

Improve the quality of education for all students

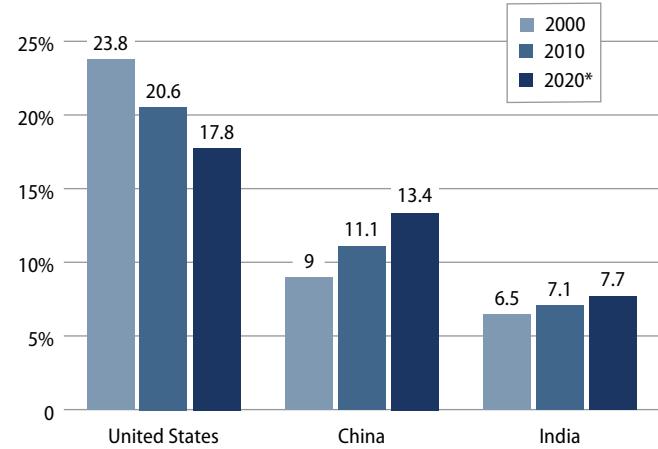
An educated workforce has long been at the heart of American economic success.

The American public school system was one of the first to focus on providing a high school education to all children and programs such as the G.I. Bill and Pell Grants have helped expand access to college. These policies helped build the greatest middle class the world has ever seen.

The United States, however, is no longer a world leader in terms of education, as our high school students score poorly compared to other countries and our college graduation lead has evaporated. Unlike many other advanced economies, the United States does not offer universal pre-school. This gap in education means that many young children do not have access to organized learning activities before age 4, although 85 percent of core brain development happens before this age.¹ Our K-12 education system is also failing students due to inequitable funding and teachers who lack support and adequate training while students have too little time in the classroom. Likewise, our higher education is in need of reform as the price of tuition continues to rise, completion rates for bachelor's degrees stagnate, and student debt reaches troubling levels.

FIGURE 5
Share of the world's college graduates

Comparing the United States, China and India, 2000 to 2020



Source: Donna Cooper, Adam Hersh, and Ann O'Leary, "The Competition that Really Matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian Investments in the Next-Generation Workforce" (Washington: Center for American Progress and Center for the Next Generation, 2012)

States can't reform the educational system top to bottom by themselves but they can take significant steps at all stages of the education system.

Establish high-quality child care and preschool for all

Background

High-quality early care and education is essential for all American children, without which children can suffer learning deficits that can last a lifetime.

Eighty-five percent of core brain development happens before age 4, establishing the foundation for a child's future health, education, and well-being.² Numerous studies show that children who have access to high-quality early education are more likely to have greater cognitive development³ and develop foundational social skills—including persistence, dealing with frustration, paying attention, and working well with others—that are the basis for later learning.⁴

Early care and education can also overcome the disadvantages associated with poverty. Research shows that an at-risk child with no access to early education is 25 percent more likely to drop out of school; 40 percent more likely to become a teenage parent; 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education; 60 percent more likely to never attend college; and 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.⁵

For those reasons, high-quality early care and preschool is a highly efficient economic investment for federal and state governments. The economic return on investment in early education routinely exceeds the payoff for remedial investments aimed at older children. As Nobel laureate James Heckman explains, “The returns to human capital investments are greatest for the young for two reasons: a) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments, and b) skill begets skills.”⁶

Improving early education is one key strategy for the United States to maintain its economic leadership. By 2020 China will provide 70 percent of its children with three years of preschool. India also plans to increase the number of children entering school ready to learn from 26 percent to 60 percent by 2018.⁷

During the last decade, states poured significantly more resources into early childhood education. States doubled their investment in pre-kindergarten from \$2.4 billion in fiscal year 2002 to \$5.4 billion between 2001 and 2010,⁸ and nationwide enrollment passed 1 million children.⁹

Yet too few American 3- and 4-year-olds have access to early education and in too many states, the programs that are available do not reach adequate educational quality. In 2011 only 4 percent of 3-year-olds and 28 percent of 4-year-olds nationwide were enrolled in early education programs,¹⁰ and many states facing budget deficits cut funding for pre-K programs in 2011.¹¹

And state investment in early care and education for infants and toddlers lags even further behind spending on preschoolers, resulting in a serious shortage of affordable, quality infant and toddler programs in most states.¹² Young, working families often find it near impossible to obtain reliable, high-quality and affordable infant and child care. Families are often forced to pay far more than what is affordable in order to provide care for their children and in 2012, 23 states either turned away or placed working families eligible for government assistance to pay for child care on waiting lists.¹³

It is critical that states return to the growing investments of the previous decade as state budgets continue to recover from the recession. And it is equally important that they apply the lessons learned from the states that are operating the most successful child care and pre-K programs.

