

CHALLENGE TO LEAD 2020

SREB

Goals for Education

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

SREB.org

This publication was prepared by a team of SREB staff members led by Joan M. Lord, vice president, Education Policies. Joan Lord and Jeff Gagne, director, Education Policies, hosted numerous discussions of the goals involving more than 35 SREB staff members over four months. They are grateful for the contributions of these staff members.

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For more information, email joan.lord@sreb.org or call (404) 875-9211. *Challenge to Lead 2020: Goals for Education* is available at SREB.org. Topics included in SREB's 2002 publication *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*, along with the titles of major goals-related reports, are listed at end of this report.

SREB's Challenge to Lead 2020

Goals for Education

All children **entering school** will exhibit the knowledge and the social and developmental skills needed for success in first grade.

Student achievement for all groups in the **early grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Student achievement for all groups in the **middle grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Eighty percent of all groups of ninth-graders will graduate from **high school** ready for college and career training. (This likely means more than 90 percent will need to graduate from high school and more than 80 percent will need to meet readiness standards for college and career training.)

Sixty percent of working-age adults will have a **postsecondary** credential: an associate's or bachelor's degree, or a career certificate. Public postsecondary institutions will make it a top priority to help states meet state needs by increasing graduates, public service and research.

Increasing percentages of **adults** without high school or postsecondary credentials will pursue opportunities to earn high school alternative certificates, college degrees or career certificates.

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SREB acknowledges the contribution of the four governors who served as Chair of SREB from 2006 to 2011 and led significant policy discussions related to the *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education:

Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia, 2006-2008

Governor Timothy M. Kaine of Virginia, 2008-2009

Governor Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, 2009-2010

Governor Beverly Eaves Perdue of North Carolina, 2010-2011



Challenge 2020

A Message from the President

Today, the states of the Southern Regional Education Board stand poised to reach our goal of “leading the nation in educational improvement.” Many states have done so, in fact, on several fronts, and others have achieved impressive gains.

This accomplishment stands as testament to the power of our collective efforts over time. The region’s leaders found common ground by committing to specific goals to improve education. And we’ve come together to find ways to meet the challenges set in 1988 and renewed in 2002.

That effort will continue. Through constant work, we have made sustained progress, by inches and by miles. That would not have been possible without the leadership of Governors (and SREB Chairs) Timothy Kaine, Sonny Perdue, Joe Manchin III and Beverly Perdue, whose leadership of SREB commissions and projects fueled important recommendations and guidance in the past several years. We are grateful for your contributions — and those of all legislators throughout the region.

Along the way, we’ve learned much about what works. Launched in this document, these *Challenge to Lead 2020* Goals for Education reflect that clearer understanding. They direct us not only to the end point — hard measures of student achievement and educational attainment — but to the implementation of essential policies that will drive us there.

Challenge 2020 updates our common goals for today’s times. The landscape has changed since SREB states last committed to education goals a decade ago. We’ve seen a long and deep economic downturn, shifts in national policy, swings in population, better data and a critical need for attention to emerging issues.

The goals are now organized concisely by a student’s age or point in the education pipeline. This enables you and other state leaders to maintain focus in two areas that have been central to SREB’s work since the mid-1980s: the full educational career, from preschool through college and beyond — and the critical transitions from one stage to the next. Equally important, it enables you to focus on both the outcomes and the policies that will get tangible results in the years ahead.

We have reached a new mile marker in our work to advance knowledge and improve the social and economic life of the region. These reframed goals for 2020 will help to chart even greater progress.

Dave Spence



Challenge 2020

Focusing on Outcome Measures and Policies to Get Results

Introduction

A decade ago, Southern Regional Education Board states boldly declared that they could lead the nation in educational progress.

They knew that SREB's very founding in 1948 was based on another bold idea — that a regional push to improve quality and student advancement could move the South up from last place in American education. Governors and legislators worked together with SREB ever since — and got results. Today, SREB states are leading the nation in educational progress on important measures — and in some areas they are, quite simply, first in the nation. But the job is not done.

SREB reframes the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals: Continuing this progress requires more than measuring performance and reporting results to states. It requires a continuing review of the measures themselves to ensure they are still right for the times. Since 2008, several SREB commissions and advisory panels studied key issues and reported on ways to increase student achievement — and they identified where SREB states still had challenges. Each group produced important recommendations. In 2012, SREB captured the recommendations and incorporated them in the six goals of *Challenge to Lead 2020*. In the years ahead, SREB will monitor, measure and report on these goals to states.



The 2020 goals recognize that outcomes need to be fueled by state support.

The six goals reframe the 12 earlier *Challenge to Lead* goals — with two critical differences. The new goals call states' attention to student *outcomes* along the continuum of each student's education journey: preschool, early grades, middle grades, high school, college and other postsecondary study, and adult learning.

The reframing also recognizes that *measures* of these outcomes (such as achievement results and graduation rates) need to be fueled by state support. Strengthening alignment, assuring accountability, ensuring high-quality personnel and other *essential policies* will enable students to achieve those desired outcomes.

Challenge 2020, therefore, is designed specifically to help SREB state leaders **link outcome measures to the essential state policies that can help them happen.**

How *Challenge 2020* arose

Governors took the lead on critical issues: Four topics from the 2002 goals were very important to the work of the states and the governors who led SREB in subsequent years: the middle grades, high school and college readiness, adolescent literacy, and college completion. SREB worked with four governors in particular to bring greater attention and resources to these topics, build consensus — and make hard-hitting recommendations on the challenges they presented:

Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia led the SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement.

Governor Timothy M. Kaine of Virginia led the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools.

Governor Joe Manchin III of West Virginia highlighted college completion efforts during his chairmanship.

Governor Beverly Eaves Perdue of North Carolina led the SREB Middle Grades Commission.



SREB states led the nation in setting and meeting goals.

SREB states took the spotlight in creating policies that work: These SREB committees and multi-year policy efforts, without question, moved to the forefront of national thought in policy development. SREB states led the nation in setting and meeting goals in the 1980s and 1990s — and in school accountability in the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, the work of the National Goals Panel, formed in 1990, led to federal educational goals that clearly echoed the SREB states’ 1988 goals. Recently, the region has provided leading voices in the national policy dialogue on such issues as high school accountability, improving students’ reading and writing skills, the mission of the middle grades, and postsecondary degree completion.

SREB states made significant improvements since 2002: SREB’s fifth biennial report on the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals (June 2012) showed a full decade of gains as states reached national stature on some indicators and made solid progress on others. The region’s track record proves that setting goals can make a difference.

Recognized in 2002 by the National Institute for Early Education Research as the nation’s trailblazers in **prekindergarten programming**, SREB states continued as the nation’s pace-setters in public pre-K access, meeting national standards and using readiness assessments. SREB states lead the nation in launching statewide **education data systems** to collect data on students, teachers and schools over a long time and link data from various education agencies. Several SREB states rank at the top of the nation’s list in **Advanced Placement (AP)** participation and AP exam pass rates.

Most SREB states adopted **end-of-course (EOC) exams** to replace all or part of comprehensive exams as high school graduation requirements or accountability measures. The use of EOC exams for this purpose began in SREB states and now is nationwide. These exams reduce the high stakes that graduation exams place on high school completion, yet assure the rigor of the high school curriculum for their stakeholders — particularly colleges and employers.

