

Policy Solutions That Foster Competency-Based Learning

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The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic provide [opportunities for states](#) to design educational systems that enable continuity of learning and meet each student's needs. Offering flexible learning options may improve students' college and career readiness in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. States are newly recognizing and considering the urgency of systemic shifts that will support students to continue learning in a world where once-certain structures and conditions are no longer an option. Some of these include:

- [Colorado's graduation requirements](#), which now allow for credit based on work- or project-based capstones or alternative learning projects.
- [Kansas' guidance for reopening schools](#), which includes a shift from reliance on seat time to flexible, competency-based approaches that focus on mastery of knowledge and skills.
- [Washington state board of education's guidance](#), which supports school districts to offer mastery-based credits.

As states consider new learning environments, system redesign will require revisiting basic and core concepts of the traditional education system — including how to define high-quality instruction and how to measure success. States can reconsider the intentions and impacts of existing systems and can use this moment to replace systems that do not support the needs of every learner with resilient and equitable education systems that provide each student with a personalized pathway to success regardless of future uncertainties, ability, income, language, race, ethnicity or location.

EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS THROUGH PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS

This Policy Brief is one of six dedicated to various facets of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, now complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the populations already underserved in our nation's education system. The series — which builds upon "[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#)" — provides actionable steps and examples for state policymakers to consider as they address the transition from high school to college and the workforce. The other Policy Briefs in the series are:

- "[Expanding High-Quality Work-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Boosting FAFSA Completion to Increase Student Success](#)"
- "[Prioritizing Equity in Dual Enrollment](#)"
- "[Modernizing Math Pathways to Support Student Transitions](#)"
- "[Establishing a State-Level Postsecondary Advising Network](#)"

A personalized, competency-based learning system can support learning in the widespread virtual and hybrid environments to which many schools must now adjust. The structure of this type of system is ideal for remedying the deepened inequities that result from interrupted learning time and the loss of many social safety nets when schools closed. Further, a personalized, competency-based system operates from the belief that the system should be designed to recognize and support the development of the talent and skills of each child.

With the number of states, districts and schools implementing elements of personalized, competency-based learning on the rise, evidence is emerging to show its potential

for improving the transition from high school to postsecondary and supporting students who are behind to catch up with their peers. Studies demonstrate that students — including students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities and students of color — who experience elements of personalized, competency-based learning generally achieve better outcomes and growth. Consider the following studies that show:

- Greater likelihood of [catching up](#) to peers for students who are academically behind.
- [Greater academic gains](#) for students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and for students with disabilities.
- [Higher levels of engagement](#).

7 Elements for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

Learner Agency: Students daily make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.

Timely, Actionable Assessments: Assessment is a meaningful, positive and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant and actionable evidence.

Customized Learner Supports: Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

Progression Upon Mastery: Students progress based on evidence of mastery or competency, not seat time.

Varied Pathways and Pacing: Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.

Strategies and Systems Ensure Equity: Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure and pedagogy of schools and education systems.

Rigorous Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Targets: Rigorous, common expectations for learning are explicit, transparent, measurable and transferable.

- [Higher graduation rates](#) and [postsecondary enrollment rates](#), particularly among [students of color](#).
- [Increased readiness for college and career](#).

Although many schools and districts are leveraging state flexibility or waivers to implement personalized, competency-based learning practices, they continue to confront policy barriers to full-scale implementation. As a result, some [states](#) have chosen to overhaul state policies to expand availability to high-quality personalized, competency-

based learning environments. While resources exist to help states explore the [full range of policies](#) that should be considered to achieve a fully personalized, competency-based system. This Policy Brief offers three high-impact policy solutions to help states design new learning environments that support students in their transition from high school to postsecondary: creating a profile of a graduate; establishing statewide competencies; and credentialing anytime, anywhere learning.

Profile of a Graduate

An essential step to ensure a smooth transition from K-12 to postsecondary education is to set a clear vision and expectations for what high school graduates know and can do. Many states have approached this work by collaborating with a variety of stakeholders — including pre-K and K-12 educators, postsecondary providers, employers, communities, families and students — to create a profile of a graduate. This co-development process results in a framework of the essential knowledge, skills and social and emotional competencies that will ensure graduates' success in postsecondary education, career and life.

This is especially critical in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that has left many students with high school transcripts that do not convey to postsecondary institutions the full range of knowledge and skills they have developed both inside and outside of the traditional academic setting. A profile of a graduate provides a consistent definition of success across the state, which ensures transcripts convey multiple kinds of student outcomes beyond academic grades and credits earned.

