

Federal Policy Priorities and Recommendations 2022



Introduction

It is critically important for our country to reimagine education and focus on investing in our future, not our past. The current K-12 education system has not produced equitable outcomes for all students. We must change policies and invest in innovation to transform our education systems. Student-centered policies are needed for true systems change and innovations for equity. We must challenge frames and investments that perpetuate tinkering with the existing system, rather than reimagining it. The time is ripe to redesign education to align with future needs and purposes to achieve human flourishing.

To ensure all learners are prepared for life's uncertainties, as well as a more knowledge-driven workforce and economy, we must restructure the education system to universally recognize anytime, anywhere learning. Many states and districts have taken steps to move in new and improved directions, but more work must be done to meet students where they are and accelerate them to successful futures and prosperity. We must question the fundamental purposes of our education system, align our goals to that purpose, and expand learning to anytime and anyplace, with greater opportunities for next generation learning.

Aurora Institute's latest *Federal Policy Priorities* represent an equity-oriented and future-focused set of recommendations designed to ensure that the nation's education system moves from its current state to a system capable of preparing all learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve lifelong success.

Policy Priorities and Issues:

- 1 Advance Education Innovations
- 2 Transform Systems of Assessments
- 3 Rethink Next Generation Accountability
- 4 Create Learning Ecosystems and Competency-Based Pathways Aligned Across K-12, Higher Education, Career and Technical Education, and the Workforce
- 5 Modernize the Educator Workforce
- 6 Diversify the Educator Workforce
- 7 Advance Educational Equity
- 8 Bridge the Digital Divide
- 9 Support COVID-19 Learning Recovery



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Advance Education Innovations

Innovations in education are taking place around the world. The federal government should take a bolder stance on supporting investments in education innovations for equity that reimagine education. Research on how students learn best challenges time-based education and training practices. Federal education policy leaders should invest in and support research on innovations through new learning designs and learning ecosystems with competency-based education pathways.

Recommendations

- Host a national dialogue in partnership with states and local communities to reconcile the purpose of education for modern societal needs with a diverse array of stakeholders to articulate principles to guide policy.
- Create a future-focused research and development agenda to support innovations.
- Invest in expanding opportunities to learn and ecosystems that support anytime, anywhere learning.
- Coordinate investments across the federal government toward reimagining education and catalyzing workforce development to support lifelong learning.
- Remove artificial time- and age-based constraints built into federal policy, and instead focus on competency development.
- Reconsider federal policy frames to support student-centered learning and competency-based pathways in support of successful outcomes for flourishing.



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Transform Systems of Assessments

Our systems of assessments should align with current research on how students learn best, support durable learning, and provide evidence of deeper learning. Providing data and information on how students are doing each day is critical. Doing this will require building capacity for valid and reliable assessments of student learning, and ensuring student outcomes include demonstrations of learning that produce evidence of student work and better transparency. The federal government should support more innovative assessments to drive improvements in teaching and learning. It is important to create coherence in redesigning education by aligning assessments to student-centered learning efforts.

Recommendations

- Provide \$100 million for the Competitive Grant State Assessments program to help meet the needs of states that are working to redesign, improve, innovate, or implement balanced systems of assessments to better evaluate students' demonstrations of building knowledge and skills.
- Expand ESEA to allow for new innovative assessment frameworks (beyond the current limited frame) with the aim of creating more transparency and data in real time, coupled with a research and development (R&D) agenda.
- Allow for new, innovative Theories of Change that support transforming teaching and learning and redesigning systems of assessments.
- Promote balanced systems of assessments, including building capacity to use a range of appropriate assessments that yield valid and reliable information on learning—especially those that support innovative models and culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning.
- Improve the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) program by:
 - » Lifting the seven-state cap on the number of states that can apply to participate in the program.
 - » Creating flexibility in extended timelines for pilots—from planning through implementation stages—to inform a strategy to scale up statewide.
 - » Funding the program with at least \$100 million for states to plan and pilot innovative, competency-based, and performance assessments.
- Build supportive policy, conditions, and infrastructure to recognize and validate learning in a mobile world.
- Increase assessment literacy through focused investments for building capacity for educators, practitioners, students, parents, state and local policymakers, and community members to deepen understanding of appropriate assessments for different purposes.



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Rethink Next Generation Accountability

There is a growing realization that the traditional, time-based K-12 education system in the United States is failing to adequately prepare students for the future. Problems arise when goals and purposes defined in accountability systems are too narrow and incentives (or disincentives) are too limiting. The current accountability framework does not guide states or local communities towards an education system that reflects the evolving demands placed on our youth.