In addition, improvement in **fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics** and **fourth-grade reading** in SREB states outpaced improvement nationwide. Five states led the nation in gains in the percentages of students meeting key benchmarks in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2003 to 2011. Increases in **high school graduation rates** in SREB states surpassed the nation's gains, and the region narrowed the gap with the nation to 1 percentage point for the first time since the nation began measuring with a comparable rate for all 50 states.



SREB states studied what works and worked to implement it.

After two decades, the 1988 *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000* and the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals paid dividends for SREB states. That's because SREB states studied what works and worked to implement it: building strong transitions from one level of education to another; getting students ready for the next level of the education journey; narrowing achievement gaps among groups of students (racial and ethnic groups, boys and girls, students from low-income families and students with disabilities); and helping education agencies and systems come together to get the job done.

Challenge 2020 incorporates what states have learned: Refreshing the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals for a new decade does not mean starting over. It means building on the already-strong foundation of the earlier goals set in 1988 and 2002 — and drawing from the solid reports on those goals and policy recommendations from the governors' efforts.

What's new about *Challenge 2020*

Challenge 2020 updates SREB's goals for today's education realities: Since 2002, new challenges and priorities emerged. Across the nation, concern about standards and the need for more rigor led states to adopt the Common Core State Standards and other rigorous standards — and to work toward implementing them with fidelity. States also have become more concerned with assessing teachers effectively as part of their focus on teacher quality. Education leaders now recognize the importance of teaching reading in the middle grades and high school within the context of all subjects. Many teachers need more professional development so they can help their students develop these higher-level literacy skills.

In addition, the national economy took a tailspin in 2008. By 2011, most SREB states still struggled with lagging state revenues, high unemployment and weak housing markets. More recently, many faced the end of federal stimulus funding that had helped fill holes in state budgets at the beginning of the recession. Education agencies made do with smaller budgets; some declared furloughs, larger classes and shorter school years. Falling family incomes meant that more children were eligible for free and reduced-priced meals.

Today, concerns about achievement gaps for black and Hispanic students still persist in spite of progress in narrowing them. The reason is clear. The regional population grew more diverse since 2002 — meaning more students need services, especially ones whose first language is not English. Nearly every school in the region faces the challenge of providing the services that a diverse population of children needs to be successful.

But closing gaps is also about closing achievement gaps related to income disparities, gender and disabilities. These concerns remain in *Challenge 2020*, particularly as income disparities widen and males are falling behind in school.

***Challenge 2020* frames the goals with outcome measures and the policies to achieve them:**

Since SREB states adopted *Challenge to Lead* in 2002, SREB provided state leaders with a steady stream of feedback — both research and analyses of each state’s status in meeting all 12 goals, as well as the region’s progress in reaching each specific one. SREB issued customized state progress reports five times from 2004 to 2012. For each of the 12 *Challenge to Lead* goals, SREB published separate, comprehensive reports at least once (and for most goals, two or three times) over the decade. It also provided shorter reports on indicators of progress.

State leaders had known for more than two decades the education outcomes they wanted. They were less clear about how to achieve them. That is no longer true. With a decade of substantial policy work now behind them, they have a clearer picture of the task ahead and a better understanding of the policies that will move their states forward.

As part of SREB’s commitment to monitor and report on outcome measures in the future, *Challenge 2020* adds a commitment to monitor and report on states’ implementation of policies SREB state leaders have identified as essential to achieving the goals.

SREB will report to states on measurable results: *Challenge 2020* includes **only** outcomes that SREB can measure and can track over time.

This is a major enhancement from earlier years, when SREB was unable to measure and report on a few of the indicators of progress from the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals — or to do so comparably from state to state. For some indicators, no data set was available to measure the outcome. For others, the definitions or schedules for reporting the data were different across the region, making comparison impossible. For example, increases in workplace exams for career/technical students, and in adult access to postsecondary training through public-private partnerships, were impossible to report because no organization tracks these exams or enrollments in all states in comparable ways. Indicators like these have been dropped or revised in *Challenge 2020*.

A few outcomes in *Challenge 2020* currently are not measurable, but they are included because work is under way to find good measures. In college completion, for example, analysts cannot yet account for career certificates in adult educational attainment, because these certificates are not included along with bachelor’s and associate’s degrees in the primary data source, the U.S. Census. Yet they are an important part of the college completion goal. Analysts may be able to provide intermediate measures until they can develop a more accurate measure. Nationwide, state-by-state, institution-by-institution annual trend data on the certificates awarded are available.

SREB will report to states *regularly* — linking outcomes and policies to results: SREB will continue to provide reports to states detailing progress on the goals — both customized progress reports to states and policy briefs that summarize the best research, updates on effective practice, and the status of SREB states on the indicators of progress. In focusing on outcome measures and essential policies along the education continuum, policy briefs in the *Challenge 2020* series will link policy implementation to results.

If the links prove strong — helping SREB states learn which policies lead most directly to results — states may be able to move more quickly to greater gains. Indeed, SREB states may well be positioned to lead the nation on significantly more indicators of educational excellence.



SREB will report to state leaders on measurable results.



Challenge 2020 Goal

All children **entering school** will exhibit the knowledge and the social and developmental skills needed for success in first grade.

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- Percentages of all groups of 3- and 4-year-olds who enroll in public (or high-quality private) prekindergarten programs will increase to above national averages.
- Percentages of all groups of young children who receive adequate health care (including health screenings) and percentages of children from low-income families who receive nutritional services before entering first grade will increase to above national averages.
- A higher percentage of children will meet targets for school readiness based on state standards each year.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures.*

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should have effective policies for assessing school readiness, including targets for percentages of children meeting state readiness standards.
- States should develop and maintain education data systems that link data on students, teachers and schools from state education and related agencies and then ensure education leaders use the data to inform policy decisions.
- States should have coordinated programs for education, health and social service agencies to serve all children at risk of not being ready for first grade.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- All public pre-K programs should meet high national standards of quality.

Develop effective teachers.

- States should adopt high national standards for pre-K and kindergarten teacher qualifications and for professional development.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies.*

FIRST-GRADE READINESS: The importance of a strong start

Research shows that if young children enter first grade ready to learn, their chances for success throughout school are greatly improved. SREB states that ensure *all* children are ready for school help build the firm foundation for reading and math skills that all students need — a well-placed investment.

The need for programs to ensure first-grade readiness has become even more critical in recent years, because the number of children living in poverty in SREB states climbed steeply as the economy declined. These children are often the ones who can benefit most from high-quality early education programs. Yet the job of ensuring their readiness for school is likely to be more difficult in the years ahead. The challenge for all SREB states will be to provide adequate access to prekindergarten programs to serve these children — while maintaining high standards for programs that have limited financial resources.

Set for progress: We know what's worked

Despite limited funds, the SREB region has tremendous momentum toward the *Challenge 2020* goal on school readiness through achievements in **access**, **assessments** and **quality**.

By 2000, all SREB states already offered kindergarten programs in public schools, and some led the nation in access to state-funded pre-K. The 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals were clear in directing states to know whether their children were ready for first grade and to have readiness assessments in pre-K and kindergarten to pinpoint their needs.

By 2007, 11 SREB states had school-readiness assessments, all had early learning standards, and seven had formal definitions of school readiness.

Challenge 2020 calls for states to ensure they have comprehensive policies for setting targets to get more children ready for school and for aligning their pre-K curriculum standards with first-grade curriculum standards.

