

Rigorous Learning for All Students

Use this advocacy guide to urge your state, district, and school leaders to address inequities within and across schools related to the curriculum (what students are learning, the materials used, and teacher instructional practices), course-taking, and use of time.

What we know

- **Curriculum matters.** What students learn in school is crucial to their future. Every student deserves a rich, well-rounded, and rigorous curriculum in order to be prepared for the college or career of their choice. Typically, every district chooses their own curriculum, which creates wide differences in what students learn and are able to do. However, state adoption of college- and career- ready standards and investments in making evidence-based curricula and professional development available to districts can help close opportunity gaps.
- **Course-taking matters.** The path to college and career readiness requires students to take rigorous courses in a sequenced manner. Often, students of color and low-income students attend schools that do not offer advanced courses. And when those courses are offered, students of color and low-income students are frequently not encouraged — even discouraged — to enroll. Students who do manage to enroll in these courses, meanwhile, are not always given the support they need to succeed. Every student needs access to and support for success in high-demand courses that will prepare them for both college and careers. State policies on resource equity and graduation requirements can powerfully impact opportunity gaps.
- **Use of time matters.** Effective use of time is essential for maximizing student learning. How schools and teachers use time during the school day can determine the amount of instruction students receive, students' level of engagement in that learning, and time on task. Innovative scheduling can provide teachers and students with opportunities to maximize their use of teaching and learning time. Determinations about use of time are typically handled at the building level within parameters set by the state and or district.

Advocacy guide roadmap

This guide offers advocates information on what states, districts, and schools can do to improve students' access to rigorous teaching — and what advocates can do to try to spur and speed those efforts. It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask** about the curriculum, access to college- and career-ready coursework, and how leaders and teachers use time to maximize adult and student learning
- **Examples** of states and districts that are rising to the challenge of ensuring that: every student receives a standards-aligned, high-rigor curriculum; schools use time effectively to maximize adult and student learning; and students are placed in challenging, engaging courses that meet their needs.
- **Additional resources** for advocates to learn more about curriculum, use of time, and course-taking.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

1. What interventions have school leaders tried in the past and what were the results?
2. Why do district or school leaders think the proposed intervention will work?
3. How will district or school leaders plan for and implement the intervention?
4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?
5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

▶ QUESTIONS TO ASK *state, district, and school leaders*

Curriculum decisions are often made at the district level, which can create wide differences in what students learn and are able to do. Ask these questions to your district leaders, but you may need to ask some questions to state or school leaders depending on your context.

Curriculum

We define curriculum as the content students learn, coupled with the materials used to foster learning, aided by careful instruction.

1. How are your curriculum and instructional materials in English Language Arts (ELA) and math aligned to the state's college- and career-ready (CCR) standards?

Look for:

- External review and endorsement of purchased or district-created curriculum and materials that shows how resources are aligned and meet the demands of CCR standards (e.g., [EdReports](#))
- Examples of trained educators being involved in review of instructional materials and standards
- Coherent and accessible documents showing the links between state standards and the instructional materials being used
- Supplemental resources (e.g., reading and writing materials, math tools) used to address alignment gaps in core curriculum resources

Watch out for:

- Relying on publisher guarantees of alignment and rigor in instructional resources
- Broad assurances of curriculum alignment without evidence (e.g., "Our materials are fully aligned to rigorous standards.")

2. How do the curriculum and instructional materials reflect the cultures and backgrounds of your students?

Look for:

- Active efforts to ensure that instructional materials, texts, and classroom tasks reflect the cultures and backgrounds of students
- Curriculum resources that include diverse authors and texts that are inclusive of all students
- Ongoing professional learning to support teachers in avoiding using materials in ways that perpetuate cultural, religious, and gender stereotyping

Watch out for:

- Unwillingness to discuss or indifference to a lack of cultural diversity in curriculum and instructional resources
- Statements like, "We only teach the classics." "Our curriculum is set."
- A single, discrete unit or lesson meant to address an entire culture or group

3. In what ways do assignments reflect the high expectations demanded by the state's college- and career-ready standards for all students, including students with disabilities and English learners?

