



Companion to the  
National Report

A Guide to Excellence

# How to Be a Frontier for State Excellence

A Quick Look  
at Best In Class



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

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

STATE CAPITOL

IB ECONOMICS

COLLEGE LEVEL MUSIC THEORY

EARLY COLLEGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHEMISTRY

HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGE

Riding on the pathway to my future

AI Researcher, Robotics Engineer, Developer...

Electrician, Electrical Engineer, Field Service Tech...

Product Designer, Architect, Engineer...

$$\int x^2 da$$

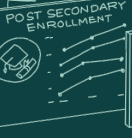
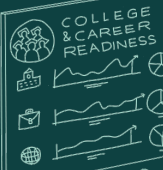
$$\int bx^2 da$$

$$\int x^2 da$$

x



ANY CAREERS USA



Horizontal Motion  
 $x(t) = v_0 \cos(\theta) \cdot t$

Vertical Motion  
 $y(t) = v_0 \sin(\theta) \cdot t - \frac{1}{2}gt^2$

LIFELONG LEARNING PORTFOLIO  
EVERY HIGH SCHOOL USA

PROJECTS:

CORE ACADEMIC MASTERY

DURABLE SKILLS

ANY HIGH SCHOOL USA

Wellness

Computational Thinking

Synthesis

Interpreting Data

Critical Dialogue

Persuasive Communication

Artistic Expression

Evaluating a broad set of skills

Sharing Ideas

Scientific Investigation

Making Meaning

Persuasive Communication

Productive Collaboration

Interpreting data

# How to Use This Guide

This guide is ambitious by design.

High school transformation does not happen through isolated policy wins or incremental tweaks. It requires a coherent policy ecosystem, that creates the conditions for innovation, enables change-making at the local level, and sustains excellence over time. The 10 policy actions in The Future is High School suite set a high threshold because that is what meaningful change demands.

At the same time, we know something important: state leaders do not aspire merely to be “good” in education. They want to be great—for their students, their communities, and their state’s future. They want to lead. They want to be a frontier state—setting the pace, modeling what excellence looks like, and proving what is possible at scale.

This guide is written for those leaders.

Think of these pages as a vision of possibility. They illuminate what it looks like when states move beyond adoption and into execution—when policy is not just passed, but brought to

life in classrooms, schools, and communities. The examples and approaches here represent next-level moves: ways states can strengthen implementation, deepen impact, and accelerate progress across all 10 policy actions.

Implementation is everything. The difference between policy on paper and transformation in practice is how well states invest in execution—building capacity, aligning systems, equipping educators, partnering with communities, and continuously learning from what works. States that pursue this work with intention and coherence do more than adopt policy; they create the conditions for educators and young people to thrive.

**We hope this guide is used as both a companion and a challenge—an invitation to imagine more, to aim higher than adequacy, and to build toward a frontier of excellence where every student benefits.**

# Where This Guide Fits in *The Future is High School Suite*

***The Future is High School* is designed not as a single report, but as a regular and ongoing source of data and information for states, designed to meet leaders where they are and invite them to help shape what comes next.**

**The Executive Summary** sets the urgency and the long view—framing high school transformation as a national imperative, explaining why it matters now, and laying out 10 policy actions that enable high school transformation.

**The National Report** provides a deep look at each of these 10 policy actions, showing where the country stands today and what strong policy looks like across states.

**The State Reports** offer a clear snapshot of where each state stands today, highlighting strengths, gaps, and opportunities for progress across the 10 actions.

**The Platform** is a dynamic, public-facing space that allows leaders to explore the data, compare progress across states, and track change over time. But more than that, it is a shared national canvas. The platform

is designed to surface examples of policy in action, highlight state and local leadership, and showcase what it looks like when the 10 actions move from paper to practice.

