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An Analysis of College and Career Readiness Emphasis in ESSA State Accountability Plans

Donald G. Hackmann
Iowa State University

Joel R. Malin
Miami University



Debra D. Bragg
University of Washington
United States

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Abstract: This study examined the extent and manner in which college and career readiness (CCR) is emphasized in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state accountability plans. We analyzed 52 plans (50 states, DC, Puerto Rico) using frameworks developed by Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer, and Roc (2016) and Dowd and Bensimon (2015). Findings disclose significant variation, with CCR featuring prominently in some plans and receiving cursory mention in others. Most states identified CCR components as part of their school quality or student success indicators but few used ESSA to restructure their state initiatives to address persistent inequities. Even states making CCR a central feature typically applied color-blind approaches, addressing CCR

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for all students rather than developing CCR plans to address inequitable outcomes for student subgroups.

Keywords: education reform; Every Student Succeeds Act; college and career readiness; accountability; equity

Un análisis de la preparación universitaria y profesional en los planes estatales de ESSA para la rendición de cuentas

Resumen: Este estudio examinó el alcance y la forma en que se enfatiza la preparación universitaria y profesional (CCR) en los planes estatales de rendición de cuentas de la Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Analizamos 52 planes (50 estados, DC, Puerto Rico) utilizando marcos desarrollados por Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer y Roc (2016) y Dowd y Bensimon (2015). Los resultados revelan una variación significativa, con CCR ocupando un lugar destacado en algunos planes y recibiendo mención superficial en otros. La mayoría de los estados identificaron los componentes de CCR como parte de sus indicadores de calidad escolar o de éxito estudiantil, pero pocos utilizaron ESSA para reestructurar sus iniciativas estatales para abordar las desigualdades persistentes. Incluso los estados que hacen de la CCR una característica central suelen aplicar enfoques homogeneizados que abordan la CCR para todos los estudiantes en lugar de desarrollar planes de CCR para abordar resultados desiguales para los subgrupos de estudiantes.

Palabras-clave: reforma educativa; Every Student Succeeds Act; preparación universitaria y profesional; rendición de cuentas; equidad

Uma análise da faculdade e da prontidão profissional nos planos estaduais da ESSA para prestação de contas

Resumo: Este estudo examinou a extensão e a maneira pela qual a faculdade e a prontidão para a carreira (CCR) são enfatizadas nos planos estaduais da Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) para prestação de contas. Analisamos 52 planos (50 estados, DC, Porto Rico) usando estruturas desenvolvidas por Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer e Roc (2016) e Dowd e Bensimon (2015). As descobertas divulgam variações significativas, com a CCR apresentando destaque em alguns planos e recebendo menção superficial em outros. A maioria dos estados identificou componentes da RCC como parte de seus indicadores de qualidade escolar ou de sucesso dos alunos, mas poucos usaram a ESSA para reestruturar suas iniciativas estaduais para tratar das desigualdades persistentes. Mesmo os estados que fazem da CCR um recurso central geralmente aplicam abordagens homogeneizadas abordando a CCR para todos os alunos, em vez de desenvolver planos de CCR para abordar resultados desiguais para os subgrupos de estudantes.

Palavras-chave: reforma educacional; Every Student Succeeds Act; prontidão para faculdade e carreira; prestação de contas; equidade

Introduction

Enacted in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a prominent focus on college and career readiness (CCR) not contained in prior Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) reauthorizations (Malin, Bragg, & Hackmann, 2017), reflecting an ongoing policy drive in the United States to improve K-12 students' preparation for college and the workforce (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). ESSA embraced the Obama administration's goal that high school students "should graduate...ready for college and a career, regardless of their income, race, ethnic or language background, or disability status" (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2010, p. 3), and it cleared both chambers of the U.S. Congress with broad bipartisan support. The law then required states to submit their plans to USDE in 2017. These plans were to be of special significance given that ESSA codified a considerable—and perhaps monumental—devolution of authority from the federal to the state level (Black, 2017). How, we and others wondered, would the states respond?

As part of these plans, state educational agencies (SEAs) were obliged to address CCR and equity, using a template created during the Obama administration based upon the USDE's categorization and integration of ESSA components into six sections: long-term goals; consultation and performance management; academic assessments; accountability, support, and improvement for schools; supporting excellent educators; and supporting all students (USDE, n.d., p. 2). After the 2017 transition to the Trump administration and appointment of Education Secretary DeVos, the federal government announced new guidelines and USDE produced a revised template (USDE, 2017) that eliminated the six components, instead asking states to articulate their program plans addressing requirements related to Titles I, II, III, IV, V, and VII contained in ESSA. This Trump administration template substantially decreased the focus on CCR and equity contained in the previous template, although both templates required states to list student subgroups and to identify academic achievement indicators, including graduation rate goals, progress in achieving English Language Proficiency, and school quality or student success. Whereas the original template contained several references to CCR, including academic standards, career and technical standards, career and technical education (CTE) postsecondary transitions, the revised template eliminated such references, with the exception of a brief mention in a section on homeless students. Similarly, the revised template removed nearly all references to equity, except for an expectation to provide equitable access to teachers.

Given the priorities of ESSA under the Trump administration, it is important to examine whether states have committed to CCR in their plans and how they propose to address persistent concerns about equity. To this end, we consider equity in conjunction with state accountability plans for ESSA implementation, motivated by our awareness of long-standing inequities in college access, opportunities, and outcomes related to race as well as to gender, income, and other characteristics associated with college and workforce attainment (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Building on our earlier review of ESSA CCR-focused provisions (Malin et al., 2017), we analyze all ESSA accountability plans to determine the extent and ways in which states address ESSA CCR goals, including in relation to facilitating students' equitable access and participation.

Our research was guided by an educational accountability framework developed by Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer, and Roc (2016) and an equity framework created by Dowd and Bensimon (2015). The research questions for the study follow:

1. To what extent and in what ways is CCR addressed in the state plans?
2. What CCR indicators do states identify to track in their accountability plans, and how do the plans attempt to address equity, if at all?

3. Looking across the subset of state plans that recognize equity in any way, what student subpopulations are identified and how are they addressed?

This paper begins by providing an overview of the literature on CCR, addressing national trends and noting its growing prominence in education policy over the last decade. Next, we present the conceptual framework and describe our research methods. Then, we present our findings, noting how CCR and equity as conceived in state plans for CCR are presented in ESSA accountability plans. In the discussion section, we characterize the overall status of the ESSA state plans and we connect our findings to extant research related to CCR and equity.

Literature Review

The economic strength and international competitiveness of the United States relies considerably on workforce quality. Despite a strong economic recovery since the Great Recession, the labor market requires well-trained adults to fill the estimated two million job vacancies lacking qualified applicants (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). The pathway from high school graduation and into the workforce increasingly requires postsecondary education, including 2- and 4-year college degrees and industry-recognized certificates, as nearly all job growth in the US since 2011 is occurring in high- and middle-skills occupations (Carnevale et al., 2016). Yet, access to college and results for those who enroll in college are not distributed equitably by race/ethnicity. In 2019, states' postsecondary attainment rates (including degrees and postsecondary credentials) ranged from 36.4% to 65.4%; nationwide, attainment for African-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics was lower than for Asian-Americans and Whites (Lumina Foundation, 2019). In addition, the wealth gap is growing between Whites and populations of color (Killewald & Bryan, 2018).

Whereas ESSA names both college *and* career as important, national dialogue has focused primarily on college (see, for example, Kreamer, O'Hara, & Curl, 2014). At the local school level, high school principals and their faculties can experience tensions when enrollments in academic (e.g., English, math, science, social studies) courses are promoted over CTE courses (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Stone, 2013), even though federal legislation in the 2018 reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act requires CTE programs of study to include both academic and career-focused coursework. This legislation encourages policymakers and educators to integrate academic and technical curriculum—again, reflecting an emphasis on college *and* career—recognizing the substantial overlap in knowledge and skills required for college academic success and employment performance and career progression.

