SIX PILLARS OF EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

AN ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT STATE POLICY AND HOW TO IMPROVE IT

By Cheryl Almeida, Adria Steinberg, Janet Santos, and Cecilia Le

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Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

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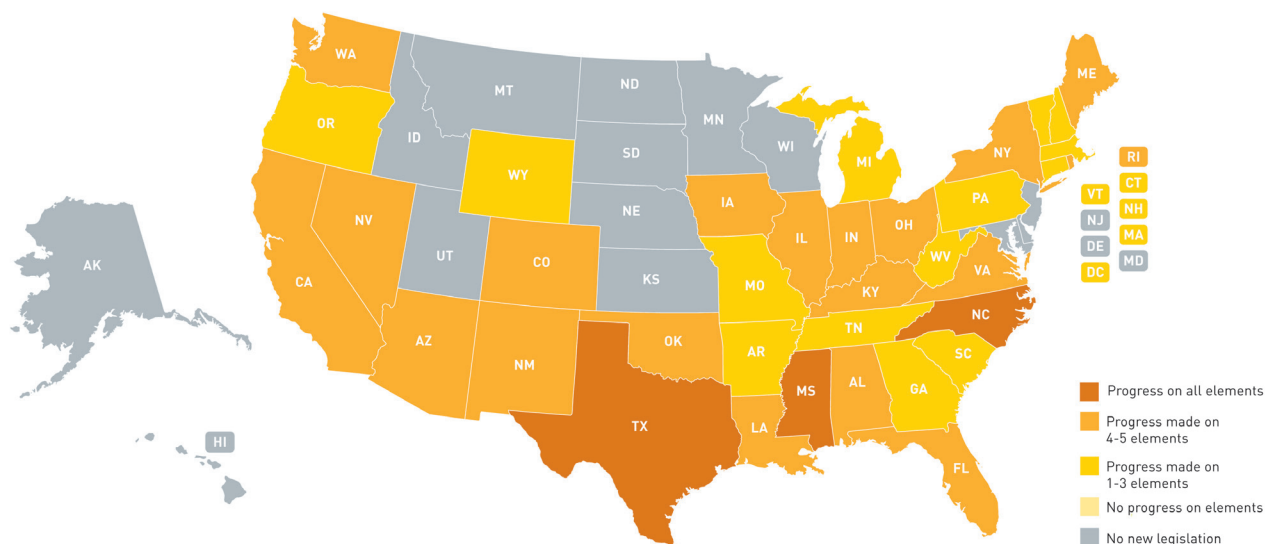
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Solving America's dropout crisis requires immediate, drastic action. President Obama underscored the urgency in his March 2010 announcement of an additional $900 million federal investment to improve the nation's graduation rates. Noting that nearly one in three students fails to graduate high school each year, President Obama called this "a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore." The nation's economy and individual success are tied more closely than ever to the level of education people achieve. Today's family-supporting jobs require not only a high school diploma but also increasingly higher skills and postsecondary credentials.

Intractable as the dropout problem may seem, recognition of its magnitude has created an environment ripe for action. Most notably, federal regulations adopted in 2008 require states to use more accurate ways of counting dropouts and holding districts and schools more accountable for improving results. In addition, encouraging developments over the past decade have put major improvement within reach: better data collection and analysis; promising research showing that a small set of school-based variables are highly effective in predicting future dropouts; and

pioneering prevention and recovery strategies in cities with the highest concentrations of dropouts.

Ideally, policymakers and educational leaders in every state will draw on these developments to design and implement comprehensive approaches to improving graduation rates. *Six Pillars of Effective Dropout Prevention and Recovery* helps states take the crucial first step: evaluating each state's dropout prevention and recovery policies to determine how well they currently support innovation for better student outcomes.

This report identifies six model policy elements that frame a sound legislative strategy for dropout prevention and recovery, and it assesses the extent to which recent state policy aligns with these model elements. Overall, 36 states and the District of Columbia have enacted new dropout legislation since 2002. While some states have moved toward adopting comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery policies, nearly all of them have a long way to go. Nearly one-third of the nation—14 states—have enacted no new laws aimed at increasing graduation rates in the past eight years.

State Progress on Model Policy Elements Since 2002

Legend:
- Progress on all elements
- Progress made on 4–5 elements
- Progress made on 1–3 elements
- No progress on elements
- No new legislation

Of the states that have passed new dropout legislation, few are fundamentally changing how they educate struggling students or seek to bring back those who leave school altogether. Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia have made significant progress in implementing three or more model policy elements. But only three states–Texas, Mississippi, and North Carolina–have made progress on all six elements. Texas and North Carolina, in particular, stand out for their comprehensive and far-reaching policies to increase graduation rates.

STATE BY STATE

This brief analyzes policy for a subset of 36 states and the District of Columbia that have passed new dropout legislation since 2002. Information for each state is available on the JFF Web site at http://www.jff.org/dropoutpolicy.

MODEL POLICY ELEMENTS

1. REINFORCE THE RIGHT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION.

States should ensure that schools and districts deliver on the federal promise that every student has the right to a free public education through high school graduation.

Increasingly, states are recognizing that policies allowing young people to drop out of high school at age 16 or earlier are out of sync with the demands of today's economy. One notable trend has been to require students to stay in school until they earn a diploma or turn 18. Seven states have done so since 2002, bringing the total to fifteen; an additional five states have raised the compulsory age to 17.

However, simply raising the compulsory attendance age is not enough. While most states have laws entitling students to a free public education until age 21, few fund or otherwise encourage new educational options designed either to meet the particular needs of older students or to target recruitment efforts at bringing older dropouts back to school.

2. COUNT AND ACCOUNT FOR DROPOUTS.

States should set public goals for substantial improvements in graduation rates and use a cohort methodology to report on progress toward those goals. Graduation rates, in tandem with academic achievement, should be a key measure of accountability for districts and schools.

Among the six elements, states have made the most progress in counting and accounting for dropouts: thirty-two states have mandated enhanced data collection or reporting, established goals for improving graduation rates, or implemented better systems to identify students at risk of dropping out.

In addition, twenty-two states now calculate graduation rates using the "four-year cohort" rate endorsed by the National Governors Association's Graduation Counts Compact. This rate tracks outcomes for an entering ninth-grade class over four years. Eleven more states plan to begin using this method by 2011.

3. USE GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES TO TRIGGER TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM.

New predictive indicators can ensure that individual students, from the earliest signs that they are off track toward earning a high school diploma, get the supports they need to stay in school and advance. Yet states must not neglect the more transformative strategies: they should help districts with low graduation rates implement far-reaching reforms, including the redesign of high schools that currently lose the most students and the implementation of new models to get struggling students back on track.

While most of the thirty-six states and the District of Columbia use graduation rates or off-track indicators to trigger reform, the range of actions is narrow. In most cases, schools provide at-risk students with assistance (e.g., tutoring, coaches). Only four states couple student-based interventions with systemic efforts to redesign schools.

4. INVENT NEW MODELS.

States should create and sustain a designated vehicle for developing and implementing "Back on Track" models, using competitive grants and other such funding mechanisms to encourage continuing innovation and the expansion of successful models.

A few states have invested in developing and replicating new school models that reengage off-track youth. In a handful of states, competitive grant programs support districts and, in some cases, nonprofits or postsecondary institutions to develop or enhance models designed to recover dropouts. And in two states—North Carolina and Texas—nimble and strategic public-private initiatives are implementing innovation on a large scale and with consistent quality and efficiency.

5. ACCELERATE PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS.

States should explicitly include "off-track" students in their strategies for accelerating high school completion and preparation for postsecondary success. Policies should encourage districts to use proven models (e.g., dual enrollment, online courses) to help at-risk students recover lost ground efficiently and develop the academic skills and behaviors required for earning postsecondary credentials.

Recognition is growing among states that dropouts and off-track students benefit from acceleration—not remediation—in their curriculum and instruction. Fifteen states have expanded at least one accelerated learning opportunity to struggling students (e.g., Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, online learning).

6. PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC REFORM.

States should commit stable funding to the development of dropout prevention and recovery options that effect systemic change and support statewide expansions of successful models.

States have moved faster to identify the scope of the dropout problem than to appropriate enough money for programming to operate at a scale that matches the extent of the crisis. Twenty-one states provide, or at one time provided, funding that can support systemic reform to reduce dropouts. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws that create dropout prevention programs without new funding to support their implementation. Ten of them, including the District of Columbia, allocated no new funding for any programmatic initiative, while seven states chose to fund some dropout initiatives and not others.

"

Our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right. Of course, getting it right requires more than just transforming our lowest-performing schools. It requires giving students who are behind in school a chance to catch up and a path to a diploma.

"

INTRODUCTION

Solving America's dropout crisis requires immediate, drastic action. President Obama underscored the urgency in his March 2010 announcement of an additional $900 million federal investment to improve the nation's graduation rates. Noting that nearly one in three students fails to graduate high school each year, President Obama called this "a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore."[1]

The President was highlighting the deep concern about low graduation rates that has been building for years among governors, state legislators, mayors, and civic leaders. As he pointed out, individual success is tied more closely than ever to the level of education Americans achieve—as is the nation's economy. Today's family-supporting jobs require not only a high school diploma but also increasingly higher skills and postsecondary credentials.

Intractable as the dropout problem may seem, recognition of its magnitude has created an environment ripe for action. Increased federal scrutiny has increased pressure on state leaders to promote change; most notably, federal regulations adopted in 2008 require states to use more accurate ways to count dropouts and hold districts and schools more accountable for improving results.[2]

In addition, alarm over startlingly low graduation rates from large urban cities to single-high-school towns has spurred several encouraging developments over the past decade: better data collection and analysis; promising research into risk factors which shows that a small set of school-based variables are highly effective in predicting future dropouts; and the creation of cutting-edge prevention and recovery strategies in cities with the highest concentrations of dropouts (Balfanz, Almeida, & Steinberg et al. 2009).

