



State Policy Priorities and Recommendations

2024

To effectively prepare our students for their futures, we need to put them at the center of their learning experiences. Creating equitable learner-centered education systems requires fundamental system-wide shifts. These shifts should be guided by a vision—co-constructed with local leaders, community members, students, and families—for what students need to know and be able to do upon graduating. With that vision as the North Star, state leaders can develop policies that equitably and effectively support students and educators to reach that goal.

The Aurora Institute has identified six policy shifts that must occur to transform education for all learners—especially for those who have been underserved by the current system. They include:

- 1 Establish a Vision by Developing a Profile of a Graduate**
- 2 Create the Conditions for Equitable Learner-Centered, Competency-Based Education Systems**
- 3 Transform Systems of Assessments**
- 4 Align Accountability and Data Systems**
- 5 Support Educators to Thrive in a Competency-Based System**
- 6 Redesign Learning Experiences**

ESTABLISH A VISION BY DEVELOPING A PROFILE OF A GRADUATE

A [Profile of a Graduate \(PoG\)](#), also known as a Portrait of a Graduate, describes the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions each learner needs to excel in post-secondary learning experiences, careers, and civic life. State PoGs should serve as a guiding vision to align other policies toward the goal of ensuring all students are given the support and opportunity to achieve the PoG.

- Engage communities and stakeholders, including higher education and employers, to develop a statewide model PoG for K-12 education that reflects your state's unique values and objectives for students, including essential academic standards, social-emotional skills, and transferable skills, such as problem solving and critical thinking.
- Share the state PoG widely as an exemplar for districts to build upon and create their own PoGs to support school and district leader decision-making. Establish supports to help schools and districts take the next step to put their PoGs into action, such as developing aligned competencies and other important structures.

Creating Conditions for Systems Change

State leaders—governors, legislators, state boards of education, and executives—have significant power and leverage to create the conditions in which competency-based systems can be developed, scaled, and sustained. Each can play a role to orchestrate, innovate, and advocate for changes through coordinated statewide effort. See Aurora's [A Promise for Equitable Futures: Enabling Systems Change to Scale Educational and Economic Mobility Pathways](#) for more in-depth examples of different actions they can take.



Defining Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE), as envisioned in [Aurora's definition](#), is not one-size-fits-all for students or any single school, district, or state. By CBE, we mean a transformational system of equitable learning that different entities and organizations may describe using terms including “personalized,” “student-centered,” “learner-centered,” “competency-based,” “mastery-based,” and “proficiency-based.” Sometimes these are synonyms; sometimes they mean different things to different people.

Competency-based education provides a comprehensive framework for creating learner-centered educational environments. The design principles of CBE prioritize equity, student ownership, and responsive pacing based on demonstrating mastery of learning (rather than the traditional system's teacher-centered delivery of curriculum in a predetermined number of hours, with students often moving on without learning essential content and skills). Competency-based education is a system in which:

1. Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
6. Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

By redesigning the education system around actual student learning and the ability to apply that learning, we will prepare each student more effectively for a future in an increasingly global and competitive economy.



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CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR EQUITABLE LEARNER-CENTERED, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION SYSTEMS

States can use their Profile of a Graduate to guide the creation of new policies and structures to support that vision, identify which existing policies do not support the vision, and then work to create greater alignment.

- Create space for innovation and the transition to competency-based education with exemptions or waivers from state statutes and administrative rules. Statutes and rules, such as seat-time requirements, often constrain improvement or impose barriers to advancing learner-centered education systems. Addressing this will require ongoing dialogue with key legislative and rulemaking bodies at the state level about the importance of enabling legislation and rulemaking to foster innovation and emerging improvements to meet the needs of all students. For example, states can create [innovation zones](#) to ensure schools and districts have the guidance and supports necessary to take advantage of opportunities for flexibility.
- Create and launch [competency-based education pilots](#) that support educators and school leaders in the design and implementation of new teaching and learning approaches tied to a state vision of student success.
- Develop networks of schools that are engaging in competency-based education to build and share knowledge about promising practices, lessons learned, and policy implications, that include embedded equity strategies to fully meet the needs of historically underserved students.
- Establish budgetary priorities to ensure every student has access to next-generation learning opportunities, such as high-quality technology tools, robust instructional supports, and paid work-based learning.
- Develop new formulas for equitable resource allocation, including metrics that weight funding distributions based on race/ethnicity and income (such as a Family Income Index), and/or the proportional share of students living in poverty and/or students of color enrolled in each school across the state. States should also consider establishing new funding structures to support the adoption of learner-centered education systems, such as planning grants.
- Ensure educators and students not only have access to connectivity, devices, and digital content, but are also provided professional learning and related support, such as state-level guidance, to use educational technology, including generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) tools effectively. When used deliberately, educational technology can create more learner-centered educational experiences.
- Develop state guidance to encourage districts to engage their communities, including learners, in designing and building competency-based systems that authentically reflect local contexts.
- Consider different [funding strategies](#) to encourage schools and districts to take up competency-based education. This could include creating new or leveraging existing state grant programs, repurposing existing federal or state dollars, and/or seeking out public-private partnerships.



TRANSFORM SYSTEMS OF ASSESSMENTS

Balanced [systems of assessments](#) support meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experiences for students that yield timely, relevant, and actionable evidence, shifting focus and investment from large-scale summative assessments and toward a variety of assessment types with different purposes.