One aspect of CCR involves college-and-career standards that build on states' previous efforts to establish K-12 education standards. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) enacted during the George W. Bush administration, states operated autonomously to create academic standards and assess students' attainment relative to those standards, both in the aggregate and by specified subgroups (Datnow & Park, 2009). Despite encouragement to include standards encompassing the full scope of the K-12 curriculum, NCLB did not require states to adopt standards embracing college and career. Each state developed varying standards and definitions of proficiency; consequently, it is difficult to get a full and accurate understanding of how state standards impacted student learning under NCLB. The Obama administration subsequently applied an incentivizing approach, through the Race to the Top competition and the use of NCLB waivers, to encourage states to band together to create the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; McGuinn, 2016). By December 15, 45 states and DC adopted the Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts, and mathematics standards, although this number dipped slightly to 42 states and

DC by August 2015 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). This collaborative process did produce uniform metrics for assessing students' CCR and fostered more consistency in state curriculum standards than under NCLB, although variations in CCR definitions, expectations, and metrics persist. Where cross-state comparisons are possible, disparities remain in educational access and attainment among subgroups, with national statistics showing gaps in enrollments in advanced courses (Kurlaender, Reed, & Hurtt, 2019) and college readiness (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016) among students of color compared to White students.

Previous ESEA reauthorizations focused solely on PK-12 but new federal policy under ESSA connects elementary-secondary and higher education, identifying mechanisms to bridge educational levels and integrate academic and career preparation (Malin et al., 2017). ESSA mandates that state standards are aligned to college and career readiness (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019), although Congress made clear states are not required to adopt the Common Core. In fact, McGuinn (2016, p. 405) noted "there is strong language in the law prohibiting the U.S. Education Secretary from forcing or encouraging states from adopting any *particular* set of standards such as the Common Core" (emphasis in the original). As an important point of context, NCLB (the predecessor to ESSA) reinforced "the expansion of state power" (Anagnostopoulos, Rutledge, & Bali, 2013, p. 218), and states' powers under ESSA have been further extended (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019; McGuinn, 2016). Hess and Eden (2015) argued that ESSA, albeit imperfect, addressed legislators' concerns over NCLB components that they saw as ill-conceived while also seeking to curb overreaches in education policy occurring during the Obama administration. McGuinn (2016, p. 405) cautioned that although ESSA "clearly does reduce federal authority in some areas, it is important to note the many important parts of NCLB that remain in place and where the federal government will continue to have influence over state education systems."

Federal influence was further reduced when the U.S. Congress chose to restrict the U.S. Education Secretary's authority to require states to fully comply with ESSA provisions (Black, 2017; Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019). In March 2017, Congress voted primarily along party lines to remove the USDE guidance for ESSA issued under the Obama Administration (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019). Analyzing these ESSA provisions and subsequent legislative actions, Black (2017) observed that "states, not the Department, wield the ESSA's flexibility" (p. 1359).

Despite this shifting of federal authority to the states, it is important to again underscore that ESSA—for the first time since ESEA legislation was enacted in 1965 and its reauthorizations—embraces CCR particularly through requiring every state to adopt standards that are college and career aligned. States continue to be held accountable, even though "they are given the autonomy to set their own goals and decide (within limits) how to measure progress" (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019, p. 298). Therefore, states have considerable latitude in identifying the measures they elect to include in their accountability systems (Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachin, 2017), including the CCR components and school quality indicators. This flexibility is concerning for proponents who question how states will hold schools accountable for preparing the growing diversity of students for college and careers, including closing achievement gaps that disadvantage racially minoritized subgroups (see, for example, Cohen, 2016; Lake, 2017). Expressing such a concern, Black (2017, p. 1341) noted the federal government now has limited ability "to press states for equal and adequate educational opportunities" for disadvantaged students and their schools, and concluded that "ESSA will produce the equality only that states randomly or voluntarily offer" (p. 1359). Taking a more positive spin on this legislation, Egalite, Fusarelli, and Fusarelli (2017, p. 774) asserted ESSA "represents an opportunity to rethink how to best achieve excellence and equity in education."

This study of the 52 ESSA state accountability plans is timely, as state-level decisions may affect further implementation of CCR reforms across the US (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). To address

equity gaps among subgroups, state leaders and PK-12 educators need to be able to make data-informed decisions and take intentional actions to close these gaps between racial and ethnic student subgroups.

Conceptual Framework

Our CCR analysis within the ESSA context was informed by Cook-Harvey et al. (2016), who claimed educational policies and practices should “provide *every student* access to an education focused on meaningful learning—one that teaches the deeper learning skills contemporary society requires in ways that empower students to learn independently throughout their lives” (p. 1) (emphasis added). This definition helped to guide our analysis of the substantive meaning of CCR relative to knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in modern-day life. Also important to their characterization of CCR, Cook-Harvey et al. cited the “long history of unequal educational opportunity” (p. 2) in the United States, recognizing inequities in educational attainment that impede the economic and social mobility of subgroups that are historically underserved in college and high- and middle-skill occupational fields. Although this recognition was valuable to our analysis, the Cook-Harvey et al. definition of equity focusing on all students and did not go into sufficient detail to highlight important, specific interventions that are essential to address the needs of historically underserved student groups. The extent of pervasive inequities in U.S. public education led us to supplement our analysis with Dowd and Bensimon’s (2015) notion of equity-mindedness that demands awareness of structural racism in education and recognition that policies appearing to be race-neutral may actually disadvantage underserved students, reproducing inequities between White and minoritized racial and ethnic groups. Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers (2012) noted that color blindness is often prevalent when addressing issues of race, noting that “color blindness is rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted” (p. 205). Although we are not claiming Cook-Harvey et al. hold this color-blind perspective, we integrated Dowd and Bensimon’s framework into our analysis because of its explicit recognition of racial equity.

In contrast to color blindness, equity-mindedness calls out ways that cultural values and norms are replicated to blame racially minoritized students for inequities embedded in and perpetuated by the educational system. Despite decades-long diversity initiatives undertaken in the US to promote “intercultural understanding” and to reverse the college education gap for historically underserved students, Dowd and Bensimon (2015, p. 5) reported that “neighborhoods and schools are as much or more segregated than they were in 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was passed,” and they also noted that to this day students of color are less likely to attend or complete college than are White students. Embedded in Dowd and Bensimon’s framework was an assertion (which we share) that changes in state policies and institutional policies and practices are needed to improve student outcomes. Using equity-mindedness as a central aspect of education policy and practice, we sought to discern whether aspects of CCR policy representing equity-mindedness (versus “color blindness;” Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) are represented in policies referenced in state plans. Consistent with Dowd and Bensimon’s theory and to the extent possible, we also applied equity-mindedness to examine practices referenced in ESSA plans that may affect the creation and perpetuation of equitable opportunities and outcomes for underserved students in K-12 and postsecondary education.

Research Methods

We employed qualitative methods to address our research questions, conducting content analysis (Patton, 2014) of the ESSA plans (50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico). Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1277) report that content analysis is “a widely used qualitative research technique” that can use conventional, directed, or summative approaches. We used a summative approach, noting the frequency with which plans cited CCR components while also applying latent content analysis to interpret how the states (as articulated via the plans) intended to implement CCR activities (Hsieh & Shannon). Through the equity-mindedness framework as applied by Dowd and Bensimon (2015), we used Critical Policy Analysis (CPA; Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Taylor, 1997) to critique matters of race and racial equity. CPA enabled us to identify the ways cultural, ideological, and power dynamics are represented in state CCR policy that may help to overcome some of the limitations of mainstream policy frameworks that prioritize step-by-step, technical, and structural processes that tend to mask inequities (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005).

State education agencies (SEAs) were permitted to submit their plans in either April or September 2017, with 17 plans submitted in April 2017 and 35 plans submitted in September 2017. The approval process was lengthy, with USDE approving the first state plans on August 4, 2017, and the final plan on September 24, 2018.¹ State plan submissions varied in length, ranging from 80 to 427 pages ($M = 172.9$ pages). Consistent with its loosening of planning guidelines, USDE permitted states to use either the original or revised state template, or they could submit an alternative, provided that the alternative addressed all required components. As noted in Table 1, 14 states submitted plans that were restructured based on the original template, 36 states used the revised template, and 2 states submitted alternative plans.

