

The logo for the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is displayed in a large, white, serif font on a dark grey vertical background strip on the left side of the page.

SREB

A Decade of Progress:

How SREB States Achieved Exceptional Gains

The Southern Regional Education Board logo is located in the bottom left corner. It consists of the text "Southern Regional Education Board" in a white, sans-serif font, positioned over a background of stylized, glowing grass blades that transition from light green on the left to bright yellow and orange on the right.

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Inside

How the Odds Were Stacked Against the Region	4
How SREB States Led the Nation in Progress	5
NAEP	5
High School Completion	8
How State Leaders Guided These Achievements	10
Eight Tools for Success	10
Alabama’s Profile	12
Kentucky’s Profile	14
Maryland’s Profile	16
Tennessee’s Profile	18
Texas’ Profile	20
Acknowledgements	25
References	26

This report was prepared by Jeff Gagne, director, Education Policies; and Joan M. Lord, vice president, Education Policies. Jeff Gagne conducted interviews with state leaders, who were generous with their time in talking about their states’ successes. The interviews are documented in the acknowledgements on Page 25. The report draws on earlier policy briefs prepared by Michaela Corrente and Jeff Gagne. The policy staff is indebted to Michael Usdan for advice on the section related to demographic changes in the region.

The report is part of the *Challenge to Lead* education goals series, directed by Jeff Gagne. For more information, email jeff.gagne@sreb.org or joan.lord@sreb.org. The *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education are available on the SREB website at www.sreb.org. A full listing of the goals is printed on the inside back cover.

A Message from the President of SREB

It's cause for celebration whenever SREB states *lead the nation* in gains on key measures of education progress. This report is, first, a special tribute to the SREB states that made substantial progress in the last decade on such measures — and that includes nearly all of them.

But when the measures are major benchmarks including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and high school graduation rates, it's also time to find out just what leaders in these states did to yield such impressive gains. This report does just that — giving you and other education leaders information you can use in your own future decision-making.



You will read that five SREB states led the nation in gains on NAEP from the time that the *No Child Left Behind Act* and SREB's 2002 *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education pushed states to step up their efforts in K-12 math and reading achievement and high school completion. Only three other states in the nation tied these states in gains on NAEP, and not one surpassed them.

Eight SREB states had such high scores and such strong gains on NAEP in at least one subject at one grade level that they are singled out in this report as “pacesetters” for the nation.

Eight SREB states had such high scores and such strong gains on NAEP in at least one subject at one grade level that they are singled out in this report as “pacesetters” for the nation.

You may not realize that four of the nation's top five states in gains on high school graduation rates from 2002 to 2009 were SREB states. Tennessee led them all. In addition, four of the nation's top five states with significant increases in the numbers of graduates over the period were SREB states. These states with rate and numbers increases — seven in all, including six SREB states — were considered the drivers of the overall increase in the national graduation rate.

Improvements like these got the attention of noted researchers Eric Hanushek of Stanford University and Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University. They attributed them, in part, to strong policies that the states' leaders had aggressively implemented. SREB's own policy team wanted to explore just which policies and programs had made the difference, so they interviewed state leaders in five states with strong results. They found similar themes in each state.

These state leaders knew they had to find a balance between state vision and local implementation if they were to achieve the results they wanted.

State leaders in Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee and Texas all realized early in the decade that they had a problem they wanted to address. They established a *plan* at the state level, based on the best *research* they could find. They knew they had to find a *balance* between state vision and local implementation if they were to achieve the results they wanted. They ensured that teachers and school leaders were *committed* to and trained for the strategies that would work. And they insisted on a *feedback* loop so they would know if the plan was working. You need to read their results and their stories in the pages that follow.

The progress all of these states made is a testament to the power of the right policies implemented by committed leaders at both the state and local levels. These states have shown that it is possible to make a substantial difference in math and reading achievement and high school completion — among the most daunting issues in K-12 education — over a decade. We can all learn from their examples.

Dave Spence
President

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A Decade of Progress:

How SREB States Achieved Exceptional Gains

Introduction

This report tells an amazing story. It centers on SREB states — and their remarkable track record of setting goals and becoming leaders in student achievement despite long odds. It is well known that in the early decades of SREB, most of the 16 member states fell well below national averages on key national education measures. Even as late as the 1990s, leaders sought merely to bring the region up to the level of the rest of the country.

After finishing that decade with some solid success, however, SREB state leaders created a new brand of goals in 2002 with the *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education. This time, they were audacious enough to challenge the region to **lead the nation** in educational progress. At about the same time, the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* set expanded accountability for schools, districts and states to require success for students in all racial and ethnic groups and for children from low-income families.

The combination of *Challenge to Lead* and *No Child Left Behind* set the bar high for SREB states: to lead the nation and achieve success for all students. Few education leaders really expected SREB states to improve more than most others and gain measurable ground — much less jump ahead of some states.

But they did.

The gains were hard won. SREB states grew to include more than one-third of the nation's public pre-K-12 students by 2010, and they faced more profound demographic changes in the new millennium than elsewhere in the nation. In many of these states, school populations bulged and tore the seams of public education. The swell of new students included a much more diverse population than SREB states had ever seen. The proportion of Hispanic students grew sharply, bringing a first language other than English. Many SREB states also saw immigrant children, many of whom were refugees, coming from around the world — bringing languages to school that no teachers in their districts spoke. At the same time, the economy expanded and then faltered — leaving

nearly all SREB states without resources to serve all their students well. These changes taken together should have thwarted school performance.

But they didn't.

*Across the region, and particularly in some SREB states, students made significant academic gains in those years — **gains that outpaced the nation** on key measures and **narrowed achievement gaps** among students from different racial, ethnic and economic groups. In some instances, these gains narrowed gaps that had persisted for a long time.*

How was this possible?

Initially, skeptics dismissed these gains in SREB states as merely “catch up” time for the South. But researchers including Stanford's Eric Hanushek and Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins concluded that the region's achievements were rooted in two decades of effective policies and programs. The most successful SREB states — the ones that saw gains on multiple fronts — and the ones profiled in this report — implemented the policies and programs with *fidelity, consistency* and bold *leadership*. They learned how to implement these policies using tools that research showed all along should work. The tools had firm grips, calibrated measures and honed blades, along with explicit instructions and technological advancements. Skepticism has died away.

Researchers concluded that the region's achievements were rooted in two decades of effective policies and programs.

And lessons can be learned from these states' achievements that all education leaders and policy-makers can use in the future.

1.

How the Odds Were Stacked Against the Region

SREB states outpaced the nation in school enrollment growth

The effect of *sheer growth* in public school enrollments in the new millennium had tremendous consequences for Southern schools. It stretched budgets year after year for more buildings, teachers, instructional materials and related infrastructure for the 1.8 million increase in students who enrolled by the decade's end in SREB states. It made planning nearly impossible in some areas. As births increased and more people moved to the region, school enrollment grew 11 percent in SREB states from 1999 to 2009, and by 2010 it was 19 million enrolled. Nine SREB states saw their public school enrollment growth exceed the U.S. rate of 5 percent. Six had double-digit growth: Delaware, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

Racial and ethnic diversity expanded

The region's burgeoning Hispanic population drove much of this growth. In SREB states from 2000 to 2010, the black population grew 14 percent, the Hispanic population grew 56 percent, and the white population grew 4 percent. Florida and Texas together were home to 27 percent of the nation's Hispanic population and 75 percent of the SREB region's Hispanic population in 2010.

At the end of the decade, Hispanic residents — at 16 percent of the SREB region's population — had nearly caught up in proportion to black residents, at 19 percent. At the same time, the white population was 60 percent.

