The Future is High School

A Strategy for State Leaders to Accelerate Learning, Work, and American Renewal.

*10 Policy Actions. Every State.
One Nation-Defining Opportunity.*

2026
Executive Summary

Across the country, states stand at a defining crossroads. More than any other level of government, states hold the power to shape the future of American education—and with it, the future of our economy, workforce, and communities.

This responsibility is not new—but it is uniquely American. Education is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, yet it has always been a bedrock of American success and innovation, and the authority for schooling has always rested with the states. Especially in this moment—when the federal role has narrowed and economic pressures are intensifying—the responsibility for preparing a new kind of workforce to thrive in a new kind of economy has never been more consequential.

Nowhere is the need for change more urgent than in high school. High schools sit at the intersection of education, economy, and citizenship: they are where young people prepare for college, careers, and civic life—and where states build the workforce and shared prosperity of the future. High schools are not too late; they are the linchpin.

Yet today's high schools were not designed for this moment. They are governed by outdated policies, legacy structures, and narrow measures of success, even as the world is changing faster than ever. The result is clear in the data.

In 2024, high school seniors posted the lowest scores ever recorded on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in both reading and math.[1] That means nearly one in three young people entering adulthood—stepping into the workforce or higher education—struggles to grasp the main point of a newspaper's opinion piece.[2] Nearly half are likely to have trouble splitting a bill and calculating a tip in a restaurant or understanding the consequences of annual credit card interest.[3]

And students moving through high school now face equally steep challenges: In 2023, our nation's 13-year-olds entered high school with the weakest reading performance in 50 years and the lowest math performance in more than three decades.[4]

Students themselves are telling us what's wrong. Too many are absent—nearly one in four are chronically so[5]—citing boredom, stress, and irrelevance as top reasons for disengaging.[6] Too few say they feel prepared for life after high school.[7]

The case for change is unmistakable. Students need schools that truly prepare them for the future they're stepping into. Employers need graduates who can do more, know more, and adapt more than ever before in a world where automation and artificial intelligence are reshaping work and daily life.[8] Employers are searching for young people who can think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate across differences, and keep learning throughout their careers.[9] Economists call these "durable competencies." They are essential not only for long-term success at work but also for life—and yet most state standards never systematically address these critical skills.

Across the country, there are already extraordinary examples of transformed high schools—proof points that show what's possible and how to do it. Decades of research now confirm what adolescent learners need, what neuroscience tells us about the teenage brain, and what successful systems change requires.[10] Together, they point to a clear and hopeful path forward.

The XQ report suite—The Future Is High School—is organized around those learnings. It lays out 10 policy actions (encompassing 22 related policy moves) that together create a new system for assessing and supporting high school success for every student, in every state. These actions build upon decades of research; our own work with communities to implement high school redesign; the science of learning; and insights from educators, school administrators, and district and state partners. And they organize around the fundamental foundations of educational excellence: clear goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that truly matter.

Future-Focused Learning Goals

States must set clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do—reflecting today's and tomorrow's world, not yesterday's. That means integrating academic standards with deeper, durable competencies like problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability. These goals should be visible, measurable, and systemically embedded across instruction, assessment, and graduation requirements.

Powerful Learning Experiences

Learning needs to be engaging, relevant, and applied across time, place, and disciplines. Students should have opportunities to explore complex ideas through real-world problems, supported by high expectations, meaningful relationships, and access to experiences beyond the classroom—including college courses, work-based learning, and community partnerships. School culture should reinforce belonging and meaning, fostering strong relationships among students and adults in a climate where students can explore ideas, express themselves, get feedback, and form positive identities.

Measures That Matter

Traditional transcripts and summative test scores tell only part of the story. Students need opportunities to demonstrate mastery throughout the year, across varied contexts, and in ways that reflect genuine learning. This includes performance-based assessments, modern credentials, and public reporting of outcomes that reflect not just graduation, but what happens next.

These actions are concrete, measurable, and most importantly, actionable.

A System of Policy Actions

Future-Focused Learning Goals

Policy Action 1	Mastery-Based Credits
Policy Action 2	Core Competencies
Policy Action 3	K-16 Alignment

Powerful Learning Experiences

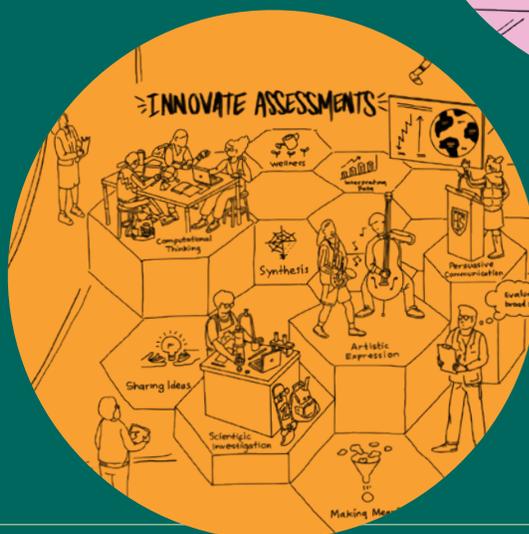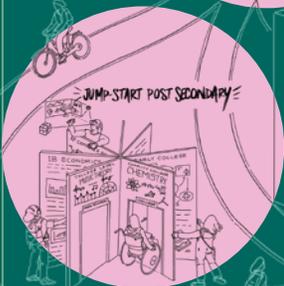|	
Policy Action 4	Community-Led Redesign
Policy Action 5	Postsecondary Credits
Policy Action 6	Internships and Apprenticeships
Policy Action 7	Professional Development

Measures That Matter

Policy Action 8	Next-Generation Assessments
Policy Action 9	Redesigned Transcripts
Policy Action 10	Success Data

A System of
Policy Actions

Let Communities Lead

Data Through and Beyond High School

Make Diplomas Matter

Jump-Start Post Secondary

Transcripts Showing All You Know

Innovate Assessments

Empower Educators

Real Works, Real Credit

Free Learning From the Clock

Define Success

Ten Policy Actions for Modernizing High School Systems

This inaugural report is written for state leaders, policymakers, and everyone working to make high school a powerful engine of opportunity, mobility, and progress. It's meant to be used—not just read. Whether you are shaping legislation, designing a pilot, leading a coalition, or rethinking systems statewide, the tools to act are here. The moment is urgent. The path is clear. And the future is already being built.
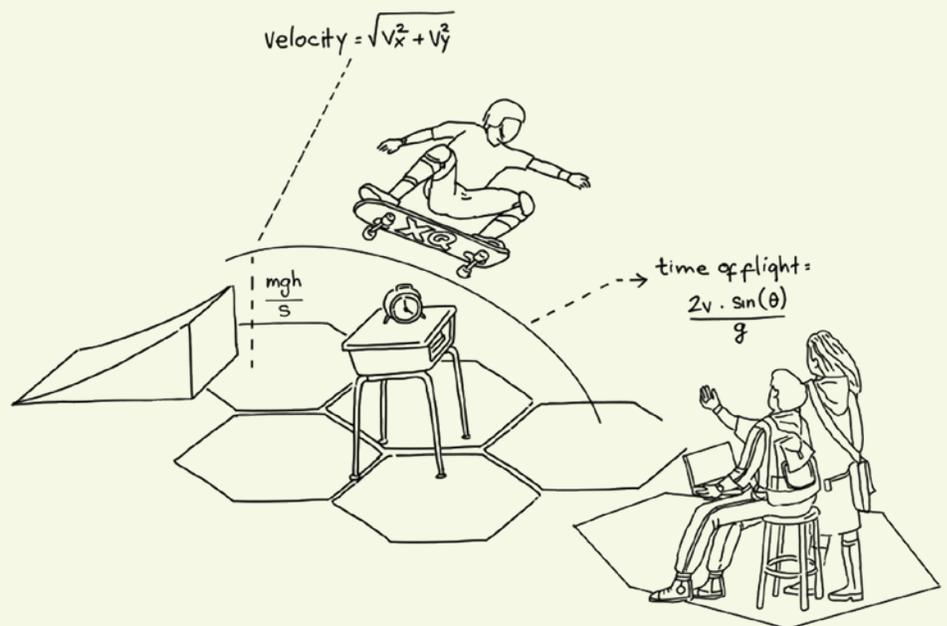
$$Velocity = \sqrt{v_x^2 + v_y^2}$$

$$\frac{mgh}{s}$$

$$time\ of\ flight = \frac{2v \cdot \sin(\theta)}{g}$$

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

Expand flexibility to award credit based on demonstrated mastery, not seat time

Met by 32 states

Why it matters: Modernizing how students earn credit enables high schools to focus on genuine learning, not minutes spent in a classroom.

What this means: State policy permits districts to award credit based on demonstrated student competency in every course, not solely in special circumstances like credit recovery.

Policy Action 2

Establish statewide graduate profiles aligned to academic and real-world competencies

Met by 32 states + D.C.

Why it matters: A graduate profile sets the North Star for what graduates should really know and be able to do: not just pass courses, but leave demonstrably ready for college, career, and citizenship. These profiles help align state systems, prepare young people for a changing future, and ensure every student gets the kind of learning that matters most.

What this means: States have adopted a public "Profile of a Graduate" or similar framework that includes durable competencies and is integrated into policy or guidance.

Policy Action 3

Align high school graduation requirements with public post-secondary eligibility and use direct admissions to streamline the pathway

Met by 22 states + D.C.

Why it matters: All students should be empowered to pursue postsecondary education, whether directly after high school or later in life. Yet in most states, students can graduate from high school and still be ineligible for entrance to public college—without even knowing it. And those who are eligible face an overcomplicated admissions process.

What this means: Students who meet high school graduation requirements also fulfill coursework required for admission to the state's public universities. Institutions directly admit eligible students without making them submit multiple, complex application forms.

Invest in community-led high school redesign initiatives

Met by 5 states
+ D.C.

Why it matters: A truly community-led high school redesign process will produce stronger school models and earn widespread local buy-in and support at the same time. High school students, families, educators, and civic leaders must have agency to design models that address the community's unique needs and leverage local resources.

What this means: States provide resources and technical support for local school communities to lead high school transformation, with room to innovate.

Ensure universal access to advanced coursework and college credit opportunities

Met by 38 states + D.C.

Why it matters: Every student deserves a fair chance to challenge themselves, work hard, and get a head start on postsecondary credits and lifelong success—which is exactly what advanced coursework is all about. Taking even one rigorous college-level course during high school leads to positive outcomes later in life. While access is growing, too many students—especially in rural and low-income communities—still don't have access to this advanced coursework.

What this means: States guarantee that all high school students have access to AP, IB, dual enrollment, or Early College courses with goals and strategies for equitable participation.

Award credit for rigorous work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships

Met by 46 states + D.C.
4 states partially meet criteria

Why it matters: High-quality work-based learning gives students the chance to explore potential career pathways, gain valuable workplace experience, and graduate with critical knowledge and competencies necessary for success beyond high school.

What this means: State policy allows students to earn graduation credit for work-based learning aligned with rigorous, state-defined quality standards.

Invest in educator preparation for student-centered, deeper learning models

Met by 23 states

Why it matters: Teachers matter most when it comes to student learning, and they are eager to adopt student-centered approaches. States can empower them by providing the time, tools, and support to lead the work.

What this means: States update teacher preparation requirements and provide professional learning focused on project-based, competency-based, or interdisciplinary instruction—not just one-time "PD" sessions.

Pilot and scale next-generation assessments of mastery and deeper learning

Met by 0 states

14 states partially meet criteria

Why it matters: Emerging technology presents new opportunities to rethink assessments from the ground up. When, how, and what we assess can be redesigned to capture deeper learning and durable competencies, along with academic knowledge and skills.

What this means: State policy authorizes or requires the use of performance-based assessments that measure mastery of competencies like collaborative problem-solving.

Develop modern transcripts that reflect a broader range of student achievement

Met by 0 states

12 states partially meet criteria

Why it matters: Traditional transcripts show courses, grades, and GPAs. But they say little about what students actually know and can do in support of lifelong learning.

What this means: States support or require transcripts that capture demonstrated competencies, credentials, artifacts, or experiences—not just seat time and grades.

Report postsecondary enrollment and completion data by high school

Met by 12 states

27 states + D.C. partially meet criteria

Why it matters: We can't improve what we don't measure. Without clear data on what happens after high school, success remains guesswork.

What this means: States publicly report disaggregated data, by high school, on students' postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and credential completion.

These 10 policies are not a checklist. They constitute a dynamic framework of interconnected, mutually reinforcing leadership actions. Taken together, they shift the purpose of high school: from compliance to preparation, from coverage to mastery, and from systems built for the past to ones designed for the future.

To support this work, XQ has developed 50 individual state reports and one for the District of Columbia. Each is a concise profile of where that state stands, where the opportunities lie, and what actions can be taken next. All of this is available through a new, interactive digital platform that allows users to compare policies across states, access tools and resources, and track progress over time. The report also highlights some of the most promising and instructive examples we've seen across the country: state and local efforts that show what's possible when bold policy meets community-driven design.

Momentum for high school transformation is already building. Across the country, state leaders, educators, and communities are advancing bold policies and pioneering new school designs, shaped by local priorities, strengths, and contexts. The opportunity now is to connect these efforts, scale what's working, and ensure that every student, in every community, has access to a high school experience that prepares them for what's next.

High school isn't the only lever for change, but it is one of the most powerful. And it's where the future of everything begins.

We Want To Learn from You

We know this report doesn't capture everything. In every corner of the country, there are communities pushing boundaries, educators leading innovation, and state leaders finding new ways forward. We've highlighted some of the most powerful examples we've seen, but we know there are more out there. Scan the QR code below to share what we've missed.

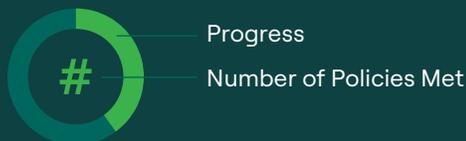If you're doing this work, or know someone who is, we want to hear from you.

Let's learn together— and build the future of high school together.

Use this QR code to share stories about high school transformation in your state or community.

The National Landscape: State Policies to Advance High School Transformation

Policy Actions by State

WA 6 · OR 3 · ID 5 · MT 4 · ND 6 · MN 6 · WI 4 · ME 5 · VT 5 · NH 4 · NY 3 · MA 6 · RI · SD 4 · IA 6 · MI 6 · WY 4 · NE 3 · NV 4 · UT 6 · CO 5 · KS 4 · MO 3 · IL 3 · IN 6 · OH 3 · PA 3 · CT 4 · NJ 4 · MD 2 · DC · DE 4 · CA 2 · WV 5 · VA 4 · KY 6 · NC 5 · OK 6 · AR 5 · TN 4 · SC 5 · AZ 2 · MS 3 · AL 5 · NM 5 · LA 4 · GA 4 · AK 1 · HI 5 · TX 5 · FL 1

Progress

\# Number of Policies Met

Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

Progress Status: ✓ Meets the Policy Action · ◐ Partially Meets · ○ Not Yet Met	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Alabama	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	◐	○	5/10; 1*
Alaska	✓	○	○	○	○	◐	○	○	○	◐	1/10; 2*
Arizona	○	○	○	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	2/10
Arkansas	○	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	◐	✓	5/10; 1*
California	○	○	○	✓	○	✓	○	○	○	◐	2/10; 1*
Colorado	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	◐	◐	✓	5/10; 2*
Connecticut	✓	○	○	○	✓	◐	✓	○	○	✓	4/10; 1*
Delaware	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	◐	4/10; 1*
District of Columbia	○	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	◐	5/10; 1*
Florida	○	○	○	○	✓	◐	○	○	○	◐	1/10; 2*
Georgia	○	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	4/10
Hawaii	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	◐	○	○	○	✓	5/10; 1*
Idaho	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	◐	◐	○	5/10; 2*
Illinois	○	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	◐	○	○	3/10; 1*
Indiana	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	◐	○	✓	6/10; 1*
Iowa	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	✓	6/10
Kansas	○	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	4/10
Kentucky	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	◐	◐	◐	5/10; 3*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Louisiana	✓	✓			✓	✓				⋯	4/10; 1*
Maine	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			⋯	5/10; 1*
Maryland	✓		✓		✓	✓				⋯	4/10; 1*
Massachusetts		✓				✓				⋯	2/10; 1*
Michigan	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	⋯	⋯	✓	6/10; 2*
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	6/10
Mississippi					✓	✓				✓	3/10
Missouri	✓					✓	✓	⋯			3/10; 1*
Montana	✓				✓	✓	✓			⋯	4/10; 1*
Nebraska	✓	✓				✓				⋯	3/10; 1*
Nevada		✓			✓	✓	✓	⋯		⋯	4/10; 2*
New Hampshire	✓	✓			✓	✓				⋯	4/10; 1*
New Jersey		✓				✓				⋯	2/10; 1*
New Mexico		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				5/10
New York		✓				✓	✓	⋯		⋯	3/10; 2*
North Carolina		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		⋯		⋯	5/10; 2*
North Dakota	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		⋯	⋯	6/10; 2*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

Progress Status
- ✓ Meets the Policy Action
- ⋯ Partially Meets
- ○ Not Yet Met

	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Ohio	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	○	3/10; 1*
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	⋯	6/10; 2*
Oregon	✓	○	✓	○	○	✓	○	○	○	⋯	3/10; 1*
Pennsylvania	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	3/10; 1*
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	⋯	6/10; 2*
South Carolina	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	5/10; 1*
South Dakota	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	4/10 ; 1*
Tennessee	○	○	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	⋯	4/10; 1*
Texas	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	5/10
Utah	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	⋯	6/10; 2*
Vermont	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	5/10
Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	6/10; 1*
Washington	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	✓	6/10; 1*
West Virginia	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	⋯	4/10; 1*
Wisconsin	○	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	⋯	4/10; 2*
Wyoming	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	⋯	⋯	○	4/10; 2*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

Across the country, state leaders, educators, and communities are advancing bold policies and pioneering new school designs, shaped by local priorities, strengths, and contexts.

This is an extraordinary challenge and a historic opportunity to lead: to shape systems, unlock potential, and take part in a nation-defining renewal, starting with high school.

Endnotes

1. The Nation's Report Card. (2025, September 9). *How did students perform in the nation compared to 2019?* https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/

2. The Nation's Report Card. Grade 12 Reading, National Trends and Student Skills. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reports/reading/2024/g12/national-trends/#student-skills

3. The Nation's Report Card. Item Maps, Grade 12 Mathematics, 2024. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/itemmaps/?subj=MAT&grade=12&year=2024. The assessed skill is solving a multi-step problem involving percentages. The NAEP example item is the restaurant scenario. Understanding the consequences of credit card debt is another real-life scenario that would require someone to solve a multi-step problem involving percentages.

4. The Nation's Report Card. NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics. *Scores decline again for 13-year-old students in reading and mathematics.* https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2023/. The assessments were administered to 13-year-olds during the 2022-23 school year, so test-takers would have entered high school in summer-fall of 2023.

5. Malkus, N. (2025, June 12). *Lingering absence in public schools: Tracking post-pandemic chronic absenteeism into 2024.* American Enterprise Institute. https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/lingering-absence-in-public-schools-tracking-post-pandemic-chronic-absenteeism-into-2024/

6. Morning Consult & Ed Choice. (2024, August). *Teens and their schooling perspectives: A national polling report.* https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/316597.pdf

7. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025, August). *Voices of Gen Z study: Year 3 annual survey report* [Downloadable data file]. https://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx

8. Hazan, E., Madgavkar, A., Chui, M., Smit, S., Maor, D., Dandona, G. S., & Huyghues-Despointes, R. (2024, May 21). *A new future of work: The race to deploy AI and raise skills in Europe and beyond.* McKinsey Global Institute. https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/a-new-future-of-work-the-race-to-deploy-ai-and-raise-skills-in-europe-and-beyond#/

9. World Economic Forum. (2025, January). *Future of jobs report 2025.* https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

10. National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century.* National Academies Press; Steinberg, L. (2014). *Age of opportunity: Lessons from the new science of adolescence.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; Jensen, F.E. (2014). The teenage brain. Harper; Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649; Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650; Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791; Martin, H.R. (2024). *How do we learn: A scientific approach to learning and teaching;* Jossey-Bass; Yeager, D. (2024). *10 to 25: The science of motivating young people.* Avid Reader Press.

XQ

XQ

The Future is High School

A Strategy for State Leaders to Accelerate Learning, Work, and American Renewal.

10 Policy Actions. Every State.
One Nation–Defining Opportunity.

Dear Reader:

XQ's new report, The Future is High School, carries a message that is both crucial and urgent. Our country depends on the excellence of its high schools, and our high schools depend on the excellence of their teachers.

Every day, we are fortunate to interact with smart, curious, ambitious young people who want nothing more than to be great teachers. The desire to be great also applies to veteran teachers, who come to us because they understand the continuing need to update their knowledge and refine their craft.

And the task they face as high school teachers today is daunting: fostering students' deep understanding of foundational knowledge while simultaneously supporting them in acquiring durable skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability, that enable them to apply their knowledge in new and unfamiliar contexts.

Both of us are in the business of preparing excellent teachers for our nation's schools, as well as school leaders who can deliver on the promise of this report. But their ability to serve with excellence depends on the coherence and quality of the systems that surround and support them in the process of teaching and learning.

We believe that XQ's compelling new report sets the policy context for systems within which excellent teaching and learning can thrive. Its recommendations will raise the bar for teachers and school leaders—but it will also raise the bar for states, students, and schools of education. To meet the challenges of the future, our high schools must change, and it will take all of us to get it done.

Carole G. Basile

Dean, Mary Lou Fulton College for
Teaching and Learning Innovation
at Arizona State University

Shael Polakow-Suransky

President, Bank Street College
of Education

Contents

Introduction

High schools have the power to shape lives, economies, and nations.

When our high schools are thriving, the ripple effects reverberate up and down the educational spectrum. Strong high schools ignite excellence in K–8, improve postsecondary completion, and strengthen career readiness. Over time, these benefits multiply and compound, leading to an educated and engaged citizenry, stronger economic growth, and greater competitiveness on the world stage.

But that stage is shifting rapidly. Our young people are growing up at a time when the economy and workforce are in constant flux. And high schools must keep pace.

We live in an age of self-driving taxis, blockchain, and renewed interest in space exploration. The public launch of ChatGPT placed a powerful form of generative artificial intelligence (AI) within the reach of every American. As of October 2025, 800 million people worldwide were using it on a weekly basis—double the 400 million active weekly users in February of the same year.[1] Tens of millions more use tools developed by other AI companies.

This rapid shift opens up a whole new world of career possibilities, but it also stands to have an enormous disruptive effect on the workforce. Up to 12 million U.S. workers will have to find new jobs as tasks become automated.[2] Others will need to learn how to partner with AI to complete job tasks formerly performed entirely by humans.[3] The implications will be even more profound as businesses expand their use of agentic AI—systems that can plan and execute multi-step, real-world tasks with minimal human oversight.[4] **Coupled with the pace and scale of technological and social change more broadly, the intelligent age is nothing less than a clarion call for a new kind of American high school.**

Today's K–12 students will inherit this new era, one in which human success will be powered as much by what economists call durable competencies—the ability to build on existing knowledge to rapidly learn new skills, solve complex problems, collaborate on diverse teams, and master ever-evolving technologies—as by technical know-how.

Unlike job-specific technical skills, these transferable competencies can be deployed in a range of different job contexts, across career sectors, and over a lifetime. In times of rapid technological change, durable competencies equip workers with the flexibility and versatility needed to adapt to any new challenge or opportunity that comes their way.[5]

Mastering these and other essential competencies requires an <u>entirely new kind of educational experience—</u> one that traditional high schools were never designed to deliver.

Even within a single, stable job setting, durable competencies are likely to be in high demand. For example:

- An investigation of 76 million job postings revealed that eight in 10 of the most requested skills were durable competencies. Employers sought the top five durable skills nearly four times more frequently than the top five technical skills.[6]

- A U.S. government analysis of federal jobs data found that durable competencies are required for in-demand jobs across all education levels, and occupations expected to grow the fastest between 2019 to 2029 "require a mix of soft skills and process skills that help a person acquire knowledge quickly, such as active learning and critical thinking." [7]

- According to a 2024 survey of employers worldwide, the top five competencies companies require today are analytical thinking; resilience, flexibility, and agility; leadership and social influence; creative thinking; and motivation and self-awareness. By 2030, employers anticipate a significant increase in demand for technological skills; creative thinking; agility; and curiosity and lifelong learning.[8]

Mastering these and other essential competencies requires an entirely new kind of educational experience—one that traditional high schools were never designed to deliver. Our urgent national priority must be to transform the high school experience to match the realities of a transformed world.

Fortunately, advances in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and the learning sciences have yielded new insights into how young people learn—and what they need to be successful in high school and beyond.[9]

The high school years are an especially fertile time for brain development. Neuroplasticity is as present in the adolescent brain as it is from birth to five years old. During the high school years, there are big changes in the parts of the brain that control reasoning, planning, and self-control.[10] Even IQ can increase during the teenage years.[11] The researcher Caroline Hoxby, whose own studies have underscored the developmental importance of the adolescent years, put it this way: "If you are going to make an intervention to improve advanced cognitive skills, you need to hit early adolescence because that is when the brain is most responsive."[12]

This growing awareness of adolescence as a critical period of development has contributed to a robust body of research over the last two decades, one that has shed light on the modes of instruction that offer the deepest and "stickiest" learning benefits for students. For example:

- **Learning deepens when it is active, not passive.** Teenagers are more likely to absorb and retain information when they engage with challenging content, make meaning from what they learn, connect new learning to what they already know, and apply new knowledge and skills to real-world challenges.

- **Integrating academic knowledge with other cognitive and durable competencies enables what the National Academy of Sciences refers to as "deep learning"—learning that can be applied in a variety of different contexts.**[13] As a result, durable competencies should always be deeply intertwined with—not "in addition to" or layered "on top of"—academic instruction.

- **Durable competencies strengthen and reinforce the acquisition of knowledge and skills in academic disciplines like literacy, math, science, and history.** In effect, durable competencies have a dual power for students. They provide knowledge and skills that are increasingly necessary for the workforce, while also supporting proficiency in academic coursework during high school.

- **The context in which a student learns plays a crucial role in the quality of their learning.** Students learn best when they have, for example, trusting relationships with the adults around them and a strong sense of belonging to their school community. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging have higher grades, better attendance, and fewer disciplinary problems than their peers who feel disconnected from school. They also graduate at higher rates and are more likely to enroll in college.[14]

Research shows that when educators act on these insights, students benefit. A study of over 160,000 Chicago students revealed that high schools fostering multiple dimensions of student development in 9th grade set students on a stronger path to success in high school and beyond. Helping students grow in areas such as school connectedness, academic engagement, study habits, and perseverance had up to twice as much impact on graduation and college-going rates as improving test scores alone.[15]

Learning in next-generation high schools will reflect both of these shifts—technology's impact on the workforce and the latest insights into how young people learn. Ultimately, that will mean moving beyond the time-based system known as the Carnegie Unit, which once helped fuel American greatness but now stymies innovation at every turn. •

Why XQ?

XQ launched in 2015 with an open call to reimagine high school, inviting communities nationwide to form teams and dream big about how high schools could better prepare students to flourish in a rapidly changing world. We supported those teams with insights from learning science, adolescent development, and effective school practices, along with a structured design process to turn their visions into reality.

The response was remarkable: 10,000 people from 49 states formed 700 teams, proposing bold, innovative high school designs. A decade later, XQ reaches more than 50,000 high school students through partnerships, tools, and resources, across nearly 200 sites.

Over the past decade, we've learned that families, educators, and students have a strong desire to create more engaging, empowering high school experiences for all young people. But desire isn't enough. They need tools and resources to guide this complex work. XQ is working alongside our partners to create a comprehensive toolbox guided by the science of learning, our decade of collaboration with schools and systems nationwide, and hundreds of conversations with experts and community innovators. This toolbox includes:

- **XQ Learner Outcomes and Competencies:** Rigorous, scientifically-based benchmarks, intertwined with standards, that describe what students must know and be able to do to truly thrive in today's world.

- **XQ Design Principles, Design Journey, and Educational Outcomes Audit and Analysis (EOAA):** Tools to help communities assess their starting point and design high school experiences that enable students to master the full set of academic, cognitive, and durable competencies they will need to succeed.

- **XQ Math Badging and XQ Math:** A student-centered, proficiency-based approach to high school mathematics, XQ Math Badging breaks traditional courses into 23 smaller, standards-aligned badges, each with targeted assessments. Built on this foundation, XQ Math is a coherent, year-long Algebra 1 course that integrates project-based learning and competency-driven activities. It can be adopted as a full course or in modular pieces, allowing flexibility for educators and students.

- **The CF+XQ Learning Experience (LX) Initiative:** A partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to create and test learning modules aligned with the XQ Learner Outcomes. These resources make powerful learning experiences accessible to high school teachers and students everywhere. (See "Making the Vision Accessible: The CF+XQ LX Initiative" at the end of this chapter for more details.)

- **"The First Class" and XQ PowerUps:** "The First Class" is a documentary film that follows the complex journeys of the founding educators and the first cohort of students at Crosstown High, an XQ School in Memphis, Tennessee. The XQ PowerUps leverage footage from that film to provide aspiring and current educators with a self-guided series of professional learning modules based on the XQ Design Principles and deep research into inquiry-driven, project-based learning. Completion of the modules earns educators a certificate of completion from Arizona State University.

A New Vision for High School Learning

Devised in 1906, the Carnegie Unit segmented academic subjects into year-long courses and daily classes, all based on standardized units of time, often called "seat time." The Carnegie Unit brought order to secondary education, offering a common system for structuring the school day, awarding credits, and granting diplomas. It established a universal "architecture" for high school learning at a time when thousands of communities were founding their first public high schools—and when Americans commonly graduated into jobs on the factory floor.
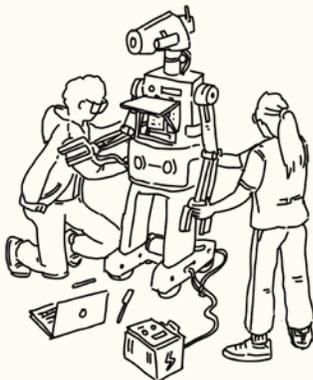
But today, that architecture is showing its age, trapping educators and students alike in systems and structures that were never intended to deliver the kinds of experiences that can engage, inspire, and empower today's young people.

Four out of five high school teachers (82 percent) believe it is important for schools to provide students with hands-on experiences to apply what they are learning through work in their community. Yet fewer than half of high school teachers say that their schools are "very" or "fairly" successful in developing students' ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world situations (48 percent) or in making courses relevant to students' future and applying what they are learning outside of school (46 percent).[16]

In a world that demands a rich mix of academic knowledge and skills coupled with durable competencies, most educators operate in a system that awards credit for completing courses that meet for a specified number of hours per year, whether or not students have fully mastered the knowledge and skills taught in the class.

The consequences of this century-old approach are increasingly impossible to ignore. Students who are highly engaged in their learning are 10 times more likely to say they feel prepared for the future than students who feel bored and unchallenged.[17] But too many young people are feeling exactly this way—and educators and students alike are sounding the alarm. Three in five secondary teachers (60 percent) say that lack of student interest in learning is a "very" or "fairly" big problem, and an additional one in four (26 percent) agree it is "somewhat" a problem.[18]

Indeed, record numbers of teenagers are simply staying home. The percentage of students chronically absent from school surged from 15 percent in 2018 to 28 percent in 2022, and it remains unacceptably high today—nearly 24 percent.[19] While there is no single explanation for this trend, young people themselves are most likely to point to school being "boring," "stressful," or "pointless" as reasons for high rates of chronic absenteeism.[20]

Less than half of 10th graders say that they get to use their thinking skills rather than just memorizing things in school (46 percent) or get to develop their own ideas in school (33 percent).[21] Fewer than two-thirds of our nation's high schoolers say that their schoolwork challenges them in a good way (57 percent).[22]

This crisis of disengagement not only poses serious risks for adolescents' social development, but it is also accompanied by ongoing declines in student achievement. In 2024, high school seniors scored at the lowest levels ever recorded on national reading and math tests. One in three 12th graders failed to demonstrate even a basic level of reading skills, and 45 percent failed to do so in math. And, although 82 percent of 12th graders said they had been accepted to a college or a technical training program, only 35 percent had college-ready reading skills.[23]

On the 2022 international PISA assessment, American 15-year-olds performed worse in mathematics than they had at any point in the nearly twenty-year history of the test. One in three U.S. teens struggles with practical, real-life math problems—things like converting from one currency to another, finding the quickest route between point A and point B, or figuring out the best car to buy based on a few facts like price and fuel capacity.[24]

With sliding student achievement and so many students feeling disengaged, it should come as little surprise that fewer than two-thirds of high school students say they feel prepared for the future.[25]

"Where I came from, it's like pencil, paper, lecture. When you come to Crosstown, it's completely different."

