Issue #2: What requirements, if any, should be placed upon states with respect to achievement standards (i.e. "cut scores")?

Current Law

NCLB requires each state to demonstrate that it has adopted challenging academic-achievement standards (cut scores) that describe at least two levels of high achievement (proficient and advanced) and one additional level (basic). The content and rigor of those achievement standards are left to each state.

Background

As most states work together to develop common assessments to accompany the Common Core standards, they are also committed to developing common cut scores. That makes sense; there's little point in creating common standards and tests if students in different states can "pass" those tests at discrepant levels. Furthermore, the cut scores are where the rubber will (or will not) meet the road in terms of aligning K–12 standards with a meaningful definition of college and career readiness.

But should common cut scores be mandatory for purposes of Title I funding? And what about states that don't participate in the Common Core initiative? Particularly because most states currently set their cut scores quite low, is there a federal role in ensuring that the bar is set high and that state standards really are pegged to college and career readiness?

More fundamentally, with an increasing focus on student growth, is there even a need to set achievement levels?

Options

Option 2A: Require states participating in state assessment consortia to adopt common achievement standards.

Pros	Cons
• Ensures that states not only have common assessments, but also have common definitions of what it means to be on track for college and career readiness at graduation • Ends NCLB-era practice of dumbing down state expectations of proficiency	• Could be seen as redundant—states participating in the assessment consortia have already agreed to adopt common achievement standards, so there is no need for a further federal mandate • Could prevent states that want to set higher expectations for their students from doing so

Option 2B: Don't require states to set proficiency or achievement levels on their assessments.

Pros	Cons
• Allows states the flexibility to develop accountability systems focused entirely on student growth • Removes an incentive to narrowly focus on students just above or just below the "proficiency" (or "college- and career-ready") line	• Obscures the current performance levels of individual students, schools, and districts • Makes it impossible to know how many graduating students are college- and career-ready (because it doesn't require at least twelfth-grade achievement levels)

Option 2C: As a condition of receipt of Title I funds, require states to set achievement standards such that students will be college- and career-ready by the time they graduate from high school. Require states to back-map achievement standards down to at least third grade, so that passing the state assessment in each grade indicates that a student is on track to graduate from twelfth grade ready for college or a career. States that opt out of the state assessment consortia funded by Race to the Top (RTT) would have their standards peer reviewed at the federal level by a panel of state officials and content-matter experts. The panel itself (not the secretary of education) would have the authority to determine whether a state's standards are adequately tied to college and career readiness. No state would be required to adopt achievement standards developed by the Common Core assessment consortia.

Pros	Cons
• Strengthens current law by anchoring achievement standards to real-world expectations • Helps ensure that all states are setting sufficiently high expectations for their students so that they are college- and career-ready by the time they graduate	• Doesn't address potential difficulty of determining whether achievement levels represent college and career readiness at various grade levels

The Reform Realism Position: Option 2C

We are tempted to allow states to opt out of achievement standards altogether; there's a legitimate case for building accountability systems on student growth alone, and/or for reporting current performance levels in terms of percentiles rather than against a static (and questionable) standard. But if achievement levels are to be mandated from Washington, they should be pegged to college and career readiness—and a peer review panel should be asked to certify that any state's cut scores are set adequately high.[4]

As a condition of receipt of Title I funds, require states to set achievement standards such that students will be college- and career-ready by the time they graduate from high school. Require states to back-map achievement standards down to at least third grade, so that passing the state assessment in each grade indicates that a student is on track to graduate from twelfth grade ready for college or a career. States that opt out of the state assessment consortia funded by Race to the Top (RTT) would have their standards peer reviewed at the federal level by a panel of state officials and content-matter experts. The panel itself (not the secretary of education) would have the authority to determine whether a state's standards are adequately tied to college and career readiness. No state would be required to adopt achievement standards developed by the Common Core assessment consortia.

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4 It is important that the peer review process not be controlled by federal officials. Various ways of structuring it can mitigate this risk. For example, the state having its standards (or tests, cut scores, etc.) reviewed might nominate two members of a seven-member panel; the secretary of education might nominate two members from other states; and the four initial nominees must agree on the three remaining members. Any recommendation emanating from such a panel must have at least five of the seven members voting in favor.