SREB's first *Challenge to Lead* report on school readiness, *Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School* (2005), documented that SREB states held the top four positions in the national ranking of access to pre-K. By the time of the second report, *Ready to Start: Ensuring High-Quality Prekindergarten in SREB States* (2007), SREB states were known as the trailblazers in pre-K.

Building a Foundation for Success advised broadening most states' priority for access at that time: 4-year-olds from families in poverty. It advocated adding 3-year-olds in poverty and 4-year-olds from low-income households.

Ready to Start documented that a higher proportion of children lived in low-income families. It showed the need for early educational services for children with disabilities and children with limited English proficiency, and it advocated giving them access to pre-K programs without regard to family income. Both reports recommended that state-funded pre-K programs meet the widely accepted standards of quality set by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). These standards address curriculum, teacher quality, staff-to-children ratios, and health and safety for pre-K programs. *Ready to Start* emphasized the need for pre-K teachers to have specific competencies and more training — and for programs to have more stable funding streams.

All of these policy recommendations have been incorporated in *Challenge 2020*.



“The most recent research on prekindergarten in SREB states shows that programs in the region are working.”

Ready to Start: Ensuring High-Quality Prekindergarten in SREB States



“The stakes are too high. We cannot leave school readiness to chance for our most vulnerable children.”

Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School

How far the region has come

SREB states came a long way from 2002 to 2010, in spite of a declining economy. Fifteen SREB states have state-funded pre-K programs; the 16th, Mississippi, has a large federally funded Head Start program.

In 2004, the *Challenge to Lead* series first reported on the adequacy of access to publicly funded pre-K programs in individual state progress reports; pre-K enrollments in eight SREB states equaled or exceeded the number of children in poverty in the state. By 2010, pre-K enrollments in 13 SREB states equaled or exceeded the number of children in poverty in the state. Five of these states had at least twice the number of pre-K-enrolled children as children in poverty.

States also made progress in meeting the 10 NIEER quality standards. In 2004, Arkansas was the *only* state nationwide that met all of them. Two others — including North Carolina — met nine. Thus, two of three states in the nation with strong standards were SREB states.

By 2011, five states — including three SREB states — met all 10 of these standards. Ten states — including six SREB states — met nine. In sum, nine of 16 states nationwide with strong standards were SREB states.

SREB states made particularly important gains in establishing pre-K curriculum standards. Five SREB states with state-funded pre-K programs met national standards for their curricula in 2004, and all 15 did in 2011.

Challenge 2020: What’s ahead

Clearly, SREB states have moved from trail-blazer to pacesetter in pre-K. But all children

are still not ready for school, and the work is not finished. SREB states need to pay particular attention to at-risk populations: 3-year-olds in poverty and those with disabilities, plus 4-year-olds from low-income families. Doing so will help states ensure that every child is ready to learn by first grade. Not only will preschoolers start school on a firmer footing, but states, too, will build the strong foundation that pays off when these children are older.

State leaders also need to ensure their states have school-readiness measures and use them to promote stronger programs and help all children develop the knowledge and skills they need.

To meet the *Challenge 2020* goal: Each SREB state should ensure strong state pre-K programs that align with its state early-learning standards.

States need to provide ample access to serve the growing number of 3- and 4-year-olds who are at risk of not being ready for school. And their programs and teachers need to measure up to high standards of quality. States also need to coordinate education with health and social service programs to ensure all students receive critical early services and screenings.

SREB’s *Challenge 2020* reporting to states will monitor a wider range of important performance measures — such as access to pre-K for 3-year-olds in poverty or with disabilities and for 4-year-olds from low-income families — in addition to the 4-year-old groups already reported in the past. Future SREB reports also will include the results of school-readiness assessments.



Challenge 2020 Goal

Student achievement for all groups in the **early grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- Percentages of all groups of students meeting state academic standards in reading, mathematics and science will increase annually to reach 90 percent — and achievement gaps between groups will close.
- Ninety percent of fourth-graders will score at or above the Basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, math and science.
- Percentages of fourth-graders who score at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading, math and science will increase regularly — to above national averages.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures*.

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should set high standards for teacher preparation programs, which should focus on both content and pedagogy; states should monitor programs to ensure teachers are able to teach the early grades standards to all groups of students.
- States should ensure that the early and middle grades math standards, curriculum and instruction are aligned so that students are ready to take and succeed in Algebra I no later than ninth grade.
- States should develop and maintain education data systems that link data on students, teachers and schools from state education and related agencies and then ensure education leaders use the data to inform policy decisions.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- States should develop school accountability systems that focus on results for all groups of students to ensure their success in reading, math and science as they move from grade to grade. States should align curricula, assessments, reporting, professional development, and rewards and sanctions with their academic standards.
- Schools and districts should ensure students have access to technology and digital instructional materials, as appropriate, to improve learning and should ensure that their teachers are trained to help students use them effectively.
- Not later than the end of third grade, states should place students who are behind in reading in programs that can help them catch up to grade level.

Develop effective teachers.

- States should adopt policies and standards for leadership preparation programs. The policies should address recruitment of aspiring principals; require leadership preparation programs to offer

substantive field-training; establish tiered licensure and evaluation; and call for districts to mentor and provide for induction of new leaders.

- States and districts should develop working conditions for school leaders that align with standards for leadership preparation, licensure and evaluation of principals.
- States should implement comprehensive teacher evaluation systems that use multiple measures to differentiate teachers across a range of performance.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies*.

EARLY GRADES: Skills all students must gain



“Success in reading and mathematics in the early grades is critical to every child’s future in school — and beyond.”

Set for Success: Improving Reading and Mathematics Achievement in the Early Grades

Reading and math skills are the building blocks for success in school. Children in the elementary grades must gain these skills so they have the critical tools for learning in all academic subjects by the time they reach the middle grades. Adding science early bolsters young learners’ curiosity *and* basic skills. It’s not surprising that research shows those who acquire these skills early are more likely to graduate from high school. Those who don’t face a long struggle — and their chances of graduating diminish each year they continue to trail.

Set for progress: We know what’s worked

SREB states have solid ground on which to build the *Challenge 2020* goal for the early grades. SREB addressed the challenges of preparing young students for the middle grades in three reports to state leaders since 2002.

- *Mastering Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades* (2004)
- *Getting State Standards Right in the Early and Middle Grades* (2006), and
- *Set for Success: Improving Reading and Mathematics Achievement in the Early Grades* (2008).

The reports emphasized three significant themes:

- 1) Reading and math programs in the early grades should be rigorous enough to ensure that students are well prepared for the middle grades and high school.

- 2) Schools need to prepare for rising numbers of children from low-income families and families in which English is not the primary language.
- 3) States need to adopt rigorous academic standards to ensure students are ready for the next level of instruction.

Demographic changes in recent years, however, are affecting states’ abilities to continue progress. Since 2002, the proportion of children from low-income families and of children who may not speak English rose in the SREB region.

These realities mean many states have a higher proportion of school-aged children considered at risk of falling behind and not completing high school — that is, unless states help these students meet standards in foundational subjects in the early grades.

How far the region has come

To date, the performance results for fourth-graders for the SREB region as a whole fell short of the goal set in 2002 — that all fourth-graders would score at or above the Basic level on reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation’s Report Card. This is important because NAEP defines the Basic level as partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills.

