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Beyond Compliance

ESSA, You & The Real College and
Career Readiness Challenge

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Overview
of the ESSA
Landscape

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has created a unique challenge for states, districts, schools, administrators and educators throughout the American education system.

The 2015 legislation charges each state with the responsibility of developing its own education plans within a federal framework. On one hand, there's freedom in having more flexibility and autonomy. On the other, it's tough to design an education plan from scratch that fits all students in all districts—and hits all the benchmarks.

> [ESSA] gives states significant new leeway to set student achievement goals and calls for looking beyond test scores in gauging school performance.
>
> - Education Week

Measuring Success

ESSA differs from prior acts. While states remain responsible for holding their schools accountable for student achievement, they've gained autonomy in defining and measuring success. ESSA's measurement framework contains four compulsory indicators, plus at least one more chosen at the state's discretion (for a minimum of five). The required measures are:

1   Academic achievement in reading and math

2   Student progress or growth in reading and math

3   Four-year high school graduation rates (with the option to include extended-year rates)

4   Progress toward English language proficiency

Overview of the ESSA Landscape

The flexible part of the plan focuses on at least one additional indicator, a measure of school quality or student success. States also have the option to include multiple measures within an indicator. ESSA suggestions for additional indicators include:

Student access to, and completion of, advanced coursework

School climate and safety

Student and / or educator engagement

College and career readiness

A lot of districts have chosen to focus on college and career readiness. Why? When done well, its chief outcome of providing all students with a personalized plan for success has a tendency to extend into other areas of ESSA mandates. Things like student engagement, academic achievement, and graduation rates can all rise when students see the purpose in what they're learning and have a plan. But what measures are the best to gauge college and career readiness?

Forty-nine states have included at least one strategy to expand career readiness in their ESSA plans.

- Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting to Learning to Work

Key Challenges
for Districts

Key Challenges for Districts

With state plans approved and underway for the 2018/19 school year, districts have a general understanding of what is required of them under ESSA's framework. But the path to compliance has not been cleared. As the pioneers of this new system, districts face a number of challenges, including:

Skills and resources

A new education plan calls for new ideas and approaches. Administrators and educators may require consultations, professional development opportunities, and access to tools to help design and implement new programs that meet ESSA mandates.

Finances

Implementing new systems inevitably comes with new costs. Funding is available to upgrade programs to improve school achievement and provide high-quality professional learning for administrators and teachers, but it may be onerous to seek out and secure.

Disparity in student and school needs

The needs of individual students inevitably differ, sometimes widely, between schools. But ESSA compliance, at its highest level, demands uniform outcomes. This sets up a push and pull between trying to deliver personalized outcomes for students while maintaining a consistent framework for measurement and execution across schools and districts..

The founding principle of ESSA was that states, unbound by federal oversight, would develop stronger, more creative education systems that in the end would better serve students and increase equity. The law was intended to act as a floor upon which states would build compelling and innovative systems.

...Unfortunately, we found that states were not taking full advantage of the opportunities ESSA presented... we found state ESSA plans to be mostly uncreative, unambitious, unclear, or unfinished.

- An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans Conducted by Bellwether Education Partners

Online Career Planning to the Rescue

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes an army to educate one. And that army needs coordinated resources to help a student set, track, and measure goals every step of the way.

The right online career planning software can be a key differentiator in a district's efforts to prepare students for their futures while also meeting important ESSA mandates. It's critical to find a program that provides measurable data, connects to state mandates, inspires engagement and achievement, and provides students with a vision for their future.

Finding a program that delivers all of these functions can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. It helps to know what you're looking for. Here are some key features and outcomes of a high-quality program.

Boosts Achievement

Generation Z students are digital natives. They prefer to use technology to do just about everything. According to the Harvard Medical School, teens see digital media as a way to connect with the people and things most important to them, and are online frequently as a result. The right career planning software harnesses that impetus, offering familiar interactive experiences that inspire students to reflect on their interests and skills, set goals, and create actionable plans.

Strong career and college readiness programs help students connect the dots between school and what's needed to achieve their desired future. When students define a goal within these programs, they can clearly see how it connects to who they are, what they're interested in, and what they are learning in school that day. With insights into their progress and guidance for how to achieve their goals, students are more likely to feel empowered, engaged, and motivated during their educational journey. That's when you start to see the ripple effect of improvement in engagement, achievement levels, and graduation rates. Once they realize that their education has a purpose, students have a reason to care.

