



Federal Policy Priorities and Recommendations

2024

To effectively prepare students for their futures, they must be at the center of their learning experiences. Creating equitable learner-centered education systems requires fundamental system-wide shifts. These shifts are vital to unlock active, engaged, competency-based education (CBE) for all learners, which the learning sciences tell us is key to lasting learning. These shifts should be guided by a vision, often called a Portrait of a Graduate, that is co-constructed with local partners, industry, community members, students, and families for what students need to know and be able to do upon graduating.¹ While much of this work is driven at the state and local levels, the federal government has an important role to play in fostering systems transformation. The Aurora Institute has identified four policy priorities where the federal government can play a significant role in supporting state and local educational transformation. They include:

1 Transform Systems of Assessments

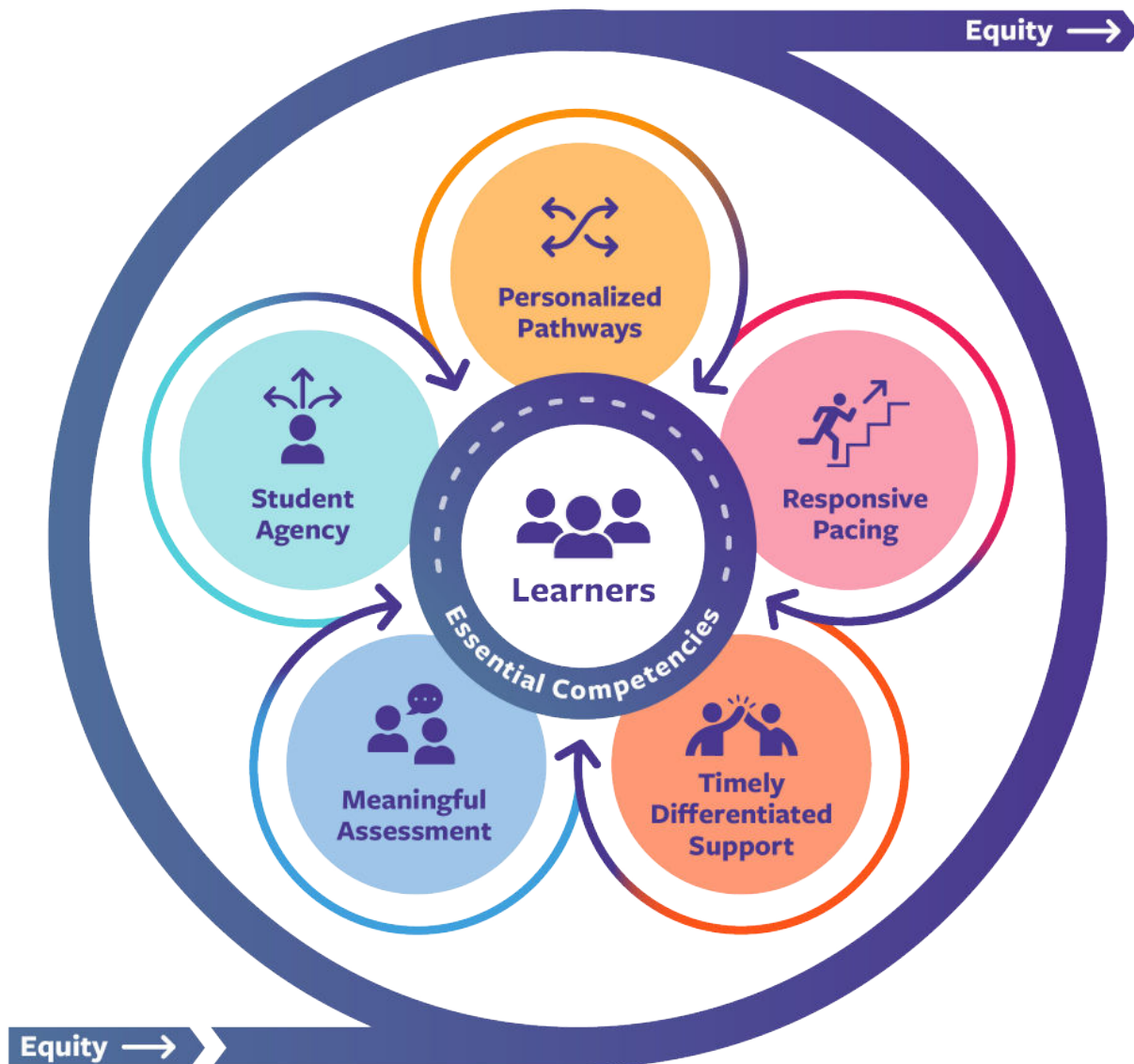
2 Align Accountability and Data Systems

3 Support Out-of-School Learning Opportunities

4 Support Innovation and Continuous Improvement through Research and Development

¹To learn more about Portraits of a Graduate, please see Aurora's state policy priorities [here](#).

DEFINING COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION



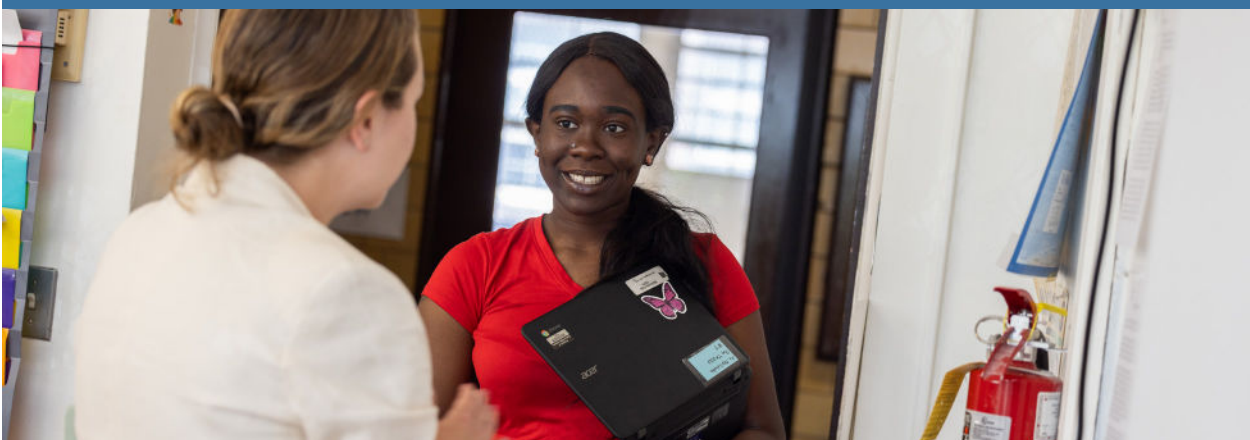
This graphic shows how the elements of competency-based education in the Aurora Institute definition relate to each other. Creating a coherent and equitable competency-based system requires an inclusive process and a learning orientation in which all participants—educators, students, families, community partners, and policymakers—provide leadership and build capacity to transform school culture, structures, and pedagogy.

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. Capturing these distinctions and similarities across contexts will help the field understand promising pathways to transformation.

Competency-based education provides a robust 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:

- 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.
- Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
- Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
- Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
- Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

An education system that is explicitly designed around student learning and the application of that learning will more effectively prepare every student for an increasingly global community and competitive economy where they can contribute as active and informed citizens.



TRANSFORM SYSTEMS OF ASSESSMENTS²

Balanced systems of assessments support meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experiences for students and yield timely, relevant, and actionable evidence. Achieving balanced systems of assessments will require diversifying federal focus from large-scale summative assessments and toward encouraging greater investment in innovation around a variety of assessment types with different purposes. The federal government can create the conditions for states to transform systems of assessments by:

- **Creating greater alignment in federal programs.** Federal policymakers should strategically align and streamline existing federal programs to provide dedicated funding to foster assessment innovation and support states in developing sustainable new systems. Despite initial excitement from states about the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), statutory and regulatory criteria have proved constraining, particularly due to the lack of associated funding. In the short term, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) can build on its recent IADA guidance improvements and deliberately link IADA and Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA) by continuing to make innovation one of the CGSA program's priorities. In the longer term, policymakers should rewrite CGSA to include a strand that explicitly provides a dedicated funding stream for assessment innovation.
- **Increasing federal assessment funding.** To ensure the development and implementation of innovative assessments, the federal government should increase dedicated funding for assessment innovation. Over a decade ago, Congress allocated \$350 million to two state consortia to develop new summative assessments aligned to state standards. Today, only about \$20 million is available annually for innovation, but the need for investment is greater than ever. Rather than a large one-time investment, the federal government should set aside consistent and increased funding for innovative assessments to support sustained progress at the state and local levels. While some states have braided federal programs together to secure funding for assessment innovation, a more coherent federal strategy would explicitly encourage innovation.
- **Revamping the USED assessment peer review process.** To encourage states to develop and adopt innovative assessments for federal accountability purposes, USED should update its peer review requirements to allow for assessment innovation within current federal law and policy. For example, USED could bring together a group of innovative psychometricians and field-based practitioners to revise the Assessment Peer Review Guidance and provide clarity on what is possible with respect to technical considerations such as alignment, comparability, depth, and breadth. In addition to providing a path for approval for innovative assessment approaches, this would signal USED's commitment to innovation to the field.
- **Fostering equity in innovation programs.** To ensure that innovative assessment systems benefit all students, federal programs supporting assessment innovation must prioritize and foster equity in their design and implementation. Innovative assessment systems developed under CGSA or other federal programs must meet the needs of diverse student populations, including ensuring that assessments are designed with universal accessibility features, are available in multiple languages, and have undergone rigorous bias review to eliminate potential sources of discrimination. By making equity a central component in innovation programs and building on the equity goals of ESSA, the federal government can ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or learning needs, have access to high-quality, fair, and inclusive assessments that accurately measure their knowledge and skills.



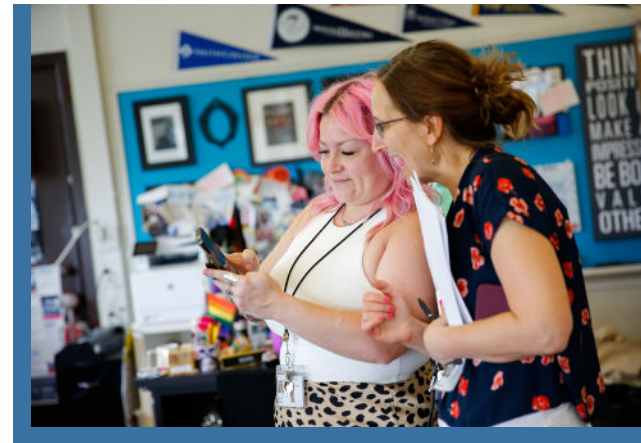
Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUImages

²These recommendations are drawn from a co-published resource, [Clearing the Path for Assessment Innovation: The Role of Federal Policy](#).

ALIGN ACCOUNTABILITY AND DATA SYSTEMS

Effective state accountability and data systems align with state visions for what their graduates need to know and be able to do, such as a Portrait of a Graduate. This alignment ensures states are collecting the information they need to determine whether students are on the path to meeting rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions), and holding school systems accountable for that student progress. The federal government can support states in creating accountability and data systems that more effectively support learner-centered education systems by:

- **Providing opportunities for innovative, balanced accountability systems.** Current federal accountability requirements are a serious constraint on state-level innovation. To foster a more cohesive and sustainable approach to educational innovation, the federal government should give states flexibility to design integrated assessment and accountability systems that align with their unique needs and goals. These balanced accountability systems should provide families and communities with accessible information to help inform school decisions. Flexibility could be provided through an expanded approach to programs like CGSA or, as a last resort, using USED's waiver authority. Doing so would allow states to focus on the coherence between their assessment and accountability systems and better prepare them to pilot, scale, and sustain innovative approaches. Then states could build on work they are already doing to design new high school graduation requirements that include transferable skills, competency-based demonstrations of knowledge and skills, and other innovative assessment options and incorporate them into state-level accountability.
- **Fostering reciprocal accountability.** To create a more collaborative and effective education system, the federal government should support pilots that encourage states and local communities to develop reciprocal accountability frameworks that engage local stakeholders and consider a broader range of metrics beyond traditional student academic outcomes. Reciprocal accountability means that all parties—educators, administrators, families, learners, and community members—are accountable to each other for outcomes and goals, creating an environment where each party works together to achieve success. The resulting performance frameworks could include both inputs and outputs as metrics, such as opportunities for paid work-based learning and career exploration, and engagement with new skills-based credentials, not just traditional student measures.
- **Continuing to invest in statewide data systems.**³ The federal government should increase funding to modernize statewide data systems that are interoperable across education and workforce sectors. Such data systems would support the development and implementation of innovative, competency-based education and employment practices, such as aligned PK-12, CTE, and workforce pathways. Relevant existing programs include the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program, the Workforce Data Quality Initiative, and data interoperability across early childhood, PK-12, post-secondary education, and employment systems. Data systems should support pathways and learning and employment records (LERs), as well as competency-based and skills-based credentials that lead to sustainable employment.



