

2024 Policy White Paper: *A student-centered approach to education*

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, states are moving to systems of education that increasingly are student-centered, equitable, and competency-based. They are doing so because they understand that the legacy model for educating our young people is not working. While graduation rates have increased, other markers of progress have not. Standardized test scores remain relatively flat. Achievement and opportunity gaps persist despite decades of increased funding and abundant strategies to reduce them. Chronic absenteeism is near an all-time high.

The reality is that too many students do not find school to be interesting, engaging, or relevant for their futures. This is particularly true for kids of color and other marginalized student populations. Rather than continuing to tinker around the edges, we can advance real change! Here's how...

MAKE EDUCATION STUDENT-CENTERED

A. Promote competency-based education (CBE).

Most states are turning to a [competency-based approach](#) to education,¹ whereby *learning is the constant* and *time is the variable*, rather than vice versa (as most schools operate today). Only when students demonstrate one competency do they move on to the next. Some may take longer and need more support, but they are guaranteed success if they persist. In California, Lindsay USD serves as a national model. A few other LEAs also are making advances, but there are neither state incentives nor guidance for LEAs to do so.

Policy implications: By creating innovation zones,² California could create flexibility and freedom from state policies and regulations for districts exploring CBE and learning lessons that would be of benefit to LEAs across the state.

B. Normalize student-centered experiential learning.

Many teachers, schools, and districts have experimented with project-based learning, service learning, civic learning, work-based learning, and other forms of instruction that (by design) engage students in solving real-world problems that give them meaning and purpose. Often these schools and districts engage students by giving them a *voice* in what they learn, a *choice* in how they learn and demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and a sense of *agency* to take

¹ See this [map](#) from the Aurora Institute, showing that CA is among the 17 “emerging” states, while 16 states are “developing” and 17 are “advancing”. See also these [examples](#) in states across the country.

² For more, see Aurora Institute’s issue brief, [Innovation Zones: Policy Flexibility to Reimagine and Modernize K-12 Education Post-COVID-19](#) (2021)

ownership of their learning journey. Perhaps most important, they enable students to center their own identities, cultures, and languages so that they find value, purpose, and relevance in their schooling. Despite the obvious benefits of these learning strategies, which often are preferred by students, families, and educators alike, they are far from the norm.

Policy implications: Building teacher capacity to shift pedagogical approaches is a heavy lift. State investment is necessary to advance this imperative. State grants³ also should encourage or require LEAs to incorporate student-centered experiential learning to access funds.

C. Center a whole child vision.

Many research reports and policy papers⁴ recommend that states and/or school districts create a whole child vision, often referred to as a “Graduate Profile” or a “Portrait of a Graduate” to more holistically and equitably define student success. To date, 17 states have done so;⁵ California has not. Lacking a statewide vision, dozens of CA school districts have convened their community members to create their own Graduate Profile and are working to move “from poster to practice” — i.e., fully operationalize it as a promise to its students and families. Across the state, district’s Graduate Profiles include competencies like critical thinking, self-direction, communication, collaboration, innovation, global and civic engagement, and more.⁶ To view dozens of actual profiles from CA and beyond, see this [interactive map](#).

Policy implications: In California, there are no state incentives – only hindrances and roadblocks – for LEAs to pursue this path. To support a whole child vision, California could create an optional statewide Graduate Profile for use by LEAs that have not, or choose not to engage their community members to create one themselves.

D. Shift from measuring knowledge to assessing durable skills.⁷

As educators and society, we’ve been complicit – valuing what we measure, rather than measuring what we value. The dozens of Graduate Profiles clearly articulate the competencies that communities value for their young people. But, our state’s accountability measures, the media, and society at large tend to oversimplify the intended outcomes of our education system, oft-times limiting signs of growth or failure to scores on standardized tests. Test scores, while they serve a valuable function of assessing progress on key measures, represent a very blunt instrument – a snapshot at a point in time on a no/low-stakes test for students, and focus narrowly on just a couple of data points for our education system. Standardized tests have, at best, provided limited insights into student learning, especially for historically underserved students. They should not be the sole diagnostic for what each individual student needs. To

³ For example, the [A-G Completion Improvement Grant Program](#), [Golden State Pathways program](#), among others.

⁴ For examples, see [Portraits of a Graduate: Strengthening Career and College Readiness through Social and Emotional Skill Development](#) (CASEL, 2023); [Future Focused State Policy Actions to Transform K-12 Education](#) (Aurora Institute, 2020) and [From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope](#) (The Aspen Institute, National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2019).

⁵ Source: “[More States Are Creating a ‘Portrait of a Graduate.’ Here’s Why](#)” (EducationWeek, Dec 2023)

⁶ See WestEd’s “[Graduate Profiles Brief](#)” (2023)

⁷ Often referred to as “21st Century skills”, “soft skills”, or “success skills”

complement test scores, we should measure what we value, i.e., the durable skills articulated in the Graduate Profiles created by communities across the state.

Policy implications: We could create flexibility in both the Local Control Accountability Plan and the CA Schools Dashboard to promote local assessment and reporting of durable skills identified as priorities by community members and partners.

E. Move from standardized tests to authentic assessment.

Graduate Profile competencies are not easily measured with standardized tests, but they can be demonstrated, observed, and assessed through essays, presentations, exhibitions, projects, portfolio defenses, and more. Many CA schools and districts have begun to assess student progress on Graduate Profile outcomes. For equity reasons, students should be able to propose and/or choose methods that are culturally and linguistically affirming. In what ways might these forms of authentic assessment be deeper, more powerful learning experiences than taking a test?