> Students learn more and retain more information when they actively participate in the learning process and when they can relate to what is being taught.
>
> - School Context, Student Attitudes and Behavior, and Academic Achievement

How It Helps Districts Meet Goals
Online Career Planning to the Rescue

Combats Absenteeism

According to non-profit public policy organization The Brookings Institution, "during the 2015-16 school year, one out of every four students attended school with high or extreme levels of chronic absence, and nearly 8 million students (15 percent) in the nation were chronically absent."

The problem is so pervasive that ESSA requires all schools to report absenteeism on report cards and many states have made it a school accountability metric in their education plans. There are many reasons that contribute to absenteeism, but academic disengagement is a big one.

Pervasiveness of Chronic Absenteeism

25%

● **25% of students attended school with high or extreme levels of chronic absence in 2015 - 16**

The right career planning program can create a route forward to a life beyond the confines of school for disengaged students. With an attainable career in mind and clear pathway to get there, at-risk students can see how they may build a future based on their aptitudes and interests. They'll learn what they need to do to reach their goals, which invariably includes attending school to earn required credits. A more defined plan may lead them to take specialized courses that align with their interests, further improving their engagement and performance.
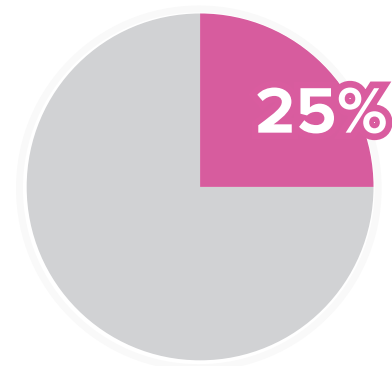
Offers Consistency and Provides Measurable Data Across the District

It's easier to measure school and student performance when the entire district uses the same career planning program. With access to the same assessments, content, lessons, and standards, administrators can be assured that every student has equal opportunity, regardless of background or ability, to plan their post-secondary future.

On the whole, an effective program also allows administrators to track and measure every student's progress towards graduation. The best programs go one step further, proactively flagging when a student is off track so that educators can swiftly intervene and focus on anyone who needs extra support. Features of this nature helps educators channel their very limited time (and depleted energy) into where they can make the biggest difference.

In Xello, for example, the Graduation Plan Completion Report lists whether students are on or off-track to meet diploma requirements. The Critical Alerts Report identifies students with alerts on their course plans that must be addressed, such as missing prerequisites or schedule conflicts.
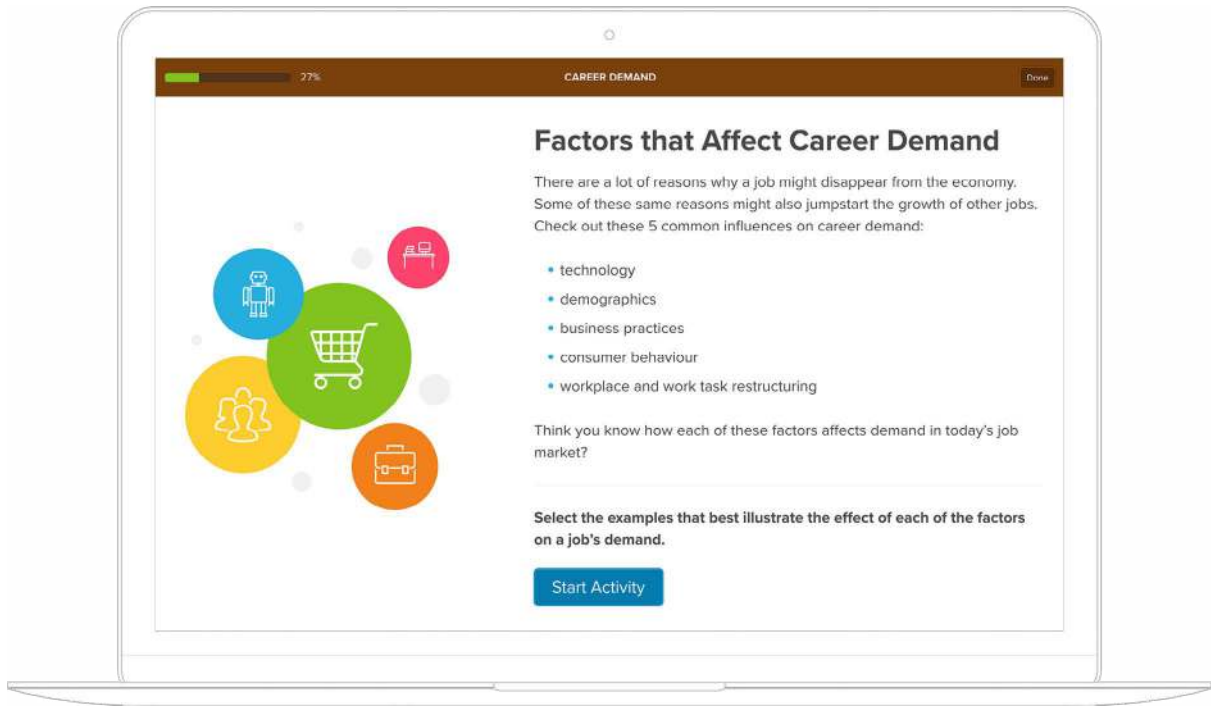
Xello - Career Demand Lesson