Our challenge is to catalyze the creation of a new, transformational Theory of Change for policy to work toward long-term solutions. The federal government should incentivize states to rethink accountability with a focus on reciprocal accountability with communities and with people who are most proximate to the problems. This will require engaging with communities and states in creating new accountability designs. To support a new Theory of Change, learning from diverse stakeholders how to take a long term view on change. Next generation accountability can provide greater transparency on how students are progressing if the education system allows for: 1) competency-based education models where students are demonstrating mastery and producing evidence; 2) utilizing learning sciences research on how students learn best by meeting students where they are; and, 3) expanding opportunities for powerful, personalized learning.

Recommendations

- Examine the purpose of K-12 education and evaluate how to modernize accountability, evaluation, and quality assurance methods to support high-quality, student-centered teaching and learning.
- Move from age-based, grade-based, and deficit-based accountability frames to global reference “levels” with transparent outcomes that recognize student attainment of knowledge, skills, and competencies. For example, incentivize states to create “literacy seals” for achievement of various levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Engage states and communities to design new reciprocal accountability systems with permission to re-examine the purpose of schooling and rethink accountability.
- Rethink measurement systems to more effectively evaluate school quality and performance.



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Create Learning Ecosystems and Competency-Based Pathways Aligned Across K-12, Higher Education, Career and Technical Education, and the Workforce

With the unprecedented influx of \$123 billion in federal funding to states and local education systems, it is critical that investments are made in what is most needed for reimagining our education systems and not just tweaking what we currently have. Education systems around the globe are making important shifts toward learner ecosystems and re-examining the very purpose of public education.

Now is the time to turn the unrealized hope of public education into an actualized promise: that every learner will have access and support to pursue a certified pathway toward a meaningful, chosen career that will build social and economic capital over the course of their lives. New learning ecosystems will support the learner through competency-based approaches and will begin to expand into networks of learning spaces and hubs across programs, schools, and institutions.

We believe the federal government and states should let go of the notion that education has to be a linear, time-bound sequence of learning that occurs only within formal education institutions. Rather, education can be reimagined as a learning ecosystem. A more aligned, coherent ecosystem would be an equitable, dynamic, and responsive system in which learners can customize their learning experiences. We must invest in building the new policies, practices, and infrastructure that drive transformational change toward aligned, lifelong learning ecosystems with personalized and competency-based pathways. In learning ecosystems, learning is organized around individuals rather than institutions, as learners chart their own experiences flexibly and fluidly across a variety of settings and providers.

It is imperative that the United States reorient education systems to develop high-quality and competency-based learning opportunities and educational pathways that are accessible to all students across the K-20 continuum through learning ecosystems. These pathways should provide anytime, anywhere learning with clear opportunities for advancement and acceleration.

To effectively prepare today's youth for tomorrow's economy, the K-20 system should establish competency-based approaches for building knowledge and skills; align and integrate learning across levels; and collaborate to redesign curricula and learning experiences. Instead of operating old modes of learning that do not fully meet the needs of all learners, we should invest more in competency-based pathways that align across K-12 schools, post-secondary experiences, and workforce training.

We must break down the silos and barriers for lifelong learning. These pathways should support learning inside and outside of school with paid internships, and allow students to explore and have workforce experiences that build towards credentials for students to realize economic prosperity. In order to strengthen the fabric of our society, we can create new pathways to prosperity that are competency-based and support students through personalized learning experiences that span inside and outside of school. These learning ecosystems will recognize learning that happens anywhere, anytime and result in credit on a comprehensive learner record over a lifetime.

Recommendations

- Establish K-12, higher education, and workforce competency-based qualification frameworks and credentialing that define success at each level of a pathway, including from K-12 education through post-secondary, employment, and beyond.
- Create pilots for recognition and validation of learning that happens anytime, anywhere.
- Seed innovation grants through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Higher Education Act (HEA) or the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins CTE), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to states to align competency-based pathways in K-12 education, higher education, and workforce.
- Incentivize states to support learner-centered credentialing across systems of early learning, K-12 education, CTE, higher education, and workforce training with micro-credentials, next generation credentials, and meaningful certifications that align across competency-based pathways.



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Modernize the Educator Workforce

The federal government should invest in competency-based educator professional learning systems to build educator capacity for student-centered learning. This requires improving and developing new educator recruitment, pre-service preparation, and professional development to better support competency-based education systems. This will ensure educators have the skills, support, and resources needed to support student-centered learning.

Federal investments should prioritize providing personalized professional learning for educators, allowing them to take ownership and design pathways that reflect their individual needs.

Recommendations

- Support grants to incentivize state education agencies to create competency-based educator micro-credential and credential programs to fulfill licensure requirements.
- Support upskilling for existing educators through micro-credentials and professional development to help teachers become planners and designers of new personalized, competency-based learning models.
- Launch an innovation pilot through the Higher Education Act (HEA) to modernize educator preparation to equip them with the skills to teach and lead in competency-based environments.
- Support priorities to build capacity for educators to strengthen assessment literacy to support competency-based assessments and recognition of learning across formal and informal education systems.
- Encourage training for educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators in anti-racist, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and restorative practices.