— Crosstown High student

At **Crosstown High** in Memphis, Tennessee, students identified patterns in health statistics by partnering with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital to examine cancer rates and treatment outcomes. In biology, they mastered key scientific concepts through a semester-long exploration of how humans can someday live on Mars.

Abolishing the Carnegie Unit and the constraints it puts on learning is critical to beginning to resolve these challenges. We need a bold, modern architecture for high school education—one that empowers transformative teaching and learning, sparking a new era of creativity and innovation in the intelligent age.

So, what exactly will the new American high school look like?

There is no single blueprint. High schools should emerge from a community-led design process in which young people and adults come together to imagine a school that meets the unique needs and aspirations of their community. At the same time, while there is no one "right" model, every high school should reflect three foundational elements: **future-focused learning goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that matter.**

Future-Focused Learning Goals: Student success looks different today than it did a century ago. In a world in which most people will hold multiple jobs over the course of a lifetime, academic knowledge alone is not enough. Our goals for what students should know and be able to do must evolve to reflect the realities of today's workforce and world. This means integrating durable competencies—being able to take initiative, communicate and collaborate, apply knowledge in new and unfamiliar situations, design solutions to real-life problems, and more—with traditional academic state standards to create a broad and rigorous set of learner outcomes. The achievement of these outcomes should serve as a north star to coordinate efforts systemwide.

Powerful Learning Experiences: As learning goals evolve to reflect a fuller set of knowledge and skills, instruction will need to evolve, too. In transformed high schools, learning is multidimensional, project-based, high interest, authentic, rigorous, and expansive in the use of space and time. (See "Making the Vision Accessible: The CF+XQ LX Initiative" at the end

of this chapter for more details). Learning isn't ruled by clocks, boxed into classrooms, and limited by what's in a textbook. Instead, students learn by connecting with community resources and experts, stepping into the role of self-motivated creators, designers, and problem solvers who tackle real-world challenges. School culture reinforces belonging and meaning, fostering strong relationships among students and adults in a climate where students can explore ideas, express themselves, get feedback, and form positive identities.

Measures That Matter: Assessing student mastery of academic, cognitive, and durable competencies requires more than classroom quizzes and periodic tests that provide only a snapshot of a student's capabilities. Students must be able to show what they have learned and what they can do throughout the school year. Next-generation transcripts and credentials will offer valuable, life-long currency because they communicate, "Here are the powerful competencies I've mastered and here's what I can do with them."

Every high school should reflect three foundational elements: future-focused learning goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that matter.

These three elements—future-focused learning goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that matter—are key to creating high schools capable of preparing students for a workforce defined by continuous and rapid transition.

Fortunately, the movement to reimagine high school is giving birth to this new generation of schools—places that show what is possible when community members come together to rethink what rigorous learning can look like, and school leaders build on that original vision through ongoing, iterative improvement. In these transformed high schools, students are learning in ways that better equip them to thrive in an uncertain future. They are exercising greater agency, connecting with real-world experts and resources, learning outside the classroom and school building, and creating fresh solutions to authentic problems.

Improving high school outcomes has the potential to dramatically change not only the trajectories of the young people they serve, but also the economic prospects of the country as a whole. Research shows that improved reading and math skills can raise an individual's salary by $11,000 to $21,000 annually, adding up to hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of a lifetime.[26] Over a 20-year period, the U.S. could add $4.7 trillion to its economy just by increasing the math skills of workers in STEM jobs. Researchers are also starting to engage in research to document the positive economic impact of durable competencies, such as problem solving and teamwork.[27]

State leaders have the power to accelerate grassroots efforts in communities across the country. They can signal urgency, galvanize action, and convene stakeholders around solutions. Most importantly, they can adopt policies that empower communities to reimagine high school learning, while removing obstacles to broad-based, sustained transformation. ●

"It's a cool experience being able to help people in the medical field while we're still in high school. It's a lot of pressure, but a good pressure you want to feel."

— Iowa BIG student

In Cedar Rapids, students at **Iowa BIG** collaborated with medical professionals at UnityPoint Health and St. Luke's Hospital to design better occupational therapy puzzles for young children. In the process, they learned how to code software and use 3D printers to build prototypes.

Eliminating Silos To Support Transformation

Transforming high school isn't just about changing what happens in classrooms—it's about aligning the systems that shape student opportunity. Forward-thinking states are taking on the hard work of breaking down bureaucratic silos that have long separated K–12, higher education, and workforce development. It's not easy. It means reimagining legacy structures and fostering deep collaboration across agencies that have traditionally been siloed. But the payoff is powerful: a more coherent, connected, and student-centered approach to preparing young people for the future.

In 2023, Ohio passed landmark legislation creating the nation's first Department of Education and Workforce. "We can't separate education from workforce—it's inseparable," says Director Steve Dackin.[28] The move reflects a fundamental shift: high school is no longer seen as the end of a pipeline, but the beginning of a flexible, skills-based journey.

Colorado is also leading in efforts to reduce silos across agencies and to support students' seamless transition from high school to postsecondary and the workforce. In 2025, Governor Jared Polis issued an executive order calling for state agencies—from higher education to economic development—to collaborate on "reimagining the postsecondary talent development system."[29] It builds on Colorado's longstanding efforts to "blur the lines" between high school, higher education, and work-based learning.[30]

In Georgia, Governor Brian Kemp has called on the state to cultivate "all the graduates that [Georgia] businesses need … [by] lining up all agencies working together to educate students."[31] Through GEORGIA MATCH—one of the largest state-run direct admissions initiatives—high school seniors are automatically admitted to participating colleges and technical schools.[32] In addition, the state's Office of Student Achievement, which works across seven state agencies, has developed a public dashboard with insights about how diploma requirements align with university entrance standards, providing students and families with the visibility necessary to confidently navigate postsecondary pathways.

These and other nationwide efforts reflect a growing consensus: meaningful high school transformation requires that states eliminate silos between school and workforce systems.

The payoff is powerful: a more coherent, connected, and student-centered approach to preparing young people for the future.

Governors Leading: 5 Ways To Elevate High School Transformation

- **Convene a cross-sector high school transformation task force:** Bring together leaders from K–12, postsecondary, workforce, economic development, and communities to co-develop a statewide vision and implementation strategy for modernizing high school.

- **Launch a statewide redesign initiative with dedicated resources:** Champion a program or state initiative that provides resources for communities and districts to redesign high schools aligned to future-ready goals, including work-based learning and mastery-based learning models.

- **Direct the Department of Education to issue guidance on flexibilities:** Empower local innovation by clarifying and expanding the use of existing flexibilities—such as credit for competency, seat time waivers, or transcript redesign—through formal guidance or executive order.

- **Integrate high school goals into workforce and postsecondary alignment strategies:** Use your executive authority to direct collaboration across state agencies—modeled after efforts in Ohio, Colorado, and Georgia—to ensure high school transformation is embedded in broader talent and economic development plans.

- **Highlight high school innovation in public forums:** Use the State of the State address, local site visits, student roundtables, and op-eds to elevate student-centered models, drive demand, and signal that high school transformation is a top priority for the administration. •

"There were a lot of real-life applications with this project—not just helping people get water but things that we can apply to our own lives with other daily challenges."

— Latitude High student

At **Latitude High** in Oakland, students tackle meaningful, creative projects with professionals in the community while mastering competencies and earning the course credits necessary to qualify for admission to California's state university systems. Concerned about the impact of water shortages on their communities, two students built a device that produces drinkable water by collecting and processing moisture from the air.

The CF+XQ LX Initiative

XQ and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching are producing and testing a collection of learning modules. These CF+XQ Learning Experiences (LXs) are designed to be taught in three to six weeks.

Every LX shares six "must-have" characteristics, based on what we know about the needs of today's young people and the science of adolescent learning.

1. Multi-dimensional.
Each LX addresses a combination of academic content standards plus a selection of durable competencies tied to the XQ Learner Outcomes, such as Original Thinkers for an Uncertain World or Generous Collaborators for Tough Problems.

2. Project-based.
An LX launches a project that lends itself to real-world problem solving and deep exploration, both inside and outside the classroom, and culminates in an authentic work product.

3. High interest.
LXs are intellectually stimulating and relevant to students, sparking curiosity while enabling students to take ownership, make choices, and explore new ideas and emerging passions.

4. Authentic.
An LX provides a genuine rationale for the learning and work students do, the products they create, and the audiences with whom they share those products—"real work" rather than merely "school work."

5. Rigorous.
Every LX requires intellectually challenging, grade-level work from all students, backed up by performance tasks, feedback, and assessments— meaningful measures of progress and mastery.

6. Expansive in use of time and space.
With a length of three-six weeks, each LX is long enough to accommodate the arc of an authentic project incorporating opportunities to learn outside the classroom, yet short enough to allow for a variety of experiences across the span of a full high school course.

A New Vision, an Age-Old Consensus

American leadership in the world is no accident of history. It is the legacy of policymakers from both sides of the aisle who recognized that our national well-being depends on the ability of our schools to ignite the ambitions and potential of young people. Our innovation and vitality as a nation are nothing less than the return on our enduring commitment to educational excellence.

Indeed, the United States invented free, universal, public high school education, a bold and transformative response to the need to better prepare young people for the evolving jobs of the early 20th century.[33] That invention made Americans the best educated people in the world, fueled our expanding economy, and paved the way for U.S. leadership during and after World War II.[34] Other countries took decades to catch up.[35]

The United States would embrace the challenge of educational transformation again in the latter half of the century. In 1957, President Eisenhower called on the country to respond to the Soviet launch of Sputnik with "resourcefulness and vigor," flagging education as a top priority.[36] Less than a year later, Congress passed the $1 billion National Defense Education Act (NDEA), a landmark education bill designed to bolster teaching and learning for the dawning Space Age.[37]

The NDEA earmarked a third of the investment for grants to states to expand and improve secondary science, math, and foreign language instruction. State leaders responded with just the kind of resourcefulness and vigor the president had called for. Along with investments in scientific research, the NDEA unleashed a technological boom that powered economic growth, landed Americans on the Moon, and won the space race for the United States.[38]

Our more recent history includes similar bipartisan action. In the 1990s, Americans came together across sectors and political parties to raise academic performance and improve educational outcomes in what became known as "the standards-based reform movement." That state-led movement played a critical role in raising academic expectations nationwide.

Two high-profile national education summits bolstered the movement. The 1989 summit, convened by President George H.W. Bush and 49 of the nation's governors, adopted six bold national education goals focused on high academic standards and improved student outcomes.

The 1996 summit, convened by governors and business leaders, reinforced the commitment to high academic standards and strengthened the role of the private sector in keeping educational improvement at the forefront of national priorities. Together, these summits helped build a shared vision for excellence in American education and laid the groundwork for major pieces of federal legislation such as the 1994 Goals 2000 Act and the 1995 Improving America's Schools Act.

We can and must take similarly bold action in our own time. **The United States invented universal high school education. Now we must reinvent it.**

Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape

Bold, transformative change in education requires state leadership. We need new tools, systems, and structures to overcome the pull of the status quo and replace the conventions of seat time. Working together, states and communities can enact a new vision for high school education, one that will pay massive dividends to students, families, communities, and the nation as a whole.

This work will not be easy. It will take all of us, from all walks of life, spanning the ideological spectrum and bringing to bear our distinctive American "resourcefulness and vigor," to transform our nation's high schools. Our students deserve no less. Our families demand no less. Every state will benefit. And our nation will be stronger for it.

Fortunately, a growing number of communities and statehouses across the country recognize the essential role high schools play in our national well-being. **As of the time of publication, every state has adopted at least one key policy among the 10 XQ has identified as important for high school transformation. Nearly three in four states have adopted four or more.**

State leaders from both sides of the aisle are blazing the path forward, building on a long history of bipartisan action to ensure that American education remains a model for the world.

But there is a long way to go. Education, like other policy domains, is a complex ecosystem. Policy action in one area often depends on policy action in another. For example, a majority of states—three in five—now give permission to districts to award credit based on learning instead of seat time, an essential step toward abolishing the Carnegie Unit. But without new modes of instruction, assessment, and credentialing, high school schedules and learning experiences in most communities look much the same as they did a hundred years ago.

Similarly, it is insufficient to simply expand learning goals to encompass durable competencies. Indeed, there have been previous promising efforts to broaden the definition of student learning to encompass skills like critical thinking and creative problem-solving. But these efforts have been limited in impact because teachers and students remained stuck in a rigid, time-based system.

The 10 policy actions presented in this report are mutually reinforcing, working in tandem to bring about the change required to adequately prepare young people for the future. Their potential rests in their connections to each other, and the ability to weave them together to form a tapestry of state law that supports meaningful, lasting change. Rather than viewing them as a roadmap, in which each policy action must be taken in sequence, state leaders should understand them as a set of puzzle pieces that, when fitted together, constitute a new, more rigorous vision for school success.

Methodology

Phase ❶
Developing the Policy Actions

To identify the 10 policy actions that have the most transformative potential and positive impact on high school, we asked some fundamental questions, including:

- Which policies have stifled or spurred innovation in our XQ partner schools and districts?

- Which policies create obstacles to the adoption of innovative strategies, like project-based learning? Which policies present barriers to enabling students to earn credit for "anywhere, anytime" learning?

- Which policies can create incentives for high school transformation or mitigate the challenges associated with implementation?

- How can states help communities and educators adopt new, transformative high school models?

To find answers to these and other questions, we drew on our more than a decade of experience working with communities to implement high school redesign; data and research including policy-related research, and findings from the science of learning; and insights from educators, school administrators, and district and state partners.

In the end, we identified 10 policy actions that are critical for implementing high school transformation at scale, each building toward one of the three foundational elements of a transformed system of high school: future-focused learning goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that matter.

While each policy is important in its own right, their real power is in how they interconnect to create a dynamic framework for state action. We believe this suite of policies will help states and communities enact a new vision for high school education unshackled from seat time—one that equips students with the broad range of competencies, knowledge, and skills they need to thrive in college, career, and life.

Phase ❷
Developing the Policy Criteria

We created operational definitions for each policy action by developing criteria for determining whether each state has adopted the policy in question.

Again, we drew on XQ's on-the-ground work with partner schools and districts over the last decade; the best available external research and evidence; and conversations with educators, experts, and policy leaders.

Next, we pressure-tested the criteria by conducting a preliminary state scan, refining the criteria as necessary to maximize validity in assessing policy adoption within each state and reliability in assessing policy adoption across states.

Phase ❸
Evidence Collection and Analysis

For each policy action, we reviewed publicly available guidance, regulations, and statutes relevant to determining whether the state met

the criteria. We supplemented the scan of official policy documents by reviewing a range of additional sources, such as information provided on state department of education websites, press releases, and material from other state agencies. For some policy actions, we examined relevant resources and tools, such as, for Policy Action 10, specific types of information about postsecondary enrollment and success published on state data websites. (See Appendix II for a table listing key types of evidence for each Policy Action.)

We did not consider the following information in determining whether a state met the criteria for policy adoption:

1. The time frame in which the policy was adopted. We counted all policies that are "on the books" as having been adopted no matter when they were adopted, with the exception of targeted initiatives that are no longer actively being implemented, such as expired grant programs or pilot programs.

2. The extent or quality of implementation of policies. Implementation is, of course, crucial for achieving maximum positive impact for students and educators. We discuss considerations for implementation in a "What You Can Do" sub-section for each policy action.

3. The extent or quality of tools, resources, and initiatives, when those are encompassed within the criteria for a policy action. For example, we did not evaluate the quality or comprehensiveness of a state's Portrait of a Graduate when evaluating whether the state met the criteria for Policy Action 2.

Phase ④
Final Confirmation and Refresh

During summer 2025, we offered every state the opportunity to preview the results of our research for their state, both to confirm the findings and to discuss the state's emerging priorities. In an effort to ensure this report includes the most current information possible at time of publication, we also refreshed the evidence base for every state by conducting a systematic review of bills passed during summertime legislative sessions; information added to official state websites; additional rulemaking; newly announced initiatives or programs being launched; and other evidence relevant to each Policy Action. We conducted a final update during fall and early winter of 2025, just prior to publication.

These findings therefore reflect research conducted between August 1, 2024, and December 1, 2025, ensuring that all policy information included is as up-to-date as possible at the time of publication. It is our intent for this report to become a regular and ongoing source of data and information for states. With that in mind, this report should be viewed as a baseline against which year-over-year improvements can be measured.

A State Policy Framework for High School Transformation

Future-Focused Learning Goals

- Grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time (Policy Action 1)

- Identify the core competencies necessary for high school graduates (Policy Action 2)

- Align high school graduation requirements with eligibility for the state's public higher education institutions and directly admit students (Policy Action 3)

Powerful Learning Experiences

- Invest in community-led high school redesign and provide flexibility and guidance to empower innovation (Policy Action 4)

- Give all high school students the opportunity to earn postsecondary credits (Policy Action 5)

- Credit high school students for work-based learning and apprenticeships (Policy Action 6)

- Invest in professional development tools and resources for educators, focused on project-based and competency-based learning strategies (Policy Action 7)

Measures That Matter

- Implement the next generation of assessments that measure competencies along with academic knowledge and skills (Policy Action 8)

- Redesign student transcripts to communicate the full breadth of student competency (Policy Action 9)

- Publish data on student postsecondary success for every high school (Policy Action 10)

Future-Focused Learning Goals

Policy Action	States	Criteria
Policy Action 1 Grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time	32 meet this policy criteria	The state has a policy that allows districts to award credit toward graduation for demonstrations of learning rather than seat time. The policy must: • grant all districts **automatic** permission to award credit for learning, not seat time, without the need for waivers; and • allow districts to award mastery-based credits on a **schoolwide** basis, not just to individual students on a case-by-case basis; and • be **clear and explicit** enough for educators to know they are in compliance with state rules for awarding credits and granting diplomas.
Policy Action 2 Identify the core competencies necessary for high school graduates	32 + D.C. meet this policy criteria	The state has identified the core competencies that students should develop before they graduate from high school, as evidenced by adopting either (1) a Portrait of a Graduate/Profile of a Learner or (2) a similar college-and-career competency framework or standards.
Policy Action 3 Align high school graduation requirements with eligibility for the state's public higher education institutions and directly admit students	22 + D.C. meet this policy criteria	The state's high school diploma requirements align with the eligibility requirements to apply to the state's public flagship institution of higher education or the state has adopted a direct admissions program that (1) provides proactive notification to students of admission; (2) includes participation of multiple 4-year institutions; (3) does not limit eligibility to top-performing students; and (4) is available to all public high schools. *For this study, we identified a single flagship university in each state, typically the "main campus" for the state public university (for example, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor).*

Powerful Learning Experiences

Policy Action	States	Criteria
Policy Action 4 Invest in community-led high school redesign and provide flexibility and guidance to empower innovation	5 + D.C. meet this policy criteria	The state (1) currently funds a grant program that exclusively supports local high school transformation; and (2) provides flexibility to innovate (for example, through waivers or an innovation zone or status); and (3) offers guidance on the adoption and implementation of research-based design principles to ensure quality and accountability, including the participation of parents, students, educators, business and community leaders, and other stakeholders.
Policy Action 5 Give all high school students the opportunity to earn postsecondary credits	38 + D.C. meet this policy criteria	The state requires all high schools to offer advanced coursework that enables students to earn college credit or the state directly offers access to advanced coursework options, either in-person or virtually. Advanced coursework opportunities could include dual credit or dual enrollment courses, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or early college.
Policy Action 6 Credit high school students for work-based learning and apprenticeships	46 + D.C. meet this policy criteria *4 states partially meet*	The state has (1) published policy or guidance on implementing high-quality work-based learning; and (2) adopted clear policies for when and how students earn credit toward graduation upon successful completion of work-based learning experiences; and (3) adopted a robust definition of high-quality youth apprenticeships. *States can partially meet the criteria for Policy Action 6 either by meeting the first two criteria for this policy action or by meeting the third criterion.*
Policy Action 7 Invest in professional development tools and resources for educators, focused on project-based and competency-based learning strategies	23 meet this policy criteria	The state (1) funds professional learning for teachers in effective instructional approaches that integrate academic and durable skills, such as project-based or competency-based learning; or (2) requires preparation in those approaches for pre-service teachers; or (3) funds a pilot program in those approaches that includes professional learning for educators; or (4) has published resources for educators that provide models and exemplars of those approaches, along with guidance to support their implementation.

Measures That Matter

Policy Action	States	Criteria
Policy Action 8 Implement the next generation of assessments that measure competencies along with academic knowledge and skills	0 meet this policy criteria *14 states partially meet*	The state is implementing the next generation of assessments that measure essential academic knowledge and skills coupled with durable competencies. *States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by piloting innovative assessment approaches.*
Policy Action 9 Redesign student transcripts to communicate the full breadth of student competency	0 meet this policy criteria *12 states partially meet*	The state has adopted a new student transcript, badging, or record system, such as learning and employment records (LERs), that communicates the full range of student knowledge, skills, and competencies. States need both the infrastructure for new transcript systems and the competency-based evidence to be included. *States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by piloting new approaches to credentialing.*
Policy Action 10 Publish data on student postsecondary success for every high school	12 meet this policy criteria *27 states + D.C. partially meet*	The state transparently and publicly reports, for each high school, disaggregated data on graduates' enrollment and progress in postsecondary education. Progress could include data on success during the first year of college, persistence beyond the first year of college, or graduation from college. *States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by transparently and publicly reporting disaggregated data on graduates' enrollment in postsecondary education for each high school, even if they do not yet report comparable data on graduates' progress in postsecondary education.*

Addressing Student Mental Health and the Digital Divide

Many kinds of policies impact high school education and the students who attend public schools, either directly or indirectly. In developing the 10 policy actions spotlighted in this report, we focused on those actions that most directly impact the transition away from a seat-time-based system of secondary education to one that embodies future-focused learning goals, powerful learning experiences, and measures that matter.

Two additional areas, both of which must be addressed across the entire K–12 education system and in coordination with other state-level agencies, warrant special discussion: student mental health and the digital divide. The importance of these two policy areas goes far beyond high school, touching the entire system of K–12 education and requiring coordinated action across agencies at the state level.

Supporting Student Mental Health

In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy sounded an alarm about a national youth mental health crisis. His announcement, while critically important for galvanizing action, was likely unsurprising to thousands of educators, administrators, parents, and caregivers who have witnessed firsthand the growing mental health challenges our children are facing. The data cited by Dr. Murthy in announcing the crisis paint a dire picture of the challenges we face as a nation: "Recent national surveys of young people have shown alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges—in 2019, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40 percent from 2009."[39] These challenges have only increased since the pandemic.

State and federal policymakers have answered the call and are taking action to address the crisis by increasing funding for the provision of mental health services to children and young adults who need them, fostering coordination across agencies and providers, and providing training to educators and administrators to better equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to support students in their care. A number of state and district leaders have also taken steps recently to ban cell phone use in school, a move made, in part, to address the potential impact of social media on adolescent well-being. While the impact of these steps remains to be seen, more clearly needs to be done to ensure that every child and adolescent experiences the quality support and services they need.

Although this report does not address student mental health directly, the policies recommended are foundational for fostering the kind of school environments that support students' mental health and wellness. Indeed, over the past several years, new research has documented clear links between the conditions and climate students experience in school and teen mental health outcomes. For example:

- A 2024 study concluded that "schools could enhance the mental health of young people by creating a school climate that students view as positive, including positive peer relationships, caring and respectful adults, and effective school leadership and involvement."[40]

- A 2023 study found that, "As Black adolescents' sense of school belonging decreased, they were 35 percent more likely to be at risk for suicidal ideation and attempts. Findings from our study support the assertion that the school microsystem plays a substantial role in modifying the risk of suicidal behavior among Black youth."[41]

In short, innovative teaching and learning practices will be most effective when they are accompanied by a supportive school environment, one that fosters belonging and cultivates trusting relationships between students and the adults around them.

Closing the Digital Divide

In January 2024, the U.S. Department of Education released its latest National Educational Technology Plan (NETP). At the heart of the plan is a challenge to education leaders—particularly state leaders—to ensure that every student has the opportunity to take part in rich, engaging learning experiences powered by technology.[42]

Technology is no longer a "nice-to-have" feature of our K–12 education system. And state education leaders must take steps to modernize K–12 education to catch up with a world that has already made the transition from analog to digital. A critical goal of this work is closing the three digital divides that are the focus of the NETP:

- The digital access divide: Ensuring students have connectivity in school and at home, and devices so they can access digital content and learning experiences

- The digital use divide: Improving how students use technology to engage their learning

- The digital design divide: Supporting educators to expand their capacities to effectively use educational technology

The good news is that state leaders have been taking steps—before and during the pandemic and to this day—to address these divides. A recent survey of state leaders conducted by the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) found that 85 percent of respondents are implementing a broadband initiative in their state.[43] As new and more powerful technologies, such as artificial intelligence, gain prominence in education, it will be incumbent on state leaders to keep pace with the world so their students are prepared to thrive in it.

The National Landscape

Our state-by-state analysis identified many bright spots across the nation. **From coast to coast and everywhere in between, there is growing recognition of the need to bridge the gap between what conventional high school is designed to provide and the demands of a modern work-force and world.**

Nearly three in four states plus D.C. have adopted at least four of the policy actions. Since the most successful implementation efforts are the result of multiple policies working together in tandem, it's encouraging that 10 states have six policy actions in place.

Even so, our analysis revealed significant opportunities for state leaders to take action to adopt the full range of policies necessary to support high school transformation. In fact, every state has room to grow.

Finally, there are two cutting-edge policy actions for which no states have yet met the criteria—Policy Action 8, regarding next-generation assessments, and Policy Action 9, covering redesigned student transcripts. While these policy actions should be viewed as aspirational at this juncture, promising and innovative early-stage efforts are already underway in some states. For example, three states are now piloting math badging— a system that uses digital badges to credential students' math knowledge. And five states have joined an effort to create next-generation assessments that can reliably capture student progress in mastering a broader set of learning outcomes, including durable competencies.

Accordingly, although no state has taken action on all 10 policies, our research uncovered many states in every region of the country that can offer models. To that end, each policy action section of the report includes state spotlights. The heat map below showcases the variance in the number of policy actions implemented, underscoring the areas in which more focused policy action may be needed.

Top Trends

- Based on evidence collected and analyzed through December 1, 2025, all 50 states and D.C. meet the criteria for at least one policy action.[44]

- Nearly three-quarters of the states (36 states plus D.C.) have adopted four or more policy actions.

- 22 states plus D.C. are leading the way with five or more policy actions in place. Among those states, 10—Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia, and Washington—are setting the pace with six policy actions in place.

- There are four policy actions for which the majority of states meet the criteria: flexibility to award mastery-based credits, identifying core competencies for graduates, ensuring access to postsecondary coursework and credits, and crediting students for high-quality work-based learning.

- There are two policy actions for which no states have yet met the criteria: next-generation assessments and redesigned transcripts. Both are intentionally aspirational. Later chapters highlight states that are making progress on those policy actions through piloting new approaches and developing the infrastructure necessary for statewide implementation.

Momentum for high school transformation is already building. Across the country, state leaders, educators, and communities are advancing bold policies and pioneering new school designs, shaped by local priorities, strengths, and contexts.

The National Landscape:
Policy Actions by State

Progress

Number of Policies Met

Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

Progress Status: ✓ Meets the Policy Action · ··· Partially Meets · ○ Not Yet Met	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Alabama	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	···	○	5/10; 1*
Alaska	✓	○	○	○	○	···	○	○	○	···	1/10; 2*
Arizona	○	○	○	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	2/10
Arkansas	○	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	···	✓	5/10; 1*
California	○	○	○	✓	○	✓	○	○	○	···	2/10; 1*
Colorado	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	···	···	✓	5/10; 2*
Connecticut	✓	○	○	○	✓	···	✓	○	○	✓	4/10; 1*
Delaware	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	···	4/10; 1*
District of Columbia	○	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	···	5/10; 1*
Florida	○	○	○	○	✓	···	○	○	○	···	1/10; 2*
Georgia	○	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	4/10
Hawaii	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	···	○	○	○	✓	5/10; 1*
Idaho	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	···	···	○	5/10; 2*
Illinois	○	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	···	○	○	3/10; 1*
Indiana	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	···	○	✓	6/10; 1*
Iowa	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	✓	6/10
Kansas	○	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	4/10
Kentucky	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	···	···	···	5/10; 3*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

Progress Status ✓ Meets the Policy Action ··· Partially Meets ○ Not Yet Met	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Louisiana	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	···	4/10; 1*
Maine	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	···	5/10; 1*
Maryland	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	···	4/10; 1*
Massachusetts	○	✓	○	○	○	✓	○	○	○	···	2/10; 1*
Michigan	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	···	···	✓	6/10; 2*
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	6/10
Mississippi	○	○	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	3/10
Missouri	✓	○	○	○	○	✓	✓	···	○	○	3/10; 1*
Montana	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	···	4/10; 1*
Nebraska	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	○	○	○	···	3/10; 1*
Nevada	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	···	○	···	4/10; 2*
New Hampshire	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	···	4/10; 1*
New Jersey	○	✓	○	○	○	✓	○	○	○	···	2/10; 1*
New Mexico	○	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	5/10
New York	○	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	···	○	···	3/10; 2*
North Carolina	○	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	···	○	···	5/10; 2*
North Dakota	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	···	···	6/10; 2*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.
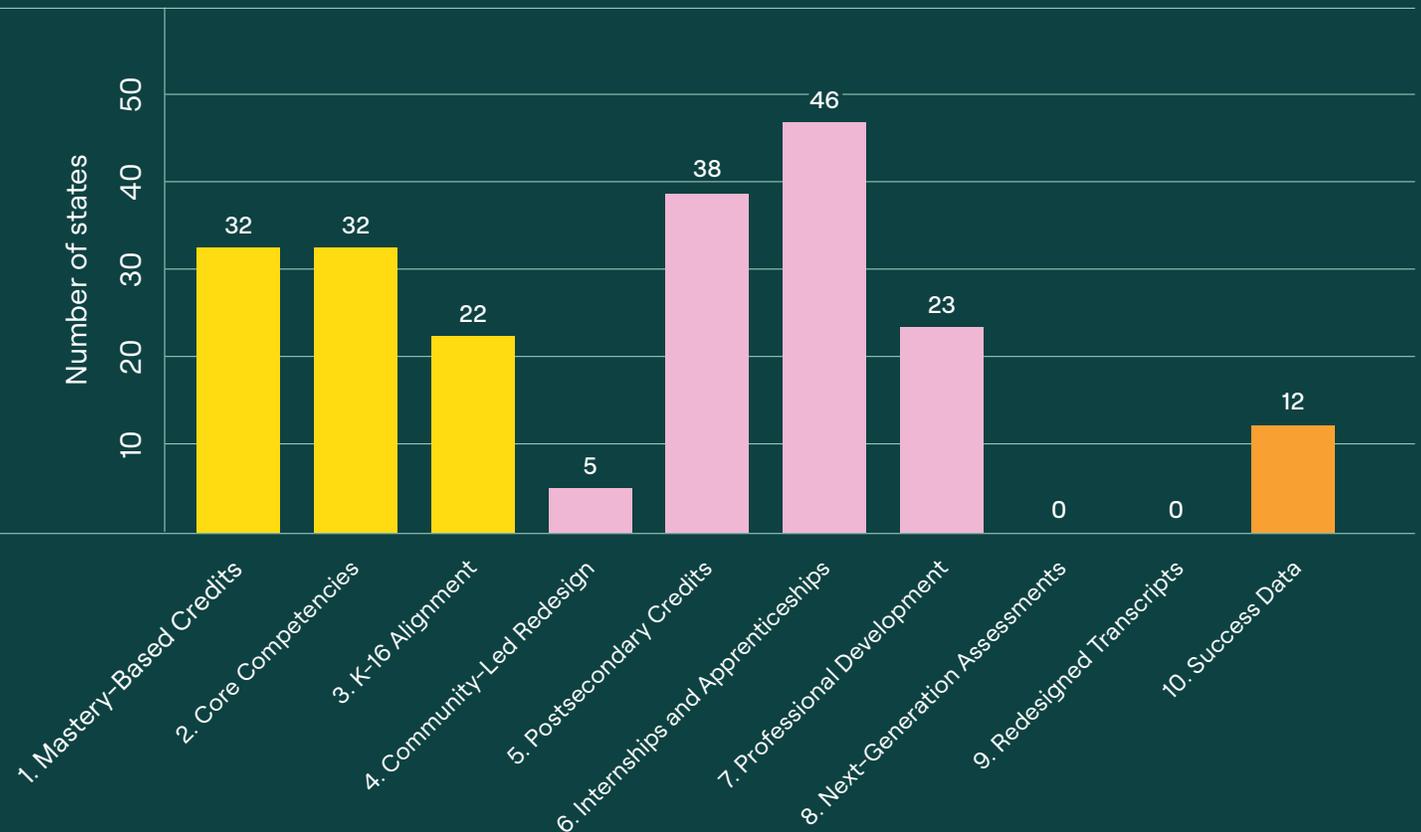
Total Policy Actions Met by Each State

(Alphabetical)

Progress Status
- ✓ Meets the Policy Action
- ⋯ Partially Meets
- ○ Not Yet Met

State	Mastery-Based Credits	Core Competencies	K-16 Alignment	Community-Led Redesign	Postsecondary Credits	Internships and Apprenticeships	Professional Development	Next-Generation Assessments	Redesigned Transcripts	Success Data	Total *partial
Ohio	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	○	3/10; 1*
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	⋯	6/10; 2*
Oregon	✓	○	✓	○	○	✓	○	○	○	⋯	3/10; 1*
Pennsylvania	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	3/10; 1*
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	⋯	6/10; 2*
South Carolina	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	5/10; 1*
South Dakota	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	4/10 ; 1*
Tennessee	○	○	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	⋯	4/10; 1*
Texas	✓	○	✓	○	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	5/10
Utah	✓	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	⋯	6/10; 2*
Vermont	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	5/10
Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○	○	⋯	6/10; 1*
Washington	✓	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	⋯	✓	6/10; 1*
West Virginia	○	✓	○	○	✓	✓	✓	○	○	⋯	4/10; 1*
Wisconsin	○	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	○	⋯	○	⋯	4/10; 2*
Wyoming	✓	✓	○	○	○	✓	✓	⋯	⋯	○	4/10; 2*

Note: Policy Actions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may be partially met by states. Please see the "Policy Overview, Methodology, and National Landscape" chapter for XQ's detailed policy research criteria and state-by-state findings.