Table 1
States' USDE Templates Used, College and Career Readiness Focus

State	USDE Template Used	Mentions CCR in Vision, Mission, or Goals	Mentions CCR in State Standards	School Quality Indicator for High Schools includes CCR	Well-Rounded Education (WRE) Definition Includes CCR Coursework and/or Assessments	Mentions Personal Learning Plans	Overall Emphasis on CCR in Plan
Alabama	Revised	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Medium
Alaska	Revised	No	Yes	No	No	No	Low
Arizona	Revised	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Arkansas	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
California	Revised	No	No	Yes	No	No	Low
Colorado	Original	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Low
Connecticut	Original	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
Delaware	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
District of Columbia	Revised	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Low
Florida	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Medium
Georgia	Revised	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Hawaii	Revised	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Medium

¹ The USDE website (<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/statesubmission.html>) contains each state's submitted state plan with date of submission, feedback, revisions (if any), approved state plan and date of approval, and Education Secretary's approval letter.

Table 1 cont.

States' USDE Templates Used, College and Career Readiness Focus

State	USDE Template Used	Mentions CCR in Vision, Mission, or Goals	Mentions CCR in State Standards	School Quality Indicator for High Schools includes CCR	Well-Rounded Education (WRE) Definition Includes CCR Coursework and/or Assessments	Mentions Personal Learning Plans	Overall Emphasis on CCR in Plan
Idaho	Revised	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Illinois	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	High
Indiana	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Iowa	Revised	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Low
Kansas	Revised	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Low
Kentucky	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Louisiana	Original	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
Maine	Original	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Low
Maryland	Revised	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
Massachusetts	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Michigan	Revised	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Minnesota	Revised	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Medium
Mississippi	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Missouri	Revised	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Low
Montana	Revised	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
Nebraska	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low
Nevada	Original	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low
New Hampshire	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Medium
New Jersey	Original	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Low
New Mexico	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
New York	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	High
North Carolina	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
North Dakota	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Ohio	Revised	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
Oklahoma	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Oregon	Alternative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Pennsylvania	Original	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Puerto Rico	Revised	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Low
Rhode Island	Revised	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
South Carolina	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
South Dakota	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	High
Tennessee	Alternative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Texas	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Utah	Revised	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Vermont	Revised	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Medium
Virginia	Revised	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Low
Washington	Revised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
West Virginia	Revised	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Low
Wisconsin	Revised	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Low
Wyoming	Revised	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Low

We identified text within each state plan that referenced CCR or components of it; we also identified strategies as CCR-related if they served a larger goal to improve students' preparation to transition to college and/or the workforce. In addition to reading each document line-by-line, we applied search functions, seeking such terms as "college," "postsecondary," "career," "pathway,"

“labor,” “work,” “workforce,” “employment,” “race,” “racial,” “gender,” “transitions,” “equity,” “equitable,” “subgroup,” and “access.” In analyzing CCR-related content, we noted (a) how CCR was represented (e.g., as a guiding framework that was integrated throughout the plan or occasionally mentioned), (b) whether college and career aspects were included in descriptions of a well-rounded education (WRE), and (c) whether CCR aspects were included as a school quality indicator.

Next, we used the Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) and Dowd and Bensimon (2015) frameworks to analyze each state accountability plan. In conducting our analysis, we noted commonalities and differences across plans and categorized submissions based on their stated levels of commitment to students’ CCR and explanations of CCR activities throughout the plans. We also examined the manner and extent to which equity was addressed in the plans, noting student subpopulations and practices pertaining to specified subgroups that states addressed in their plans.

We chose to analyze state plans for ESSA by conducting a content analysis of each state plan, creating data matrices that enabled us to create categories, code data, and identify relationships in the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Nadin & Cassell, 2004). Recognizing trade-offs are made in designing all research studies, we took this approach to reviewing the state plans because we expected it to help us understand CCR implementation and accountability strategies as articulated in formal state plans. Also by unpacking these plans using an equity lens to answer research questions concerning the ways in which CCR in general, and with respect to racial subgroups, we may also be able to understand state plans for access, opportunity, *and* outcomes relative to or through CCR policy and practice.

Findings

This section presents the findings from our analysis of ESSA plans. We focus on the extent and manner in which CCR is addressed in the state plans, the CCR indicators the states included in their plans, and how equity is represented in the state plans.

Overall Emphasis on College and Career Readiness Within State Plans

ESSA contains numerous CCR provisions (see Malin et al., 2017), but neither the original nor the revised ESSA templates required such an emphasis. Consequently, the extent to which submitted plans address CCR varies greatly, from states electing to integrate aims and components comprehensively throughout their plans to states that do not offer any statements about preparing students for college and careers. Across the 52 plans, there is little consensus on descriptions of CCR or ways in which states highlight CCR-related goals. Overall, 34 states address some aspect of CCR within their vision, mission, and/or goal statements (Table 1), and although such statements were not required within the templates, several include goals envisioning college and career preparation in varying ways. As examples, Maine states the following goal: “By 2030, 90% of Maine students will graduate college and career ready;” Texas includes a goal statement noting, “by the year 2030, 60% of Texans aged 25-34 should possess some form of post-secondary credential.” States also provide varying CCR descriptions, choosing to emphasize different aspects, including military readiness, civic engagement, or being “future ready.” For example, New Hampshire describes college and career readiness as “the knowledge, skills, and work-study practices needed for post-secondary success.” South Dakota and Washington graduation goals include preparation for college, career, and “life,” while North Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming plans include goals stating students would graduate college, career, and military ready. Montana states its graduates will have “the capability to succeed and excel in college, careers, civic engagement, and lifelong learning,” whereas

North Carolina includes a vision that “every public school student will graduate reading for post-secondary education and work, prepared to be a globally engaged and productive citizen.”

We also analyzed the extent to which each plan addresses CCR. We noted whether introductory sections (if they exist) contain a commitment to CCR, including a clearly articulated CCR focus within vision, mission, and goals statements (if these were included). We also noted whether a plan reports that state content standards include a CCR focus and whether state descriptions of WRE incorporate CCR coursework. Through content analysis we closely read through each text, coding whether CCR is included as a central feature of the plan and whether the state’s commitment to CCR is consistently highlighted and described throughout the plan, occasionally mentioned, or not addressed. Also, we noted whether plans include CCR school quality indicators for high schools, as well as the number of high school indicators that were listed. For each of these factors, our analysis went beyond simply crediting a state with mentioning CCR but scrutinizing the state’s description and justification of how the state intended to address CCR.

Based upon this analysis, we assigned a rating of “high,” “medium,” or “low” to the CCR emphasis of each plan. Table 1 indicates the extent to which plans addressed CCR specifically. Twelve state plans include a high CCR emphasis, 24 plans provide a medium emphasis, and 16 plans place a low emphasis. As examples, five states rated as having a high CCR emphasis offered brief descriptions of CCR approaches within their plans. Indiana includes a School Improvement Theory of Action that, if followed, concludes, “then all Hoosier students will be college and career ready, allowing them to successfully embark on their chosen path in life.” Kentucky’s plan contains an introductory statement, “We value high achievement in academics and the selection of the careers of students’ choice as well as a well-rounded education for every student.” Pennsylvania includes a Future Ready PA Index containing several high school pathways to CCR. South Dakota’s plan begins by noting the state’s goal that, by 2025, 65% of citizens aged 25-34 will hold a postsecondary credential, then outlining how “the K-12 education system’s aspiration of college, career and life readiness directly impacts this goal.” Tennessee provides the most comprehensive CCR treatment, noting how the state’s CCR standards guided the state goals and ESSA plan development.