Convert states to an integrated birth-through-12th-grade education model

Although the majority of brain development occurs before age 4, for decades our dominant school model has begun teaching children only after age 5. States, with support from the federal government, should move from a K-12 school model to a pre-K-12 school model, and work to make voluntary pre-K available to all 3- and 4-year-olds. States should also ensure that their pre-K programs are smoothly integrated with the broader early care and education system for children from birth through age 5.

Thirty-nine states have established state pre-K programs, but enrollment varies substantially. Florida (76 percent), Oklahoma (74 percent), and Vermont (67 percent) had the largest percentages of 4-year-olds enrolled in state pre-K programs in 2011.¹⁴ And New Jersey, Connecticut, and Oregon top the list in terms of state spending per child, all spending more than \$8,000 per student.¹⁵

Moving to a universal and integrated pre-K model will require new investments in public school systems to create preschool programs, but it will also require better coordination of early childhood education programs to build on the early learning gains for children enrolled in high quality child care. Administration of local

Head Start programs, for example, should move to the state level. States should prioritize an integrated approach to early care and education for children from birth to age 5, which recognizes the needs of working families for full-day, full-year services, and which improves early experiences for children of all ages.

To ensure that the early gains that children make in preschool are supported and enhanced as children transition to kindergarten and the early grades, states' expanded pre-K programs should be operated by school districts, or by community providers in partnership with school districts, where districts have a comprehensive plan and system of continuity. Research, for example, attributes the Head Start "fade out" effects—that is, how the cognitive benefits disadvantaged students gain from attending preschool often "fade out" within the first years of elementary school—documented among black children to the poor quality of schools that they disproportionately attend.¹⁶ The coordination between preschool and K-12 school systems, therefore, is critical.

Boost the accessibility and affordability of quality infant and child care

Too often working families with young children struggle to find high-quality and affordable child care. Child care assistance can help working families with the cost of child care. But in 2012, 23 states either turned away eligible children or placed them on child care waiting lists.¹⁷ Less than one out of every five children potentially eligible for child care assistance received support.¹⁸ And although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that parents spend no more than 10 percent of their family income on child care,¹⁹ the cost of center-based care for an infant exceeds 10 percent of state median income for a married couple in 40 states and the District of Columbia.²⁰

Meanwhile, the child-care and early-learning workforce—which remains a key career opportunity for many women—is among one of the lowest-paying fields.²¹ This not only hurts the early care workforce, but when worker turnover rates are high due to very low wage rates, access for working families is reduced. And most early care and early learning providers do not have access to one of the primary means available to moving into the middle class—meaningful access to union representation.

In order to build a more accessible and affordable early care and learning system, child care assistance should be expanded to serve all needy children—not the less

than 20 percent of potentially eligible children who are currently served²²—and early care and learning teachers should earn family-sustaining wages.

Even in tough economic times, states are experimenting in a number of ways to expand access to child care and raise the quality of early care and learning positions. State governments should pursue strategies to create incentives for teachers to pursue further education, as well as supplementing pay and strengthening workers' voice on the job.

North Carolina's TEACH Early Childhood Project, for example, was created in 1990 to improve the training, compensation, and turnover of their early childhood educator workforce. The program, which has now spread to 21 other states and the District of Columbia, offers scholarships to early education teachers who want to get an associate or a bachelor's degree in early childhood development.²³

In Washington the state government partnered with child care centers to establish the Washington State Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder in 2000. Under the program, participating centers agree to a career and wage ladder where teachers are compensated based on education and experience and the state supplements these wages.²⁴ Research by Washington State University finds that the program has improved quality of care, encouraged additional teacher training, reduced teacher turnover among newly hired staff, and increased teacher morale.²⁵ Other wage supplementation strategies employed by states include North Carolina's Child Care WAGE\$ project, which provides salary supplements directly to low-wage teachers, directors, and family child care providers working with children from birth to age 5.²⁶

States can also support the early childhood workforce by giving child care providers and teachers a voice at work. Research shows that where providers have reached collective bargaining agreements with the state, they have gained many benefits that stabilize the workforce and improve the quality of services.²⁷ Such an investment will not only serve to recruit and retain the best providers but will also provide children with quality services.