- Engage practitioners and leaders from K-12 education, industry, and higher education to create a process and develop resources and recommendations to support the development of competency-based performance assessments across K-12.
- Support communities in creating and using locally developed assessments and portfolios to understand student progress and mastery of both higher-order competencies aligned to the state's PoG, as well as rigorous academic knowledge and skills. Provide support to ensure these include culturally responsive assessment practices in which every student can see themselves in the assessment experience.
- Invest in building assessment literacy among administrators, educators, and the public. This can include the development of resources about the different types and uses of assessments, opportunities for educator communities of practice, and support for schools and districts to engage communities in understanding local assessments and how data is used.
- Support the [development of performance tasks](#) at the local level that measure transferable skills identified in the PoG that enable individuals to perform effectively in different settings, including outside of traditional school walls, and apply knowledge and skills to different tasks.
- Review and eliminate assessment requirements that do not align with the state's PoG and that are not required under federal law. Support the use of coherent assessment systems that allow more time for deeper learning in classroom-based assessment practices. Such systems should support increased student growth and agency through engagement with authentic learning experiences that are relevant to the real world.
- Review how assessment data is being used at the state, district, and school level for decisions such as placement and promotion, and ensure data use aligns with the state's learner-centered, competency-based approach. This could include designing systems of assessments that move beyond single summative standardized assessments to include performance-based assessments that support demonstrations of mastery.



ALIGN ACCOUNTABILITY AND DATA SYSTEMS

Aligning accountability and data systems with state Profiles of a Graduate ensures that states are collecting the information they need to determine whether students are on the path to meeting that goal and to hold systems accountable for that student progress.

- Identify what indicators meaningfully reflect student progress toward the goals identified in the state's PoG and consider changes to state accountability systems to better align with the PoG vision.
- Engage with local communities to develop a [reciprocal accountability](#) approach that considers both inputs and outputs as metrics, not just traditional student outcomes. Reciprocal accountability means that all parties—educators, administrators, families, learners, and community members—are accountable to each other for outcomes and goals to create an environment where each party works together to achieve success.
- Develop integrated, transparent, and learner-centered data systems to support cross-sector coordination, inform instruction, and empower learners.
- [Support the development](#) of digital learning and employment records infrastructure and digital wallets that learners own for a lifetime of building knowledge and skills.
- Enable school and district leaders to use data to support learner-centered education, including ensuring resources flow to historically underserved students.
- Provide opportunities for districts and localities to pilot innovative, learner-centered accountability systems that follow the principles above to supplement existing accountability systems or provide evidence to support replacing existing systems.



SUPPORT EDUCATORS TO THRIVE IN A COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEM

Moving to competency-based education requires educators to shift the role they play in the classroom and requires states to invest in supporting that shift.

- Convene a statewide coalition representing a diverse array of voices—policymakers, administrators, educators, educator preparation providers, and professional learning providers—to lead the development of recommendations to modernize teaching and professional learning and engage educator preparation providers as core partners in this work.
- Develop state guidance to encourage districts to co-design with educators to create more collaborative roles and communities of practice for educators.
- Redesign teacher and school leader licensure and credentialing to be awarded based on demonstrations of mastery, including competency-based validation of skills. This can be accomplished through [micro-credentials](#), which should provide meaningful value to educators who earn them.

- Prioritize approaches to educator and leadership preparation and development that build the knowledge and skills needed to lead competency-based, learner-centered education, including support focused on assessment literacy.
- Develop an education equity office or task force to design culturally responsive practices and high-quality professional learning for educators that address the unique needs of students of color and other historically underserved students.
- At the state and district levels, increase investment in recruiting, training, retaining, and promoting teachers of color. Increasing the diversity of the educator workforce is a [critical element of an effective learner-centered education system](#), particularly as we consider how students of color and other historically underserved students experience education.
- Increase the salaries of educators, including both teachers and school leaders, to provide a competitive wage and attract a more diverse workforce. As the role of the educator shifts in a competency-based and learner-centered system, the way we compensate educators should shift, too.

REDESIGN LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Learners are ready to engage deeply in real-world, meaningful, and future-focused learning experiences. Modernizing our education systems will allow students to develop and demonstrate readiness for post-secondary learning experiences, careers, and civic life in a variety of ways.

- Align systems of early learning, K-12 education, career and technical education, higher education, and workforce training by creating [competency-based pathways](#) to fulfilling careers. Pathways should be transparent, accessible, and recognized by schools and employers across the state.
- Decouple academic progression from seat time, age, or grade level, and enable students to progress based on demonstrations of knowledge and skills through a variety of pathways—with guidance from state-designed or state-approved competency frameworks.
- Invest in educator capacity to develop and implement new learning designs that activate deeper learning by engaging students in the application of knowledge, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and communication in a variety of contexts.
- Support district and school leaders to provide students with hands-on opportunities to apply, grow, and demonstrate their skills through [high-quality work-based learning experiences](#) co-developed with employers and learning community partners.
- Support the use of [learning and employment records](#) to communicate the competencies learners are building over a lifetime, changing the way individuals access education and career opportunities.
- Develop policies and guidance for the responsible use of Gen AI tools in schools that align with the state’s learner-centered education approach and maintain learner safety.
- Ensure graduation requirements are informed by the state’s PoG and are designed to support the success of every student. This should include allowing learners to earn credit for learning that takes place both inside and outside of the classroom, such as through work-based learning or after-school activities.



A New Dawn for
Every Learner

The mission of the Aurora Institute 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 Institute works with state policymakers to enable innovative education systems to prepare all students for a lifetime of success.
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