Applying the Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) and Dowd and Bensimon (2015) equity frameworks to the state plans addressing CCR, we found the majority of plans describe aims and goals that encompass all students, with only seven states (Arkansas, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin) and a subset of these offering equity-related plans addressing specific racial and ethnic subgroups. As examples of a color-blind framing of equity relative to CCR policy, Oklahoma includes a statement noting “by 2030, the majority of all students will be expected to achieve proficiency, indicating their readiness for the challenges of college or career,” while further noting that continuous improvement would be expected for all required subgroups but without describing specific approaches to address persistent inequities within any subgroups. Wisconsin articulates a goal to cut the achievement gap in half, reflecting “Wisconsin’s expectation that all students graduate from high school ready for college and career, and the urgency needed to ensure that this expectation must be met for all students, regardless of race, income, and ability.” This is a noteworthy passage because, while this commitment may be consistent with the Cook-Harvey et al. framework of addressing “every student,” the language seems to reflect a dismissive if not deficit view of subgroups. The statement also fails to recognize that state policies and practices that recognize students’ race and other characteristics may contribute to improving achievement, according to Dowd and Bensimon’s equity-minded framework. Although the Wisconsin plan contains numerous references to equity, it does not acknowledge that specific strategies may be needed to improve the achievement of student subgroups. In contrast, South Dakota’s plan integrates an equity-minded approach, disclosing that Native American students historically

underachieve in meeting the state's adoption of more rigorous CCR standards. Noteworthy because of its recognition of the specific circumstances of a historically minoritized group and repeated references to strategies for this subgroup, the state claims through its ESSA plan activities, "Native American students [will] experience increased academic success, and the achievement gap for this subpopulation will be closed." The South Dakota Department of Education proposed creating "a permanent formal consultation protocol, which will include regular meetings and opportunities for collaboration and communication" with South Dakota's Native American tribes.

Thirty-nine accountability plans mention state curriculum standards that incorporate CCR. (See again Table 1.) No plans report how the states will integrate academic and CTE coursework into their CCR efforts, although Mississippi notes its standards are "aligned with college and work expectations." Thirty state plans report creating statewide processes requiring students to develop Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) that typically begin in the middle grades and extend through high school graduation, to address their career and academic goals, even though ESSA templates did not ask states to include this information. The PLP is titled in different ways across the states, including such terms as Education and Career Action Plan, Educational Development Plan (EDP), High School and Beyond Plan, Individual Graduation Plan, Individual Learning Plan, Individual Plan of Study, and Next Step Plan. Oregon's state submission describes the purpose of its planning requirement: "Their Education Plan and Profile serves as a personalized 'road map' to guide students' learning throughout school and prepare them for next steps after high school." Only 2 of these 30 states (Michigan, Pennsylvania) mention utilizing the PLP process to address student subgroup participation in career-focused coursework. Michigan's plan leans toward an equity-minded approach to EDP by referencing "minority students" as well as age, gender, income, and disability status:

Through the student's EDP planning process students, with their parents, will be given individualized assistance in planning coursework to support progress toward educational and career goals, including awareness of careers that may be nontraditional for the student's gender, and opportunities offered through Career and Technical Education. As part of the EDP process districts will engage students and parents in discussing educational and career opportunities and available academic and financial supports that may be available to minority students, students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students.

The Michigan plan goes further, explaining how the state uses a gender equity consultant, as well as efforts to encourage females to enroll in CTE programs that are nontraditional for their gender. Michigan also references consultation with tribal leaders and Native education stakeholders during plan development. As another example, Pennsylvania proposed developing a Career Readiness Indicator to note the percentage of all students, and of required subgroups, who "implement their individualized career plan through ongoing development of a career portfolio and participation in career preparation activities aligned to the CEW [Career Education and Work] standards."

Well-Rounded Education

ESSA includes a provision for states to explain how they will support a "well-rounded education" (WRE), expanding beyond core subjects emphasized in NCLB (Malin et al., 2017). The original ESSA template contained a subsection entitled *Well-Rounded and Supportive Education for Students* (WRE) and asked plans to include

the State's strategies and how it will support LEAs [Local Education Agencies] to provide equitable access to a well-rounded education and rigorous coursework in

subjects in which female students, minority students, English learners, children with disabilities, or low-income students are underrepresented. Such subjects could include English, reading/language arts, writing, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, geography, computer science, music, career and technical education, health, or physical education. (USDE, n.d., p. 22)

Although student subgroups by race, gender, and other characteristics were explicitly recognized in the original ESSA template, the revised template eliminated this section and, consequently, the expectation to address WRE was no longer mandated. Despite this adjustment, each of the 52 submitted plans reference WRE in some way, although 10 states (Alabama, Alaska, California, Florida, Kansas, Missouri, New Hampshire, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming) simply cite the term “well-rounded education” without providing a description of what curriculum content is included and/or state supports that are provided. Forty plans contain some type of reference to college or careers in their descriptions of WRE, with most referencing broad CCR goals (Table 1). As an example, Montana mentions “providing equitable access to a broad well-rounded education aimed at developing our children into college- and career-ready young adults.” Pennsylvania’s plan includes a WRE description connected to its CCR goals, noting one priority goal is “ensuring well-rounded, rigorous, and personalized learning experiences for all students.” This goal contains three approaches for “all students:” (a) increasing participation in advanced coursework, (b) promoting equitable access to STEM education, and (c) supporting meaningful college and career pathways.

For those state plans that include WRE descriptions, the majority adopt a color-blind approach, typically citing a commitment to provide access to WRE for all students, consistent with the Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) framework. Strategies to increase access, participation, and outcomes for racially minoritized subgroups more closely aligned to Dowd and Bensimon’s (2015) notion of equity are not mentioned. However, offering a nod toward a more equity-minded approach, 12 plans report that their state will calculate student participation in coursework by subgroups, emphasizing participation in Advanced Placement [AP]; International Baccalaureate [IB]; CTE; science, technology, engineering, arts, and/or mathematics (STEM/STEAM). Yet, these states do not indicate whether they will develop strategies or provide funding to address historically underserved students’ low levels of participation in these courses, if they are found to exist. Five states (Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Wisconsin) include a commitment to expanding females’ access to programs that are nontraditional for their gender. Connecticut describes a more specific focus on professional development, stating that education officials will include an activity to “train LEA staff in the use of available statewide course-taking data to develop plans that ensure underrepresented students have equitable access to a well-rounded education and rigorous coursework.”

In analyzing plans that contain WRE descriptions, we examined whether they identified coursework and/or learning experiences that could be considered as promoting students’ CCR, including such components as advanced coursework in AP, IB, dual credit/dual enrollment courses, CTE, STEM/STEAM, or obtaining industry credentials or participating in work-based learning. Table 2 indicates states’ WRE features that are applicable to CCR aims. State plans are most likely to mention CTE programming (27 states), STEM and/or STEAM educational experiences (22 states), AP courses (22 states), dual credit/dual enrollment (18 states), advanced courses and/or accelerated learning (15 states), and IB courses (12 states). In general, these state plans provide a listing of subjects or courses that should be offered in schools to provide a WRE, and they do not explicitly

indicate which courses or aligned programs of study are intended to prepare students for college and/or careers.