Establish consistent learning standards

Learning standards are fundamental to every educational program. In early education these standards establish what each child can and should be learning, including academic, social, and emotional skills.²⁸ All 50 states and the District of Columbia have standards for pre-K, but they differ widely.²⁹

States should align their pre-K standards with the Common Core State Standards, which are state-developed standards for reading and math in grades K-12 that 45 states have voluntarily chosen to adopt.³⁰

A handful of states are working toward this goal. The Maryland State Department of Education, for example, brought together educators from across the state to develop pre-K benchmarks in reading and math that used the K-12 Common Core State Standards as a reference point.³¹

[Close the gaps in universal developmental screening](#)

Early developmental screening that leads to assessment and effective intervention is inconsistently used by early childhood education and care programs. Delayed or absent screening means children with developmental disabilities are identified much later than they should be, making it more difficult to address their conditions.³² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 6 children suffer from developmental disabilities—and that number is rising—yet only a fraction of these children receive early intervention services.³³

States should close the gaps in universal developmental screening across all state-supported early learning or care programs. They need to be especially attentive during the screening of children whose first language is not English, and use uniform home language assessments, both to identify actual developmental disabilities and to guard against the overidentification of disabilities among dual-language learners.³⁴

Washington state is implementing a program that aims at universal development screening with the goal of supporting each child's development and helping to reduce the kindergarten readiness gap. Through a partnership between the state's department of early learning, department of health, and private companies, Washington is instituting a program that would initially focus on providing universal development screenings for children from birth to age 3.³⁵ The screenings will be accessible through many venues and the program will work to break down cultural barriers so that all children can receive necessary screenings.³⁶

Strengthen K-12 education

Background

Few issues are more important to strengthening America's middle class than our ability to strengthen our K-12 education system. In order to make it into the middle class, American students must graduate with the knowledge and skills to get a good job and move on to postsecondary training. Also, the nation's economy depends on our schools to create a skilled workforce that can compete for jobs in a global economy. Yet too many public schools are failing their students.

Students should be able to succeed no matter where they go to school. Yet public school quality varies tremendously within states and school districts. Too many public schools are not succeeding due to inequitable funding, teaching staff with insufficient training and support, and the lack of time spent on high-quality instruction. As a result, student performance suffers, teachers churn through schools, and dropout rates climb—and too many children leave high school unprepared.

Too often it is African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students who attend these failing schools. Many of these students scored about two grade levels behind their more advantaged peers on national reading and math assessments in 2011.³⁷

And American students are falling behind our global competition.³⁸ A 2009 study found U.S. teens ranked 25th out of 34 nations in math, while Shanghai's (China) teenagers topped the list.³⁹ And just 6 percent of U.S. students performed at an advanced level on an international exam administered by 56 nations in 2006, lower than students from 30 other nations.⁴⁰ While U.S. schools have seen some improvements in recent years, many other nations are making gains at a much faster rate. A recent study by Harvard University's Program on Education Program and Governance found that Brazil, Latvia, and Chile are making gains three times faster than American students, while many other countries were gaining twice as rapidly.⁴¹

While school reform debates often divide progressives, reform-minded policy-makers, administrators, and teachers' unions are collaborating across the country to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Ensure equitable funding to poor jurisdictions

States must put an end to persistent school funding inequity that often leaves students from high-poverty districts without the resources they need to succeed in school. Too often, state and local funding of public schools entrench rather than alleviate existing disadvantages.

Local funding—generated primarily through property taxes—allows property-rich districts to raise far more support for their schools than property-poor areas. About 40 percent of school funding is generated at the local level across the country,⁴² but in states such as Illinois and Nevada, this number is about 60 percent.⁴³

And although state tax revenue is supposed to ameliorate this inequality and provide increased funding for high-need districts, too often states fail to target state funding based on need, causing funding gaps to remain. In some cases state funding distribution methods may even exacerbate inequity in resources by providing state funding to the communities with the least need, according to a recent Center for American Progress report by Rutgers University's Bruce D. Baker and New York University's Sean P. Corcoran.⁴⁴ As a result, in 39 states, differences in per-pupil funding across districts still range by more than \$1,000.⁴⁵ To be sure, funding inequality cannot be blamed for all the problems of struggling schools, but failing to provide schools with the resources they need means that low-performing schools, which are often high poverty, may find it challenging to adopt necessary reforms.