But SREB states made notable progress. In 2011, almost two out of three fourth-graders

in typical SREB states scored at or above the **Basic** level in reading on NAEP — up 5 percentage points from 2003. In math, more than four out of five fourth-graders scored at or above the Basic level on NAEP — up 8 points from 2003. In both reading and math, every SREB state but one increased the percentage of students scoring at or above the Basic level from 2003 to 2011. Yet in sheer numbers, too many students fell below the Basic level on NAEP.

At the **Proficient** level in 2011, few states met the goal of exceeding national averages, important because the Proficient level measures mastery of grade-level material.

The 2002 goals challenged SREB states to close achievement gaps for students from various groups, including those from racial and ethnic groups and those from low-income families. White students continued to outperform their black and Hispanic peers in reading and math in typical SREB states.

For black students, the gaps narrowed in both reading and math from 2003 to 2011. But achievement gains by Hispanic students did not keep pace with those of their white peers in reading. In math, the gap for these students narrowed by 4 points.

The 2002 goals also called for all fourth-graders to meet state grade-level standards. After Congress passed *No Child Left Behind*, many SREB states strengthened their academic standards. In mid-2012, 14 SREB states had adopted the Common Core State Standards, and two had adopted rigorous state standards.

Challenge 2020: What's ahead

Challenge 2020 retains the region's focus on mastery in reading and math for the early grades — and expands it.

While NAEP tests fourth-graders, *Challenge 2020* calls for SREB states to ensure **third-graders** read on grade level.

To meet the *Challenge 2020* goal: SREB states need to set an early target for on-time grade-level reading, so students go from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. This ensures states have ample opportunity to provide aggressive help to children who are struggling before they complete the early grades.

Long-term success in math also begins in the early grades. Students need to master the fundamentals early, and they need to begin to build math concepts they will need later. But if the early grades curriculum does not align with more advanced math curriculum, young students do not get the start they need.

Challenge 2020 calls on states to align the math curriculum from the early grades through Algebra I. The National Mathematics Advisory Panel has established that Algebra I is a gateway subject for many careers. Without curriculum alignment, too many children will not be ready for Algebra I by eighth grade, when most students need to take it — or even by ninth grade, when all need to complete it.

Challenge 2020 also calls for getting more students to state standards and to NAEP Basic and Proficient levels in science. Progress on these outcome measures will mean students can be ready for the critical transition to the middle grades.

SREB states need to step up science instruction in the early grades and set targets for getting more students to state standards and national averages. The science curriculum should be hands-on and engaging. If children experience science this way, it increases their enthusiasm for learning and builds their capacity for critical thinking.

All SREB states have set ambitious academic standards. Now they need to provide the extra help students need so they can succeed in reading, math and science in the early grades — and be well prepared for the middle grades.



“The National Assessment of Educational Progress serves as a common measure for comparing students at the same grade level among states.”

Mastering Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades



MIDDLE GRADES

Challenge 2020 Goal

Student achievement for all groups in the **middle grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- Percentages of all groups of students meeting state academic standards in reading, mathematics and science will increase annually to reach 90 percent — and achievement gaps between groups will close.
- Ninety percent of eighth-graders will score at or above the Basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, math and science.
- Percentages of eighth-graders who score at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading, math and science will exceed national averages.
- All students will pass Algebra I, preferably in eighth grade, but no later than ninth grade.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures*.

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should set high standards for teacher preparation programs, which should focus on both content and pedagogy; states should monitor programs to ensure teachers are able to teach the middle grades standards to all groups of students.
- States should develop and maintain education data systems that link data on students, teachers and schools from state education and related agencies and then ensure education leaders use the data to inform policy decisions.
- States should ensure the early and middle grades math standards, curricula and instruction align so that students are ready to take Algebra I on time.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- States should develop school-level accountability systems focused on performance outcomes and grade-level progression, with particular emphasis on preparing all students for the transition to ninth grade. Curricula, assessments, reporting and professional development should align with standards. States should provide rewards for success and assistance for low-performing schools.
- States should adopt adolescent reading policies to promote improvement in middle grades literacy. The policies should *identify* critical reading skills students need; *provide* for development of a literacy-based curriculum that fosters the mastery of critical reading skills in each subject and is grounded in the Common Core State Standards or other rigorous state standards; and *intervene* to help struggling readers.

- States should promote improved achievement in middle grades STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and math) by: providing for a curriculum that emphasizes conceptual understanding and reasoning in STEM subjects as related to the Common Core State Standards or other rigorous state standards; and giving middle grades teachers tools and strategies, including technology, to enrich the engagement of students in their learning.
- By the end of eighth grade, all students should have an academic and career plan, created with the school and parent or guardian. States should adopt an assessment system that identifies student potential for success in high school and beyond and provides follow-up advisement for both student and parent or guardian that is based on the results.
- States should have programs that counsel middle-graders who are below grade level on academic standards in key subjects and provide them with a plan to accelerate learning so they can catch up academically, through extended time, richer instruction and extra support.
- Schools and districts should ensure students have access to technology, digital instructional materials, online and blended learning options, and individualized instruction to meet their needs and should ensure that their teachers are trained to help students use them effectively.

Develop effective teachers and leaders.

- States should adopt policies and standards for leadership preparation programs. The policies should address recruitment of aspiring principals; require leadership preparation programs to offer substantive field-training; establish tiered licensure and evaluation; and call for districts to mentor and provide for induction of new leaders. The policies also should provide support for principals in the state's most challenged middle grades schools.
- States should ensure teachers can advance student learning in their subjects by teaching students to use critical literacy skills in reading complex, discipline-related texts. Teachers should have high-quality preparation programs; intensive, school-embedded professional development; and specific certification/licensure requirements that enable them to develop their capacities.
- States should prepare STEM teachers to place greater instructional emphasis on conceptual understanding and reasoning than on procedural skills. Teachers should have high-quality preparation programs; intensive, school-embedded professional development; and specific certification/licensure requirements that enable them to develop their capacities.
- States and districts should develop working conditions for school leaders that align with standards for leadership preparation, licensure and evaluation of principals.
- States should develop comprehensive teacher evaluation models that use multiple measures to differentiate among teachers on their performance. They should provide teachers with feedback and information that can help them improve their teaching.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies.*



Governor **Timothy M. Kaine** of Virginia, the 2008-2009 SREB Chair, led the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools.

MIDDLE GRADES: The make-or-break point in the K-12 system

No transition is more important to increasing high school graduation rates than the one from eighth to ninth grade. But this one may well be the most difficult for students.

The seeds of success and failure are sown early and then nurtured in the middle years. Too many students become distracted by the many social and developmental changes they face, lose interest in their classes and see school as irrelevant. The research is clear: Absenteeism, poor grades in English and math, and discipline problems at this stage lead to disengagement — and shortly thereafter to dropping out.

But research is also clear about what puts many of these students back on the path to success: interventions that are immediate and personal, and schoolwork that actively engages them in each academic subject in interesting, real-world ways.

Set for progress: We know what's worked

The middle grades figured prominently in SREB's *Challenge to Lead* work and reports over the past decade for good reason. Policy leaders knew they needed to develop a strong consensus that the central mission of the middle grades is to prepare students aggressively for success in high school and beyond. Two of SREB's special committees tackled this issue head-on.