White students fell to 55 percent of SREB states' public high school graduates by 2010 — and by 2020 they are projected to be 48 percent. Hispanic seniors are expected to more than double in their proportion of their high school classes across the nation, rising from 11 percent of the total in 2000 to 23 percent in 2020. In SREB states, the rise will be even steeper: from 11 percent to 25 percent of the total class.

The change in the growth of Hispanic students has meant that schools have had to teach language skills, including reading, to more students for whom English is not their first

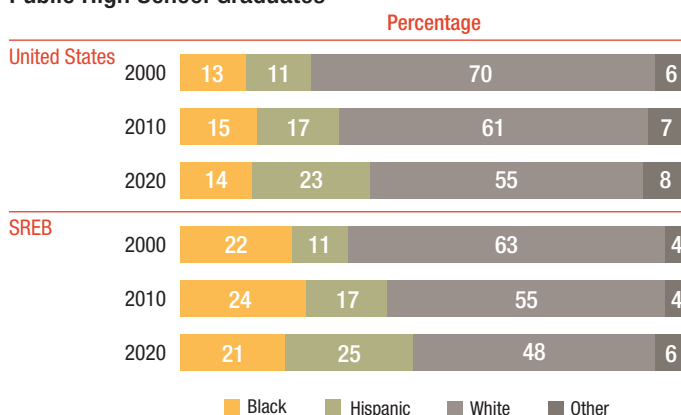
language. They have had to work with parents who could not speak English and whose school and life experiences were very different from their child's. For students whose parents were undocumented residents, schools have had to develop creative ways to engage parents. (See Figure 1.)

More children lived in poverty

Many children in SREB states also endured declining family financial resources, and too many did not have all they needed to support their growth and development. SREB states experienced increases in both low-income families and families in poverty.

In the typical SREB state, the poverty rate rose from 13 percent to 17 percent from 2000 to 2010 — topping the nation's poverty rate. But poverty hits families with children disproportionately. **During this period, the percentage of school-aged children from families in poverty climbed even more.** On average, 26 percent of children under age 18 in SREB states lived in poverty in 2010, compared with 22 percent nationwide. That's about 6.6 million children, or about one in four children in SREB states who lived in poverty in 2010. *The poverty rate for children rose in most SREB states during the period.*

Figure 1
Racial and Ethnic Proportions
Public High School Graduates



Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

By 2010, the majority of school children in SREB states — 58 percent — were eligible for federal free or reduced-price lunches under the National School Lunch Program, up from 46 percent in 2000. Under federal guidelines, students eligible for the lunch program are considered to be from low-income families. Nine SREB states were among the top 10 states in the nation with the highest percentage of school-aged children eligible for the national lunch program. *The percentage of these school children increased in every SREB state from 2000 to 2010.*

Why does this matter? Low income contributes to absenteeism. It causes frequent family relocation as parents seek work and new housing — resulting in disruptions in learning for

children. It contributes to poor nutrition and inadequate health care. It hinders student and parent engagement with school — all factors that affect student achievement.

Why begin this report with a recap of tough demographic challenges? Because it *emphasizes all the more how impressive the gains were* against a backdrop of rapidly expanding student enrollments, increasing diversity and tough economic times. Although more challenges remain, the ways in which leading SREB states implemented their education policies and practices are valuable models that more states can adopt so that even more students achieve success.

2.

How SREB States Led the Nation in Progress

By 2011, most education leaders in SREB states were genuinely surprised at the remarkable gains so many SREB states made in a decade. One standout accomplishment was fourth- and eighth-grade reading and mathematics achievement — particularly compared with other states in the nation. Another: Leaders had not dared believe the region could nearly catch up with the nation on the high school graduation rate after being significantly behind for so long.

In fact, SREB states improved so dramatically overall that by 2011, they led the nation in gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). By 2009 they were within 1 percentage point of the national high school graduation rate.

SREB states were first nationally in NAEP gains

Five SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland and Texas — **made the greatest gains in the nation** from 2003 to 2011 in the percentages of fourth- and eighth-graders scoring at two key benchmark levels in reading and math on NAEP. (See Appendices A and B for these results.)

Specifically, one or more of these SREB states **led the nation** in percentage-point gains in each of eight key NAEP categories: fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math at the Basic and Proficient levels. *No other states in the nation made greater gains.* (See Table 1.)

Known as the Nation's Report Card, NAEP is a key measure of achievement because it chronicles how American students are performing in various subjects in fourth, eighth and 12th

grades. The test is administered every two years to a sample of students in each state. It serves as a barometer, helping state policy-makers gauge progress over time.

Most of the gains were more than double the gains of the nation — and in most instances, far greater. For example, Alabama's growth in fourth-grade reading achievement at the Basic level was nearly quadruple the national gain. The increase from 2003 to 2011 in reading for fourth-graders in Maryland scoring at or above the Proficient level was **five times the nationwide increase** over the period.

The story in Alabama was particularly outstanding. In reading, the state trailed the nation in 2003, with 52 percent of fourth-graders scoring at or above the Basic level on NAEP — 10 percentage points below the nation. By 2011, 67 percent of Alabama fourth-graders scored at or above the Basic level on NAEP in reading, a higher percentage than their national peers. This stunning growth of 15 percentage points in reading for fourth-graders over the period was the **greatest gain of any state in the nation on this measure.**

NAEP defines levels of student achievement that include:

- **Basic:** Partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade level.
- **Proficient:** Solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Demonstrated competence over challenging subject matter.

Table 1

**SREB States That Ranked First in the Nation in Percentage Gains
on NAEP Basic and Proficient Levels in Reading and Math, 2003 to 2011**

State	Subject	NAEP Level	Percent Scoring At or Above NAEP Level		Percentage-Point Gain 2003-2011	
			2003	2011	State	Nation
Fourth Grade						
Alabama	Reading	Basic	52	67	15	4
Kentucky	Math	Basic ¹	72	85	13	6
	Math	Proficient ²	22	39	17	9
Maryland	Reading	Proficient	32	43	11	2
	Math	Basic ¹	73	86	13	6
	Math	Proficient ²	31	48	17	9
Eighth Grade						
Arkansas	Math	Basic ³	58	70	12	5
Maryland	Reading	Basic	71	80	9	3
	Reading	Proficient	31	40	9	2
Texas	Math	Basic ³	69	81	12	5
	Math	Proficient	25	40	15	7

¹Kentucky and Maryland tied in gains.

²Kentucky and Maryland tied with Hawaii and Massachusetts in gains.

³Arkansas and Texas tied with Hawaii and New Mexico in gains.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Some SREB states became U.S. pacesetters

Not only did five states lead the nation in gains, eight SREB states were also **pacesetters for the nation**. Specifically, in these eight states: (1) *higher percentages of students than the nation scored at or above a key benchmark in one of eight NAEP categories in 2011, and* (2) *students made greater gains than their peers in the nation from 2003 to 2011.* (See Table 2.)

Seven of the eight states were pacesetters in **fourth grade**: Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma and Virginia. Kentucky's fourth-graders set a hot pace for their peers nationwide in math. In 2003, they trailed the nation by 4 percentage points on NAEP at the Basic level in math. By 2011, the state's fourth-graders made an impressive 13-point gain, outpacing national growth by more than double over the period.

In **eighth grade**, four of the eight states were pacesetters: Delaware, Maryland, Texas and Virginia. From 2003 to 2011, eighth-graders in these states outpaced the nation in gains in at least one category of NAEP math and reading achievement, and the states ended the period with greater percentages of eighth-graders at or above the benchmarks than their U.S.

peers. In math, Virginia made impressive gains that set the pace in three categories. Virginia fourth-graders led their peers in the nation in 2003 by 5 percentage points at the Proficient level and then led the nation by 6 percentage points by 2011. Eighth-graders led their peers in the nation in 2003 by 5 percentage points at the Basic level and by 6 percentage points in 2011. They led their peers by 4 points at the Proficient level in 2003 and by 6 points in 2011.



