



FUTURE-FOCUSED STATE POLICY ACTIONS TO TRANSFORM K-12 EDUCATION

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State policymakers are in a unique position to enable the innovations in education necessary to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. Working with 8,000 educators nationwide, the Aurora Institute identified the top 10 issues to address in state policy for transforming our K-12 education system.

Education leaders recognize the need to transform the education system to disrupt inequitable, centuries-old practices that no longer fit the world in which we live. Modernizing our education system means moving away from an industrial age “one-size-fits-all” model in which teachers stand and deliver and learners sit and get. Today, we know more than ever about how students learn best, and bold policy actions can align current educational practice with this knowledge. This challenges traditional thinking around how to deploy resources for learning more flexibly to meet learners’ needs. Namely, these resources include teachers, time, spaces, funding, technology, as well as opportunities for community-based and place-based learning. It also requires increasing access and opening pathways toward future-focused learning experiences that will result in building knowledge and skills for lifelong learning and success.

The traditional model of K-12 education system is a veritable monolith in which each student’s learning journey follows a single path at a single pace. The dominant approach to K-12 learning notably lacks needed differentiation and expects students to progress at the same time through the same content, regardless of their starting points or individual needs. Despite this outdated model, how educators teach and how students learn are rapidly evolving with the use of more personalized approaches. Policymakers can create enabling conditions and remove barriers that may inhibit these powerful innovations from taking hold at scale.

Change will happen through a concerted effort to organize a movement toward learner-centered enabling policies to increase flexibility and expand pathways for students, based on mastery of knowledge and skills. This publication sets a policy agenda to effect change through 10 priorities (see below). The following sections describe each of these priorities, provides examples of states with leading initiatives, and offers a set of bold policy actions to activate and scale change.

→ PROFILE OF A GRADUATE

→ INNOVATION ZONES

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↑ SPECIAL ISSUE - CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

State Policy Priority #1

PROFILE OF A GRADUATE

A key role for state policy is to redefine success based on a modernized vision for what students need to know and be able to do upon graduating. Redefining success through a [“Profile of a Graduate”](#) is one strategy states are using to clearly set a vision and a more holistic definition of student success.

Background

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states and local communities the opportunity to partner with local stakeholders to develop new definitions of success so that all students are prepared to thrive in postsecondary education, employment, and civic life. Reading and math proficiency comprise an essential but insufficient definition of a graduation-ready student. States can redefine success with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for future success.

State policymakers and stakeholders could collaborate to identify the knowledge and skills students will need to succeed in life after K-12 education. New definitions of student success are the first step to set a vision for modernizing student learning, empowering educators to facilitate learning and growth toward a new, more comprehensive definition of success, and creating alignment in state education systems.

Graduate profiles describe what students should know and be able to do upon graduation from high school. With clear, comprehensive definitions of success, states can begin to transform their education systems and do so in a coherent manner, so everyone is working together to help students succeed.

Recommendations

- Engage communities and diverse stakeholders to create a vision to modernize and redefine more holistic graduation requirements based on what students need to know and be able to do for future success.
- Broaden coalitions and develop a statewide “Profile of a Graduate” for K-12 education based on a long-term vision describing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students need for college, careers, and civic life.

STATE HIGHLIGHTS

South Carolina

In South Carolina, a coalition of education and business leaders organized as “TransformSC” and began working in 2012 to develop the [Profile of the South Carolina Graduate](#). The South Carolina Council on Competitiveness, a coalition of business and education leaders, including students, parents, and policymakers across the state, engaged in community conversations on how to redefine student success. The effort resulted in a vision for the new Profile of a Graduate across a network of 37 schools and districts in 2013. From the grassroots up, the [South Carolina Board of Education adopted](#) the Profile of a South Carolina Graduate statewide in 2015 articulating a holistic set of knowledge, skills, and characteristics high school graduates need for future success.

Virginia

Virginia is taking a comprehensive and coherent approach to transforming education, using the Profile of a Virginia Graduate as a powerful driver. In 2016, [HB 895](#) required the state to create the [Profile of a Virginia Graduate](#). The bill requires each graduate to complete an AP, Honors or IB course, or industry certification, effective for the Class of 2022. In 2017, the Virginia State Board of Education approved revised [Standards of Accreditation](#) that updated graduation requirements for the Class of 2022. These board regulations (8VAC20-131-51) go beyond the requirements of HB 895 and require all graduates to “acquire and demonstrate foundational skills in critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship in accordance with the Profile of a Virginia Graduate.” Local divisions are connecting into the Virginia Is for Learners Innovation Network, a statewide initiative building educator capacity for innovation, aligned with the new vision of success.