Ideally, every state will draw on these developments to design and implement comprehensive and strategic approaches to reducing dropout rates and improving graduation rates. It is critical that states build on the most recent and rigorous research about effective strategies and program models, and that they provide supports to enable statewide scale-ups of these solutions.

This report helps state policymakers take the important first step: *evaluating their states' dropout prevention and recovery policies to determine how well they currently aid in improving outcomes for dropouts and struggling students*. Without thoughtful and thorough policy, states will be hamstrung in their efforts to address their dropout problems or make a major difference in the economic prospects of their youth.

MODEL POLICY ELEMENTS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

Six Pillars of Effective Dropout Prevention and Recovery documents the recent activity in all 50 states and the District of Columbia on dropout prevention and recovery policy, and it analyzes the potential impact of these laws in the subset of states passing new legislation. This scan of dropout legislation illuminates the extent to which each state is designing comprehensive approaches to stem the dropout epidemic, ranging from modest programmatic "add-ons" to more extensive and promising reforms.

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002, 36 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws directed at lowering dropout rates and increasing graduation rates. To analyze whether and how quickly these states are creating the conditions to dramatically lower dropout rates, JFF identified six model policy elements that frame a sound legislative strategy for dropout prevention and recovery. The elements are based on JFF's policy research for this report, the most recent research and expert thinking in the field, and the collective expertise of JFF on effective dropout prevention and recovery strategies. (*See the appendix for a description of the research methodology, including the criteria used for coding state policies.*)

The six policy elements that all states should incorporate in order to ensure a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention and recovery are:

1. **REINFORCE THE RIGHT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION:** States should ensure that schools and districts deliver on the federal promise that every student has the right to a free public education through high school graduation. Only raising the compulsory attendance age is not enough.

2. **COUNT AND ACCOUNT FOR DROPOUTS:** States should set public goals for making substantial improvements in graduation rates and use a cohort methodology to report publicly on progress toward those goals. Graduation rates, in tandem with student academic achievement, should be a key measure of accountability for districts and schools.

3. **USE GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES TO TRIGGER SIGNIFICANT AND TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM:** States should use new predictive indicators to ensure that individual students get the supports they need to stay in school and advance academically from the earliest signs that they are off track to earning a high school diploma. But states must not neglect the more transformative strategies. They should help districts with low graduation rates implement far-reaching reforms, including the redesign of high schools losing the most students and the implementation of new models to accelerate student learning and get off-track students back on track to a high school diploma and postsecondary attainment.

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION POLICY

Alternative education policies are not included in this research. JFF performed a separate, 50-state analysis of alternative education policy, examining how well states enable and encourage alternative schools and programs to serve as pathways for off-track students to graduate ready for college. The findings of this analysis are described in the brief *Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy and How to Improve It*.

4. **INVENT NEW MODELS:** States should create and sustain a designated vehicle for developing and implementing back-on-track models, using competitive grants and other such funding mechanisms to encourage continuing innovation and the expansion of successful models.

5. **ACCELERATE PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS:** States should explicitly include off-track students in their strategies for accelerating high school completion and preparation for postsecondary success. Policies should encourage districts to use proven approaches (e.g., dual enrollment, online courses) to help at-risk students recover lost ground efficiently and develop the academic skills and behaviors required for earning postsecondary credentials.

6. **PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC REFORM:** States should commit stable funding to the development of dropout prevention and recovery options that effect systemic change and support the statewide expansions of successful models.

STATE BY STATE

This report assesses the extent to which recent state dropout prevention and recovery policy aligns with the six model policy elements, revealing the areas in which states have had the most and least traction.[3] Information for each state is available on the JFF Web site at http://www.jff.org/dropoutpolicy.
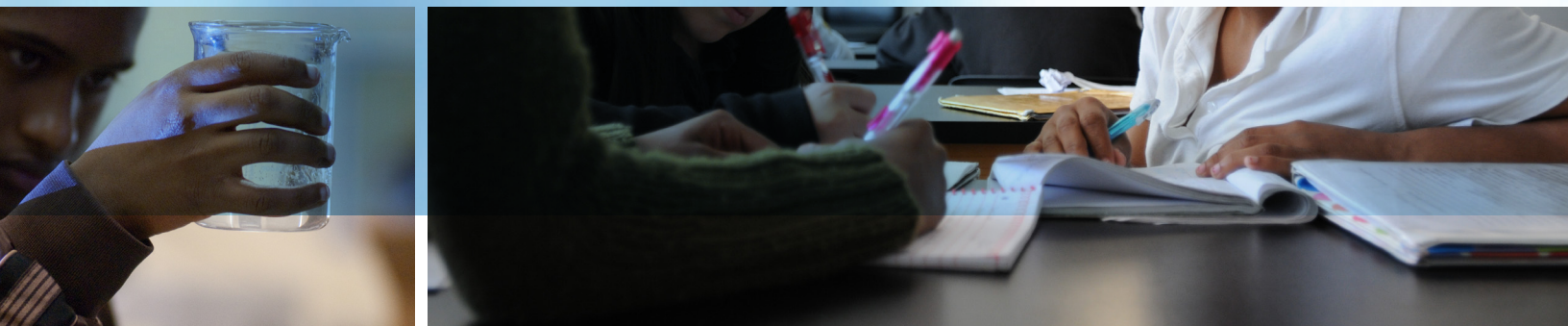
STATE OF THE STATES: AN OVERVIEW OF DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY POLICIES

While some states have moved toward adopting comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery policies, the vast majority have a long way to go. Nearly one-third of the nation—14 states—has enacted no new laws aimed at increasing graduation rates in the past eight years.[4] Of the 36 states and the District of Columbia that have passed new dropout legislation, few are fundamentally changing how they educate struggling students or seek to bring back those who leave school altogether.

States are generally taking steps that they know how to take well. They are using blunt but important policies that incorporate some facets of a comprehensive approach, such as counting and accounting for dropouts, raising the compulsory school attendance age, and providing grant programs for a broad range of targeted dropout prevention and recovery programs. These actions are clear, visible signs that increasing the number of students who complete high school is a top priority. They are easy for both the public and policymakers to understand and stand behind.

Meanwhile, a few states are instituting other types of policy that are just as critical but more difficult to implement because they require fundamental changes in the ways that states organize education. For example, while collecting better data is essential to grasping the scope of a state's dropout problem, it also should be a tool to help design dramatic school transformation strategies. While requiring high school students to attend school until age 18 is necessary, it will not in itself engage or serve older dropouts. While grant programs can spur innovation, they need to focus on evidence-based, back-on-track models that offer pathways to graduation and postsecondary success for students who are over-age, under-credited, or have left school.
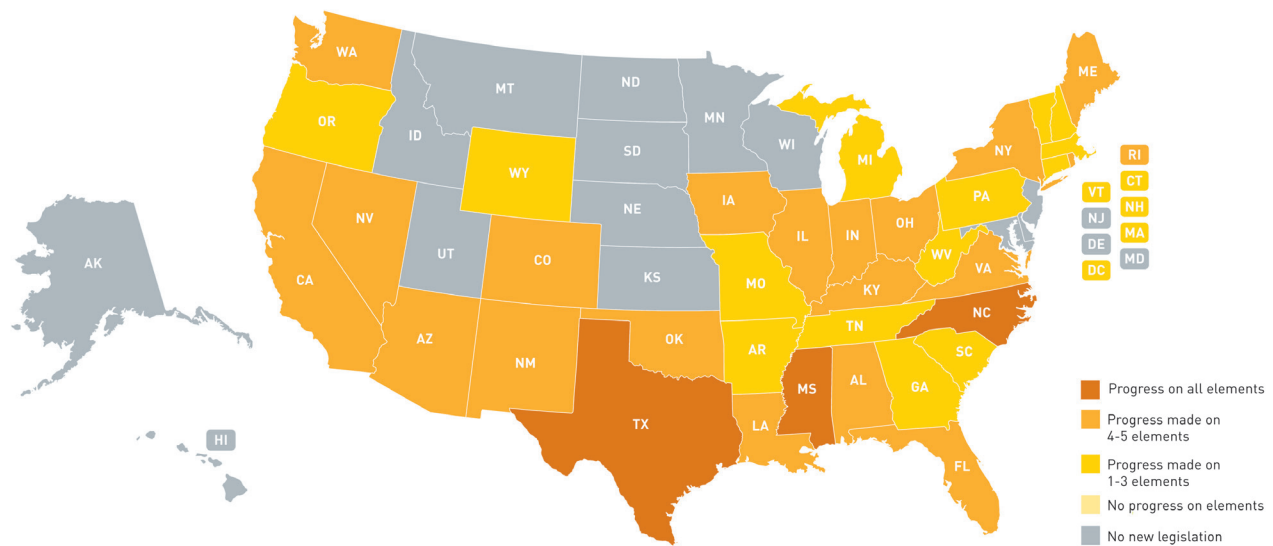
Almost every state that has enacted legislation related to dropouts since 2002 has addressed at least one of the six model policy elements (*see page 6*). Twenty-nine states, including the District of Columbia, have made significant progress in three or more model policy areas (*see Figure 1*). However, only Texas, Mississippi, and North Carolina have made progress on all six elements. Texas and North Carolina, in particular, stand out for their comprehensive and far-reaching policies to increase graduation rates. *(For details on Texas's comprehensive strategy, see box, "Texas: Breaking Ground in Education Reform," page 14.)*

Increasingly, states are recognizing that policies allowing young people to drop out of high school at age 16 or earlier are out of sync with the demands of today's economy. One notable trend has been for states to require students to stay in school until they earn a diploma or turn 18. Seven states have done so since 2002, bringing the total to fifteen; an additional five states have raised the compulsory age to 17.

