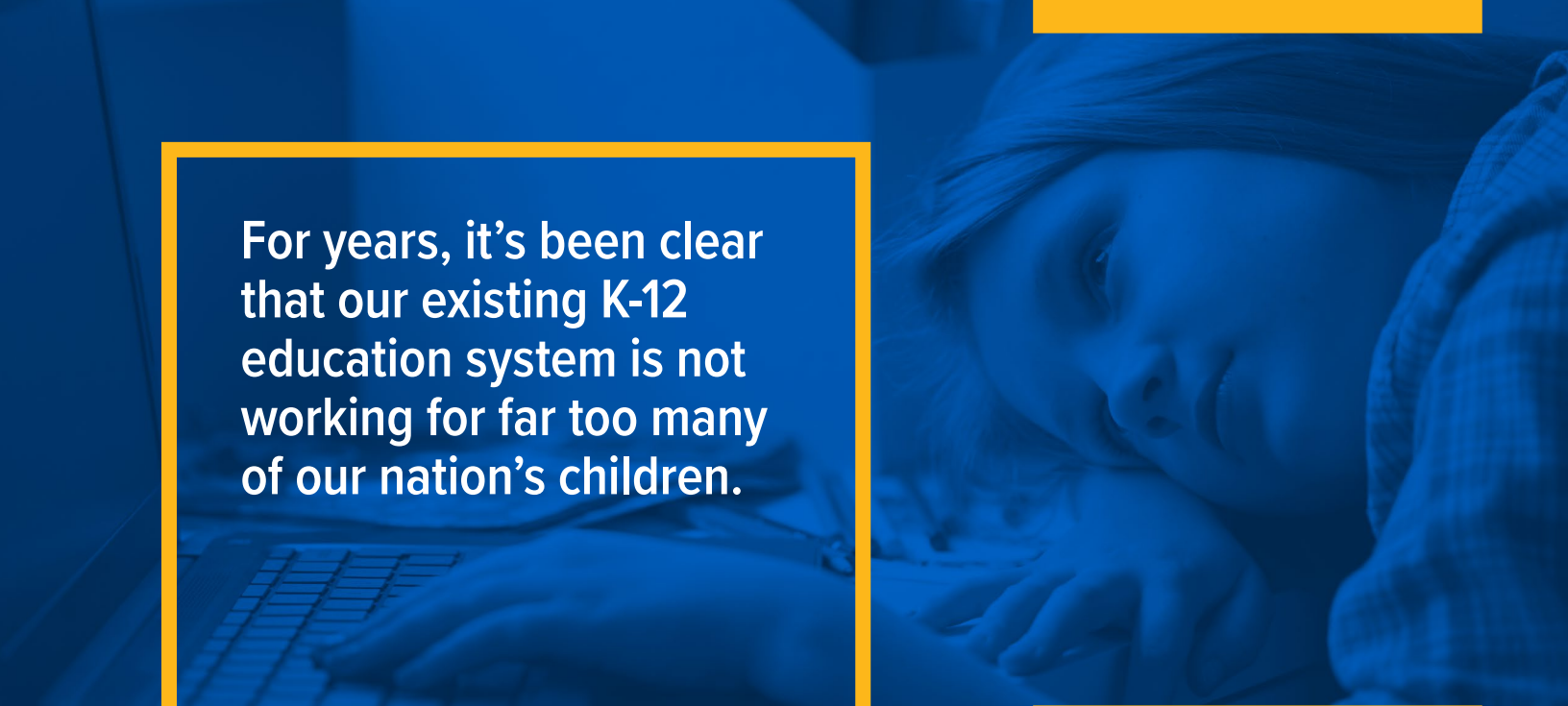


Transforming for Tomorrow

Supporting Student-Centered
Education Systems Through
State Policy Action



For years, it's been clear that our existing K-12 education system is not working for far too many of our nation's children.

While students are graduating high school at record rates, too many are not prepared for what comes next. Statistics suggest that between 40% and 60% of first-time undergraduate students enroll in remedial college courses to learn content and skills that should have been attained in high school, and employers consistently give new college graduates low ratings for key skills such as work ethic and communication. Parents and students recognizing this reality are increasingly calling for change.

A personalized, competency-based approach to learning reimagines our K-12 education systems with the goal of ensuring that each child is empowered with the knowledge and skills they need for the future. This approach to education creates engaging learning experiences customized to each student's strengths, needs and interests. Regardless of how long learning takes or where it occurs, once students have demonstrated their competency of concepts and skills, they are allowed to advance academically. This approach also ensures that schools implement the necessary supports that enable students to take ownership of their learning.