INNOVATION ZONES

For states beginning their journey to support schools in creating more innovative education opportunities for students, policymakers can create [innovation zones](#).

Background

A powerful strategy to create space for local educators to lead education transformation, innovation zones offer school districts a way to request waivers or exemptions from state regulations and statutes to implement new learning environments. They enable state leaders to identify outdated policies and regulations that can impede these innovative educators from meeting the needs of every student.

Innovation zones also help to change the relationship between school districts and state departments of education from one based largely on compliance to one involving support of school districts and building their capacity. Innovation zones are also known as “districts of innovation” or “schools of innovation.”

An innovation zone authority provides increased flexibility for a state to waive certain regulations and requirements for schools and systems beginning to plan, design, and implement personalized, competency-based education models. States can create innovation zones to support innovating districts and schools developing new learning models and to help remove barriers for modernizing education delivery.

Recommendations

- Authorize the state board or state department of education to create innovation zones.
- Allow waivers for school districts from state statutes, regulations, and requirements that impose barriers to modernizing K-12 education systems.
- Provide flexibility for schools and districts to advance transformative practices and move to innovative, student-centered learning models.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Kentucky

Kentucky passed [HB 37](#) in 2012, creating the districts of innovation, allowing for participating districts to have “flexibility from selected Kentucky Administrative Regulations, Kentucky Revised Statutes, and local board of education policies for school administrators, teachers, and staff to meet the diverse needs of students.”

The legislation increased flexibility related to the accessibility of internships, community-based programs, and learning opportunities outside of school. Some of the policies waived for the innovation zones in Kentucky include seat-time policies and the average daily attendance calculation. Currently, 10 districts of innovation are approved in Kentucky.

LEGISLATIVE EXAMPLES

ARKANSAS

Arkansas created a program to support districts of innovation. A school district may petition the Arkansas State Board of Education for all or some of the same waivers granted to an open-enrollment public charter school.

[AR Code § 6-23-304 \(2012\)](#)

COLORADO

The Innovative Schools Act enables the creation of innovation schools and innovation school zones within school districts. Upon designation of a district of innovation, the Colorado State School Board may waive any statutes or rules specified in a school district’s innovation plan.

[C.R.S. 22-32.5-101](#)

MINNESOTA

Minnesota’s legislation enables school districts, charter schools, postsecondary institutions, nonprofit organizations and units of government to join together to form an innovation zone partnership. A partnership may apply for exemptions from most state laws and regulations.

[Minnesota Session Laws, 2017, 1st Special Session, Chapter 5, Sec. 52](#)

State Policy Priority #3

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION TASK FORCES & PILOTS

States are launching competency-based education task forces and creating pilot programs for personalized learning and competency-based education. These initiatives are designed to build capacity and support educators at the district and school levels creating innovative learning models.

Background

Creating an education system that prepares every student to succeed requires systemic transformation to high-quality, personalized, competency-based education (see definition on the next page). Today, the prevailing traditional, one-size-fits-all K-12 education model is not meeting the unique needs of learners. Too many students are falling through the cracks, not graduating, or graduating unprepared for success after high school. School districts across the country are making shifts to competency-based learning, seeking state policy support and flexibility. Transformation at scale will require innovations to take hold in local contexts and support a long-term alignment of both policy and practices.

TASK FORCES

Establishing a competency-based education legislative task force allows members to study competency-based education (CBE) and the related policies and practices. The task force interviews experts and educators from competency-based education systems, analyzes supportive policies and barriers, identifies educator capacity needs, and provides recommendations for getting started.

Allowing conversations to happen in a low-stakes environment leads to a more thorough understanding of what is possible. State leaders benefit from having a space where they can exchange

their ideas and concerns freely. A task force empowers members to challenge the ideas that “one-size-fits-all” is the only way to deliver education. A task force can also dig deeply into real problems of sorting kids in a time-based system; learn more about educator-led solutions using personalized, competency-based learning, and also dream big about what the future of education could look like for students.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION PILOT PROGRAMS

Competency-based education pilot programs support the development of new models, incubate innovations in teaching and learning, and offer insights into promising practices that can scale across the state. Pilot programs are one way to connect and

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Utah

Utah's [SB 143](#) (2016) created a competency-based education pilot program, which provided grants and incentives to local education agencies (LEAs) to transform their learning models. This bill authorizes the Utah State Board of Education to review and establish competency-based education pilots and assessments to award demonstration of student mastery. In 2017, the state allocated additional funds for Utah educators to attend study tours of competency-based education across the country. In 2018, the state published its [Competency-Based Education Framework](#), which is informed by the earlier exploratory work and provides guidance on the shifts required to implement competency education, including those involving culture, quality, and change management. Finally, in 2019, the [Utah Talent MAP](#) was launched to provide a model profile of a graduate. Utah is [building on the Talent MAP](#) and state standards to design prototype competencies for secondary education, which are expected to launch in spring 2020. Local pilot implementations of these prototypes may begin as soon as 2021.

support innovators to plan, implement, and ultimately scale high-quality competency-based educational practices.