How Many Policy Actions Does Each State Meet?

D.C. is not included in state counts but meets Policy Actions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Number of states (y-axis): 5, 10, 15, 20

Number of policy actions met	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of states	2	4	8	14	12	10	0	0

How Many States Meet the Criteria for Each Policy Action?

D.C. is not included in state counts but meets Policy Actions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Number of states (y-axis): 10, 20, 30, 40, 50

Policy Action	Number of states
1. Mastery-Based Credits	32
2. Core Competencies	32
3. K-16 Alignment	22
4. Community-Led Redesign	5
5. Postsecondary Credits	38
6. Internships and Apprenticeships	46
7. Professional Development	23
8. Next-Generation Assessments	0
9. Redesigned Transcripts	0
10. Success Data	12

From coast to coast and everywhere in between, there is growing recognition of the need to bridge the gap between what conventional high school is designed to provide and the demands of a modern workforce and world.

Future Focused Learning Goals
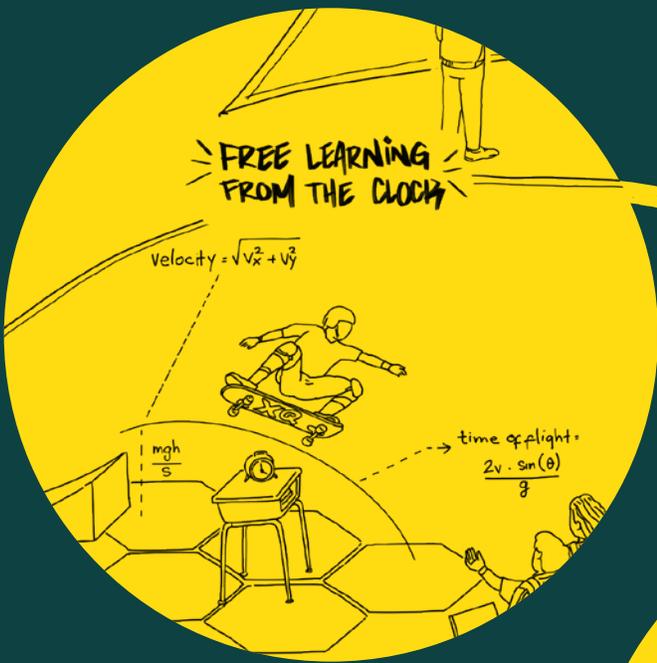
FREE LEARNING FROM THE CLOCK

$velocity = \sqrt{v_x^2 + v_y^2}$

$\frac{mgh}{s}$

$time\ of\ flight = \frac{2v \cdot \sin(\theta)}{g}$

Policy Action 1

Mastery-Based Credits

DEFINE SUCCESS

Productive Collaboration

PORTRAIT OF GRADUATE

Policy Action 2

Core Competencies

MAKE DIPLOMAS MATTER

ANY COLLEGE USA
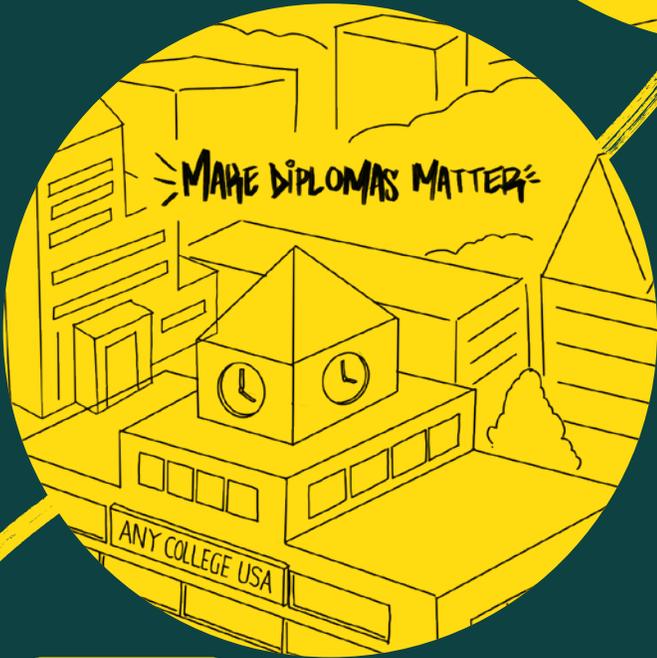
Policy Action 3

K-16 Alignment

Mastery-Based Credits

Policy Action 1

FREE LEARNING FROM THE CLOCK

$Velocity = \sqrt{V_x^2 + V_y^2}$

$\dfrac{mgh}{s}$

time of flight:
$\dfrac{2v \cdot \sin(\theta)}{g}$

Riding on the Pathway to my future

Computational Thinking

Wellness

Synthesis

Sharing Ideas

Scientific Investigation

Electrician Electrical Engineer & Service Tech

Grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time

Why Mastery-Based Credits Matter

State policy plays a major role in defining how students earn credits to meet graduation requirements. Traditionally, these policies have been grounded in "seat time."

State policies define seat time in many different ways: "Carnegie units," "clock hours," "teacher contact hours," "hours of bona fide instruction." But the message those policies send is the same: put in your time, do the minimum to pass, and earn the credit—even if you haven't truly mastered the subject. As a result, many students don't acquire the full range of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in college or in the modern workplace.

States driving a new vision of high school teaching and learning can adopt policies that give all districts the option to award credit for demonstrated mastery of academic knowledge, skills, and durable competencies. By enabling students to progress and earn credits through demonstrations of what they have learned—and what they can do with their knowledge and skills—state leaders can help ensure that students graduate with employable competencies that support success in college, work, and life.

With mastery-based credits, students can take more ownership of their own learning, growing in confidence to become self-driven, self-directed learners for life.

But the benefits don't end there. **When state leaders allow communities to design learning that *values mastery over minutes*, they open up a whole new world of possibilities for students and educators.** For example, mastery-based credits can help educators extend learning beyond the school building and into the community, such as at work-based learning sites. And they enable students to accelerate their educational progress and get a head start on college and careers.

With mastery-based credits, students can take more ownership of their own learning, growing in confidence to become self-driven, self-directed learners for life. Educators can address student disengagement by designing extended, relevant, real-world projects that spark student interest, illuminate potential career pathways, and ignite lifelong passions. Leaders can adopt next-generation approaches to assess and credential learning, like badging, that are rooted in mastery and measure a broader range of knowledge and skills in more flexible and authentic ways (Policy Actions 8 and 9).

Purdue Polytechnic High School (PPHS), a STEM-focused high school in Indianapolis, leverages the state's mastery-based credit policy to deliver more personalized, flexible learning that takes place in nine-week project cycles rather than year-long courses and daily class periods. Students can, for example, receive credit for engaging, hands-on learning experiences, often undertaken in collaboration with industry partners.

One group of PPHS students, inspired by professionals at Corteva Agriscience to imagine how the world can feed nearly 10 billion people by the year 2035, created an app that helps reduce waste by detecting whether food is still good to eat or should be trashed or recycled. "I used to believe that the problems our community faced were impossible to solve," one student said. "Working with industry partners showed me that no effort is too small, and it can lead to innovative ideas." •

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

Every state provides some measure of flexibility from seat time.[45] That's because the U.S. has seen two waves of state policymaking on this topic. In the period from the 1970s to early 1990s, states recognized the need to provide flexibility in special circumstances—for students who required more time, or less time, to graduate, for example. Sometimes the flexibility even provided options for students to navigate graduation requirements after missing too many "snow days."

That kind of "legacy language" in state laws and regulations can create confusion about what's permitted and what's not. For example, California's graduation requirements include a paragraph about credit flexibility that dates back to legislation passed nearly 50 years ago. Most districts interpret that paragraph as requiring high schools to provide alternative ways for individual students to earn credits based on exceptional circumstances. But others might interpret it as allowing for more proactive efforts to transform teaching and learning on a schoolwide basis.

More recently, states have crafted policies explicitly meant to encourage districts to implement new kinds of instructional approaches that break free from the hold of the Carnegie Unit, such as competency-based learning. Our own work with states, districts, and schools has shown that three criteria in particular are essential for communities to invest the time and resources necessary to reimagine the high school experience:

- Grant all districts automatic permission to award credit for learning, not seat time, without the need for waivers.

- Allow districts to award mastery-based credits on a schoolwide basis, not just to individual students on a case-by-case basis.

- Be clear and explicit enough for educators to be sure they are in compliance with state rules for awarding credits and granting diplomas.

Many Kinds of
Seat Time Policies

This report examines only one kind of seat time policy: state rules governing course credits and diplomas. While those policies are the most critical for high school transformation, it's important to note that seat time requirements have, over the past century, infiltrated a host of other policies governing high school education.

For example, most states have policies on "instructional time," rules for school calendars that require districts to offer a minimum number of minutes or hours in a school year, week, or day. Many states tie their school funding formulas to those calendar requirements as well.

State leaders are often reluctant to provide flexibility on school calendar rules because they view them as safeguards that protect student learning opportunities. However, a few states have begun to offer conditional flexibility to communities that are deeply engaged in high school transformation.

For example, Colorado regulations require high school calendars to include at least 1,080 hours of "planned instruction" annually, resulting in at least 1,056 hours of "actual instruction" per year. Districts can lose state funding when their hours fall short. But in 2021–22, the state launched a High School Innovative Learning Pilot Program allowing participating districts to waive that requirement in order to provide students with opportunities to learn outside the school building.

Less Than Meets the Eye

Nationally, the potential to transform high school learning through mastery-based credits (Policy Action 1) isn't as widespread as the results of the state scan might suggest. That's because fewer than half of U.S. high school students attend school in a state with a clear policy allowing all districts to grant credits based on mastery rather than seat time on a schoolwide basis. Currently, four of the five states that enroll the most students—California, Florida, New York, and Illinois—do not have such a policy.

Clear, Explicit Policies That Give Automatic Permission To Award Credit for Learning, Not Seat Time, on a Schoolwide Basis

Percentage of States

- ■ Yes ■ No

36%

64%
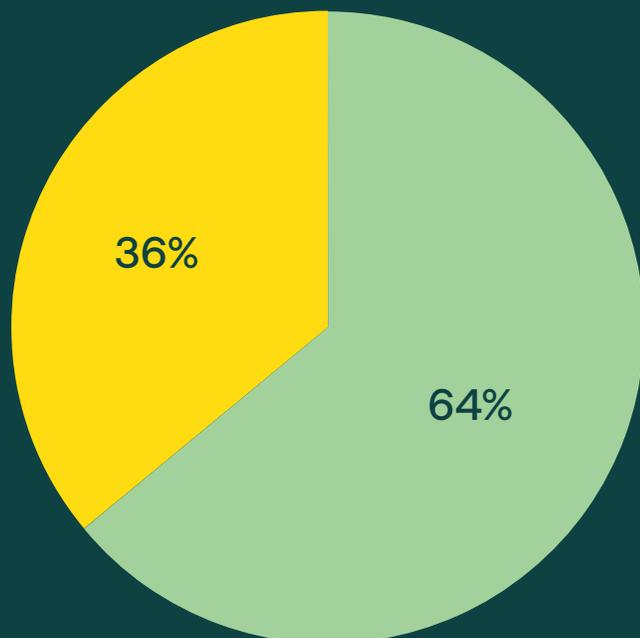
Percentage of Grade 9-12 Students in Those States

- ■ Yes ■ No
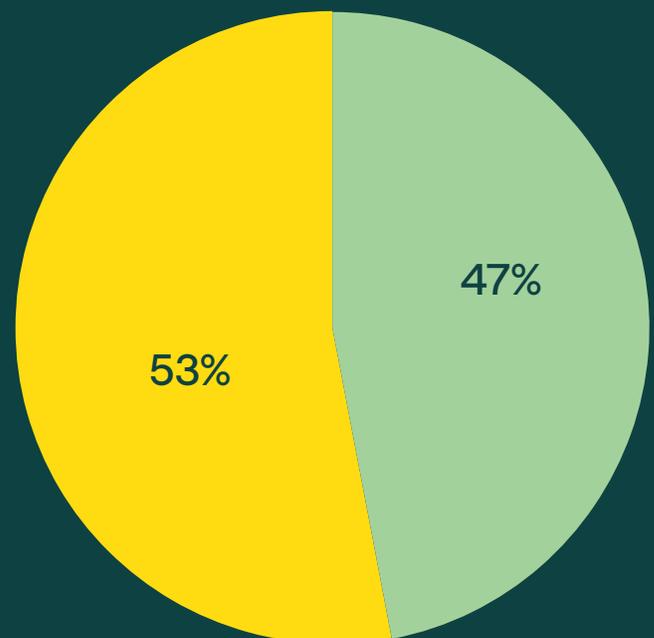
47%

53%

Policy Action 1: Mastery-Based Credits

32 States Meet This Policy Action

Today, 32 states grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time. These states have automatic, explicit, and schoolwide policies for awarding mastery-based credits.

$$Velocity = \sqrt{v_x^2 + v_y^2}$$

$$\frac{mgh}{s}$$

time of flight $= \frac{2v \cdot \sin(\theta)}{g}$

State of the States for

Policy Action 1

Status

Not Yet Met

Meets the Policy Action
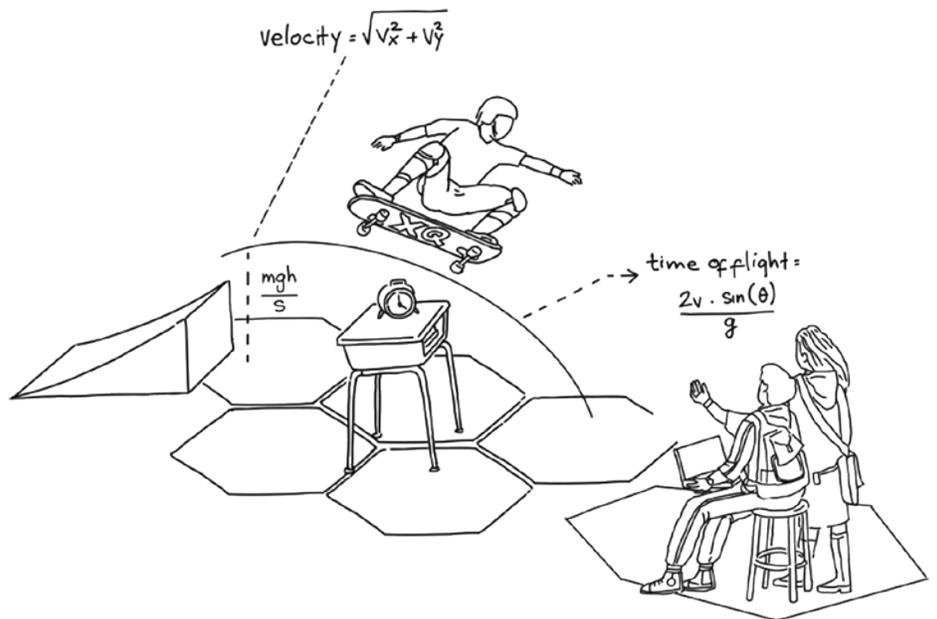
What You Can Do

Providing flexibility is only the starting line. States can spark real innovation by equipping districts with tools for leveraging credit flexibility to transform classroom practice and learning experiences. Leaders can also link mastery-based credit policies to other initiatives, such as pilot programs that enable leading districts to design and refine new personalized-learning strategies. Credit flexibility also calls for next-generation assessments and redesigned transcripts that can measure and credential a broader range of student knowledge and skills in more authentic ways.

Provide guidance and technical assistance to help communities leverage credit flexibility to transform student learning experiences.

Three in five states now give all districts permission to award credits based on learning instead of seat time on a schoolwide basis. Yet in most communities, high school schedules and learning experiences still look much the same as they did a hundred years ago. That's because localities need tools, guidance, and technical support to do the hard work of transforming daily teaching and learning.

After introducing seat time flexibility in 2012, Iowa's leadership followed up with a reflection and action planning tool, as well as guidance describing different scenarios through which students could earn credit by demonstrating competency. Similarly, Indiana's 2020 publication *INnovate: Flexibility Guide for Indiana's K-12 Schools* describes how district leaders can leverage the state's seat time flexibility to advance innovation.

Evaluate your state's flexibility provisions against the criteria.

Some policies on the books were passed decades ago, well before the modern movement toward high school transformation and often with the goal of providing flexibility for individual students in exceptional circumstances. Others are provisional, granting flexibility if a district submits a waiver request or takes part in a pilot program. As a starting point, state leaders should examine their existing policy and consider two questions:

- Does this policy make it clear to district leaders that they can—and should—award credit to all of their students based on demonstrations of their learning?

- As written, is the policy sufficient to support high school transformation in any community across the state?

If the answer to either question is no, policy makers can explore opportunities to adopt policies that meet criteria for Policy Action 1.
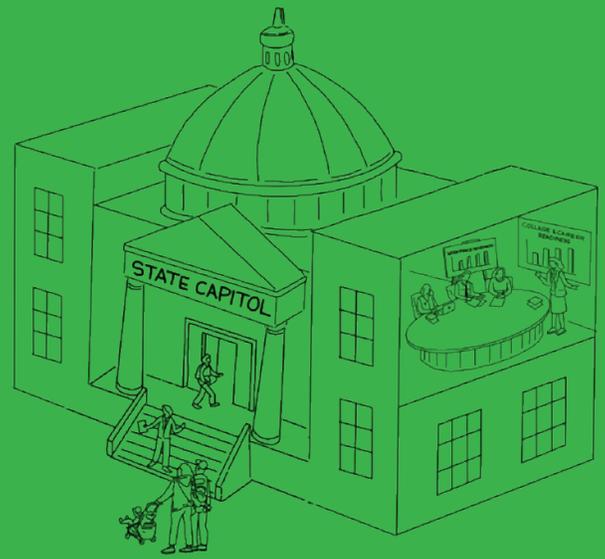
Weave seat time flexibility into other state policies.

To ensure seat time flexibility becomes a catalyst for more engaging student learning experiences, state leaders can explore opportunities to leverage other policies to incentivize local communities. For example, they can create a high school transformation grant program (Policy Action 4) to empower local communities to explore approaches to teaching and learning that aren't bounded by seat time.

"Can We Stop The Clock? Replacing Seat Time With Mastery"
The Hoover Institution (2021)

Moderated by Stephen Bowen, then-deputy director for state leadership at the Council of Chief State School Officers, this recording of a Hoover Institution Success Initiative session features an expert panel discussion about moving from seat time to mastery.

Iowa

Iowa was an early adopter of policies to enable a shift from seat time to a more competency-based approach to awarding credit toward graduation. In 2012, state leaders introduced credit flexibility by expanding Iowa's official definition of a "unit" and creating an explicit opportunity for school systems to award credit for demonstrations of learning rather than seat time.

"A unit is a course which meets one of the following criteria: it is taught for at least 200 minutes per week for 36 weeks; it is taught for the equivalent of 120 hours of instruction; [or] it requires the demonstration of proficiency of formal competencies associated with the course according to the State Guidelines for Competency-Based Education."

The state then followed up with guidelines to support competency-based education (CBE), including a reflection and action planning tool for districts interested in transitioning to CBE. These included policy guidance describing different scenarios through which students can earn credit by demonstrating competency rather than fulfilling seat time requirements. Iowa's robust policy flexibility has made it possible for programs like Iowa BIG to provide high school students in Cedar Rapids with opportunities to engage in multidisciplinary projects in collaboration with community or industry partners.

Indiana

For over a decade, Indiana has been a national leader in driving a new vision for high school education focused on better preparing students for their next step. Prior to 2011, Indiana defined a "credit" as "satisfactory completion of a course … that includes a minimum of two hundred fifty (250) minutes of instruction per week for one (1) semester for a school operating on a traditional schedule." That same year, the state board of education adopted a new definition of credit based on student "demonstration of proficiency against the academic standards in a course," which empowered the development of new high school models, like Purdue Polytechnic High School in Indianapolis. In 2020, the state provided additional guidance to districts in *INnovate: Flexibility Guide for Indiana's K-12 Schools*, which clearly articulates that all districts are fully authorized to award credits based on a student's proficiency.[46]

Core Competencies
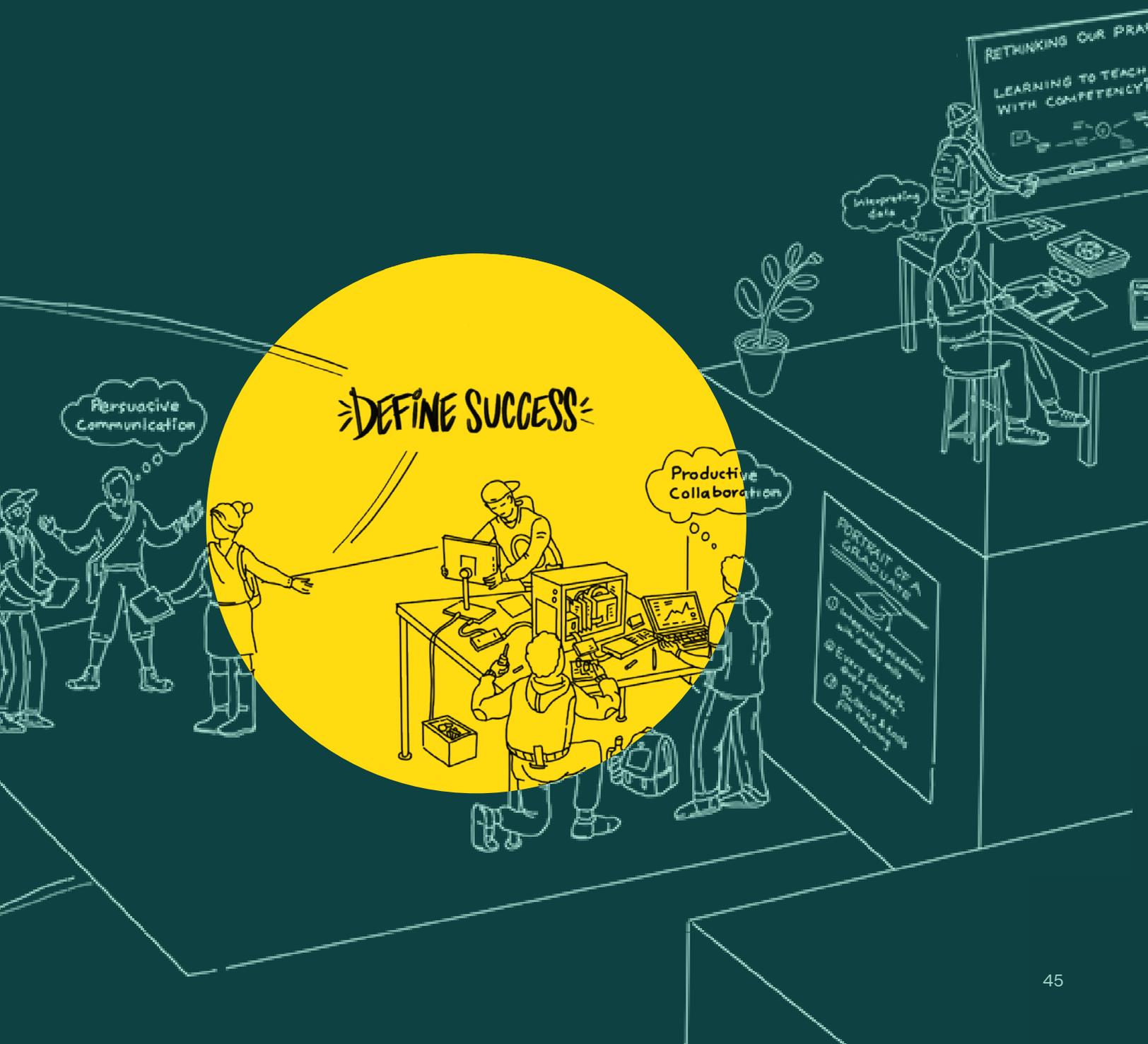
Identify the <u>core competencies</u> necessary for high school graduates

Why Core Competencies Matter

Academic knowledge and skills will always be critically important. But in a nation with a fast-evolving economy and workforce, academic learning alone is no longer sufficient. Recognizing the need for high school students to cultivate a broader set of skills, a growing number of states have engaged educators, families, business and postsecondary leaders, and students to reimagine the fullness of what graduates should know and be able to do in order to thrive in college, career, and life.

States that adopt a broader vision for student success typically articulate these core competencies in a "Portrait of a Graduate" (sometimes called a "Profile of a Learner" or a "Graduate Profile"), or in a student competency framework. These profiles and frameworks go beyond academic knowledge and skills to incorporate competencies such as self-discipline, initiative, resilience, creativity, and problem-solving—the kinds of durable competencies that employers demand, families want, and research confirms to be critical for lifelong success.

When educators integrate core competencies into high school learning experiences, they empower students to more fully prepare for success in the current and future workforce. An investigation of 76 million job postings nationwide revealed that eight in 10 of the most requested skills were durable competencies.[47] According to a 2024 survey, the most in-demand competencies among companies worldwide include analytical thinking; resilience, flexibility and agility; leadership and social influence; creative thinking; and motivation and self-awareness.[48]

States are seeing similar trends in their own work-force data. A 2024 study by the North Carolina Department of Commerce showed that the competencies described in the North Carolina Portrait of a Graduate are important for every occupation in the state. It also found that occupations with the strongest demand for the Portrait's competencies pay more and are projected to grow more in the future.[49]

Students who develop such competencies enjoy more success during their school years as well. That's because durable competencies strengthen and reinforce the acquisition of knowledge and skills in disciplines like literacy, math, science, and history. In effect, durable competencies have a dual power for students. They provide knowledge and skills that are increasingly necessary for the workforce while also supporting proficiency in academic coursework during high school.

Finally, a graduate profile or other description of core competencies can offer a "North Star" for reimagining the entire high school experience, a common vision for student success that can guide policymakers, local leaders, educators, and families as they come together to drive trans-formation efforts locally and statewide. •
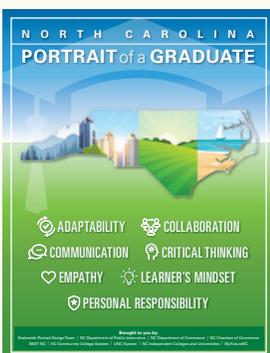
Read North Carolina's
Portrait of a Graduate

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state will have identified the core competencies that students should develop before they graduate from high school, as evidenced by adoption of either:

- A Portrait of a Graduate/Profile of a Learner (POG/POL), or

- Similar College-and-Career Competency Framework or Standards

A graduate profile or other description of core competencies can offer a "North Star" for reimagining the entire high school experience.

32 States and D.C. Meet This Policy Action

Thirty-two states and D.C. have identified the competencies graduates need for success after high school. Of these, 19 states and D.C. have adopted a Portrait of a Graduate or Profile of a Learner, while the rest have adopted another type of competency framework.
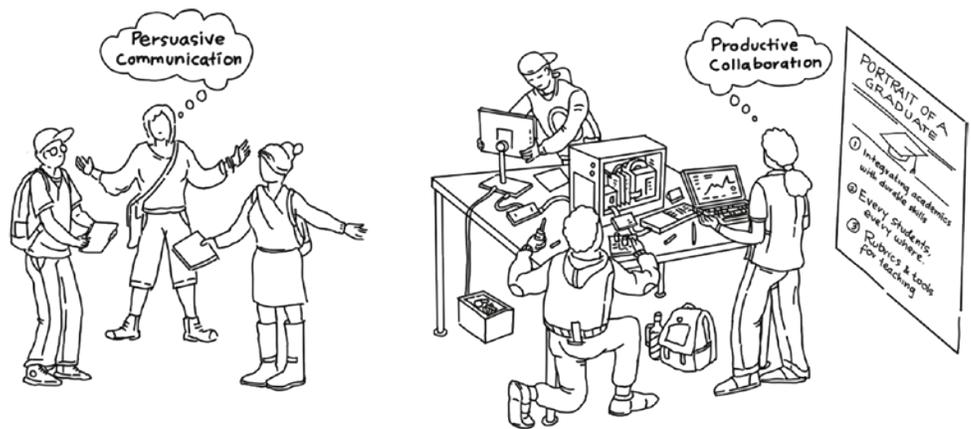
State of the States for

Status

Not Yet Met

Meets the Policy Action
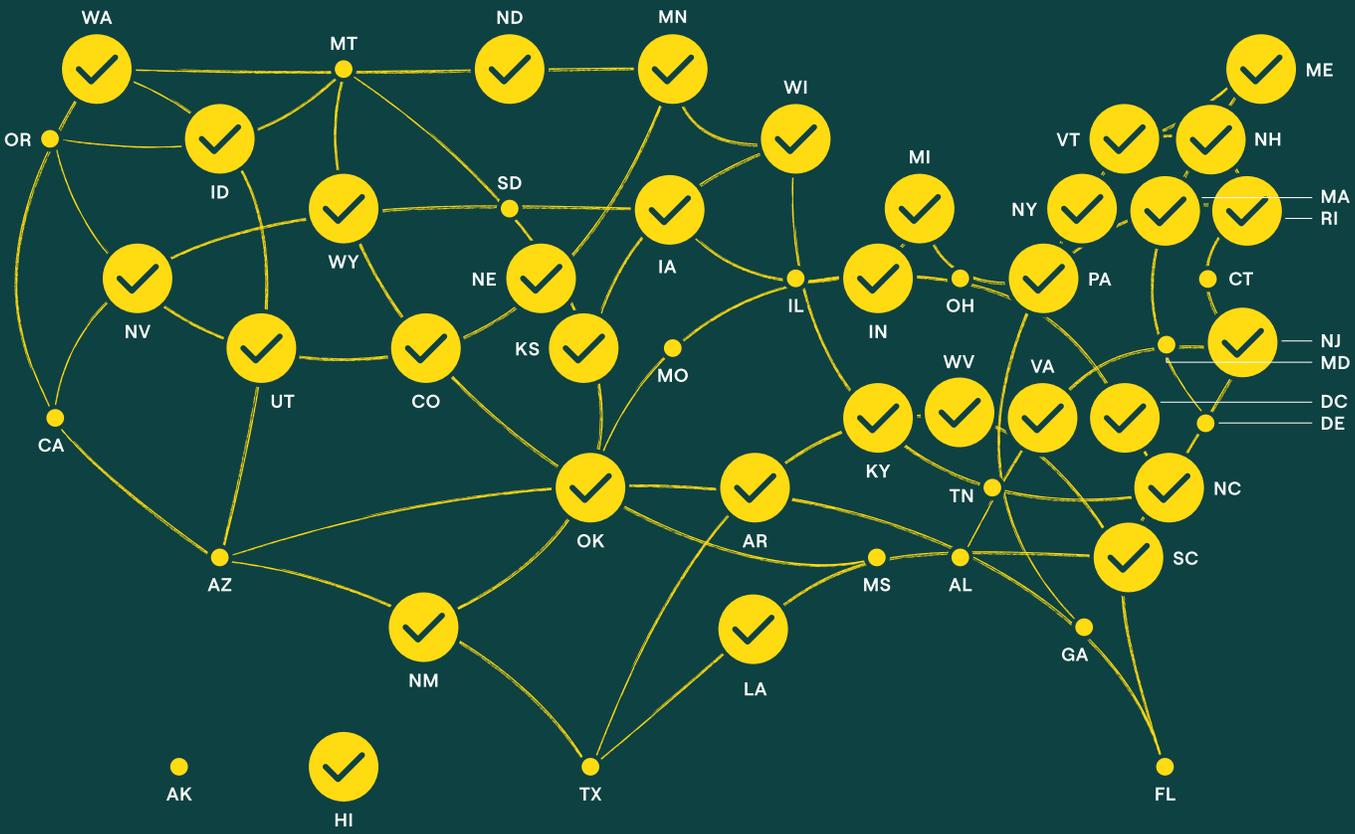
What You Can Do

The best graduate profiles integrate durable competencies with academic knowledge and skills and reflect shared aspirations from a broad group of stakeholders including high school students, families, and industry leaders. Leading states make sure the profile comes with rubrics, indicators, and tools that make it actionable in classrooms and leverage it as a North Star to align statewide education policies and initiatives.