Led by Governor Kaine of Virginia, SREB's committee on adolescent literacy published a 2009 report, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, which stressed to state leaders a critically important idea — that all teachers should help students build literacy skills in every academic subject. The report emphasized that students should read engaging texts in all subjects and urged SREB states to implement statewide adolescent literacy plans to ensure that teachers can implement this new approach to literacy instruction.

Two *Challenge to Lead* reports, *Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades* (2004) and *Keeping Middle Grades Students on the Path to Success in High School* (2009), laid out additional strategies: accelerated curriculum for struggling students; better-aligned math curriculum to promote preparation for Algebra I; and engagement of middle-graders in developing academic and career plans.

These reports set the stage for the important 2011 SREB Middle Grade Commission, led by Governor Perdue of North Carolina. Its report added urgency to the call for change and provided hard-hitting advice to states to:

- communicate and clarify the middle grades mission
- focus on math and science and emphasize reading high-level texts in every subject
- identify students likely to drop out of school — and intervene
- require that students complete individual academic and career plans, and
- provide professional development targeted to middle grades teachers, counselors and school leaders.

How far the region has come

The 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals called for all students to meet state standards in reading and math and reach the NAEP Basic levels in these subjects. The goals also stretched states to bring greater percentages to the NAEP Proficient levels in these subjects than the nation.

SREB state leaders can take pride in their progress — in strengthening middle grades standards *and* raising student achievement. From 2003 to 2011, most SREB states adjusted curriculum standards and aligned their assessments to their standards to promote greater achievement. In typical SREB states, more than two out of three students met state standards in reading and math.



Governor **Beverly Eaves** **Perdue** of North Carolina, the 2010-2011 SREB Chair, led the SREB Middle Grades Commission.

In 2011, in most SREB states, greater percentages of eighth-graders scored at or above Basic on NAEP in reading compared with 2003, and all SREB states did in math. Similarly, most SREB states were up in percentages of eighth-graders scoring at or above NAEP Proficient in reading, and all were up in math.

Yet a tough ceiling remained. No SREB state had more than 80 percent of eighth-graders scoring at or above the NAEP Basic level in reading from 2003 to 2011. Percentages of students reaching the Proficient level topped out at 40 percent in both reading and math among SREB states, and many states were much lower. These rates need to rise for high school graduation rates to improve and for more students to be ready for postsecondary study.

Challenge 2020: What's ahead

It is time to put a strong adolescent literacy program in place in SREB states — one that stresses critical reading in every subject. It is also time to bolster the science and math curricula in every middle grades school. The science curriculum needs to be engaging and project-based. The math curriculum needs to align carefully from the early grades to Algebra I so most eighth-graders are fully prepared to take Algebra I.

States should ensure they set strong policies on advisement for all students and intervention for struggling students. Waiting until high school to engage students in developing a plan for their future is simply too late. In most districts, schools need more counselors and more teachers trained as teacher-advisors to carry out this work.

Intervening to help stalled students also is critical, but the programs schools put in place need to *accelerate* student learning — so students catch up and do not fall further behind as they work on their deficiencies.

For these efforts to be successful in the middle grades, each SREB state needs to strengthen its educator workforce, through better professional preparation for new teachers and school leaders and through intensified professional development that focuses on teachers' instructional tasks within the school.

Policy leaders have studied the middle grades again and again. Members of the SREB Middle Grades Commission called for **action** rather than more talk and studies. In response, the region's policy leaders charted a course based on research and effective practices. Their policy recommendations complement the efforts already under way to adopt and implement more rigorous standards, curricula and assessments — and they hold promise for helping states meet the middle grades goal.

To meet the Challenge 2020 goal: SREB states need to adopt state policies that regional leaders have recognized as vitally important for the middles grades — ones that complement their implementation of the Common Core State Standards or other rigorous state standards.

These include strong literacy policies, greater emphasis on math and science in the curriculum, more attention to teacher preparation, professional development specifically for middle grades teachers, and a focus on academic and career guidance for middle grades students.



“The new core standards provide a strong framework for improving math instruction, [stressing the] conceptual understanding and application of math.”

*A New Mission for the Middle Grades:
Preparing Students for a Changing World*



HIGH SCHOOL

Challenge 2020 Goal

Eighty percent of all groups of ninth-graders will graduate from **high school** ready for college and career training. (This likely means more than 90 percent will need to graduate from high school and more than 80 percent will need to meet readiness standards for college and career training.)

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- Four-year high school graduation rates, calculated using the adjusted cohort graduation rate, will rise each year to meet annual state targets and to reach at least 90 percent by 2020.
- The percentage of all groups of students in the ninth-grade cohort who meet state college-ready benchmarks as they complete high school will increase so that 80 percent of high school graduates are ready for college and career training.
- Percentages of students in SREB states who meet state standards on end-of-course and other graduation tests will be higher than percentages in the nation.
- Rates of on-time progression through high school — from grades nine to 10, 10 to 11 and 11 to 12 — will increase over time to above national averages.
- Students will drop out of high school at lower rates than the national average.
- Each year, higher percentages of recent high school dropouts will re-enter high school and earn diplomas or GED credentials.
- Percentages of students taking and passing courses as part of accelerated learning options (such as dual enrollment and Advanced Placement) will increase, and rates will exceed national averages.
- State average scores on national college admissions exams (when taken by more than 50 percent of a state's seniors while in high school) will exceed national averages.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures*.

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should develop and maintain education data systems that link data on students, teachers and schools from state education and related agencies and then ensure education leaders use the data to inform policy decisions.
- States should set high standards for teacher preparation programs to focus on both content and pedagogy. States should monitor programs to ensure they prepare teachers who are able to teach the high school standards to all groups of students.
- States should focus school accountability systems equally on student performance outcomes and graduation rates, and they should expect student achievement beyond minimum competency. Curricula, assessments, reporting and professional development should align with standards.
- States should strengthen policies on accelerated learning options so that more students statewide have access to those opportunities.

- States should first assist schools with the lowest achievement levels and graduation rates. They should provide rewards for success and focus sanctions on districts and schools that fail to improve, even after receiving state help.
- States should align middle grades and high school standards with college-readiness standards and strengthen the transition to high school to improve student achievement in ninth grade. States should identify students in the 11th grade who do not meet college-readiness standards and require them to participate in 12th-grade transition courses designed to prepare them to begin college without needing remedial courses.
- States should have plans and programs for schools and districts to prevent students from dropping out and to bring dropouts back into the education system.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- States should adopt adolescent reading policies to promote discipline-based reading in high school. The policies should *identify* critical reading skills students need; *provide* for the development of a literacy-based curriculum that fosters the mastery of critical reading skills in each subject and that is grounded in the Common Core State Standards or other rigorous state standards; and *intervene* to help struggling readers.
- Schools and districts should ensure students have access to technology, digital instructional materials, online and blended learning options, and individualized instruction to meet their needs and should ensure that their teachers are trained to help students use them effectively.
- States should recognize more than one path to graduation, one of which is built on academic rigor and includes career/technical (CT) programs of study that join a strong academic core with a coherent sequence of high-quality CT courses.

Develop effective teachers and leaders.