The creation of a K-12 vision, established through an inclusive process that engages a variety of stakeholders and postsecondary institutions, ensures students have the opportunity to learn in a system where the expectations are clear and aligned to postsecondary expectations. This vision becomes the foundation of a personalized, competency-based system, providing transparency and alignment that enable students to learn in different places and at different paces with the assurance and supports to achieve the same end goal of graduation. A unifying state vision supports consistency and continuity of learning across the state regardless of student mobility or geography.

Creation of a profile of a graduate also ensures that diverse stakeholders have a say in what success looks like for the students in their state and provides a model for communities to define success at the local level for their students. The pandemic has brought to light the fact that a quality education extends beyond the achievement of academic standards, and surveys show that students' [social and emotional well-being has decreased](#) with

the shift to completely virtual schooling. Along with academic standards, states can consider prioritizing essential skills, such as [self-direction](#), that enable students to be successful in a variety of settings. A state's profile of a graduate can be broad enough to include the educational hopes and values of students from different racial, ethnic, ability and socioeconomic backgrounds.

OBSTACLES

- The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to establish long-term proficiency goals for their accountability systems based on academic achievement, growth, graduation rates and English-language proficiency. This emphasis has encouraged states to use narrow definitions of college and career readiness.
- ESSA also gives states the opportunity to adopt a fifth accountability indicator for student success. Most states selected a [measure of college and career readiness](#) defined by a menu of advanced coursework opportunities or experiences such as internships and work-based learning. While diverse pathway opportunities are essential to student success, states are limited in how much weight they can attach to the indicator in their accountability systems. Further, states often include a long list of opportunities — many of which are tied to seat-time policies — that do not ensure students graduate with the skills and dispositions to ensure a smooth, successful transition to higher education

POLICY ACTIONS

- Engage with a diverse set of stakeholders to create a vision for student success that ensures learning is personalized, students

can advance upon mastery and students are empowered to take ownership of their learning. The vision should also include the knowledge, skills and social and emotional competencies that students need for success in postsecondary and career.

- Align programs, resources, roles and initiatives to the profile of a graduate to ensure that every student can benefit from high-quality learning environments that align to the state's vision for success.

STATE EXAMPLE



South Carolina created a profile of a graduate and aligned all education initiatives in the state to that profile. The [Profile of the South Carolina Graduate](#) emerged from a process led by the state superintendent's roundtable, part of the South Carolina Association of School Administrators. The development of the profile included buy-in from the business community. This profile — adopted by the state board of education, department of education, education oversight committee, chamber of commerce and school boards association — includes the knowledge, skills and characteristics that all South Carolina graduates should be able to demonstrate. Since the creation of the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate, many districts are implementing this vision. The South Carolina Department of Education has created an Office of Personalized Learning to support implementation and the state Legislature has codified the state's vision for education.

Statewide Competencies

Emerging from the knowledge, skills and characteristics that states prioritize in a profile of a graduate, aligned statewide competencies spanning pre-K through postsecondary provide clear expectations of what students should learn by the time they graduate from high school. Competencies are transferable skills that encompass subject-area knowledge, technical skills, and social and emotional attributes that students should master to be prepared for college and career. By aligning statewide competencies through postsecondary, high school graduates are prepared to transition to postsecondary education without remediation.

The development of competencies provides an opportunity for states to address instructional time lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. By clearly defining grade- and subject-level competencies, course credit can be awarded when students have mastered the competencies rather than when students have spent a certain amount of time in the class. By defining success through competencies, diverse pathways become viable options for supporting students in gaining mastery of essential competencies according to their interests, strengths and goals — while also ensuring that postsecondary readiness is achieved.

Creating transparent competencies enables a variety of educational providers to support students with content and resources aligned to their levels. As school closures resulting from the pandemic have required families to actively participate in their children’s learning, the need to clearly define the knowledge, skills and characteristics that students should learn at each level has become even more necessary.


OBSTACLES

- The agrarian calendar’s impact on schooling limits students to age-based classrooms or courses for a full semester or year. Furthermore, grade leveling limits the flexibility that students need to learn at different paces.
- Policies that define required course sequences limit students to one track until graduation without flexibility to meet competencies in ways that match their strengths, interests and goals. Additionally, graduation requirements around the number of credits for each subject can be at odds with pathways in which students can demonstrate mastery in different ways.