³For more information, see [ALI Task Force Brief: State and Local R&D Infrastructure](#).

SUPPORT OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Competency-based education systems recognize learning that happens beyond the classroom, often called “anytime, anywhere learning.” This means students receive recognition or credit for learning that takes place outside of the traditional school setting, including work-based, after-school, and summer learning. The federal government can create conditions for states to expand student access to out-of-school learning opportunities by:⁴

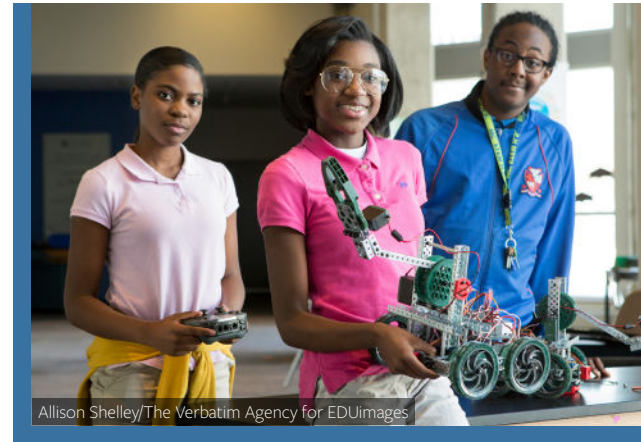
Expanding Work-Based Learning

- **Supporting cross-agency collaboration.** Work-based learning is a powerful tool for anytime, anywhere learning and plays an important role in effective workforce development systems. To stimulate significant investments in work-based learning opportunities, the federal government should coordinate across federal agencies to provide federal grants to promote innovative state and regional work-based learning models and competency-based pathways programs that span PK-12, CTE, post-secondary education, and industry/workforce. Such grants should prioritize competency-based credentials and/or micro-credentials that recognize and validate learning anytime, anywhere and the need to bridge these systems with institutions of higher education. These systems could put students on connected and coherent career pathways that are relevant for skills-based hiring initiatives.
- **Increasing funding.** To align and coordinate transformation efforts across education and employment pathways in states, the federal government can increase federal investment through new innovation grants to states and intermediary organizations. Funding could:
 - Expand equitable access to work-based learning by race, identity, disability, or opportunity (such as students who have fallen out of the traditional PK-12 system).
 - Support states moving to competency-based systems for education, workforce training, and credentialing.
 - Incentivize creating competency frameworks and the infrastructure needed to support competency-based pathways for building knowledge and skills.
 - Incentivize system alignment across early learning, PK-12 education, CTE, postsecondary education, and workforce to support competency-based pathways.
 - Support development and implementation of high-quality professional learning for educators and work-based learning providers.
- **Supporting funding flexibility.** To leverage resources to support work-based learning, the federal government should allow for flexible blending and braiding of federal funds into state, regional, or local innovation revolving funds and provide more flexible reporting for blended resources. The federal government could consider simplifying, combining, and/or allowing recipients to combine existing funding sources, such as within WIOA and Perkins V, to reduce silos and increase the impact of federal funds. These integrated plans could even incorporate ESSA to further reduce siloing.



⁴For more information, please see the Aurora Institute’s [Expanding Student Access to Work-Based Learning: Federal Policy Recommendations](#).