In order to provide equal opportunity to students in high-poverty schools, state legislatures should adopt a state-centralized system of financing that allocates funding based on student need that all but eliminates local funding of schools, as Cynthia Brown, Vice President for Education Policy at the Center for American Progress, advocates for in an upcoming book.⁴⁶ School districts would be prohibited from raising more than 10 percent in additional funds. Admittedly, this would be costly and politically difficult and would require significant commitment by the state government to provide sufficient aid to backfill local contributions. Yet some states have already undertaken this approach. Local revenues generate only 3 percent of public school funding in Hawaii, which has a state centralized system, and 8 percent in Vermont.⁴⁷

At a minimum, states should implement progressive funding formulas that allocate resources through a weighted student funding system that takes into account

student needs and the local district's capacity to meet those needs. Such systems ensure the districts that spend the most are those with the greatest student needs.

States that have adopted more equitable systems of public school funding have seen results in the classroom. In New Jersey, for example, after lawmakers adopted a more equitable funding system, test scores improved and the achievement gap narrowed. Between 2003 and 2007 all New Jersey students improved their fourth-grade reading scores, and the gap between African American and white students continued to narrow through 2011. On eighth-grade math, all students in New Jersey improved between 2003 and 2011 and achievement gaps were narrowed for African American (but not Latino) students versus white students.⁴⁸

Build teacher capacity

To improve teacher quality there are a number of strategies states should pursue including:

- Strengthening professional development
- Mentoring opportunities and evaluation of teachers
- Encouraging school districts to collaborate with teachers and their representative unions when developing and implementing performance pay programs and incorporating these pay systems into comprehensive strategies to improve teacher effectiveness

Oklahoma, Nebraska, Ohio, and Indiana have passed new laws to encourage school districts to engage in various forms of compensation reform.⁴⁹ And at least 19 states have some type of performance-pay law on the books.⁵⁰

But too often these programs are treated as simply a bonus for increasing test scores rather than being incorporated into comprehensive efforts to build teacher efficacy and don't involve teachers in the development of performance metrics or programmatic design. This inhibits teacher support for these programs and reduces the likelihood that these pay programs will improve school performance.

The federal government has offered a model—the competitive Teacher Incentive Fund Program—to incentivize districts to develop performance-based compensation reforms that are linked to improvements in classroom instruction and student achievement, and are tied to high-quality educator evaluation and support

systems. Some states are using the experiences of their Teacher Incentive Fund grantees to pilot various components of their statewide educator evaluation and support systems. States can expand the use of performance-based compensation through similar incentive grant efforts.

For these efforts to have any chance of success, however, they must be sited within comprehensive human resource management systems that consider district recruitment and program needs, are tied to educator effectiveness based on student achievement (not seniority and degrees), provide for greater differentiation of teacher roles, and recognize additional responsibilities as well as service in high-need schools and subjects. These incentive grants to districts would require collaboration with teachers and their unions to create, implement, and sustain these new systems. State laws that do not align educator performance based on student outcomes and compensation policies should be revised.

Several individual school districts—including districts in Colorado, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—have collaborated with unions to develop and implement more comprehensive performance-pay partnerships. In these districts teachers are being rewarded for improving student performance, taking on additional master/mentor responsibilities, and teaching in schools that are especially difficult to staff.

In a report for the Center for American Progress, “Partnering for Compensation Reform: Collaborations Between Union and District Leadership in Four School Systems,” journalist Meg Sommerfield profiles four school systems that have created successful differential-pay systems through collaboration with teachers unions, especially the American Federation of Teachers, finding that these programs shared several common elements, including:

- A history of trust between administrators and union leaders
- A focus on joint problem solving
- A significant amount of teacher input
- A complete approach to building teacher capacity with accompanying efforts to change the way teachers are recruited, trained, developed, and evaluated
- Voluntary teacher participation
- Flexibility in program design⁵¹

Also at the local level, school districts in California, Florida, New York, Minnesota, and Ohio are partnering with local unions to enhance the level of detail in teacher evaluations, and ensuring that teachers have a role in determin-

ing review criteria and evaluating their peers.⁵² A Center for American Progress report, “Reforming Public School Systems through Sustained Union-Management Collaboration,” by Saul A. Rubinstein and John E. McCarthy at the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations, finds that these collaborative efforts have allowed school administrators and teachers’ unions to find collaborative solutions to improve student achievement and teacher quality.⁵³