Elevate stakeholder input and student voice.

The first step to creating a Portrait of a Graduate is to engage key stakeholders, including families, educators, employers, higher education representatives, and community leaders to articulate the skills and knowledge they believe students need to be successful. Ideally, the process should incorporate the voices of high school students, giving them a seat at the table so their experiences and their aspirations for their own education can inform the collective vision.

Advance a broader set of competencies that matter.

A Portrait of a Graduate should not be limited in its vision for student success. In addition to capturing academic content knowledge—which will always be important—the portrait should also include career skills and durable competencies like critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and the ability to build on existing knowledge to rapidly learn new skills. While the specific language may vary, the core competencies tend to be somewhat similar across existing Portraits of a Graduate, perhaps indicating that, despite political and other differences, communities tend to want the same outcomes for their young people.

A Portrait of a Graduate is the beginning of the high school transformation journey, not the end.

Make the Portrait a launch pad for ongoing support.

It is important to remember that a Portrait of a Graduate is the beginning of the high school transformation journey, not the end. Its value derives from what state leaders do with it. In states leading this work, like Kentucky, the Portrait of a Graduate or Learner Profile has served as the jumping off point for the development of resources for educators—such as rubrics, frameworks, and guides—to support the adoption of learning models that advance the shift from seat time to demonstrations of student proficiency.

Use the Portrait as a touchstone for policy alignment.

The competencies in a state's Portrait of a Graduate or competency framework should be woven into other policies and systems, such as next-generation assessments (Policy Action 8), redesigned transcripts (Policy Action 9), and robust data systems and reporting (Policy Action 10). States that align their Portraits of a Graduate and competency frameworks to other policies are well positioned to advance a coordinated agenda to support high school transformation by establishing the conditions necessary for those efforts to succeed.

"States Sketch 'Portraits of a Graduate'"

National Association of State Boards of Education (2022)

This short publication from NASBE describes how four states—South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington—developed Portraits of a Graduate and the lessons they learned along the way.

Grassroots Momentum:

Local Leadership in Mayfield, Ohio

In the village of Mayfield, Ohio, the public schools are guided by an educational vision that goes beyond state academic standards. It's called the Portrait of a Mayfield Wildcat. When Superintendent Michael J. Barnes was invited back to lead the district in 2021, he decided it was time to give that portrait a refresh.

PORTRAIT OF A MAYFIELD WILDCAT

SCHOLARSHIP · PERSONALIZATION · COLLABORATION · COMMUNICATION · CRITICAL & CREATIVE THINKING · CURIOSITY

Mayfield City Schools
EVERY STUDENT. EVERY DAY.

COLLABORATION
A Mayfield Wildcat can:
- Cooperate with others to resolve problems and achieve goals
- Support team members by encouraging participation, listening, and empathy
- Acknowledge skills, experience, knowledge, creativity, and contributions from all
- Address team conflict without help from the team leader

CRITICAL & CREATIVE THINKING
A Mayfield Wildcat can:
- Identify, define, and work with authentic problems and essential questions
- Collect, assess, and analyze relevant information
- Reflect and reason effectively
- Implement innovations and generate ideas

CURIOSITY
A Mayfield Wildcat can:
- Develop a strong desire to learn
- Actively explore the unknown
- Engage in the design process
- Commit to a state of wonder

COMMUNICATION
A Mayfield Wildcat can:
- Articulate thoughts and express ideas effectively using oral, written, visual, and non-verbal communication skills
- Practice civil discourse
- Become an active listener

SCHOLARSHIP
We believe in:
- Academic excellence in all things
- Mastery
- Cutting-edge, world-class pathways and programs
- A focus on student achievement and growth

PERSONALIZATION
We believe in:
- All-Access Learning: Agency, Outcomes, Opportunity, and Engagement
- Placing students at the center of the learning process
- Providing customized learning based on student strengths, needs, skills, and interests
- Providing deeper learning experiences and cultivating understanding through rigorous content

"At the onset, we asked ourselves the question: How has the world changed in the last five to 10 years? And as a result of that change, what skills, abilities, and habits of mind do our kids need to thrive in a complex and ever-changing world?" said Barnes. "For heaven's sake, COVID, we had a global pandemic."

The portrait reflects a collaborative effort among educators, students, families, and other community members, according to Barnes. (The original portrait was created when Barnes was an assistant superintendent in Mayfield. He left to lead another northeast Ohio school district, then returned to Mayfield as superintendent.)

The Portrait of a Mayfield Wildcat describes four core competencies students should master before graduation, with scholarship and personalization as key drivers: collaboration, critical and creative thinking, curiosity, and communication. The district calls the portrait its "North Star."

Adopting the portrait prompted district leaders to rethink student learning experiences, including how to provide students with what the district calls "voice and choice." At Mayfield's one and only high school, this is evident in a recent reorganization that allows students to choose from several pathways, from a traditional, eight-classes-a-day format to several options permitting varying levels of flexibility. The most unconventional is dubbed simply The Option.

Essentially, The Option is what the superintendent calls a "fully customizable school day," where students might attend a few traditional classes, such as math or English, but also work independently outside of those classes. Students often spend that time in an open work space, also called The Option. In addition, they might head out into the community for an internship or other work-based activity.

Mayfield senior Charlie Brunello switched from the traditional, eight-classes-a-day format to The Option his junior year.

"I just wasn't connecting, and I was thinking about a trade for my profession, like an EMT, but I knew something had to change," he recalled. "So I went into The Option in my junior year, and it was like a breath of fresh air."

His daily schedule at the 1,200-student high school includes three classes in a traditional setting, but for Algebra 2 and English he works independently to meet the course requirements rather than attending class in person. The experience, Charlie said, has helped him discover more about himself.

"I kind of found who I was," he said. "Like service learning, helping people who are less fortunate. And it also gave me a value and goal in life." Charlie also saw his GPA rise.

Paige Zenovich, a teacher in The Option program, said the Portrait of a Mayfield Wildcat provides a valuable "touchpoint, or a North Star: This is what we're aiming for."

She noted that the district is currently developing a set of student "portrait projects that are embedded in the curriculum" at certain grade levels. In addition, the portrait is part of the conversation after administrators conduct classroom observations, Zenovich said.

"I kind of found who I was."

— Mayfield senior Charlie Brunello

Mayfield has drawn considerable attention, and a lot of visitors, for its work to reimagine the learning experience in ways that help students master real-world competencies.

With regard to The Option, Zenovich emphasizes that the design includes certain guardrails to make sure students stay on path while taking advantage of the flexibility it allows.

"Students have to touch base with me at least once each day," Zenovich said, and she helps to keep them organized. "Time management is the biggest issue that we try to help them understand, and model."

Mayfield has drawn considerable attention, and a lot of visitors, for its work to reimagine the learning experience in ways that help students master real-world competencies. Just recently, a group of about 50 educators from Missouri came for a visit, according to the superintendent.

Michael Duncan, the president and CEO of Battelle for Kids, a national nonprofit that has supported portrait work around the country, said Mayfield stands out as an especially strong example of bringing a portrait to life.

"Mayfield City Schools has had the courage and the support of their community to redefine time. Time is the great barrier to transitioning learning environments into deeper learning environments," Duncan said.

"What they've done brilliantly is that, even with The Option, there are still very high expectations and students are mentored and coached through the whole process," he said.

The Portrait of a Mayfield Wildcat has resonated with many families, said Meghan Perez, the president of the Gates Mills Elementary Parent Teacher Group in Mayfield. She personally finds it compelling for her two elementary-age children. As a parent, Perez said, the portrait provides "the kinds of attributes that I hope to see in my own kids," such as being able to work effectively with others, a desire to learn and understand the world around them, and an ability to problem-solve and come to solutions.

Stepping back, Superintendent Barnes, who often gets invited to speak about his experience, believes the portrait is helping the school system deliver a great education, in combination with the increased flexibility offered through six choices, or "learning modalities," that students are afforded.

"Comprehensively, the achievement scores at Mayfield High School continue to rise, and one of the reasons they continue to rise is because we have empowered students to have more say so over how they learn," he said.

"Think about college, the military, the trades: Nobody is hovering over your shoulder," Barnes said. "We just assumed all of these years that a kid can't do that at the high school level."

The superintendent added, "We're not perfect, but we're onto something." ●

Kentucky

Over the last decade, Kentucky has become a leader in supporting local innovation to drive school transformation. The state's United We Learn vision for education emphasizes "Vibrant learning experiences for every student; encouraging innovation, especially around assessment; [and] creating a bold new future for Kentucky's schools through collaboration with our communities."[50]

To support that vision, in 2023, the Kentucky Board of Education adopted a statewide Portrait of a Learner that defines a set of core, real-world competencies that all Kentucky graduates should attain. The Portrait includes mastery of challenging academic content and skills like communication, collaboration, and adaptability.

Crucially, Kentucky also published a guidance document called *Developing Competencies, Performance Outcomes and Indicators for Portrait of a Learner*. The guidance offers detailed explanations and definitions for each competency, including model indicators and performance outcomes—a critical step toward making competencies actionable and measurable. Together, United We Learn and the Kentucky Portrait of a Learner reflect a shift away from a system of education grounded in seat time and a narrow vision of student success and a shift towards flexibility and support for local communities and schools to adapt to the needs of a changing world.

North Dakota

Since 2018, North Dakota has been a national leader in its efforts to support personalized competency-based learning as a driver for student success after high school in the modern workforce. During that year, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction partnered with KnowledgeWorks to launch a five-year North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Initiative to support pilots in a handful of districts and a broader learning community across the state focused on creating learning experience resources for schools and educators.

At the heart of that work is the state's Portrait of a Graduate and the North Dakota Learning Continuum, providing districts with a model competency framework that they can either adopt in full or use as a starting point for their own frameworks. In 2021, the state passed legislation permitting any district to waive seat time rules for awarding credit (Policy Action 1) by formally adopting a local mastery learning framework.

K-16 Alignment
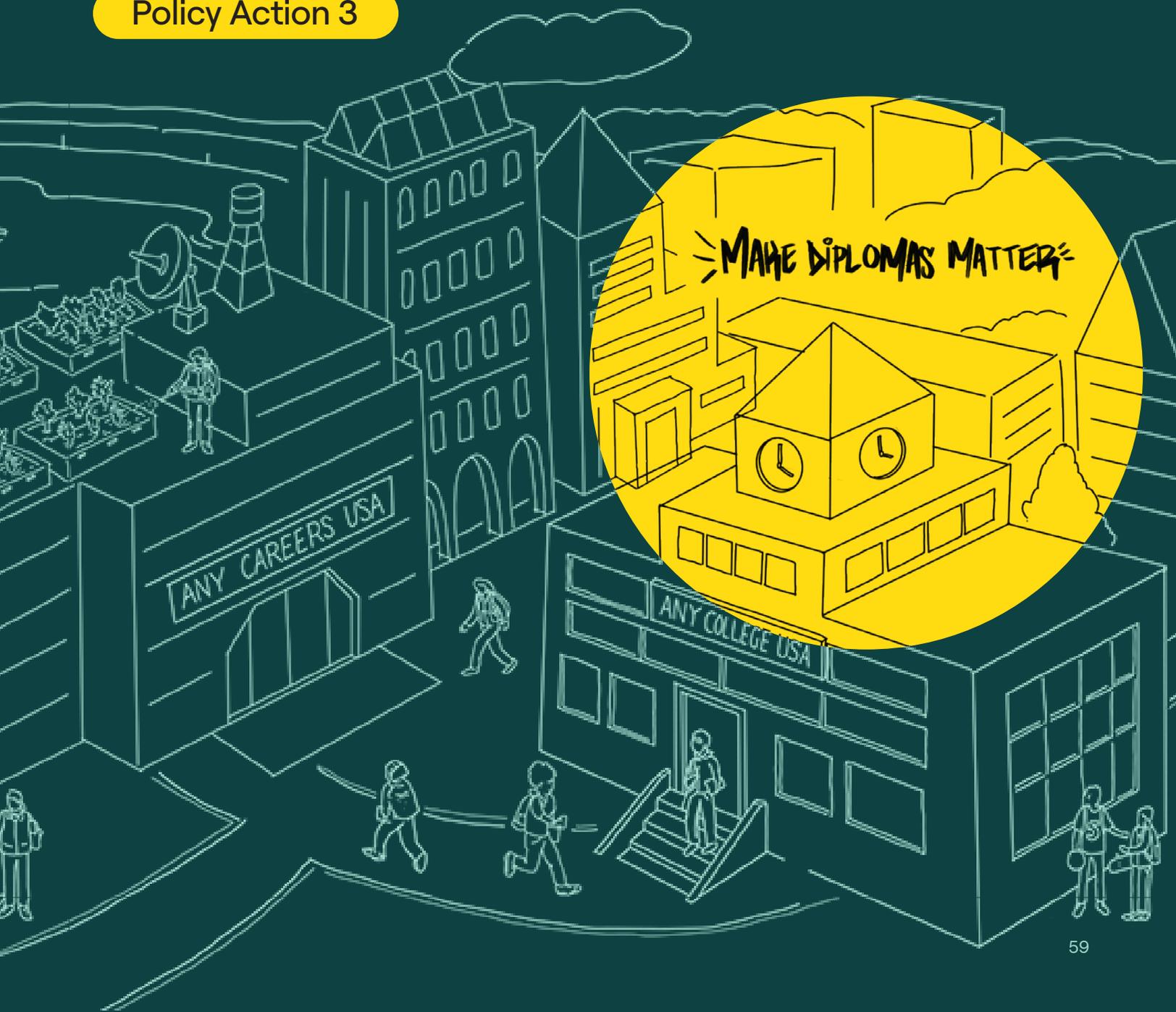
MAKE DIPLOMAS MATTER

ANY CAREERS USA

ANY COLLEGE USA

Align high school graduation requirements with eligibility for the state's public higher education institutions and directly admit students

Why K–16 Alignment Matters

The research is clear: The value of a college degree continues to increase,[51] most teenagers aspire to go to college,[52] and higher education levels improve economic outcomes for both individuals and states.[53] Yet too many students face significant hurdles on the pathway to postsecondary education—and the many benefits a seamless pathway can bring.

One big barrier is basic eligibility for four-year public colleges and universities. Many students don't realize until too late that the courses they're assigned in high school do not meet the college entry requirements of public university admissions offices.[54] This is because, in many states, the coursework required for a standard high school diploma isn't aligned with the eligibility criteria for public college admission.

Over the course of their lives, today's students may need to move from work to education to training and back again—perhaps many times.

The cumbersome college admissions process presents another big barrier. Three in four young people feel the process is too complex and fear that even one small mistake in their application could limit their chances. Over half say that applying to college has been more stressful than anything else they have done academically.[55] The result? One in four high school students starts a college application but never submits it— with students in lower-income, less-educated communities having the most "false starts" even when they are fully qualified.[56]

Across the country, state leaders are showing what's possible when policies and programs are used to knock down these barriers, highlighting steps states can take to ensure that students' college aspirations are within reach. First, states can align high school graduation requirements with the coursework needed for college eligibility. In states with multiple diploma options, the "default" diploma should meet public college entrance standards.

Second, states can create "direct admissions" programs that proactively notify high school seniors that they've earned a guaranteed place at one or more public institutions of higher education— without the need to submit a full application and typically requiring only a simplified form to confirm acceptance. Like college-aligned diploma policies, direct admissions policies ensure a more seamless pathway for students to postsecondary educa- tion. Idaho, the first state to adopt such a policy in 2015, saw a significant increase in enrollment in the state's public universities.[57]

To be sure, today's teenagers want choices. Not every student will earn a four-year degree. Students need new, more flexible pathways that enable them to pursue their goals while navigating a rapidly evolving economic landscape.

But we also know that today's students will need to become tomorrow's highly agile workers and lifelong learners. They will need to be prepared

not just for work or postsecondary education, but for both work and postsecondary education. Over the course of their lives, they may need to move from work to education to training and back again—perhaps many times, as challenges arise and opportunities present themselves.

For some, college might come later as they learn what is necessary for advancement in their field or to enter new careers in our rapidly changing labor market. A recent Wall Street Journal profile described surging enrollment in college nursing programs among men in their late twenties and early thirties. Among them was a 28-year-old former welder now studying nursing at Johns Hopkins University. He realized that his trade was at risk of being automated by robots, and he wanted a career that drew on his problem-solving skills.[58] His story isn't uncommon: 34 percent of U.S. undergraduates are 25 or older.[59]

Moreover, research tells us the value of a college degree continues to increase. According to a 2024 study by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, "economic opportunity will increasingly favor workers with higher levels of education and training." By the year 2031, "while there will be good jobs on every educational pathway, only 15 percent will be available to workers on the high school pathway, compared to 66 percent on the bachelor's degree pathway and 19 percent on the middle-skills pathway."[60]

And make no mistake: Greater educational attainment bolsters not only individual earnings but also state economies and our U.S. economy as a whole. Economists estimate that the 6.7 percent increase in college degree attainment observed in the decade between 2010 to 2020 will raise U.S. workers' lifetime earnings by $14.2 trillion.[61]

That might be why most teenagers still aspire to earn a college degree. In a national survey conducted in August 2025, 70 percent of high school students expressed a desire to enroll in college immediately following graduation, and

67 percent of those students said they'd like to attend a four-year institution. Overall, nearly three in four American high schoolers (72 percent) believe that earning a bachelor's degree will be important to achieving their lifetime goals.[62]

The last decade has rightly seen renewed interest in career and technical education (CTE) pathways for high school students. Sometimes, however, the enthusiasm for CTE can raise questions about whether such pathways should only be for students who have no plans to attend college. The best pathways blend high-quality CTE with rich and rigorous academic learning to prepare students for all of the challenges and opportunities the future holds. (See "Grassroots Momentum: Local Leadership at Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School" at the end of this chapter.)

Every student deserves the kind of promise that a third of states have embedded into their diploma policies: If you earn a standard high school diploma, you will be eligible to apply to the state's public colleges and universities—now or in the future. A growing number of states have recognized that the time has come to offer another kind of promise: Meet minimum qualifications for entry, and you will be directly admitted to public institutions of higher education.

And let's remember: K–16 alignment isn't only about educational opportunity for students but also about workforce preparation and economic development. As Sonny Perdue, former Governor of Georgia and current Chancellor of the Georgia University system has said of that state's direct admissions program, "A trained higher education workforce is what attracts employers to Georgia and supports our economy. … We started this because we believe higher education is valuable to everyone."[63] ●

Across the country, state leaders are showing what's possible when policies and programs are used to knock down barriers, highlighting steps states can take to ensure that students' college aspirations are within reach.

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state will have adopted policies that reinforce K–16 alignment by adopting one or both of the following policies:

- **A default diploma policy that aligns coursework required for graduation with the courses necessary to be eligible for the state's flagship institution of public higher education.** To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state must align its basic high school diploma requirements with the minimum college eligibility requirements for the state's flagship institution of higher education.[64] If the flagship institution includes specific course requirements—such as Algebra II and lab science—the graduation requirements must align to those specific courses, in addition to meeting the credit requirements for the subject in general (for example, three credits of math).

Flagship campuses are publicly-funded land grant institutions to which students should be able to apply if they meet diploma requirements set by public authorities. These campuses have historically been enhancers of economic opportunity. One quasi-experimental study found that attending a state flagship campus can have a substantial, independent impact on later earnings.[65]

To be sure, just as not every student will pursue a four-year college degree, not every student who does so will aim for the state's flagship public university. Some will apply to private higher education institutions, others to community colleges, and still others to public four-year universities with fewer eligibility requirements than the flagship campus. However, examining alignment with the flagship institution offers a common, understandable benchmark to establish the baseline national landscape across states in this inaugural analysis.

- **A direct admissions program that proactively notifies qualified high school seniors that they have guaranteed admission to one or more institutions of public higher education.** To qualify based on this criterion, the direct admissions policy must:

  - Provide proactive notification to students of admission;
  - Include participation of multiple 4-year institutions;
  - Not limit eligibility to top-performing students (as distinguished from "Top 10%" automatic admission policies or policies requiring additional coursework); and
  - Offer participation to high schools across the state. (We designate direct admission pilot programs as "in progress" until expanded statewide.)

22 States and D.C. Meet This Policy Action

Twenty-two states and D.C. meet the criteria for this policy action. Of those, 17 states and D.C. have adopted high school diploma requirements that align with the minimum eligibility requirements for the state's flagship public university. (Seven specify the number of credits students must earn in different subjects, not specific courses they must complete; these states are aligned by default.) Eleven states have direct admissions programs in place. Six states—Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin—have both policies in place.

State of the States for

Status

● Not Yet Met

✓ Meets the Policy Action
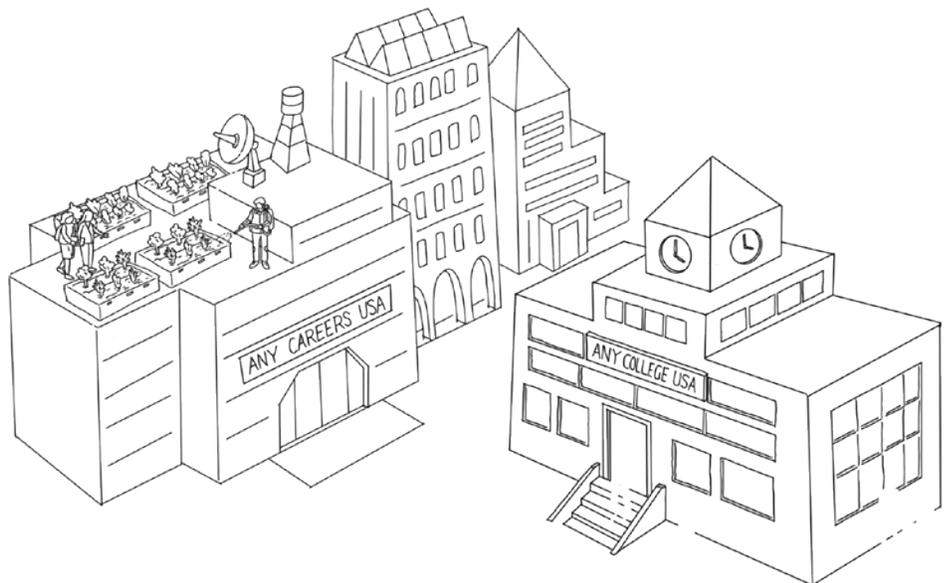
What You Can Do

The most effective alignment efforts reflect true collaboration between K-12 and higher education leaders reaching agreement on shared expectations for high school exit and college entry. State leaders can thoughtfully scale direct admissions by starting with a pilot program that expands to include more high schools and colleges over time. Streamlining pathways to postsecondary education means no student discovers too late they were shut out of college and every diploma opens doors to higher education, career opportunities, and lifelong learning.

Ensure diploma requirements align with the state's vision for high school student success (Policy Action 2).

A state's Portrait of a Graduate or competency framework should reflect a consensus among key stakeholders—including students, families, educators, higher education leaders, and employers—of the knowledge, skills, and experiences students should have before they graduate. It's important that diploma requirements reflect that vision. For instance, if stakeholders want to encourage students to explore work-based learning opportunities in high school, the diploma requirements should allow space for students to pursue those experiences while still satisfying the academic requirements needed to earn a diploma with college eligibility.

Coordinate the development of new diploma requirements with in-state public institutions of higher education and leading employers.

Before states adopt changes to their diploma requirements, it is imperative that leaders determine how those changes will affect student eligibility for in-state public universities. If proposed diploma requirements create misalignment with college eligibility requirements, state leaders must work in concert with public university leaders to adjust accordingly. Students must have confidence that the diploma they earn will enable them to apply to public universities in their state. Involving employers in these efforts can ensure that policy actions are informed by the demands of the new and future economy. For many students pursuing higher education, this means success in the labor market.

Develop and expand direct admissions programs to serve all students and a wide range of state institutions of higher education.

Direct admissions programs can remove significant barriers for students who are eligible for and interested in pursuing college but uncertain about how or whether to apply. To unlock the full potential of these programs, states can expand beyond pilot initiatives and design systems that are inclusive, streamlined, and easy to navigate. Programs should provide proactive notifications to eligible students, reflect a range of public higher education options—including regional universities and community colleges—and ensure participation from high schools across the state. Successful direct admissions programs are grounded in student data already collected by states (such as GPA, coursework, and test scores where applicable) and work best when coordinated with other supports, such as FAFSA completion campaigns, financial aid advising, and summer transition programs. States can also continuously analyze program outcomes to identify and close gaps in participation and enrollment. By scaling and formalizing direct admissions policies, states can send a powerful signal to students: College is not just possible—it's already within reach.

"Bridging the Gap: How States Are Aligning High School with Postsecondary Success"
ExcelinEd (2025)

This resource from ExcelinEd explores how Indiana, Utah, and Georgia are aligning high school graduation with postsecondary success through redesigned diplomas, guaranteed admissions, and personalized matching. These strategies expand access and connect students to college, career, and military opportunities while strengthening workforce readiness.

Grassroots Momentum:

Local Leadership at New York City's Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School

At many public high schools, the divide is often clear: Students are either college-bound or on a career and technical education track. And the latter sometimes means fewer opportunities and lower wages. But in Queens, N.Y., an innovative campus—one that literally has CTE emblazoned in its name—rejects that dividing line.

"We always try to push the mindset that CTE, it's not an alternative to college, it's a gateway to it," said Navindra Haripersaud, an assistant principal at Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical High School, which serves some 2,300 students. The school offers seven career pathways and 13 discrete CTE programs (or "career tracks"), more than any other New York City public high school. Examples include architectural drafting, automotive technology, graphic arts, and robotics. The most recent addition is interactive game design.

Career Opportunities at Edison CTE High School

CTE Pathways	Career Tracks
Visual Arts	Graphic Arts Digital Media Interactive Game Design
Information Technology	IT Specialist IT Security IT Networking Software Development
Automotive	Automotive Technology Collision & Refinishing
Engineering	Architectural Drafting
Medical	Medical Assisting
Electrical	Electrical/Solar Installation
STEM	Robotics & Drones

Most Edison graduates, about 90 percent, go on to college within a year or so, according to Haripersaud, who oversees CTE at Edison and is himself a 2009 graduate of the school. For those who don't, their academic preparation and the credits required to receive an Edison diploma keep their options open.

For example, some students who earn an industry certificate in Edison's electrical pathway participate in apprenticeships with New York City Transit that may lead to entry-level jobs with attractive pay and benefits straight out of high school. The 36-month apprenticeship pays more than $50,000 per year and includes comprehensive benefits.

Senior Gabrielle Salins values the combination of college-oriented coursework, including Advanced Placement classes, with CTE pathways—in her case, information technology.

"Students at Edison are more prepared for the workforce. We're more prepared to adapt, not just as students, but as industry professionals," said Gabrielle, who plans next fall to attend Stony Brook University, part of the State University of New York system.

Edison has cultivated an array of relationships beyond the school walls to facilitate opportunities for students in industry, nonprofits, and governmental organizations, including companies such as Apple, Google, and BMW. The high school was selected to participate in two initiatives launched by New York City Public Schools, FutureReadyNYC, and the Modern Youth Apprenticeship Pilot Program. With FutureReady, for example, students gain knowledge and real-world, paid experience in the fields of business and finance, education, healthcare, technology, and—beginning in the 2025-26 academic year—"human & social services" and "HVAC and building decarbonization."

Gabrielle and other students highlight Edison's strong focus on developing durable competencies for success in an ever-changing world.

Co-developed by teachers and student leaders, Edison's five essential skills are the heart of the enterprise and are embedded across the curriculum: communication, collaboration, giving and receiving feedback, design thinking, and professionalism.

"If you look at job ads around the country, there are certain things employers are always looking for, right?" said Edison educator Philip Baker, who also runs the school's research and development department in partnership with special education teacher Danielle Ragavanis. "People who are good at communication. People who can collaborate. … People who can give feedback to others, receive feedback themselves, think through goals."

Senior Jessica Baba—who is in the architectural "shop," as students refer to career tracks—echoes the sentiment about Edison helping students thrive in the real world. For example, she believes the school has changed her relationship with failure.

"Our school is really good at teaching us that we can fail," Jessica said. "They understand that we are still children, but they treat us as adults. And they know we're going to make mistakes in the process."

Jessica added: "Our school tries to challenge us to do things that we normally wouldn't do in order to grow. So, by making mistakes, by failing sometimes, we eventually learn from our failures, and that is what generates success."

Edison students are frequently low-income and the first in their families to be going to college. Among graduates who head directly to college, two thirds enroll at State University of New York campuses or the City University of New York, often with the help of New York State scholarships. Many end up juggling college with part-time jobs, and the workforce skills and industry certifications they obtain at Edison help them earn a better wage even as they work on a postsecondary degree.

Graduates who opt to head straight into the workforce, about 10 percent, tend to hit a wall when it comes to career advancement, Haripersaud explained. "Sometimes, they can only go so far and they need to get back into the cycle for college," he said.

In fact, Haripersaud draws on his own life experience when it comes to the limitations that come without postsecondary education. After high school graduation, he had no interest in college, so he enlisted in the U.S. military, only to discover later that his desire to work in the field of education required a college degree, and more.

"I was just so against going to [college]," he recalled. "And look at me, I had to come back and do my master's degree."

The school's combination of academic rigor and career prep delivers impressive results when it comes to student outcomes. Edison students are far more likely to graduate on time, complete advanced coursework, and enroll in college compared with their peers locally and statewide. (See "Excelling at Edison CTE High School.")

The school makes an effort to ensure that students' academic courses align with their career pathways. For example, Haripersaud said guidance counselors encourage students in particular pathways, like electrical or automotive, to take physics as one of their science courses. In fact, they often urge students to take four years of math or science—even though the state requires only three to earn a diploma.

"The future is so uncertain at the moment, because technology is so rapidly evolving; we need to build students who are also adaptable," said Baker. "So the last thing you want to do is the traditional high school approach."

His colleague, Danielle Ragavanis, agreed. "We're preparing them for anything, and that's the point."

The school's combination of academic rigor and career prep delivers impressive results.

Excelling at Edison CTE High School

97%
of students graduate on time in four years, compared with 83% citywide.

96%
of students score proficient on state English exams by the time they graduate, compared with 81% citywide.

71%
of students score proficient on state math exams by the time they graduate, compared with 48% citywide.

91%
of students complete college- and career-ready coursework, exams, and certifications by the time they graduate, compared with 62% citywide.

60%
of graduates earn an Advanced Regents diploma, compared with 22% citywide.

84%
of students graduate on time in four years and then go on to enroll in college, workforce training, or a service program within six months (including military service), compared with 64% citywide.

Sources: New York City Public Schools and the New York State Department of Education.
Figures represent data published as of June 2025.

Rhode Island

Over the last decade, Rhode Island has become a leader in statewide commitment to high school transformation—most notably, by adopting new diploma requirements in 2022 through a process that was bolstered by evidence and informed by widespread community input. The work leading to the adoption of the Readiness-Based Graduation Requirements began in 2019, when state leaders partnered with XQ to conduct an Educational Outcomes Audit and Analysis (EOAA).[66] The findings showed that, although 80 percent of seniors wanted to go to college, only 60 percent took courses needed even to apply to public institutions such as Rhode Island College or the state flagship University of Rhode Island—and only 52 percent were passing those courses.[67]

When confronted with the data, the state's K–12 Council challenged the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to find solutions. After presenting an initial proposal to the Council, state leaders held seven public hearings and four town halls across the state to discuss the EOAA findings and the proposed graduation requirements.

The new diploma policy makes college-readiness coursework the "default" for all students beginning with the class of 2028, though it provides flexibility to substitute other courses with informed consent of parents or guardians. The state's FAQs about the policy change make the intent crystal clear: "We do not want to close the door to opportunities for students because of the courses they took when they were 13 and 14 years old or for a graduate to find themselves ineligible to attend our state colleges and universities."[68] Importantly, Rhode Island's new diploma policy also fully frees high schools from the hold of the traditional Carnegie Unit (Policy Action 1), emphasizing that "seat time and instructional minutes shall not be a consideration in the issuance of credit."[69]

North Carolina

State leaders in North Carolina have adopted a number of policies that support high school transformation, including steps to ensure that every student who completes the state's Future-Ready Course of Study earns a diploma that meets the requirements for the University of North Carolina system.[70]

In 2024, the University of North Carolina (UNC) system piloted NC College Connect, a direct admissions program for North Carolina public high school seniors who completed their junior year with a GPA of 2.8 or above. In October, seniors receive a letter notifying them where they have been automatically admitted. To claim their admission, students need only submit a simple five-question form through a centralized portal. Every community college in the state also participated, and North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) piloted its own direct admissions program.

