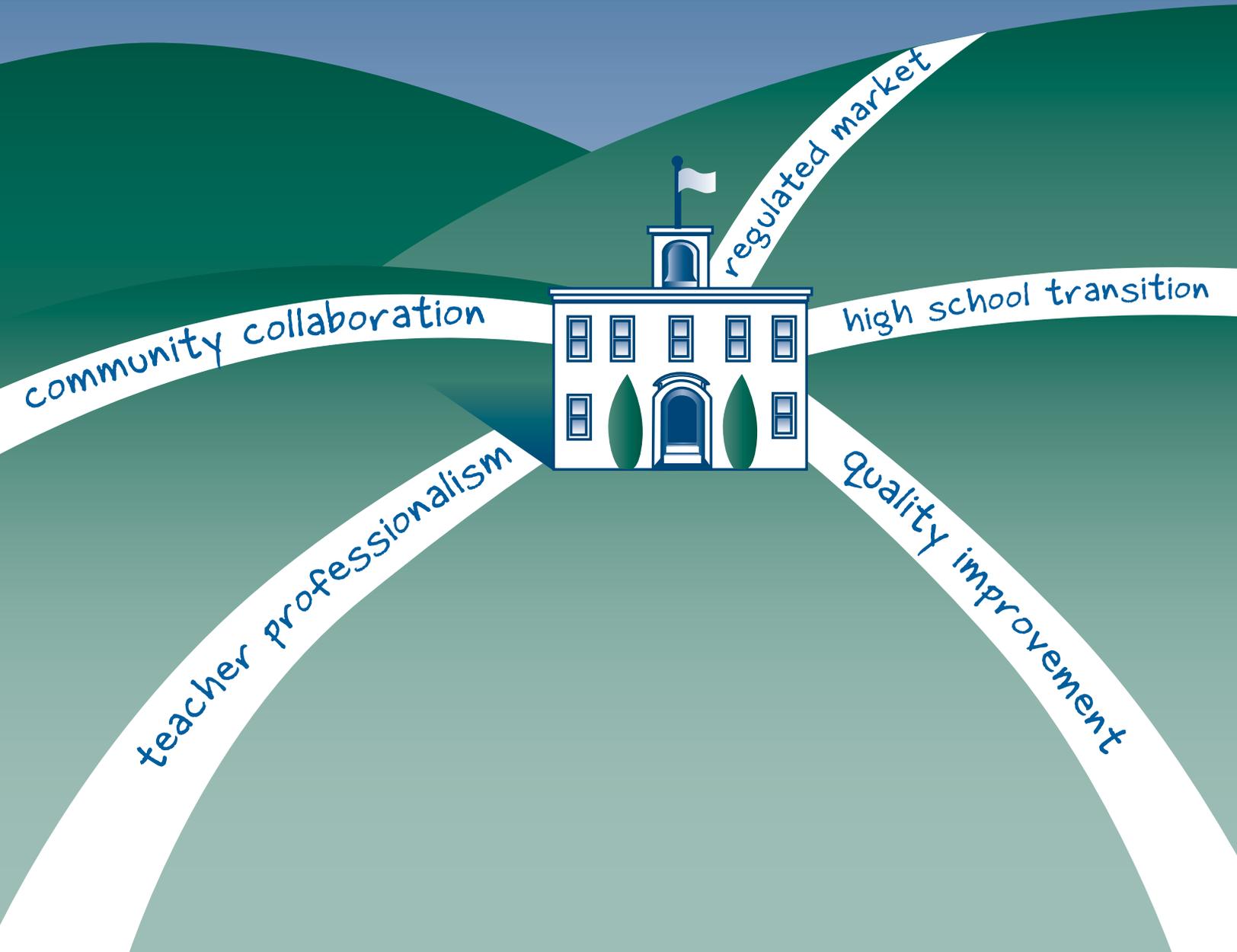


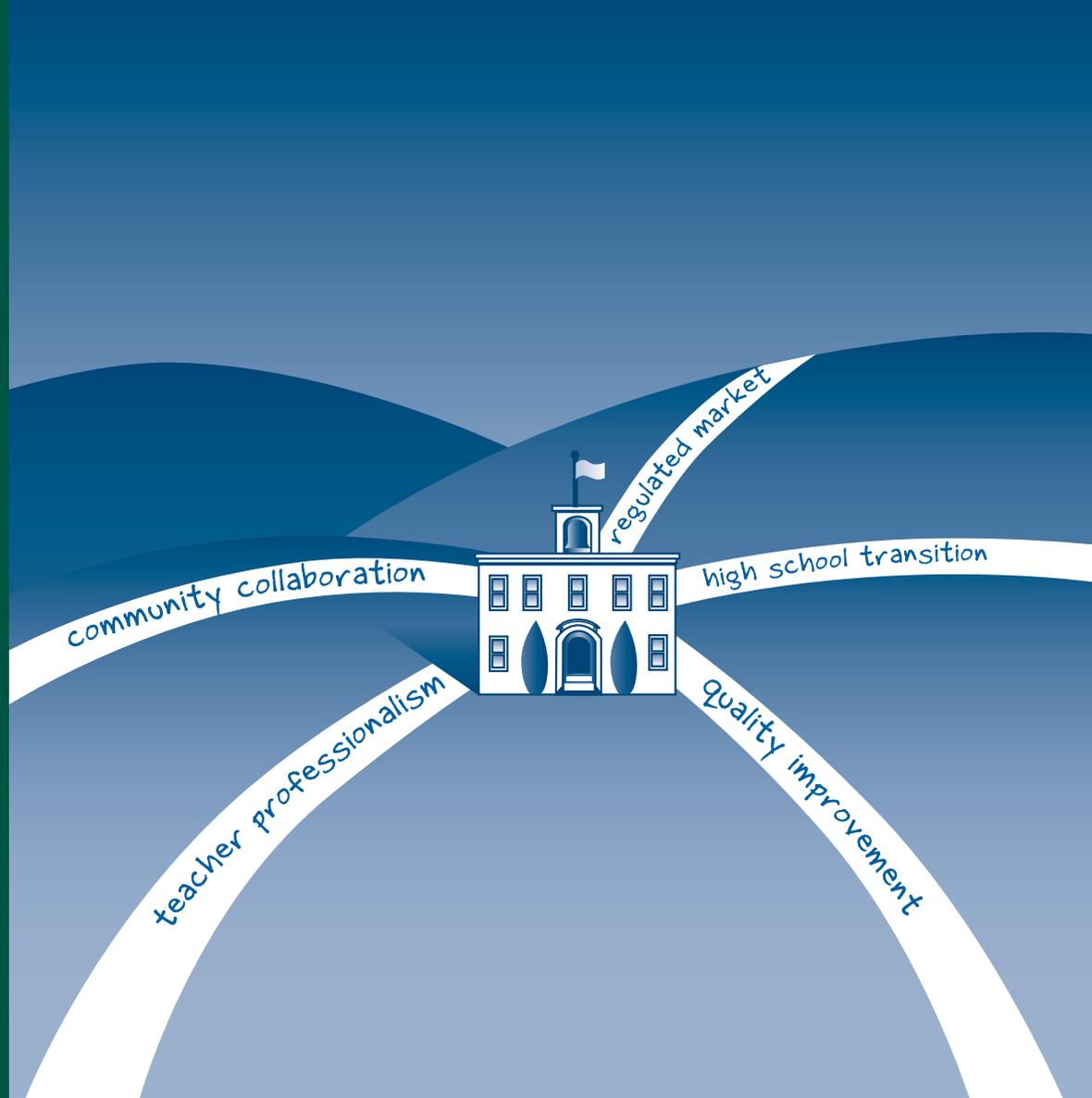


Education Commission  
of the States



# State and District Approaches to School Improvement:

*Helping All Students Meet High Academic Standards*



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# Introduction

**F**or too long, some educators have underestimated the learning potential of too many of our country's children. Assumptions were made about their ability. Expectations were high for some students but not for all. And educators haven't always had the tools they need to create high performing systems so that all children do learn.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) now requires schools to ensure that all students succeed regardless of income, race, ethnicity or disability. Helping all students meet high standards comes at a time when many districts face tight resources and demands for greater accountability from policymakers and the public. More than ever, policymakers and educators are searching for practices that will improve performance – often for large numbers of students.