To receive flexibility through the waivers provided by the U.S. Department of Education from certain provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, states are required to engage diverse stakeholders, including educator unions, in the planning, development, and implementation of new systems of educator evaluation and support.⁵⁴ In response, most states have included union representatives on statewide advisory committees, councils, and taskforces. In many states, new reform legislation has been the culmination of thoughtful discussion between state leaders and the leaders of state teachers’ unions and other key stakeholders. In some cases, for example in Michigan, this is a requirement of state law.⁵⁵ And at the local level, teachers and school administrators and school districts have worked with local unions to develop teacher evaluations that are aligned with the state evaluation framework. Recently, this reform was enacted in New Haven, Connecticut.⁵⁶ And in New York, school districts must bargain with their unions over the selection of student achievement measures for the evaluation systems.⁵⁷

Begin improving teacher recruitment and retention by obtaining firsthand feedback

Improving educational outcomes requires recruiting and retaining strong teachers. Yet approximately one-third of new teachers leave the classroom within the first three years, and as many as half leave after just five years, according to Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.⁵⁸ National surveys uncover that unsatisfied teachers often report too little preparation time, heavy teaching load, poor salary and benefits, and a lack of input into factors that affect teaching and student achievement.⁵⁹

States can improve teacher satisfaction, better understand how to recruit new teachers, and retain existing ones by surveying educators about workplace conditions and responding to their concerns. Research shows that when teachers’ needs are met, they are more likely to stay on the job and student achievement increases.⁶⁰

In 2002 North Carolina became the first state to survey its teachers on their experiences and working conditions. By 2008, 87 percent of teachers were completing this online survey, which was providing to lawmakers invaluable firsthand data at a school-specific level.⁶¹ At least nine other states have developed teacher surveys since then—including Alabama, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, and West Virginia, which developed their surveys through a partnership with the National Education Association and the New Teacher Center in 2008.⁶²

States adopting these surveys report that policymakers and activists are using the results to support the right set of education policy reforms, improve current programs, and facilitate collaboration between state and local policymakers.⁶³

Improve teacher preparation programs

Nationwide, many state teacher preparation programs are weak, the methods to evaluate them are ineffective, and too often the regulations to hold them publicly accountable are toothless. Federal law requires states to hold preparation programs accountable, but few to none use actual performance to do so. A 2010 Center for American Progress report⁶⁴ called for a stronger accountability system for teacher education programs and recommended five measures:

- A teacher effectiveness measure that reports on whether program graduates help their K-12 students to learn
- Measures of classroom teaching performance of program graduates built on reliable and valid classroom observation instruments
- Persistence rates in teaching for all program graduates, disclosed to the public for up to five years post-completion
- Feedback surveys from program graduates and from their employers
- A new system of teacher licensure testing, with the number of current tests cut by more than 90 percent, and with every state adopting the same tests and the same pass rate policies

The Obama administration's signature Race to the Top program, among its other priorities, provided support for states to improve their teacher preparation

programs, to use enhanced data to better evaluate their effectiveness, and to make those programs more transparent and accountable by releasing that data publicly. In January 2012 the Center for American Progress released a report, “Getting Better at Teacher Preparation and State Accountability: Strategies, Innovations, and Challenges Under the Federal Race to the Top Program,” that details the progress of the 2010 winners of the Race to the Top grants. The report outlines how each state is attempting to meet its commitments to improve teacher education and to strengthen public disclosure and accountability of program performance.

Policy recommendations aimed at maximizing the potential for change through the Race to the Top program, and also applicable for other states, included the need to:

- Develop high-quality state data reporting systems
- Pilot stronger measures of preparation program accountability
- Monitor state performance
- Work to close the gaps in a fragmented accountability system⁶⁵

[Extend school day and year](#)

Lengthening the school day, school week, or school year for all students in a given school can help close the academic and enrichment gap between the haves and the have-nots. Many students from low-performing, high-poverty schools have likely suffered a series of missed opportunities in the educational pipeline, including lack of high-quality preschool opportunities and highly effective teachers. They also lack access to traditional afterschool activities such as arts, service, and athletics, which enhance and enrich student learning.