Policy implications: See implications for B and D above.

MAKE COMPATIBLE STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

In order to achieve the shifts described above, California can begin by making a handful of compatible structural adjustments.

A. Blend in-school and out-of-school time.

Learning does not only happen in classrooms on school days; it happens at home, in the community, and in the workplace, during all waking hours through the year. The state has robustly funded community schools and expanded learning, but we continue to expect that “learning” happens within the boundaries of the classroom, clock (school day), calendar (school year), and curriculum (core disciplines). It simply isn’t true. We should value the many ways, venues, and times in which students learn and incorporate them into a broader vision for California education. Moving toward a competency-based approach honors diverse learning experiences. Moving from traditionally closed systems to [open systems](#) would honor learning that happens across time and space.

Policy implications: The state could explore ways to integrate and blend varied learning environments by creating/adapting data systems, modifying grant expectations, and promoting cross-sector partnerships (i.e., schools, governments, business/industry, community).

B. De-emphasize the Carnegie Unit.

A competency-based approach recognizes that each student learns at their own pace in their own way. The Carnegie Unit represents an outdated notion that a defined set of content knowledge requires a fixed amount of time to master. It is a one-size-fits-all approach with a false premise, yet it continues to drive the way we organize schools. Even the Carnegie

Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recognizes that it is time to phase out the Carnegie Unit⁸ in lieu of a competency-based system. Students should earn credits for demonstrating mastery, not for sitting in their seats (“seat time”). ETS is combining with the Carnegie Foundation to launch a national pilot (guided by this [concept paper](#)).

Policy implications: The State Dept of Education could lobby to include (previously referenced) innovation zone districts in the ETS/Carnegie pilot. The State Board of Education could issue waivers to districts wishing to experiment with de-emphasizing the Carnegie unit in lieu of demonstrated competency of both traditional subjects and Graduate Profile outcomes / durable skills.

C. Modify the LCAP and CA School Dashboard.

The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) sets the course for all 2,500+ LEAs across the state – defining growth goals, metrics, activities, and expenses. The CA Schools Dashboard (dashboard) is a reporting mechanism that reflects results. While the spirit of local control is strong in California, these documents tend to elevate state measures and diminish local ones. Neither requires LEAs to create and/or pay attention to a whole child vision as a means of clarifying student-centered outcomes and building coherence across initiatives, programs, and funding sources.

Policy implications: With adjustments, the LCAP and dashboard could easily do so. If each LEA started their LCAP with a whole child vision (like a Graduate Profile) and aligned goals for the eight priority areas to that vision, it would promote coherence. And, if the dashboard elevated local indicators (like Graduate Profile outcomes) – with 5-color speedometer dials (rather than a simple gray toggle switch), similar to the statewide metrics⁹ – we could more effectively honor the spirit of local control preferred by constituents across the state.

D. Fund students, not attendance.

The above requires schools to be more flexible in what, how, when, and where students learn. In fact, the goal should be learning, not sitting at desks. If we commit to advancing a competency-based approach, then it makes sense to fund enrollment (sometimes called “membership”) rather than attendance (i.e., ADA). California remains as one of only six states that have not yet moved to an enrollment-based funding model. Other states have done so for many reasons, not the least of which is that our current funding structure undermines efforts by the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to fund schools more equitably. Attendance funding exacerbates inequities — granting more funding to wealthy suburban districts that typically have higher attendance rates and less funding to poor communities of color often with lower attendance rates.

Policy implications: California could follow the lead of other states and fund enrollment.

⁸ See [EdWeek article](#) (Dec 2022)

⁹ See mock-ups of examples created by Parsec Education at the request of Scaling Student Success – [full-length “Inspiration & Innovation Talk”](#) (60 minutes) or [highlights](#) (9 minutes).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

The above can (and should) inform several policy recommendations. For clarity, we have identified a handful that we believe would be high-leverage and high-impact.

- **Create a statewide “Graduate Profile”** or at least a holistic definition of college, career and civic readiness that incorporates the durable skills, competencies, and mindsets young people need for future success. If LEAs lack interest, capacity or resources to create their own profile, they could voluntarily adopt the state’s profile.
- **Establish education innovation zones** where interested LEAs receive waivers from education code statutes and regulations to pilot and pursue the strategies articulated above (i.e., assessing and reporting locally defined whole child outcomes through a competency-based approach, enabling students to learn through engaging projects and demonstrate learning through alternative assessments, while blending in-school and out-of-school learning, and doing away with the Carnegie Unit).
 - To advance the lessons learned by the innovation zone districts, seek associated modifications to the Education Code.
- **Promote competency-based education and authentic forms of assessment** through grants, professional development, leadership coaching, and accountability measures.
- **Elevate local indicators on the CA Schools Dashboard** (at least for an interested group of pilot districts) to equate with statewide indicators (i.e., those with 5-color speedometer dials) in order to better adhere to the spirit of local control and give LEAs more ownership of their high-profile growth goals. See these [models](#) (9-min video) created for [Scaling Student Success](#) by [Parsec Education](#).
- **Modify the LCAP template** to begin with a whole child vision – whether a simple statement or a Graduate Profile – with an expectation for LEAs to map each of their goals to the whole child vision in order to promote coherence.
- **Shift to enrollment funding** (or “member funding”) rather than attendance funding.

SUPPORT:

To **support** this policy white paper and/or discuss specific policy actions, please contact Roman Stearns (Roman@ScalingStudentSuccess.org) and Austin Webster (austin@wstrategiesllc.com). Thank you!

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