Throughout this suite, you will find QR codes and invitations to contribute—stories, examples, early wins, and lessons learned. Those contributions flow into the platform, where they become part of a growing national picture of high school transformation across communities and contexts. In this way, the platform turns the report suite into a call and response: states learn from one another, leaders are recognized for progress, and the field advances together.

This **Frontier Guide** is a compliment to the rest of the suite.

Each **Frontier Ambition** highlights what excellence looks like for students and what it takes to deliver it at scale. Together, they offer a forward-looking view of what is possible when states pursue the 10 policy actions with intention and coherence, investing in implementation and building systems that enable innovation.

Think of this guide as a look ahead—to the frontier of what excellence can look like when states choose to lead.

# Award Credit for Mastery and Redefine What Learning Counts

## What the Policy Requires

States give all districts clear, explicit flexibility to grant credit for mastery rather than seat time—for every student in every high school.

## Why This Is Not Enough

On its own, permission is not transformation. Allowing mastery-based credit without investing in the systems that make it rigorous, trusted, and equitable risks uneven quality and limited impact. Reaching the frontier requires more than flexibility—it requires coherence across standards, assessments, professional learning, data systems, and postsecondary recognition.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students progress based on what they know and can do—not how long they sit in a classroom. Expectations for mastery are clear, consistent, and meaningful, and students understand what quality work looks like from the start. A student who demonstrates mastery of Algebra I in October moves forward in October. Another earns credit through a rigorous marine science field study or an industry-aligned project.

Learning happens in classrooms, libraries, workplaces, and online—and all of it counts because evidence of learning is benchmarked to shared expectations for rigor and validation. Transcripts reflect demonstrated competencies, not accumulated hours.

Most importantly, mastery is trusted. Colleges, employers, and families can read a student's

record and understand what they are ready to do next. Students graduate confident, capable, and prepared—not because time has passed, but because mastery has been demonstrated.

## Excellence in Action

Delivering mastery-based credit at scale requires more than flexibility—it requires shared expectations, intentional strategies, and sustained investment.

States set clear, statewide definitions of mastery and expectations for rigor, evidence, and consistency across contexts. They align standards, assessments, and graduation requirements so that mastery has a common meaning whether it is demonstrated in a classroom, a community-based project, or a workplace setting.

States invest in professional learning so educators can assess mastery reliably and equitably, backed by shared rubrics, exemplars, and calibration tools. They modernize data systems to track student progress in real time and ensure that mastery-based records are portable, transparent, and secure.

Finally, states work with higher education and employers to ensure mastery-based credit and records are recognized and trusted beyond K-12. When these systems are aligned, mastery becomes more than a policy option— it becomes a credible, scalable pathway to graduation and what comes next.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



**Shared Definitions**

Clear, statewide definitions of mastery and evidence

**Aligned Expectations**

Across standards, assessments, diploma policies

**Collaborative Calibration**

Teachers share learning, rubrics, exemplars

**Real-Time Visibility**

Data systems track progress and provide timely feedback

**Portable Records**

Mastery-based records travel across schools and systems

**System Coherence**

All parts work together so mastery is credible at scale

**External Trust**

Recognition by higher ed. and employers

# Define the Graduate of the Future

## What the Policy Requires

States adopt a Profile of a Graduate or similar framework that communicates the competencies students will need for lifelong success.

## Why This Is Not Enough

A Profile of a Graduate only matters if it moves from paper to practice. When the profile exists as an aspirational statement but is disconnected from standards, instruction, assessment, and credentials, it risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Reaching the frontier requires coherence—so that the profile meaningfully shapes what students experience every day and how readiness is recognized beyond high school.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students know what they are working toward and why it matters. A clear, statewide definition of readiness gives students a shared language for life-long success, one that integrates strong academics with durable skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and adaptability.

These competencies are visible and reinforced across courses, projects, internships, and feedback. Students can articulate what they are learning, how they are growing, and how their strengths show up in real work. Families understand what progress looks like. Educators teach toward a common North Star. Graduates walk across the stage able to articulate their strengths and enter into a world that recognizes their readiness.