To help level the playing field and capitalize on underutilized afterschool time, state governments can expand school learning time to focus on rigorous academic work and formally incorporate enrichment activities into the school day. Schools that lengthen the school year can help combat summer learning loss—a problem that disproportionately affects impoverished students⁶⁶—and address the challenge of finding child care for working families during the long summer break.⁶⁷

Research suggests that redesigning and expanding the school calendar to use learning time more wisely can close the achievement gap between low- and high-performing students. A recent analysis of charter schools in New York showed that students are more likely to outperform their peers in traditional and other

charter schools if their schools stayed open even 10 days longer.⁶⁸ A study by the American Institutes for Research of the large student achievement gains at Boston's charter schools concluded that additional learning time was essential to the success of charter schools.⁶⁹ Charter schools in the study operated for an equivalent of approximately 62 additional days of school over the course of a traditional school year.⁷⁰ In addition to improving student achievement and adding more time for enrichment activities, expanding the school calendar can provide teachers with more time for planning, preparation, and professional development, as is the case for school participating in Massachusetts's Expanded Learning Time, or ELT, Initiative.⁷¹

Lengthening the amount of time students spend in school can increase costs. Schools participating in Massachusetts's Expanded Learning Time Initiative generally add up to two hours to their school day, while also implementing comprehensive reforms to the entire school day, at a cost of \$1,300 per student, or about \$4.33 per extra student hour. But more schools are experimenting with creative staffing models, including staggering teacher schedules, and new uses of technology to expand learning time at a minimal cost. States can also make the most of their investment by prioritizing high-poverty schools, whose students are most likely to benefit from the additional time.

Make higher education and continuing education available to all

Background

Today's economy places unprecedented demands on America's higher education system. The dizzying pace of technological change requires not only the most highly educated workers in the nation's history, but a workforce that is continually adding to and diversifying its skills. Our future economic competitiveness will largely depend on whether we increase the education and skill levels of the American workforce.

Yet as demand for postsecondary education grows, the skyrocketing cost of colleges and universities puts college out of reach for millions of Americans and poses a severe threat to America's ability to meet the competitive challenge of a global economy. In 1979 a person earning the minimum wage could pay a year's tuition at a public four-year college after working about 250 hours, but today it would take

a minimum-wage worker four times as long—nearly 1,000 hours or more than six months working full time.⁷² And after adjusting for inflation, the cost of tuition, room, and board at a public university has risen 42 percent in just 10 years.⁷³

And even when students are able to access postsecondary education, too often universities and colleges do not provide sufficient support to ensure that they are successful and receive the training they need to find a good job. Yet state governments do too little to encourage in-state colleges and universities with abysmal graduation rates to improve or to match training to the high-growth industries.

As a result, the United States will soon be unable to produce the graduates we need to fill jobs in growing sectors or compete in the global economy. About 63 percent of job openings between 2008 and 2018 will require some amount of postsecondary education or skill training, but our higher education system will fall short by 3 million associate and bachelor's degrees and nearly 5 million postsecondary credentials.⁷⁴ Also, by 2030 China will have 200 million college graduates—more than the entire U.S. workforce—and by 2020 India will be graduating four times as many college graduates annually as the United States.⁷⁵

It's critical that state governments maximize opportunities for every high school student to attend and succeed in college or receive some sort of postsecondary training. And it's equally important that states optimize the choices adult workers have to continue their education to diversify the skills they will need to compete in a dynamic economy.

Ease transfers across postsecondary institutions and give credit for prior learning

According to the Department of Education, only 34 percent of college students will attend only one college while pursuing their degrees.⁷⁶ The majority will move on to a second or third institution, and consequently will need to transfer credit between institutions.⁷⁷ Also, many students returning to school after beginning their working lives have gained experience that is directly relevant to their degree programs. Too often colleges and universities do not recognize learning obtained from other institutions or in students' working lives. This needlessly drives up costs, wastes time and effort, and discourages students from continuing with their educations.

Elsewhere, fortunately, other institutions are lowering barriers that prevent students from completing college. Two strategies stand out.

First, articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions allow students a simple process to transfer credits among institutions and can establish common course requirements within popular majors across institutions.⁷⁸ Establishing articulation agreements is not expensive, and federal aid is available through programs such as the College Access Challenge Grant.⁷⁹

States should require all public colleges and universities receiving public appropriations to participate in a common statewide articulation agreement. Statewide articulation agreements should:

- Provide for a common core curriculum across all public institutions within the state, with common course numbering for core classes. This will facilitate easier transfer between schools and reduce the unnecessary waste of time, effort, and money.
- Guarantee that an associate's degree fulfills the first two years of core studies at public four-year institutions within the state. This common articulation agreement will enable students to save thousands of dollars if they choose to spend their first two years of study at a community college.