- States should adopt policies and standards for leadership preparation programs. The policies should address recruitment of aspiring principals; require leadership preparation programs to offer substantive field-training; establish tiered licensure and evaluation; and call for districts to mentor and provide for induction of new leaders. The policies also should provide support for principals in the state's most challenged high schools.
- States and districts should develop working conditions for school leaders that align with standards for preparation, licensure and evaluation of principals.
- States should ensure teachers can advance student learning in their subjects by teaching students to use critical literacy skills in reading complex, discipline-related texts. Teachers should have high-quality preparation programs; intensive, school-embedded professional development; and specific certification/licensure requirements that enable them to develop their capacities.
- States should develop comprehensive teacher evaluation models that use multiple measures to differentiate among teachers on their performance. They also should provide teachers with feedback and information that can help them improve their teaching.



Governor **Sonny Perdue** of Georgia, the 2006-2008 SREB Chair, led the SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies.*

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: Door to the future

Completing high school matters in America. It means a better chance at jobs — and with higher wages. It opens doors to postsecondary education — and even better jobs and wages. And it is linked to better health, less crime and more civic engagement.

Yet one-quarter of U.S. high school students do not graduate with their peers. In 1,550 of the nation's high schools, less than 60 percent of the students make it to the senior year. Too many of number of these so-called “dropout factories” are located in SREB states.

SREB states have already accepted the challenge to raise high school graduation rates. These rates climbed from 2002 to 2009 — narrowing the gap with the nation to within 1 percentage point by 2009. Still, regional and national rates are a long way from the 90-plus percent rate for graduation and the 80-plus percent target for college- and career-ready graduates.

A high school completion goal that incorporates college readiness means that many more students should be ready for postsecondary study and training when they finish. Statistically, for 80 percent of graduates to be college-ready, *more than* 80 percent likely need to reach college-ready standards. Why? Because some who meet the standards will not graduate. The goal also anticipates that states will graduate some students who are not college- and career-ready.

ACT Inc. research suggests that states are a long way from the 80 percent target, and it will be a hard climb to ensure that more students meet this higher college-ready standard when they complete high school. ACT reports indicate that about one-fourth of the Class of 2012 measured up to its college-ready benchmarks. About half did not reach the college-ready benchmark in reading alone, and fewer did in math.

Set for progress: We know what's worked

SREB states have laid the groundwork for reaching the *Challenge 2020* high school goal. SREB's *Getting Serious About High School Graduation* (2005) noted that from 1992 to 2002, graduation rates in 13 SREB states declined, some precipitously. The report urged states to set real goals for graduation — not simple “any-increase-will-do” targets that some SREB states had adopted.

Getting Serious also called attention to differences in rates between groups of students. To grow overall state graduation rates, it advised states to help black, Hispanic and male students improve. This advice is still good.

In 2007 and 2008, SREB convened the Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement, chaired by Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia. It created an aggressive slate of recommendations to improve accountability and completion. To do less, it concluded, put the prosperity of SREB states at risk.

The committee report, *The Next Generation of School Accountability: A Blueprint for Raising High School Achievement and Graduation Rates in SREB States* (2009), known as the *Blueprint* report, recommended giving more weight to high school graduation rates in state accountability systems, giving priority for assistance to the lowest-achieving schools, providing rewards and assistance for districts and schools, and bringing dropouts back to class.

“We know what to do,” wrote SREB President Dave Spence in the *Blueprint* report. “We need the right state policies and leadership to get it done. Two tactics will make a difference,” he said: teaching students specific strategies for reading by discipline, and identifying 11th-graders who need college-readiness courses in 12th grade.



“We must set higher goals for improving graduation rates at the state and local level, provide better help for schools that need it, and hold schools accountable for reaching their goals.”

Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts

The *Blueprint* report also stressed that states should focus on the transitions from middle grades to high school and from high school to college. It pushed for robust ninth-grade transition programs to help students catch up. And it called for courses to help high school seniors accelerate their start on postsecondary study or develop skills they need to be successful beyond high school. For students who need a more hands-on approach, the report called on states to offer career/technical options joined with a solid academic core, so students can develop the knowledge and skills they need for postsecondary study and careers. All of these principles are incorporated in the *Challenge 2020* goals.

How far the region has come

SREB states' progress on high school graduation rates has been dramatic. SREB states reduced the gap with the nation on these rates to within 1 percentage point. The Johns Hopkins Everyone Graduates Center documented that 12 states nationwide fueled the improved national graduation rate from 2002 to 2009. Eight were SREB states. From 2002 to 2010, they reduced by one-third the number of high schools in the region considered "dropout factories" — and by one-fifth the number in the nation.

Tennessee and other states made remarkable progress in raising graduation rates, and Texas led in reducing the number of "dropout factories" in the region.

Until 2005, no consensus ruled on the best way to calculate these rates. Then governors nationwide (through the National Governors Association) reached consensus on using a cohort-style graduation rate formula. The U.S. Department of Education built on the consensus and issued a single formula: the adjusted cohort graduation rate. Beginning in 2012, all states were required to report graduation rates using this rate.

In addition, a nationwide coalition of organizations, including SREB, began calling for strong data systems in 2005. This effort, the Data Quality Campaign, helps states know what education data they need to collect from multiple state agencies, how to link it and how to use it to make good policy decisions. SREB states led the nation in developing these systems and have made a strong start in using them to guide policy on graduation rates and other decisions.

Challenge 2020: What's ahead

SREB states need sustained commitment to reach the high school graduation targets. When the consortia of states developing assessments for the Common Core State Standards have completed their work, states should have the tools they need to make college readiness a measurable indicator. In the meantime, states should identify and use their own measures of college readiness within their own accountability systems.

In addition, *Challenge 2020* continues to call for states to prevent students from dropping out and to bring dropouts back to school to earn high school diplomas or GED credentials.

To meet the *Challenge 2020* goal: SREB state leaders need to align middle grades, high school and college-readiness standards and smooth the transitions from middle grades to high schools and from high schools to college.

They should ensure that their states have programs in place to assess student readiness in the 11th grade and to give students who are not ready a chance to catch up in their senior year. Twelfth-graders also need transition courses that can prepare them for college admission and direct entry to freshman-level courses.



"Unless SREB states begin to meet these ambitious goals, too many students will be destined to face limited opportunities for lifelong success and states will lose their economic competitiveness."

The Next Generation of School Accountability: A Blueprint for Raising High School Achievement and Graduation Rates in SREB States



Challenge 2020 Goal

Sixty percent of working-age adults will have a **postsecondary** credential: an associate's or bachelor's degree, or a career certificate. Public postsecondary institutions will make it a top priority to help states meet state needs by increasing graduates, public service and research.

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- Postsecondary enrollment rates of recent high school graduates will increase.
- Enrollment in public colleges and universities will represent the diversity of the state's recent high school graduating class.
- First-year persistence rates and progression beyond the second year will increase.
- Credit-hours that students earn toward degrees will not exceed the base requirements of degree programs by more than 10 percent.
- Percentages of college students who graduate on time will increase for students from all racial and ethnic groups, in both four-year and two-year programs. The time it takes for full-time students to earn degrees will decrease to no more than one semester beyond normal time.
- The percentage of adults ages 25 to 64 who have postsecondary degrees or career certificates (from programs of at least one year) will increase to 60 percent.
- Advanced degrees and degrees awarded in high-need fields will increase to meet established state targets, based on state needs.
- Students will pass professional licensure examinations at higher rates than national averages.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures*.