POLICY ACTIONS

- Create a set of competencies that align to the state’s profile of a graduate and encompass the full range of knowledge, skills and dispositions that students need in order to be prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.
- Leverage the state’s competencies to create grade bands and competency-based pathways that enable students to advance or receive remedial supports as needed while progressing toward college and career readiness. Explore improvements to the state’s graduation requirements, accountability and reporting policies to ensure alignment.

STATE EXAMPLE

 Beginning with **Utah**’s version of a profile of a graduate, the [Utah Talent MAP](#), the state drafted a set of

[statewide competencies](#). The Utah Talent MAP includes 13 ideal characteristics of graduates that provide the framework for development of competencies: academic mastery; wellness; civic, financial and economic literacy; digital literacy; communication; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and innovation; collaboration and teamwork; honesty, integrity

and responsibility; hard work and resilience; life-long learning and professional growth; service; and respect. The competencies are grouped into grade bands: pre-K, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12 and postsecondary. The [P-20 competencies](#) were designed with the input of more than 100 stakeholders and educators.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning

Arguably one of the most powerful elements of a personalized, competency-based system is anytime, anywhere learning — the necessary replacement for a system based on seat time. Rather than awarding credit based on hours, credit can be awarded based on students' demonstration of mastery of competencies. This involves identifying new ways to assess and credential learning to ensure that students have expanded opportunities to overcome gaps in learning. Systems that emphasize anytime, anywhere learning encourage students to earn credit through capstones, projects, portfolios, community partnerships or other demonstrations of mastery.

To address recent disruptions to traditional, classroom-based learning, anytime, anywhere learning approaches ensure that students continue to demonstrate progress and learning even without time in the classroom. States can consider how to address immediate challenges around awarding credit and ensuring college readiness, while also exploring how to ensure students can overcome the learning gaps created by such barriers as technology challenges, home responsibilities, access to nutrition, illness, stress and depression, among others. Combining anytime, anywhere learning

policies with personalized, competency-based pathways enables students to receive credit for learning that occurs outside the classroom. Some postsecondary institutions have already begun to explore permitting [project- or portfolio-based demonstrations of college readiness](#), instead of SAT and ACT scores, to meet college admissions requirements. The shift away from seat time provides students with the necessary flexibility to smoothly transition into postsecondary education despite learning interruptions caused by school closures.


OBSTACLES

- Seat-time and agrarian-calendar requirements limit students' ability to demonstrate mastery and earn credit outside the traditional classroom setting and hinder districts' ability to pursue flexible models without risking funding based on per-pupil funding policies.
- For students graduating during the COVID-19 pandemic, graduation requirements based on seat-time or exams led to an inability to assess students' readiness for postsecondary education.


POLICY ACTIONS

- Set or encourage graduation requirements allowing the development of portfolios and capstones rather than end-of-course or college entrance exams so students have rich resources to use in the college admissions process.
- Explore funding approaches that enable students in personalized, competency-based environments to count as full-time equivalents to ensure sufficient funding.

STATE EXAMPLES

 In **Colorado**, local school boards may establish graduation requirements by selecting from a full menu of options

available from the Colorado Department of Education. Local boards can choose as many options as they would like including assessments such as Advanced Placement, concurrent enrollment, International Baccalaureate, industry certificate, district capstone, or a collaboratively developed, standards-based performance assessment.

 **Kentucky** provided all school districts with waivers allowing nontraditional instructional programs. These waivers allow schools to have an unlimited number of nontraditional instruction days to enable virtual and distance learning throughout the year. They also ensure that funding is not linked to in-person attendance.

Final Thoughts

While the three examples discussed above are central to advancing personalized, competency-based learning and improving the transition from K-12 to postsecondary education, they are first steps toward realignment of the state's education system to ensure that every student is supported and ready for postsecondary. Assessment policies will likely need to shift to enable students to demonstrate mastery when ready. The removal of seat-time policies will probably require substantive changes to the state's funding systems. And the development of statewide competencies and profiles of a graduate will require a

realignment of accountability and reporting systems. Policymakers can explore more in KnowledgeWorks' [State Policy Framework for Personalized Learning](#), which details 12 policy considerations for states on a journey toward personalized, competency-based learning.

Although small steps can begin to address the inequities that exist in the transition to postsecondary education — inequities that have deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic — a systemic approach is needed to ensure that states have resilient education systems that can withstand interruptions and that are designed to meet the needs of each student.

About the Author



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