. **Identifying the levels of achievement necessary for college and career readiness is vital to ensuring that more students arrive at college prepared to do college-level work.** The new assessment systems should reflect common expectations for all students in academic achievement and academically-related behaviors while accommodating differing objectives aligned with students’ postsecondary plans, and should be used to highlight progress towards college and career readiness standards and benchmarks.

A paramount concern in developing these systems is the security of individual student data. For example, as standard policy in all its assessments, ACT encrypts all personally identifiable student information (e.g., name, address, Social Security numbers) using industry-standard practices and technologies to protect sensitive student information collected in association with test administrations. Information is used and disclosed in conformity with industry standards, as well as applicable U.S. law. Under no circumstances do students give up their rights to privacy: all data that are shared are done so in a secure and confidential manner. Following these principles minimizes the likelihood that student information may be compromised.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

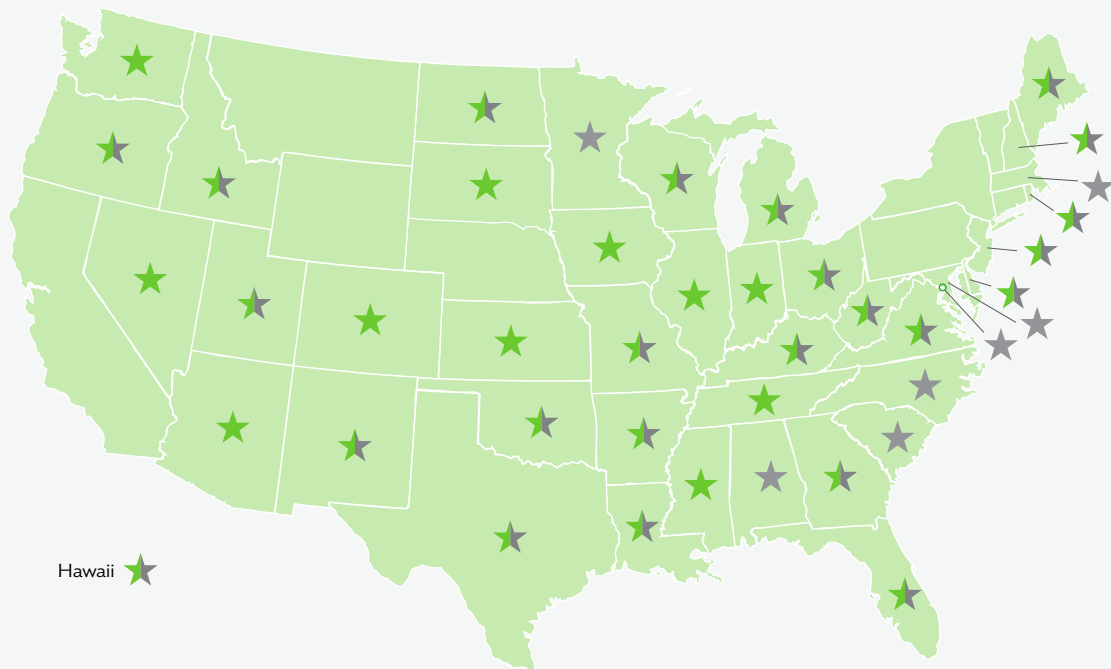
DEVELOP MONITORING SYSTEMS: *Encourage states to continue to develop and implement monitoring and early warning systems aligned to college and career readiness benchmarks that help educators identify and intervene as early as possible with students who are at risk for academic disengagement or failure.*

ACT research has shown that students who do not acquire age- and grade-appropriate knowledge and skills in the early grades, and who are off target for college and career by eighth grade, have a very small chance of getting on target in time to graduate from high school ready for college and career.^{43,44} High school often is too late to intervene with students who are off target. States and school districts must focus on student performance before high school to identify students who are not on target and take action to accelerate those students’ progress before they fall too far behind.

A monitoring system should provide an evolving picture of students over time and identify their unique learning needs at various points along their educational careers. Adoption of such systems in states where they do not yet exist—as well as further development of systems in states where they currently exist—will support earlier and therefore more effective interventions by providing teachers with information to implement the necessary next steps required to maximize student potential. **Teachers, who have been consistently identified as the most important school-based factor in student achievement, should be equipped with as much relevant data as possible to inform and supplement their efforts.**⁴⁵ The data should help to identify students in need of intervention and model student growth toward college and career readiness.

As of 2013, teachers in 35 states have access to data about students in their classrooms and 31 states produce early warning reports to identify students who are at risk of academic failure or dropping out of school.⁴⁶ But it is critical to also provide teachers with training and professional development opportunities that will assist them in interpreting and applying the data. Teachers must be given quality professional development that goes above and beyond sessions on general access and technology and must instead build on the foundation of effective data use.⁴⁷

Teachers, who have been consistently identified as the most important school-based factor in student achievement, should be equipped with **as much relevant data as possible** to inform and supplement their efforts.



35

STATES WITH
ACCESS TO DATA

about students in
their classrooms



31

STATES THAT
PRODUCE

early warning reports to
identify at-risk students





The recommendations offered
in this platform will help
establish a framework
that improves students' experience
navigating the K-12 portion of the
continuum.

ACT's mission is to help people achieve education and workplace success.

At a time when the nation's economy is quickly changing and states are gearing up to teach and assess to a higher, college- and career-ready standard, this K-12 Education Policy Platform extends that mission into the public policy arena, bringing ACT's unique experience and research in education and workforce assessment to bear on the challenge of ensuring that all students are able to progress successfully along the continuum from kindergarten through career. The recommendations offered in this platform—focus on college and career readiness for all students, ensure that all students have access to a core curriculum and rigorous high school courses, and promote the use of high-quality student assessment systems—will establish a framework that improves students' experience navigating the K-12 portion of the continuum.

To be effective, such efforts at the K-12 level must be coordinated with improvements to our postsecondary and workforce systems. This is why ACT has prepared three Policy Platforms – K-12 Education, Postsecondary Education, and Workforce Development – with related recommendations.

ALL OF ACT'S POLICY PLATFORMS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE:

www.act.org/policyplatforms

Notes

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