Lessons that Go Beyond Simply Correlating to State Guidelines

Many online career planning programs offer grade-by-grade content that support students as they build the critical skills and knowledge needed to become college and career ready. A high-quality program includes lessons that are interactive and practical, so that students can internalize what they're learning and see how it applies to their everyday lives.

In addition, these lessons should teach students social-emotional skills and help them build real-world knowledge important to success beyond high school. Examples include ways to get work-related experience, interpret job market trends, become financially literate, and develop critical communications and job interviewing skills.

If they're properly constructed and age-appropriate, a program's content or lessons should help you easily check the boxes for many state college and career readiness requirements. With Xello, 14 states (and counting!) can find a direct link between the outcomes driven by lessons in a program like Xello and key college and career readiness requirements.

What to Look For
Online Career Planning to the Rescue

Investing in the right solution is a big decision for any districts. Cost effectiveness, ease of implementation and use for students and educators, and return on investment are the key considerations. Beyond the basics, districts must discern which elements actually make the future-planning process easier for everyone involved.

Here are some game-changing features that can make the difference between an 'okay' solution and one that makes college and career readiness fun, engaging, and insightful for both students and educators.

Personalized and Interactive

Interactive features like career interest surveys, learning style assessments, and personality style quizzes help students discover and tap into their strengths and interests. And associated activities that encourage rating and reflection get kids thinking critically about career and life goals. The results allow students to narrow down the vast array of career possibilities into navigable clusters and options. By personalizing the exploration process, students gain the confidence and skills to make smarter, more informed choices.

Room to Reflect

In today's world, be it at school or work, things are moving infinitely more quickly. Our most common online experiences tend to exacerbate this problem, prompting instant reactions and snap decisions. Encouraging students to slow down and reflect on their ideas and experiences, and better internalize their thinking is a skill that's sorely lacking in today's decision making culture.