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Diversify the Educator Workforce

Research shows that a diverse educator workforce improves academic outcomes and wellbeing for all students. Recruiting and retaining a more racially diverse educator workforce is essential to best serve students and address injustices that have prevented educators of color from teaching.¹ In the last 30 years, the number of teachers of color has grown from 13 to 20 percent, but students of color make up 51 percent of public school students. The teacher workforce is not reflective of the racial makeup of the communities they serve. To diversify and create more equitable preservice pathways, federal policymakers should consider federal student aid policies that better address college affordability, persistence, and completion.

Recommendations

- Propose doubling the TEACH Grant award from \$4,000 to \$8,000 to provide additional support for college students who commit to teaching in a high-need field, in low-income schools.
- Establish a national goal to diversify the teaching profession such that it reflects the racial makeup of the national population.
- Double existing funding commitments for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and other initiatives such as the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence program, to create or scale up centers of excellence for teacher preparation programs and prepare the next generation of teachers of color to enter the educator profession.
- Establish or offer new funding to programs to support statewide Grow-Your-Own teacher training programs prioritizing those established to serve or operate in communities of color.

¹ In the 1950s, there were large numbers of Black educators. It was so common that one half of all college educated African Americans in the south were employed as classroom teachers. Following the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black schools closed and 38,000 Black educators in 21 southern and southern bordering states lost their jobs.



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Advance Educational Equity

For over a century, due to inequitable policy conditions past and present, students of color—especially Black and Brown students—have fared worse in almost every traditional educational measure of success compared to their white peers. Learning science research, however, shows us that all students can achieve at high levels and that learning happens on a continuum. It is important to meet students where they are academically and holistically. The nation must address academic and opportunity gaps early and ensure all students have access to a holistic, well-rounded education that supports whole-child development.

Recommendations

- Provide new funding for the Education, Innovation, and Research (EIR) program to study and invest in new learning designs to accelerate student-centered learning pathways and reduce opportunity gaps.
- Examine and challenge the frame of federal policy for elementary and secondary education. Make changes and recommendations to ensure federal policy is consistent with the evidence base and research from the learning sciences, allowing for student-centered learning environments to meet students where they are, and support research on positive human development.
- Encourage federal education policy leaders to develop education equity task forces that can help them understand federal barriers, and make recommendations to address the unique needs of students of color and other historically underserved students.
- Increase funding for HBCUs and other MSIs to build or expand K-20 pathways.



Bridge the Digital Divide

Student success in the 21st century requires access to technology and high-speed internet. Bridging the digital divide requires increasing federal funding and expanding access to broadband so that all students, families, and staff in K-12 education are connected to high-speed internet. Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should continue to modernize and expand the E-Rate and Lifeline programs for schools, communities, and home broadband and high-speed internet access and services to address the persistent inequalities that digitally disconnected students and staff face.

Recommendations

- Fully fund the E-Rate and Lifeline programs to provide all economically disadvantaged students access to high-speed internet.
- Expand eligible expenditures for connectivity, internet services, and access devices— such as the purchase and distribution of hotspot devices—to provide flexibility to meet future student and community needs.
- Provide permanent and ongoing funding for affordable connectivity programs to increase the number of low-income students who can access remote instruction at home.
- Streamline the E-Rate application process.
- Develop a more reliable data collection methodology that does not rely on self-reported coverage information.



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Support COVID-19 Learning Recovery

The long tail of COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate decades-old academic and opportunity disparities in a K-12 education system designed for an industrial era.² The federal government should use this critical moment to modernize our education systems. It is time to rethink the fundamental purpose and vision of K-12 education toward greater goals and challenge the current paradigm for how students are served.

The federal government must begin to invest in transforming toward student-centered learning, and not simply invest in tweaking the existing one-size-fits-all education model. In the wake of COVID-19, this will require examining federal policy, moving away from time-based and age-based policy frameworks, providing more flexibility to accelerate learning, and supporting the redesign of schooling and learning models with increased flexibility. The federal government needs to play a role in supporting future-focused learning by catalyzing the reinvention of the education system, supporting innovations to meet students' needs, and ensuring learning is personalized.

Recommendations

- Incentivize states to establish COVID-19 recovery task forces to address transforming education systems into personalized, competency-based learning systems to meet students' unique needs.
- Support local reciprocity by working with states and communities to establish short- and long-term goals for students and communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and providing increased federal flexibility to meet their needs.
- Prioritize funding for states that implement personalized, competency-based education strategies to meet students where they are and advance them based on demonstrated mastery of knowledge and skills.
- Encourage states to develop multiple pathways to graduation to ensure students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to be successful in postsecondary education and careers.

² <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>



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 federal and state policymakers to enable innovative education systems to prepare all students for a lifetime of success.

Please contact Aurora Institute's Center for Policy:

Susan Patrick, President and CEO
spatrick@aurora-institute.org

110 N. Glebe Road, Suite 1010
Arlington, VA 22201



aurora-institute.org