Most states also have laws entitling students to a free public education until their 21st birthday. However, such legislation usually does not fund or otherwise encourage new educational options designed to meet the particular needs of older students; nor do states target recruitment efforts at bringing dropouts back to school. In addition, loopholes in some state policies continue to allow school districts to turn away older dropouts trying to earn a diploma.

States have made the most progress in counting and accounting for dropouts. The majority of the 36 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws that mandate enhanced data collection or reporting, establish goals for increasing graduation rates, or implement more effective warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out. This is a welcome change from the many years that most states and the federal government obscured the magnitude of the problem with inaccurate data, misleading calculations, and inadequate accountability systems.[5]

Legend:
- Progress on all elements
- Progress made on 4-5 elements
- Progress made on 1-3 elements
- No progress on elements
- No new legislation

In addition, 22 states now calculate graduation rates using the four-year cohort graduation rate endorsed by the National Governors Association's Graduation Counts Compact.[6] The "four-year cohort" rate tracks graduation outcomes for an entering ninth-grade class over a four-year period and provides each state with an accurate measure of its dropout problem.[7] The other 15 states including the District of Columbia that have enacted recent dropout laws are not yet reporting cohort graduation rates. However, almost all of them plan to do so by 2011 (Curran & Reyna 2009).

Twelve states also factor four-year cohort graduation rates into their accountability programs for high schools; however, most have not established meaningful progress goals (Achieve 2009; Princiotta & Reyna 2009). State policies reveal mixed progress on the use of graduation and off-track data to help schools and districts implement significant reform. While most of the 36 state legislatures use graduation rates or at-risk indicators to trigger reform activity, the range of actions is relatively narrow. In most cases, schools provide individual at-risk students with assistance (e.g., academic tutoring, social supports, graduation coaches). Only four states employ student-based interventions coupled with systemic efforts to redesign high schools with low graduation rates.

Another promising development has been a growing recognition that dropouts and off-track students benefit from acceleration, not remediation—in their curriculum and instruction. Fifteen states have expanded accelerated learning opportunities to struggling students as well as high-performing ones. However, too few legislatures have invested in the development and replication of new school models that reengage off-track youth or get high school dropouts back on track to a college-ready high school diploma.

Unfortunately, funding continues to be a significant barrier. States have moved faster to identify the scope of the dropout problem than to appropriate enough money to sustain the programs needed to address the crisis. Twenty-one states from our sample either provide (or at one time provided) funding that can support systemic reform to reduce dropouts. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws that create dropout prevention programs without new funding to support implementation.[8]

STATE PROGRESS ON MODEL POLICY ELEMENTS, 2002-09

Model Policy Element	Number Of States Adressing Aspects of Policy Element
1. REINFORCE THE RIGHT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION	
> Compulsory attendance age is 18	15
> Maximum allowable age is 21	25
> Maximum allowable age is over 21	2
> Compulsory age raised since NCLB	11
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**31**
2. COUNT AND ACCOUNT FOR DROPOUTS	
> Enhanced data collection and/or public reporting	19
> Using leading/early warning indicators	11
> Reporting NGA four-year cohort graduation rates	22
> Using NGA four-year cohort graduation rates in calculations for accountability	12
> Public goals are set by government leadership	7
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**32**
3. USE GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES TO TRIGGER TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM	
> Targeted interventions	26
> High school redesign strategies	4
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**26**
4. INVENT NEW MODELS	
> Statewide effort to spread new models	2
> Competitive grants that allow for new models	3
> Charter priority for back-on-track models	2
> Appropriation to community colleges	1
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**7**
5. ACCELERATE PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS	
> Dual enrollment	8
> Advanced Placement	5
> Credit recovery	6
> Online learning	5
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**15**
6. PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC REFORM	
> Funding formula/block grants	8
> Line item/competitive grants	11
> Other budgetary appropriations	6
> New programmatic legislation but no new funding	17
Total number of states addressing at least one aspect of the policy element	**21**

Subcategories under each element are not mutually exclusive. For the purposes of reporting, the District of Columbia is counted as a state. The table is based on a sample of states and the District of Columbia adopting new dropout policy or amending existing policies between 2002 and 2009.

A DEEPER LOOK AT STATE PROGRESS

Taken together, the six model elements provide the policy underpinnings of a state approach that couples accountability with a multifaceted solution set geared toward accelerating the learning of struggling students and getting them back on track to both a high school diploma and postsecondary attainment. This set includes targeted interventions, high school redesign, and program innovation. Looking in depth at state progress on each policy element gives states and advocates a framework for determining where to focus future efforts and provides them with exemplary policies upon which they can draw.

1. REINFORCE THE RIGHT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION

Young people in the United States should have the right to a free public education beyond age 18. Four states extend that promise through age 20. Twenty-five states do so until students graduate from high school or reach age 21. In **Indiana**, the right extends to age 22. The most significant expansion of the right to public education has occurred in **Texas**, which authorizes funding for districts to serve young people up to age 26 (De Souza & Colasanti 2007).[9]

However, policies in most states fail to reinforce these rights. Recent dropout prevention and recovery legislation rarely encourages older dropouts to return to school and complete their education. In fact, some states give explicit leeway to schools and districts to turn away older returning dropouts seeking a diploma if the district or school determines that they cannot "reasonably graduate" by their 20th or 21st birthday due to age or lack or credits.[10]

Public School Entitlement Ages for States Passing New Legislation Since 2002

Legend:
- Determined by local districts
- Over 21
- At 21
- At 20
- No upper age limit
- No new legislation
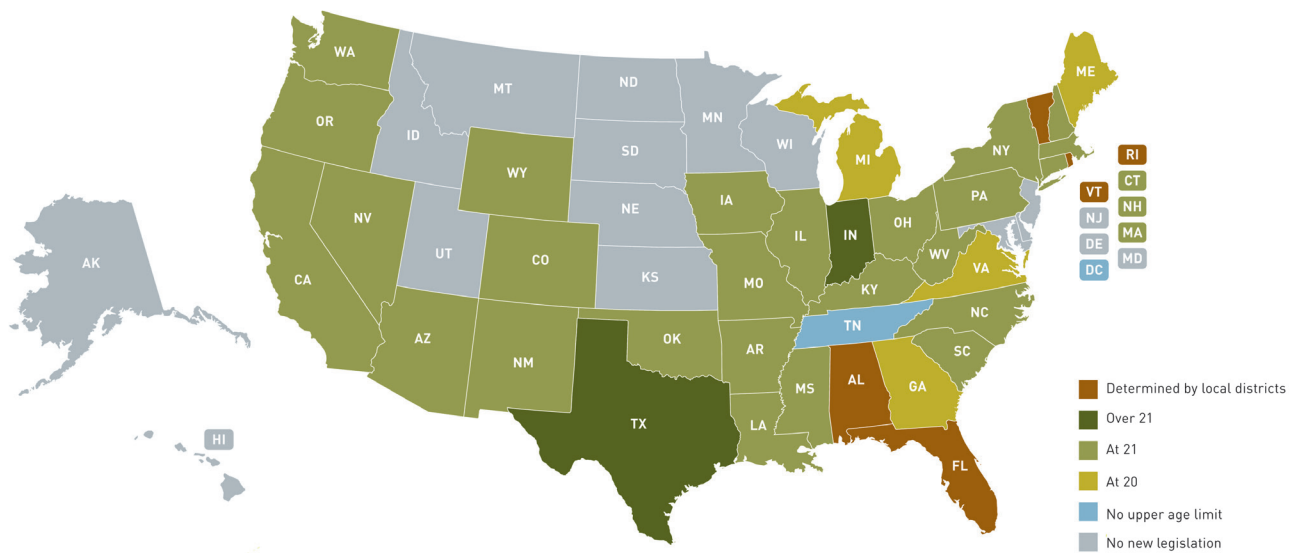
Source: Adapted and updated from De Souza & Colasanti. 2007.

State policies should establish the responsibility of districts to provide appropriate school options for all students who have dropped out, especially those close to "aging out" of their entitlement and who could benefit from programs designed to accelerate their learning and earning of credits. Only six states—**California**, **Florida**, **Louisiana**, **Mississippi**, **Nevada**, and **Texas**—include credit recovery programs in their dropout legislation (*see: "Accelerate Preparation for Postsecondary Success," page 17*).
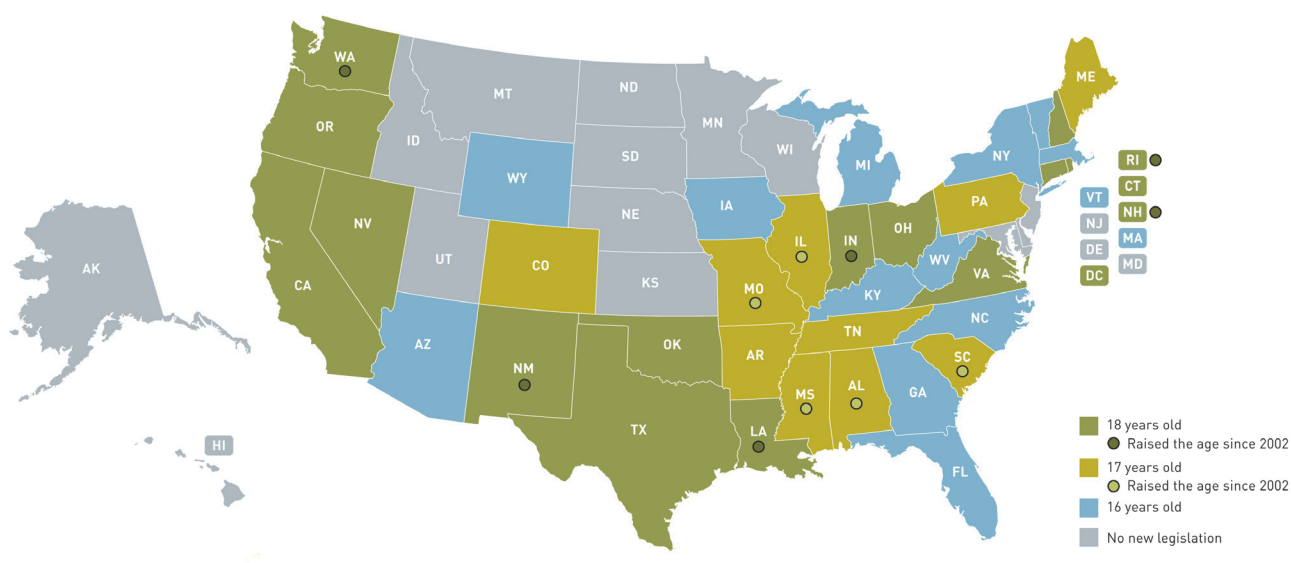
While some young people leave high school before earning more than a few credits, many actually leave high school with at least half of the credits required for a diploma. Some cities are boosting graduation rates and reducing dropout rates significantly by creating new options for this population. For example, New York City's 22 Young Adult Borough Centers use school buildings after school hours to operate programs designed for dropouts who are at least halfway to graduation.[11] Boston has credit recovery centers in 10 neighborhoods for students who are just a few credits short of completion.[12] However, **Texas** is the only state that has led or supported strategies to ensure that districts and schools deliver on the promise of free public high school education until graduation or a student has reached the state's entitlement age.