With that in mind, the best online learning programs build in self-reflection at multiple points, making it a fundamental part of how students evaluate their options and make decisions about their future. When students are encouraged to slow down and think deeply about their ideas, goals, and experiences they stand a better chance of arriving at the right destination.
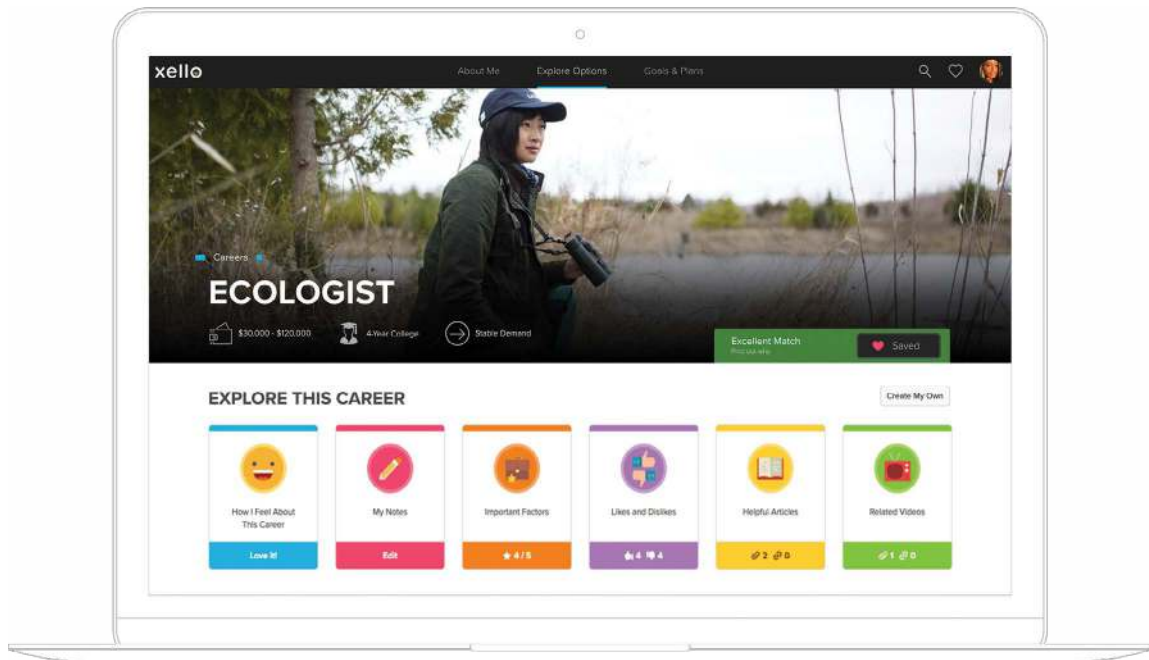
To facilitate this process, Xello not only provides student with access to explore rich, interactive content, but also makes reflection an integral component of program completion. Each student's profile is an ever-evolving collection of learnings, ideas, and plans that they are prompted to revisit and build on regularly. To that extent, the essential skills of critical thinking and self-reflection are cultivated throughout the student's educational journey rather than arrived at as a singular destination.

Grows With and Eases Student Transitions

Personalized profiles that students take with them as they progress through elementary, middle, and high school act as consistent and familiar archives of achievement for students and educators alike —but they can have a more profound impact as well. Transitions between grades, and especially schools, can be stressful on students. Programs that mature as students do and move with them to each stage of school can make those transitions smoother. Students who remain in the same district can continue building their established profiles, and marking their achievements as they reach and achieve various education and life milestones.

Xello - Career Profile

Picturing a Successful Future

Too often online career planning programs include career profiles with imagery and descriptions that are out of date or inauthentic. These can erode a student's confidence in the career exploration process and dilute the impact. The best career planning programs seek to make these profiles as real and relatable as possible for students of all backgrounds.

Xello's career profiles provide the latest information on salaries, working conditions and education requirements. This is critical to building a believable picture of a career. Plus, day-in-the-life accounts and interviews with real people from a variety of backgrounds provide inspiration and insight into what it's really like to work in each career, and the education and skills required to get there and continue to thrive.

Empowers Independence

Empowering students and encouraging self-directed learning is a self-perpetuating concept, but requires tools with specialized attributes.

Start by ensuring programs you're looking at include features like self-paced quizzes and lessons, combined with lots of space for students to reflect on what they're being exposed to. From there provide students autonomy to work within a system that guides through the process of researching and selecting college and career choices. This signals student ownership of the journey. And beyond that, empowering them with the ability to edit, add and remove things from their profile as they go, further encourages and reinforces that this space is theirs to explore and customize.

Any solution worth considering needs to mesh with students' expectations for how technology needs to work in their lives. According to Marketing Tech News, "Generation Z is engaging with 10 hours of online content a day". With this in mind, mobile access provides the ability to strike when the iron is hot, allowing students to login, research and reflect on options whenever inspiration strikes.

Builds Real-World Skills

Communication, relationship building, problem solving, time management, and other transferable, non-technical skills are what give 21st-century job seekers an edge over their competitors. According to the Strada-Gallup 2017 College Student Survey – which represents the views of more than 30,000 randomly selected college students across 43 randomly selected institutions – while nearly 80% of students considered their oral/written communication skills proficient, less than 42% of employers felt this way about recent hires. Lessons that introduce these concepts, including increasingly vital financial literacy, help prepare students to meet the challenges of successfully building a career while taking on the adult responsibilities that go with it.

Supports Course Planning and Specializations

Look for functionality that enables students to build four-year course plans that meet diploma requirements and help students align their course load to their interests. In addition, look for features that track progress and recommend courses for specific pathways and graduation requirements. To help students stay on track, ensure that they can log in any time to view their progress and determine whether their course selections qualify them to graduate with a specialization or other special designations they require.