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should implement college completion plans with specific targets and responsibilities: They should set targets for the numbers of credentials by level (associate's and bachelor's degrees, and career certificates from programs of at least one year) to ensure that 60 percent of adults ages 25 to 64 hold at least one of these credentials by 2025; and all state agencies with responsibilities for meeting the college completion targets should formalize ways to collaborate in meeting the targets.
- States should hold postsecondary institutions accountable for making timely graduation central to campus culture and for taking specific steps to increase the number of graduates and the completion rates.
- States should limit credit-hours for nearly all degree programs to a recognized standard, such as 120 semester hours for bachelor's degrees and 60 hours for associate's degrees.
- States should have financing strategies for meeting their college completion goals, and they should tie state appropriations for institutions, in part, to meeting the goals.

- States should improve college affordability by coordinating funding, tuition and financial aid policies more effectively.
- States should have a guaranteed statewide college-transfer system based on standard, lower-division curriculum requirements.
- States should develop and maintain education data systems that link data on students, teachers, faculty and schools from state education and related agencies and then ensure education leaders use the data to inform policy decisions.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- States should hold institutions accountable for productivity and cost-efficiency strategies — including technology strategies — that reduce excess credits toward degrees and lead to timely degree completion at lower costs.
- Postsecondary education agencies should ensure support for research, development and technology transfer, especially in science, engineering and mathematics, to support the state’s social and economic needs.
- Colleges and universities should ensure students have access to technology, online and blended learning options, and high-quality digital content.

Develop effective leaders.

- Statewide system and institutional governing boards should set policies to hold educational leaders accountable for raising both graduation rates and the numbers of certificates and degrees awarded annually.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies*.



“The immediate major challenge for the nation and every state is to ensure their populations have the levels of education necessary to meet the job requirements of the next 15 years.”

No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion

POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIALS: A workforce imperative

“No single factor will determine the future quality of life for all residents in your state more than whether enough adults earn college degrees and technical certificates.” So said the first *Challenge to Lead* report on college completion, *Creating College Opportunity for All: Prepared Students and Affordable Colleges*, in 2005.

A well-educated workforce puts capable leaders in important business, industry, legal and government roles — people who can perform high-skills jobs *and* create jobs. It fills classrooms, from pre-K to college, with effective

and diverse faculty, teachers, counselors and leaders who can guide the next generation. It produces adequate numbers of health care and other professionals who can respond to today’s needs and seek solutions for unsolved problems. It also supplies the state with creative minds that can enrich art and culture.

Above all, it builds a general workforce that qualifies for high-demand, high-wage jobs that can fuel state economies. The fastest-growing jobs from 2008 to 2018 will require a postsecondary credential, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Governor **Joe Manchin III** of West Virginia, the 2009-2010 SREB Chair, highlighted college completion during his chairmanship.

Set for progress: We know what's worked

In 2010, SREB's advisory panel on college completion and SREB's Board Chair, Governor Manchin of West Virginia, did not hesitate to set a bold, new course for raising college completion. They recommended a focus on new measures. The advisory panel and Governor Manchin were concerned in part with findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: The United States had dropped in its standing as a world leader in the proportion of working-age adults with postsecondary credentials.

Also, according to reports from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, the nation was projected to fall significantly short of the degree and certificate production needed to meet economic needs.

State leaders received two SREB policy reports in 2010. *No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion*, the advisory panel's report, stressed that SREB states no "longer can afford to ignore the low levels of college completion." It set out 10 major policy recommendations for helping states turn the situation around. It began with the strong recommendation that states develop a statewide policy on college completion and detail the goals, roles and responsibilities for achieving state targets.

More specifically, *No Time to Waste* recommended changing each state's focus from increasing graduation rates of individual colleges to increasing the *percentage of adults* with postsecondary credentials. It called for states to set a target that 60 percent of working-age adults would have postsecondary degrees or career certificates.

Challenge 2020 includes all of the *No Time to Waste* recommendations.

The companion report, *Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States*, laid out current rates and summarized themes from *No Time to Waste*: "keeping

college costs down, strengthening financial aid, bringing more adults back to college, and insisting on more productivity and efficiency in our colleges and universities."

Measuring Success painted a complex picture of today's college student: Many students are part time, or they transfer from institution to institution, change majors or take long breaks. Fewer students devote four straight years to college study. Yet the calculation of a college's graduation rate used in formal reporting includes only students who began at that college as full-time students. When students transfer into a college and earn a degree, they are not included in that college's graduation rate. In addition, other typical students today — the part-timer and the stop-out — are not included, either, even though they are a significant part of the postsecondary picture.

For this reason, the SREB-State Data Exchange provides a college progression rate to help regional policy-makers understand the less-than-ideal college graduation rate calculations. Its yearly *Indicators Report* includes rates for graduates, students still enrolled and transfer students at the six-year point from their entry. It also includes time- and credits-to-degree information that captures transfer, stop-out and part-time students.

These outcome measures are incorporated in *Challenge 2020*.

SREB also studied how some public institutions beat the odds in graduating more students, including those with academic and/or economic disadvantages. A 2010 report, *Promoting a Culture of Student Success: How Colleges and Universities are Improving Degree Completion*, documented that a graduation-oriented campus culture requires commitment at every level. It also requires focusing intensely on the individual student, with a variety of strategies and programs to meet each student's needs.

In addition to college degree completion, the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* goals recognized that public colleges and universities have other

important roles. Most are responsible for economic development in addition to teaching, some are responsible for public service, and many play a vital role in research.

In 2006, SREB reported progress toward meeting these responsibilities in *Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Meeting State Needs* . The report highlighted efforts in three SREB states to implement public agendas that identified their state needs. The report also examined research funding as a measure of competitiveness and as an indication of economic development.

How far the region has come

In the last 10 years, every SREB state increased both the number and the percentage of students who earned bachelor's degrees at public four-year colleges and universities. The number of bachelor's degrees awarded, for example, increased 17 percent in SREB states from 2004 to 2009. These graduation rates for first-time, full-time students went up 2 percentage points in typical SREB states.

Despite this progress in degrees awarded and college graduation rates, SREB states still have a way to go in the proportion of adults who have college credentials.

In 2010, the percentage of working-age adults ages 25 to 64 in SREB states who held an associate's or bachelor's degree trailed the percentage in the nation. The proportion (27 percent) holding a bachelor's degree in SREB states stayed the same from 2005 to 2010. The proportion with an associate's degree or higher was 35 percent in 2010, 3 percentage points below the nation. The U.S. Census Bureau currently does not collect information on career certificates, as it does for bachelors' and associate's degrees, and so states do not know the impact these credentials will have on their attainment rates.

Gaps among racial and ethnic groups are narrowing in bachelor's degree attainment,

but they remain substantial in every SREB state. The greatest gains were among black and Hispanic adults earning associate's degrees. The gap in bachelor's degrees between females and males remained the same in 2009 as in 2004, with 58 percent of degrees awarded to women.

Challenge 2020: What's ahead

The college completion goal focuses on increasing the proportion of state residents who earn associate's and bachelor's degrees or career certificates. It sets a specific target for states — 60 percent.

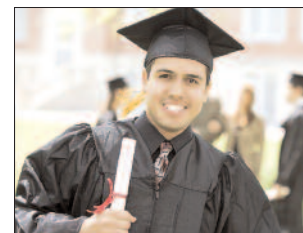
State policy should incorporate a broad array of activities by multiple agencies to ensure that students are *ready* for college, that students can *afford* college, and that colleges *serve* students well. No single program will ensure that a state meets the targets. State leaders will have to take action on a number of fronts if they are to make real progress.