RAISING THE COMPULSORY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AGE

A recent trend among states is to increase the compulsory school attendance age to 18; fourteen states and the District of Columbia have now made it law. Before No Child Left Behind, most states allowed students to leave school at age 16 (Bush et al. 2009). Vestiges from a century ago, these laws reflected an agrarian and industrial society in which families relied on their teenage children to work and contribute to a household's income; a high school diploma was an uncommon achievement.

Recent legislative activity suggests a growing recognition that such laws are obsolete and hinder young people's economic prospects. Since 2002, eleven states have changed their laws to acknowledge that a compulsory education age of 16 is not aligned with modern economic realities. However, nine of these states and three others allow for exceptions. For instance, a parent or district in **Pennsylvania** or **Nevada** can release students from school at a younger age because of employment or other reasons (De Souza & Colasanti 2007). For the most part,

Compulsory Attendance Ages in States Passing New Legislation Since 2002

Legend:
- 18 years old
  - Raised the age since 2002
- 17 years old
  - Raised the age since 2002
- 16 years old
- No new legislation

Source: Adapted and updated from Bush et al. 2009.

these laws do not specifically require a school district to delineate the process for leaving school, articulate the rationale, document the number of departures, or report the data publicly.

Furthermore, nearly a third of the states in our sample still allow students to drop out at age 16 (Bush et al. 2009). In a few states, they can quit even earlier. **Arizona**, **Vermont**, and **Wyoming** require only completion of the tenth grade. Ten other states require schooling until age 17 (Bush et al. 2009).

Stricter compulsory school attendance laws generally attract broad public support, and their implementation is relatively straightforward. However, budget concerns have derailed some recent legislative efforts to increase the attendance age. Policymakers are worried about the potential cost to states if every 16- and 17-year-old dropout were to remain in school. In **Maryland**, bills to increase the legal dropout age to 18 stalled in 2006 and 2008 when lawmakers were presented with an estimated cost of $200 million a year. In **Florida**, legislators held back on a similar bill after officials estimated it would cost the state $425 million annually (Dunbar 2008).

2. COUNT AND ACCOUNT FOR DROPOUTS

Making a meaningful commitment to dropout prevention and recovery requires knowing the full scope of the problem and using this information to drive systemic improvement. To that end, 31 states and the District of Columbia have included policies to improve the way they count and account for dropouts. Each of these states has made one or more key legislative changes in data collection and accountability. These include using more accurate methods for calculating dropout and graduation rates, setting public goals for substantial increases in these rates, and making those data transparent to the public.

An area of major progress for states has been improving the accuracy and reporting of graduation data. In 2005, governors of all 50 states committed to counting graduates using a common cohort rate, which gives a more accurate sense of how well high schools are retaining their students up to graduation.[13] To date, 22 states have reported a cohort graduation rate; 10 states and the District of Columbia are in the process of improving their data systems in order to do so by 2011 (Curran & Reyna 2009).[14]

State Progress in Counting and Accounting for Dropouts Since 2002
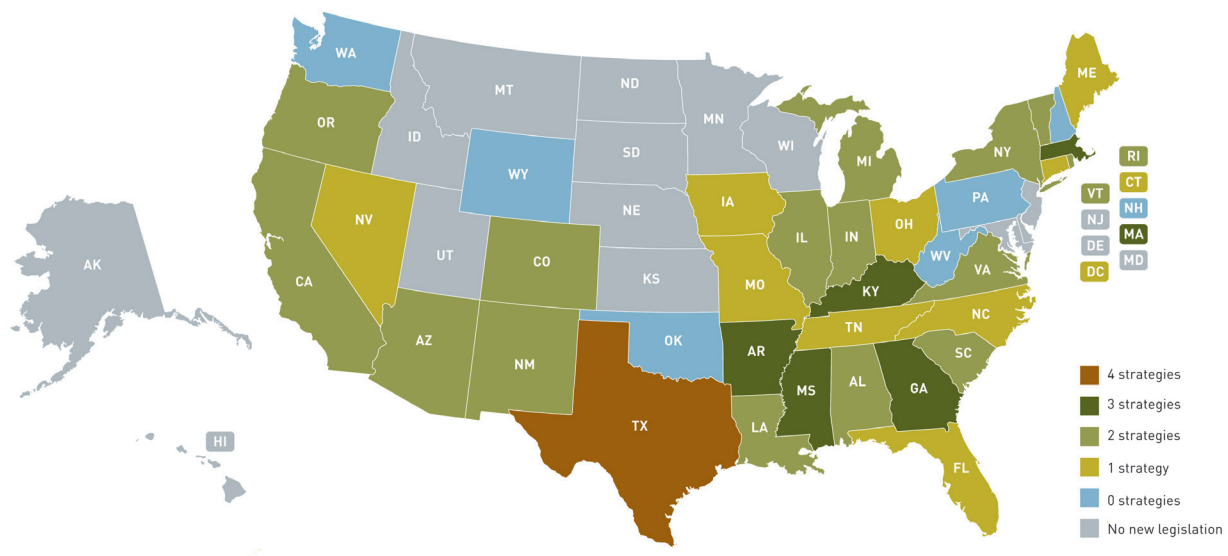
Source: JFF analysis of states' policies. For more details, see Appendix.

INCREASING THE VISIBILITY OF IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Setting Goals

States can demonstrate their commitment to improving outcomes for all young people by establishing clear and public goals for reducing the number of dropouts, increasing the number of graduates, and sending more students on to postsecondary education. In 2006, two state legislatures established specific goals and timelines for reducing dropout rates. **Mississippi** set the goal of a graduation rate of 85 percent by 2018-19. The state also directed the Office of Dropout Prevention to establish graduation rate benchmarks for each two-year period until then. Similarly, the **Kentucky** legislature formally set out to cut the annual statewide dropout rate by 2006 by 50 percent and reduce the number of young adults without a high school diploma or GED by 30 percent.

A few governors have made similar public proclamations in "State of the State" addresses. **Nevada's** governor has committed the state to increasing the graduation rate by 10 percent by 2013, and **Colorado's** governor is aiming to halve that state's dropout rate by 2017 (Princiotta & Reyna 2009). This type of public statement establishes dropout reduction as a major priority and puts the spotlight on an often-neglected population.

Improving Public Awareness

Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to improve the public's awareness of and access to graduation data. For example, **California** requires its state superintendent to report to the legislature annually on dropout and graduation rates, to make the same report available to the public, and to accompany the release of the report with publicly accessible data for each school and district.

Other states have created dropout prevention and recovery commissions or task forces. Such commissions can heighten the attention to dropouts and the need for additional programming and resources. For example, in 2009, **Arkansas** legislated the creation of the Arkansas Project Graduation Commission, a standing committee staffed by the state department of education, with appointed members serving three-year terms. The commission is charged with advising the legislature on effective strategies for improving high school and postsecondary outcomes and the costs to the state's economy of low educational attainment among young people.

In **Massachusetts**, the legislature created the Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission in 2008 and charged it with studying best practices both statewide and nationwide. The commission's report, released at a high-profile event in 2009 with the lieutenant governor and top education officials in attendance, has become the foundation for the state's dropout reduction strategy.

IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

While states have made significant progress in collecting and reporting graduation rates, they fall short in holding districts and schools accountable for failing to graduate students. Only 12 of the 22 states that report a cohort graduation rate include those reports in their state-level accountability systems, and most of that subgroup uses progress measures that are too weak to be meaningful.[15] For example, states often allow almost any progress in graduation rates to be counted as sufficient, including annual improvement targets as low as 0.01 percent.

Recent changes in federal accountability regulations are increasing pressure on states to make graduation rates as important as student performance on state tests. New federal regulations go into effect for the 2010-11 school year, requiring states to use a cohort graduation measure and to set aggressive graduation goals and annual targets for improvement. Districts and schools that do not meet their states' goals will have to demonstrate "continuous and substantial improvement" toward meeting that goal each year.[16]

State Progress on Adopting the National Govenors Association Cohort Graduation Rate Since 2002

Sources: Curran & Ryan 2009; Achieve, Inc. 2009.

GROWING INTEREST IN EARLY WARNING INDICATORS

States' progress in calculating, reporting, and using cohort graduation rates has been made possible by significant advances in the capacity of student-based, longitudinal data systems. As states continue to develop their data capabilities, some are interested in designing early warning systems as well. These systems build on groundbreaking studies that pinpoint school-based indicators for reliably identifying students who, without school-based intervention, are very unlikely to graduate (*see box, "Predicting Success," page 12*).