Table 2

SREB Pacesetter States on NAEP in 2011

Students in pacesetter states: (1) had greater percentages scoring at or above the Basic or Proficient benchmark level than peers nationwide, and (2) made greater gains than their peers in the nation from 2003 to 2011.

	Percent At or Above NAEP Level, 2003	Percent At or Above NAEP Level, 2011	Percentage-Point Gain, 2003-2011
Reading-NAEP Basic-Fourth Grade			
U.S.	62	66	4
Alabama	52	67	15
Florida	63	71	8
Kentucky	64	72	8
Maryland	62	75	13
Reading-NAEP Basic-Eighth Grade			
U.S.	72	75	3
Maryland	71	80	9
Reading-NAEP Proficient-Fourth Grade			
U.S.	30	32	2
Delaware	33	36	3
Florida	32	35	3
Kentucky	31	35	4
Maryland	32	43	11
Virginia	35	39	4
Reading-NAEP Proficient-Eighth Grade			
U.S.	30	32	2
Maryland	31	40	9
Math-NAEP Basic-Fourth Grade			
U.S.	76	82	6
Florida	76	84	8
Kentucky	72	85	13
Maryland	73	86	13
Oklahoma	74	83	9
Math-NAEP Basic-Eighth Grade			
U.S.	67	72	5
Delaware	68	74	6
Maryland	67	74	7
Texas	69	81	12
Virginia	72	78	6
Math-NAEP Proficient-Fourth Grade			
U.S.	31	40	9
Maryland	31	48	17
Virginia	36	46	10
Math-NAEP Proficient-Eighth Grade			
U.S.	27	34	7
Maryland	30	40	10
Texas	25	40	15
Virginia	31	40	9

Note: **Bold** indicates the state exceeded the nation.

SREB states topped U.S. growth in high school graduation rates

By 2009, the SREB median graduation rate in the region had narrowed its historic gap with the nation to less than 1 percentage point. Moreover, the region almost doubled the U.S. graduation rate *growth* — clearly leading the nation. (See Figure 2.)

Individual states made impressive gains

Almost every SREB state increased its high school graduation rate from 1999 to 2009. Over half of the SREB states *outpaced the nation's gains*. Tennessee's gains were a standout, leading the nation for the period with an increase of 19 points. Georgia, Alabama and North Carolina, along with Tennessee and New York, made up the nation's top five in rate gains for the period. (See Appendix C for rates in all SREB states.)

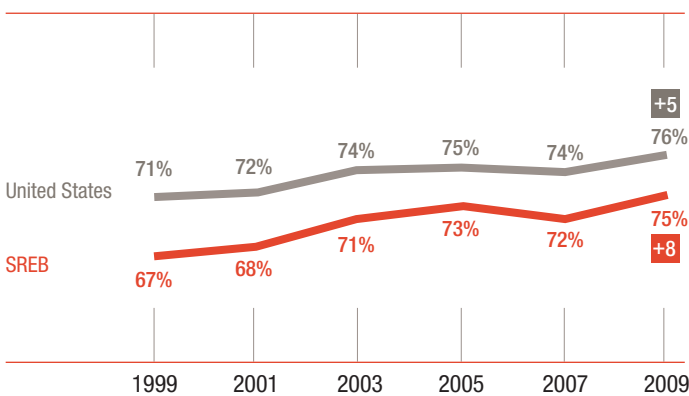
The value of a high school diploma can be measured in many ways: higher wages, more significant contributions to society, improved health, more parental engagement with children's education, and less incidence of criminal behavior. When states raise their high school graduation rates, they raise the quality of life for individual residents and promote economic development for the whole state.

The improvement in the U.S. graduation rate from 2002 to 2009 led noted researcher Robert Balfanz to identify eight states as drivers of the increase. He recognized two ways that states help push up the national rate: by boosting either the state graduation rate or the number of new graduates in the state. Five states nationwide had sufficiently large rate gains to drive the national increase during this period: Alabama, Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee — and New York. Five

Figure 2

Four-Year High School Graduation Rates

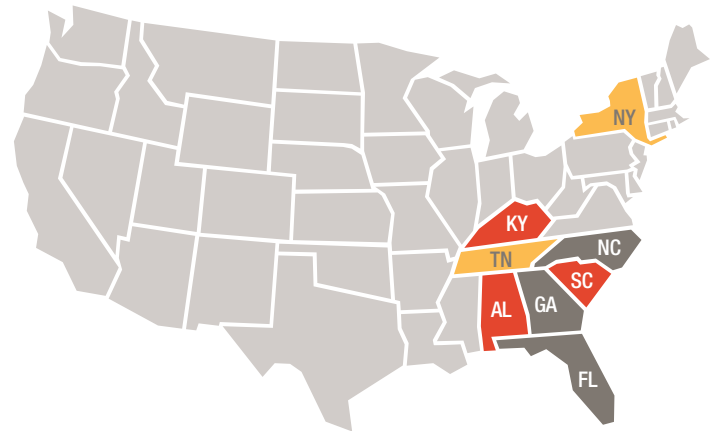
The regional gain outpaced the nation.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Figure 3

States Driving Up the U.S. High School Graduation Rate 2002 to 2009



- Top five in gains in graduation rate
- Top five in gain in number of graduates
- Top five in gains in both rate and graduates

Source: Johns Hopkins University.

states had sufficiently large increases in graduates over the period to affect the national rate: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee — and New York. Two states — Tennessee and New York — increased in both rates *and* numbers of graduates. (See Figure 3.)

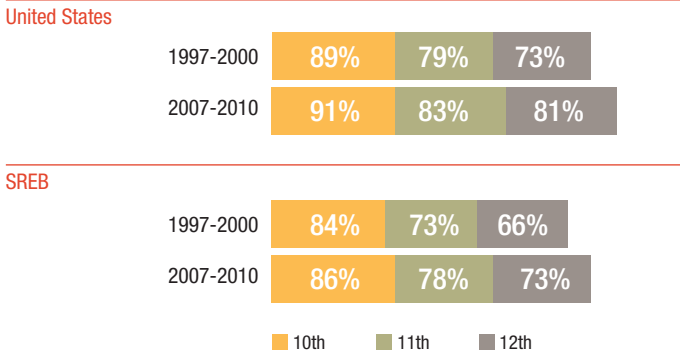
When states raise their high school graduation rates, they raise the quality of life for individual residents and promote economic development for the whole state.

Research shows that as students make the transition from the middle grades to high school, they need to make steady progress from grade to grade if they are going to graduate on time. In SREB states that improved grade-to-grade progression, the high school graduation rate also increased.

For instance, Tennessee's astonishing graduation rate gains resulted from steady improvements in the progression of ninth-graders to 12th grade over a decade. The percentage of ninth-graders from 1997 who entered 12th grade in 2000 was 70 percent; the rate reached 81 percent for 2007's ninth-graders who entered 12th grade in 2010. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4

Percentage of Ninth-Grade Cohort Progressing Through High School, by Grade



Source: SREB, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Specific groups also gained ground

Throughout the SREB region, black and Hispanic students made important strides from 1999 to 2009 in pacing gains with their national counterparts and in closing achievement gaps. Black, Hispanic and white students in the region outpaced their peers nationally in increases in graduation rates over the period. In 2009, the rate for black students in the region matched the rate for their national peers, and the rate for Hispanic students exceeded the rate for their national peers. The rate for white students in the region narrowed the gap with their national peers from 7 percentage points to 4 points. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Graduation Rates by Student Group				
	1999	2009	1999 to 2009	Nation in 2009
Black				
U.S.	53%	64%	11	Matched
SREB	52	64	12	
Hispanic				
U.S.	60	66	6	Exceeded
SREB	61	69	8	
White				
U.S.	76	82	6	Trailed
SREB	69	78	9	

Source: SREB, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The gains were distributed across racial and ethnic groups. In the beginning of the decade, 54 percent of Hispanics adults, 70 percent of black adults and 81 percent of white adults had earned high school diplomas. Yet by decade's end, 63 percent of Hispanic and 80 percent of black adults had earned high school credentials; 85 percent of white adults had earned one. Gains for *all groups*, with accelerated gains for *black* and *Hispanic* students, meant that achievement gaps were narrowing. College access (and, ultimately, completion), economic development and quality of life were at stake for these residents. For the additional adult residents in SREB states earning diplomas in 2010, high school completion opened the gate to a lifetime of more opportunity.