Competency-based education pilots are generally limited to a specified number of districts, and they are created to enable innovative educators to begin designing new learning models. Pilots often help educators work through planning stages, identify core design elements, communicate what competency-based education systems look like and how they work. Pilots build educator capacity for assessing performance tasks as students create evidence of mastery and fine-tune strategies to develop a true mastery-based system through exhibitions of student work. While innovations in schools are taking hold, state policymakers can help foster collaboration across pilot sites to spread best practices and scale high-quality new learning models.

Recommendations

- Launch a statewide legislative task force for competency-based education to provide thought leadership and create a space for dialogue between policymakers and stakeholders in states.
- Clarify definitions of competency-based education systems to support the development and continuous improvement of these innovative education structures and models.
- Create and launch competency-based pilots that allow educators and schools to innovate new teaching and learning approaches tied to a state vision of student success.
- Provide support to competency-based education pilots to build capacity for educators to share evidence and best practices in designing and implementing student-centered learning.

WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

The field of K-12 competency-based education is expanding, and knowledge is growing. From 2017 to 2019, Aurora Institute's *CompetencyWorks* initiative engaged in a multi-stage, participatory process to update the 2011 working definition.

The revised 2019 definition of competency-based education is:

- Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
- Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
- Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
- Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
- Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

A competency-based school or district should implement all seven elements of the definition. Strong implementation also requires policies, pedagogy, structures, and culture that support every student in developing essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

CREDIT FLEXIBILITY

States are enacting new kinds of policies for credit flexibility. They offer students ways to earn credit through demonstrations of mastery—building knowledge, skills, and competencies— and provide a functional equivalency of seat-time credit.

Background

States can offer seat-time waivers and [credit flexibility](#) to allow for multiple pathways for learning anytime, anywhere.

CREDIT FLEXIBILITY

Credit flexibility permits schools and districts to develop alternatives to earning credit through seat-time, such as awarding credits based on demonstrated mastery of standards and competencies. These policies provide districts and schools with the ability to base credit on factors other than seat time. Credit flexibility policies at the state level ensure districts have alternatives to seat time awarding of credit. Credit flexibility allows districts and schools to integrate content standards from multiple subject areas for credit and supports schools in developing integrated courses and pathways. Credit flexibility is one way to increase a student's interest and motivation. This flexibility gives students a way to connect learning with community, real-world situations, and future jobs.

FROM SEAT-TIME FLEXIBILITY TO COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEM REDESIGN

Preparing all students for success requires creating an education system that promotes deep student engagement and empowers students to apply and demonstrate their learning. [Competency-based education](#) systems move away from the traditional seat time-based, one-size-fits-all models of schooling. In a competency-based learning system, students advance upon demonstrated mastery and are empowered with the supports they need to succeed. Student progress is not measured by the amount of time spent in a classroom. Instead, student progress is measured by actual demonstration of competencies.

Advanced redesign in moving from seat-time to competency-based education includes redefining how students earn credits by redefining the Carnegie Unit into specific standards and competencies. The focus

STATE HIGHLIGHTS

Oregon

Oregon is a leading state in credit flexibility and encouraging districts to award academic credit based on mastery rather than seat-time. Since 2002, the state's policies have allowed districts to award credit based on proficiency. [Oregon Administrative Code 581-022-1131](#) allows a school district or charter school to grant credit if a student demonstrates mastery by any one or more of the following ways:

- » Successfully completing classroom or equivalent work designed to measure proficiency in class or out of class, where hours of instruction may vary;
- » Successfully passing an appropriate exam designed to measure proficiency or mastery of identified standards;
- » Providing a collection of work or other evidence which demonstrates proficiency or mastery of identified standards; and/or
- » Providing documentation of prior learning activities or experiences that demonstrate proficiency or mastery.