Look for:

- Assignments that are aligned to the state's CCR standards, push student thinking to higher levels, provide an opportunity for writing, and are made relevant to students' lives
- Tasks that are appropriately supported to meet the needs of all students, especially students with disabilities and English learners
- Professional learning to develop teachers' knowledge and skills in the area of developing high-quality assignments
- Well-rounded curriculum with access to science, social studies, CTE, and other courses available for all students

Watch out for:

- Limited or no professional learning addressing the need for teachers to be able to identify and enhance low-level tasks
- Lack of understanding that teachers often modify tasks, which can have a positive or adverse effect depending on what changes are made

4. How do your teachers increase rigor for students who perform at the upper end of the achievement spectrum, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) who demonstrate high academic potential? What supports are in place to ensure students below grade level are taught to grade-level standards?

Look for:

- Attention to increasing rigor for high-achieving students, especially high-achieving low-income students and students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners
- Ongoing professional development opportunities that provide educators with strategies for increasing rigor and using supports to meet the needs of all students
- Opportunities for advanced coursework offerings (secondary level) or enrichment (elementary level); use of in-class strategies such as small group instruction that meets the needs of high-achieving students
- Lesson planning templates that prompt teachers to describe how they will challenge high-achieving students and support students who are below grade level

Watch out for:

- No recognition of SWDs and ELs as able to be part of advanced learning opportunities
- Assurances that all students are engaging with high-rigor materials

5. How are assessment results used to address students' academic needs?

Look for:

- A variety of formal and informal assessments that provide actionable, unique, and timely data on student progress
- Ongoing, varied assessment data is used to guide differentiated instructional practices to meet the needs of all students.
- Opportunities for students to have ownership of learning goals and outcomes (e.g. student-led conferences)

Watch out for:

- Frequent testing that does not produce timely, unique, and actionable data
- Overuse of state-level assessment data as tools for accountability rather than for ongoing daily learning improvement
- Relying solely on lagging data from annual state-wide assessments

A state that is rising to the challenge

Recognizing the need to support teachers in helping students meet recently adopted college- and career-ready standards, the [Louisiana Department of Education](#) is improving student learning through access to high quality, standards-aligned curriculum. The state acquired and developed high-quality, standards-aligned curricula, free to districts, and invested in professional learning to support teachers as they adopted new standards and curriculum. The state also [requires](#) districts to adopt a standards-aligned curricula and eliminate all low-quality curricular resources to have their improvement plan under ESSA approved.

Course-taking

Decisions about course-taking happen at various levels. States determine graduation requirements and districts and schools determine course sequencing, scheduling, and other related matters.

1. Are all students (especially students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English learners) expected to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum that aligns with the minimum standards required by your state's higher education institutions?

Look for:

- All students are automatically assigned into a college- and career-ready pathway that includes the necessary coursework for post-secondary success
- Clear and accessible communication to students and families about course requirements and how diploma options will prepare them for and give them access to post-secondary opportunities
- The district's college- and career pathway meets the minimum requirements for entry into the state's higher education institutions
- School has full-time school counselors (with reasonable student loads) who can, among other things, regularly review student progress toward course requirements and communicate with students, families, and teachers to make adjustments where needed

Watch out for:

- Choice whether or not to participate in a college- and career-ready pathway left to families/students with no guidance from school
- Disproportionate number of low-income students or students of color placed on a pathway that does not lead to a CCR diploma
- Students who complete the college- and career-ready pathway still require remediation in college
- [Lack of knowledge or transparency regarding courses that state colleges requirement for admission](#)

2. What will you do to increase participation and success in advanced courses (e.g. Honors, AP/IB, dual enrollment) and programs (e.g., work-based learning for 21st century careers) that maximize the range of options available to students after high school, especially for your most vulnerable students?

