

# FEDERAL POLICY PRIORITIES TO ACCELERATE EDUCATION INNOVATION

APRIL 2020

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has empowered states to do even more toward creating future-ready education systems. Every state now has some degree of flexibility to transform K-12 education to advance more equitable, competency-based learning models. Although states are in the driver's seat, federal policymakers can fully unleash ESSA's potential. Congress now has a historic opportunity to increase access and affordability to educator pipelines and to innovate teacher preparation to meet the needs of 21st-century learning with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Moreover, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) must continue to modernize broadband telecommunications infrastructure to close critical access gaps in underserved communities for anytime, anywhere learning.

The Aurora Institute's Federal Policy Priorities are an equity-driven and future-focused set of recommendations designed to ensure the nation's education system is fit for purpose. The priorities are intentionally constructed to support moving states and localities forward from their current state of education to future systems capable of preparing all graduates with the knowledge, abilities, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, to contribute to their communities, and to advance our society.

## FEDERAL POLICY PRIORITIES AT A GLANCE

#1

PREPARE EDUCATOR-LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE

Launch a pilot program in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to encourage the development of innovative, fully competency-based, and personalized teacher and leader preparation programs.

#2

INCREASE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY TO DIVERSIFY EDUCATOR TALENT POOLS

Address college affordability, persistence, and completion in federal student aid policies to increase the diversity of the educator workforce.

#3

EXPAND THE INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT PILOT

Remove barriers for states to participate in the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA).

#4

INCREASE ACCESS TO BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY

Support expansion of broadband infrastructure and increase access to Wi-Fi in schools and homes by fully funding the E-Rate and Lifeline programs.

## Federal Policy Priority #1

## PREPARE EDUCATOR-LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE

*Launch a pilot program in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to encourage the development of innovative, fully competency-based, and personalized teacher and leader preparation programs.*

### Background

The shift to student-centered learning in K-12 education demands modernized preparation, training, and ongoing development for teachers and school leaders. The capacity of the educator-leader workforce is essential for the transformation of K-12 education systems to support success for all students. Many educators will require new skills to orchestrate, design, and navigate anytime, anywhere learning, as well as to adapt instruction with varying levels of knowledge and competency development with future goals and interests.

Educator competencies are the specific sets of educator knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are prioritized within a system. This will require significant shifts to pre-service preparation, certification, professional development, and evaluation programs. Federal policymakers can play a critical role in this transformation, working to revise and align policies and programs that would make it possible to build an educator leader workforce with the expertise to ensure all students master competencies by graduation.

Institutions of higher education and alternative programs train the majority of the educator workforce, and investments are needed to prepare teachers to lead in personalized, competency-based learning environments. There is an opportunity in the Higher Education Act to launch an innovation pilot for teacher preparation that can equip teachers with the skills to teach and lead in future-focused, competency-based learning environments. The pilots would be designed to be innovative, competency-based models with personalized pathways for educators.



### Recommendations

- Launch an innovation pilot for modernizing teacher preparation in the Higher Education Act for pre-service providers to equip educators with the skills to teach and lead in competency-based environments for anytime, anywhere learning.
- Provide grants and programs to result in the preparation of a more capable workforce and better-educated citizenry.
- Re-examine educator competencies to drive systems to engage in a participatory process to define (and continually re-evaluate) the “right” educator competencies for a future-focused context. This entails identifying core foundational competencies that will be prioritized for all educators and calibrating developmental competencies for evolving practices to support competency-based education programs and continuous improvement.
- Move away from clock-hour and time-based credits toward credits defined by competency attainment.
- Build assessment literacy to support competency-based education systems.
- Support more modular attainment of micro-credentials throughout the professional lifetime to expand access and availability to innovative learning opportunities and competency-based programs, as well as to validate and recognize prior learning.

## INCREASE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY TO DIVERSIFY EDUCATOR TALENT POOLS

*Address college affordability, persistence, and completion in federal student aid policies to increase the diversity of the educator workforce.*

### Background

A teaching workforce that reflects the diversity and life experiences of today's communities and schools is an important part of closing achievement and opportunity gaps and ensuring all students are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and beyond.

The costs of teacher preparation tuition and loan repayment can be barriers to entry for all prospective teachers, and particularly those who have shared life experiences with students of color, students in poverty, and students whose families have immigrated to the United States. Policies that increase access and affordability are, therefore, necessary to achieve the goal of diversifying the teacher workforce.