This goal also recognizes that colleges and universities serve multiple missions and owe accountability to the residents of their state for meeting them. State leaders need to communicate state needs and the roles they expect their postsecondary institutions to play in meeting them.

But this goal is about more than what these institutions can do. It is also about state leaders setting postsecondary education policies that get results.

To meet the Challenge 2020 goal: SREB state education policy leaders need to set their sights on college completion at the statewide level — seeking to increase the percentage of adults with postsecondary credentials instead of the graduation rates of individual colleges.

Challenge 2020 calls for a higher proportion of state residents to complete postsecondary credentials so they can have higher-wage, productive careers.



“A successful, effective state initiative to improve college completion needs a formally adopted and widely embraced state-level, statewide plan.”

Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States



Challenge 2020 Goal

Increasing percentages of **adults** without high school or postsecondary credentials will pursue opportunities to earn high school alternative certificates, college degrees or career certificates.

Outcome Measures:

How to know if your state is improving

- More working-age adults who do not have the basic reading, writing and mathematics skills to begin a high school diploma program will enroll in Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language classes.
- Each year, higher percentages of working-age adults without high school credentials will enroll in Adult Secondary Education programs and earn GED credentials.
- More working-age adults will enroll in postsecondary studies within two years after passing GED tests.
- More working-age adults who do not have associate's or bachelor's degrees will enroll in college.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *meeting these outcome measures*.

Essential Policies:

What policies your state needs to improve performance

Align P-20 programs and state agencies to ensure students make smooth transitions.

- States should design and implement statewide plans for adult education. The plans should establish statewide goals; identify funding; and assign state responsibilities for coordination, governance and partnerships with business.
- States should develop policies for adult programs (including "return-to-college" programs) that reduce barriers for returning adults: expedited admissions, child care services, online services and lower counselor-student ratios.

Hold programs accountable for ensuring success for all groups of students.

- States should develop content standards for high-quality certificates and applied associate's degrees.
- States should promote and support the use of technology in adult learning.

SREB will assist states by reporting state progress in *implementing these essential policies*.

LIFELONG LEARNING: A solid return on investment

Too many of the least-educated adults in SREB states are unemployed or under-employed, even in the good times. SREB's 2005 report on adult learning called attention to it then. But the recession that hit in 2008 showed states how vulnerable adults without high school creden-

tials are, especially in tough times. They are more likely to need state services and less likely to contribute to state tax revenues. States risk their own economic well-being when they limit educational opportunities for undereducated adults.

Of the 10 million adults ages 18 and older without high school credentials in the SREB region, about 1.5 percent earn GED credentials in a year. SREB states are not connecting an important segment of adults with educational programs.

Demographers project that working-age adults *with* a high school education will decline by 4 percentage points as the population ages. SREB states can reverse this trend by increasing high school graduation rates and promoting adult education programs to help those without diplomas earn GED credentials. States also need to turn their attention toward helping adults with some college credit return to complete their degrees.

Set for progress: We know what's worked

SREB state leaders have learned much about the needs of adults who left the education system at some point but could return — to their own benefit, and the state's. Two reports addressed the challenges: *Investing Wisely in Adult Learning is Key to State Prosperity* (2005) and *A Smart Move in Tough Times: How SREB States Can Strengthen Adult Learning and the Work Force* (2010).

Both reports recommended that states invest more in adult learning and establish specific goals, including numerical targets for adults to complete each level of adult education.

The reports encouraged state leaders to use more technology in adult learning programs, to market these programs more aggressively, and to improve the governance and coordination of services within the state.

SREB also worked with states to promote programs for adults who earned credits but did not complete degrees or certificates. States quickly realized this population of adults is large. They found that many adults will enroll if the programs are flexible and can accommodate their adult responsibilities.

How far the region has come

By 2010, the record on adult learning across the SREB region was still weak. In spite of improved high school graduation rates, large numbers of residents without high school credentials were added to the pool of under-educated adults in every SREB state each year.

More disturbing, enrollments in Adult Secondary Education programs, which prepare adults to take GED tests, declined by 6 percentage points in SREB states from 2005 to 2008, and enrollment in Adult Basic Education programs remained flat. Only enrollments in English as a Second Language programs rose modestly.

On a positive note, four successful state programs serve adults who have some college credits but no degrees: Kentucky's Project GRAD, Louisiana's CALL, Oklahoma's Reach Higher and West Virginia's Degree Now.

Challenge 2020: What's ahead

SREB's adult learning goal has long focused on adults who did not complete high school. To help states meet their college completion targets, the adult learning goal in *Challenge 2020* asks states to increase efforts to enroll adults in Adult Basic Education and Adult Secondary Education programs and earn GED credentials — and work to get them enrolled in postsecondary study.

To meet the *Challenge 2020* goal: State leaders also need to move college dropouts up the priority list and offer programs to help them complete their degrees.

When more adults return to their studies and earn credentials, states will realize that reaching their adult education goal is a sure path to a stronger workforce and healthier state economies.



“Quite simply, the economic well-being of our region is at stake if we allow the growing group of less-educated adults in SREB states to expand further.”

*A Smart Move in Tough Times:
How SREB States Can Strengthen Adult
Learning and the Work Force*

Major Reports in the 2002 *Challenge to Lead* Goals Series

10-year SREB state goals report

A Decade of Progress (16 reports, 2012)

First-grade readiness

Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School (2005)

Ready to Start: Ensuring High-Quality Prekindergarten in SREB States (2007)

Achievement in the early grades

Mastering Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades (2004)

Set for Success: Improving Reading and Mathematics Achievement in the Early Grades (2008)

Smart Class-Size Policies for Lean Times (2012)

Achievement in the middle grades

Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades (2004)

Keeping Middle Grades Students on the Path to Success in High School (2009)

High school graduation

Getting Serious About High School Graduation (2005)

The Changing Roles of Statewide High School Exams (2007)

Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts (2009)

College and career readiness

Getting Students Ready for College and Careers (2006)

Redesigning Dual Enrollment to Promote College Completion (2012)

Adult literacy

Investing Wisely in Adult Learning is Key to State Prosperity (2005)

A Smart Move in Tough Times: How SREB States Can Strengthen Adult Learning and the Work Force (2010)

Postsecondary certificates and degrees

Creating College Opportunity for All: Prepared Students and Affordable Colleges (2005)

Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States (2010)

School performance standards

Focusing on Student Performance Through Accountability (2005)

Getting State Standards Right in the Early and Middle Grades (2006)

School leadership

Progress Being Made in Getting a Quality Leader in Every School (2004)

Schools Need Good Leaders Now: State Progress in Creating a Learning-Centered School Leadership System (2007)

Qualified teachers

Resolve and Resources to Get a Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom (2004)

Measuring a Teacher's Value and Effectiveness in SREB States (2011)

College and university accountability

Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Meeting State Needs (2006)

Education system that is accountable

From Goals to Results: Improving Education System Accountability (2006)

Major Policy Reports Guided by SREB Chairs, 2009-2011

- *The Next Generation of School Accountability: A Blueprint for Raising High School Achievement and Graduation Rates in SREB States* (2009) (SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement)
- *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States* (2009) (SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools)
- *No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion* (2010)
- *A New Mission for the Middle Grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World* (2011) (SREB Middle Grades Commission)

All reports are available at SREB.org.

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