New Hampshire

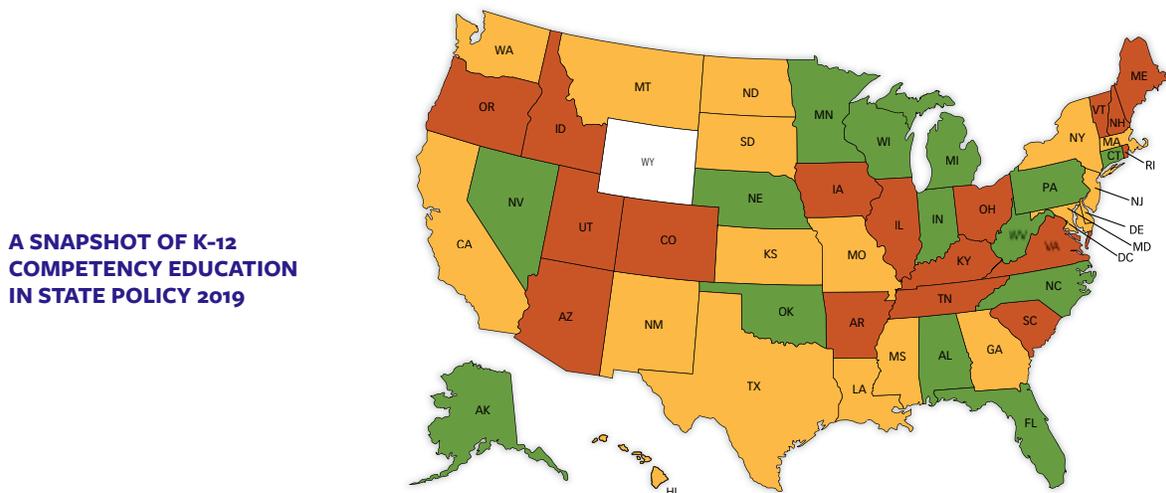
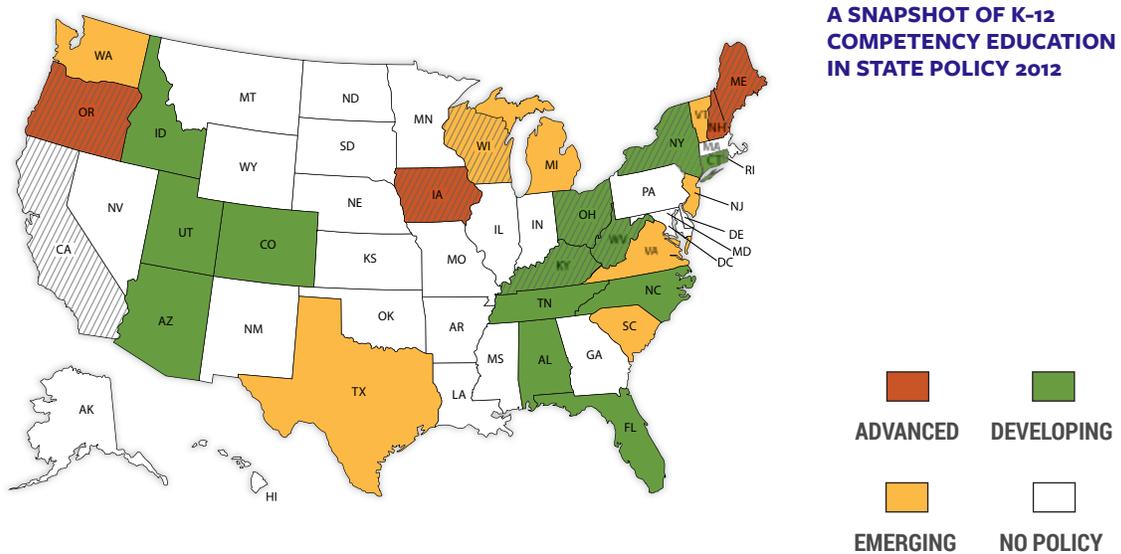
New Hampshire is a leading state in redefining seat time and Carnegie Units to competencies. Changes to New Hampshire's legislative code, [Ed 306.27](#), [allowed districts to award credits based on students' mastery of competencies](#). In 2013, the [National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment](#), the [Center for Collaborative Education](#), and the [New Hampshire Department of Education](#) developed model state-level competencies to support and build capacity for local school systems. Carnegie units were redefined into competencies as an alternative for time-based credits. The state-approved model competencies in mathematics, English language arts, science, art, and work-study practices.

on mastery eliminates definitions of credits by seat-time and allows states to re-examine all related policies so that districts can move toward learner-centered approaches.

States can play an important role in capacity building to help school districts move away from seat-time credits and use credit flexibility policies to move toward highly personalized pathways. Advanced states are redefining credits based on competency development and promoting mastery-based transcripts to ensure students earn credit based on mastery of knowledge and skills.

Recommendations

- Provide credit flexibility to schools and districts from seat-time policies.
- Redefine credits based on competencies for mastery of learning rather than solely on seat-time.



MEANINGFUL CREDENTIALS

States can ensure [meaningful credentials](#) that articulate what students know and are able to do and provide transparency of achievement for students, communities, and employers by defining credits [based on mastery](#) of knowledge and skills.