- **Supporting intermediary organizations.** To support the coordination of work-based learning and pathways across state, regional, and local entities, federal policymakers should ensure intermediary organizations are eligible for federal grant funds. Funds could be targeted for intermediaries that engage in high-intervention activities, such as designing and registering programs, identifying and recruiting both participating learners and employers, and monitoring progress.
- **Creating tax incentives.** To increase employer engagement, the federal government should provide tax incentives—such as payroll tax breaks—to employers participating in work-based learning programs.
- **Supporting the development and dissemination of guidance for employers.** To encourage employers to participate in work-based learning programs, the federal government should support the development and dissemination of frameworks for how employers can provide opportunities for learners. Such guidance could include concrete examples of solutions to challenges such as liability insurance and workers’ compensation insurance coverage for work-based learning students.
- **Enhancing relevant grants.** To build on effective programs, the federal government should increase the maximum Pell Grant award amount and provide more funding for work-based learning experiences, including extending Pell Grant eligibility to students who are dual-enrolled in college courses or attending early college high schools. Doing so would help scale proven solutions for increasing access to and completion of postsecondary education. This could include continuing and evaluating the Experimental Sites Initiative for the Federal Work-Study Program to identify effective, new approaches for Pell funding, including dual enrollment and competency-based education.



Supporting After-School and Summer Learning

- **Providing funding for after-school and summer learning programs.** To ensure equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities beyond the classroom, the federal government should increase and sustain funding for after-school and summer learning programs, particularly in traditionally underserved communities. After-school and summer learning programs provide students with powerful opportunities to engage in learning beyond the classroom, often in nontraditional ways. For example, federal policymakers could increase funding for initiatives such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers to increase access to out-of-school programs and offer states higher grant awards when their programs support the development of the essential skills outlined in a state’s Portrait of a Graduate.

SUPPORT INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT THROUGH RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (R&D)

Effective research and development strategies, designed and implemented in partnership with educators and local communities, are critical to supporting the transformation to learner-centered, competency-based education. The federal government can support education innovation through research and development by:

- **Prioritizing and increasing funding for inclusive research and development initiatives that connect research findings to practical learning solutions.**⁵ With often limited resources for R&D at the state and local levels, federal funding is critical to support education innovation. In particular, it is vital that federal funding prioritize knowledge transfer and mobilization, including how states and school districts can apply new research findings. Currently, the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) is instrumental in connecting research and practice. Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grants are another important lever for supporting educators to innovate and improve. These resources help the field advance collectively and have a meaningful impact on students. However, current federal education R&D spending levels are only a fraction of the billions spent on R&D in other sectors. Federal policymakers could go a step further to create a center within IES that focuses explicitly on education R&D, similar to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, known as DARPA.
- **Supporting research and development that actively engages a diverse range of practitioners in collaboration with researchers.** Including a diverse range of practitioners as collaborators in the research process will help ensure the outcomes of that research are more meaningful and useful to the field. Through legislation such as the proposed Advancing Research in Education Act (S.3392), the federal government can help prioritize research questions, expand research methodologies, and engage in knowledge mobilization that practitioners develop in consultation with researchers to produce actionable information.
- **Authorizing grants specifically designed to build state capacity in research and development.** To ensure state and local leaders can meaningfully engage in the research and development process, the federal government should authorize grants that support state capacity for R&D. Providing resources and support to involve them more directly in the process will also help improve the initiatives' effectiveness. This could include restructuring existing grant programs to better account for costs states and school districts incur while participating in federal grant programs.



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⁵For more information, see [ALI Task Force Brief: State and Local R&D Infrastructure](#).

CALL TO ACTION

We urge federal policymakers to put our students and communities on a path to transform education systems to be more adaptive, personalized, engaging, and flexible—offering true individual pathways linked to mastery of learning standards.

Designing and realizing K-12 education systems—in partnership with learners, families, educators, and community members—that can prepare all students to succeed will require sustained focus, support, and leadership. We hope federal policymakers embrace their role in catalyzing systems change. Through legislation, regulations, grant programs, guidance, and more, federal policymakers can determine the direction of education transformation for years to come.

Thank you for your leadership and service to our nation’s youth.





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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