This guide is designed to help. It provides a snapshot of five different approaches to system-wide improvement developed by the National Forum on Accountability with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The models are based on principles that support teaching and learning, hold more stakeholders accountable, and include all levels of the education system – state, district, school and classroom.

## The five approaches are:

- **Community Collaboration** — coordinates resources of the community to create better outcomes and life opportunities for students
- **Teacher Professionalism** — ensures a high-quality teacher in every classroom by focusing on professional teaching standards, accountability and career development
- **Quality Improvement** — uses lessons from business such as strategic planning, benchmarking and continuous improvement to improve system performance
- **High School Transition** — creates stronger connections and student advancement between high school and postsecondary education and training
- **Regulated Market** — provides competition by giving families, educators and vendors freedom in how they select and operate schools.

All of the approaches work within the guidelines of NCLB with the possible exception of the regulated market. Although NCLB allows children in continually failing schools to choose another public school or public charter school, it focuses on government oversight rather than markets as the main accountability mechanism. With possible changes in the federal legislation, however, the regulated market approach might be used in persistently low-performing cities. All approaches have promise of raising student achievement, and some may be used in combination.

For each approach, a short description is provided, followed by a section on “how this approach works.” Two more sections follow, including tips on “putting it in place” and a final section, “to learn more,” which offers resources, tools and often case studies of sites using these approaches.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) encourages policymakers, educators, superintendents, community leaders and other stakeholders to use this guide as a starting point for conversation about what communities want and expect from their schools. These approaches may be most useful when selected by school districts and supported by state education leaders.

# Community Collaboration Approach

## What It Is

The community collaboration approach coordinates the resources of community-based agencies and organizations to meet the health, social and emotional needs of children and their families. It also focuses community support and accountability for improving teaching and learning in public schools. The goal is to create better academic outcomes and life opportunities for children.

## How This Approach Works

The efforts of teachers and schools alone cannot ensure all children will meet challenging academic standards or leave school prepared to work in a changing economy. Many conditions affect students' development, schooling and success. Community leaders increasingly are working with human service providers and school leaders to develop interventions to help students. Key to this effort is increasing the public's responsibility for public education and the well-being of families and their children.

Several examples of this work are in action. One example is community schools, which provide a range of services not just to students but also to the entire community. School and district leaders work together with community agencies to coordinate services to serve the community's needs. Typically, the services are provided before, during and after school. Community schools often include family support centers that help promote parent involvement, provide training in child rearing and employment, and offer housing assistance and health care. They are organized to improve student achievement and strengthen families by removing barriers to learning and providing family supports.

Another example is an increasingly concerted effort to integrate health and human services. For some time, social service providers have recognized that families seeking assistance face multiple needs and often require the services of more than one program or agency. It is not unusual, for example, for a family member to face substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health issues that interfere with obtaining and keeping a job. Because social services – mental health, corrections, health, social services, public safety and employment – often are funded and housed in separate agencies, there is a growing need for a “single point of contact” for families. Some states and communities have begun experimenting with a more seamless delivery system of services tailored to meet families' needs and better coordinate limited state and local funding.

Some communities are taking on even larger agendas than community schools or integrating social services. Through its Education Reform Initiative, leaders in Grand Rapids, Michigan, are broadening care and developmental opportunities for children from birth to 5 years of age; integrating health and human services; supporting middle and high school reform; increasing resources for public schools through a proposed Education Renewal Zone; and planning to provide leadership training and professional development for teachers and administrators.

## Putting It in Place

Several factors must be in place for the community collaboration approach to be successful. The first is leadership that engages the public to define a “preferred future” for its community. This process involves identifying community conditions, gathering community perspectives and mapping community assets. A community's preferred future defines



what the “end results” will be for the community. Starting with the “ends” – or outcomes – allows the community to work backwards to identify the “means” to achieve the outcomes.