## Excellence in Action

Making a Profile of a Graduate actionable requires more than adoption—it requires alignment across the system.

States ensure the profile integrates academics with durable skills so they are mutually reinforcing. They embed the profile's competencies into academic standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and transcripts so the profile becomes the organizing framework for learning, not an add-on.

States make the profile actionable by equipping local leaders and educators with tools for translating the profile into curriculum, performance tasks, and instructional practice, including shared rubrics and exemplars that make expectations clear and consistent. They couple tools with capacity-building by aligning educator preparation and professional learning.

Finally, states work with higher education and employers to recognize and value the profile as a credible signal of readiness—so that students' demonstrated competencies carry meaning beyond high school.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



**Integrated Expectations**

A profile that couples academic essentials with lifelong competencies

**System Alignment**

Standards, assessments, credentials aligned to the profile

**Instructional Support**

Curriculum and performance tasks make the profile real

**Educator Expertise**

Teacher prep and professional learning support the profile

**Assessment Coherence**

Rubrics and measures aligned to the competencies

**External Validation**

Recognition of the profile by higher ed. and employers

# Make Every Diploma a Launchpad by Aligning High School to Real Opportunity

## What the Policy Requires

Align graduation requirements with public postsecondary eligibility and streamline the pathway through direct admissions.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Alignment on paper does not guarantee clarity for students. When graduation requirements, admissions criteria, and placement policies are technically aligned but poorly communicated, too many students still graduate unsure of what doors their diploma actually opens. Frontier ambition requires that alignment be visible, actionable, and reinforced throughout a student's high school journey.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students understand, from early in high school, how their coursework and learning experiences connect to their postsecondary options. A diploma feels like a promise, not a question mark. Students can see which pathways lead to direct admission, credit-bearing placement, credentials, or employment—and they receive guidance to stay on track. Seniors receive direct admissions offers without having to navigate complicated application requirements. First-generation students and students historically excluded from opportunity suddenly see their futures expand. High school choices translate seamlessly into postsecondary opportunities.

## Excellence in Action

Streamlining the pathway to postsecondary means more than policies and programs. Students and families need transparent tools to turn pathways into concrete opportunities.

States widely disseminate clear, family-friendly guidance on ways to fulfill diploma requirements while highlighting the benefits of college-ready credentials. They invest in advising systems, early readiness indicators, and data-sharing agreements so students receive timely signals and guidance beginning in ninth grade.

States partner with higher education to expand direct admissions, reduce unnecessary barriers, and ensure that high school completion reliably unlocks next steps. When diplomas are aligned, understood, and trusted, they become true launchpads.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## **Aligned Requirements**

Graduation requirements match admissions standards



## **Clear Signals**

Transparent information on requirements and opportunities



## **Personalized Counseling**

Postsecondary guidance happens early and often



## **Cross-Sector Collaboration**

K-12 and higher ed. partner to reduce barriers



## **Data Sharing**

K-12 and higher ed. build integrated data systems

# Trust Communities To Lead Boldly

## What the Policy Requires

Empower communities to transform high school through resources, flexibility, and research-based guidance.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Encouragement alone does not produce excellence. Without shared expectations, sustained support, and mechanisms for learning, innovation can remain isolated or uneven. Frontier ambition requires trusting communities not only with permission, but with the exemplars, time, and feedback needed to design boldly and improve continuously.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students attend schools that reflect their hopes, respect their voices, and honor their aspirations. Learning is relevant and affirming. Students participate on design teams, showcase their work in exhibitions, and offer feedback on their experiences, contributing to decisions that affect them. Families are always partners, never afterthoughts.

Across communities, students experience different models—but a shared commitment to quality. Innovation is not random; it is intentional, responsive, and rooted in local strengths.