Background

Today, a high school diploma minimally signifies that a student was awarded credit for academic subjects by meeting seat-time requirements and receiving a passing grade. However, there is wide variability in preparedness by students who hold a diploma; it signals very little about what they know and can do.

A more meaningful high school credential would focus on the knowledge, skills, and competencies based on demonstrated mastery, rather than on seat-time. With [qualifications frameworks](#) and [mastery-based diplomas](#) aligned to a profile of a graduate, state policymakers can ensure qualifications are meaningful to students, postsecondary institutions, and employers upon graduation.

Recommendations

- Offer mastery-based diplomas and mastery transcripts.
- Create proficiency-based graduation pathways aligned to high-quality standards and a comprehensive vision of student success.
- Ensure diplomas and credentials are meaningful with evidence.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Arizona

Arizona created the competency-based [Grand Canyon Diploma](#), which allows students to earn credit based on demonstration of mastery. The Grand Canyon High School Diploma is a valid, recognized high school diploma available to Arizona students who demonstrate college and career readiness in all core subject areas before they leave high school. Earning the Grand Canyon High School Diploma means that a student is academically prepared to take college-level courses without remediation. The Grand Canyon Diploma allows students to move on when they demonstrate mastery. Advancement is based on mastery, not “seat-time.”

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Vermont

Vermont passed legislation encouraging flexible pathways to secondary school completion to identify how individual students would benefit from flexible pathways to graduation with the option of a proficiency-based diploma. The goal is to increase students’ aspirations and encourage postsecondary success by offering secondary students personalized learning pathways, including work-based learning opportunities, future-focused career and technical education, internships, blended learning, and dual enrollment opportunities. Vermont’s law, [Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Initiative](#), was passed in 2013 allowing districts to combine “high-quality academic and experiential components leading to secondary school completion and postsecondary readiness.”

COMPETENCY-BASED PATHWAYS ALIGNMENT ACROSS K-12, HIGHER EDUCATION, CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION, AND WORKFORCE/EMPLOYMENT

States can ensure alignment from early education, K-12, postsecondary education to career and technical education, and the workforce to prepare students for future success.

Background

State policymakers can support the transformation of education and workforce systems, most strategically by targeting funding within the reauthorized federal [Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act \(Perkins V\)](#), [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#), and the ESSA. They can leverage that funding to encourage alignment of programs with personalized pathways and competency-based approaches across K-12, higher education, career/technical education, and the workforce in each state.

Innovative states are re-examining how to better target Perkins V funding to align programs across K-12, higher education, career education, and the workforce with personalized pathways and competency-based approaches across a lifelong learning continuum that lead to equitable opportunities and high-demand future jobs. State leaders may consider how systems can realign for competency-based pathways and how to ensure credentials and licensure are mastery-based across the continuum. Governors, legislatures, and state policymakers are well-positioned to help align systems of early learning, K-12 education, career and technical education (CTE), higher education, and the workforce with a vision of future opportunity and prosperity.

Recommendations

- Create a task force for the alignment of programs across K-12, higher education, CTE, and the workforce.
- Align systems of early learning, K-12 education, career and technical education (CTE), higher education, and workforce training by creating competency-based pathways and certifications, including micro-credentials.
- Create a statewide vision for a lifelong, continuous system of learning to ensure all youth have pathways to prosperity.
- Focus on building competency-based systems with recognition and validation of prior learning.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Alabama

Alabama is developing a “continuous learning system” with [competency-based pathways](#) in K-12 education, career technical education, higher education, and the workforce. State leaders are developing in-demand career pathways that align workforce development programs around the attainment of valuable credentials, postsecondary graduation credit, and work-based learning experiences. The system will braid Alabama’s federal education and workforce development funding streams to support in-demand career pathways and develop the Alabama Industry-Recognized and Registered Apprenticeship (AIRRAP) program.

State Policy Priority #7

EDUCATOR WORKFORCE MODERNIZATION

States can build teacher capacity for systemic transformation toward student-centered learning by investing in a competency-based educator professional learning system.

Background

State policy provides an important lever to create a shared vision and modernize professional learning for educators. Educators must be prepared for a future-focused profession that better meets the demands of student learning and workforce needs. It is time to move beyond outdated systems of educator preparation and development and transition to a competency-based, educator professional learning system. States can invest in developing educator capacity for personalized, competency-based learning models.

Policymakers at the local, regional, and state levels could consider how [micro-credentials](#) could be used to transform the continuum of teacher professional learning to meet the needs of every student.

Policymakers can create and support [professional learning communities](#) focused on preparing educators for a learner-centered environment. In addition, through [cultivating assessment literacy](#), educators can develop the knowledge and skills to assess student learning, provide meaningful feedback, and personalize learning.