This growing body of research offers a powerful methodology for states to use while planning systemic and strategic interventions that are based on more detailed understanding of the crisis in specific geographic areas. One sign of progress is that a number of states are taking advantage of this important knowledge at the statewide level.

Louisiana is one trailblazer, developing an early warning system that balances the need to report on risk factors identified at the state level with the flexibility to adjust risk factors at the local level. At the state level, the system flags students who are absent at least 10 percent of the days they are enrolled, are over-age for their grade level, or whose grade point averages have decreased by at least 0.50.[17] Because the specific trigger points can vary by district and school, both can make modifications as needed. To ensure that staff can use the data to develop and deliver effective interventions for identified students, the system automatically emails results to district and school leaders twice a month. The state also provides incentives for districts and schools to use this system to improve outcomes for students. For example, schools can receive state grants and technology for developing intervention programs and producing student reports (Princiotta & Reyna 2009).

Louisiana's state-level early warning system has helped spur other states to develop their own systems. **Colorado** and **Arkansas** are beginning the process. Another nine states are either using predictors to identify and drive resources to the students most likely to drop out without intervention or have started to incorporate some components of an early warning system into their high school reporting. **Indiana** has taken an important first step by requiring schools to report students who are off track after the ninth grade, and then mandating that guidance

counselors develop plans to get them back on the path toward graduation. **Texas** identifies schools and districts with high concentrations of students at risk—those who have been retained a grade level, are failing in two or more core subject areas, or have previously quit school—and allows these districts to compete for additional resources. Furthermore, at-risk student data appear as a distinct subgroup in state reporting.

3. USE GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES TO TRIGGER TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM

Improved data systems are powerful tools by which states can more accurately track cohort graduation rates and predictive on-track and off-track data, and use that information to trigger effective interventions to improve student outcomes. Using this new information, states should be able to identify:

> Which students would benefit most from additional support services, credit recovery programs, and academic acceleration strategies; and

> Which schools and districts have high concentrations of potential non-graduates and therefore need substantial changes to school culture and organization.

Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia use at-risk indicators and/or graduation and dropout rates to identify off-track students or institutions in need of reform. However, only about a quarter of the states using at-risk data draw on the newer set of school-based indicators that are proven to have strong predictive power (*see box, "Predicting Success"*). The remaining states appear to rely on general at-risk indicators associated with dropping out, even though studies have shown that none of these factors—alone or in combination—accurately predict whether a particular student will graduate (Steinberg, Johnson, & Pennington 2006). Only four states combine student-based interventions with high school redesign efforts for schools with low graduation rates.

PREDICTING SUCCESS

Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research predicted future Chicago public school graduates with 85 percent accuracy by looking at a small set of factors at the end of their ninth-grade year: the number of credits earned and the number of failures in core courses. Students who were on track based on these factors at the end of ninth grade were four times more likely to graduate from high school than those who were not (Allensworth & Easton 2005; 2007).[18]
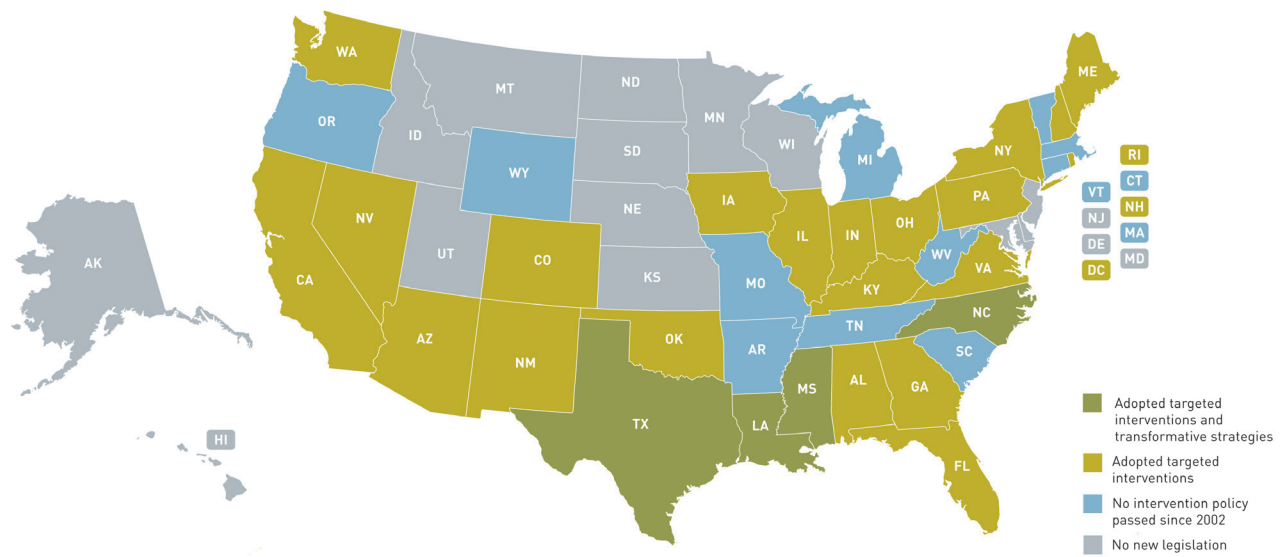
Researchers in Philadelphia found that they could predict future dropouts with 75 percent accuracy as early as the eighth grade using a small set of similar school-based indicators: failures in core courses, poor attendance, and behavioral grades. In fact, 80 percent of future dropouts exhibited at least one of these early warning signs during middle school or the first year of high school. The researchers have conducted similar studies with similar results in other cities, including Boston and Indianapolis (Neild & Balfanz 2007).

FOCUSING ON INTERVENTIONS

Whether states use data to identify troubled districts, schools, or individual students, the emerging solutions typically focus on student-based interventions. Many provide at-risk students with additional services, while some offer new programming designed to accelerate their progress (*see "Accelerate Preparation for Postsecondary Success," page 17*). Targeted services often include extra academic tutoring, test preparation, social-emotional supports, and case managers to help students negotiate the many difficult issues luring them to leave school.

Some states offer a range of interventions. For example, **New Hampshire's** dropout prevention and recovery policy provides for academic support, school-site mentors, opportunities for community service or peer-centered

State Progress in Using Graduation Rates to Trigger Reform Since 2002

Adopted targeted
interventions and
transformative strategies

Adopted targeted
interventions

No intervention policy
passed since 2002

No new legislation

Source: JFF analysis of states' policies. For more details, see Appendix.

activities during non-school hours, and a range of work-related programs, including work-based learning and school-sponsored workplace mentoring. Other states choose to invest in a single approach. For example, **Georgia** places graduation coaches in high schools as its primary strategy.

A few state legislatures have extended the reach of intervention approaches by promoting partnerships of schools or districts with postsecondary institutions or nonprofit entities. **New York's** Liberty Partnerships Program offers grants to partnerships of postsecondary institutions, school districts, and community-based organizations to provide a variety of services to middle and high school students at risk of dropping out. Services include extended-day and summer programs, counseling, mentoring, and college guidance and course-taking experiences. **California's** Educational Clinic Program offers chronically truant students and dropouts an opportunity to earn credits toward a high school diploma or to prepare for the GED. It also provides ways to gain basic academic and workforce skills through programs developed in partnership among districts, local nonprofit organizations, and businesses.

COUPLING INDIVIDUAL INTERVENTIONS WITH TRANSFORMATIVE REFORMS

While interventions designed to help individual students are necessary, so too is addressing underlying school-based and systemic factors. This is especially true for schools with high concentrations of students who are falling off track. Many states have school reform initiatives, typically as part of accountability and improvement efforts. However, these initiatives often focus heavily on elementary and middle schools rather than high schools. Furthermore, reform plans that do include high schools often fail to address those that are losing the most students due to an absence of substantial accountability for low graduation rates.[19]

In general, school reform initiatives are seldom aligned in policy or practice with dropout prevention and recovery efforts. The typical result is that several disjointed initiatives proceed on parallel tracks, using up resources that could be spent more strategically. Several large districts, most notably New York City, are the exceptions: they have substantially improved graduation rates by integrating high school redesign with new back-on-track models for struggling and out-of-school youth (*see box, "New Models Replace Low-Performing High Schools in New York City," page 15*).

Favorable state policies could promote this comprehensive strategy. For example, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, a **Texas** school district of about 31,000 students, has paired high school reform and back-on-track models by taking advantage of the state's comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery policies and its school development focus (*see box, "Texas: Breaking Ground in Education Reform"*). With the aid of supportive state policy, the district is using its highly successful early college/STEM school as a model for reform activity across its high schools. It also has coupled these efforts with the opening of three back-on-track schools as well as academic catch-up in the ninth grade. As a result, the district's graduation rate rose by 40 percent over two years.[20]

TEXAS: BREAKING GROUND IN EDUCATION REFORM

Texas stands out for its coherent and far-reaching strategy to put dropouts and struggling students at the center of high school reform. Drawing on the latest research on predicting dropouts, Texas uses its at-risk student indicator system to trigger significant reforms (and resources) targeted toward schools and students with the greatest need. In 2003, Texas built on this foundation by enacting the state's first legislation on early college high schools (SB 976), adopting the National Center for Education Statistics definition of a dropout (SB 186), and appropriating $60 million for high school completion and success programs. In 2007, the state enacted HB 2237, Texas's comprehensive policy approach to reduce dropouts and increase the number of students who graduate ready for postsecondary success. Also that year, Texas enacted HB 1137, which authorizes funding for school districts to help young people up to age 26 receive a high school diploma.

Additionally, under HB 1, enacted in 2006, the state created the high school allotment, which provides all districts and charter schools with $275 in additional funding per student to implement programs and practices that help increase students' college and career readiness. School districts with high dropout rates must submit a plan for approval by the Texas Education Agency detailing how they plan to use High School Allotment and Compensatory Education funds to curb dropout rates.