Table 2
States' CCR Options Contained Within Well-Rounded Education (WRE) Descriptions

State	ACT or SAT benchmark (N=2)	Advanced/ Accelerated Courses (N=15)	AP (N=22)	CTE (N=27)	Dual Enrollment/ Dual Credit (N=18)	Gifted/ Talented (N=4)	IB (N=12)	Industry Credentials (N=2)	STEAM or STEAM (N=22)	Work-Based Learning (N=4)
AR	ACT	X	X		X				STEM	
AZ		X	X	X		X				
CO				X						
CT		X	X	X					STEM/ STEAM	X
DC									STEM	
DE			X		X					
GA			X			X			STEM	
HI			X	X	X		X		STEM	
IA				X		X			STEM	
ID				X					STEM	
IL				X	X					
IN			X	X	X		X		STEM	
KY				X						
LA		X (Early College)		X	X					X
MA			X	X	X					
MD	ACT/SAT		X	X	X		X	X		X
ME			X	X	X					
MI		X							STEM/ STEAM	
MS		X (Early College)	X		X		X		STEM	
MT			X		X					
NC				X						
ND		X		X					STEM	
NE				X						
NJ			X	X			X	X		
NM		X (Early College)	X		X		X		STEM	
NV			X	X	X	X	X			
NY				X					STEM	
OH		X	X		X		X			
OK		X	X						STEM	
OR		X	X	X					STEM/ STEAM	
PA		X	X	X	X		X		STEM	
RI		X		X	X				STEM	X
SC									STEM	
SD									STEM	
TN		X (Early College)	X	X	X		X		STEM	
TX				X						
UT		X (Early College)	X	X	X		X			
VA									STEM	
WA			X	X			X		STEM	
WI				X						

Note: States with no CCR options and/or WRE descriptions: AL, AK, CA, FL, KS, MN, MO, NH, PR, VT, WV, WY

Accountability Indicators

States are required to create accountability indicators addressing such factors as academic achievement, graduation, and a School Quality or Student Success component. These indicators are mandated for specific grade spans (elementary, middle, high school), and we analyzed them for the high school level because of our focus on CCR. Not every state explicitly references CCR, so within plans we identified indicators that were the most direct or proximally closest preparation for college and careers. This section reports findings related to states’ high school graduation and academic achievement indicators, again noting references to equity.

High school graduation rate indicator. State plans are expected to include a high school 4-year adjusted graduation rate indicator for the entire student cohort at each grade level; these range from a high of 100% (South Dakota) to a low of 84% (Nevada, Virginia), with 90% being the most popular attainment rate goal, listed by 21 states. Each plan identifies a percentage goal, with the exception of Missouri, which chose to “set the goal of reducing the rate of failure to graduate by half over the next 10 years.” Table 3 notes the graduation rates set by each state.

Table 3
Graduation Rate Goal (4-year) for all Students

Stated Goal	States (N)	States
100%	1	SD
95%	10	IA ID KS KY MD NC NJ NY RI TN
94.44%	1	MI
94%	4	AL AR CT TX
93%	2	NH OH
92.4%	1	PA
92.1%	1	DE
92%	1	NE
91%	1	MA
90.4%	1	WI
90%	21	AK AZ CA DC GA HI IL LA ME MN MS NM ND OK OR PR SC UT VT WA WV
89.5%	1	MT
88%	1	WY
87.9%	1	IN
84.2%	1	CO
85%	1	FL
84%	2	NV VA
Reduce rate of failure to graduate by half	1	MO

Academic achievement indicators. Accountability plans contain numerous School Quality or Student Success Indicators for high schools, beyond mandated state achievement testing, and there was little uniformity in these metrics across the plans. Thirty-six plans (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin) include chronic absenteeism as an indicator for high schools, which nearly all define as students missing 10% or more of the school year. We mention this finding because Darling-

Hammond et al. (2014) reported that some states consider attendance as one of several indicators promoting CCR.

As noted in Table 1, 38 state plans include CCR Indicators (CCRI) for which high school students and/or high schools will be held accountable for academic improvements, although as previously noted, none of these state plans specifically mention racial equity. Most plans employ the terminology “College and Career Readiness” for this indicator but other terms are used, such as Postsecondary Opportunities (Oklahoma), Prepared for Success (Ohio), Readiness for Postsecondary Success (Maryland, Rhode Island), Ready Graduate (Tennessee), and Transition Readiness (Kentucky). Those states including CCRI vary greatly in their approaches to providing evidence of college and/or career readiness, ranging from 1-2 identified indicators to multiple options. Some states offer numerous opportunities for students and/or high schools to demonstrate CCR; options typically contain provisions for documenting college readiness *or* career readiness, rather than both. For example, North Dakota provides a Choice Ready framework permitting students to demonstrate they are College Ready, Career Ready, or Military Ready, with coursework, learning experiences, and assessments delineated for each option. Tennessee’s Ready Graduate indicator contains four options to demonstrate college, military, and/or career readiness: (a) scoring 21 or higher on ACT/SAT equivalent, (b) completing 4 early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs), (c) completing 2 EPSOs and earning industry certification in an approved CTE program of study, or (d) completing 2 EPSOs and scoring state-determined designated score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Armed Forces Qualifying Test. Tennessee defines EPSOs as AP coursework, IB coursework, Cambridge International Examinations, College Level Examination Program, dual enrollment, local or statewide dual credit, and industry certification. Some plans offer an array of options, allowing students and schools to accrue points based upon the total number of CCR indicators amassed. For example, Arizona includes a CCRI menu with indicators including an advanced high school diploma, completing a CTE sequence, meeting cut scores on ACT subtests, and earning industry-recognized credentials; points can be accrued based upon each indicator (Table 4).

Table 4
Arizona ESSA College and Career Readiness Menu

Indicator Points	Indicators
1.25	Earns a Grand Canyon Diploma or International Baccalaureate Diploma
1.25	Completes a CTE sequence and passes the Arizona Technical Skills Assessment for that sequence
.5 per exam	Passing score on AzMERIT Algebra 2 or ELA 11
.35 per exam	Meets cut score on ACT English, math, reading or science exam
.5 per exam	Meets cut score on SAT English or math exam
.5 per exam	Meets cut score on any AP exam
.3	Completes the FAFSA
.5 per course	Passes a college level career pathway (CTE) course for which college credit can be earned with an A, B, or C (dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment
.5 per course	Passes a college level English, math, science, social studies, or foreign language course for which college credit can be earned with an A, B, or C (i.e., dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment
.25 per course	Completes a CTE course with an A, B, or C (outside of completed sequence referenced above)
.5	Meets benchmarks for ASVAB
.5	Meets benchmarks for ACT WorkKeys

Table 4 cont.

Arizona ESSA College and Career Readiness Menu

Indicator Points	Indicators
.35 per exam	Meets cut score on ACCUPLACER, ALEKS, COMPASS (or any nationally recognized college placement exam currently used by an Arizona institution), or Cambridge IGCSE English, reading, writing, math, social studies, science, or foreign language exam
.5 per exam	Meets cut score on CLEP, Cambridge A or AS, or IB English, math, social studies, science, or foreign language exam
.5 per credential, certificate, or license	Earns an Industry-Recognized Credential, Certificate, or License. No more than one point may be awarded in this indicator.
1	Completed well-defined Work-Based Learning (i.e., internship) of at least 120 hours
1	Meet all 16 Arizona Board of Regents program of study requirements.

Analyzing the CCR indicators across the 52 state plans, the specific indicators most frequently included are: Dual credit/dual enrollment course completion, 27 states; AP exam (meeting benchmark scores), 24 states; IB exam (meeting benchmark scores), 23 states; ACT exam (meeting benchmark scores), 22 states; CTE sequence completion, 21 states; Industry-recognized credential, 20 states; SAT exam (meeting benchmark scores), 15 states; AP course completion, 13 states; IB course completion, 12 states; ASVAB benchmark, 10 states; and work-based learning, 10 states. Table 5 displays the CCR indicators identified across the state plans. Ten states (Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Wisconsin) include no CCRI for high schools. As was illustrated in the Arizona plan menu, CCRI include metrics that focused on college readiness (e.g., meeting benchmarks for ACT or SAT exams, earning passing scores on IB or AP exams, and completing dual credit courses), career readiness (e.g., industry-recognized credentials, CTE courses, work-based learning), and military readiness (e.g., ASVAB, military enlistment).

Table 5

College and Career Readiness Indicators for High Schools Contained in State Plans

Indicator	States (N)	States
ACCUPLACER	2	AZ NM
ACT exam: benchmark met	22	AL AZ AR CT GA IL IN KY MD MS MT NV NH NC ND OH SC SD TN UT VT WY
ACT exam: taken	3	CA NE NM
ACT WorkKeys	6	AL AZ LA NM NC ND
Advanced Diploma	10	AZ CA FL IN LA ME NC OH PA RI
ALEKS	1	AZ
AP course(s): completion	13	AR CT DC IL IN LA MI MT PA TN WA
AP exam(s): benchmark met	24	AL AZ CA CT DC DE FL GA IL IN KY LA MA MS NH NY OH RI SC SD TX UT VT WV
ASVAB benchmark	10	AZ DE IN MD NH ND SC TN VT WY
Biliteracy certificate	4	DE MD NY
Cambridge	6	AZ FL IN KY RI TN WA
CLEP	5	AZ IN LA TN VT
Co-curricular activities	1	IL
College Board PEAU	1	PR
College entry requirement met	1	MD (University of Maryland admissions requirements)

Table 5 cont.