Recommendations

- Convene a statewide task force on modernizing teaching and professional learning.
- Remodel teacher licensure and credentialing based on mastery, including competency-based pathways through micro-credentials.
- Prioritize educator preparation and development for building the knowledge and skills teachers need to lead in competency-based, student-centered learning.
- Build educator capacity for assessment literacy to evaluate anytime, anywhere student learning for mastery.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Tennessee

Tennessee has a competency-based education pilot for schools and a micro-credential pilot for educator development. Tennessee's [Personalized Learning Task Force](#) informed the state's pilot initiatives and provided recommendations on the overall direction for the state to support personalized learning. The recommendations included piloting micro-credentialing to promote personalized professional development for teachers to implement competency-based education and expand student access to personalized learning. The state is working to expand its micro-credentialing pilot as a resource to all educators and develop micro-credentials around the [Tennessee Academic Standards](#).

EDUCATOR WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

States can support the transformation of K-12 learning systems that are equity-focused and reflect the diversity and life experiences of today's communities and schools by diversifying the educator workforce.

Background

Research is showing that black and brown students do better academically, experience fewer disciplinary incidents, and form stronger and more trusting bonds with teachers who look like them.¹ States can set an imperative to support the pipeline of high-quality, black, and brown instructors to ensure that all students are equipped with the skills necessary for success. A racially diverse teaching workforce is an important part of closing achievement and opportunity gaps, but the increasing costs of teacher and leader education programs exclude many people of color from the profession.

Although state policymakers alone cannot drive all changes necessary to shift the conditions for teaching and learning, they can initiate and coordinate collaborative approaches and enact targeted policies.

Recommendations

- Prioritize the use of ESSA Title II, Part A funds to support the development of teacher preparation practices that support the diversification of the educator workforce.
- Increase access and affordability of teacher and leader preparation pathways.
- Prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion across the educator-leader workforce.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Tennessee

Tennessee's [Innovation in Preparation Grants](#) awarded \$200,000 to four educator preparation programs to develop innovative strategies that will recruit a diverse educator workforce, bolster the pipeline of teachers in high-demand areas, and improve the preparation of educators in literacy content. Additionally, Tennessee instituted the [Diversity Innovation Implementation Grants](#) to encourage innovative practices in districts around the recruitment and retainment of diverse, high-quality educators. Tennessee's Department of Education invested Title II, Part A funds on local initiatives focused on recruiting diverse high school students to the teaching profession.

¹ Wright, A. C. (2015). *Teachers' perceptions of students' disruptive behavior: The effect of racial congruence and consequences for school suspension*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Santa Barbara.

State Policy Priority #9

BALANCED SYSTEMS OF ASSESSMENTS

States can design balanced systems of assessments to certify student mastery of knowledge and skills and provide timely feedback on where students are in their learning.

Background

Balanced systems of assessments² support students' deeper learning and offer insights on student outcomes. State leaders, in collaboration with local districts, can increase the likelihood that competency-based education strategies will enhance the equality of student outcomes by supporting the development of [balanced assessment systems](#).

New flexibility under ESSA allows statewide systems of assessments to measure student learning at levels below and above grade level, use the results of multiple assessments over time, and incorporate different types (such as performance assessments) to allow students to demonstrate evidence of mastery.

Several states are exploring these new flexibilities to rethink their statewide systems of assessments. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education program under ESSA allows states to participate in the [Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority \(IADA\)](#). Up to seven states can pilot new, innovative systems of assessments in a subset of districts by applying to the IADA.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

New Hampshire

New Hampshire has been implementing the [Performance Assessment of Competency Education \(PACE\)](#) program to use balanced systems of assessments to build capacity and drive toward continuous improvement. New Hampshire has seen positive outcomes from expanding high-quality professional development, building educator capacity for assessment literacy, and utilizing data and feedback from embedded assessments to support data-driven decisions and growth for both teachers and students throughout the year.

Recommendations

- Create a task force with diverse stakeholders to reimagine the state assessment system, leveraging flexibility in ESSA toward balanced systems of assessments.
- Create a working group on examining and auditing the systems of assessments that are being used in the state.
- Collaborate with willing districts and schools to explore possible approaches to piloting new, innovative systems of assessments, under the Innovative Accountability and Assessment Demonstration Authority (ESSA Section 1204).
- Convene a pilot to develop balanced assessment systems that include multiple types of assessments (including performance assessments), which are linked to specific competencies and provide a range of evidence over time.