Easily Shareable

The home-to-school connection is an important contributor to student success. With access to view their child's long-term goals, including colleges, majors, and careers of interest, parents and guardians can offer valuable and relevant guidance and ensure their advice and support is in line with their child's plans for the future. And at school, educators can have more productive meetings with students as they review profiles together.

Streamlines College Exploration and Application Processes

To help students choose a college that will be a good fit for their needs and preferences. Look for a program that differentiate colleges with robust, up-to-date profiles that include program details and admission requirements, as well as information on campus setting, nearby amenities, demographics, expected costs and expenses, extracurriculars, and financial aid options.

Once students decide which colleges to apply to, you'll want a system that facilitates requests and securely delivers electronic transcripts on their behalf, and keeps their documents organized and visible. A strong program allows students to easily submit transcript requests and administrators to quickly approve and send.

Accessible for All

Successful futures are for everyone. Many programs tout accessibility, but look carefully because not all truly comply. Seek a program that delivers an experience that meets WCAG 2.0 (Level AA) standards with full keyboard, screen reader, and low-vision accessibility.

Safe and Secure

Cloud-based software allows users to access the application and its data from anywhere, anytime. Such access naturally poses security concerns. Keeping students' data, records and personal information private and secure is not only critical, it's the law. Look for a partner that has rock solid privacy protocols and breach prevention controls at all levels of the company. Prevention starts on the front line so they should have regular security awareness training. They also need to be reviewing their privacy policies frequently. Best-in-class vendors go the extra mile. They set up prevention controls like automatic backups, firewalls, intrusion detection systems, and even annual third-party vulnerability scans and assessments.

Case Study: The Wenatchee School District and Xello

How the Right Career Planning Software Helped a Washington State District Meet their Mandates and Engage Students Like Never Before

Case Study: The Wenatchee School District and Xello

When it came to preparing students for college and career planning, Mike Wilson knew the state-provided software wasn't cutting it. As a long-time educator, he knew something was missing.

Students needed to be connected with their communities, engaged in the exploration process and provided individual support, regardless of their background or pathway. Mike felt that the students of Wenatchee School District deserved more—so he initiated an effort to make that happen.

This is Mike's story...

Mike Wilson, Wenatchee School District in Washington State.

Q: **When did you realize that what your district had in place wasn't the best solution?**

A: When I looked at our state-created software options, I realized they weren't quite fitting the bill for our vision of what college and career readiness meant. We wanted a platform that was more robust and would actually help students see the big picture—all connected together.

Our vision was to expand students' horizons and show them everything that might be possible for their future, getting them energized about the future and able to picture what academic and career success actually looks like for them.

Q: **How did you go about figuring out what you'd need to achieve these goals?**

A: We started by thinking about what success for our students really looked like and getting everyone aligned on our vision. I came up with a list of categories and boxes that we wanted to ensure we checked based on what we felt our students really needed to be ready to succeed in the real world.

There were also some guidelines from our department of education. For example, in the state of Washington, we have the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP). It details the graduation requirements for every student in the state. So we looked at that, too, and what it would mean to fulfill that mandate. We wanted something that was simple to use but that also provided powerful information for both students and educators—something that everyone was excited to use!

Q: **What changes have you seen in your students after bringing on the Xello program?**

A: It's like a lightbulb went on [for our students] and they're now able to see how everything relates. They're more self-aware. They're able to link together how things like personality, likes, dislikes, skills, interests—all the stuff that makes up who they are—connect with careers and schooling.

It's really helped make course planning more meaningful. For instance, if a student is interested in becoming an electrician, they can now see what training and skills they need to do that job. They then better understand why they would need to study something like physics or trigonometry. It's a crystal ball into their future. We get a lot less of the "When will I ever use this?" type questions because students know how it's relevant.

And students are more engaged. I actually have to tell students to log out when the bell rings. It's not difficult anymore to keep students on task, which just makes our lives so much easier and is really rewarding to see.

Q: **What benefits have you experienced at the administrative or educator level?**

A: Apart from knowing that we're giving the students something better to work with, the biggest benefit for us was the ability to meet the High School and Beyond Plan requirements. With just one piece of software, we've been able to ensure that we can meet that requirement because it spans both middle school and high school students. We actually were able to get ahead of the curve with it.

We had an out-of-the-box solution to help guide the students' Personalized Pathway Requirement. It's been a win-win for us—good for students, good for us.

Read the complete interview here.