The state's omnibus dropout prevention law, HB 2237, codified some of the state's secondary school reform efforts and laid the groundwork for its forward-thinking dropout prevention agenda. In particular, HB 2237 formed the High School Completion and Success Council, a committee of educational and legislative leaders that created a strategic plan calling for a focus on students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out. The **Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program** is a competitive grant program that extends the state's commitment to college-readiness to all students—even those who had formerly dropped out of school. It grants funds to high schools, institutions of higher education, open enrollment charter schools, and community-based organizations to recover dropouts and help them to either graduate with a diploma or gain a GED and meet college-readiness benchmarks. Another programmatic option created under HB 2237 is the **Collaborative Dropout Reduction Pilot**, which creates local partnerships among businesses, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, and higher education institutions to reduce dropouts.

Texas also offers implementation funding targeted to low-income students and students at the critical junctures in high school, such as the transitions from middle school through college. **Intensive Summer Programs** serve students in high-poverty, high-dropout-rate districts. **The Ninth Grade Transition Program** supports initiatives to ease middle school students' transitions into high schools and from ninth to tenth grade.

Finally, HB 2237 provides additional resources for the continuing implementation of innovative high school programs. These high schools form a statewide demonstration project that supplies models for successful practice in school reform and turnaround.

4. INVENT NEW MODELS

Evidence of raised graduation rates is emerging from cities and states that have invested in a combination of redesigns for failing high schools and new models aimed at helping struggling students get back on track (*see box, "New Models Replace Low-Performing High Schools in New York City"*). For such endeavors to occur at the scale needed, states must create effective vehicles to test new models, then refine and spread them.

NEW MODELS REPLACE LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY

New York City has moved aggressively to replace large low-performing high schools with new small schools designed by teams of educators and community partners. Almost 200 of these high schools consistently post graduation rates of 75 percent or above, nearly 20 percentage points higher than the city average and often twice the rate of the schools they replaced. This improvement has occurred despite the fact that these schools have a higher-than-average percentage of English language learners and students with disabilities compared to other New York City schools (Klein 2008).

Simultaneously, the city has invested in 42 new "transfer schools" for students who are significantly over-age and undercredited. These schools are getting older students back on track and graduating them at two to three times the rate of traditional high schools in the city.[21] Overall, these strategies have contributed to a 15.2 percent rise in the city's graduation rate over the last eight years.[22]

DEVELOPING EXEMPLARY SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT VEHICLES

The North Carolina New Schools Project and the Texas High School Project provide pioneering examples of how states can undertake the important work of school development. In both cases, nimble and strategic public-private initiatives are implementing innovation on a large scale and with consistent quality and efficiency. Each has created a common platform of statewide services, most notably leadership development, regional curriculum resource centers, and instructional coaching. As the premier school development agencies in their states, the **North Carolina** and **Texas** efforts support the development and implementation of school models to ensure quality control and fidelity to model design.

The North Carolina New Schools Project is pivotal to the implementation of the state's Innovative Education Initiatives Act of 2003, which authorized community colleges and local school boards to jointly establish innovative programs for students at risk of dropping out and who would benefit from accelerated instruction.

Since its inception, the New Schools Project has developed 62 early college high schools and Web-based platforms that help at-risk students not just complete high school but begin college. In 2006, with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro began a rigorous experimental study with random assignment. Preliminary results show that the early college design improves students' school experiences and appears successful in closing the performance gap for students of color (Edmunds et al. 2010).[23] These "Learn and Earn" schools also serve as exemplars of best practice for others involved in the ongoing transformation and replacement of high schools with low graduation rates.

The redesign of **North Carolina's** traditional comprehensive high schools, conducted in partnership with local school districts, led to the creation of 43 autonomous schools across 25 high school campuses in 22 districts by 2007-08. Each of the new schools selected a curricular focus that combines academic work with adult, real-world experiences. In 2006, these redesigned schools reported annual dropout rates of 3.93 percent versus 5.24 percent for similar high schools across the state (North Carolina State Board of Education 2009).

Also founded in 2003, the Texas High School Project is a public-private alliance of the Governor's Office, the Texas Education Agency, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and the Communities Foundation of Texas, among others. The project has created 41 early college high schools and 46 technology, science, engineering, and math (T-STEM) academies. As with **North Carolina's** Learn and Earn schools, students outperform those at demographically similar schools in reading and math (SRI International Forthcoming). These schools, which serve predominantly low-income and minority students, accelerate learning through college-course taking and rich curricular offerings. At early colleges, students can graduate high school with up to two years of college credit tuition-free. T-STEM schools prepare students for science, technology, engineering, and math careers. At the same time, the Texas High School Project has invested in transformative school turnaround, resulting in 93 redesigned high schools.

Texas also has a statewide Dropout Recovery Pilot Program to help dropouts earn a standards-based high school diploma or meet the even higher bar of demonstrating college readiness by completing a college-level course (*see box, "Texas Breaking Ground in Education Reform," on page 14*). In addition to receiving base funding to support start-up costs, programs that successfully compete for this grant can apply for performance funding both when students meet established benchmarks and when they complete the program by earning a standards-based high school diploma or otherwise demonstrate college readiness. Fifty-eight programs have received funding through these grants.

PROVIDING INCENTIVES FOR INNOVATION

A handful of other states have competitive grant programs that support districts and, in some cases, nonprofits or postsecondary institutions that develop or enhance models designed to recover dropouts. However, these grant programs generally are not part of broader high school reform efforts. And with the exception of programs in **North Carolina** and **Texas**, they lack the type of public-private support and effective development vehicles that can supplement the capacity of their state departments of education.

In **Oklahoma**, dropout recovery grants focus on vocational and technical education and training in area vocational technical high schools. **Washington State** awards grants to district/community partnerships—including workforce investment boards, postsecondary institutions, and nonprofit organizations—to support prevention, intervention, and recovery programs. **Maine's** education technology grants support five types of programs, including designs that use digital environments to reengage dropouts and students at risk of dropping out. **Mississippi** provides funding to each of its community and junior colleges for dropout recovery programs emphasizing vocational training.

In addition to dropout prevention and recovery policies, a few states—most notably **Minnesota, Oklahoma**, and **Oregon**—have enacted alternative education policy that is robust enough to support the spread of recuperative models (Almeida, Le, & Steinberg 2010).

Finally, all 36 states and the District of Columbia that have enacted new dropout education policy since 2002, have brought in and supported a combination of national models designed to reengage dropouts in education and work (e.g., YouthBuild, Conservation Corp, Job Corps, the National Guard Youth Challenge Program). While these can play an essential role in increasing the number of young people who graduate, at their current scale they serve only a small percentage of the population in need of new pathways to high school completion and postsecondary credentials.

5. ACCELERATE PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Exemplary dropout prevention legislation creates acceleration opportunities that target students who are at risk of not graduating and underrepresented in higher education. It also provides the support structure necessary for struggling students to succeed in accelerated coursework. Since 2002, at least 15 states have specified one or more acceleration strategies in their dropout prevention policies.

Opportunities for acceleration, which have long been available to advanced students, are equally important for those who are struggling in high school. Acceleration enables struggling students to catch up on skills and credits while they also gain valuable experiences with college preparatory and college-level coursework and expectations. Both are essential if they are to reach the finish line of a diploma, prepared for success in careers and postsecondary education.

Acceleration for struggling students can take a number of forms (*see box, "Accelerating Strategies," on page 17*). Eight states offer dual enrollment options, allowing struggling students to tackle college courses while still in high school. In five states, dropout prevention policy mentions the expansion of Advanced Placement coursework to areas and schools that serve students at risk. Six states offer credit recovery opportunities to help students catch up and get back on track to high school graduation. And dropout legislation in five states identifies online coursework as a mechanism to accelerate the progress of students who need it.

State Progress in Adopting Acceleration Strategies Since 2002

Legend:
- All strategies
- 2-3 strategies
- 1 strategy
- No acceleration policy passed since 2002
- No new legislation
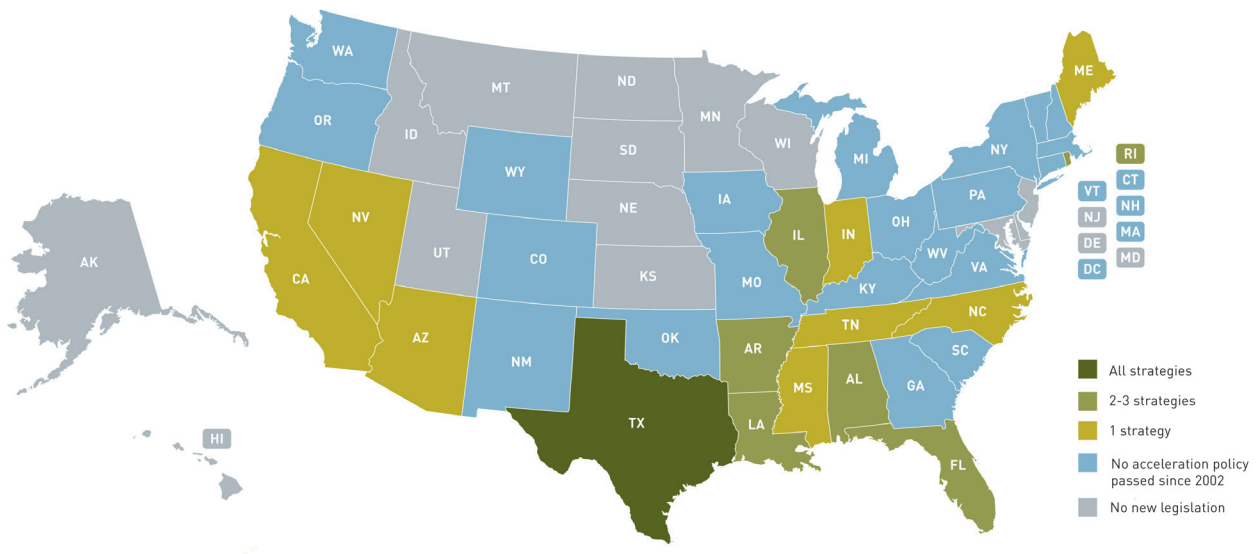
Source: JFF analysis of states' policies. For more details, see Appendix.