² According to [Chattergoon & Marion](#) (2016), balanced systems of assessments meet the following criteria:

- » Coherent systems: “The assessments in a system must be compatible with the models of how students learn content and skills over time” and “curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be aligned to ensure that the entire system is working toward a common set of learning goals”;
- » A well-articulated theory of action that guides how each part of the system relates to the others. In other words, what purpose does the system as a whole serve, what different needs does it meet for different stakeholders, and how does it meet them? “A set of assessments, even if they cohere, will not fulfill the intended purposes if the information never reaches the intended user”; and
- » Assessment efficiency means that systems are providing stakeholders with the full range of information that it is intended to provide. “For example, if a state wants to give educators information to help them adjust instruction, its assessments must be tied to the curriculum that is being used. These assessments should in turn yield timely, detailed information about the knowledge and skills being assessed at the local level.” (See Chattergoon, R. & Marion, S. (January 2016). Not as easy as it sounds: Designing a balanced assessment system. *State Education Standard*, 16(1), pp 6-9.

NEXT-GENERATION ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

States can redesign accountability systems for [continuous improvement](#) to achieve equity and excellence and empower stakeholders with [multiple, balanced measures](#) and [reciprocal accountability](#).

Background

State and local education systems need to focus on supporting an accountability system that continuously improves to meet the needs of a changing society, economy, and student population. Policymakers, school leaders, teachers, parents, and communities want systems that are transparent, equitable, and aligned to improving teaching and learning over time.

Under ESSA, states and localities are rethinking accountability and using data to drive continuous improvement, empowering educators, students, and communities with transparent information on student achievement. In reciprocal accountability, every level of the system is accountable for contributions to produce high-quality learning for all.

[Next-generation accountability systems](#) can serve this purpose by providing the appropriate information to the appropriate stakeholders. Furthermore, next-generation accountability can be an effective tool to inform capacity-building in schools aimed at supporting teaching and learning in an equity-driven, student-centered, competency-based education system.

Next-generation accountability focuses on designing systems that are adaptive and iterative toward continuous improvement. It focuses on distributing responsibility across the education system's stakeholders toward reciprocal accountability. Through multiple measures, accountability systems can provide data contributing to greater transparency for all stakeholders and for informing and enabling school improvement.

Next-generation accountability systems can empower, state, district, and schools with timely, relevant information and provide the capacity to analyze and continuously improve on their practice. States can now use multiple measures of student knowledge and skills in their accountability system. Multiple measures drive continuous improvement, providing schools with far better data to support student learning, provide greater transparency, and improve on their practice. Likewise, states can consider how to present multiple measures of student learning and school quality with advanced data visualization to provide families with rich, easy-to-understand information.

Recommendations

- Determine the measures the state will use for accountability purposes.
- Empower communities and build trust by developing a framework for reciprocal accountability, to ensure that resources and supports are responsive to the needs of local communities, districts, and schools.
- Identify school improvement models to support student-centered learning with personalized, competency-based education and to advance equity.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

Colorado

Colorado's legislature passed a new law in the 2019 session to support local education agencies to try piloting new, student-centered accountability models. The [Student-Centered Accountability System Pilot](#) in Colorado provides funding and flexibility to school districts to design and implement new accountability systems. Colorado SB-19-204 also created the [Local Accountability System Grant program](#) in 2019. This program provides grant money to school districts to adopt local accountability systems that supplement the state accountability system. This grant program will allow districts the opportunity to design accountability systems that align with goals of college and career readiness for all students. Through the Student-Centered Pilot Accountability Systems, school districts can receive grants and flexibility to design new accountability systems.

STATE HIGHLIGHTS

Vermont

[Vermont's Education Quality Standards](#) were approved by the Vermont State Board of Education in 2013 and require schools to have proficiency-based graduation requirements for students graduating in 2020 and for each subsequent graduating class. The state allows students to demonstrate mastery through multiple means, including teacher-designed assessments, papers, presentations, portfolios, or projects. Local school districts may adopt their own specific graduation requirements but must adhere to state standards.

California

California's [innovative school dashboard](#) and system of support promote continuous improvement toward a holistic definition of success. In this new system, districts monitor four local indicators to determine where they are in meeting targets for two or more years. This information is gathered into a local dashboard, allowing district leaders to focus their efforts on evaluating and building school-level performance and capacity. Additionally, six indicators make up performance categories the state monitors as common measures of student performance outcomes. This approach allows the state to monitor the progress of the six indicators as they are reported through the dashboard, to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support.

Conclusion

State education policymakers play a key role in examining the changes needed for the future of education.