This approach requires building a wide circle of consensus for a community agenda. Mapping community assets such as public schools, health care and employment help identify which partners should be invited to the table. The circle of partners then can be expanded to create a local governance group that oversees the community initiative. The governance group includes members with strong community leadership, political savvy, commitment to community improvement and a strong relationship with the school district. Membership often includes representatives from the school district, foundations, teachers’ unions, mayor’s office, social service agencies, community-based organizations, higher education, faith-based institutions, major businesses, parent groups and state agencies. The governance group does the following:

- **Identifies the strategies that will help the community reach its preferred future.** Strategies both leverage the assets of the community and address its challenges.
- **Identifies the indicators that will measure progress toward each strategy.**
- **Creates an action plan that specifies how the community will implement each strategy.** The action plan is based on promising practices. Partners agree upon their roles, and each participating organization develops its own organizational performance measures to assess its contribution to the larger community indicators.
- **Develops a financial plan to fund the action plans.** This work starts by identifying existing dollars, which provide a funding base. The group also identifies new funding sources to support their work.
- **Presents an annual report on progress on the community’s indicators.** Performance measures for each partner organization are reviewed and adjustments are made.

Data-collection systems are developed to house the performance measures of participating agencies or organizations. Indicators then are used to assess and report how well the community effort is improving the outcomes, a process referred to as “results accountability.” Decisions, including the allocation of resources, are based on results. Agencies that meet or exceed their performance measures are provided additional resources to create even more results.

## To Learn More

To learn more about the **next-generation community involvement model**, visit the Education Commission of the States Web site at [www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels](http://www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels).

To learn more about *Building Capacity for Local Decisionmaking*, go to the Center for Social Policy’s six learning guides at [www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org).

To learn more about results accountability, see the *Results and Performance Accountability Implementation Guide* at [www.raguide.org](http://www.raguide.org).

For more information on the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative, visit <http://www.greri.org/>.

# Teacher Professionalism Approach

## What It Is

The teacher professionalism approach is designed to ensure a high-quality teacher in every classroom by focusing on student achievement, professional teaching standards, and increased skills and responsibility through career development and compensation.

## How This Approach Works

Research shows that effective teachers are instrumental in helping students learn and meet challenging standards. Given the demands placed on teachers in today's classrooms, the profession requires ongoing training to increase knowledge and build new skills. Teachers must customize instruction for each student, use data to diagnose learning needs, work collaboratively with other teachers and hold one another accountable for meeting professional standards.

Recent reforms in the teaching profession include aligning standards for preservice preparation to K-12 academic standards, developing state licensing standards and creating standards for advanced teacher licensure. The teacher professionalism approach adds a next step – creating a career-development system that supports a teacher moving through professional stages, starting as a teacher candidate and finishing his or her career as a master or board-certified teacher. The career development system develops teachers' instructional skills and deepens content knowledge by creating high-quality standards, benchmarks and assessments at different stages of a teacher's career.

Key components of the teacher professionalism approach include the following:

- **Support for beginning teachers**, including initial licensure, and a mentoring and induction program during the first years of teaching.
- **Career growth and development opportunities** such as career licensure, professional development, greater responsibilities and ongoing teacher evaluations.
- **A tiered licensure and compensation system** that provides increasing leadership responsibilities and compensation as teachers move from initial license to career license to master teacher.

## Putting It in Place

Several factors must be in place for the teacher professionalism approach to be successful. These include academic standards for students, professional standards for teachers and a performance-based licensing system.

To begin with, states and districts must develop standards and assessments of student learning. While state policymakers set the framework, districts work to align curriculum to the standards and provide resources for students to meet the standards. Teachers are accountable for possessing the content knowledge and instructional strategies to help students excel.

Beginning teachers also must meet their state's requirements for initial licensure to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to help all students meet standards. Teacher preparation institutions also are held accountable to the professional standards board and/or state board of education for preparing teacher and administrator candidates. Teachers' associations are actively involved in the accrediting role and the development of preservice standards.



Also critical to this strategy is the development of a tiered, performance-based licensing system. This system encompasses preservice preparation, testing requirements, an internship or a provisional licensing period. A state's professional standards board develops entry requirements for educators and for preparation programs. The state education agency implements the licensing process.