College and Career Readiness Indicators for High Schools Contained in State Plans

Indicator	States (N)	States
Community Service	3	AR IL ND
COMPASS	2	AZ NM
Computer Science course	1	AR
Consistent employment	1	IL
CTE course(s) completion	3	CT GA ND
CTE sequence	21	AZ CA ID IL IN KY MD MI MT NH NM NY OH OK RI SC SD TN WA WV WY
Dual credit: any courses	27	AL CA CT DE FL GA ID IN KY LA MD MA MI MS MT NH NM OK PA RI SC TN TX UT VT WV WY
Dual credit: CTE	3	AZ IL ND
Dual credit: Not CTE	4	AZ AR IL ND
Early middle college or associate's degree	2	MI (early middle) TX (associate's degree earned in high school)
End-of-course (EOC) exams	4	NC (English, math, biology) NV SC (biology, US History, math) VA (math)
English course completion	1	IL (College Remedial English)
FAFSA completion	1	AZ
Freshmen on track	1	OR
GPA minimum	3	AZ IL ND
Graduates participating in CCR outcomes within 16 months	1	VT
Honors course	2	MA TX
IB Course(s): completion	12	AR CT DC ID IL LA MI MT NM OK TN WA
IB exam: benchmark met	23	AL AZ CT DC DE FL GA IL IN KY LA MD MA MS NH NY ND OH SC UT VT WV WY
IB exam: taken	1	CA
Industry-recognized credential	21	AL AZ DE FL GA IL IN KY LA MD MS NY ND OH OK RI SC TN TX VT WY
Math course completion	2	IL (Algebra II) ND (Algebra II)
Military enlistment	4	AL IL ND TX
National Career Readiness Certificate	3	NH SC SD
Postsecondary enrollment	4	CT MI TN TX
PSAT/NMSQT	1	NM
SAT exam: benchmark met	15	AZ CT DC DE GA ID IL IN KY MD NH ND OH OK SC TN VT
SAT exam: taken	1	NM
State assessment performance	2	OR (Level 3 or 4 on English math) TX (Texas Success Initiative reading or math benchmark)
State-approved program of study	2	AZ NH
Student attendance	1	ND (95% or higher)
Work-based learning	10	AZ CT DE ID IN KY MD ND OK SC

Most state accountability plans note CCR indicators will be reported by the percentage of all students attaining these indicators; however, for some states, it was unclear whether they also intend to report performance on each indicator by subgroup. Aligned with Dowd and Bensimon's (2015)

equity-minded framework, 28 states (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming) include verbiage indicating that performance of subgroups would be calculated and/or reported separately.

Delving more deeply, we found the state plans focus on different aspects of the high school curriculum regarding their concepts of CCR attainment, some without considering whether students meet minimum benchmarks or performance levels. For example, some states view simply completing AP or IB courses or taking the AP or IB examinations as adequate evidence of CCR, whereas other states require that AP and IB examinations be passed at certain levels, such as scoring a minimum of 3 on AP exams and 4 on IB exams. Similarly, a few states determined that completing only one CTE course is a sufficient CCR indicator, whereas most states require a higher level of academic performance, through completion of an approved CTE sequence. Some states allow students' readiness to be documented through attainment of only one or a limited number of indicators, whereas others—such as Tennessee's Ready Graduate indicator—expect students to satisfy multiple indicators to document their CCR attainment.

Emphasis on Equity

The introductory section of the original ESSA template created during the Obama administration contained the following statement that leaves a mixed understanding of equity by referencing “to ensure a focus on equity and excellence” that is also illustrative of color-blind framing of equity in declaring equity “for all students:”

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) encourages each State to think comprehensively about implementation of programs across the ESEA and to leverage funding to ensure a focus on equity and excellence for all students as it develops its consolidated State plan. Further, the Department aims to support collaboration and efficiency across multiple programs to help ensure that all children have significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and that each SEA works to close achievement gaps. (USDE, n.d., p. 2)

Noteworthy in terms of our application of the equity-mindedness framework of Dowd and Bensimon (2015), this original template also included a section on educator equity, requiring states to document how they would “provide low-income and minority students greater access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders.” This statement is significant because it recognizes that the educational system and its embedded structures, including personnel who teach and lead schools, are integral to reforming educational outcomes for minority and low-income students. However, the new ESSA template removed this statement and dropped the educator equity requirement, as follows: “Include the required information regarding equitable access to, and participation in, the programs included in its consolidated State plan as required by section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act” (USDE, 2017, p. 17). States submitting alternative templates were required to include “information regarding equitable access to, and participation in, the programs included in its consolidated State plan” (USDE, 2017, p. 2), but de-emphasizing of the equity indicator reduced the likelihood that state plans would redress inequitable outcomes for minoritized groups.

Despite the ESSA emphasis on both equitable access and participation, most states simply choose to describe how their plans will address students' access to programs while ignoring the additional requirement to ensure historically underserved students also participate in and complete

these programs. Only 17 of the 52 plans (Arkansas, Connecticut, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming) contain references to equitable participation in programming, either as overt statements of commitment or implying a commitment to increased participation. As examples, Connecticut reports an intention to support LEAs in “increasing student participation in work-based learning opportunities” and South Carolina describes “working to increase the number of students achieving industry credentials and to increase the number of students earning a silver certificate or higher on the National Career Readiness Certificate.” Although these statements indicate these states’ efforts to increase the number of students engaged in these activities, they address a general goal of increased participation for all students without specifically referencing historically underserved subgroups or outcomes, which is essential to addressing equity (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Only two plans (North Carolina, Oklahoma) give specifics regarding how their state education departments will monitor and promote equitable participation. North Carolina reports it will “provide disaggregated data to school districts to support effective student programming and monitoring of student access, participation and performance” and continue to support an AP partnership program that “targets low-performing districts and supports all school districts to broaden access and successful participation in advanced coursework, including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programming and coursework.” Oklahoma schools will receive “a letter grade for the participation of all students in postsecondary opportunities, the OSDE [Oklahoma State Department of Education] will also report this metric disaggregated by all ESSA student groups.”

Aside from the above examples, the revised ESSA template includes minimal expectations to address equity, which may have contributed to varied emphases on equity in the accountability section of state plans. Four plans (Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Virginia) contain limited references to equity, beyond the ESSA requirement to address disproportionate access to educators. Sixteen states (Hawaii, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Washington) introduce their plans with statements using the words “equity” or “equitable.” For example, Minnesota titled its submission “Equity and excellence every day for every one,” and Hawaii’s plan is entitled “A commitment to equity and excellence.” Missouri’s introductory section begins with “Missouri’s commitment: Ensuring equitable access to opportunity;” similarly, Oregon begins with four commitments, and the first is entitled “Prioritizing and advancing equity.” Tennessee’s introduction includes the state’s unifying vision: “Districts and schools in Tennessee will exemplify excellence and equity such that *all students* are equipped with the knowledge and skills to successfully embark upon their chosen path in life” (emphasis added).

Despite some states’ referencing of equity, most states present a color-blind or race-neutral approach (e.g., Nebraska’s “plan for providing all students in the state an excellent and equitable experience”) rather than embracing an equity-minded frame that specifies how circumstances within schools and school districts will change to address inequities in access, opportunities, *and* outcomes for racialized minorities. For example, Oregon includes a comprehensive description of their “equity lens” followed by core beliefs concerning how *all students* will receive a relevant, rigorous, and well-rounded education (Table 6). The Oregon description includes some references to subgroups, including English as second language and special education, but does not explicitly state a commitment to supporting students from historically underserved populations.