3.

How Did State Leaders Guide These Achievements?

Many of the region's policy-makers (and some outside the region) wanted to know *how* SREB states were able to make the gains they made over a turbulent decade.

- What policies and practices made the differences?
- Is it real change, or a fluke?
- If it is real, what strategies did state leaders use to overcome the demographic and economic hurdles they faced? What policy initiatives did they use?

In his analysis of NAEP data, researcher Eric Hanushek reported that “five of the top-10 [NAEP] states were in the South, while no Southern states were among the 18 with the slowest growth.” He went on to note that these results may be related to policy-makers’ efforts to enhance school quality in the region.

Likewise, researcher Robert Balfanz concluded that graduation rate gains resulted from “having better data, an understanding of why and where students drop out, a heightened awareness of the consequences to individuals and the economy, [and] a greater understanding of effective reforms and interventions.” He also pointed to SREB’s work — policy, research and practice in addressing local and state needs — as an important contributor.

Policies make the difference

While both researchers provided strong evidence of the region’s success, neither examined *how* specific policies and programs had made the difference. From 2002 to the end of the decade, SREB states raised K-12 standards, revised assessments, aligned curriculum and professional development to standards, and approached school accountability in new ways. They worked on policies related to pre-K and early reading, algebra readiness, adolescent literacy and career/technical education. They set new high school graduation policies and developed college-readiness standards. They shifted from comprehensive high school assessments to end-of-course exams. They focused on dropout prevention policies and accelerated learning policies. All the while, their focus

was on improving student achievement for all students and raising high school graduation rates for all student groups.

How did some SREB states make a difference with these policy initiatives?

State leaders provide answers

To develop this report, SREB policy analysts looked to state leaders in key states to provide answers. Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee and Texas stood out for particular achievements. SREB staff interviewed education leaders in these five states to learn first-hand how they raised NAEP results or high school graduation rates at an unprecedented pace.

Which states the SREB researchers chose for the review is important. Each interview focused attention on a state that had distinguished itself in reading or math achievement gains on NAEP from 2003 to 2011, high school graduation rate improvement from 1999 to 2009, or a combination of both. (See Table 1 and Figure 3.)

Some of these states stressed reading in the early grades, and some emphasized math readiness in the middle grades. Others focused on reducing the dropout rate and increasing high school graduation. **The profiles of these five SREB states are a testament to the importance of getting policies right and implementing them with fidelity.** Each highlights the primary policies and programs the state implemented over the course of the decade — and identifies the tools the state used to great effect.

Eight state tools for success

Each of these state stories begins with an issue the state chose for resolution. In each case, the state became intentional about and committed to finding and implementing the right policies and programs to overcome a problem — such as long-standing and intransigent under-achievement or newly apparent increases in dropout rates.

Seldom do state leaders find entirely new ways to approach education problems, so they generally turn to what they

know: legislation, expert panels, task forces, research, professional development — sometimes even funding. But in these profiles, state leaders were all particularly astute in the way they used the tools available to them. Their task forces, commissions and panels were generally armed with solid research and made recommendations based on local circumstances, informed by knowledge about what works. Likewise, when they had the benefit of funding, they were smart in its application. Their initiatives generally required deep local buy-in in a very balanced way. They were led with a statewide vision, launched by state (and sometimes private) funding but fueled by local commitment, energy and creativity.

In each case, leaders in the states reported having or using remarkably similar strategic tools to overcome the educational obstacles they faced. A common set of approaches emerged. Their overall success over the last decade indicates these approaches — along with diligence and hard work — paid off.

These tools for success emerged:

- **Research.** States leaders stressed the necessity to ground their efforts in the best research available, related to their specific issue. In some cases, this meant drawing on existing research or on recommendations of a national or state organization. In others, it meant creating a task force to study the problem before beginning the work.
- **Planning.** Leaders generally took a broader perspective, stopping to determine root causes of their problem before developing and implementing any plan. They reported, for example, that it was important to know if low middle grades reading results or graduation rates were affected by curriculum misalignment, a need for teacher professional development or a weak school culture. Once they were assured that they had identified the causes, they set out a plan or program directed at the problem.
- **Leadership.** Effective leadership at both state and local levels was critical to success for each initiative. Effective leaders manage people, resources, action and data. They create a professional climate that cultivates confidence in other stakeholders and build consensus for the initiative. Members of the state legislature were often effective in leadership roles in raising critical issues through legislation, establishing goals, providing resources, or setting a clear course of action. In other cases, a staff member for a state education agency provided a statewide vision or became a catalyst for change or plotted a steady course of action. Often, principals and local superintendents played key roles in ensuring that schools followed through on their commitments. In all cases, the key was having dedicated people working at all levels to bring plans and recommendations into reality.



- **Action.** Leaders understood their plans require action in the form of implementation — with fidelity. Once states developed their broad approaches to their problems, they identified specific steps to carry them out. Without implementation at the local level, nothing would have happened. Local leaders often customized state plans to create local action plans to meet the needs of their students, schools and districts.
- **Support.** State and local leaders provided support such as coordination, technical assistance, professional development and funding to ensure that teachers, school leaders, students and others had the support and resources they needed to succeed.
- **Feedback.** State and local leaders gathered feedback regularly through various means such as formative and summative assessment data, staff input and public comments. Then state and local leaders used the data to inform and improve policies, programs and implementation.
- **Balance.** State and local leaders sought balance in their plans and implementation between state and local ownership. This balanced approach allowed initiatives to remain aligned with the plan but to be open to innovation, local needs, and adjustments that would improve the initiative and the end results.
- **Commitment.** Successful initiatives had strong state commitment over time. Leaders also worked to build commitment from stakeholders as part of the initiative. States understood that one way to build strong commitment is to build a strong communication network and to communicate results regularly.

Alabama's Profile:

Exceeding Expectations on NAEP in Reading

From problem to plan

In 1996, Alabama assessed students in reading and math in the early and middle grades for the first time using a nationally recognized exam. The results showed state education leaders that one in three students in grades three through eight could not read at grade level. They took these results as a wake-up call and began to engage the problem head-on.

From plan to action

The Alabama State Board of Education and the State Department of Education asked a reading coordinator, Katherine Mitchell, to head a panel to study how the state could improve its reading results. The panel of 25 members included teachers, university faculty, and representatives of business and grass roots organizations.

The late 1990s was a time of rancorous nationwide debate about how best to teach reading — known as the “reading wars.” The panel took time to study the *research* carefully, and with Mitchell’s *leadership*, it was able to come to consensus early in 1998 about a way forward. To the panel’s credit, their conclusions were solid: Much of their work was reflected in the National Reading Panel’s report published two years later.

The panel recommended creating a multi-year Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) with the goal of creating 100 percent literacy among school children. They laid out a bold statewide *plan* of curriculum change and summer professional development for teams of faculty from participating schools. They also agreed to regular and rigorous evaluation to ensure the program was doing what it was intended to do.

Mitchell moved the state *plan* from conception to *action* in just a few months. The panel recognized that the plan had to be a *balanced* approach between state support and local (school-by-school) implementation. By 1998, the first 16 pilot schools for the initiative were under way. Each of the schools had to volunteer for participation, and school staff had to *commit* to implement its key principles: Volunteering and committing became key strategies that ARI continued to use.