For 2025-26, NC College Connect expanded beyond the pilot phase to include the participation of 11 universities in the UNC system, all 58 community colleges, and 29 private institutions through NCICU— for a total of 98 colleges and universities. The new program, which is supported by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, has the potential to streamline college admissions for more than 70,000 high school students each year.

North Carolina shows how it is possible to go beyond alignment of diploma policies to make the transition to public higher education more seamless, leveraging both policy and relationships with higher education to remove barriers young people face as they launch their postsecondary journeys.
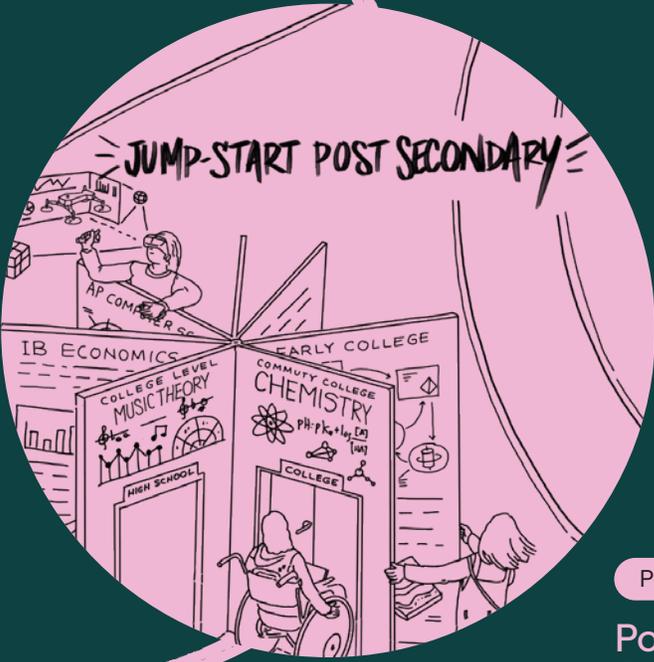
Powerful Learning Experiences
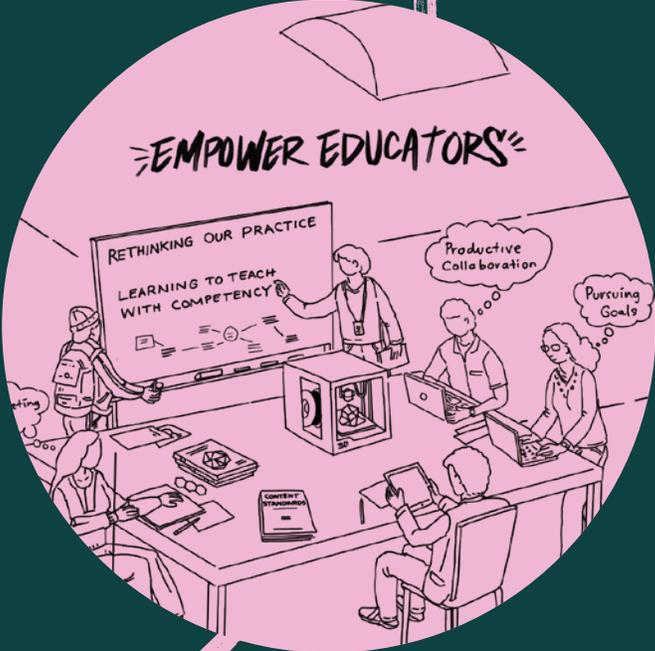
LET COMMUNITIES LEAD

COMMUNITY MEETING
NY CITY, USA

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
34% 53%

LOCAL LABOR MARKET
69%

HOW TO PREPARE HIGH SCHOOLERS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Policy Action 4

Community-Led Redesign

EMPOWER EDUCATORS

RETHINKING OUR PRACTICE

LEARNING TO TEACH WITH COMPETENCY

Productive Collaboration

Pursuing Goals

CONTENT STANDARDS

Policy Action 7

Professional Development

REAL WORK, REAL CREDIT

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Product Designer, Architect, Engineer

Policy Action 6

Internships and Apprenticeships

JUMP-START POST SECONDARY

AP COMPUTER SCI

IB ECONOMICS

COLLEGE LEVEL MUSIC THEORY

EARLY COLLEGE

COMMUTY COLLEGE CHEMISTRY

HIGH SCHOOL

COLLEGE

Policy Action 5

Postsecondary Credits

Community-Led Redesign

Policy Action 4

Invest in community-led high school redesign and provide flexibility and guidance <u>to empower innovation</u>

Why Community-Led Redesign Matters

State policymakers can ensure that high school transformation reflects the aspirations and needs of local communities by creating initiatives that explicitly empower local stakeholders—students, families, employers, community and cultural leaders and, of course, educators—to take the lead in the design process.

Unlike conventional "top-down" processes of school redesign or "turnaround," a truly community-led process can produce stronger school models and earn community buy-in and support at the same time. The initiative should provide design guidelines, relevant research and data, flexibility and other incentives, and funding that inspire and empower local communities to take on the demanding work of reenvisioning the high school experience of their students.

With the right supports, communities take up this challenge with enthusiasm. When XQ invited communities across the country to engage in a design challenge in 2015, more than 10,000 people representing nearly 4,000 communities across 49 states answered our call to propose student-centered designs for 21st-century learning.

As part of that national challenge, XQ provided community teams with guidance and materials during a design journey informed by the XQ Design Principles, six research-backed elements of effective high schools based on best practice and the science of teaching and learning.

Teams of community members came together to articulate what they wanted their students to know and be able to do before designing their own distinctive school models and learning experiences, using the Design Principles as a framework.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the XQ challenge produced radically different, high-quality school models that met the goals of community-led design teams and capitalized on unique local resources. Since then, Rhode Island and D.C. have used the same design principles and community-led process to reimagine high schools on a statewide and systemwide scale.

High school redesign requires ongoing community support and buy-in, which means that progress can only be sustained when local communities are empowered to design their own solutions to the common challenge of ensuring that each and every student graduates prepared for success after high school.

The XQ Design Principles

Strong mission and culture—a clear set of school values that unify stakeholders around a common purpose

Meaningful, engaged learning—interdisciplinary and engaging strategies that help students develop content knowledge and complex skills

Caring, trusting relationships—personal connections between students and adults, and between students and their peers, to help them develop holistically

Youth voice and choice—authentic, ample opportunities for students to build autonomy, develop agency, and develop their identities

Smart use of time, space, and tech—nontraditional approaches to when, where, and how students learn

Community partnerships—connections that open up real-world learning opportunities for students to gain valuable experiences that help them envision life beyond high school

# How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state must demonstrate the following:

- The state has a grant program or provides other state funding to local communities to support high school design; and

- The state provides flexibility to innovate (e.g., through waivers or an innovation zone or status); and

- State policy offers guidance on a design process that ensures high quality and accountability, including requiring participation of a broad range of stakeholders in the high school design journey, including parents, students, educators, business leaders, and community leaders.

Progress can only be sustained when local communities are empowered to design their own solutions.

Five States and D.C. Meet This Policy Action

Today, five states—California, New Mexico, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Virginia—plus D.C. have programs in place to support communities in developing innovative high school models.
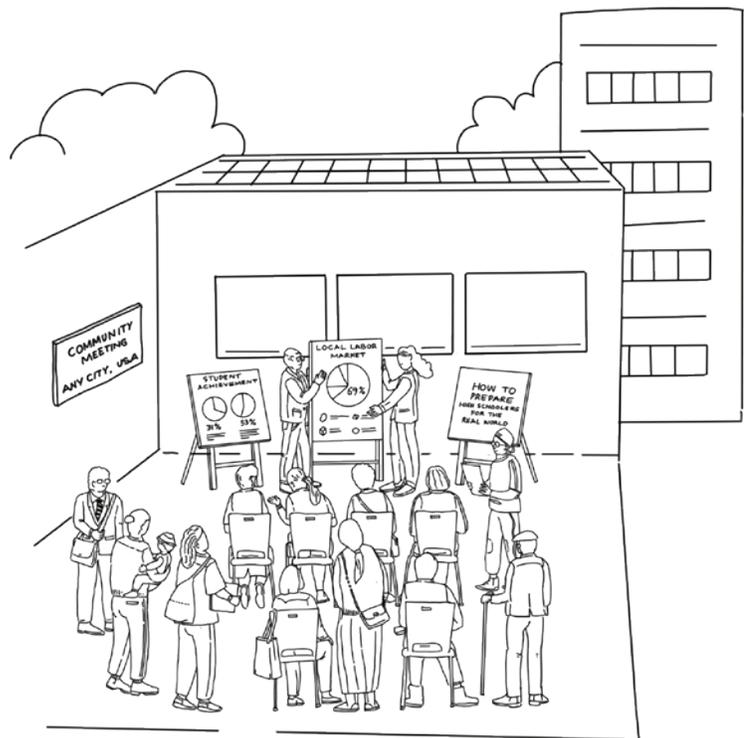
State of the States for

5 states and D.C.
meet this policy action

Status

Not Yet Met

Meets the Policy Action

WA
MT
ND
MN
ME
WI
OR
ID
VT
NH
SD
MI
MA
RI
WY
IA
NY
PA
CT
NV
NE
IL
IN
OH
UT
CO
KS
MO
NJ
MD
CA
VA
WV
DC
DE
KY
TN
NC
AZ
OK
AR
SC
NM
MS
AL
GA
LA
AK
HI
TX
FL
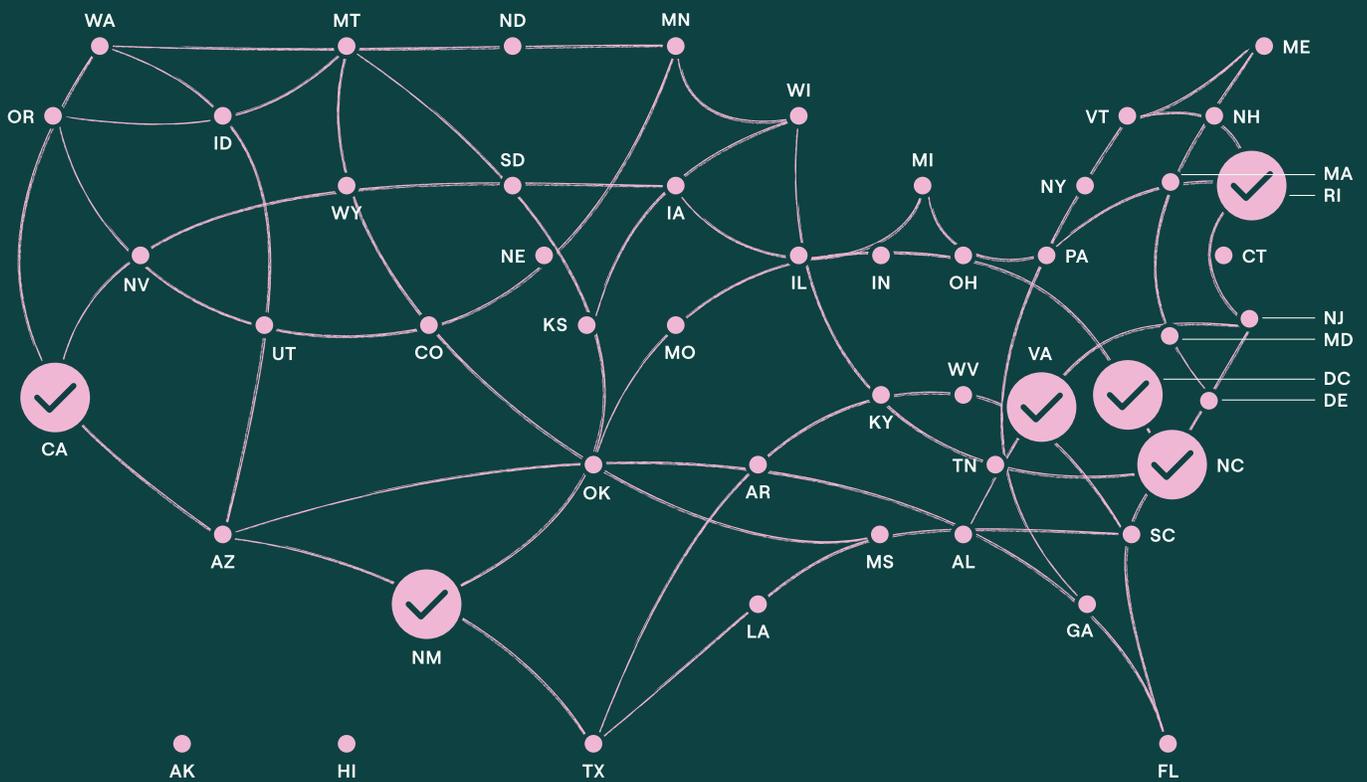
What You Can Do

Community-led redesign initiatives will be most successful in states that offer districts true flexibility to think big and reinvent the high school experience, including freedom from seat time requirements. By coupling resources with flexibility, states empower districts and schools to co-design high school experiences alongside students, families, and employers. Excellence requires everyone—and sustaining excellence requires authentic community agency and meaningful, ongoing participation. Leaders can also build networks of participating schools to share lessons learned, ensuring that grassroots solutions can spread and scale across the state.

Establish flexibility from seat time and articulate expectations for student success.

The first two policy actions are critical starting points for a state's high school transformation efforts. Ensuring school systems can award students credit based on their learning unshackles the redesign process from the constraints of seat time and allows communities to innovate and adopt rigorous instructional approaches and engaging learning experiences for students. Meanwhile, adopting a Portrait of a Graduate will set clear expectations for what students need to learn prior to graduation that can serve as a North Star for high school redesign efforts.

Ensure that student voice is central.

Redesign efforts need to be community-led, incorporating the voices of educators, parents, industry leaders, and, most importantly, students. To develop high schools that students can believe in and commit to, students need to be at the center of the design process, sharing their aspirations and ambitions, their reflections on their current schools, and their hopes for a new, reimagined high school experience. XQ's Design Journey and Youth Voice Toolkit provide a wealth of resources that communities can use to meaningfully engage students and incorporate their voice in the design process.

Students need to be at the center of the design process, sharing their aspirations and ambitions.

Listen to and learn with your communities.

The community-led redesign process creates a singular opportunity for state leaders to engage in meaningful conversations with communities—including students!—to better understand unique and common needs and opportunities to ensure success. These discussions may help state leaders identify additional flexibilities that would remove barriers to high school redesign or develop resources that would benefit every community and every design journey across the state.

Encourage partnership.

As noted above, rethinking the high school experience is hard, but local communities do not need to operate in isolation or reinvent the wheel in search of transformation. Innovative efforts are underway in states across the country, featuring partnerships with industry, civic and cultural organizations, and organizations that have expertise in the adoption of new instructional approaches. State leaders can help identify partners who can work with communities to ensure the success of their redesign efforts.

"Youth Voice Toolkit"

XQ

The Youth Voice Toolkit is a comprehensive resource designed to support high school students to drive change within their high school communities.

Rhode Island

In 2018, Rhode Island partnered with XQ to launch a statewide initiative to rethink high school. The RI+XQ Challenge featured interactive design sessions that brought together community stakeholders—students, educators, industry partners, and families—to engage in a guided process of rethinking their community's school. Participants from all of the state's 64 public high schools took part.

Those initial sessions resulted in 20 schools receiving planning grants in June 2019, with several schools continuing their redesign journey as XQ partner schools. Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts (TAPA) received two-year transformation funding and became part of XQ's Community of Practice, a diverse group of innovative schools nationwide that learns from and with one another, alongside leading education researchers and experts.

Rhode Island's partnership with XQ also produced statewide research findings, based on the in-depth Educational Outcomes Audit and Analysis (EOAA), that laid the groundwork for the state's adoption of new Readiness-Based Graduation Requirements. Beginning with the class of 2028, all graduates will be eligible for the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College (Policy Action 3).

New Mexico

New Mexico leaders have taken a number of steps to advance high school transformation across the state. Most notably, in January 2022, the New Mexico Department of Education collaborated with the LANL Foundation to publish the New Mexico Comprehensive College and Career Pathways Assessment Report. The report served as the launching pad for the NM Innovation Zones initiative, a statewide effort to transform the state's high schools.[71]

During the 2023-24 school year, 47 high schools—approximately 20 percent of the state's high schools—and their school districts received funding to participate in the NM Innovation Zones initiative to rethink pathways for college and career readiness by leveraging "grassroots solutions with wisdom from local communities."[72] The number of participating high schools and school systems increased to 51 in 2024-25.

Postsecondary Credits

Policy Action 5
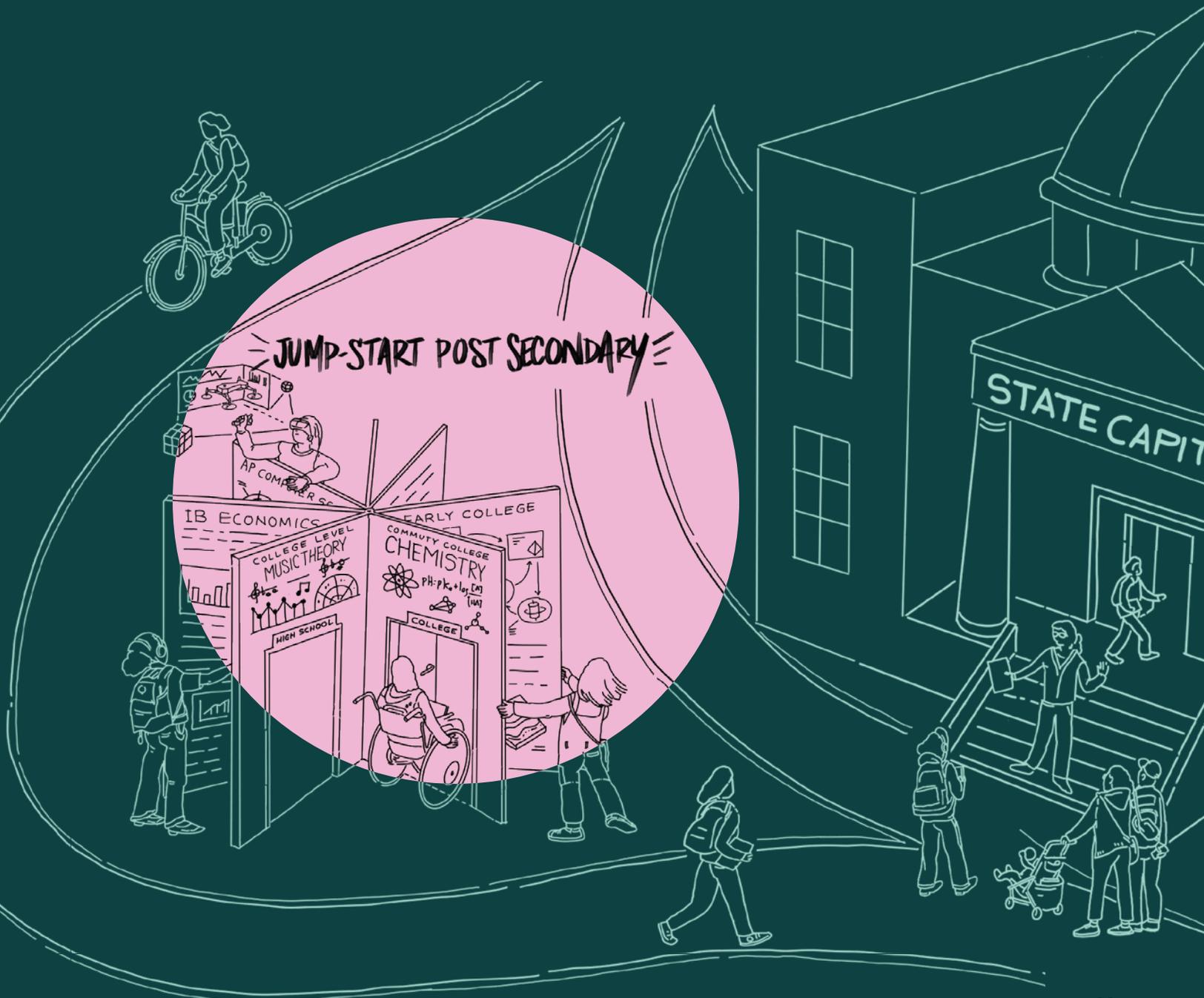
Give all high school students the opportunity to earn postsecondary credits

Why Postsecondary Credits Matter

High schools should be springboards of opportunity, ensuring that postsecondary education and training is available to every student. Beyond aligning diploma requirements with public college admissions criteria (Policy Action 3), states can expand opportunity by offering all students access to advanced, college-level coursework that allows them to earn postsecondary credits while still in high school. That can include, for example, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment or dual credit, and postsecondary CTE-focused courses.

Studies show that taking even one advanced class predicts positive outcomes later in life, including college-going, choice of college major, and lower student loan debt—all of which in turn predict greater success in the labor market.[73] The benefits begin in high school: According to the Education Trust, "When students have access to advanced coursework opportunities, they work harder and are more engaged in school, have fewer absences and suspensions and higher graduation rates."[74] Finally, students who earn postsecondary credits in high school can use them to reduce college tuition costs and shorten the time it takes to earn a degree.

Every student deserves a fair chance to challenge themselves, work hard, and get a head start on postsecondary credits and lifelong success.

Advanced coursework can support career readiness as well. In Washington State, for example, the CTE Dual Credit program allows students to earn college-level credit in high school through industry-aligned courses that blend rigorous academics with technical and workplace skills. These credits can be applied at any community or technical college in the state.

Despite these benefits, many students still don't have access to such opportunities. Only 69 percent of high school students say their school offers advanced coursework for earning postsecondary credit.[75] Among parents with children who are not enrolled in a dual enrollment course, 73 percent said they'd like their child to enroll in one—an "unmet demand" seen across all income levels.[76]

National data have long shown that access to advanced courses varies across different kinds of high schools. A survey conducted in 2025 revealed that 79 percent of high schools serving relatively few students of color offer advanced courses of some kind, compared with 67 percent of high schools enrolling a high percentage of such students.[77]

Every student deserves a fair chance to challenge themselves, work hard, and get a head start on postsecondary credits and lifelong success—which is exactly what advanced coursework is all about.

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state will require that all high schools offer advanced coursework that enables students to earn college credit, or it will directly offer statewide access to advanced coursework options either in-person or virtually.

Studies show that taking even one advanced class predicts positive outcomes later in life.

38 States and D.C. Meet This Policy Action

Thirty-eight states and D.C. have policies in place that ensure all high schools offer advanced, credit-bearing coursework in high school.

State of the States for

Policy Action 5

Status

● Not Yet Met

✓ Meets the Policy Action
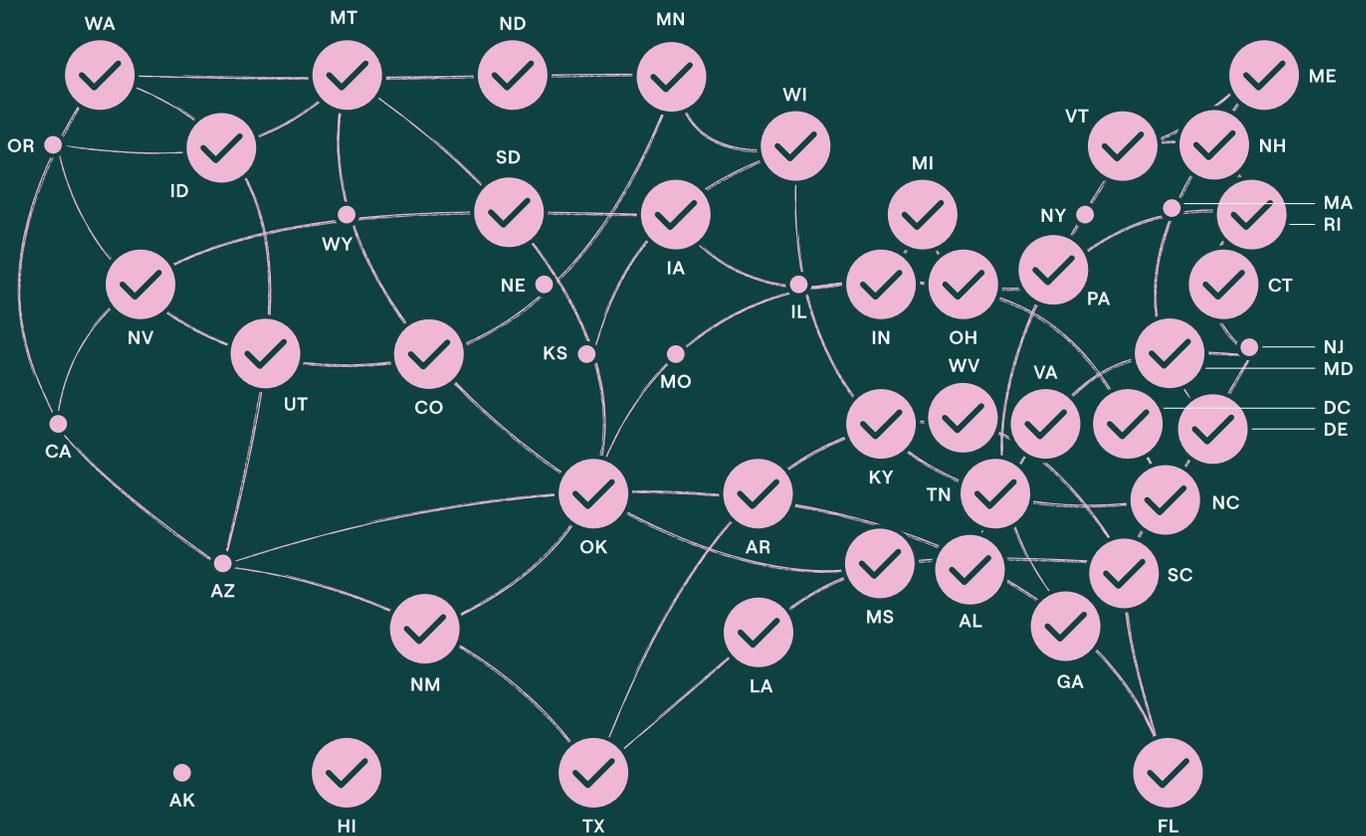
What You Can Do

Beyond ensuring access, state leaders can maximize benefits to students by offering college-level courses free of cost, expanding course offerings, shifting to "opt out" policies, and transparently reporting data on outcomes. Ideally, advanced coursework is available to every student, in every community, along with the support students and teachers need to succeed.

As a starting point, align graduation requirements with eligibility for public institutions of higher education (Policy Action 3).

Every high school student who passes the required coursework to earn a basic diploma should be confident that they are eligible to apply to the state's public institutions of higher education.

Identify opportunities to increase the number of students eligible for advanced coursework.

Even if state policies meet the criteria for this policy action, students may find themselves ineligible to take advanced coursework due to prior learning decisions—possibly taken as early as elementary school. Policies like Texas' automatic enrollment for advanced mathematics coursework help remove barriers that may prevent students from taking the rigorous courses that would prepare them for college-level work. These policies send a clear message that every student, in every community, can and should participate successfully in these courses.

These policies send a clear message that every student, in every community, can and should participate successfully in these courses.

Help establish multiple options for college-level coursework that can earn students postsecondary credit.

State leaders should work with higher education institutions and other providers to ensure that every student, in every community across the state, has access to advanced courses in a wide range of subjects. Of equal importance, states can help students leverage the credits they earn by requiring in-state institutions to accept the credits and by supporting articulation agreements across institutions and across state lines.

"On Ramp to College: A State Policymaker's Guide to Dual Enrollment"
Jobs for the Future (2021)

This guide shows how dual enrollment can serve as an "on ramp" to postsecondary education for students who are otherwise unlikely to attend college, highlighting successful statewide dual enrollment efforts and offering a step-by-step plan for policymakers to create successful programs and review their current approaches.

Texas

Policy makers in Texas have established a solid foundation for high school transformation through efforts to support college and career readiness for every student across the state. To that end, the state has adopted policies to align high school diplomas to college entrance requirements (Policy Action 3) while providing high school students with opportunities for advanced coursework and work-based learning.

Texas law requires all school systems to offer students the opportunity to earn 12 or more semester hours of college credit through different course options, including dual enrollment, AP, and IB.[78] Eligibility is open to all students enrolled in high school who meet the prerequisite course requirements. Dallas ISD has proven to be an exemplar in increasing dual credit experiences for Black, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students and outpacing the state average. In the 2022-23 school year, 873 high school students earned associate degrees (60+ credit hours), and the dual credit success rate rose to 79 percent—a jump of five percentage points from the previous year.[79]

Additionally, Texas is one of a handful of states that has implemented an automatic enrollment policy requiring eligible students to "opt out" of middle school advanced courses rather than requesting to be admitted to them. The state's commitment to the college and career readiness of its high school students also extends to the state's data and reporting systems, which present disaggregated information on postsecondary enrollment and attainment by high school.

Washington

Washington State is a national leader in transforming high school education through its focus on mastery-based learning and expanding access to advanced coursework. In the class of 2023, 90 percent of graduates completed at least one dual credit course (including AP, IB, postsecondary CTE, or other postsecondary-level coursework).[80]

In 2011, the legislature passed a policy requiring every high school to work towards the goal of offering enough advanced courses to enable students to earn a full year's worth of postsecondary credits before graduation. The policy also requires schools to inform students and their families about the opportunity and encourage students to consider 12th grade a "launch year" to get a head start on their postsecondary education and career preparation.

In addition, in 2019, Washington State became the first in the nation to adopt a policy that requires all eligible students to be automatically enrolled in advanced coursework unless they actively decline to participate. A recent study of the policy—dubbed Academic Acceleration—found that it increases enrollment in advanced coursework, especially for students who traditionally are less likely to take such courses, without negatively impacting students' grades.[81]

Internships and Apprenticeships

Policy Action 6

REAL WORK, REAL CREDIT

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Product Designer, Architect, Engineer...

AI Researcher, Robotics Engineer, Developer...

Electrician, Electrical Engineer, Field Service Tech...

Credit high school students for <u>work-based learning and</u> apprenticeships

Why Internships and Apprenticeships Matter

High-quality, work-based learning (WBL) opportunities enable students to explore potential career pathways, gain valuable workplace experience, and graduate with critical knowledge and competencies necessary for success beyond high school.

For Jesus, a 2025 graduate of Latitude High in Oakland, California, a worksite visit during his first year of high school sparked an unexpected passion for aviation. "I really just fell in love as soon as I walked into the hangar," he recalls. "I learned everything about the airframe of the airplane, the engine parts, everything about the weight and balance and aerodynamics. The whole process of it has been really intriguing to me."

Jesus pursued his new interest by completing a full internship in an aviation shop. "The whole internship process is based on the student trying to build those connections and network outside of their bubble" says Jesus, who is now in college. "I'm really proud of my ability to be professional, and to really grow and be mature."

Students, parents, and industry leaders place tremendous value on such opportunities. In fact, teens rank "skills for future employment" as the most important thing to learn at school.[82]

But the demand for WBL far exceeds supply. Nearly eight in 10 high school students (79 percent) express interest in participation in work-based learning experiences.[83] Yet only 62 percent of U.S. high schools offer formal WBL programs. Among those schools, a mere 20 percent of students participate, on average, largely because opportunities like internships remain limited.[84] Among parents whose children are not participating in an internship or apprenticeship, 74 percent express interest in such programs—an "unmet demand" that is consistently high across all income levels.[85]

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle have begun to respond to this growing demand. In 2024 alone, state legislatures enacted a total of 46 distinct policies related to WBL and industry partnerships.[86]

Expanding access is a crucial first step—but access alone isn't enough. To deliver real impact, WBL programs must be high quality. That means offering meaningful, rigorous experiences that build skills and open doors to good jobs in growing fields, all while helping students grow into capable, confident learners.

Unfortunately, when programs lack structure or purpose, students, families, educators, and employers can come away disappointed. **Without a strong learning focus, WBL risks becoming just another version of "seat time."**

State leaders can safeguard quality by clearly defining what high-quality WBL and youth apprenticeship programs should look like—and by providing guidance and support for effective implementation. They can also ensure that students who complete these programs earn credit toward graduation.

Defining WBL and Youth Apprenticeships

Federal definition of work-based learning in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006: "[S]ustained interactions with industry or community professionals in real workplace settings, to the extent practicable, or simulated environments at an educational institution that foster in-depth, firsthand engagement with the tasks required in a given career field, that are aligned to curriculum and instruction."[87]

Definition of high-quality youth apprenticeship adopted by the Partnership to Advance for Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA): "Apprenticeship is a proven education and workforce strategy that combines paid, structured on-the-job training with related, classroom learning. A youth apprenticeship is a structured, work-based learning program designed to start when apprentices are in high school. High-quality youth apprenticeship programs are built on partnerships that include employers, high schools, and providers of postsecondary education, most often a community college. High-quality youth apprenticeship programs include the following four core elements:

- Paid, on-the-job learning under the supervision of skilled employee mentors;

- Related, classroom-based instruction;

- Ongoing assessment against established skills and competency standards;

- Culmination in a portable, industry recognized credential and postsecondary credit."[88]

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state will have:

- A published policy or guidance on implementing high-quality work-based learning; and

- Clear policies for when and how students earn credit toward graduation upon successful completion of work-based learning experiences; and

- A robust definition of high-quality youth apprenticeships.