Table 6

Oregon's Equity Lens

Oregon has set a vision that all students receive a relevant, rigorous, and well-rounded education from birth through postsecondary. This vision, along with a set of core beliefs (Oregon's Equity lens, Oregon Education Investment Board, 2013) represent how we think about and approach supporting all students.

We believe that everyone has the ability to learn and that we have an ethical and moral responsibility to ensure an education system that provides optimal learning environments that lead all children to be prepared for their individual futures.

We believe that speaking a language other than English is an asset and that our education system must celebrate and enhance this ability alongside appropriate and culturally responsive support for English as a second language.

We believe children receiving special education services are an integral part of our educational responsibility and we must welcome the opportunity to be inclusive, make appropriate accommodations, and celebrate their assets. We must directly address the overrepresentation of children of color in special education and the underrepresentation of these children in "talented and gifted" programs.

We believe that the children who have previously been described as "at risk," "underperforming," "underrepresented," or "minority" actually represent Oregon's best opportunity to improve overall educational outcomes.

We believe in access to high-quality early learning experiences and appropriate family engagement and support, recognizing that we need to provide services in a way that best meets the needs of our most diverse segment of the population.

We believe that communities, parents, teachers, and community-based organizations have unique and important solutions to improving outcomes for our children and educational systems. Our work will only be successful if we are able to truly partner with the community, engage with respect, authentically listen—and have the courage to share decision making, control, and resources.

We believe the rich history and culture of learners is a source of pride and an asset to embrace and celebrate.

And, we believe in the importance of great teaching. An equitable education system requires providing teachers with the tools and support to meet the needs of each child.

Oregonians value diversity and recognize that different backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas foster strength. Educators and communities have a long-standing commitment towards creating respectful and inclusive learning environments and eliminating discrimination or harassment in all forms, levels, or aspects.

Only two states (Minnesota, New York) include definitions of equity within their accountability plans, with Minnesota's definition being:

Education equity is the condition of justice, fairness, and inclusion in our systems of education so that all students have access to the opportunity to learn and develop to their fullest potential. The pursuit of education equity recognizes the historical conditions and barriers that have prevented opportunity and success in learning for students based on their race, income, and other social conditions. Eliminating those structural and institutional barriers to educational opportunity requires systemic change that allows for distribution of resources, information, and other support, depending on the student's situation to ensure an equitable outcome. Equity is different from equality; equity is a principle that is based upon justness and fairness, while equality demands everyone be treated at the same level.

New York's description follows:

The term equity means that the learning needs of every student are supported in an environment where all students are valued; respected; and experience academic success without regard to differences in age, gender, socio-economic status, religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, native language, national origin, or immigration status.

Both states offer a perspective that recognizes diversity and inclusion as fundamental to equity according to the accountability framework of Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) but Minnesota falls short of the Dowd and Bensimon (2015) concept of equity-mindedness that explicitly recognizes equity as pertaining to fairness and justice for racially minoritized groups.

Discussion

Our analysis disclosed that most state plans exhibit a relatively modest attempt to address CCR as conceived by Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) and an even more limited focus on equity, as defined by the equity-mindedness framework by Dowd and Bensimon (2015). We observe, as have other scholars (e.g., Black, 2017; Egalite et al., 2017; McGuinn, 2016; Saultz et al., 2017; Weiss & McGuinn, 2017), that the ESSA legislation and subsequent actions by the U.S. Congress devolved considerable power, authority, and flexibilities to the state and local levels, therefore begging the question of the potential of this federal education policy to leverage improvements in accountability or equity, particularly as it relates to CCR.

We found very few states had integrated CCR throughout their ESSA plans, with some states even virtually ignoring CCR. Interpreting this scant pattern, we suspect a couple factors are at play. First, 14 plans adhered to the ESSA original template and 36 used the revised template developed by USDE, with only 2 using an alternative approach. The relatively bare-boned revised template lacked any of the CCR spirit that had permeated the ESSA law itself—and, as a result, most states largely or entirely passed up the option to integrate CCR into their plans. It is also possible that some state officials simply missed the mark when creating their plans, not fully understanding and embracing the potential of CCR in terms of helping their states advance an accountability and equity agenda. The limited descriptions of specified activities included in these plans makes this difficult to assess.

Moreover, by focusing on ESSA state plans solely, which we acknowledge as a limitation of our methodological approach, we do not know whether CCR activities are happening that are not mentioned in state plans. However, our analysis strongly suggests that some states expanded beyond the minimum expectations in the ESSA template in their submissions, including Indiana, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee, to provide compelling CCR visions that may translate into action. Of course, it is possible that legislators and policy officials in those states we identified as having a high CCR emphasis may have already been engaging in CCR activities through state-legislated reforms giving them the foresight to be strategic in developing their ESSA plans and ensuring that existing CCR initiatives were integrated into ESSA accountability components and leveraging ESSA funds. In short, the states with a high CCR emphasis tended to address CCR in their visions and goals, they chose to include these vision statements in their plans, and they highlighted these CCR aspects throughout their plans. In contrast, states with lesser CCR focus tended to provide only limited references to CCR in their plans and did not fully align their ESSA accountability components with CCR indicators.

Our analysis disclosed—as noted above—very few state plans contained a vision for education that included CCR and described how they would leverage ESSA resources to assist them with achieving CCR visions in their K-12 educational systems. Weiss and McGuinn (2017) asserted state education agencies should “ideally begin with state education leaders and stakeholders defining the vision for education in the state” (p. 13). Because CCR was not a central feature of either the initial or revised ESSA templates, most states did not incorporate a CCR vision into their planning process beyond serving a compliance purpose, a comment well aligned with a criticism from Education Secretary DeVos whose agency approved the revised template (Camera, 2018). However, this commentary neglects the fact that the USDE did not require detailed plans and only in its revised template permitted states to “include supplemental information such as its overall vision for improving outcomes for all students and its efforts to consult with and engage stakeholders when developing its consolidated State plan” (USDE, 2017, p. 2). Arguably, a suggestion to include a vision as “supplemental information” does not encourage states to be forward-thinking. Here we note an interesting paradox: The U.S. Congress made an intentional decision to include CCR as a new aspect of ESSA, yet through subsequent actions reduced the federal government’s authority—including that of the Education Secretary—to hold states accountable for including CCR provisions and activities in their state plans. We suggest both the U.S. Congress and USDE should examine their roles, determining whether they simply want to promote a compliance-driven accountability process that primarily is placed in the hands of the states with relatively little federal oversight, or if they wish to promote more transformative orientation to state planning, which will require more active oversight by federal officials.

We ultimately concur with those who see a need for a strong federal role in education, generally and with respect to supporting and strengthening states’ efforts to improve their students’ CCR. In particular, we suggest federal policy and guidance should seek to “unite rather than divide” K-12 and higher education sectors (Loss & McGuinn, 2016, p. 226). Especially now, where “a high school—and increasingly a college—degree have become a necessity for economic success, improving K-12 and higher education must be a national imperative” (Loss & McGuinn, 2016, p. 228), and it makes sense to approach education as a “single continuum” (p. 228). Given this position, we are concerned by what we view as a *laissez faire* approach on the part of the Trump administration relative to education, and particularly respecting matters related to college and career readiness and equity of opportunities and outcomes.

In analyzing elements of the state plans that seem directly related to CCR, such as a well-rounded education (WRE), we found most states did not include courses or curriculum linked to pathways that could be considered as connecting to CCR. Alternatively, the state plans tended to include a menu of options through which all students would gain access, endorsing color-blind framing that is inconsistent with equity and equity-mindedness policy and practice as defined by Dowd and Bensimon (2015). Some states mentioned striving for a rigorous curriculum, including providing access to advanced/accelerated, CTE, AP, IB, and dual credit/dual enrollment courses. However, beyond listing course options, the plans generally did not explain how the states aligned these offerings to promote equity for racial and ethnic subgroups. Previously, we suggested ESSA’s new focus on WRE had great potential, and we presented a vision of WRE that “would serve the goal of producing reflective and participative citizens who are equipped to perform a variety of functions in a changing world—students well prepared for college *and* careers” (Malin et al., 2017, p. 829). However, our optimism has been dampened by this analysis of state plans that generally presents limited descriptions about what WRE would mean in practice, particularly within the CCR context. English, Cushing, Therriault, and Rasmussen (2017) also have argued that CCR should be

embedded within states' descriptions of a WRE, so there may be support outside of ESSA for states to integrate WRE and CCR.