Principals had to agree to participate in the implementation of the reading program, and 85 percent of the schools’ teachers had to *commit* to the program. ARI confirmed the old adage that carrots work better than sticks. The ARI invited all 1,400 elementary and middle grades schools in the state to apply to participate in the initiative. Seventy-six schools expressed interest; 26 applied and 16 were chosen.

In the initial year, the program needed funding to begin its work. Mitchell found that *support* in the business community when The A+ Education Partnership raised \$1.5 million. Mitchell used the funding for two weeks of summer professional development for the teachers and administrators in the early-adopting schools and other initial costs. The success in the first year and the addition of \$6 million in new state *support* allowed ARI to expand to 81 schools in 1999.



“I firmly believe that Dr. Mitchell’s work will prove to be seen as resulting in the most dramatic improvements in student learning in the last 50 years.”

– U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions, 2008

From action to results

At the end of second year, the percent of “struggling readers” in ARI schools had decreased by 10 percent, discipline referrals had decreased by 67 percent, and special education referrals had decreased by 28 percent.

By the third year, the program grew to 267 schools. But the data showed a problem for the first time, and Mitchell’s strategic *leadership* abilities emerged. She showed that while she had the energy to move the program aggressively, she also had the wisdom to pause the action when necessary — so that the ARI team could process the *feedback* and make needed adjustments. While students in many schools were thriving under the new instruction, a substantial group of schools had disappointing results.



Alabama's Academic Improvement – Beyond Expectations							
Gains in Percentage Points on NAEP Reading: Fourth Grade – At or Above the Basic Level (This gain was the largest in the nation in the category.)				Gains in High School Graduation Rate			
U.S.		AL			1999	2009	Gain
2003	2011	2003	2011	U.S.	71%	76%	5
62%	66%	52%	67%	AL	61%	70%	9

Sources: National Assessment of Educational Progress and National Center for Education Statistics.

The data showed that non-ARI schools outpaced 78 ARI schools that year. The ARI team concluded that teachers working in the weakest schools needed more instructional support: longer periods of deep engagement in professional development than they could get in the two weeks of summer training. Full-time reading coaches were placed in schools to support teachers in the classroom.

Training at each school was customized based on each school's needs, using results from ongoing student reading assessment tools including the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). This assessment was administered three times during the year in kindergarten through grade three to assess student progress and to help teachers plan their instructional strategy.

Teachers, coaches and the principal reviewed the data at monthly school meetings and made decisions accordingly. The benefit of reviewing the data together and making collaborative decisions helped the teachers to learn from each other and from the coaches not only what the data meant but how to respond to the information with individual students. Mitchell made the changes the next year, and the program restarted. The effort paid off in significant improvement with subsequent groups of students.

Mitchell became the state's first state assistant superintendent of education for reading. Her tenacity, wisdom and ultimate successes would earn her widespread recognition — and even the title of “reading czar” from Governor Bob Riley.

Alabama was perfectly poised for the first competition of the federal Reading First grants in 2002. Because the grant program was built on the National Reading Panel's recommendations, and because the national Panel's recommendations reflected the 1998 work of the Alabama Panel, ARI was well situated for Reading First support. Over the next

four years, it was able to expand ARI across the state effectively, using both state and federal funding.

Alabama's reading results for fourth-graders at the Basic level on NAEP — the greatest improvement in the nation with a 15 percentage-point gain from 2003 to 2011 — dramatically demonstrate what is possible in public education when initiatives are based on sound theory and practice and then implemented with fidelity by strong leaders who listen, analyze and act thoughtfully to support school leaders and teachers — and make adjustments as needed so the lives of children can be improved.

Kentucky's Profile:

Exceeding Expectations on High School Graduation

From problem to plan

In the mid-1980s, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) formed a statewide commission to address its chronic dropout problem. Yet in 1996 when the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems assessed higher education performance in Kentucky, it concluded that the state's low educational attainment levels and high levels of adult illiteracy resulted from Kentucky's high school dropout problem, which continued to linger.

In 2000, when policy-makers examined dropout data in Kentucky, they realized the state still had not made progress on dropout prevention. The General Assembly assumed *leadership* and publicly *committed* the state to three targets for 2006: Cut the state dropout rate by 50 percent; limit school dropout rates to 5 percent; and reduce individual county rates of young adults (ages 16 to 24) without a high school diploma or GED by 30 percent. Policy-makers knew the key to improving high school completion was at district and school levels. So they charted a *balanced* approach: statewide goals and support with local action. They required KDE to develop a comprehensive statewide *plan* to provide assistance to local school districts and schools to tackle the dropout problem.

From plan to action

KDE set out a *plan*; a number of statewide strategies followed. State *actions* included an eighth-grade planning system. Beginning in 2002, eighth-grade students and parents (with the help of school officials) were required to complete an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP). It established what academic courses and electives students needed to complete to graduate and identified extracurricular opportunities, aligned to the student's interests. Students, parents and school officials review and approve the plans annually. To make the process more accessible for everyone, the IGP was redesigned from a paper- to a Web-based tool in 2006, made available to students as early as sixth grade, expanded to include college and career exploration, and renamed the Individual Learning Plan (ILP). In 2009, KDE added an "Intervention Module,"

requiring extra planning for students who did not meet assessment benchmarks in grades eight, 10 or 11.

In launching efforts to prevent dropping out, Kentucky was also *committed* to maintaining high standards for its diploma to ensure students would be prepared for their futures. As one of the 13 inaugural states in the American Diploma Project, Kentucky assured in 2005 that its students would be college- and career-ready by committing to the tenets of the project:

- Align standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required beyond high school;
- Require all high school students to take challenging courses that prepare them for life after high school;
- Build college and work-ready measures into statewide accountability systems; and
- Hold schools accountable for graduating students who are college and/or workforce ready and hold postsecondary schools more accountable for students' success once enrolled.

To provide support for students throughout their secondary school careers, Kentucky began testing all eighth- and 10th-graders in 2006-2007, using diagnostic assessment that provided academic *feedback* on student progress. Eighth-grade students take ACT's EXPLORE to assess their high school readiness in four subjects (English, mathematics, reading and science) to help students plan for high school and beyond. Tenth-grade students take ACT's PLAN to assess their academic progress, explore career and training options, and plan for the rest of high school and beyond. Eleventh-graders take the ACT college admissions examination.

In 2008, the twin dropout prevention and high school graduation promotion efforts were boosted with a statewide effort — Graduate Kentucky. The Governor's Office, led by First Lady Jane Beshear, brought together community leaders, policy-makers, parents, teachers, counselors, school board members and students in regional summits across the state to raise awareness, identify solutions and promote activity. This effort exhibited the same balanced approach: a statewide



Kentucky's Academic Improvement – Beyond Expectations							
Gains in Percentage Points on NAEP Math: Fourth Grade (Gains were the largest in the nation in these categories.)				Gains in High School Graduation Rate			
U.S.		KY		1999	2009	Gain	
At or Above the Basic Level							
2003 76%	2011 82%	2003 72%	2011 85%	U.S.	71%	76%	5
At or Above the Proficient Level							
2003 31%	2011 40%	2003 22%	2011 39%	KY	70%	78%	8

Sources: National Assessment of Educational Progress and National Center for Education Statistics.

vision carried to the local level. Regional summits drew hundreds of stakeholders to identify the obstacles to graduation in the region. They launched numerous efforts to ensure that students in their regions would graduate from high school prepared to succeed in the future.

In 2009, the General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1, a comprehensive K-12 education bill that focused on school standards, assessment and accountability; it also established college- and career-readiness standards. To address high school completion and to *support* local districts and schools, KDE developed various resources, including materials on dropout prevention.