States and local communities need to redefine student success more broadly — educators, administrators, parents, students, and community members — toward higher ideals about the purpose of education and create a demand for change. Systemic change starts with communities who challenge the status quo, build a vision for the future of education that is “fit for purpose,” and engage in a backward design process around what their hopes are for students. From the ground up, states can move a vision forward for competency-based education systems. Driving the transformation of our K-12 education systems is led by educators designing new learning models and leading the changes taking place across the field by imagining a path forward to futures that most cannot see. Ultimately, they are effective by uniting diverse groups with common, shared values, and ideals of innovations for equity. Competency-based education systems are agnostic on delivery model — and ensure learning can happen any time, any place.

These policy issues are identified by leading educators and grounded in research on innovative practice. We look forward to working collaboratively with visionary state policy leaders who are creating space for innovations to flourish. High-quality, modernized education systems are critical for our youth and the future of our democracy.

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

States have a leadership role to play in Continuity of Learning for preparedness in times of an emergency, such as a pandemic or other disasters, during which schools must close.

Background

Decisions about instruction, curriculum, methods, delivery models, tools, and resources are made locally. Therefore, states must consider the needs of all students and support every district and school to create action plans for continuity of learning to ensure equity and availability for all students. Local education agencies are best positioned to determine which tools work best for their schools and districts based on the anticipated length of the closure, current resources available, student access, and other needs. Emergency management and continuity planning teams should conduct readiness assessments for continuity of learning preparedness at least annually to ensure people are prepared, to ensure infrastructure will provide access to technologies and broadband Internet, to ensure continuity of learning is equitable, and to ensure a clear communication plan will be implemented. In Singapore and China, best practices include ensuring online learning by piloting schoolwide e-learning days annually.

Recommendations

- Establish a statewide Continuity of Learning Task Force to plan, implement, and evaluate academic continuity and preparedness statewide.
- Ensure districts assess readiness for continuity of learning (at least once annually):
 - providing educators, students, and parents with training and the infrastructure to carry out the plan remotely;
 - providing access to high-speed broadband, platforms, materials, and tools needed for remote and online learning; and,
 - ensuring accessibility, equity, and options for students with disabilities.
- Support continuity of learning through credit flexibility to enable anytime, anywhere learning.
- Evaluate state education policies to identify enablers and barriers to remote learning (i.e., credit flexibility for seat-time, areas for waivers, demonstrations of evidence for achieving learning outcomes, and graduation requirements, etc.).
- Take action for the future. Move to competency-based education systems and structures to address gaps. Create pathways for anytime, anywhere learning, and ensure equity for all students in building mastery of knowledge and skills needed for success.

STATE HIGHLIGHT

New York

In New York state, there is a provision for flexibility for seat-time requirements. In districts where “distance and online learning methods are available, or other continuity of learning strategies are utilized, the priority for the instruction should be that which best prepares students to meet the learning outcomes for the course and prepare for the culminating examination, if applicable. Any student who achieves the learning outcomes for the course should earn the applicable course/diploma credit without regard to the 180-minute/week unit of study requirement in Commissioner’s Regulations Part 100.1.”

Resources to Learn More

- Aurora Institute [What Is Competency-Based Education? An Updated Definition.](#)
- Aurora Institute [Current to Future State: Issues and Action Steps for State Policy to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](#)
- Aurora Institute [Innovation Zones: Creating Policy Flexibility for Competency-Based Personalized Learning](#)
- Aurora Institute [Redefining Student Success: Profile of a Graduate](#)
- Aurora Institute [Redesigning Systems of Assessments for Student-Centered Learning](#)
- Aurora Institute [Rethinking State Accountability to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in K-12 Education](#)
- Aurora Institute [State Funding Strategies to Support Education Innovation](#)
- Aurora Institute [State Strategies to Develop Teacher Capacity for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](#)
- Aurora Institute [How Systems of Assessments Aligned with Competency-Based Education Can Support Equity](#)

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Aurora's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students through its work in policy advocacy, research, and field-building/convening. Aurora works on systems change in K-12 education, identifies root causes in structures, promotes best practices, examines policy barriers, and makes recommendations for change. Aurora has a national and global view of education innovation and lifts up promising policies and practices that yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world where all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

About Aurora Institute Center for Policy

The Aurora Institute Center for Policy leads the evolution of policy necessary for the growth of effective learning models toward the goals of high quality, equity, access, as well as dramatically improving student learning to close the achievement gap and ensure every student has access to high-quality, world-class learning opportunities.

To achieve this, we work with state policymakers to enable innovative education systems to prepare all students for a lifetime of success. From 2017-19, the nonpartisan Aurora Institute Center for Policy supported more than 100 policymakers across 41 states to build understanding of the historic opportunities to redefine student success and redesign education systems focused on equity, quality, and excellence.

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The mission of the AURORA INSTITUTE is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all.

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