We are concerned that equity, access, and participation by racially minoritized subgroups are minimal in state plans, mostly taking the form of color-blind statements referencing *all students* and accompanied by few specifics. Discussions of equity most often arose within the context of the state plan portion that concerned staffing of administrators and teachers, which is important but overlooks how historic inequities in educational structures, policies, and practices contribute to disparities in impact on student subgroups. Most state plans mentioned that equity plans had been developed, but these plans focused solely or predominately on the equitable placement of educators in school districts. The fact that the ESSA templates (both original and revised) required all states to address equitable access of students to teachers is valuable, but concerning when state plans were limited to this single, required reference to equity in the entirety of the plans.

Further, we appraised most plans as being color blind in that they framed equity, access, and participation around notions of “all students” but avoided explicitly addressing racial equity gaps that pertain to academic achievement and other important CCR outcomes. Minnesota seemed to go the farthest of any state plan to demonstrate aspects of an equity-mindedness framework, to explicitly define equity as part of their plan, and name racial subgroups that should receive special emphasis. Other state plans tended to be general and therefore superficial in nature, merely offering modest examples of inequity rather than describing structural inequities that need to be addressed to close equity gaps in student outcomes. Kurlaender et al. (2019, p. 9) reported that access to a rigorous course of study is often unequally distributed in schools, and for some students, “the option to enroll in them is outside of their control.” For example, if schools rely on students to self-select into advanced courses, they may not see how students' varied levels of college knowledge may impact their decisions to complete advanced coursework that they need to meet college admissions standards. Further, course prerequisites or tracking practices in schools may limit historically underserved students' access to advanced courses. Policies that are couched within the color-blind language of success for “all students” do little to dismantle structural inequities that limit students' access to, participation in, and completion of programs that prepare them for college and careers.

In terms of CCRI for high schools, the factors most frequently adopted were graduation rates and school attendance. An assortment of additional CCRI were identified, with several states including multiple ways to hold high schools—and their students—accountable. Many states elected to offer varied pathways for students and high schools to demonstrate college, career, *or* military readiness, but there was little to no uniformity, as the number and types of indicators varied considerably across the entire set of state plans.

Finally, with respect to equity, many states tipped toward the perspective that identifying numerous indicators to demonstrate CCR attainment would provide flexible, personalized pathways for students to engage in high school learning experiences that prepare them for postsecondary transitions. They tended to point to the development of rigorous CCR standards directed at all students graduating ready for college and careers without acknowledging past history showing different pathways have the potential to produce very different—and potentially inequitable—outcomes. For example, pathways framed as college preparatory or CTE may expose long-standing tensions and divisions between academic and CTE coursework that reinforce tracking long and widely recognized as perpetuating inequities between majority and minority populations. If tracking historically racially minoritized students into pathways that do not integrate CTE with rigorous academics emerges under ESSA, it is likely the states will perpetuate structural inequities long recognized as problematic (see, for example, Oakes & Saunders, 2008). With few exceptions, states do not appear to have developed plans articulating how schools will ensure racially minoritized

students are enrolling and completing rigorous courses, as identified through their high school CCRIs. So that they do not replicate past deleterious results, SEAs must address how educational systems will increase rigor and disrupt the reinstatement of tracking practices. If state officials and educators do not acknowledge that schools perpetuate structural racism, inequitable outcomes will continue to pervade schools across the U.S. educational landscape. As Black (2017) concluded, “the ESSA’s willingness to largely ignore input equality and adequacy assumes that inputs are of limited relevance to student outcomes” (p. 1355). Since many state plans offer CCRIs that seem to expect students to demonstrate readiness for college *or* career, instead of both, the potential to replicate tracking emerges more strongly under ESSA than NCLB and is potentially further reinforced by the continuation of separate federal legislation for CTE. The fact that few states are using ESSA to address persistent inequities related to students’ CCR is reason for concern. Without a clear focus on addressing the needs of racially minoritized students, the ESSA will do little to address the historic and persistent equity gaps in our nation’s public schools.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

We note some limitations in our research methods. The focus of this study was the extent to which each state chose to highlight aspects of college-and-career readiness and equity within their ESSA accountability plans, and we delimited our analysis to the text contained within these plans. We acknowledge that the 2017 revised template did not require references to CCR and equity—even though these were included in the ESSA legislation—and states electing to use this template may have chosen to exclude these references in their plans. It is possible that many states are deeply immersed in CCR and equity reform activities (whether relatively recent developments or long-standing initiatives) and that policy officials who created their plans simply chose not to include this information in the plans. For this study, we did not analyze state legislation or related documents prepared by states that may have described their CCR activities and equity commitments, as that was not our purpose. As we noted in the research methods section, states’ submissions varied greatly, ranging between 80 to 427 pages; consequently, the more in-depth plans contained context and explanation required fine-grained analysis. Arguably, policy officials may decide to incorporate their state CCR activities into the ESSA accountability provisions, strategically applying federal funding to align state and federal initiatives. Because ESSA represents the first time that an emphasis on CCR was included in ESEA legislation, we were interested in exploring the extent to which states choose to address this requirement in their plans. Consequently, our analysis should be interpreted within this context and viewed as informative of future research that delves into policy implementation and also policy evaluation.

Based on our findings, and acknowledging the limitations of our research design, we propose that additional studies can be conducted. This research can be expanded, through including state CCR legislation and state-level policy initiatives related to CCR, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico are electing to implementing policy to address students’ preparation for college and careers. Interviews of state policy officials charged with development of the ESSA accountability plans could be conducted, to discern how their understandings of CCR and individual state commitments to CCR influenced the formation of state plans, as well as to determine how the political actions of state actors may have affected plan developments. Finally, in-depth case studies could be conducted for those states that submitted plans that were deliberate in integrating CCR commitments and activities throughout their plans, to identify how state policy officials were effective in leveraging ESSA mandates to align with existing state CCR activities. Doing so, we hope, will provide information of value to those scholars,

practitioners, and policymakers who see it as imperative—as we do—that our K-12 and higher education institutions and systems converge around shared goals related to student readiness for college, careers, and citizenship.

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About the Authors

Donald G. Hackmann

Iowa State University

dghack@iastate.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3869-1201>

Donald G. Hackmann is the Frances S. and Arthur L. Wallace Professor and Director of the School of Education at Iowa State University and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research focuses on school leaders' practices in support of college and career readiness, including career pathways, career academies, cross-sector collaboration, equity and data use, distributed leadership, and school improvement. A second research interest involves leadership preparation program quality and staffing, including characteristics of faculty, and mentoring of graduate students and novice faculty.

Joel R. Malin

Miami University

malinjr@miamioh.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6642-3434>

Joel R. Malin is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University-Oxford, Ohio. Malin's research focuses on research-practice-policy connections, and upon the leadership and organization of complex, cross-sector collaborations. His research in the latter area has primarily addressed college and career readiness reforms, occurring at the intersection of secondary and higher education. In the former area, his book *The Role of Knowledge Brokers in Education* (edited with Chris Brown), was published by Routledge in 2019.

Debra D. Bragg

University of Washington

bragg.associates.inc@gmail.com

Debra D. Bragg is director of Community College Research Initiatives at the University of Washington in Seattle and Edward William and Jane Marr Gutsell Endowed Professor emerita and founding director of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Bragg's research focuses on P-20 transitions from K-12 education to community colleges and universities, as well as employment. She has led national studies on policy reforms associated with dual enrollment, college and career readiness, career pathways, career and technical education, high-performing transfer partnerships, and community college baccalaureates.

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