It drew on *research* from the National Dropout Prevention Center to design the *Persistence to Graduation - Evidence-Based Strategies Toolkit*, which it made available to all schools. The toolkit includes an early warning system that is embedded in the Kentucky Student Information System. The toolkit identifies nine indicators to help local school staff identify students at risk of dropping out of school. It also identifies effective strategies for serving students based on the indicators. KDE piloted the warning report in three school districts and provided training to all districts before rolling out it out for statewide use.

To help districts battle high school truancy, the Kentucky General Assembly enacted a No Pass, No Drive Law in 2007. Schools use academic and attendance data annually to identify if 16- and 17-year-old students are eligible for driver's licenses. To receive or keep their licenses, students must pass four courses or the equivalent and have no more than nine unexcused absences in the preceding semester.

Districts like Jefferson County Public Schools have taken steps

to address the dropout problem. The district has created a dropout recovery program for 16- to 21-year-old students and adults (21 years or older) who have dropped out of school. The district developed a flexible curriculum that provides individualized, self-paced instruction. Students can start any time and work at their own pace to earn credits toward graduation. The district offers the program at multiple sites with flexible scheduling, which allows students to schedule classes around their personal commitments and work schedules.

From action to results

From 1999 to 2009, Kentucky saw its high school graduation rate climb 8 percentage points to 78 percent, using the calculation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. The John Hopkins Center also cited Kentucky as one of five states nationwide that had rate gains large enough to help drive up the nation's average from 2002 to 2009. These gains coincide with increases in grade-level progression for grades nine, 10 and 11, as well as the rate at which seniors graduate on time.

Maryland's Profile:

Exceeding Expectations on NAEP in Reading and Math

From problem to plan

NAEP scores in Maryland were generally at the national average (or slightly above) in 2003. Yet state leaders knew that average results would not position the state to “lead the nation.” So Maryland very strategically set out to raise student achievement by building on 2002 requirements of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* and its own 1990s education reform efforts. In these state efforts, Maryland had set rigorous academic standards with aligned assessments and had designed a results-focused accountability plan for schools.

In January 2002, right after *NCLB* was signed, the Maryland Visionary Panel for Better Schools published its report *Achievement Matters Most*. The report documented the panel’s yearlong *research* on and review of Maryland’s public schools — covering the previous decade. It focused on several key points: (1) Maryland students would need to learn more if they were to survive in a changing world. (2) Achievement gaps between students of different races and economic circumstances needed to be narrowed significantly. (3) Educating low-achieving students to perform at much higher levels had to be a high priority. In fact, the report stressed that many of the low achievers were black, Hispanic and immigrant students, and it noted that their numbers were growing fast among enrolled students in the public schools. Not only was it clear that former minority racial and ethnic groups would soon comprise the majority of students in Maryland — it was clear that the state needed to ensure their educational success to ensure the success of the state.

From plan to action

To guide state efforts, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) played a key *leadership* role in developing a strategic *plan* based on the recommendations in the panel’s report and on the requirements of *NCLB*. The strategic plan had five public education priorities: improving student achievement; building educators’ capacity to improve achievement; building an aligned, clear system of instruction, curriculum and assessment; fostering positive school environments; and engaging families in education.

While the state’s earlier reforms raised expectations for all students, meeting the new priorities required a leap forward in achievement. State leaders knew this leap could occur only if the state accelerated learning in the classroom, through state support for high-quality instruction balanced with support for teachers who delivered it.

MSDE, playing a key *leadership* role, developed its first state-wide curriculum with substantial involvement from teachers. Initially, local districts could choose to adopt the *Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC)*. MSDE developed the *VSC* in response to local superintendents’ requests for clarity on the state’s priorities and its expectations for students and schools. The state took several *actions* to launch the new curriculum.

- The state encouraged teacher preparation programs to work closely with school districts to ensure that pre-service teachers had experience with the *VSC* as early as possible in their training at local schools.
- The state provided state-level specialists, including math specialists, to support the middle grades curriculum.
- The state *supported* grants to districts for instructional coaches to facilitate ongoing, job-embedded professional development for teachers. These coaches worked to improve teachers’ instruction, their use of student assessment information, planning with peer teachers, and their collaboration with others through whole-school planning.

In 2006, MSDE also launched a task force on the middle grades to refine the priorities for the middle grades, and it issued a report in 2008. All of these efforts were based in the MSDE’s *commitment* to implementing a full-court press that could improve student learning. Maryland officials made clear to teachers and administrators the *balance* between *taking action* and *supporting actions taken*. They knew that when they had implemented a new initiative, they had a responsibility to stay the course long enough to determine whether the initiative was effective or not. If they changed course too soon, they risked not knowing whether the initiative was working and would have been effective. They also needed to know when they had waited long enough.



Maryland's Academic Improvement – Beyond Expectations							
Gains in Percentage Points on NAEP (Gains were the largest in the nation in these categories.)							
U.S.		MD		U.S.		MD	
Math: Fourth Grade: At or Above the Basic Level				Reading: Eighth Grade: At or Above the Basic Level			
2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011
76%	82%	73%	86%	72%	75%	71%	80%
Math: Fourth Grade: At or Above the Proficient Level				Reading: Eighth Grade: At or Above the Proficient Level			
2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011
31%	40%	31%	48%	30%	32%	31%	40%
Reading: Fourth Grade: At or Above the Proficient Level							
2003	2011	2003	2011				
30%	32%	32%	43%				

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

MSDE officials provided direct **support** for low-performing schools through an internal division, the Breakthrough Center. It provided support through targeted professional development for teachers and leaders, as well as resource identification and allocation to support school improvement efforts. It identified MSDE staff who could serve as coaches in schools and had them work directly with district staff to identify next steps. Once they had identified a plan, the state officials provided the districts and schools with the resources and support to bring real and lasting improvement.

To **support** state efforts, the governor and the General Assembly increased public funding for education through the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act (2002). It created equity with greater funding to poorer school districts and for students with disabilities. It also provided districts with flexibility so local leaders could analyze their data annually to assess how best to invest their state funding. In exchange, districts committed to establish pre-K programs for children from low-income families and full-day kindergarten programs for all children to ensure greater school readiness. As a result of the state's early-learning push, the percentage of Maryland students who were ready to learn on entering first grade more than doubled — from 40 percent in 2002 to 83 percent in 2012.

Districts are required to develop five-year master **plans** to improve student achievement. Each year, districts answer key questions on how they are using state resources. What are they doing well? What is making it work? What are their concerns? What is helping poor-performing schools?

District plans are reviewed and approved by local school boards and then submitted to MSDE for review. This **feedback** — what Maryland calls “plan, do, act” — repeats itself every year in every district. To support district leaders, the state school chief meets with all the district chiefs monthly. Information flows from the state to the local levels and then to their staff. In addition, MSDE each year informs the General Assembly on the use and impact of state funding on the state's education priorities.

From action to results

Maryland was number one in the nation in gains in the percentages of fourth- and eighth-graders scoring at two key benchmark levels in reading and math on NAEP: fourth-graders scoring at or above Proficient in reading; fourth-graders reaching Basic and Proficient in math; and eighth-graders scoring at or above Basic or Proficient in reading. No other state led the nation in more categories. Fourth-graders outpaced their national peers in gains more than five-to-one on NAEP reading at the Proficient level. Eighth-graders outpaced their national peers in gains more than three-to-one on NAEP reading from 2003 to 2011 at the Basic level — and more than four-to-one on NAEP reading at the Proficient level.

Tennessee's Profile:

Exceeding Expectations on High School Graduation

From problem to plan

In 2002 — the same year the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* was signed into law — Tennessee's high school graduation rate (59.6 percent) was second from the bottom among the 50 states. This low rate reflected a dropout problem that had grown across the state over the 1990s. In 2003, the Tennessee Board of Education decided to raise expectations for the future: It used the requirements within *NCLB* for improving high school graduation rates and establishing a consolidated state accountability **plan** that would set a new course for Tennessee.