ACCELERATION STRATEGIES

Dual enrollment: High school students enroll in college coursework for college credit. Many such programs offer free or discounted tuition, yielding significant savings for families who otherwise could not afford to send their children to college. The opportunity for a head start on postsecondary education can motivate students to stay in or return to high school and perform well.

Advanced Placement: Students tackle college-level work at significant cost savings and earn college credits while still in high school.

Credit recovery: Students who are behind in coursework need high-quality options to help them get back on track toward a diploma. Credit recovery options should be rigorous yet flexible, and should allow students to build their skills and credits at an accelerated pace toward on-time graduation. Credit recovery can be integrated into the traditional school model or built into an alternative setting.

Online learning: Online learning can support any of the options above: dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, or credit recovery. The flexibility of online learning is particularly beneficial to students with family or work obligations and those struggling in the traditional school setting.

Indiana and **Rhode Island** stand out for how their dual enrollment policies reengage and accelerate struggling students and dropouts. They authorize "fast track to college" programs in which participating students can earn a high school diploma while earning credits toward a credential. These fast-track programs target high school students 17 and older, as well as out-of-school youth age 19 and older.

Several other states have expanded Advanced Placement courses to students who have historically lacked access to accelerated learning opportunities. **Arkansas** policy requires that Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses be made available to students in the most academically troubled areas through two-way interactive television. In addition, **Alabama** and **Louisiana** also require improved access to Advanced Placement courses for struggling students in school districts with low graduation rates.

Florida has taken a model policy approach toward accelerating at-risk students through online learning. Beginning in 2009-10, each of its school districts must provide eligible students—including those in dropout prevention programs, career and technical programs, and the juvenile justice system—with the option of a virtual instruction program using online and distance learning. For students who need to recover credits and build their skills, particularly those confined to detention centers, virtual instruction can provide a viable pathway toward graduation. **Florida** also is one of the few states to require that certified teachers provide at least 85 percent of the instruction to these students.

Finally, ninth-grade transition programs can accelerate student learning during a period when many struggling students drop out or fall even farther behind. **Texas** and **Nevada** policies serve as strong examples in this area. The Texas Ninth Grade Student Transition Program targets eighth graders who are in danger of academic failure. Students can take a summer/fall program that helps them transition to high school and gain the necessary skills and credits for promotion to the tenth grade. **Nevada** allows eighth graders who have not passed all their courses to advance to ninth grade and recover eighth-grade credits. **Louisiana** and **Rhode Island** also excel at identifying early interventions for ninth graders failing core math courses.

6. PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC REFORM

States have done much more to identify the scope of the dropout problem than to fund programs to help curb it. The early stages of dropout work (e.g., establishing a commission to examine the problem and propose solutions; gathering and reporting data) can be accomplished with relatively modest investments. The next steps cost considerably more. Once a state begins to implement new dropout prevention or recovery programs—especially whole-school reform designs and accelerated learning options—stable, continuous, and substantial funding is critical.

Thirty-one states and the District of Columbia have adopted policies that offer at least one or more new programmatic and school reform options.[24] Of these, twenty-one states have provided new state appropriations to support dropout prevention and recovery. These states take one of two funding approaches: some finance initiatives through state legislative or budgetary appropriations; others shift existing resources to cover the new activities. One state—**Colorado**—uses private and philanthropic contributions to raise funds for one of its dropout prevention initiative.

No new funding has been allocated in 16 states and the District of Columbia, under the assumption that school districts will shift existing resources to support the new policy initiatives. Ten of them allocated no new funding for any programmatic initiative. The other seven allocated funding for some, but not all initiatives.

Unfortunately, all eight states that recognize the importance of providing off-track students and returning dropouts with access to dual enrollment courses rely on existing funding streams to support what could be cutting-edge strategies. Lack of new funding can undermine otherwise sound policy and hamper the pace at which new strategies can be implemented.

State Progress in Funding Dropout Initiatives Since 2002
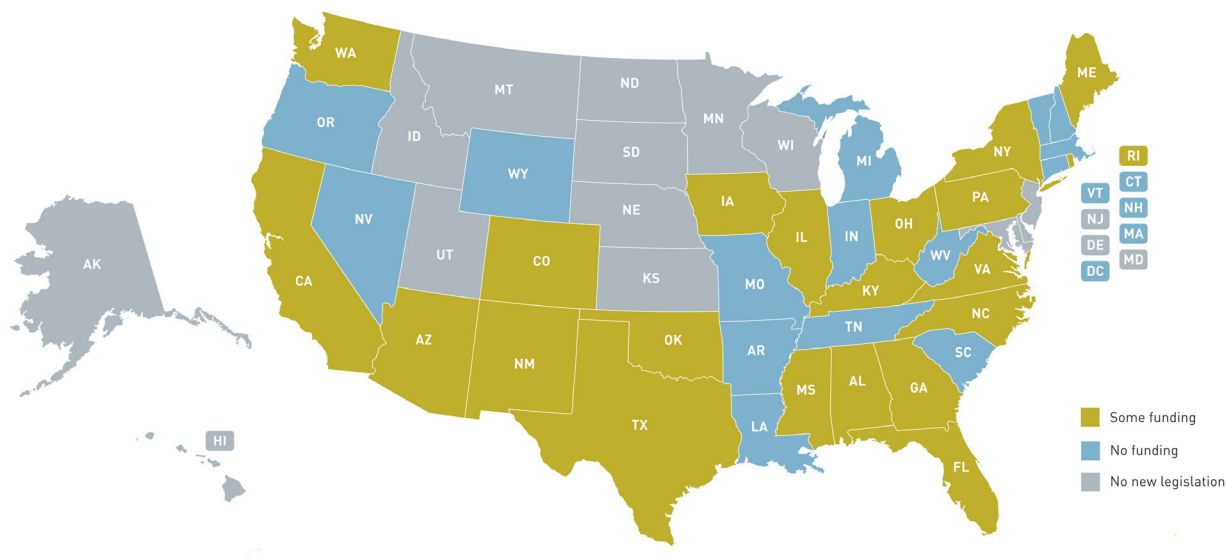
Source: JFF analysis of states' policies. For more details, see Appendix.

APPROPRIATING STATE FUNDING THROUGH LEGISLATIVE OR BUDGETARY PROCESS

States provide funds for dropout prevention in two main ways. The first is through legislative appropriations, specifying a dollar amount for a particular program or allocating money through a funding formula or block grants. This type of funding tends to be more stable because legislators typically appropriate money for multiple years. The second type of state appropriation is disbursed via a budgetary process and is, therefore, contingent upon the availability of funds. Competitive state grants often fall under this category.

Distributing Legislative Funding Through Formula or Block Grants

Eight states have instituted a funding formula or block grant to determine the amount of funding they will provide for dropout prevention and recovery programs. Some states narrowly target funds, while others provide more flexibility.

Ohio takes the targeted approach to utilize its formula-generated funds. It requires that $1 million of its total Poverty-Based Assistance, part of the state's funding formula for public education, be set aside to fund dropout recovery programs administered by the Ohio Department of Education's Jobs for Ohio's Graduates program. **California's** block grants specifically fund dropout specialists in districts where more than 50 percent of the student population either qualifies for the federal school breakfast and lunch programs or receives Title I funding.[25]

A block grant is generally guaranteed for multiple years. However, because of the latitude inherent in state policy, it is difficult to distill how much of the total actually funds staff and programs working with dropouts, potential dropouts, and other struggling learners.

Arizona is unique: it stipulates that 56 percent of gaming income be used to fund the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) intervention and dropout prevention fund.

Establishing Competitive Grant Processes

The state competitive grant process creates one of the more promising spaces for the development of innovative programming for students who are off track from graduating on time or who have dropped out of school. Since 2002, 11 states have at one time or another adopted a competitive grant process resulting in the seeding of pilot programs and school models for dropout prevention and recovery. Of these, five states—**Georgia**, **Oklahoma**, **North Carolina**, **Texas**, and **Washington**—have held competitive grant processes that spread innovation to multiple sites statewide. An example is **Washington State's** $2.6 million demonstration partnership grant, used to fund 18 local partnerships for two years beginning in 2008.

Seven states—**Alabama**, **Georgia**, **Kentucky**, **North Carolina**, **Oklahoma**, **Texas**, and **Washington**—have shown their commitment to scaling up pilot programs and models by sustaining them through consecutive budgetary cycles. The momentum gained from these initiatives points toward a long-term, iterative reform strategy: constant investment, incubation, growth, and lessons learned from states' dropout recovery and prevention interventions.

Georgia and **Texas** have each invested over $10 million since 2006 and 2007, respectively. **Georgia's** statewide initiative places graduation coaches in low-performing high schools. **Texas** is in the third cycle of its Collaborative Dropout Reduction Program and its Dropout Recovery Pilot Program. The latter not only pushes along the development of dropout recovery models, but also introduces a new incentive funding structure that gives grantees an opportunity to earn additional funding beyond the base amount as their students obtain college credits.

North Carolina also has put its weight behind multiple dropout prevention and recovery initiatives through a continuous competitive grant process. Its Dropout Prevention Grant program awards funds to programs that provide effective, sustainable, and coordinated dropout and reentry programs in middle and high schools. This program began in 2007 with $7 million from the legislature, which increased its support to $15 million and $13 million in 2008 and 2009, respectively.

CONCLUSION

States have taken important steps toward solving America's high school dropout crisis over the past eight years, and they should be applauded for their efforts so far. But there is an enormous amount of critical work left to do.