## Excellence in Action

States establish clear design principles and quality criteria that define what strong high school models must deliver for students. They invest in multi-year design cycles that enable planning, piloting, refinement, and scaling.

States create feedback loops so communities can continuously improve their designs, and they elevate models and share learning across districts. When communities are trusted and supported, innovation becomes informed and iterative.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Design Principles

Expectations for quality and student outcomes



## Reliable Resources

Tools and expertise for communities to design well



## Feedback Loops

Continuous improvement grounded in evidence



## Shared Learning

Elevating effective models and strategies

# Enable Early College Success by Bringing Advanced Learning to Every Student

## What the Policy Requires

Give students in every high school the opportunity to take college courses and earn postsecondary credits.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Availability does not equal access. When advanced learning depends on opt-in systems, uneven advising, or local capacity, participation skews toward students who already have advantages. Frontier ambition requires that early college success be normalized and supported statewide.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students earn college credit while still in high school and come to see advanced learning as an expectation, not an exception. They experience college-level work with the backing they need to succeed and build confidence that they belong in higher education. Families save time and money. Students enter postsecondary education with momentum, credit in hand, and a clear sense of direction.

## Excellence in Action

Frontier states translate course availability into widespread access and impact.

Leaders address financial costs, subsidizing tuition, course materials, and exam fees. They invest in virtual and regional course hubs so geography does not determine opportunity.

States leverage automatic enrollment strategies so students who demonstrate strong academic preparation are never left out. And they follow up by ensuring that enrolled students have all the support they need to succeed.

Finally, K-12 leaders work with higher education to ensure statewide transferability of credits so that students' hard work and achievement pays off, no matter where they matriculate.

Access to college credits becomes a systemwide pathway, not a boutique offering.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Affordability Assistance

Subsidized tuition, materials, exam fees



## Virtual Reach

Online and hybrid options to boost availability



## Automatic Enrollment

Default participation of well-prepared students



**Academic Support** Advising and instructional assistance to ensure success



## Portable Credit

Guaranteed transfer of all earned credits

# Make Work Integral to School – Real Experience, Real Credit, Real Futures

## What the Policy Requires

Credit students for completing high-quality work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Isolated internships do not create systems of opportunity. Without clear standards, infrastructure, and alignment to academics, work-based learning remains peripheral. Frontier ambition requires integrating work into the core of schooling.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students engage in real work that matters. They apply academic learning in authentic settings, build professional skills, and develop relationships with mentors and employers. Work-based learning clarifies interests, builds confidence, and opens doors. These experiences count—toward credit, graduation, and future opportunity. Students graduate with résumés, references, and a sense of direction.

## Excellence in Action

When work is intentionally integrated into school, learning becomes more relevant—and more powerful.

States emphasize the “learning” in work-based learning by crafting quality standards that embed academic expectations along with the kind of durable skills found in a Profile of a Graduate.

Leaders identify and address structural barriers to participation and quality, tackling issues related to transportation, scheduling, liability, and insurance.

States invest in the infrastructure to connect schools and employers at scale, leveraging strategies like regional intermediaries that facilitate high-quality opportunities for students statewide.

Finally, K-12 leaders don’t just consult with employers when designing the system. They establish an ongoing partnership that ensures continuous improvement and alignment with the evolving labor market.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Learning Focus

Academic and durable skills clearly embedded



## Structural Solutions

Removing barriers to quality and access



## Collaborative Infrastructure

Strategies to connect schools and employers



## Sustained Partnership

Ongoing collaboration with leading employers

# Equip Educators To Lead Deeper Learning

## What the Policy Requires

Equip educators to transform learning through strategies like pilots, professional development, tools, and preservice training.

## Why This Is Not Enough

While high-quality instructional materials are essential, they must be accompanied with time, trust, and support for educators to change practice at scale. Frontier ambition requires treating teaching as a profession that learns, collaborates, and innovates.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students learn in classrooms shaped by collaboration and creativity. Teachers design interdisciplinary projects, provide meaningful feedback, and continually refine their practice. Learning is engaging, challenging, and connected to the real world.