Look for:

- A school culture in which all students are encouraged to participate and excel in advanced coursework
- Concerted and varied family/community outreach explaining processes for identification into gifted and talented programs (elementary school) and opportunities/benefits of advanced-level classes and coursework (secondary)
- Open enrollment to advanced classes for all interested students or access based on multiple measures (e.g., academic performance, placement assessments, teacher recommendation, student/family input)
- Systems of support for students enrolled in advanced courses to ensure success

Watch out for:

- A disconnect between district and school policies and teachers' beliefs regarding students' abilities
- Barriers to participation in advanced coursework (e.g., over-reliance on a single measure to determine entry)
- Gaps in participation and success in advanced coursework for particular groups of students
- Limited family/community outreach
- Limited or no systems of support for students in advanced courses who may need extra help

3. How are course failures addressed to ensure that students remain on track for graduation and college- and career- readiness?

Look for:

- Early warning systems in place to identify students who may be in danger of failing, including early and ongoing communication with students and families; opportunities for extended support at no additional cost to families
- Opportunities for students to retake courses or make-up coursework that maintains rigorous college- and career-ready academic standards
- Supports for students experiencing unforeseen life events that may contribute to academic struggle
- Systematic review of data on course failures to uncover possible patterns along racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and course/subject lines with processes for addressing and fixing disparities

Watch out for:

- No clear system for alerting families and students about potential course failures or inadequate time to get students on track
- Credit recovery systems that do not maintain course rigor and prevent students from moving in other course sequences
- Unwillingness to review or address potential disparities in course failures

4. What will you do to increase access to a rich curriculum, including courses in social studies, science, the arts, etc., that lead to a well-rounded education?

Look for:

- A well-rounded and balanced offering of courses that allows students to complete core academic classes alongside courses in other areas of interest
- Time devoted to enrichment classes and activities that expand students' educational experiences and boost engagement in school
- [Innovative scheduling](#) that maximizes course-taking (e.g., block scheduling, rotating schedules)

Watch out for:

- Offering no or limited courses outside of core academic classes
- Master scheduling that prevents students from taking non-core academic classes while meeting graduation requirements
- Allowing budget restrictions to solely drive decision-making on non-core academic course offerings

Use of Time

Decisions on how leaders and teachers use daily time are frequently handled at the school building level, with the districts usually determining the school calendar, and states determining the length of the school year.

1. How is the school schedule structured to allow educators sufficient time for collaborative planning, data analysis, and professional learning that helps them to support all students?

Look for:

- Teachers to have [common planning time to collaborate](#), discuss student data, and plan with their grade-level or subject area teams
- Schedules that provide opportunities for extended time for staff collaboration (e.g. by releasing students early one day each week)
- Differentiated professional learning to meet the individual needs of teachers

Watch out for:

- Teachers having to use personal time for planning and collaboration
- Substantial amount of collaborative time focused on issues not related to student performance

2. How is instructional time structured to maximize student learning?

Look for:

- Existing instructional time — within the school day and school year — is maximized with learning opportunities that keep students engaged (e.g. building/classroom routines, minimal classroom disruptions)
- Rotating [schedules](#) to allow scheduling flexibility and keep a particular class or content area from being at the same time each day
- Full-day kindergarten program, especially for low-income students and students of color
- [Later](#) start schedule (e.g., starting after 8:30 am) for middle and high schools

Watch out for:

- Large blocks of time in which instruction is not taking place (e.g., beginning/end of day or period, last month of year)
- Inflexible scheduling of courses or content area instruction

3. In what ways does your schedule allow teachers to meet the needs of students who may require additional support, without removing those students from classes/courses such as music, art, etc.?