States should also be encouraged to negotiate articulation agreements with other states, which would facilitate interstate transfer.

Second, prior learning assessments allow students to save valuable time and money by earning college credit for subject matter they've already mastered through workplace experience.⁸⁰ The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning found that 56 percent of adult students using these prior learning assessments earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, compared to only 21 percent of adult students without this opportunity.⁸¹

Each state should facilitate greater use of prior learning assessments credit by creating their own statewide agency to assess prior learning and allowing students to transfer prior learning credit earned through the statewide agency to any school in the system. Vermont, for example, has successfully adopted such a system.⁸² Also, Pennsylvania has taken a step in the right direction by establishing the Pennsylvania Prior Learning Assessment Consortium, a group of commonwealth

institutions that offer various assessment opportunities and have agreed to abide by state recommended guidelines for prior learning assessments.⁸³

In addition, states should work with the federal government to ensure that federal student aid—such as Pell Grants, Stafford Loans, or Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits—is eligible to pay for prior learning assessment portfolio evaluation courses through their statewide system of prior learning assessment, as long as subsequent credits are accepted at all public colleges and universities in the system.

[Ensure students have the technical skills they need to succeed in the workplace](#)

States can help provide good jobs and strengthen regional economies by helping to build training partnerships between community colleges and industry.

High-growth industries such as health care, biotech, nanotech, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing provide the promise of good paying, middle-skill careers for millions of American workers. Yet these positions too often go unfilled today due to lack of qualified workers, and we are on pace to encounter a shortage of nearly 5 million of these sorts of middle-skill workers by 2018.⁸⁴

In order to access these jobs, workers need to acquire technical skills through an associate degree or industry-recognized postsecondary credential.⁸⁵ Community college systems have the ability to train workers to fill these positions, but too often lack the funding or key industry relationships.

States should provide funding and help build partnerships between industry and community colleges to align business needs with community college curricula, so industry knows that community college graduates will be trained to meet their needs, and so students will know that they will have a job available to them upon graduation or certification. States should use a portion of their federal workforce training funds—while also requiring 50 percent matching funds from the private sector—to develop these alternative postsecondary education and training programs that are tightly linked to local or regional economic development.

After the United Parcel Service, Kentucky’s largest employer, for example, threatened to relocate in 1996, the state partnered with the company and a local community college to help upgrade workforce skills. Through collaboration these groups created Metropolitan College, which allows UPS workers to work

part time and obtain a postsecondary degree tuition free—tuition costs are split between UPS, the state, and local government. In the first decade of Metropolitan College operations, the number of UPS workers with a postsecondary degree grew from 8 percent to 45 percent, and annual turnover rates fell from 100 percent for new hires at the company in 1998 to just 20 percent in 2009.⁸⁶

Also, more than 15 states have purchased licenses for analytic tools to study the needs expressed by industry in online job ads, to uncover mismatches between labor market demand and college skills training, and to make programmatic decisions based on that data.⁸⁷

Require colleges to provide consumer information via college “nutrition labels”

Average student debt loads at colleges can range from \$950 to \$55,250 and graduation rates range from 6 percent to 92 percent.⁸⁸ Yet many students are unaware of these differences in part because colleges are free to determine the information they provide to students, which means they are likely to exclude embarrassing information that may reflect poorly on the school.

State governments should require public colleges and universities to provide pertinent information to prospective students concerning their likelihood of graduating, finding employment, and paying off student debt. And states should encourage in-state private schools—both nonprofit and for-profit—to provide this information by making compliance a condition of the authorization process to operate in the state or tying compliance to receipt of student financial assistance payments.

Just like with nutrition labels on food, this information should be provided through a standardized college fact card that is used by all colleges and universities.⁸⁹ Schools should be required to place this standardized college fact card on all promotional materials and on the front page of school websites to allow students to easily compare schools. An adequate college fact card should include a standard format to communicate easy-to-understand information on:

- Graduation rates
- Average out-of-pocket costs net of grant aid
- Average student debt and average monthly payments to pay off student debt in 10 years

- Employment rates and average salary one year after graduation for recent graduates

The effectiveness of the college nutrition label relies upon it being accessible and easy to find. Requiring the college label to be posted on college websites, enrollment forms, financial aid paperwork, offer letters, and other promotional materials will make it visible enough to grab the attention of applicants.