Different states, districts and schools use different terms for similar ideas such as personalized, competency-based learning. Some other ways people refer to related approaches to teaching and learning include:

Personalized learning

Student-centered learning

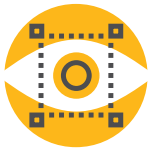
Competency-based learning and education

Proficiency-based learning

Mastery-based learning



State leaders in various positions play an important role in supporting this type of education at the school and district level. These guiding documents are designed to help a range of state policymakers identify initial steps they can take to support schools and districts wanting to implement a personalized, competency-based approach to learning:



Creating a student-centered vision of the skills and qualities students need to have upon graduation and an accompanying roadmap with expectations for how students can demonstrate mastery of these skills



Incentivizing district innovation as well as sharing lessons with other interested communities and state leaders to inform future policy change and state support



Giving credit for all learning that occurs by developing a framework for students to receive credit for high-quality experiences outside the classroom, which also requires aligning funding and policy to encourage district creativity and collaboration with others



Rethinking accountability and assessment policies where possible to support personalized, competency-based efforts

Each of these key points is addressed in a short two-page summary, which can be found at knowledgeworks.org/###. This guidance is designed to be useful to leaders in both state legislative and executive branches wanting to understand how they can support personalized, competency-based education systems. Where possible this report identifies potential lead actors on different issues while also recognizing that the specific lead will depend on the state context, governance structure and history.

For information on other state examples and next steps you can take, please contact us at policy@knowledgeworks.org.

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Creating a Student-Centered Vision for Success

BIG IDEA Creating a personalized, competency-based education approach requires a new vision for what education can and should be. States play a key role in this process. Traditional systems teach the same content at the same time to every student in age-defined grades with success tied to attendance of a prescribed number of instruction days and passing grades. A personalized, competency-based approach, by contrast, individualizes the learning experience so that every student benefits from varied pacing and customized supports to help them master essential life skills and academic content. Schools and districts must have guiding structures in place before beginning the work of reorienting education around this new system of teaching and learning.

POLICY ACTIONS (Why/What/Who):

Create a Portrait of a Graduate

Communities need to articulate the high-level skills and characteristics a student should have once they have completed their K-12 education journey. This set of skills is often referred to as a “portrait” or “profile” of a graduate and should be created through a process involving broad collaboration with a diverse statewide community. **Governors, state boards or state education chiefs** typically lead this effort at the state level with close engagement from the **legislature**. The state may also choose to provide technical assistance to schools and/or districts developing their own local profiles rather than develop a single statewide set of characteristics.

Define Competencies

Once a Portrait of a Graduate is developed, a frequent next step is to establish a roadmap with specific expectations for how students will demonstrate mastery of these skills and characteristics. These expectations are frequently referred to as “competencies” and are often developed at the state level. The state-level actor best positioned to lead and/or support this work is often the **state education agency**. While competency development should be undertaken by K-12 educators, leaders from the legislature, higher education and workforce communities, as well as parents, students and community members, should be closely engaged in the development of these competencies.

Integrate Data

Understanding the impact of student-centered policies requires accurate and transparent data. The state should bring together a wide range of stakeholders to set goals for the work and identify appropriate ways to track the impact of student-centered learning. This work can be required by the **legislature** and led by the **governor**. The practical work of integrating data should be governed by a board with empowered representatives from all agencies contributing data, and that board should designate a single lead entity to hold and integrate the data. Strong data systems can also be used to identify the impact of student-centered learning approaches as students move from K-12 into higher education and the workforce.

KEY QUESTIONS

- » How does my state's current vision for education advance personalized, competency-based learning?
- » How has my state articulated the knowledge and skills a successful graduate will need, building directly on the state's college- and career-readiness academic content standards? If the state has not done this, has the state supported the creation of local articulations?
- » What resources and supports are already available to help schools and districts achieve the necessary changes to create student-centered systems?
- » Is there a state entity that is well positioned to support implementation of the new requirements, or might a new entity need to be created?

STATE EXAMPLES

Idaho made mastery-based, student-centered learning a clear priority when the state legislature established student-centered learning as an imperative. The Idaho State Board of Education subsequently adopted as its vision the establishment of a student-centered education system. The state education agency has become a national leader in supporting districts and schools in the Idaho Mastery Education Network, working from the state's mastery-based education framework.

South Carolina created a personalized, competency-based learning framework that builds on the state's vision for personalized learning. With support from the state's PersonalizeSC office, schools and districts can use this framework to place student ownership at the core of all learning experiences, and ensure that every learner's needs are met through application of the competencies aligned to the state's Profile of a Graduate.

Utah established a Portrait of a Graduate through the collaboration of stakeholders including educators, students, parents and community members. The state then used that Portrait of a Graduate to create competencies and competency model rubrics.

Virginia created a Portrait of a Graduate to ensure students are prepared to be successful in college and/or the workforce.