### Recommendations

To diversify and create more equitable pre-service pathways, federal policymakers should consider strategies that address college affordability, persistence, and completion in federal student aid policies. Education advocacy groups have proposed a variety of ideas to achieve this goal. These include:

- Considering reforms to federal student aid to increase access to competitive financial aid, loans, and loan forgiveness programs for the highest-need students;
- Enabling competency-based models in higher education by ensuring that eligibility for loans is not tied to units of time (e.g., credits completed or seat time hours), but rather to outcomes (e.g., program completion, performance assessment, or demonstration of competency against program and state standards); and
- Expanding pathways to new potential teachers by offering loans or loan forgiveness to mid-career professionals, veterans, or other prospective teachers, modeling or extending successful efforts like the GI Bill and Military College Loan Repayment Program. In addition to increasing accessibility and affordability, such incentives could contribute to a future-ready workforce by integrating professionals with the skills and experience to support community-based, work-based, and applied forms of learning that prepare students to thrive in college and career.

## EXPAND THE INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT PILOT

*Remove barriers for states to participate in the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) by lifting the seven-state cap, by allowing adequate time for planning and statewide scale-up, and by making funding available for states to develop and stage implementation of high-quality, innovative systems of assessments that include performance assessments to support competency-based pathways.*

### Background

ESSA provides flexibility for states to redesign systems of assessments to better align with student-centered learning. Under ESSA, all states can use a variety of assessment types, including formative and performance-based assessments, together to create statewide, balanced systems of assessments. States can also apply to the U.S. Department of Education for the new Innovative Assessment Authority pilot program, through ESSA Section 1204, which allows states to pilot next-generation systems of assessments with a subset of districts prior to scaling statewide. One implementation challenge is IADA's requirement for scaling state pilots statewide within five to seven years. This time frame is too narrow for most states to plan, create processes for calibration and moderation for comparability, implement high-quality systems of assessments, evaluate, and scale up statewide effectively. Developing a plan and model for statewide scale-up with quality assurance checkpoints, consistency and evaluation is important.

The other major issue with IADA is that it does not allow for any planning time, nor does it provide funding for states to redesign systems of assessments. In sum, the IADA needs to be strengthened and revised to provide a pilot program and resources to allow states to create space for balanced systems of assessments that create alignment; that would dramatically advance student achievement and better prepare students for higher education and employment success. To achieve this goal, the federal government should remove the limitation of a seven-state cap in ESSA for IADA's implementation. The federal government should also extend the amount of time a state can take to plan and implement the pilot—beyond the five years currently required—to develop the necessary processes for comparability, calibration, and moderation across pilot schools and districts. Additionally, it should expand their pilots using additional phases to add new districts statewide over an approved, extended timeframe.

### Recommendations

The U.S. Department of Education should prioritize awards of Competitive Grants for State Assessments to support planning for and implementation of state IADA applications. Congress should amend Section 1204 of ESSA to remove barriers to state participation in the pilot, with the implementation of high-quality performance assessments to support competency-based pathways by:

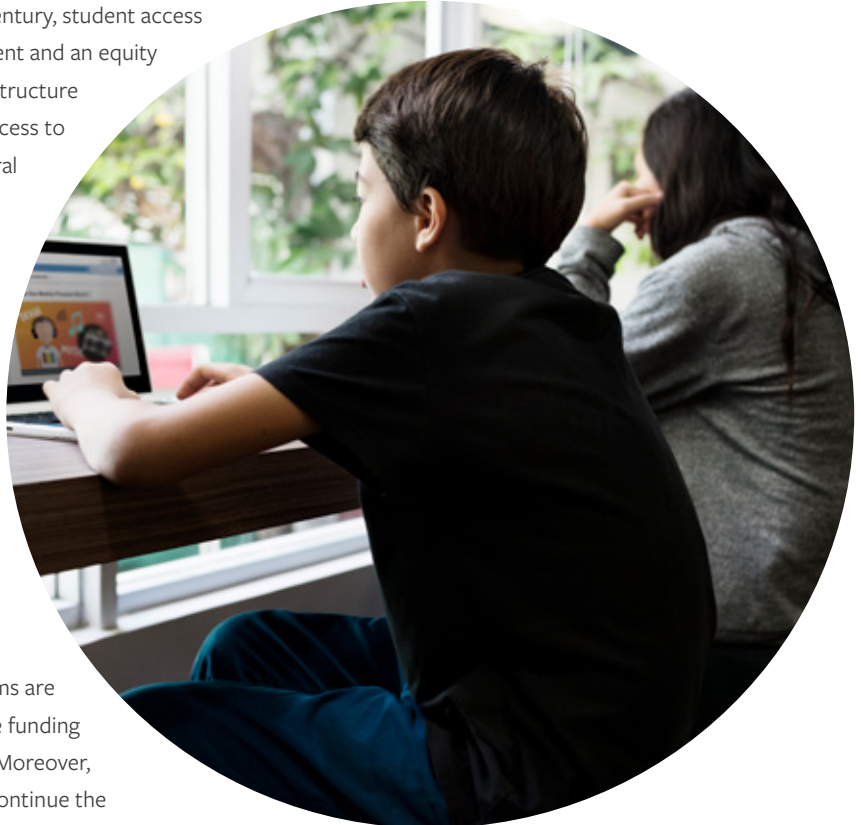
- Lifting the cap on the number of states that could apply to participate in the IADA;
- Including language that allows states to have planning time before implementation and to scale up;
- Allowing adequate time for states to scale up new systems of assessments statewide with high quality, by removing barriers or providing greater flexibility in the time to statewide implementation; and,
- Making funding available for states to plan, develop, and improve on innovative systems of assessments.

## INCREASE ACCESS TO BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY

*Support continued expansion of broadband infrastructure and increased access to Wi-Fi in schools and homes by fully funding the E-Rate and Lifeline programs.*

### Background

To prepare students to succeed in the 21st century, student access to technology and the internet is a requirement and an equity imperative. Comprehensive broadband infrastructure provides states, districts, and schools with access to the internet for learning purposes. The Federal Universal Service programs, including E-Rate, which subsidizes internet access for schools and libraries, and the Lifeline program, which supports low-cost home access, are increasing equitable student access to powerful learning opportunities. The FCC oversees the E-Rate and Lifeline programs. It issued long-awaited modernization orders for E-Rate in 2014 and for Lifeline in 2016. To keep pace with the accelerating demand for connectivity and adequate bandwidth as schools transition to student-centered learning, continued support and commitment from the FCC for these programs are necessary. Unfortunately, the need for E-Rate funding will soon surpass the cap on funds available. Moreover, FCC leadership has indicated that it may discontinue the Lifeline program.



Congress and the FCC need to take proactive, positive action to continue to modernize and expand the E-Rate and Lifeline programs for schools and homes to address the persistent inequalities and digital divide that exists for underserved communities. This will require increasing federal funding and expanding access to broadband for our nation's education systems, students, and families. Crucial updates continue to be needed for the E-Rate and Lifeline programs to expand essential Internet and Wi-Fi connectivity for schools and community learning environments.

### Recommendations

- The FCC should examine how much funding is needed for E-Rate to keep pace with the accelerating demand for high-speed broadband connectivity and ensure equitable access to a variety of high-quality learning pathways for all students.
- The FCC should continue implementation and support for the Lifeline program.
- Continue to simplify the E-Rate application process and expand eligible expenditures to provide flexibility to meet local communities' needs.
- Fully fund E-Rate and Lifeline to provide access to broadband Internet infrastructure for all students, families, and educators.
- Ensure every school, district, library, and home in each community has the broadband Internet access and the technology infrastructure to fully participate in, benefit from, and access anytime, anywhere learning opportunities.

## Resources to Learn More

- Aurora Institute [Developing a Modern Teacher Workforce: Federal Policy Recommendations for Professional Learning and Supporting Future-Focused, Competency-Based Education Systems](#)
- Aurora Institute [Moving Toward Mastery: Growing, Developing and Sustaining Educators for Competency-Based Education](#)
- Aurora Institute [How Systems of Assessments Aligned with Competency-Based Education Can Support Equity](#)
- Aurora Institute [Redesigning Systems of Assessments for Student-Centered Learning](#)

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## About Aurora Institute

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

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## About Aurora Institute Center for Policy

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

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

## Contact

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Every Learner

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