Work-Based Learning Is a Four-Year Journey for Students at Latitude High

Oakland's Latitude High integrates work-based learning into its fundamental design, providing a continuum of "Extended Learning Opportunities" that grow in challenge and duration as students grow in maturity and competence.

9th graders visit workplaces throughout Oakland, gaining a deep understanding of the kinds of careers they might aspire to in their community. All 10th graders "job shadow" a variety of adults in various Bay Area organizations. Every 11th grader completes a full month-long internship. Seniors have the choice to seek out an extended internship opportunity or to participate in a creative multimedia challenge.

Nationally, fewer than an estimated one in five high school students has a formal work-based experience in any given year. In contrast, Latitude's innovative design delivers WBL to every student in every grade level every year, leveraging a broad set of community partners to customize WBL experiences as students hone their career interests over time.

Well-planned, high-quality work-based learning experiences can have profound value for high school students. For example, Miles, a member of Latitude's class of 2024, is pursuing a college degree and career in the healthcare industry based on a passion he explored while interning with Cardea Health during his junior year. Xavier, a class of 2023 graduate, is pursuing a college degree in aviation after interning with two pilots and learning to fly an airplane in high school.

Importantly, students at Latitude don't have to choose between preparing for work and preparing for college. In 2024, three in four Latitude graduates (73 percent) successfully completed all academic coursework necessary to be eligible for the University of California and California State University systems, compared with only 52 percent of graduates statewide.[89] (See Policy Action 3.)

46 States and D.C. Meet This Policy Action

4 states partially meet the criteria

Forty-six states and D.C. have policies in place that define and give students credit for completion of high-quality work-based learning experiences and offer apprenticeship programs aligned with a national benchmark of quality.
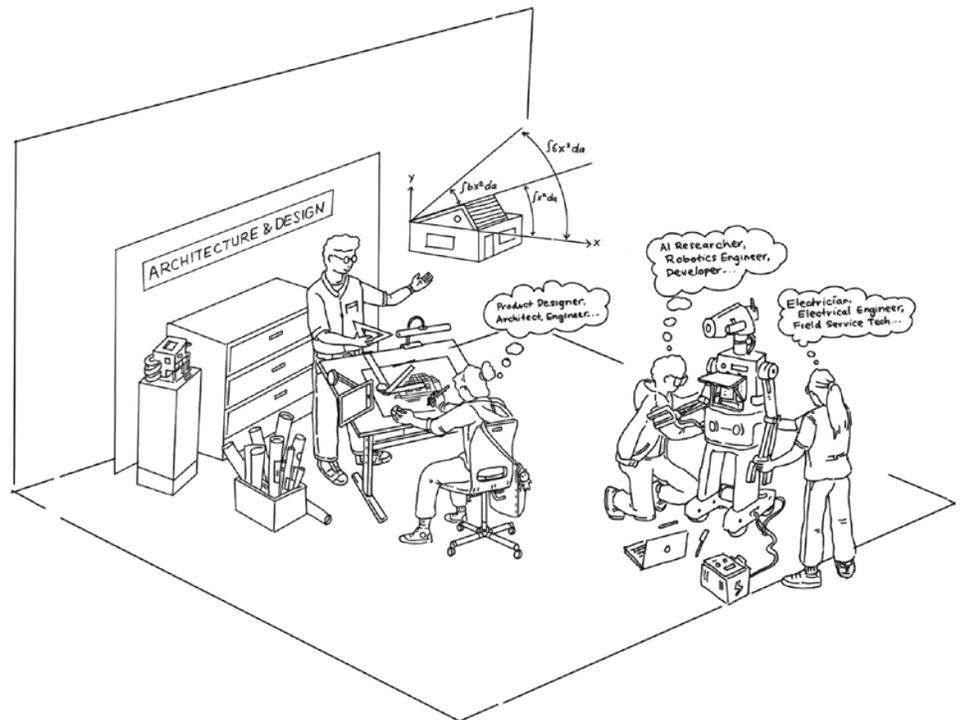
State of the States for

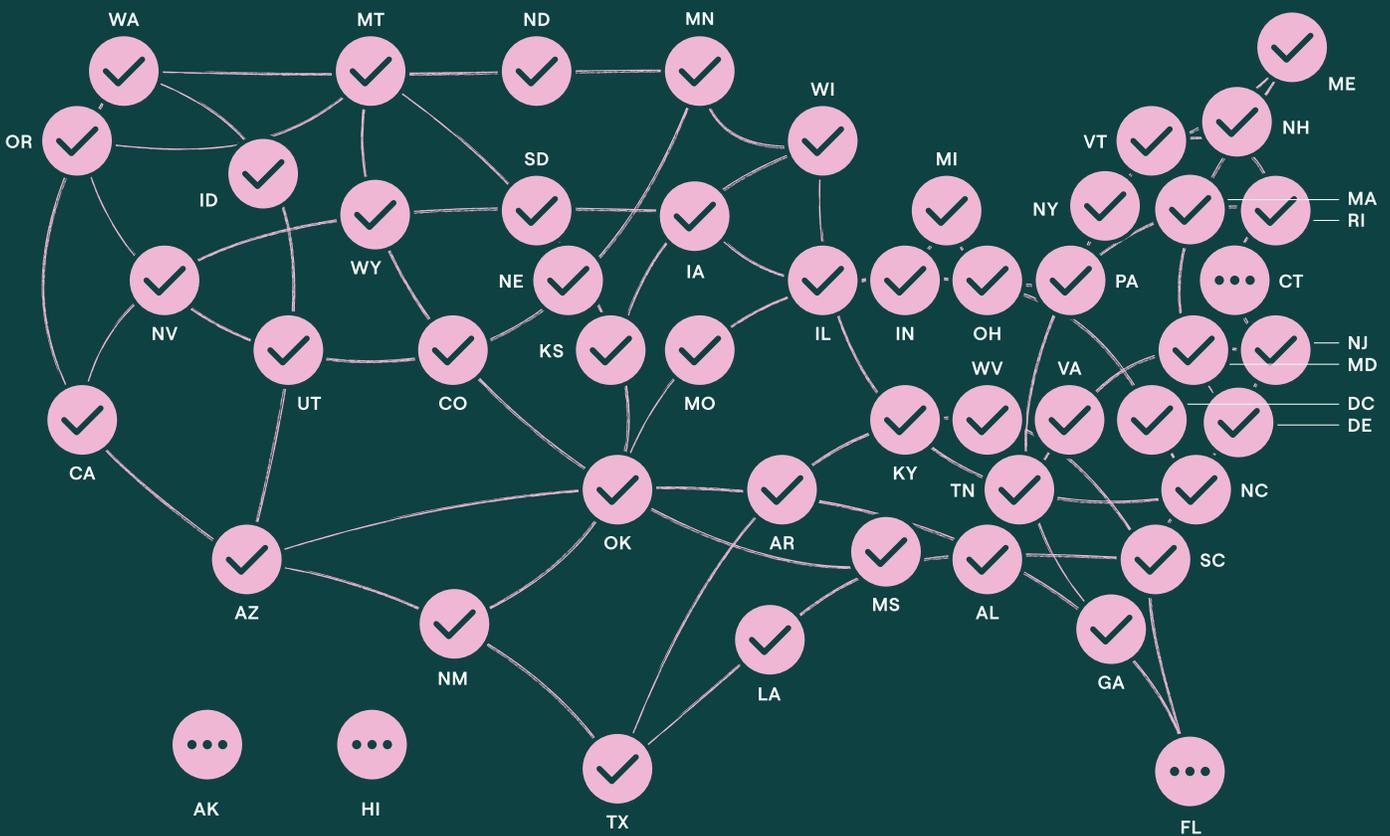46 states and D.C. meet this policy action

4 states partially meet

States can partially meet the criteria for Policy Action 6 either by meeting the first two criteria for this policy action or by meeting the third criterion.

Status

● Not Yet Met

⋯ Partially Meets

✔ Meets the Policy Action

What You Can Do

The best work-based learning blends practical hands-on experience, opportunities to apply academic knowledge and skills, and a focus on developing durable competencies. State leaders can elevate WBL by providing clear guidance and tools while highlighting local exemplars. Ideally, employers and higher education are not just involved, but co-leading efforts to expand high-quality WBL in collaboration with state officials.

Integrate durable competencies into work-based learning strategies.

High-quality WBL experiences offer a perfect setting for students to develop the kind of durable competencies employers increasingly demand. States that adopt a Portrait of a Graduate or competency framework (Policy Action 2) can link the competencies to WBL policies so that students, educators, and employers can identify key competencies for the job in question and collect evidence of student progress in mastering the competencies.

Ensure diplomas matter for success in the workforce.

In addition to aligning with entry requirements for public higher education (Policy Action 3), diploma policies should reflect a vision for high school that includes work-based learning and career pathways, creating opportunities for students to earn credentials that matter both for employers and post-secondary institutions.

Take steps to expand high-quality work-based learning—in particular apprenticeship programs—across the state.

From grants to corporate incentives to data systems, states are employing a wide array of strategies to support the expansion of high-quality work-based learning experiences. The goal: to ensure that every student, regardless of where they live, can access high-quality work-based learning opportunities in their community.

State leaders can safeguard quality by clearly defining what high-quality WBL and youth apprenticeship programs should look like—and by providing guidance and support for effective implementation.

Incorporate workforce readiness into state data and accountability systems.

State data and accountability systems should help families, educators, policymakers, and students understand if their high schools are satisfactorily performing their primary objective: preparing students for success in life. This should include data and metrics of student success after high school, whether in postsecondary institutions, the workforce, and/or the military.

Invest in community-led high school redesign (Policy Action 4) to explore how creative uses of time and space can expand access to high-quality WBL.

Ideally, work-based learning should be embedded in the core design of the high school experience rather than being an "add-on" available to only a few students. But schoolwide approaches to WBL require creative thinking about schedules and calendars. Transformed high schools like Purdue Polytechnic High School in Indianapolis, Latitude High in Oakland, and Dunbar High School in D.C. are showing how schoolwide transformation can support an integrated "WBL for all" design.

Grassroots Momentum:

Local Leadership in Washington, D.C.

Every Wednesday, seniors Denim Johnson and Labiba Kahn leave their high school campus to spend half the day at the District of Columbia National Guard headquarters, a few miles east of the U.S. Capitol. The two students at Dunbar High School in D.C. have internships: They handle tasks such as helping soldiers and staff track inventory in the facility's stock room.

Denim and Labiba are part of a growing effort by District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) to provide career preparation and work-based learning as part of the educational experience before high school graduation. Along the way, the students are learning valuable lessons for success in the workforce and life.

Labiba volunteered an example, recalling a day she was absent because of an illness and neglected to inform the National Guard team. The staff pressed her on the matter later: "They said, 'Why weren't you there?'" she recalled. "I feel like that was a lesson for me, that I need to communicate with these people," Labiba said. "I thought, 'OK I think I made a mistake.' But it bettered my communication skills."

Most seniors at Dunbar take part in internships. Those opportunities run the gamut, such as working at local government agencies, the U.S. Department of Energy, federal and D.C. courts, libraries, and the Humane Rescue Alliance. Students earn an elective academic credit for their internships, the majority of which take place off campus.

"Dunbar's model is centered on leveraging the city as a classroom. And they are right in the center," said Constance Parham, the Director of Innovation and Design for DCPS.

The internship element of the school redesign reflects a key XQ policy priority: providing high-quality, credit-bearing, work-based learning opportunities for students. Parham said she's been struck by the positive impact on participating students.

"I definitely see the level of thoughtfulness and increased awareness of what is needed in a workplace setting that [students] did not have previously, which was pretty powerful," she said.

The internship experiences—reinforced in weekly reflections during a student advisory class—aim to enrich the seniors' educational experience and expand their horizons. This school year, roughly three-quarters of Dunbar seniors participated. All eligible seniors take part in the program.

Work-based experiences are also available to other DCPS students, including through the Advanced Internship Program, which provides paid and credit-bearing internships for students in the Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, and the paid, summertime Career Ready Internships. Both programs serve several hundred students each year, Parham said. In 2020, the city launched a modern youth apprenticeship program called CareerWise DC, with the support of CareerWise USA, CityWorks DC, and the Federal City Council. That program is still growing, with one Dunbar student participating in 2024-25.

Most seniors at Dunbar take part in internships. Those opportunities run the gamut, such as working at local government agencies, the U.S. Department of Energy, federal and D.C. courts, libraries, and the Humane Rescue Alliance. Students earn an elective academic credit for their internships, the majority of which take place off campus.

Students like Denim and Labiba have benefitted from a few perks beyond their job itself at the D.C. National Guard, like chatting with the facility's commanding officer, Major General John C. Andonie. "He sat with us for about 30 minutes on the first day," Labiba recalled. "He talked with us about our future. He also talked about his experiences in the military."

As for Denim, the National Guard experience helped him decide his next step after graduation: "Through the internship, I enlisted in the Army," he said, and will report for duty in August. Denim said he was accepted to a couple of four-year colleges but decided to complete military service first.

Not all Dunbar internships involve leaving campus. Senior Curtis "Justin" Taylor interns under the direction of student experience coach Nakisha Yates. Justin helps with an array of tasks, including scheduling field trips, creating invoices and surveys, managing spreadsheets, and even reaching out to school vendors.

"My responsibilities have been growing over time," Justin said. He recalled times when he was not keeping up with his duties. The repercussions made a lasting impression: "I was avoiding responsibility," he said. "Learning to take that up for myself, developing accountability even when no one is watching, that is something huge that I took from this [internship]."

Justin also shared some of the competencies he has cultivated through the experience.

"There were a lot of transferable skills that I gained," he said. "Time management is a huge one, communication, integrity. And then also, developing the attitude of being able to complete tasks, that is something I can take with me when I … go to college."

In fact, Justin was accepted and plans to attend the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor next fall.

Dunbar's aspiration to create a school-wide vision for work-based learning grew out of its participation in DC+XQ, a multi-year, community-driven partnership to rethink what high schools can be and make those visions a reality. In 2022, the school was selected to be among the first cohort of DCPS high schools to begin implementing its design. (See Policy Action 4.)

Parham notes that in a traditional public school, "constraints and requirements can make school leaders and educators feel like there is not a lot of wiggle room for creativity" in rethinking the school experience. "This pushed the district to think about what we are flexible about. … We also did visits to other XQ schools across the country, like Purdue Polytechnic, that inspired us a lot."

"State Policy Playbook to Advance Youth Apprenticeship"

National Governors Association (2022)

The National Governors Association has compiled a state policy playbook, outlining specific actions that governors and other state leaders can take to foster high-quality youth apprenticeship.

The hope, Parham said, is that DCPS can increase the number of students and schools that participate in internships, apprenticeships, and dual enrollment programs, "all of which require more flexibility and creative scheduling." She added, "First you need to navigate the speed bumps. Hopefully, through the innovative work underway at Dunbar, we can get proof points and have a process and a model."

One of the driving forces behind Dunbar's internship program was a desire to "address rising disengagement with postsecondary ambitions" among students, said Oumar Diallo, Dunbar's redesign director. School leaders wanted to "bring the future to students, to put students in spaces where they could be thinking about what they would be doing in five or six years, and not just talking about it."

One powerful way to drive this home, he said, is requiring all students to complete a "capstone project," where they develop and present a slide deck about their internship experience to their peers and educators. "There is a very elaborate rubric that we have put together. We try to treat it like a celebration."

Dunbar is still early in its experience with internships, which launched on a schoolwide basis in 2023-24. But Parham is hopeful other DCPS schools will follow suit, not only with internships but also with additional ways to rethink how students spend their time.

Meanwhile, Dunbar is working to expand the support provided to students in the internship program, with more time and attention paid upfront to prepare them for the experience. The school is also looking to cultivate additional workplace opportunities in the city.

"The internship is really there to position students so they can see themselves in a future that is empowering and dignifying," Diallo said.

"Learning to take that up for myself—developing accountability even when no one is watching—that is something huge that I took from this [internship]."

– Justin Taylor, Senior at Dunbar High School

Colorado

Colorado is a national leader in reimagining the education-to-career pipeline, with high schools playing a critical role in that work. By breaking down traditional barriers between K–12, higher education, and the workforce, state leaders have expanded work-based learning and apprenticeship programs, incentivized local innovation, and explored new assessment and accountability models with the goal of supporting the development of the durable skills demanded by a modern economy.

To further advance that objective, in September 2023, Governor Jared Polis issued an executive order to expand work-based learning opportunities across the state. The Colorado Department of Education, in collaboration with the Office of the Future of Work, has developed a Work-Based Learning (WBL) Continuum. The state's framework categorizes WBL activities into three main areas: Learning ABOUT Work, Learning THROUGH Work, and Learning AT Work. Each category is defined with quality expectations to guide districts and employers in implementing effective programs. Districts have the authority to determine which industry certificates to include and to allow for credit accumulation.

In addition, Colorado founded the nation's first CareerWise youth apprenticeship program in 2016. Since then, CareerWise Colorado has seen more than 1,400 apprentices hired by over 120 employers, offering students opportunities across a variety of pathways and occupations.

Georgia

State leaders in Georgia have taken a number of steps to support workforce readiness and work-based learning through initiatives like the GeorgiaBEST@School program, which provides resources and frameworks for educators and students starting as young as pre-kindergarten. State leaders also support partnerships between schools, businesses, and technical colleges to create relevant work-based learning opportunities that align with industry needs and prepare students for future careers.

In addition, Georgia developed quality guidance on the implementation of work-based learning that is an exemplar for other states. Offering a robust rubric for evaluating work-based learning programs across 24 standards, the guide clearly articulates how these programs can meet or exceed the expectations of the state. Students are able to earn credit for work-based learning placements through internships and youth apprenticeships. Designated Work-Based Learning Coordinators are, among other things, responsible for ensuring that WBL placements are properly accounted for in students' fulfillment of graduation requirements.

Professional Development

Policy Action 7
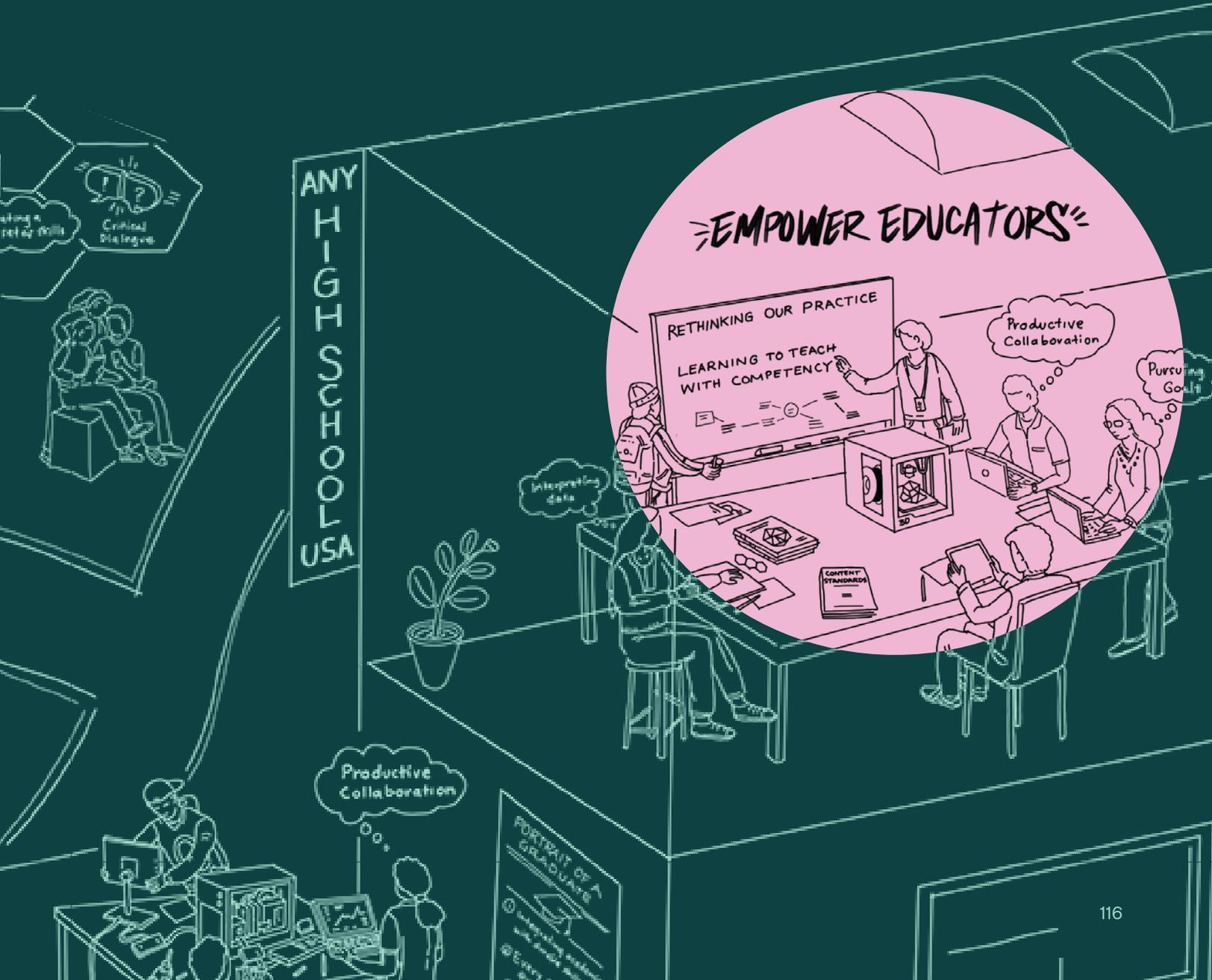
Invest in professional development tools and resources for educators, focused on project-based and competency-based learning strategies

Why Internships and Apprenticeships Matter

Teachers are the foundation of any effort to reimagine the high school learning experience and improve student outcomes. As schools shift from traditional time-based class periods to more flexible, student-centered learning models, educators will face new challenges—and new opportunities—that require significant shifts in professional practice. State leaders can support this transition by equipping teachers with the tools, resources, and professional learning needed to explore and adopt innovative instructional strategies.

Most high school teachers have limited experience with approaches that integrate academic knowledge and durable skills—such as competency-based and project-based learning—where students earn credit by demonstrating mastery. Adopting these methods requires new knowledge grounded in the science of learning, deep shifts in daily practice, and a clear understanding of the student competencies adopted by the state or district (Policy Action 2).

If America's high schools are engines of opportunity, teachers are the fuel that keeps them running.

For all of these reasons, redesigning the high school experience must include robust, ongoing support for educators. This support can include professional development opportunities, pilot programs focused on building capacity, and access to high-quality examples of powerful learning experiences that integrate durable competencies. Educators also need opportunities to test and refine these approaches in real-world settings.

Teachers are ready to lead this transition. A 2024 *Education Week* survey found that while only 13 percent of teachers had experience with competency-based instructional approaches, 69 percent expressed interest in learning more or trying them in their own classrooms. More than half expected their districts to implement competency-based education within five years. The biggest barrier? A lack of support for making the transition, according to educators, with half citing "teachers don't know how to do it" as a major concern.[90]

Teachers expressed similar enthusiasm for project-based learning in a 2021 survey, with 78 percent saying it would benefit their students.[91] When asked why, they cited "student voice and choice" in the learning process; a focus on real-world problems of interest to students; and the way that project-based learning builds on student strengths to develop confidence.[92]

If America's high schools are engines of opportunity, teachers are the fuel that keeps them running. Research consistently shows that teachers have a significant impact on student learning and later life success.[93] But we also know that teaching is a demanding profession. To truly transform high schools, we must give teachers the support and resources they need—and deserve—to design the powerful learning experiences today's students require.

Teachers are ready to lead this transition. A 2024 *Education Week* survey found that while only 13 percent of teachers had experience with competency-based instructional approaches, 69 percent expressed interest in learning more or trying them in their own classrooms.

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state must devote resources to developing the capacity of high school educators and leaders to implement learning models that integrate durable competencies with academic knowledge and skills, by:

- Funding professional learning for teachers in effective instructional approaches that integrate academic and durable skills, such as project-based or competency-based learning; or

- Requiring preparation in those approaches for pre-service teachers; or

- Establishing and funding a pilot program in those approaches that includes professional learning for educators; or

- Publishing resources for high school educators that provide models and exemplars of those approaches, along with guidance to support their implementation.
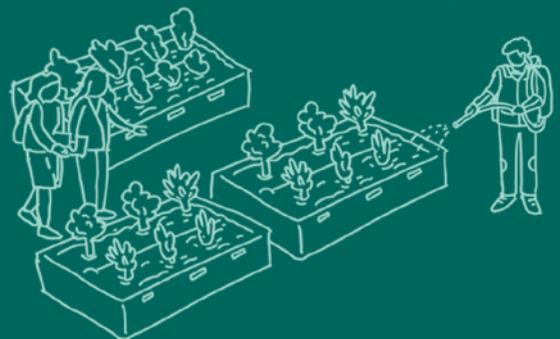
What You Can Do

The best professional development is job-embedded, collaborative, and content-specific. State leaders can support innovative staffing and scheduling models that empower high school teachers to take the lead on their own learning. Leading states invest in teachers as innovators, empowered to design transformative learning—and supported to succeed.

As a starting point, identify the core competencies necessary for high school graduates (Policy Action 2).

Articulating clear expectations about the knowledge and skills students need to acquire before they leave high school is critical. As in both Utah and South Carolina, a state Portrait of a Graduate can serve as the touchstone for the development of resources, guides, and professional development opportunities for educators, who can in turn bring the state portrait to life through the design and implementation of new instructional models.

Ensure professional learning opportunities and resources are research-based and effective.

In developing tools and professional learning opportunities for educators, state leaders should ensure that those resources align with the science of adolescent learning and development and incorporate research-based design principles for effective professional learning. Finally, professional learning opportunities should be job-embedded and provide opportunities for educators to collaborate with and learn from peers.

23 States Meet This Policy Action

Twenty-three states have policies and programs in place that meet the criteria for this policy action. All of those states meet the criteria by offering some combination of professional development; pilot programs; or tools and guidance. None of those states require teacher education programs to provide pre-service teachers with training as part of the pilots currently underway. State pilots are designed to implement effective instructional approaches and provide resources and supports for educators to integrate academic and durable skills, such as project-based learning and competency-based instruction.

State of the States for

23 states meet this policy action

Status

● Not Yet Met

✓ Meets the Policy Action
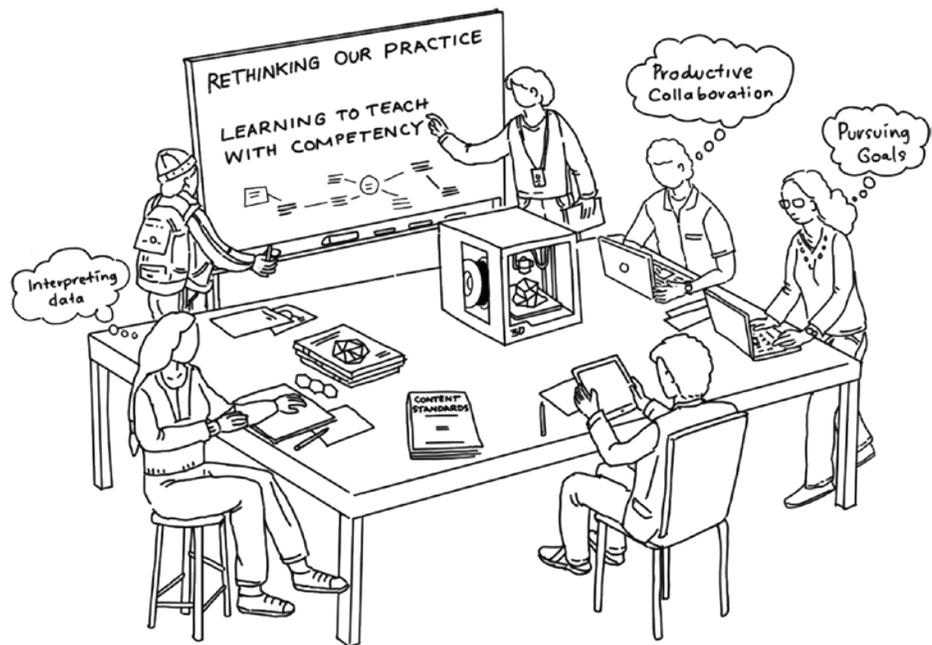
Utah

For over a decade, Utah has been recognized as a national leader in making the shift to a personalized, competency-based approach to learning that is driving high school redesign across the state. At the heart of the state's efforts is a focus on building the capacity of local leaders and educators to lead innovative, new learning experiences that integrate academic content with durable skills. The touchstone for that work is the state's robust *Personalized, Competency-Based Learning (PCBL) Framework*. The Framework is based on the state's Portrait of a Graduate, which serves as the foundation for a multitude of educator-facing resources, including a Portrait of a First Year Teacher and accompanying competencies for educators.

To further support local educators and leaders, in 2016, the Utah Legislature authorized a competency-based education grant program; the first cohort of six Utah pilot school districts received planning grants in 2019. Now known as the Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Grant, this program continues to provide planning and implementation grants to new cohorts of local schools and districts.

South Carolina

In 2017, South Carolina state leaders and educators began a statewide initiative aimed at transforming education through a personalized, competency-based approach. This shift was grounded in the state's Profile of a Graduate, a vision that defines the skills and competencies students need for success in college, career, and citizenship. Recognizing the importance of educator support in realizing this transformation, state leaders took early steps to invest in professional learning. They established a Personalized Learning Team and launched the PersonalizeSC website, offering resources such as coaching, workshops, and live events to guide educators and school leaders in adopting personalized learning strategies.

As the initiative evolved, South Carolina began to refine its approach—shifting from broad, individualized learning models toward more structured, curriculum-based professional learning. This shift aims to ensure that educators are not only familiar with personalized practices, but also equipped with high-quality instructional materials and aligned training to consistently implement the competencies outlined in the Profile of a Graduate. The South Carolina Competency-Based Learning program now plays a key role in this effort, emphasizing curriculum coherence, instructional alignment, and collaborative professional learning that supports sustainable, systemic change across schools and districts.