While a few SREB states used *NCLB* to establish absolute graduation-rate targets, all except Tennessee based their graduation-rate goals on small, incremental improvements each year. Tennessee was the only one that set an absolute goal — 90 percent by 2014. The state Board then required every high school to set the same goal — and to set equal annual targets beginning in 2003 that would culminate in reaching it. This meant that schools with lower starting points had to plan to make steep gains from the very beginning. It also meant Tennessee had annual **feedback** on improvements in high school graduation rates every year.

From plan to action

The state Board then turned to local school districts to develop school improvement **plans** that would ensure annual goals were met. This early decision to **balance** state targets with local action was pivotal in ensuring Tennessee's success. The strategy worked. The initiative became grounded at the school and district level. District and school leaders knew the state had made a serious **commitment** when it required each high school to adopt the statewide goal.

Leadership emerged across the state at the local level, as school and district principals and superintendents began developing programs to address the local plans. They took **action** by developing programs — from the middle grades through high school — that would ensure students stayed engaged in school. Some programs were replicated

widely across the state, and some were deemed useful in some locales but not in others. Many state leaders attribute significant gains in dropout prevention to ninth-grade transition programs, sometimes called freshman academies, launched shortly after the high school graduation initiative was under way. These programs smoothed out the transition from the middle grades to high school by providing ninth-graders with a smaller, friendlier climate. They incorporated strong college and career planning, enhanced academic support, a dedicated team of teachers and greater parental involvement.

Many districts focused attention on catching up students who fell behind in ninth and 10th grades, even the ones who transferred into Tennessee from out of state. Others began a strong local credit recovery program coupled with law enforcement partnerships that helped to keep more students in school and out of jail.

Districts began using a wider variety of career and technical education in the state to help connect students' education to future jobs. These included Jobs for Tennessee's Graduates, Pathways to Prosperity and Project Lead the Way. And, in an effort to incentivize graduation, the local governments (including Kingsport County and Sullivan County) even started paying community college tuition for their respective high school graduates. In the words of one official: "Tennessee put lots of opportunities in front of students and their parents to ensure students saw the value in staying in school to graduation."

Local leaders relied on a strong foundation of key state policies, too. The current commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education believes one state law was particularly effective. The state's compulsory attendance law makes it difficult for students to withdraw from school before they turn 18, which he notes is "a big deal that makes a big difference." It sends a strong message to students and parents that staying in school and finishing are important.

In addition, district and community leaders effectively used the state's 2001 driver's license law, which pairs with



Tennessee's Academic Improvement – Beyond Expectations

Gains in High School Graduation Rate			
	1999	2009	Gain
U.S.	71%	76%	5
TN	58%	77%	19

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

compulsory attendance. That law requires that students ages 15 to 18 meet compulsory attendance requirements and make “satisfactory academic progress,” or their driving privileges are suspended until they return to school or improve their grades.

In an effort to raise rigor and ensure high school students graduate college- and career-ready, Tennessee joined the network of states making up the American Diploma Project in 2007. The entry required the state to take a close look at the *research* on graduation, dropout prevention, rigor of its high school curriculum, and readiness of its graduates for success in college and careers after high school.

In 2007, the Tennessee Alignment Committee (a panel of state and local government, business and education leaders) and the Tennessee Business Roundtable studied business leaders’ expectations for high school graduates’ skills and knowledge, as part of Tennessee’s American Diploma Project efforts. A *plan* was then developed for raising state standards and graduation requirements, which the state Board approved in 2008, effective for the graduating class of 2013.

In 2011, the Tennessee Department of Education established the Center for Dropout Prevention. The center provides districts and schools with *research* on dropout prevention, intervention and recovery strategies that promote high school completion to ensure that all students have access to a quality education and can successfully complete high school ready for college and careers. It also provides *support* through professional development and technical assistance to help districts, schools and their stakeholders as they develop local dropout prevention strategies. Local efforts were grounded in state and national dropout research. These include broad risk factors such as the effects of large schools and the density of poverty, as well as school-related factors such as excessive absences, discipline referrals and poor grades.

From action to results

By the end of the decade, strong local efforts reversed the state’s position on graduation rates. By 2009, Tennessee led the nation in its increasing graduation rate, using the calculation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. That year it had the second-highest gain in the number of graduates in the country; it also more than doubled the rate of growth from 1999 to 2009 in all states except for three: Georgia, New York and North Carolina.

At its current pace, Tennessee is on track to achieve a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020, a projection only a few states can claim. These gains coincide with increases in grade-level progression for grades nine, 10 and 11, as well as the rate at which seniors graduate on time. Gains for all three indicators are the result of state and local policies and programs focused on decreasing the number of dropouts and increasing the number of students who graduate from high school on time.

Texas' Profile:

Exceeding Expectations on NAEP in Math

From problem to plan

State leaders in Texas publicly called for higher achievement in math in the late 1990s. By 1999, the state established promotion requirements for students in grades three, five and eight, including math readiness benchmarks for those in grades five and eight through its Student Success Initiative (SSI).

In 2001 the state Legislature created the Texas Math Initiative (TMI) with an emphasis on diagnosing students' math skills, intervening to help struggling students and providing instructional support for teachers. The state **supported** the TMI with \$30 million and created a grant program to improve **research** on math instruction and to ensure that the public schools used methods of instruction that were proven to work. Texas also established training and professional development institutes for math teachers so they could learn the newest research and instructional techniques. The training was modeled on the five-day summer institutes for reading teachers that the state had supported during the 1990s. The state called on its commissioner of education to make available a math diagnostic tool that would help teachers identify strengths and weaknesses in student performance.

All of this work led to some gains by the mid-2000s. But with end-of course exams to be implemented in Texas high schools within four years, the state analyzed fifth-grade math results closely to assess readiness. The results startled them. Even though fifth-graders in larger measure were passing their math assessment, almost none showed proficiency with rational numbers — the ability to add and subtract fractions and decimals. Education leaders knew this meant these students were not ready for pre-algebra and algebra. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) became **committed** to readiness for algebra and immediately formed a state **leadership** commission on math comprising key experts on math education from the state's network of regional service centers, higher education institutions, school districts and the TEA.

From plan to action

Starting in mid-decade, the commission provided significant **leadership** for the state. Through **research** dissemination and **planning**, it helped TEA begin to focus on student success in math in the middle grades. It took a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach, benefiting from strong state **support** in designing a **plan** from development to implementation. The plan provided professional learning that gave teachers the training and resources to help their students.

In 2006, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) adopted a standards framework, known as *Curriculum Focal Points*, which narrowed the group of core math concepts to serve as organizing structures for curriculum design and instruction. Texas took **action** when it rolled out its own *Response to Curriculum Focal Points* shortly thereafter and narrowed its own curriculum. By focusing on fewer key concepts, teachers could help students develop problem-solving, reasoning and critical thinking skills at each grade level. The state **balanced** this statewide curriculum initiative with training at the pre-service and in-service levels to ensure that teachers could use the *Texas Focal Points* effectively.

As state math assessment results began to improve, the state launched the Middle School Texas Algebra Ready Initiative (MSTAR) in 2009 to assure the algebra readiness of Texas middle grades students. It had three components — professional development, curriculum support and a Web-based screening tool to help teachers identify struggling math learners. It offered teacher academies that combined professional development with curriculum support, including intervention guides and targeted lesson plans, all to accompany the online screening tool. The MSTAR Web-based tool, the Universal Screener, is a formative assessment system administered to students in fifth to eighth grades to provide **feedback** about student progress and the success of a student's instruction thus far.