Districts play an important role by developing and managing a differentiated staffing and compensation system for school staff. This system should result in greater teacher learning, more consistent teacher quality and accountability for student learning, especially in hard-to-staff schools.

Together, districts and schools evaluate teacher and school leader performance against accepted standards of professional practice and goals set for students, teachers and school leaders. Principals conduct evaluations and work with teachers to improve practice. The district provides professional development and other resources to the school to support improvements in teaching and learning.

Schools then are evaluated on student results on state and local assessments, as well as other measures. Principals hold individual teachers accountable for student gains in achievement. The community also is expected to support and weigh in on school improvement efforts.

Another key component of this approach is providing teachers with high-quality opportunities for continued professional growth. These opportunities are made available through quality standards for professional development, advanced professional recognition (such as certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards), and state standards for re-licensure.

For this strategy to be effective, state and local education leaders, policymakers, teachers and the community must be involved in developing standards and assessments for teacher preparation, teacher licensing and teaching performance. The approach also requires adequate resources and the support of teacher unions. Holding teachers accountable in some way for student academic gains also will raise tensions and policy questions that education leaders and policymakers must be prepared to address.

## To Learn More

To learn more about the **next-generation teacher professionalism accountability model**, go to the Education Commission of the States Web site at [www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels](http://www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels).

The Teaching Commission has a recent report on improving teaching quality called *Teaching At Risk: A Call to Action* at [www.theteachingcommission.org](http://www.theteachingcommission.org).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future report, *What Matters Most: Teaching and America's Future*, is at [www.glefi.org/php/resources.php?id=Item\\_202348](http://www.glefi.org/php/resources.php?id=Item_202348).

# Quality Improvement Approach



## What It Is

**B**ased on lessons from business, the quality improvement approach uses strategic planning, performance assessments, process improvement and other tools to create high-performing education systems.

## How This Approach Works

This approach is grounded in the adage that if you improve processes that create a product, you will improve the product. So if educational processes are improved, then one product – student achievement – will improve. The primary focus is on improving teaching and learning. But other areas, such as planning, information systems, resource allocation, maintenance, human resources and transportation, also can be strengthened by analyzing them as processes that can benefit from continuous improvement.

Quality improvement is based on seven “quality principles” adapted for K-12 education. Those principles include:

- **Education quality is defined in terms of student outcomes.** State education policy-makers set academic and performance standards for school districts. Districts leaders collect data from stakeholders – parents, business and community leaders, and others – to determine their desires for student outcomes. Plans, including goals and measures, are developed to attain student outcomes.
- **The focus is on improving the processes of teaching, learning and student assessment.** Instruction becomes the primary focus of schools and districts. Curriculum is aligned to standards, and instruction is designed to help students meet standards. Assessments measure student progress – and give teachers feedback on how individual students are doing. This feedback allows teachers to make adjustments to meet the learning needs of all students.
- **There is a steady progression of student learning and results.** School curricula are organized so each learner’s skills, knowledge and ability to conceptualize increase over time. Students know their test results and take responsibility for their learning. They understand how their assignments fit together and the reasons for completing them.
- **Educators work collaboratively to improve teaching, learning and assessments.** Teachers meet in grade-level teams or teams across grade levels to align curriculum and instruction. Non-instructional staff work to make other school and district processes such as transportation, maintenance and human resources more efficient, freeing teachers and other resources to focus on student instruction.
- **Decisions are based on student performance results.** Student performance data inform the teaching and learning process. At the school level, data help teams develop a common view of the current situation, determine instructional changes, evaluate their effectiveness and assess progress toward goals. At the district level, trend data provide information on the current and future demographics of the district, the effectiveness of schools and the performance of different groups of students across schools.

- **Educators learn from best practices.** Called “**benchmarking**,” this practice allows educators to learn from “**the best**” in education. Some educators also will take practices from other settings, such as business or health care, and adapt them.
- **District leaders create a quality-oriented and collaborative culture.** District leaders hold themselves accountable for implementing a strategic planning process that produces a shared vision based on community input, and develop goals and measures that reflect the community’s expectations for student learning. Policymaking and resource allocation must support districtwide realization of the vision.

In short, leaders in high-performing organizations “connect the dots.” They use the principles above to create a learning system.