Students regularly engage in authentic projects, public exhibitions, and real-world problem solving that demand critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Students experience consistency across classrooms because educators share expectations and learn from one another.

## Excellence in Action

States embed project-based and competency-based learning into teacher preparation programs, ensuring that new educators enter the profession equipped for the challenges and opportunities of transformed high schools. They invest in high-quality, job-embedded professional learning for teachers to test out and hone new approaches together.

State leaders support staffing and scheduling models that prioritize time for collaboration and provide statewide professional development networks and coaching. When educators are trusted and supported, innovation becomes the norm—not the exception.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Practical Preparation

Aligned pre-service prep and ongoing professional learning



## Collaborative Time

Schedules allow educators to plan together



## Professional Trust

Autonomy paired with shared expectations and support



## Statewide Networks

Communities of practice that spread innovation

# Measure What Matters by Building Assessments That Reveal True Readiness

## What the Policy Requires

Implement next-generation assessments that measure durable competencies such as creative problem-solving along with academic knowledge and skills.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Simply adopting next-generation assessments will not lead to changes in instructional practice or improvements in student learning. States need to intentionally design new assessment strategies with an eye to systemwide alignment, equip educators and students to understand and meet new expectations, and ensure that feedback is timely and actionable.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students demonstrate learning through authentic tasks that reflect real-world application. These assessments include simulations, research projects, performances, and real-world writing—from lab reports and policy briefs to presentations and creative work. Students receive timely feedback, see their progress in real time, and understand how their learning connects across courses and experiences. Assessment feels like part of learning, not an interruption to it.

## Excellence in Action

States align assessments to the Profile of a Graduate and mastery-based systems.

They provide scoring rubrics, calibration tools, and exemplars, and they modernize technology infrastructure to power diverse assessment formats.

States engage educators in assessment piloting, iteration, and scaling efforts. They communicate continuously with educators, students, and families to share the goals and benefits of next-generation assessments.

When assessments measure what matters, they reinforce deeper learning rather than constrain it.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Multiple Modalities

Performance tasks, simulations, interdisciplinary projects, gamified assessments, and capstones



## Scoring Calibration

Common rubrics, exemplars, and inter-rater reliability



## Rapid Feedback

Timely information that facilitates learning and growth



## Credibility Building

Involve educators and other stakeholders early and often



## Technology Modernization

Infrastructure that enables varied assessment formats

# Modernize Transcripts To Show a Fuller Story of Student Talent

## What the Policy Requires

Redesign student transcripts to show all the ways students are ready for what comes next—from academic mastery to lifelong competencies.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Expanding what can appear on a transcript is a necessary first step—but optional, static, or disconnected records do not change how learning is recognized or valued. Without common standards, interoperability, and trust across systems, records remain marginal, unevenly used, and easily ignored. Reaching the frontier requires reimagining transcripts not as school artifacts, but as lifelong learning records.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students graduate with a living record of their learning, one that reflects not just what courses they completed, but what they know, can do, and have demonstrated over time. Their transcript shows academic mastery, durable skills, projects, credentials, work-based learning, and contributions beyond the classroom. That record does not stop at graduation. As students move through college, training, work, and career transitions, their learning continues to be documented and validated. Colleges and employers can see evidence they trust. Students can tell their story with confidence—using a record that grows with them across their lives, not one frozen at age 18.

## Excellence in Action

States build interoperable, digital learning records that are secure, portable, and owned by learners. They establish common data standards and pro-ocols so records can be understood and trusted across K–12, higher education, workforce systems, and employers.