Measures that Matter
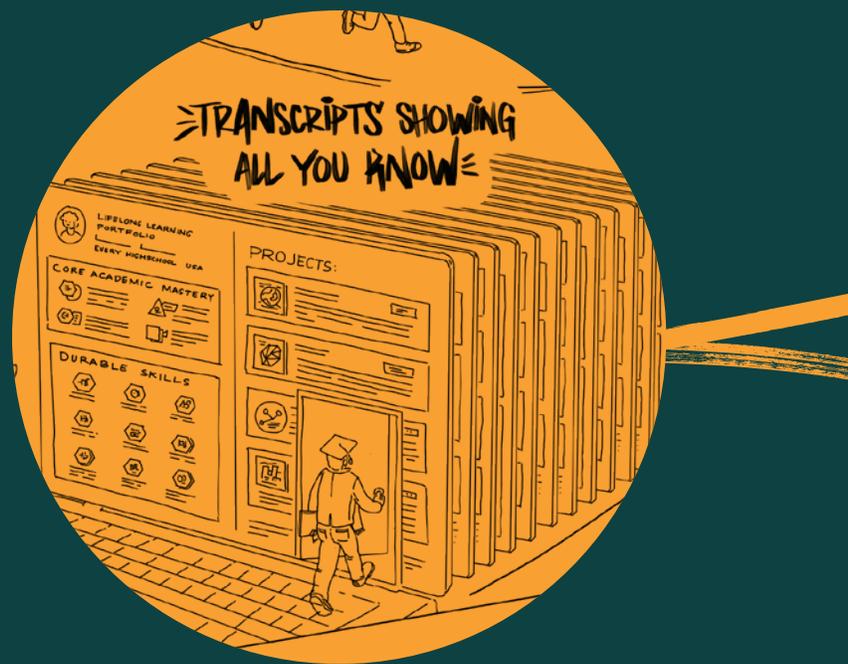
Policy Action 9

Redesigned
Transcripts
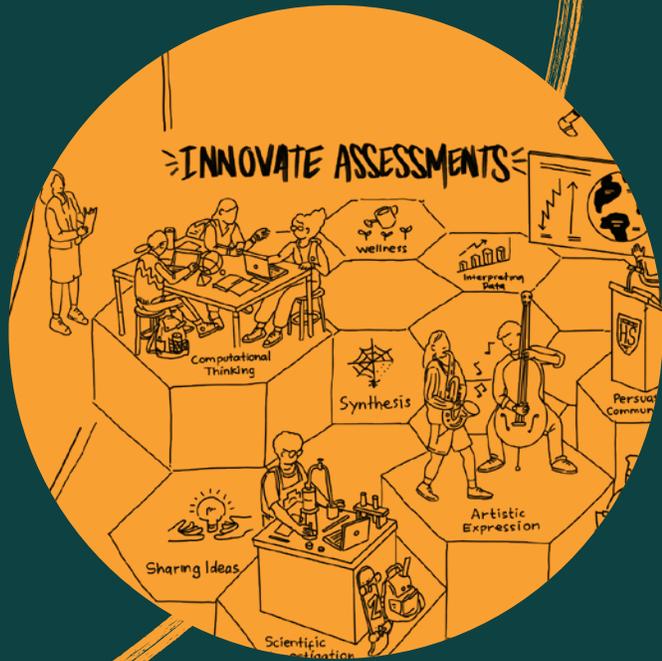
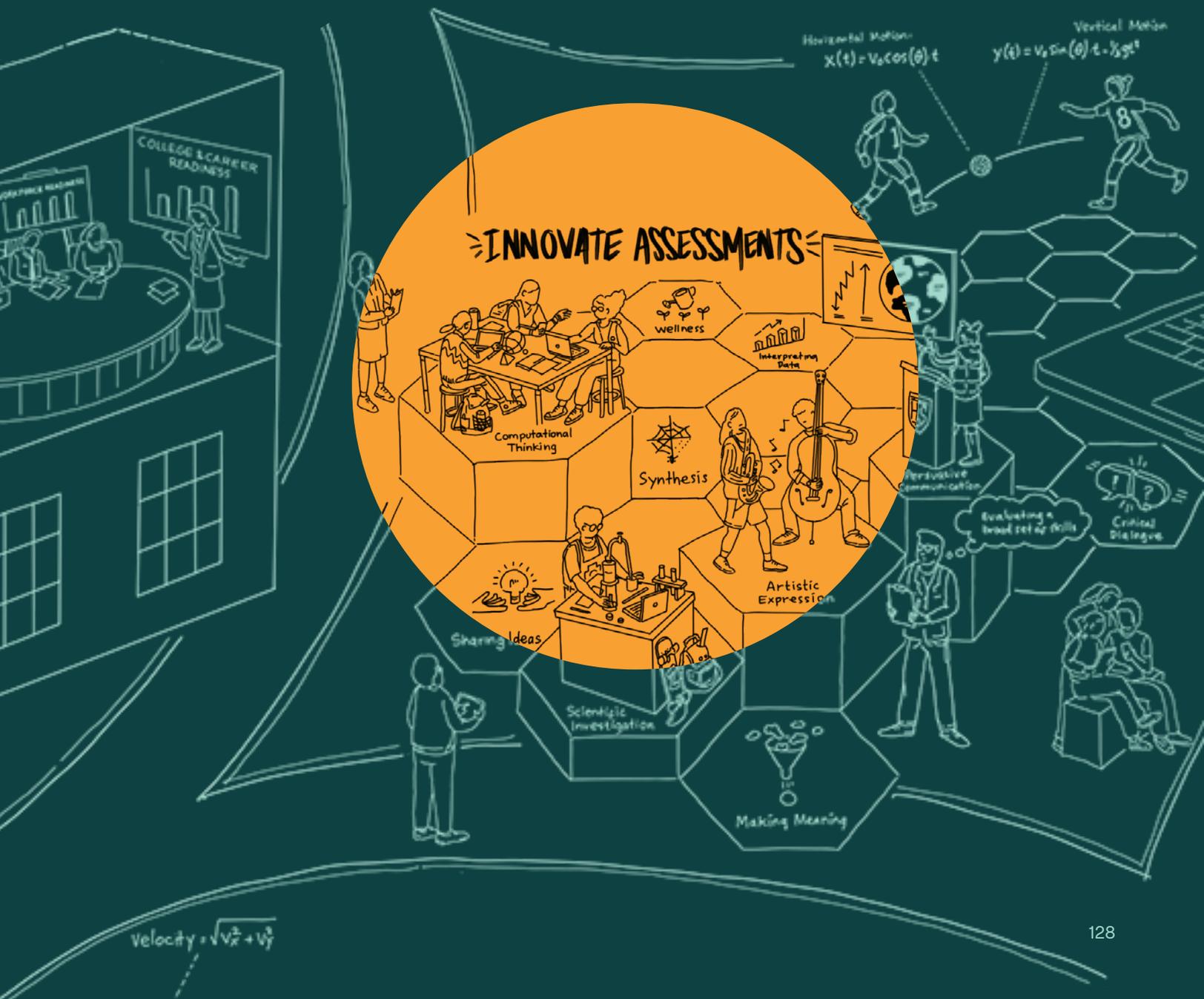**Policy Action 8**

Next-Generation Assessments

Policy Action 10

Success Data

Next-Generation Assessments

Policy Action 8

Implement the next generation of assessments that measure competencies along with academic knowledge and skills

Why Next-Generation Assessments Matter

State assessments play a critical role in providing information to leaders, educators, students, and families about the "North Star" of the entire educational enterprise: progress toward attainment of learning goals that equip students for success after high school. However, today's assessments measure only a slice of the outcomes we want for our students—mastery of academic knowledge and skills in subjects like math, science, and English.

As states adopt core competencies that describe a broader vision of student success (Policy Action 2), they will need to implement next-generation assessments that widen the lens on learning to reliably measure mastery of durable competencies alongside academic knowledge and skills.

Both kinds of learning are vital. Research has long shown that solid academic knowledge and skills—the kind measured by traditional assessments—contribute to greater student success both during and after high school.[94] But recent evidence suggests that durable competencies matter just as much, if not more, especially when combined with strong academic skills.[95]

In addition, today's statewide assessments tend to capture learning at a single point in time, typically the end of the school year. And the results are often released too late to provide actionable feedback to teachers, students, and families. According to a 2023 survey conducted by *Education Week*, only 25 percent of classroom educators believe state-mandated academic assessments are useful to the teachers in their school.[96]

States need new kinds of assessment solutions—ones that are more integrated into daily learning, provide frequent and actionable feedback, and capture both academic knowledge and durable competencies.

Some leading states are already advancing this work. Several are piloting "badging" systems, including participants in the XQ Math Badging initiative. Others are exploring innovative methods to assess problem-solving and critical thinking.

For example, five states are partnering with Skills for the Future, a partnership between Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ETS to co-design and pilot new tools that assess durable skills alongside academic competencies. In 2025, the partners launched pilots focused on three core competencies: collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.[97] The partnership is exploring how to capture evidence from oral, written, and digital student work, and experimenting with cutting-edge assessment modules such as AI-driven simulations.

Let's be clear: Developing these next-generation assessments will require time, resources, expertise, and cross-sector collaboration. But emerging technologies—like simulations, gaming, and virtual reality—are expanding what's possible. And the work already underway in leading states promises significant progress over the next few years.

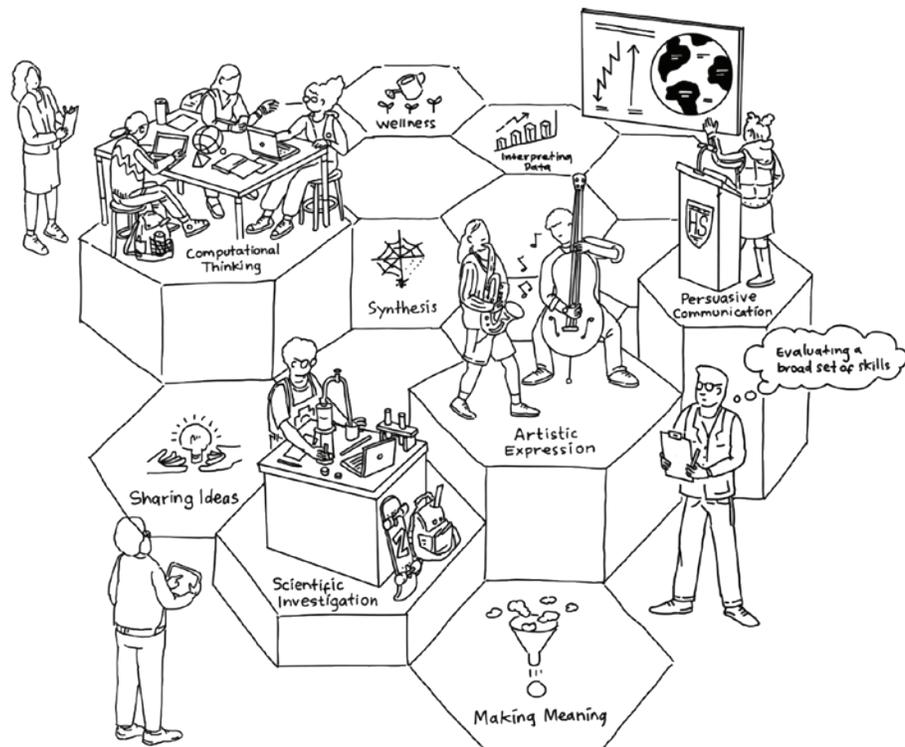# How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state must be implementing next-generation high school assessments that measure essential academic knowledge and skills coupled with durable competencies (for example, the kinds of competencies captured in a state's Portrait of a Graduate or student competency framework, as described in Policy Action 2).

Research has long shown that solid academic knowledge and skills—the kind measured by traditional assessments—contribute to greater student success both during and after high school. But recent evidence suggests that durable competencies matter just as much, if not more, especially when combined with strong academic skills.

No States Meet This Policy Action

14 states partially meet the criteria

Although leading states have stepped up to design and test out new forms of assessment, those efforts are still in the early stages of development.

State of the States for

Policy Action 8

States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by piloting innovative assessment approaches.

Status

● Not Yet Met

⋯ Partially Meets

✓ Meets the Policy Action

What You Can Do

Next generation assessments must be accompanied by transformed learning experiences that help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and durable competencies these new assessments will measure. As states pilot new assessments, they can also provide support for educators to implement student-centered instruction that enables deeper learning.

As a starting point, identify the core competencies necessary for high school graduates (Policy Action 2).

New assessments should measure and align with the broad knowledge and skills that stakeholders agree high school students should learn before they graduate, as reflected in a state's Portrait of a Graduate or competency framework.

Grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time (Policy Action 1).

By connecting the awarding of credits toward graduation to demonstrations of student learning, state leaders will create a need for—and an incentive to develop—new assessments that can support new systems for credentialing learning, such as badging systems.

States need new kinds of assessment solutions—ones that are more integrated into daily learning, provide frequent and actionable feedback, and capture both academic knowledge and durable competencies.

Invest in community-led high school redesign along with professional development tools and resources for educators (Policy Actions 4 and 7).

High schools must provide students with engaging, hands-on learning experiences, both within and outside the classroom, that will help them acquire the knowledge and skills that new assessments will measure.

Pilot the design and implementation of assessments with local districts and educators.

Before states can adopt new assessments that may inform state and federal accountability systems, leaders will need to work with local educators and administrators to pilot the assessments and ensure their validity and reliability.

"A New Vision for Skills-Based Assessment"
ETS and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2023)

This preliminary report from the "Skills for the Future" initiative analyzes common frameworks for describing durable competencies and discusses technical considerations for next-generation assessments that could measure such skills.

Idaho

State leaders in Idaho have established a strong foundation for high school transformation by adopting seat time flexibility, developing a set of college and career readiness competencies, and ensuring that students who earn a diploma are eligible for the state's institutions of higher education.

Building on this foundation, in 2022 state leaders embarked on an exciting initiative in partnership with XQ to rethink high school math with a focus on demonstrations of student learning through new approaches to assessment. Idaho's Math Badging pilot program explores the use of a competency-based math framework and aligned assessments to rethink students' third year of math coursework and build stronger career pathways for students. Rather than testing the ability to memorize formulas, performance assessments ask participating students to model real-world problems to demonstrate their mastery of rigorous math concepts and earn badges that might ultimately inform the redesign of student transcripts (Policy Action 9).

Skills for the Future

Five states—Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin—have partnered with the Carnegie Foundation and ETS to co-develop and pilot next-generation assessment tools. Critically, these states aren't just offering pilot sites. Instead, "state partners are actively engaged at each step of the process—from developing and testing through implementation."[98] The first pilots—focused on assessing critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills—launched in early 2025.

Redesigned Transcripts

Policy Action 9

Redesign student transcripts to <u>communicate the full breadth of student competency</u>

Why Redesigned Transcripts Matter

The high school transcript has been a staple of K–12 education for over a century. Indeed, the factors that drove the invention of the Carnegie Unit in 1906—the rapid growth of high schools across an expanding nation and the need to standardize college admissions— also created a need to keep a consistent record of a student's coursework and grades.

Unfortunately, today's high school transcripts—which look largely the same as they did a century ago—offer only a narrow, two-dimensional view of students, conveying little about their mastery of knowledge and competencies and even less about their accomplishments within and out of school. Like the Carnegie Unit, the conventional high school transcript is a relic of a bygone era: an innovation that once served an important purpose, but whose time has passed.

Take, for example, a traditional transcript that shows a "C" in 9th grade algebra. What does that grade actually tell us? What course material did the student truly understand, and what learning gaps remained? Even if the transcript could answer such questions, it still wouldn't convey the student's mastery of the kinds of durable competencies described in a state's Profile of a Graduate.

As states and communities reimagine high school, students need new types of transcripts and learning records—ones that go beyond a list of courses and grades and enable students to communicate, "Here are the competencies I've mastered—and here's what I can do with them."

Redesigned transcripts can carry greater value as students transition into higher education, career training, and the labor market, enabling graduates to showcase their unique strengths and capabilities in ways a traditional transcript never could. By incorporating new ways to credential learning—such as digital badges—these transcripts can reflect knowledge and skills gained both in and beyond the classroom and support credit toward graduation based on demonstrated mastery.

Finally, it's clear that students themselves readily see the value of redesigning the traditional school transcript. As one student participant in a transcript redesign pilot told us, "Using the mastery transcript, I love that way more than traditional grading." (See "Grassroots Momentum: Local Leadership in Fort Wayne, Indiana" at the end of this chapter.)

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state will have adopted a new student transcript, badging, or record system, such as learning and employment records (LERs), that awards students badges or other types of credentials for demonstrating the requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies. States need both the infrastructure to demonstrate student competencies and also the artifacts (e.g., badges) to be included.

Transcripts, Badges, and Learning Records

States and communities are exploring different ways to capture and communicate student mastery of the knowledge, skills, and competencies students should develop during high school. Here are a few of the most common approaches and how they relate to one another.

Redesigned Transcripts

A redesigned, digital transcript includes evidence that the student has mastered competencies such as problem-solving in addition to information about coursework completed. Learners have voice and choice in the evidence they use to demonstrate learning and mastery of key competencies. States and districts that participate in the Mastery Transcript Consortium are creating Mastery Transcripts that fully replace the traditional transcript in high schools ready to shift away from conventional course grades.

Learning Records

Some partners in the Mastery Transcript Consortium are using Mastery Learning Records as a bridge to transition to a full Mastery Transcript, and some are issuing Mastery Learning Records to complement traditional student transcripts. (See "Grassroots Momentum: Local Leadership in Fort Wayne, Indiana" at the end of this chapter to learn how one midwestern community is piloting Mastery Learning Records to complement official transcripts.)
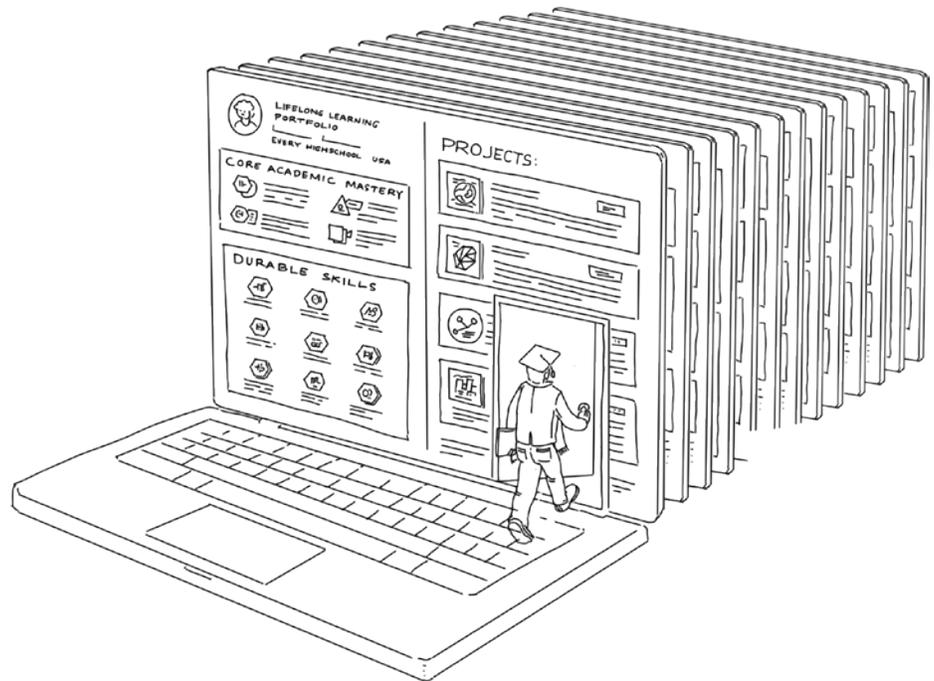
Digital Badges

A digital credential that recognizes a student's achievement, skill, or competency in a specific area. Each badge includes metadata detailing what was learned, how it was assessed, and who issued it, often with links to evidence of the student's work. Digital badges capture a broader range of learning and can be shared in student portfolios to highlight progress and accomplishments and generate currency for colleges and employers. Badges can be incorporated into redesigned transcripts and mastery-based learning records.

No States Meet This Policy Action

12 states partially meet the criteria

While a number of states are engaging in pilot programs or developing learning and employment record (LER) systems that have the potential to serve as the foundation for a new transcript system, there are currently no states that have redesigned transcripts with the complete infrastructure necessary for systemwide implementation.

State of the States for

Policy Action 9

States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by piloting new approaches to credentialing.

Status

● Not Yet Met
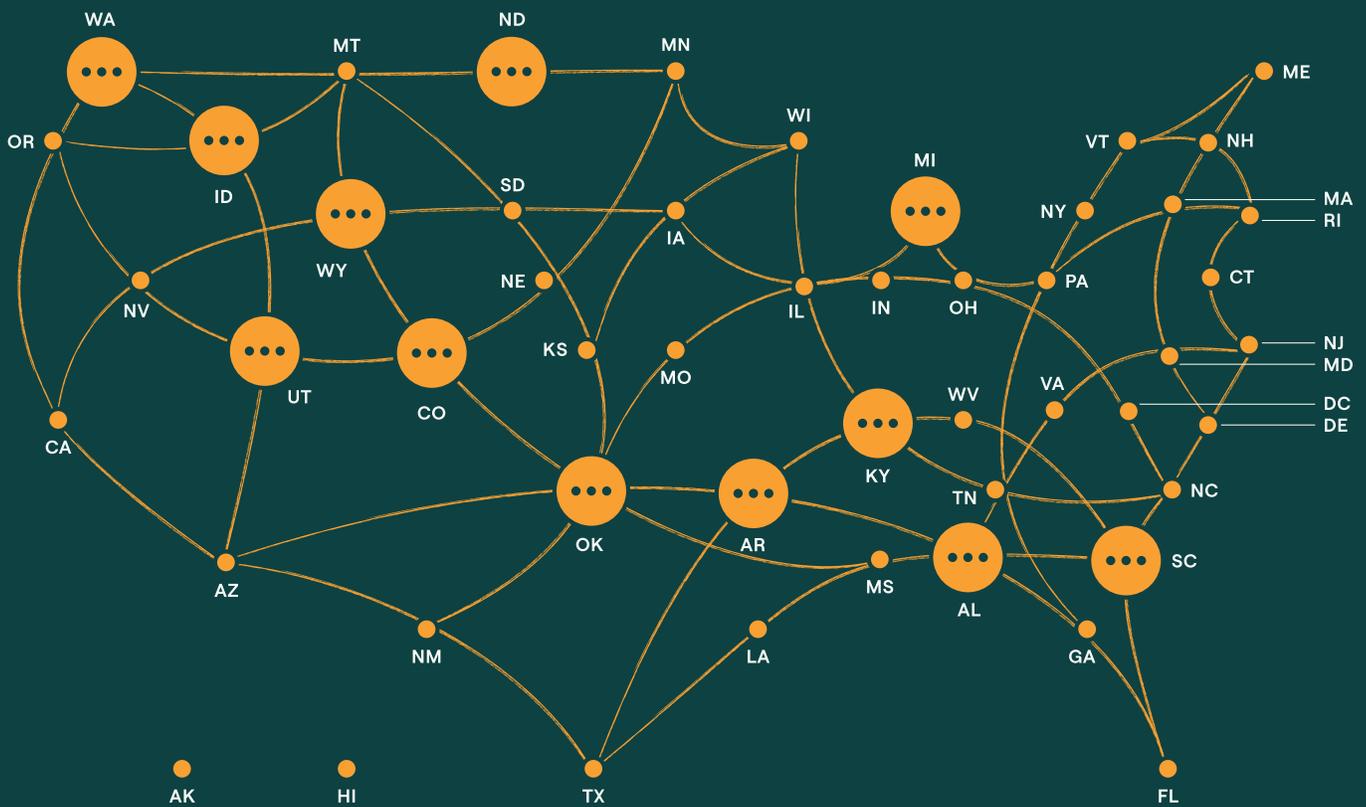
●●● Partially Meets

✓ Meets the Policy Action

What You Can Do

Beyond redesigning transcripts, state leaders can work with higher education and employers to ensure these transcripts are recognized as valid, credible signals of student readiness. The goal should be transcripts that open doors because they clearly demonstrate what graduates can do—digital, lifelong learning portfolios that employers value and potential employees can use to demonstrate skills and know-how.

Adopt a Portrait of a Graduate or similar competency framework (Policy Action 2).

A new transcript system that meets the criteria of this policy action will need to align with the expected learning goals—the knowledge, skills, and competencies—for high school students that are often reflected in a Portrait of a Graduate.

Launch a high school redesign initiative and/or programs that equip educators for high school transformation.

A new transcript system has little value if educators and students are unprepared to offer and participate in these broader learning experiences and use new transcripts. Likewise, school systems that are deeply engaged in the assessment work should inform the development and piloting of the system.

Explore new assessments.

Awarding students credit based on demonstrations of learning and a broader set of knowledge and skills requires new approaches for measuring student learning and the acquisition of those skills.

As states and communities reimagine high school, students need new types of transcripts and learning records—ones that go beyond a list of courses and grades and enable students to communicate, "Here are the competencies I've mastered—and here's what I can do with them."

Develop the necessary technical infrastructure.

These new transcript systems will need to capture student learning—and credit for that learning—both inside and outside of the classroom. Students must also be able to easily share their transcript and communicate their mastery of learning objectives with higher education institutions and employers. Technology platforms—such as the digital wallet developed in North Dakota—will be critical to ensuring that new transcript systems are seamlessly accessible and shareable.

Issue badges with currency.

The credentials students earn and that are reflected in the new transcript system must have meaning for, and be valued by, institutions of higher education and employers. Optimally, these badges or credentials will be developed by school systems, higher education institutions, and employers in concert. This is where state leadership is paramount, supporting the collaboration between the necessary parties—including developers of the technical infrastructure—and ensuring that there is trust in the credentials students earn.

Grassroots Momentum:

Local Leadership in Fort Wayne, Indiana

A typical morning for Cash Gaines, a high school senior in Fort Wayne, Indiana, is spent in classrooms, much like millions of other U.S. students. But his afternoons are anything but standard fare. He works as an intern at a steel fabrication business three days a week, and he also has been collaborating with several other students on a year-long research project for Indiana University Fort Wayne.

The topic of their research? Seeking to better understand why Indiana's college-going rate hasn't rebounded since a big drop in 2020, when the pandemic shutdown disrupted education. The students have engaged in both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as data analytics and visualization. They even presented their findings to the Northeast Indiana Colleges and Universities Network.

Such activities are not unusual at Amp Lab, both a program and innovative learning environment in the Fort Wayne School District that aims to help students "explore their passions, apply their talents, and contribute to making our community a better place."

Participating students typically spend half the day taking core academic classes in a high school building and the other half at Amp Lab, located on the Electric Works campus, an impressive, renovated facility a few blocks from downtown Fort Wayne that houses an array of offices, restaurants, and business innovation centers. Amp Lab participants also spend time out in the larger Fort Wayne community working with businesses and nonprofits. Some, like Cash, even take on formal internships.

"With Amp Lab, we chose to use entrepreneurship as the vessel and vehicle for all students, and how we connect that entrepreneurial spirit to their chosen path," said Riley Johnson, the director of Amp Lab. "For some of our students, the true definition of entrepreneurship comes to life, and for others it's more of a tool belt."

But the program does more than just offer engaging, non-traditional learning experiences. Amp Lab has an intentional focus on enabling students to develop the kind of competencies that will help them tackle complex problems and thrive in the real world long after they graduate.

These competencies aren't easy to convey in a conventional report card or transcript, which is why Amp Lab has adopted a mastery-based learning record that does a far more detailed and nuanced job of conveying skills and knowledge. The Amp Lab record documents exactly which competencies students have mastered, such as intuitive agility, collaborative intelligence, and—yes—entrepreneurial spirit.

"Using the mastery transcript, I love that way more than traditional grading," said junior Alexis Muhammad, explaining that, for instance, it allows her to show, "How have you pivoted, or how have you persisted this week?"

The program does more than just offer engaging, non-traditional learning experiences. Amp Lab has an intentional focus on enabling students to develop the kind of competencies that will help them tackle complex problems and thrive in the real world long after they graduate.

On a recent day, Alexis was creating her business card for the entrepreneurial venture she planned to launch: a preteen fashion line.

The Amp Lab program serves about 400 students each year, with applicants accepted based on a lottery. They can participate as high school juniors and/or seniors. Since its launch in August 2022, Amp Lab has worked with about 120 companies, nonprofits, and government organizations, Johnson said.

At Amp Lab, each competency represents a specific skill or set of skills that may be discipline-specific or cross-disciplinary, according to Johnson. "We took our state [academic] standards and categorized them along those six competencies."

To earn competencies, learners build a portfolio of evidence from a variety of experiences, which is reviewed by Amp Lab staff. Learners are then awarded the competency or given feedback on how to advance their portfolio to demonstrate mastery.

Students still receive traditional credit (with letter grades) on a conventional transcript. "Their Amp Lab experience shows up as three classes," Johnson said. But they are also "collecting and validating evidence" aligned to the Amp Lab competencies. "So, when students depart Amp Lab, they have a portable, tangible document that highlights how they have either grown or mastered the skills that we say are important at Amp Lab," he said.

The program has attracted a host of industry and community partners. Students get the chance to hone their competencies by engaging with organizations such as New Millennium Building Systems, where Cash is interning, the Fort Wayne city hall, a sports agency, and the Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation.

One project with the Parkview Mirro Center was to help it develop marketing materials for the Safe Sleep program, which aims to ensure families follow best practices for when infants sleep alone. Two participating students, who continued working with Mirro after they entered college, even got the chance to present their work at an industry conference.

"I can't even fathom having the resumes that my interns have even before graduating college," said Alyssa Ehinger, an innovation project specialist at the Parkview Mirro Center.

Amp Lab Student Competencies

- ✅ Intuitive agility
- ✅ Leadership development
- ✅ Emotional intelligence
- ✅ Entrepreneurial spirit
- ✅ Collaborative intelligence
- ✅ Financial insight

Just recently, more than 30 Amp Lab students helped to create guides and videos for Fort Wayne Neighborhoods in collaboration with the city and local businesses.

Amp Lab, which is classified as a career and technical education program, collects a variety of data to gauge the impact on students, according to Johnson. Here are a few highlights:

- 100 percent of students have engaged in at least one authentic work-based learning experience, with 75+ hours of embedded or off-site learning engagement.

- 50 percent have earned 6+ college credits in entrepreneurship and business management from a four-year university.

- 99 percent of Amp Lab students have graduated high school (with 20 percent deemed off track for graduation when they entered the program).

- Overall student academic performance, based on GPA, has increased.

The Amp Lab program tends to draw a lot of visitors these days.

"I tell them Amp Lab is not a model that is meant to be packaged and sold," said Johnson. "Our job is to be the best version of ourselves for Fort Wayne and northeast Indiana."

His hope is that visitors seeking to learn from Amp Lab are inspired "to figure out what your version of Amp Lab is."

Both Alexis and Cash highly recommend Amp Lab to other Fort Wayne students.

"Not everyone does best in the traditional school," Cash said. "But when they come to Amp Lab, they thrive while working on projects." And, he said, the experience has profoundly impacted his college and career plans.

"Even if you are not planning to open your own business, you gain so many skills here that you can take with you," Alexis said. "Amp Lab is an experience I wouldn't trade for the world."

At Amp Lab, each competency represents a specific skill or set of skills that may be discipline-specific or cross-disciplinary.

North Dakota

Since 2018, North Dakota has been a national leader in its efforts to support personalized, competency-based learning as a driver to prepare students to succeed in the modern workforce. That year, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction collaborated with KnowledgeWorks to launch a five-year North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Initiative to support pilots in a handful of districts and a broader learning community across the state.

In parallel with these efforts, the state has also been a national leader in developing the technical infrastructure that could serve as the foundation for a new high school transcript. In 2022, North Dakota announced the launch of an LER system and first-of-its-kind digital wallet that will give learners more ownership of their credentials and allow them to share a digital transcript with college admissions officers. The platform is a critical piece of technical infrastructure, serving as a precursor to the development of competency-based badges that could have currency with higher education institutions and employers—work that is currently underway in the state.

Utah

State leaders in Utah have been supporting the transition to personalized, competency-based education for over a decade by, among other things, funding a Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Grant program and developing resources such as the *Personalized, Competency-Based Learning (PCBL) Framework* based on the state's Portrait of a Graduate (Policy Action 7).

Efforts to reimagine education in Utah have also involved rethinking transcripts. In 2023, Utah launched a pilot program with the Mastery Transcript Consortium to develop new competency-based learning records that align with the state's Portrait of a Graduate and Personalized, Competency-Based Learning (PCBL) initiatives. Participants include a number of districts that have received PCBL grants to support their school redesign efforts.[99]

Success Data

DATA THROUGH AND BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL

GRADUATION RATES

POST SECONDARY ENROLLMENT

WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

2010 - 2016

COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

Publish data on student postsecondary success for every high school

Why Success Data Matter

Purdue Polytechnic High School (PPHS) offers a powerful example of the importance of postsecondary success metrics. PPHS opened in 2017 with a bold mission: dramatically increase the number of Indianapolis graduates who qualify for and enroll at Purdue University. Thanks to its strong partnership with the university, PPHS knows it is delivering on that promise. By 2022, PPHS had single-handedly tripled the number of Indianapolis public high school graduates who enroll at Purdue University's flagship campus each year.[100]

Over time, however, school leaders have widened their focus. Is PPHS's innovative model—centered on STEM and real-world learning—also preparing more students for higher education more broadly, and for success in well-paying careers? Fortunately, because PPHS operates in Indiana, they're able to begin answering those questions.

In 2022, for example, 60 percent of Black PPHS graduates enrolled in college—twice the Indianapolis average of 30 percent and well above the statewide rate of 45 percent. Students from low-income families enrolled in college at a rate of 58 percent compared with 27 percent districtwide and 39 percent statewide. PPHS graduates are also keeping pace with their peers across Indiana in college success metrics like credits earned and persistence into the second year.[101] In time, school leaders will be able to track degree completion and even employment outcomes, and they will be able to assess the postsecondary success of subsequent graduating classes.

PPHS leaders know they are fulfilling their promise to students and families because Indiana has built a longitudinal data system, and state agencies use that system to transparently report on how graduates progress after high school. No single high school could follow its graduates so precisely, nor could any district. In this case, it truly does take a state.

Statewide data and reporting systems don't just benefit school leaders and staff. Families can use the data to make informed decisions about their student's education and to advocate for additional resources or schoolwide improvements. According to one national poll, about one in three students said such school-level data would be helpful to understand whether they are prepared for their next steps after high school.[102] Finally, these systems also inform policymakers, helping them identify changes that may be needed in order to improve the quality of a state's education system and the life outcomes of its students.