## Putting It in Place

The teaching and learning interaction between students and teachers occurs within a larger education system. For example, state education leaders set the policy context, allocate resources and provide assistance for district leaders. School boards and district administrators, adding their own policies and quality improvement strategies, help schools become learning organizations. When schools are learning organizations, the focus is on long-term improvement of learning – by teachers and students. Each level of the system must know and address key stakeholder expectations; translate these expectations into strategic plans and processes; develop specific goals and measures; allocate specific resources focused on meeting their plans; and continually evaluate, share and improve results. Accountability mechanisms might include loss of school accreditation for failing to improve performance.

Defining stakeholder expectations and quality systems through academic standards, assessments and criteria is just the first step, though. Support is needed at all levels of the system to implement quality principles and processes to create a high-performance education system that raises student achievement.

## To Learn More

To learn more about the **next-generation quality improvement model**, visit the Education Commission of the States Web site at [www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels](http://www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels).

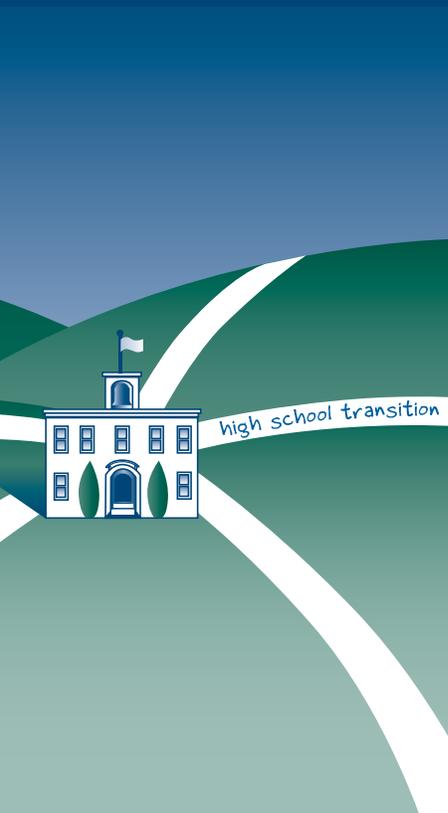
For a case study on how a rural Alaskan school used quality processes to improve student achievement, go to *Guide to Reinventing Schools*, available from the Chugach School District in Alaska at [www.chugachschoools.com](http://www.chugachschoools.com).

For examples of how state leaders have used the Baldrige Education Criteria, see *Dancing with the Bear: Real Life Adventures in Transforming Education* at [www.baldrigeineducation.com](http://www.baldrigeineducation.com).

For an example of quality review criteria, see North Central Association’s School District and Systems Accreditation at [www.ncacasi.org](http://www.ncacasi.org).

For an example of an effective continuous improvement model, see Maryland’s school improvement process at <http://www.mdk12.org/>.

# High School Transition Approach



## What It Is

To help students graduate from high school and enter postsecondary education or training, the high school transition approach creates stronger connections between the two levels by aligning standards, assessments, accountability and admissions, and by encouraging high school students to take college courses.

## How It Works

More and more jobs in today's economy require post-high school-level skills, and income rises with college experience. Urgency exists to support students in making the transition from high school to college. Currently, there are large inequalities in terms of who attends and who graduates from college. Approximately 90% of students say they intend to go to college after high school, and 70% actually begin college – yet just 53% graduate from a four-year college within six years.

Barriers undermine students' aspirations. High school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college entrance and placement requirements. Coursework between high school and college is not connected, and students often are assigned to remedial classes in colleges to make up learning gaps. Students also face other challenges such as navigating the financial aid process; not taking the right high school courses at the right time (e.g., algebra by 8th grade); and not having support from parents, teachers or counselors during the college application and testing process.

To create a smooth transition from high school to postsecondary education, significant efforts in two policy and practice areas are crucial. First, a logical continuum of academic standards and assessments spanning all levels of the education system – elementary, secondary and postsecondary – must be put in place to help students more easily move from one level to the next. Second, stronger connections between the K-12 and postsecondary systems must be made in the areas of curriculum, assessment, data collection, financial aid and others to increase students' participation in and readiness for postsecondary education. Creating these connections is particularly important for economically disadvantaged and minority students.