Texas' Academic Improvement – Beyond Expectations

(Gains were the largest in the nation in these categories.)

Math: Fourth Grade: At or Above the Basic Level				Reading: Eighth Grade: At or Above the Basic Level			
U.S.		TX		U.S.		TX	
2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011	2003	2011
67%	72%	69%	81%	27%	34%	25%	40%

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Results can help teachers identify students who are in need of additional instructional support related to algebra readiness. They also can determine if interventions are needed and the degree of intensity for the interventions and can monitor students' risk status over the year.

To serve the state's large geographical region and number of teachers, the state developed high-quality professional development materials and largely uses a training-of-trainers model to deliver it, using its regional service centers. Training is provided to the regional service staff first. Each center provides training mainly to its district-level trainers. From there, the district-level trainers deliver the training to teachers within the district. (Large districts such as the Houston Independent School District send trainers directly to state-level training to ensure sufficient number of trainers for redelivery.) Trainers at each level are required to sign a state "fidelity agreement" indicating that they will deliver the professional development training as designed, because it is considered a high-quality TEA product of importance to the state. All training of trainers is delivered face-to-face, but redelivery to district and school personnel is offered both face-to-face and online to ensure broad access to the materials. The state does not require that all teachers participate in training, so unless local districts require teachers' participation, participation remains voluntary. The state has found that in years where a stipend could be provided, teacher participation attendance increased.

In 2009, TEA also rolled out Project Share Texas to provide online follow-up training to teachers. This online tool allows trainers, developers and teachers across the state to work collaboratively — asking questions, sharing information, and providing and receiving *feedback*. Following face-to-face training sessions, the state encourages trainers to set up

their trainees in a Project Share group so they can continue learning with their trainer in online learning communities during the school year. Online delivery also provides access to training for those who do not travel to the face-to-face sessions. Initial training is followed by sessions that help teachers learn to differentiate learning for each student. Not only do they learn to make instructional decisions based on data, but they also learn intervention strategies based on individual student's needs.

Texas leaders report key lessons learned: One-time professional development does not work. Teachers need to have the right tools and the right training to be successful. States need to ensure that training and materials are regularly updated. Informal, Web-based approaches work well, including Web-based professional communities. Keeping the training materials up to date ensures that school personnel have the right information in their hands at all times.

From action to results

Texas was number one in the nation in gains in the percentages of eighth-graders scoring at two key benchmark levels in math on NAEP: eighth-graders scoring in math at or above Basic and the Proficient levels. Texas students led their peers in the nation in 2003 by 2 percentage points at the Basic level but trailed by 2 percentage points at the Proficient level. By 2011, eighth-graders in Texas outpaced the nation in math gains by more than double on both indicators.

Appendix A

Percent of Fourth-Graders Scoring At or Above NAEP Basic and Proficient Levels, 2003 to 2011

	Reading						Math					
	At or Above Basic			At or Above Proficient			At or Above Basic			At or Above Proficient		
	Percent		Change	Percent		Change	Percent		Change	Percent		Change
	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011
U.S.	62	66	4	30	32	2	76	82	6	31	40	9
Alabama	52	67	15	22	31	9	65	75	10	19	27	8
Arkansas	60	63	3	28	30	2	71	81	10	26	37	11
Delaware	71	72	1	33	36	3	81	84	3	31	39	8
Florida	63	71	8	32	35	3	76	84	8	31	37	6
Georgia	59	66	7	27	32	5	72	80	8	27	37	10
Kentucky	64	72	8	31	35	4	72	85	13	22	39	17
Louisiana	49	55	6	20	23	3	67	73	6	21	26	5
Maryland	62	75	13	32	43	11	73	86	13	31	48	17
Mississippi	49	55	6	18	22	4	62	72	10	17	25	8
North Carolina	66	68	2	33	34	1	85	88	3	41	44	3
Oklahoma	60	64	4	26	27	1	74	83	9	23	33	10
South Carolina	59	61	2	26	28	2	79	79	0	32	36	4
Tennessee	57	60	3	26	26	0	70	75	5	24	30	6
Texas	59	64	5	27	28	1	82	85	3	33	39	6
Virginia	69	72	3	35	39	4	83	87	4	36	46	10
West Virginia	65	61	-4	29	27	-2	75	78	3	24	31	7

Note: **Bold** indicates the state exceeded the nation.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Appendix B

Percent of Eighth-Graders Scoring At or Above NAEP Basic and Proficient Levels, 2003 and 2011

	Reading						Math					
	At or Above Basic			At or Above Proficient			At or Above Basic			At or Above Proficient		
	Percent		Change	Percent		Change	Percent		Change	Percent		Change
	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011	2003	2011	2003-2011
U.S.	72	75	3	30	32	2	67	72	5	27	34	7
Alabama	65	69	4	22	26	4	53	60	7	16	20	4
Arkansas	70	71	1	27	28	1	58	70	12	19	29	10
Delaware	77	77	0	31	33	2	68	74	6	26	32	6
Florida	68	73	5	27	30	3	62	68	6	23	28	5
Georgia	69	74	5	26	28	2	59	68	9	22	28	6
Kentucky	78	79	1	34	36	2	65	72	7	24	31	7
Louisiana	64	66	2	22	22	0	57	63	6	17	22	5
Maryland	71	80	9	31	40	9	67	74	7	30	40	10
Mississippi	65	65	0	21	21	0	47	58	11	12	19	7
North Carolina	72	74	2	29	31	2	72	75	3	32	37	5
Oklahoma	74	73	-1	30	27	-3	65	72	7	20	27	7
South Carolina	69	72	3	24	27	3	68	70	2	26	32	6
Tennessee	69	70	1	26	27	1	59	64	5	21	24	3
Texas	71	74	3	26	27	1	69	81	12	25	40	15
Virginia	79	78	-1	36	36	0	72	78	6	31	40	9
West Virginia	72	68	-4	25	24	-1	63	65	2	20	21	1

Note: **Bold** indicates the state exceeded the nation.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

SREB uses the *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate* (AFGR) to compare state-level high school graduation rates. The AFGR was adopted in 2004 by the National Center for Education Statistics to calculate a comparable graduation rate for all 50 states and territories. This rate was chosen because it was considered the most accurate way to estimate graduation rates until states had more comprehensive data systems that could provide the data needed to calculate actual cohort graduation rates. Before the AFGR was adopted, no single rate was available to compare all 50 states.

The **Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate** divides the number of diploma recipients in a senior class by the estimated first-time, ninth-grade class size four years earlier (using an average enrollment figure based on an average of eighth-, ninth- and 10th-grade enrollment). AFGR cannot account for those students who transfer in or out of a class over the four years.

$$\frac{\text{Number of Graduates With a Regular Diploma}}{\text{Estimated First-Time 9th-Grade Enrollment for that Class}}$$

Appendix C

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate		
	Class of 2009	Change 1999-2009
U.S.	76%	5
SREB median	75	8
Alabama	70	9
Arkansas	74	0
Delaware	74	4
Florida	69	8
Georgia	68	11
Kentucky	78	8
Louisiana	67	6
Maryland	80	3
Mississippi	62	3
North Carolina	75	10
Oklahoma	77	1
South Carolina	66	7
Tennessee	77	19
Texas	75	6
Virginia	78	2
West Virginia	77	-1

Notes: The SREB median is the average of the two SREB middle states. States that exceeded national gains and/or the national rate are shown in **bold**.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics and SREB.

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SREB *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education

SREB's *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education were adopted in 2002 and challenged SREB states to lead the nation in education improvement. These 12 goals are listed below. Three are highlighted to indicate the specific goals addressed in this publication. In 2012, these goals were refreshed and reissued as six *Challenge to Lead 2020* goals, which are available at www.sreb.org.

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for post-secondary education and a career.
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
12. The state places a high priority on an education system of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.

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