As our 50-state policy scan demonstrates, 14 states—nearly one-third of the country—have enacted no new laws to help increase graduation rates since 2002. Of the 36 states and the District of Columbia that have, few are taking the comprehensive approach to dropout prevention and recovery that research shows is most effective; fundamentally changing how they educate struggling students and trying to bring back those who have left school. Our hope is that state leaders and advocates will use the model policy elements and detailed information about states' policy progress detailed in this report—and on the accompanying Web site http://www.jff.org/dropoutpolicy—as a framework for assessing how far they have come and where to focus future efforts.

We acknowledge that it will be a challenge to maintain momentum in this era of tight budgets. But now is the time for action. Unprecedented public attention is focused on the financial, social, and economic dangers of permitting millions of students to leave school each year without effective plans to help them earn diplomas and move on to some form of postsecondary education. States must draw on the most recent research revealing specific and effective measures to identify at-risk students early in their school careers and put them back on a path toward graduation. Failure to invest in these efforts will lead to more severe problems down the road that require greater resources to solve. We cannot let these opportunities be wasted.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

DATA SOURCES

Six Pillars of Effective Dropout Prevention and Recovery examines state policies on dropout prevention and recovery enacted between the 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind and December 12, 2009.

Jobs for the Future identified the state policies analyzed in this report primarily through the Netscan and National Conference of State Legislators databases. Netscan enabled us to conduct keyword searches. The NCSL database collects policies on multiple topics across all states, including dropout legislation. Our research team supplemented these database queries by consulting state legislative Web sites and conducting Google searches.

For our analysis of state budgets and the extent of state investment in dropout initiatives, we relied heavily on state government Web sites. For topics related to the compulsory attendance age and public education entitlement age, the research team drew on policy scans conducted by the Education Commission of the States, which disseminates information about state education policies. The team checked the information from these searches by using the Netscan and the NCSL database. Information was updated where appropriate.

We followed a similar process in reporting the number of states using a cohort graduation rate. Here we relied on information provided in *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2009*, a report by the National Governors Association.

In assessing the use of cohort graduation rates in the high school accountability calculations, we relied on Achieve's 2009 report, *Closing the Expectations Gap: Fourth Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers*.

JFF's inquiry commenced with a set of research questions reflective of current research and expert thinking in the field on what makes for robust dropout policy:

> To what extent does each state send a clear signal to its districts, schools, and students of the importance of high school completion by reinforcing education entitlements and raising the compulsory attendance age?

> How does each state count dropouts and students who are off track to graduation?

> Does each state's data inform a targeted strategy for student supports and high school redesign?

> Do each state's policies enable the development of new models and/or the spread of existing or nationally recognized school models?

> Does each state encourage the development of acceleration mechanisms for academic learning?

> Are each state's dropout policies adequately funded to allow for significant reform and improvements in student outcomes? If so, how often is the funding level revisited?

Based on our initial analysis, we identified six model policy elements with which to create a sound legislative strategy framework for dropout prevention and recovery. This framework provides the policy underpinnings of a state-level approach that couples greater accountability for improving student outcomes with a solution set that builds on the most recent and rigorous research about effective strategies and models for prevention and recovery. It also provides the right conditions to support the statewide scale-up of these solutions.

The six policy elements that comprise this framework became the point of analysis for examining state policy. We developed a set of criteria for each element and then assessed whether states' policies reflected progress on each element according to these indicators.

CRITERIA USED FOR ASSESSING PROGRESS ON EACH STATE POLICY ELEMENT

REINFORCE THE RIGHT TO A PUBLIC EDUCATION	> A state's compulsory attendance age is 18. > A state has raised the compulsory attendance age since enactment of NCLB. > A state's maximum allowable age is 21 or over.
COUNT AND ACCOUNT FOR DROPOUTS	> A state reports the NGA four-year cohort graduation rate and/or uses the NGA rate in calculations for accountability. > A state uses early warning or leading indicators to identify students who are unlikely to graduate. > A state has improved data collection and/or enhanced public reporting of data on graduates and/or dropouts. > State government leadership sets explicit and public goals to improve graduation rates/reduce dropouts.
USE GRADUATION AND ON-TRACK RATES TO TRIGGER REFORM	> A state's policies target interventions to provide identified students with needed supports. > A state's policies emphasize high school redesigns that embed student supports.
INVENT NEW MODELS	> A state supports the development of new and robust school options for struggling students and recovered dropouts through: • A state-led statewide effort to spread new models and/or • Competitive grants that allow for new models and/or • Charter priority for Back-On-Track models and/or • Appropriation to community colleges
ACCELERATE PREPARATION FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS	> A state's legislation allows for credit recovery and/or online learning opportunities. > A state explicitly encourages Advanced Placement and/or dual enrollment as a strategy for serving returning dropouts or students at risk of dropping out.
PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC REFORM	> The state allocates funding through legislative or budgetary appropriations for programmatic initiatives designed to prevent or recover dropouts.

LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

This brief assesses the extent to which recent states' dropout prevention and recovery policies align with the six model policy elements. It is limited to an analysis of the policies themselves and does not address the degree of implementation at the state or local levels. Moreover, it focuses primarily on *legislative* policy and does not include an exhaustive search of all dropout-related policies and activities by state education departments.

An examination of a state's dropout prevention and recovery policies is critical to understanding how well they align and build on current research and best thinking on the most effective solution sets for preventing dropouts and recovering those students who do leave school early. However, to fully assess the impact of dropout policy requires an examination of the extent to which policies are implemented at the state and local levels and their impact on student outcomes. These research activities were beyond the scope of this study.

Alternative education policy is often considered part of the larger body of dropout prevention and recovery policy. JFF has conducted a separate analysis of alternative education policy, the results of which are presented in the JFF brief *Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy and How to Improve It*.

ENDNOTES

[1] Remarks by President Barack Obama at the America's Promise Alliance Education Event. U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC. Office of the Press Secretary. March 1, 2010.

[2] For more information about the federal regulations on calculating graduation rates adopted in spring 2008, see www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html.

[3] This report's analysis focuses on the policies themselves. Next steps for policymakers and researchers would be to examine the degree of implementation of these policies at the state or local levels and, ultimately, their impact on dropout rates.

[4] The 14 states that have enacted no new dropout legislation since 2002 are: Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Maryland, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin. Connecticut, West Virginia, and Wyoming were included in our final list of states, although for the purposes of this report could not be coded.

[5] For example, see Hall (2007), Richmond (2006), and Steinberg, Johnson, & Pennington (2006).

[6] An additional four states that have not passed dropout legislation since 2002 are also using the NGA cohort graduation rate—Delaware, Kansas, Minnesota, and North Dakota. Virtually all states plan to follow suit in the next two years. For more information on NGA Graduation Counts Compact, see www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507GRADCOMPACT.pdf.

[7] The dropout rate is not simply the four-year graduation rate subtracted from 100 percent. Some students remain in school and take five or more years to graduate. Others earn alternative high school credentials, such as the GED.

[8] Ten of the seventeen states allocated no new funding for any programmatic initiative. The other seven states allocated funding for some but not all the initiatives that were created under new policies.

[9] Texas extended the entitlement age to 26 during the 2007 state legislative session. With the passage of HB 1137 ("Hochberg"), students up to age 26 were eligible to participate in the state's dropout recovery pilot program that also grew out of the 2007 legislative session.

[10] Examples of such states include Alabama, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont.

[11] To learn more about the New York City Department of Education's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, see http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/AlternativesHS/default.htm.

[12] See http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/community. To learn about credit recovery options in Boston Public Schools, see Grobe, Richards, & Almeida (2009).

[13] Counting graduates by using a cohort rate enables states to follow graduation and dropout outcomes for a cohort of students as they advance through secondary school, measuring the share of incoming ninth graders who graduate within four, five, or six years. States can use a student-level database to track individual students over time. They can also disaggregate graduation and dropout data by demographic characteristics.

[14] More information on graduation rate accountability is available on the U.S. Department of Education Web site: www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html.

[15] Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia report cohort graduation rates; 22 states have enacted recent legislation aimed at reducing dropouts.

[16] For more information about the federal regulations on calculating graduation rates adopted in spring 2008, see www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html.

[17] The state conducted a retrospective, longitudinal analysis to identify predictive indicators to inform the development of its early warning system.

[18] In Chicago, on-track students had at least 10 semester credits and no more than one semester F in a core course by the end of their freshman year.

[19] Briefing to the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. 2009. "Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low-Graduation Rate High Schools." Presentation by Jobs for the Future, the Everyone Graduates Center, and Alliance for Excellent Education. October.

[20] Presentation to the Texas Education Agency. 2010. "Focused on Performance." Presentation by Daniel P. King, PhD, and Pharr San-Juan Alamo ISD superintendent. February.

[21] New Visions for Public Schools: Internal research using May 2009 New York City Department of Education data.

[22] See: http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2008-2009/20090622_grad_rates.htm.

[23] Edmunds, J.A., L. Bernstein, F. Unlu, E. Glennie, J. Willse, N. Arshavsky, R. Yamaguchi, & A. Dallas. 2010. "Expanding the College Pipeline: Early Results from an Experimental Study of the Impact of the Early College High School Model." Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in Denver, CO.

[24] Four of the other six states–Massachusetts, Michigan, Oregon, and Vermont–passed legislation related to the collection and reporting of data, and in some cases the creation of commissions, and did not include any programmatic initiatives. The fifth state–West Virginia–passed legislation to revoke the driver's licenses of dropouts between the ages of 15 and 18. Wyoming's legislation on the National Youth Challenge Grant program could not be coded for the purposes of the funding section.

[25] Beginning in 2006-07, California has folded money traditionally set aside to support dropout programs under the state's Pupil Retention Block Grant. Block grants represent the only state funding that targets dropouts in California, a state that uses continuation schools as its primary mechanism for dropout prevention.

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