## Putting It in Place

The primary steps for facilitating students' graduation from high school and entrance into postsecondary institutions include the following:

- **Developing, articulating and implementing standards and assessments that connect the K-12 and postsecondary education systems.** This could mean that high school graduation requirements also serve as college entrance admissions.
- **Ensuring students enter high school with course-taking plans that they know will give them access to postsecondary education.** All students should have access to a college preparation curriculum.
- **Ensuring all students have multiple pathways to college.** This can include dual enrollment options, finishing high school early or an "early-college" option where students finish high school with an associate's degree.

- **Investing in coordinated testing, data and feedback systems from kindergarten through postsecondary education.** Feedback on student success – especially from colleges to high schools – can provide information needed to improve the process. Aligning student progress on state standards to college admission requirements will reduce the need for remediation when students arrive in college.
- **Creating education funding mechanisms that bridge K-12 and postsecondary education funding.** Financing for K-12 and postsecondary education needs to be adequate, enable successful transitions, promote access and provide incentives for both performance and collaboration.
- **Developing a K-16 accountability system focusing on the percentage of high school students who meet academic standards, course-taking rates, high school matriculation rates, and dropout and graduation rates; and the completion and graduation rates of postsecondary students.** A K-16 governing body would set targets for these measures, analyze progress and suggest interventions as needed.
- **Developing common transfer procedures from high schools to community colleges and from community colleges to universities.**
- **Aligning incentives to promote collaboration among high school and postsecondary education faculty.** College faculty in particular have few incentives for working collaboratively with high schools to coordinate curriculum, help teachers keep up to date and help students move from high school to postsecondary education.

In some of these areas, there is a solid knowledge base on which to build. Others will require more study and research to make operational, including how to hold postsecondary institutions more accountable for student retention and completion; and how to design incentives that will improve admission, enrollment and placement practices.

## To Learn More

To learn more about the **next-generation K-16 accountability model**, visit the Education Commission of the States Web site at [www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels](http://www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels).

For a recent report card on state higher education systems, see the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's *Measuring Up 2004: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education* at <http://measuringup.highereducation.org>.

The American Diploma Project has developed English and mathematics benchmarks that high school graduates should have, along with an action agenda. These are described in *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*, which is available at <http://www.achieve.org/achieve.nsf/AmericanDiplomaProject?openform>.

To learn more about how to make the senior year more meaningful, see the National Commission on the High School Senior Year report, *The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way* at <http://www.woodrow.org/CommissionOnTheSeniorYear/>.

To learn more how states and regions develop more aligned and equitable policies that help students prepare for and succeed in some form of postsecondary education, see the Bridge Project's report, *Betraying the College Dream*, at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/>.

# Regulated Market Approach

## What It Is

The regulated market approach suggests schools will improve through competition by giving families, educators and vendors more freedom in how they select and operate schools. Some regulations are put in place to ensure school quality and student access and safety.

## How It Works

The regulated market approach assumes that competition among schools will result in better instruction for students and better working environments for teachers. Families decide where to send their children to school, and schools have more leeway to design programs, curriculum and other school activities that meet students' needs. Supporters of this approach say it is more responsive and will result in higher-quality schools, better student results and greater public satisfaction.

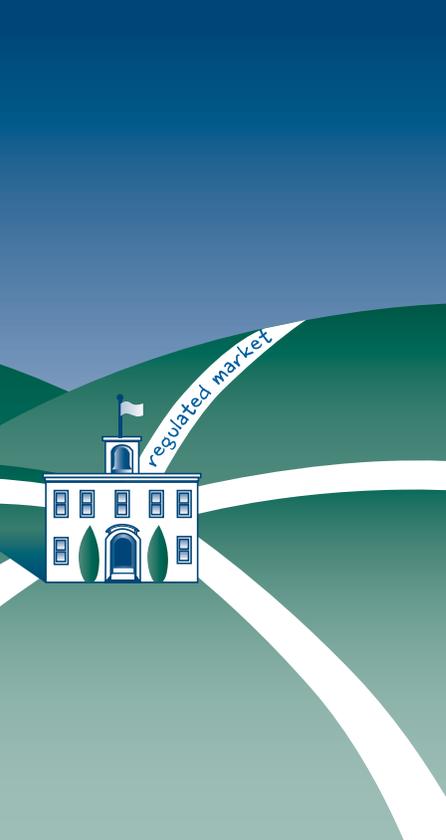
The regulated market approach focuses on four principles, which advocates view as critical to helping all students achieve high standards:

- **Defined performance incentives for schools**, making it clear all adults have a stake in the school's success in educating students.
- **Freedom to make decisions**, allowing staff to use time and money in ways they believe increase student learning.
- **Investments in school staff**, encouraging schools to invest in effective teaching methods, materials, and staff training and recruitment.
- **Parental choice**, giving parents the freedom to enroll their children in schools they believe will best meet the children's needs and leave schools that no longer serve their children well.

While a pure market strategy argues for competition without regulation, a regulated market strategy would put a few rules and safeguards in place to protect children and parents, ensure equity for the disabled and monitor school management. For example, the government would guarantee all schools operate in safe buildings, conduct their admissions and other procedures without prejudice, and produce a level of student literacy sufficient to help students meet standards and other school goals. Regulations are broad enough to let the market function competitively, yet constrained just enough to provide important safeguards.

Under a regulated market approach, state agencies monitor districts to ensure they have a strong supply of diverse, high-quality schools that parents and students may choose among. States might offer start-up funds for schools in communities experiencing low student interest or to ensure there is adequate competition. For the regulated market strategy to work, there must be a way to create new alternatives, to ensure families have multiple options and to see that all schools constantly face new competition.

Schools where students meet state academic standards would be licensed and accredited. Schools that fail to teach certain core skills would not receive public funds. While all schools would be required to meet basic standards, "aspirational standards" could be set to spark greater competition among schools. Aspirational standards might include schools where a high number of students take Advanced Placement courses or enroll in



advanced programs such as the International Baccalaureate. Families also would understand that schools with many students in advanced programs would offer expanded learning opportunities for their children.

Accountability comes with the support of schools that meet parent and student needs. Schools that provide the instruction – and produce the outcomes – that parents and students want in a cost-effective manner will succeed. Those that don't will fail to attract students and lose their clientele and licensure.

## Putting It in Place

The regulated market strategy is still theoretical, and no school district yet has attempted to implement it. A reasonable strategy, however, would focus on a pilot project and an evaluation to assess the feasibility, benefits and costs of the pilots and, if results are successful, their expansion.

The most likely location for a pilot project is a big-city school district whose low performance makes it subject to state takeover. Cities have a large enough population and the numbers of schools needed to create an educational market. “Failing” urban districts also are ripe for novel interventions. Under these conditions, for example, the pilot could become a state strategy for reconstituting failing districts. All schools would be converted to independent schools such as charters and/or for-profit, contract schools.

To implement the regulated market approach, state officials should put in place four policies:

- **Establish a reconstitution authority to oversee the conversion of the pilot district.**
- **Create waivers to provide pilot districts with operational flexibility.** To encourage an adequate supply response, such as new schools forming or existing schools enlarging, waivers should be long term, perhaps 10 years.
- **Develop a finance formula specific to the pilot district that allocates the bulk of state and local revenues earmarked for the district through a per-pupil subsidy that families assign to schools their children attend.**
- **Design a governance mechanism to license, oversee and regulate the pilot market.** This mechanism would supersede the authority of the local education agency.

Policymakers should take caution with this approach. For it to succeed, all the design elements and supportive policies must be present early in its implementation. The approach, however, does introduce market forces and competition into school districts that are anticipated to increase the quality and diversity of schools. The regulated market approach may be effective in persistently failing school districts that have enough schools to support diverse schools, competition and adequate transportation.

## To Learn More

To learn more about the **next-generation regulated market model**, visit the Education Commission of the States Web site at [www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels](http://www.ecs.org/accountability--next-generationmodels).

For information on a closely related issue, charter school districts, go to *The Nuts and Bolts of Charter Districts* at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/44/95/4495.htm>.

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