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Giving Credit for Learning Whenever and Wherever It Occurs

BIG IDEA States should create the conditions for students to receive school credit, including toward receipt of a high school diploma, for learning that occurs at any time and any place. This could include receiving credit for school-based core content coursework through mastery-based means as well as through opportunities outside the classroom, such as work-based learning experiences that demonstrate understanding of key academic concepts or content. Giving students these options allows schools to adopt innovative models and design new systems that give students the rich and engaging experiences that prepare them for future success.

POLICY ACTIONS (What/Who):

Enable schools to transcend “school-based instructional time”

Almost all states provide schools and districts some flexibility to award credit for learning that takes place outside of traditional instructional time, but the amount of flexibility varies widely from state to state. State policymakers can examine state statute and regulations to determine the extent to which the state already allows students to earn credits outside of traditional seat time requirements. Once necessary changes are identified, the state legislature should pass laws providing schools and districts the flexibility to award academic credit upon demonstrated mastery, both for traditional coursework as well as in contexts other than the traditional classroom, such as work-based learning experiences or dual credit courses in higher education settings.

State boards of education and state education agencies can play a key informational role to ensure that schools and districts understand how to take advantage of both new and existing flexibilities.

Align financial incentives

K-12 funding formulas use a variety of methods to determine whether students are enrolled in a particular school for the purposes of making funding allocations. However, many use statutory definitions that often require students to physically be present in a school building when students are counted. This can stymie the ability of schools and districts seeking to take advantage of learning flexibilities that allow students to earn credit outside the walls of the school. The governor and/or legislators should

establish a body to review the state's funding formula to determine if the formula presents financial barriers to districts supporting innovative learning opportunities beyond time-constrained, grade-based methods. That body can also recommend additional financial incentives that may be needed, such as grant programs to support innovation.

Rethink Graduation and Promotion Policy

State policies should empower students to meet graduation requirements through deeper demonstrations of mastery than the current system affords. The **state education agency** and **state legislature** should review and revise state graduation requirements as needed to permit these deeper assessment methods, such as portfolios or performance tasks. Those same entities can provide resources and guidance to help districts create opportunities outside the traditional classroom, such as work-based learning or dual credit, as well as implement supports that ensure students can take advantage of these opportunities.

KEY QUESTIONS:

- » How does my state define instruction and instructional hours?
- » Does school funding in my state depend on students being physically in the building, sitting in a classroom for a prescribed amount of minutes each day?
- » Do definitions of student headcount include learning outside of traditional instructional time models that focus on in-school or grade-based learning?
- » What course or learning experience flexibilities does my state provide for students to demonstrate their readiness for graduation?

STATE EXAMPLES

Arizona recently enacted a school instructional time law that provides districts and charters with authority to adopt a model that uses remote instruction, project-based learning, mastery-based learning, weekend courses and evening courses to meet instructional hour requirements.

Kentucky's graduation and promotion policies offer flexibility that is personalized to the student. For example, it allows students to select a variety of courses to satisfy required credits beyond a set of the foundational courses and by requiring students to complete individual learning plans. These policies also provide students with the opportunity to earn credit based on either a Carnegie unit or performance.

The **State of Washington** enacted the Workforce Education Investment Act to provide students with the opportunity to participate in career experiences in combination with classroom learning. The act focuses specifically on closing workforce gaps and helping students prepare for in-demand jobs. It also includes Career Connect Washington, a group of business, labor, education and community leaders committed to creating work-based learning opportunities.

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Incentivizing District Innovation

BIG IDEA States should ensure that policies provide schools with the flexibility to design innovative approaches to education that show strong promise for improving student outcomes. Schools often lack the legal flexibility they need to pursue these opportunities, and even when they have it, they may face additional barriers to being able to act on it, such as lack of awareness or expertise. Authorizing and supporting district and school innovation, as well as retooling state laws and regulations, can incentivize new ways of personalizing instruction. This can include giving credit for out-of-class experiences or through other methods of helping students learn and develop.

POLICY ACTIONS (What/Who):

Pass laws giving districts room to innovate

States can create opportunities such as innovation zones, waivers from state statute and administrative rules and/or pilot programs for districts to engage in innovative educational practices that potentially conflict with existing rules and regulations or that don't fit neatly into existing funding categories.

Any state policymaker could take the lead on reviewing a state's existing legal structures, with the legislature or state department of education tasked with making any necessary legal or regulatory changes.

Provide supports for interested districts

Schools need both financial and technical support to successfully execute a transformative change in their instructional approach.

The legislature can provide funding to support districts making this shift. State boards of education and state education agencies can provide guidance and technical assistance to help schools and districts navigate this change, possibly through the creation of a specific office or department with expertise in district innovation.

Support networks of implementing districts

States can and should create opportunities for likeminded districts to learn from each other and discuss common challenges. Such a network is typically authorized or created by the legislature or state board of education. This type of network is typically then coordinated by a state education agency.