States work with postsecondary institutions and industry to validate and accept these records, ensuring they carry real currency beyond high school. They invest in the tools, guidance, and professional learning educators need to document learning consistently and meaningfully. When done well, transcripts become public-good infrastructure—making learning visible, transferable, and valuable over a lifetime.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## Digital Records

Modern, secure learning record systems



## Learner Ownership

Students control and carry their records



## Lifetime Portability

Records that grow with learners for life



## Cross-Sector Trust

Acceptance by higher ed. and employers

# Report What Happens After High School – And Use It To Drive Real Change

## What the Policy Requires

Publish data for every high school showing how well students succeed in postsecondary education.

## Why This Is Not Enough

Reporting outcomes in isolation does not change practice or opportunity. Fragmented data systems, slow feedback loops, and limited access prevent families, educators, and leaders from using information to improve pathways in real time. Reaching the frontier requires moving from retrospective reporting to continuous learning.

## What Excellence Makes Possible for Students

Students, families, and community members have clear, timely insight into what different pathways actually lead to—college persistence, credential attainment, employment, and earnings. They can make informed choices based on real outcomes, not assumptions or averages. Schools and educators use data not as a compliance exercise, but as a tool for improvement—adjusting programs, strengthening partnerships, and expanding opportunities that lead to better results. Over time, students benefit from systems that learn from outcomes and continuously get better at fostering their success.

## Excellence in Action

States build integrated, longitudinal data systems that securely connect K–12, higher education, workforce, and labor data. They modernize technology so outcomes can be tracked, analyzed, and shared responsibly, with protections for privacy and equity.

States make data accessible, actionable, and timely—through interactive dashboards and analytic tools that inform decision-making at every level, from families to policymakers.

They invest in the capacity of schools and districts to use outcome data to improve pathways, close gaps, and expand what works. When outcomes drive learning, the system itself becomes smarter over time.

# What It Takes – At a Glance



## **Inclusive Measures**

Integrated education  
and workforce data



## **Modern Infrastructure**

Technology enables  
timely, secure analysis



## **Actionable Insights**

On-demand data informs  
improvement



## **System Learning**

Outcomes drive action to  
strengthen pathways

# The Frontier Ahead

Taken together, these 10 Frontier Ambitions describe more than a set of policies. They outline a new architecture for American high school—one designed for the world students are entering, not the one we inherited.

In this future, learning is measured by mastery, not minutes. Students understand what they are working toward and why it matters. Diplomas open doors. Communities design school models that reflect their identities and aspirations. Work and college are not add-ons, but integral parts of the learning experience. Educators are trusted, supported, and equipped to innovate. Assessments reveal real readiness. Transcripts tell a fuller, truer story of what students know and can do. And outcomes after high school are visible, actionable, and used to improve opportunity for the next generation.

None of this happens through policy alone.

Excellence at this scale requires coherence—across systems, sectors, and time. It requires sustained investment in implementation, infrastructure, and learning. It requires states willing to move beyond adoption toward execution, beyond compliance toward leadership,

and beyond isolated reforms toward durable systems that can adapt and improve over decades.

That is why this work is designed as a journey, not a moment.

Over the next 10 years, through repeated cycles of analysis, learning, and contribution, states will have the opportunity to learn from one another and help shape what excellence looks like nationwide. The platform that accompanies this work is not a repository, but a living record—one that highlights progress, surfaces lessons, and recognizes leaders who are building the future in real time.

The frontier is not a fixed destination. It is the space created when states choose to lead—when they set a higher bar, invest in what it takes to reach it, and commit to improving continuously on behalf of young people.

Ten policy actions. Fifty states. One nation-defining opportunity.

The frontier ahead is not abstract. It is being built—by leaders willing to imagine more, align systems, and do the hard work of turning possibility into reality.

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

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

STATE CAPITOL

COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

GRADUATE RATES

WORKFORCE READINESS

COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

COLLEGE

STRY

Riding on the Pathway to my future

Computational Thinking

Synthesis

Sharing Ideas

Scientific Investigation

wellness





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