Protect students from failing colleges and universities

State governments should protect students from poorly performing schools by preventing failing public, nonprofit, and for-profit colleges and universities from receiving state-level student aid and upholding strong oversight in the state authorization process.

This problem has been particularly acute among for-profit colleges and universities in recent years. An increasing number of American students are choosing for-profit colleges and universities, as enrollment in these institutions grew by 225 percent between 1998 and 2008.⁹⁰ Yet too often, high-cost private, for-profit colleges fail to deliver positive outcomes for students.

For-profit schools, for example, graduated 22 percent of their first-time, full-time students from their bachelor's degree programs on average in 2008, compared to 55 percent of such students at public institutions, and 65 percent at private non-profit schools, according to a 2010 report by The Education Trust.⁹¹ And graduates at for-profit schools paid a much higher price for their degrees. The median debt load of bachelor's degree recipients from for-profit schools was \$31,190—nearly two times that of graduates of private nonprofit institutions (\$17,040) and more than three and a half times that of graduates of public colleges (\$7,960).⁹²

Yet many of the problems associated with for-profit universities are due to lax state and federal regulation of all colleges and universities. By raising standards for all public, nonprofit, and for-profit universities that the universities must meet in order to receive state support and operate within the state, state governments can go a long way toward ensuring students choosing for-profit schools receive good value for their investment.

California has moved in the right direction—its 2012–2013 state budget ties

eligibility to the state's Cal Grant loan program to student loan default and graduation rates.⁹³ In order to qualify, the new law requires colleges to have a graduation rate of at least 30 percent and a maximum default rate of 15.5 percent. California's Legislative Analyst's Office expects that for-profits that will be excluded from receiving grants due to poor performance will account for more than 80 percent of the sector's total enrollment in the state.⁹⁴

State governments can also uphold high standards through university and college authorization requirements. In order to operate within a state, all institutions must receive the state's authorization. This includes online universities that should be authorized in every state in which their students reside. Yet many states have turned a blind eye to online universities that are out of compliance with this requirement in recent years.

In order to encourage compliance, the federal government recently enacted regulations tying an institution's receipt of state authorization and compliance with any "State requirements for it to be legally offering distance or correspondence education in that State" to the ability of students from that state to be eligible for federal financial aid to attend the school.⁹⁵ While this regulation is currently being litigated, states should use this opportunity to uphold high standards in their authorization standards.

In order to do so, several states are joining together in a State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement, being convened by the National Center for Interstate Compacts (a policy program developed by Council of State Governments to assist states in developing interstate compacts), The Presidents Forum (an organization that promotes online colleges and universities), and the Lumina Foundation (the nation's largest foundation dedicated exclusively to increasing students' access to and success in postsecondary education). The agreement will allow states to recognize online universities' and colleges' authorization from states that uphold similarly high standards and ease the administrative burden on online schools of meeting compliance requirements in every state in which they operate.⁹⁶ Concurrent with these efforts, state governments should also aggressively seek out schools operating without authorization.

Develop public online higher education options

Students are increasingly relying on online universities in order to fit postsecondary training into their working lives. For-profit universities were the pioneers in providing flexible, online education options, but a number of states have introduced innovative online options that provide high-quality, low-cost options for students.

States should establish an exploratory committee or fund state university governing boards to consider how to facilitate the formation of an online public university that would provide a high-quality and affordable option for in-state students. These committees should investigate how student and industry needs could be met by a public online option, how best to situate an online university within the existing state system, and regulatory and legal changes—including changes to the state's accreditation and financial aid requirements—to facilitate program formation. In addition, state governments should identify open courses that are equivalent to existing college courses and develop a process for students to use these online programs and courses to earn college credit.

Western Governors University is an online, nonprofit university supported by 19 state governors that now serves more than 19,000 students.⁹⁷ Supporters of the private nonprofit university laud it both for its affordability—tuition is \$5,800 annually—and its innovative performance-based model, which allows students to earn credit based on demonstrated competencies. In 2012 Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels signed an executive order to partner with the school to create WGU Indiana, which will offer fully accredited bachelor's and master's degree programs.⁹⁸ WGU Indiana will operate without direct state funding and be self-sustaining on tuition.

Similarly, Maricopa County, Arizona, has created the primarily online Rio Salado College, which offers associate degrees and delivers course offerings to nearly 63,000 students. Rio Salado College has partnered with corporations, government agencies, and other educational institutions to offer more than 600 online courses and 60 certificate and degree programs as well as in-person and hybrid classes throughout the region.⁹⁹

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