KEY QUESTIONS

- » What types of flexibilities exist to help schools and districts advance new and innovative ways of delivering instruction, and what additional flexibilities are needed?
- » Does my state provide financial and/or technical support for schools that are interested in innovating how they deliver instruction?
- » What learning opportunities exist for schools implementing new types of instruction? Are there informal networks and does the state education agency provide this support?

STATE EXAMPLES

Illinois created a competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot program allowing districts and multi-district collaboratives to replace graduation requirements with a competency-based learning approach.

Texas statute established Districts of Innovation, which allows districts to implement innovative programs so long as certain performance requirements are met. Districts can choose locally to become a District of Innovation; local boards of trustees can initiate the process of developing an innovation plan through a resolution. Plans can include the implementation of innovative curriculum or methods, modifications regarding school days or years, accountability and assessments that exceed state and federal requirements or exemptions from certain state requirements.

The **Washington State** Board of Education uses a mastery-based education working group to identify barriers to mastery-based learning as well as steps that can increase school and district capacity for personalized learning approaches. The Board also supports the Washington State Mastery-based Learning Collaborative, which works to identify best practices for implementing mastery-based learning and provide resources to educators focused on student-centered learning.

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Rethinking Assessment and Accountability

BIG IDEA State assessment and accountability systems should support district and school efforts to advance student-centered learning strategies. While federal law establishes a framework for statewide assessment and accountability systems, states do have some flexibility to align components to their vision for student success. States should think about ways that these systems can support personalized learning, such as providing more timely information to inform instruction, while also providing a more holistic picture of school quality.

POLICY ACTIONS (What/Who):

Identify Collaborative Opportunities for Improvement

State policymakers should create a cross-sector effort to identify the challenges and opportunities created by the state's existing assessment and accountability systems to personalized, competency-based innovation and explore improvements. A coalition of state policymakers and community members could undertake this effort, bringing together stakeholders to identify changes that need to be made in state statute and regulation by the legislature, state board of education and/or state education agency as appropriate.

Develop school improvement supports

States are required under federal law to identify each year schools that need improvement. States can bring together leading stakeholders to discuss how to

integrate student-centered learning practices into the state's school improvement system to accelerate success in student outcomes. Depending on the state, the governor, state board of education or state education chief could spearhead this effort.

Align graduation requirements

Graduation rates are a part of federal high school accountability requirements. If the state is allowing students to earn credit for experiences outside the traditional classroom, it should ensure that its federal accountability plan reflects its inclusive approach to credit attainment. The state board of education or state education chief may lead an initial effort to review the existing accountability system, with the legislature potentially formalizing any needed changes within state statute.

Create and fund opportunities for state assessment and accountability innovation

States can create opportunities such as pilot programs that allow districts to advance student-centered assessment systems or to create new school quality dashboards that provide stakeholders with a holistic picture of school performance. **The governor, legislature or state education chief** could lead the charge on framing the right action for each state, with the **legislature** enacting it into law.

KEY QUESTIONS

- » What do teachers, students, families and other stakeholders say about the impact of the current assessment system on classrooms?
- » What measures of school quality are most useful to stakeholders in my state and does my current accountability system value those accordingly?
- » How (if at all) can schools and districts in my state develop alternatives to traditional graduation requirements?
- » Is there existing assessment and accountability innovation happening in my state?
- » Has my state attempted to make improvements to its accountability system as it restarted from pandemic disruptions?

STATE EXAMPLES

Colorado established an accountability pilot program in 2019 for local systems to supplement the state accountability system. According to the Colorado Department of Education, local systems can create local accountability systems that are tailored to their own needs, using additional measures for statewide performance indicators and indicators of student success. The state can then learn from district creativity.

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Montana created a comprehensive assessment system that provides a balanced approach to assessments. This includes the use of summative assessments, interim assessments and formative assessments, all of which are supported through ongoing professional development and instructional resources for educators working to implement this system.

In collaboration with several partners, **New Mexico** created an Innovative Assessment Community of Practice. This community is piloting a new project-based graduation pathway that will provide an alternative to graduation options that require traditional testing and culminate in a senior capstone. The capstone also aims to create learning and assessment systems that embrace students cultural and linguistic strengths.

Utah convened an Assessment Strategic Plan Work Group to make recommendations for the Utah state assessment system. This group is comprised of key education stakeholders who were geographically and demographically diverse individuals, including representation from charter schools and schools that are using innovative educational and assessment approaches. The working group included several detailed recommendations for how assessments can support the state's personalized, competency-based learning vision and framework.

Vermont uses Education Quality Reviews to determine whether schools are successfully meeting the state's education quality standards. The goal of this review process is to provide data to schools for school improvement efforts. The first component of this review is an annual snapshot, which considers academic proficiency, high quality staffing, personalization, safe and healthy **schools and**

investment priorities. This is followed by integrated field reviews, which are in-person reviews of each school or district.