How States Satisfy the Criteria for This Policy Action

To meet the criteria for this policy action, a state must transparently and publicly report, for each high school, disaggregated data on graduates' enrollment and progress in postsecondary education. Progress could include data on success during the first year of college, persistence beyond the first year of college, or graduation from college.
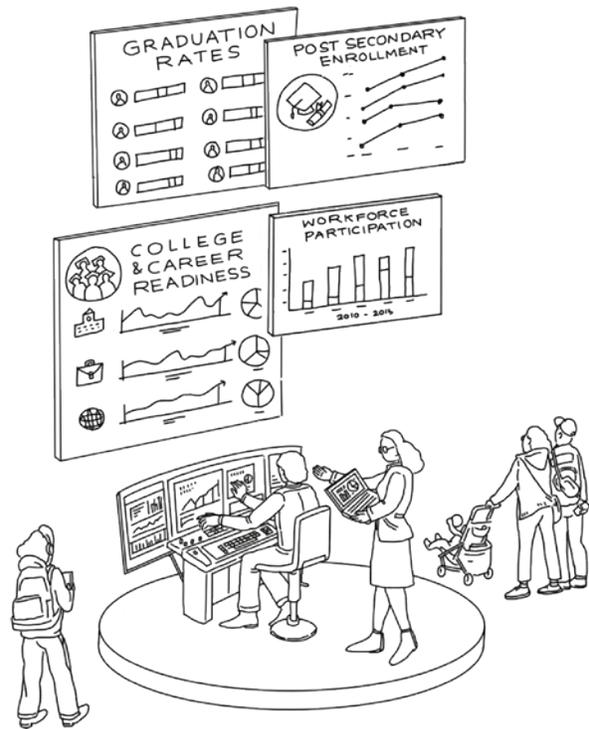
Some states have started to capture and report success in the workforce, while others have chosen to incorporate postsecondary success measures into school accountability systems.[103] For this inaugural report, and as states continue to develop their longitudinal data and reporting systems, XQ has set a baseline bar for public reporting on postsecondary success.

Statewide data and reporting systems don't just benefit school leaders and staff. Families can use the data to make informed decisions about their student's education and to advocate for additional resources or schoolwide improvements.

12 States Meet This Policy Action

27 states and D.C. partially meet the criteria

Twelve states publish reports for every high school that include information about postsecondary enrollment and success—such as credit accumulation or degree attainment—disaggregated by student groups.

State of the States for

Policy Action 10

States can partially meet the criteria for this policy action by transparently and publicly reporting disaggregated data on graduates' enrollment in postsecondary education for each high school, even if they do not yet report comparable data on graduates' progress in postsecondary education.

Status

● Not Yet Met

⬤ Partially Meets

✓ Meets the Policy Action

Catalyzing the Next Generation of Education Data Systems

Across the United States, school districts—especially large urban centers serving nearly a third of our nation's students—face a critical hurdle: Outdated and fragmented data systems hinder their ability to fully leverage EdTech investments, particularly the safe and effective deployment of AI-powered applications. Long-standing issues severely limit innovation and the capacity to respond nimbly to student needs. Recognizing and addressing these roadblocks is the first step towards unlocking a new era of educational possibility.

At XQ, we envision a future in which every student benefits from the seamless, secure flow of information that supports their individual learning journey. AI tools help teachers plan lessons based on live student-level data and tailor interventions to address each student's needs. Next-generation forms of assessment and credentialing, such as the XQ Math Badging System, are customized based on up-to-date data and classroom-level information (Policy Actions 8 and 9).

Our work, in partnership with Emerson Collective and building on the foundational efforts of groups like the Ed-Fi Alliance, Project Unicorn, 1EdTech, and CoSN (Council of School Networks), aims to catalyze the development of this modern data infrastructure. We will steer the development of open-sourced blueprints for systems that enable safe data interchange, foster interoperability, streamline partner onboarding, and ensure coherence across the EdTech ecosystem. This isn't just about solving today's problems, it's about building the data foundations for the next generation of teaching and learning tools.

To bring this vision to life, we are collaborating with forward-thinking districts. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's second-largest, is an early partner, working with us under the leadership of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho to catalyze and accelerate the modernization of its massive data infrastructure. Our collective aim is to tackle systemic gaps in granular classroom data, district-vendor sharing, and operational infrastructure—all vital for truly data-informed, AI-enhanced education.

However, this journey requires strategic investment, multi-year commitments, and, crucially, a broad coalition. Therefore, we also are bringing together national organizations and funders working to build standardized solutions and blueprints that most districts cannot develop autonomously.

While states play a vital role in maintaining data systems for K–12 accountability and tracking postsecondary success, the innovative, AI-powered experiences that transform daily teaching and learning rely on robust, dynamic school-level data. These are the district systems that capture rich, real-time information needed to personalize learning and provide targeted support.

State policymakers have a critical role to play, not just in managing state-level data, but in championing, supporting, and potentially requiring the development of modern data infrastructures within their districts. By fostering these next-generation systems, states can empower educators, enable a vibrant EdTech ecosystem, and ultimately, help create more effective learning environments for each and every student. We invite you to join us in catalyzing this essential transformation for America's students.

Policy Action 10: Success Data

What You Can Do

States can foster cross-agency collaboration among K-12, higher education, and workforce systems to capture success in the workforce as well as in postsecondary education and thoughtfully integrate these newly collected metrics into school-level reporting systems. Ideally, postsecondary data drive continuous improvement across the state, delivering insights that leaders need to act along with tools to ensure continuous improvement.

Improve collaboration across agencies.

Many of the shortcomings in today's data systems arise from the siloing of data in individual state agencies. For instance, ideally postsecondary success data would also include the need for remedial coursework (see Mississippi) and workforce participation and success (see Colorado). But state data systems have not advanced systematically to include labor and workforce outcomes.

State leaders can take steps to remove these barriers, requiring better cross-agency collaboration and data sharing between the state departments of education, higher education, workforce, and labor. As states invest in next-generation assessments and credentialing systems (Policy Actions 8 and 9), they will need to continue to develop their state longitudinal data systems to track and report on those new measures.

Make progress on Policy Actions 1 through 9.

Ideally, state reporting and accountability systems should align with a state's future-forward learning goals and vision for high school success (Policy Actions 1-3). The insights from reporting systems should also be actionable. Establishing policies and systems that enable high schools to provide students with learning experiences that prepare them for the outcomes reflected in reporting systems (Policy Actions 4-7) will ensure that schools and systems can respond to the data in state reports.

While it isn't necessary for state leaders to meet each of the other nine policy actions before embarking on the development of new reporting systems, making progress toward those policy actions will improve the impact of state reporting systems by creating a more coherent secondary education system.

Colorado

Colorado is a national leader in reimagining the education-to-career pipeline, with high schools playing a critical role in that work. State leaders have dismantled traditional barriers between K–12, higher education, and the workforce in order to expand work-based learning and apprenticeship programs, incentivize local innovation, and explore new assessment and accountability models—all with the goal of supporting students' development of in-demand durable competencies.

The state's focus on the postsecondary success of its students extends to the state's data system. Colorado's Pathways to Prosperity Statewide Longitudinal Data System enables users to answer questions like "Are graduates enrolled in higher education?" and "Are graduates working?" for any high school graduating class. In addition, the system provides data aligned to critical metrics of postsecondary success, including enrollment in higher education, first-year persistence, and credit attainment. Moreover, Colorado is one of only a few states to include data on enrollment in out-of-state institutions of higher education.[104]

Colorado is one of only a few states to include data on enrollment in out-of-state institutions of higher education.

Mississippi

In 2018, state leaders launched the "Mississippi Succeeds Report Card," a model for state data and reporting systems aimed at providing valuable information about schools to families, school leaders, and community members.

In addition to student performance and growth data, the report card transparently communicates information on graduation pathways and postsecondary enrollment, career fields, and the performance of students in their first year of college. The Report Card allows users to compare a school's data with comparable information for the school district and the state, alongside disaggregated results for student groups.

The system hosts a wealth of information on the success of the state's students after they graduate, providing a vivid picture of the higher education institutions students are attending—public or private, in-state or out-of-state, two-year or four-year—along with their fields of study, whether they are attending full time or part time, gaps between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, and how graduates perform in their first year of college. Mississippi is also one of a handful of states that reports on student enrollment in remedial courses, information that is critical to improving outcomes for students during and after high school and postsecondary education.[105]

Conclusion

At a time when artificial intelligence and other tech-
nologies are fundamentally reshaping the workforce
and world, state leaders can empower high schools
to meet the moment.

This report offers guidance and insights to support that
work. We encourage state leaders to identify the actions
that align with their communities' needs and begin the
work of setting them into motion.

XQ stands ready to support these efforts. We invite anyone
working to reimagine high schools to connect with us—
share context, ask questions, update us on progress,
or offer ideas to advance transformation in your state.
Let's do this together.

Appendix I: Inspirations and Additional Resources

Many organizations are working to inspire, inform, and support localities and states in their efforts to reimagine the high school experience. XQ has learned much from them, both for this report and for all of its ongoing work.

Moreover, many of those organizations have produced useful publications and other resources that speak to the topics covered in this report and might be of interest to readers who want to learn more about those topics. Below are just some of the organizations that have inspired and educated us, followed by a QR code to access a list of resources we think can be helpful to state leaders and others engaged in this vital work.

But we also want to hear from you: What resources have you found especially enlightening and helpful? Which would you recommend to state leaders or others? Please use the QR code below to let us know.

Inspirations

Organizations Listed in the Additional Resources or Featured in the Report

- The National Association of State Boards of Education
- The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- The Hoover Institution
- The Education Futures Council at the Hoover Institution
- The Council of Chief State School Officers
- America Succeeds
- Getting Smart
- Battelle for Kids
- Jobs for the Future
- American Student Assistance
- Bellwether Education Partners
- National Governors Association
- Excel in Ed
- Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA)
- Arizona State University

- ETS
- The Aurora Institute
- The Education Commission of the States
- Education Strategy Group
- Data Quality Campaign
- WestEd
- CASEL
- Minnesota Office of Higher Education
- College in High School Alliance
- Community College Resource Center
- Career Ladders Project
- Advance CTE
- United States Department of Labor
- United States Department of Commerce
- United States Department of Education
- Career and Technical Education Research Network
- The Learning Agency

Use this QR code to explore a wide range of additional resources on high school transformation and each of the policy actions.

Appendix II: Key Types of Evidence for State Policy Research

Policy Action	Resources Primarily Referenced	State Example
Policy Action 1: Grant all districts flexibility to credit learning based on competency rather than seat time	State Statute, State Board of Education Policies	Iowa: 281.12.5(14) explains the following as an option for a unit of course credit: "requires the demonstration of proficiency of formal competencies associated with the course according to the State Guidelines for Competency-Based Education or its successor organization."
Policy Action 2: Identify the core competencies necessary for high school graduates	State Department of Education documentation on website	Kentucky Portrait of a Learner
Policy Action 3: Align high school graduation requirements with eligibility for the state's public higher education institutions and directly admit students	State Statute, State Board of Education Policies, State Department of Education Programs	North Carolina High School Graduation Requirements; College Connect
Policy Action 4: Invest in community-led high school redesign and provide flexibility and guidance to empower innovation	State Department of Education Programs and Partnerships	New Mexico High School Transformation Innovation Zones
Policy Action 5: Give all high school students the opportunity to earn postsecondary credits	State Statute, State Board of Education Policies, State Department of Education Programs	Texas (TEC) §28.009 requires "Each school district shall implement a program under which students may earn the equivalent of at least 12 semester credit hours of college credit in high school."

Policy Action	Resources Primarily Referenced	State Example
Policy Action 6: Credit high school students for work-based learning and apprenticeships	State Statute, State Board of Education Policies, State Department of Education Programs	Colorado Work-Based Learning (WBL) Continuum; CareerWise Colorado
Policy Action 7: Invest in professional development tools and resources for educators, focused on project-based and competency-based learning strategies	State Department of Education Programs and publicly available resources	Utah Personalized, Competency-Based Learning (PCBL)
Policy Action 8: Implement the next generation of assessments that measure competencies along with academic knowledge and skills	State Department of Education Programs and publicly available resources	Skills for the Future: Five states—Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin—are currently engaged in a project to explore next-generation assessments focused on knowledge and skills that matter for success after high school.
Policy Action 9: Redesign student transcripts to communicate the full breadth of student competency	State Department of Education Programs and publicly available resources	National Governor's Association Skills-Driven State Community of Practice
Policy Action 10: Publish data on student postsecondary success for every high school	State Department of Education report cards, State Department of Higher Education data sources	Mississippi Succeeds Report Card

Endnotes

1. Sor, J. (2025, October 8). Sam Altman touts ChatGPT's 800 million weekly users, double all its main competitors combined. *Business Insider*. https://www.businessinsider.com/chatgpt-users-openai-sam-altman-devday-llm-artificial-intelligence-2

2. Hazan, E., Madgavkar, A., Chui, M., Smit, S., Maor, D., Dandona, G. S., & Huyghues-Despointes, R. (2024, May 21). A new future of work: *The race to deploy AI and raise skills in Europe and beyond*. McKinsey Global Institute. https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/a-new-future-of-work-the-race-to-deploy-ai-and-raise-skills-in-europe-and-beyond

3. Georgieva, K. (2024, January 14). AI will transform the global economy. *IMF Blog*. https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/01/14/ai-will-transform-the-global-economy-lets-make-sure-it-benefits-humanity

4. McKinsey & Company. (2025, November.) The state of AI in 2025: Agents, innovation, and transformation. https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai

5. Wildavsky, B. (2023). *The career arts: Making the most of college, credentials, and connections*. Princeton University Press.

6. America Succeeds & Lightcast. (2025). *Durable by design: An update on the high demand for durable skills*. https://americasucceeds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Durable-by-Design_July-2025-.pdf

7. United States Government Accountability Office. (2022, August). *Workforce automation: Insights into skills and training programs for impacted workers*. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105159

8. World Economic Forum. (2025, January). *Future of jobs report 2025*. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

9. 1) National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century*. National Academies Press. 2) Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649 3) Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650 4) Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791 5) Martin, H.R. (2024). *How do we learn: A scientific approach to learning and teaching*. Jossey-Bass. 6) Yeager, D. (2024). *10 to 25: The science of motivating young people*. Avid Reader Press.

10. Steinberg, L. (2014). *Age of opportunity: Lessons from the new science of adolescence.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

11. Jensen, F.E. (2014). *The teenage brain.* Harper.

12. Brookings Institution. (2021, March). *Advanced cognitive skill deserts in the United States: Their likely causes and implications.* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/advanced-cognitive-skill-deserts-in-the-us-their-likely-causes-and-implications/

13. National Research Council. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st Century.* The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/13398

14. Balfanz, R. (2023, September). Centering school connectedness. *State Education Standard: The Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education*, 23(3). https://www.nasbe.org/centering-school-connectedness/

15. Porter, S., Jackson, K., Kiguel, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2023, April). *Investing in adolescents: High school climate and organizational context shape student development and educational attainment.* University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/investing-in-adolescents

16. Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J. M., & Manspile, E. P. (2021). *Ready to engage: Perspectives of teachers and parents on social and emotional learning and service-learning in America's public schools.* Civic with Hart Research Associates. https://www.civicllc.com/_files/ugd/03cac8_9d7e59eee72f4e22bd59a9df5754814f.pdf

17. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2024, August). *Voices of Gen Z study: Year 2 annual survey report.* https://www.gallup.com/analytics/506663/american-youth-research.aspx

18. Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J. M., & Manspile, E. P. (2021). *Ready to engage: Perspectives of teachers and parents on social and emotional learning and service-learning in America's public schools.* Civic with Hart Research Associates. https://www.civicllc.com/_files/ugd/03cac8_9d7e59eee72f4e22bd59a9df5754814f.pdf

19. Malkus, N. (2025, June 12). Lingering absence in public schools: Tracking post-pandemic chronic absenteeism into 2024. American Enterprise Institute.https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/lingering-absence-in-public-schools-tracking-post-pandemic-chronic-absenteeism-into-2024/#scrollSection4 See also Dilbert, M.K. and others. (2025, August 14). Chronic absenteeism still a struggle in 2024–2025: Selected findings from the American School District Panel and the American Youth Panel. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-34.html

20. Morning Consult & Ed Choice. (2024, August). *Teens and their schooling perspectives: A national polling report.* https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/316597.pdf

21. Winthrop, R., Shoukry, Y., & Nitkin, D. (2025, January). *The disengagement gap: Why student engagement isn't what parents expect.* Center for Universal Education at Brookings & Transcend. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-disengagement-gap/

22. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025, August). *Voices of Gen Z study: Year 3 annual survey report* [Downloadable data file]. https://www.gallup.com/analytics/506663/state-of-students-research.aspx

23. The Nation's Report Card. (2025, September 9). *How did students perform in the nation compared to 2019?* https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/

24. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023, December). *PISA 2022 results (volume I and II) - country notes: United States.* https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/united-states-a78ba65a/#chapter-d1e11

25. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025, August). *Voices of Gen Z study: Year 3 annual survey report* [Downloadable data file]. https://www.gallup.com/analytics/506663/state-of-students-research.aspx

26. Boser, U. (2020, August 4). *Education and income: How learning boosts salary.* The Learning Agency. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/better-learning-outcomes-can-help-kick-start-economy/

27. Chingos, M. & Furtado, K. (2024, March 6). *What evidence could help schools put students on a path to economic mobility?* Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-evidence-could-help-schools-put-students-path-economic-mobility See also Deming, D. J. (2022). Four facts about human capital. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 36(3), 75–102. https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.36.3.75

28. O'Donnell, P. (2024, February 12). 74 interview: Director of Ohio's Department of Education on adding "workforce" to name and mission. *The 74.* https://www.the74million.org/article/74-interview-director-of-ohios-department-of-education-on-adding-workforce-to-name-and-mission/

29. Exec. Order No. D 2025 006. (2025, May 20). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lJTshCRBw7 O65Vt6VFp1c9MzHtRfvD4D/view

30. Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Workforce Development Council, & Colorado Department of Education. (2023, December). *Secondary, Postsecondary and Work-based Learning Integration Task Force report.* https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/secondary_postsecondary_and_work-based_learning_integration_task_force

31. Kemp, B. (2025, May 29). *The future of high school.* The WSJ Future of Everything. https://futureofeverything.wsj.com/event/the-future-of-everything/

32. GAfutures. *Georgia match.* https://www.gafutures.org/college-planning/georgia-match

33. Beston, P. (2017, August 1). When high schools shaped America's destiny. *City Journal.* https://www.city-journal.org/article/when-high-schools-shaped-americas-destiny. And Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2008.) *The race between education and technology.* Harvard University Press.

34. Beston, P. (2017, August 1). When high schools shaped America's destiny. *City Journal.* https://www.city-journal.org/article/when-high-schools-shaped-americas-destiny

35. Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2008.) *The race between education and technology.* Harvard University Press.

36. Peoples, C. (2008, February). Sputnik and 'skill thinking' revisited: Technological determinism in American responses to the Soviet missile threat. *Cold War History.* https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14682740701791334

37. Mieczkowski, Y. (2013). *Eisenhower's Sputnik*

moment: The race for space and world prestige. Princeton University Press.

38. Mieczkowski, Y. (2013). *Eisenhower's Sputnik moment: The race for space and world prestige*. Princeton University Press.

39. Murthy, V. H. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory*. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf

40. Hinze, V., Montero-Marin, J., Blakemore, S.-J., Byford, S., Dalgleish, T., Degli Esposti, M., Greenberg, M. T., Jones, B. G., Slaghekke, Y., Ukoumunne, O. C., Viner, R. M., Williams, J. M. G., Ford, T. J., & Kuyken, W. (2024, February). Student- and school-level factors associated with mental health and well-being in early adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 63(2). https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567(23)02136-6/fulltext

41. Boyd, D. T., Gale, A., Quinn, C. R., Mueller-Williams, A. C., Jones, K. V., Williams, E., & Lateef, H. A. (2023, May). Do we belong? Examining the associations between adolescents' perceptions of school belonging, teacher discrimination, peer prejudice and suicide. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 11, 1454–1464. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-023-01622-5

42. U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology. (2024, January). *A call to action for closing the digital access, design, and use divides: 2024 national educational technology plan*. https://portal.ct.gov/das/-/media/das/ctedtech/publications/2025/2025-used-oet-archive/netp24.pdf

43. Lee, K. & Popoff, E. (2024). *2024 state EdTech trends report*. SETDA and Whiteboard

Advisors. https://www.setda.org/priorities/state-trends/

44. We do not include Washington, D.C. in numerical state counts and instead reference D.C. separately using its formal abbreviation. Review of the evidence is current as of December 1, 2025.

45. ExcelinEd. (2019, November). *Debunking the myth of seat time: A national analysis of seat time for credit*. https://excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ExcelinEd.Innovation.NextGenerationLearning.SeatTimeReport.pdf

46. Indiana State Board of Education. (2020, December). *INnovate: Flexibility guide for Indiana's K-12 schools*. https://www.in.gov/sboe/files/IN-Flex-Guide-12182020.pdf

47. America Succeeds & Lightcast. (2025). *Durable by design: The high demand for durable skills*. https://americasucceeds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Durable-by-Design_July-2025-.pdf

48. World Economic Forum. (2025, January). *Future of jobs report 2025*. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

49. Smith, M. (2024, July 11). *Are Portrait of a Graduate skills important to NC jobs?* [Press release]. North Carolina Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis. https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/the-lead-feed/portrait-of-a-graduate-skills

50. Kentucky Department of Education. *United we learn*. https://www.education.ky.gov/Pages/default.aspx

51. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. (2024, July 30). *85% of good jobs will go to workers with some form of*

postsecondary education or training by 2031, Georgetown University report says [Press release]. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/

52. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025, August). *Voices of Gen Z Study: Year 3 annual survey report* [Downloadable data file] https://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx

53. Carnevale, A.P., Strohl, J., Campbell, K.P., Gulish, A., Cheah, B., Nyhof, E., & Fix, L. (2024, January.) *Learning and earning by degrees: Gains in college degree attainment have enriched the nation and every state, but racial and gender inequality persists.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/attainmentgains/

54. According to one national survey, only 35 percent of high school students say their school tells them if the courses they're taking are preparing them for higher education. Source: Data Quality Campaign. (2022, September 20). *Students want access and support to use their own data to navigate their futures.* https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/students-want-their-own-data-to-navigate-their-futures/

55. National Association for College Admissions Counseling and The Harris Poll. (2023, August). *NACAC admissions process survey.* https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACAC-College-Admission-Process-Research_FINAL.pdf

56. Odle, T., Delaney, J.A., and Magouirk, P. (2023, October.) *Complex applications create barriers to college—some are trying to change that.* The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/complex-applications-create-barriers-to-college-some-are-trying-to-change-that/

57. Odle, T.K. & Delaney, J.A. (2022). You are admitted! Early evidence on enrollment from Idaho's direct admissions system. *Research in Higher Education 63.* https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-022-09675-x

58. Torry, H. (2024, November 30). The hot new job for men: Nursing. *The Wall Street Journal.* https://www.wsj.com/economy/jobs/male-nursing-boom-high-demand-field-7733dfaf

59. Education Data Initiative. (2025, March 17). *College enrollment & student demographic statistics.* https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics

60. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. (2024, July 30). *85% of good jobs will go to workers with some form of postsecondary education or training by 2031, Georgetown University report says* [Press release]. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/

61. Carnevale, A.P., Strohl, J., Campbell, K.P., Gulish, A., Cheah, B., Nyhof, E., & Fix, L. (2024, January.) *Learning and earning by degrees: Gains in college degree attainment have enriched the nation and every state, but racial and gender inequality persists.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/attainmentgains/

62. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025, August). *Voices of Gen Z Study: Year 3 annual survey report* [Downloadable data file] https://www.gallup.com/analytics/506663/american-youth-research.aspx The question concerning the importance of earning a bachelor's degree was asked on the previous year's survey, in 2024.

63. Knox, L. (2023, October 16.) Direct admissions spreads, state by state. *Inside Higher Education.* https://www.

insidehighered.com/news/admissions/
traditional-age/2023/10/16/state-university-
systems-take-direct-admissions

64. The Flagship is typically the "main campus"
for the state's public university.

65. Hoekstra, M. (2009). The effect of attending
the flagship state university on earnings: A
discontinuity-based approach. *The Review
of Economics and Statistics 91*(4), 717–724.
https://hceconomics.uchicago.edu/sites/
default/files/events/Hoekstra_2009_
REStat_v91_n4.pdf

66. Formerly called the Educational Opportunity
Audit (EOA). For more information about
XQ's EOAA, visit https://xqsuperschool.org/
resource/eoaa/.

67. Infante-Green, A. (2023, May). How Rhode
Island increased the value of a high school
diploma. *State Education Standard: The
Journal of the National Association of State
Boards of Education 23*(2). https://nasbe.nyc3.
digitaloceanspaces.com/2023/05/Infante-
Green_May-2023.pdf

68. Rhode Island Department of Education.
(2024, July, revised). *RIDE Readiness-Based
Graduation Requirements: Frequently asked
questions*. https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/
xkgbur806/files/2024-07/General_FAQ_
Secondary_Regulations_V2_July_2024.pdf

69. Rhode Island Code of Regulations,
200-RICR-20-10-2.3.1.B.2, https://ride.ri.gov/
sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/2023-05/
Secondary_Regulations_Clean_
Version_11-16-22.pdf

70. The UNC system, including UNC Chapel Hill,
recommends—but does not require—that
aspiring applicants complete two sequential
world language courses, which is not a
requirement for a diploma under the state's
Future-Ready Course of Study policy.

71. LANL Foundation. (2022, January.) *New
Mexico comprehensive college and career
pathways assessment report*. https://
lanlfoundation.org/research/new-mexico-
comprehensive-college-and-career-
pathways-assessment-report/

72. LANL Foundation. (n.d.). *Transforming New
Mexico's high schools*. Retrieved June 15,
2025, from https://lanlfoundation.org/
program/college-career-community-
pathways/new-mexico-innovation-zones-
initiative/

73. Austin, M., Backes, B., Goldhaber, D., Li,
D., & Streich, F. (2025, February). Leveling
up: An academic acceleration policy to
increase equity in advanced high school
coursetaking. *American Educational Research
Journal, 62*(1), 136–179. https://journals.
sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0002831224128
2793?utm_source=chatgpt.com See also
Austin, M., Backes, B., Goldhaber, D., Li, D.,
& Francie, S. (2022, October). *Leveling up:
A behavioral nudge to increase enrollment
in advanced coursework*. National Calder
Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in
Education Research. https://caldercenter.
org/publications/leveling-behavioral-nudge-
increase-enrollment-advanced-coursework

74. Hengtgen, K., & Biaggi, H. (2023, December).
*Increasing access to advanced coursework in
Washington*. Education Trust. https://edtrust.
org/rti/increasing-access-to-advanced-
coursework-in-washington/

75. Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025,
August). *Voices of Gen Z Study: Year 3 annual
survey report* [Downloadable data file].
https://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/
gen-z-research.aspx. A separate national
survey of schools corroborates that

finding: Only 75 percent of public high schools say they offer Advanced Placement (AP), Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual enrollment courses. See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2025, January). School Pulse Panel [Downloadable data file]. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/default.asp

76. 50CAN. (2024, October). *The state of educational opportunity in America: A 50-state survey of 20,000 parents.* https://50can.org/education-opportunity-survey/

77. The figures represent high schools, defined as schools offering any grade levels 9–12, where students of color make up less than 25 percent of enrollment and high schools where students of color make up more than 75 percent of enrollment, respectively. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2025, January). School Pulse Panel [Downloadable data file]. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/default.asp.

78. Texas Education Code, EDUC §28.009. https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.28.htm

79. Dallas Independent School District School Board. (2023, November). *Board update.* https://go.boarddocs.com/tx/disd/Board.nsf/files/CWWSCQ6F6306/$file/2023-11%20Student%20Outcome%20Goal%20GPM%205.3-5.4%20_%20Constraint%20CPMs%205.1-5.2.pdf

80. Education Research & Data Center. (2024, December). *Dual credit dashboard.* https://erdc.wa.gov/publications-and-reports/dual-credit-dashboard

81. Austin, M., Backes, B., Goldhaber, D., Li, D., & Streich, F. (2025, February). Leveling up: An academic acceleration policy to increase equity in advanced high school coursetaking. *American Educational Research Journal, 62*(1), 136–179. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/00028312241282793?utm_source=chatgpt.com

82. Morning Consult & Ed Choice. (2024, August). *Teens and their schooling perspectives: A national polling report.* https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/316597.pdf

83. American Student Assistance. (2023). *High school work-based learning: Best practices designed to improve career readiness outcomes for today's youth.* https://asa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ASA_WBLPlaybook_Final.pdf

84. High schools are defined as schools offering any grade levels 9–12. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2025, January). School Pulse Panel [Downloadable data file]. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/default.asp.

85. 50CAN. (2024, October). *The state of educational opportunity in America: A 50-state survey of 20,000 parents.* https://50can.org/education-opportunity-survey/

86. AdvanceCTE (2024, February). *State policies impacting CTE: 2023 year in review.* https://careertech.org/resource/state-policies-impacting-cte-2023-year-in-review/

87. Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-270 (2016. https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-bill/250

88. New America Foundation & Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. (2018). *About youth apprenticeship.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Diu8lZG7IVWS4-UCMgwhpx4dDK_nKU2C/view

89. California Department of Education, DataQuest. *2023-24 four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate: Latitude 37.8 High School report*. https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?agglevel=school&year=2023-24&cds=01771800138289

90. Lieberman, M. (2024, September 16.) It's hard to shift to competency-based learning. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/its-hard-to-shift-to-competency-based-learning-these-strategies-can-help/2024/09 and Lieberman, M. (2024, September 27). Teachers want to know more about competency-based learning. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/technology/teachers-want-to-know-more-about-competency-based-learning-will-they-embrace-it/2024/09

91. Project Tomorrow Speak Up & PBLWorks Buck Institute for Education. (2021). *The state of project-based learning: Engaging and empowering our students for future success*. https://www.pblworks.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/The%20State%20of%20Project%20Based%20Learning.pdf

92. Project Tomorrow Speak Up & PBLWorks Buck Institute for Education. (2021). *The state of project-based learning: Engaging and empowering our students for future success*. https://www.pblworks.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/The%20State%20of%20Project%20Based%20Learning.pdf. The figures related to specific aspects of project-based learning represent the responses of all teachers who participated in the survey in grades K-12.

93. Chetty, R., Friedman, J.N, & Rockoff, J.E. (2014). Measuring the impacts of teachers II: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood. *American Economic Review 104*(9). https://dash.harvard.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/7312037d-dfcf-6bd4-e053-0100007fdf3b/content and Jackson, C.K. (2018, August). What do test scores miss? The importance of teacher effects on non–test score outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy 126*(5). https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/699018?journalCode=jpe&

94. Chingos, M. & Furtado, K. (2024, March 6). *What evidence could help schools put students on a path to economic mobility?* Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-evidence-could-help-schools-put-students-path-economic-mobility

95. 1) Doty, E., Kane, T. J., Patterson, T., and Staiger, D. O. (2025). What do changes in NAEP scores imply for birth cohorts' later life outcomes? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.70018 2) Jackson, C.K. (2018, August). What do test scores miss? The importance of teacher effects on non–test score outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy 126*(5), https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/699018?journalCode=jpe& 3) Porter, S., Jackson, K., Kiguel, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2023, April). *Investing in adolescents: High school climate and organizational context shape student development and educational attainment*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/investing-in-adolescents

96. Stanford, L. (2023, September 1). Educators feel growing pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/educators-feel-growing-pressure-for-students-to-perform-well-on-standardized-tests/2023/09

97. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ETS. (2025, updated). *Skills for the future: Designing the future of assessment.* https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Updated-SFF-2-pager-Final-022625.pdf?utm_source=cf_website&utm_medium=SFF_page&utm_campaign=SFF-Designing-Future-of-Assessment

98. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ETS. (2025, updated). *Skills for the Future: Designing the future of assessment.* https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Updated-SFF-2-pager-Final-022625.pdf?utm_source=cf_website&utm_medium=SFF_page&utm_campaign=SFF-Designing-Future-of-Assessment

99. Sturgis, C. & Bell, S. (2023, September). *How Utah turned the Portrait of a Graduate into a powerful level for systems change.* Utah State Board of Education and Mastery Transcript Consortium. https://mastery.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Utah-Whitepaper-Final-copy.pdf

100. Purdue University. (2022, September 12.) *Purdue sets all-time student enrollment record in West Lafayette* [Press release]. https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/2022/Q3/purdue-sets-all-time-student-enrollment-record-in-west-lafayette/.

101. Indiana Commission on Higher Education. (2024). *College-going dashboard.* https://www.in.gov/che/college-going-reports/

102. Data Quality Campaign and Kentucky Student Voice Team. (2022, September 20). *Students want access to and support to use their own data to navigate their futures.* https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/students-want-their-own-data-to-navigate-their-futures/

103. Education Strategy Group and American Student Assistance. (2024, May). *Measurement for mobility: How states can use data to incentivize postsecondary and workforce success in public education.* https://edstrategy.org/resource/measurement-for-mobility/

104. Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023, May 1). *Pathways to prosperity: Postsecondary access and success for Colorado's high school graduates.* https://cdhe.colorado.gov/pathways-to-prosperity

105. Mississippi Department of Education. (2022). *Mississippi outcomes for high school graduates.* https://msrc.mdek12.org/hsfb?EntityID=0000-000&SchoolYear=2022