How to Never Make a Bad Online Software Purchase Decision

How to Never Make a Bad Online Software Purchase Decision

Selecting a college and career readiness solution for a school or district is a huge decision. You want to engage and inspire students, empower educators, and be respectful of the budget. Here are some best practices to keep in mind as you begin the purchasing process.

Assemble a Buying Team

Bring together a number of professionals in different roles who can offer a broader perspective than a single stakeholder. Roles may include:

- **Executive sponsor:** Ensures outcomes align with state and district mandates. May also advise on budget and funding availability.
- **Curriculum and mandate expert:** Examines how all embedded lessons and activities in the program align with required grade-level outcomes for post-secondary planning.
- **Counselor:** Validates a solution's alignment with college and career planning methodologies, especially graduation requirements.
- **CTE specialist:** Ensures adequate options and guidance for students who are pursuing technical specializations and career options.
- **IT analyst:** Validates all technical implementation and operating considerations, including ease of integration, system resiliency, security, data migration, and management needs.

Work to Find the Best Price

Many software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions offer a flat-rate subscription price. Buyers often find out about hidden service fees after they've signed the contract. Look for service providers that have a transparent pricing structure. They do exist!

You can also avoid the hidden-cost trap by asking companies to break down all fees to a price-per-student line item. Be sure they include training and implementation costs, data migration and activation, and costs for non-standard modules. It's helpful to add a margin of error for unforeseen costs and challenges.

Look for the Best Value

Cost isn't everything. While two or more products might meet the same general requirements at different prices, there may be huge gaps in the experience they provide. One option may save you money, but deliver an inferior student experience. When the Wenatchee School District shopped for a solution that was right for them, they put price in perspective by evaluating other factors as well.

How to Never Make a Bad Online Software Purchase Decision

> The added cost actually felt really minimal for the value we would be getting in return—both in terms of student engagement and based on the expected improvements in student retention and achievement. When we started looking at things based on value, it became a pretty easy decision.
>
> - Mike Wilson, Partner Facilitator/Trainer & Service Specialist, Wenatchee School District, Washington State

Make the Most of Demos

Most solutions offer demonstration log-ins that allow administrators and educators to explore all features and get a feel for the true user experience. It's important that the entire buying team spends time with each solution before delivering their recommendations on which one to purchase. It's also helpful to bring in additional educators and some students of varying engagement levels to try the options out and report on their preferences.

Evaluate ESSA Compliance

The solution you choose should be a tool that helps you meet your state mandates. Take special care to evaluate how each option measures up to compliance requirements. Ask the vendor's sales staff to show you how their system aligns with your curriculum and education plan mandates. Check that any associated compliance reporting processes are easy to use and make it simple for educators to access, run, and share.

Ensure Good Service and Support

Even the best solutions don't always work perfectly right out of the box. Probe the vendor's sales team about their approach to service and support. Ask:

- ✓ Do you provide a personalized plan complete with defined program goals?
- ✓ How extensive is onboarding training?
- ✓ Are you available for regular check-in calls and advice for things like measuring program usage and tracking outcomes?

- ✓ Is there an online knowledge base for quick troubleshooting?
- ✓ Is there after-hours help available?
- ✓ Who do we call if we need more personalized assistance?

[Read our Complete Guide to Never Making a Bad E-learning Purchase Decision](#)

xello

Improve District Wide Objectives with A Program Students Love!

Xello is the only online program designed to help educators consistently, easily, and measurably prepare students for college and career success. You'll improve district wide achievement, engagement and graduation rates with a program your students will love.

Learn More

Resources

ESSA

Ed.gov -- Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (funding)

Bellweathereducation.org -- An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans

Achieve.org -- Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts

Understood.org -- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): What You Need to Know

CTE.careertech.org -- Career Readiness and ESSA: Mapping Career Readiness in State ESSA Plans

Education Week -- Approved ESSA Plans: Explainer and Key Takeaways From Each State

College and Career Readiness

5 Initiatives to Help Meet Your District College & Career Readiness Requirements

Empowering Students To Take Control of Long-term Planning

Your Guide to Never Making a Bad E-learning Purchase Decision (Again)

5 Ways Online Career Learning Gets Today's Kids Excited About Their Future

Complete Course Planning That Meets All Requirements for Future Success

Prepare Students For the Real World With 21st-century Skills

Organize and Track Transcripts All in One Place

Keep Students On-track With Actionable Course Plan Reports