Look for:

- Students who need extra supports have time built into their day without requiring they miss elective courses/classes (e.g., physical education, career technical education, etc.)
- Students receive extra supports within their academic courses or classes from the classroom teacher and other support staff
- Afterschool and summer learning opportunities and programs aligned to college- and career-ready standards

Watch out for:

Students only receive extra support:

- By being removed from the classroom
- At the expense of participation in other courses (e.g., art, music) or break time (e.g., lunch, recess)

4. How are determinations made to provide extended learning opportunities (e.g. after-school, summer school)?

Look for:

- Decisions on when and how to extend learning are based on student data (assessments, student interest surveys, etc.)
- Variety of academic and social offerings, which may include teacher- and/or student-developed learning clubs/activities
- Extended learning opportunities that take advantage of community partnerships and offerings

Watch out for:

- Extending learning only for remediation in math and English language arts
- Academic and social offerings not based on student or teacher input
- Extended learning is viewed as a catch-all when existing time is not maximized
- Extended learning options are cost-prohibitive

A school that is rising to the challenge

When Sergio Garcia became principal of [Artesia High School](#) in Los Angeles, he took advantage of one of the biggest levers of change available to a principal: the master schedule. He put all students who had been scheduled for “basic math” in Algebra I, and assigned some of the students — those with lower math scores — into a second math support class. By increasing students’ access to rigorous math courses, building in common planning times for teachers to plan and learn together, and providing additional supports to help students meet the high expectations set for them, Artesia High School has seen increasing achievement in both English and math for all students.

How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to compel state, district, and school leaders to focus on access to rigorous learning?

Improvement Plans: Under ESSA, school improvement plans for Comprehensive and Additional Targeted Support schools have to include evidence-based strategies for addressing the needs of the school. Advocates — who district and school leaders should consult under ESSA’s stakeholder engagement requirements — can push for these plans to prioritize improving curriculum, the use of adults’ and students’ time, and access to rigorous coursework.

Funding: Under ESSA, districts must engage with stakeholders in developing their applications to the state for Title II, Part A funds to improve teacher and leader quality, Title III funds to support language instruction for English learners, and the optional 3% Title I “set-aside” for direct student services. Advocates can urge district leaders to target these funds to improve instruction in schools identified for improvement. They can also encourage district leaders to apply to the Literacy Education Grant Program, which provides funding for evidence-based literacy instruction, with a focus on English Learners, students with disabilities, and students who are behind.

Additional resources

Curriculum: For the past six to seven years, states and districts have been working to adopt college- and career-ready standards. These resources provide additional information on standards:

EdReports is an independent non-profit organization, which uses evidence-based reviews of instructional materials to support educators in making decisions about educational resources.

The Hidden Value of Curriculum Reform is a report from the Center for American Progress on how curricula are selected in every state across the country and examines the costs of various curricula. The report demonstrates that curriculum change can be a low-cost effort towards school improvement.

Course-Taking: Use the resources below to learn more about how schools can ensure every student has access and is assigned to a high-rigor course in preparation for college- and career-readiness.

Systems for Success: Thinking Beyond Access to AP This Ed Trust report highlights how schools can increase enrollment and success in advanced placement courses for underserved students.

How the States Got Their Rates: 2015 Graduates For this report, Achieve analyzed 95 diploma options across the country and looked at which states expected students to take courses that would best prepare students for college- and career.

Meandering Toward Graduation: Transcript Outcomes of High School Graduates This Ed Trust report highlights the need for high school students to have a clear course pathway that will lead to college- and career-readiness upon graduation.

Use of Time: The resources below highlight ways schools can use time to effectively maximize student learning.

Reimagining the School Day This report from the Center for American Progress provides examples of schools from across the country who have implemented innovative school schedules to improve instruction and ensure teachers have ample time to teach, prepare lessons, and to develop their craft.

National Center on Time and Learning is an organization focused on expanding and improving learning time in school to improve student achievement and promote a well-rounded education.

School Design: Strategic Scheduling This checklist from Education Resource Strategies is designed to address critical areas to consider regarding school scheduling. Use this tool to engage in discussions about how school leaders can think strategically about how they structure time.