

2025 Policy White Paper: *An aspirational vision for California education*

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, states are moving to systems of education that increasingly are learner-centered, equitable, and competency-based. They are doing so because they understand that the legacy model for educating our young people is not working. While graduation rates have increased, other markers of progress have not. Standardized test scores remain flat. Achievement and opportunity gaps persist despite decades of increased funding and abundant strategies to reduce them. Chronic absenteeism is near an all-time high.

Across California, the vast majority of students do not find school to be interesting, engaging, or relevant for their futures.¹ This is particularly true for the millions of kids of color and marginalized student populations.² Students deserve an education that inspires, engages, and challenges them to meet their potential. California is the fifth largest economy in the world and celebrated for its innovations. Rather than tinker around the edges of an outdated system, we can advance real innovation and change, starting with a clear vision for California education!

CREATE A RENEWED VISION FOR CALIFORNIA EDUCATION

In the late 80's and early 90's, state agencies created several visionary guiding documents³ but now they are long forgotten. Over a decade ago, the state adopted the Common Core State Standards (2010) and Next Generation Science Standards (2013) to define what students should know and be able to do. More recently, the state adopted the California English Learners Roadmap (2017), which provides a vision of powerful education for emergent multilingual students, but not the state's entire student population. These guiding documents may be *necessary*, but they are *not sufficient* to ensure the whole child outcomes that young people need to thrive in an ever-changing world. Together, they fall short of offering a comprehensive vision for *all* students enrolled in California schools that extends beyond core academics.

Seeking such a vision, over 100 California school districts⁴ have engaged their community members to create a "Portrait of a Graduate" (PoG) *as a whole child vision that holistically defines the competencies, including knowledge, skills, and mindsets, that young people need for future success.* While students benefit from mastering academics, they also must be self-directed lifelong learners, culturally-competent and globally-aware citizens, creative and critical thinkers, effective communicators and collaborators, digitally- and financially-literate, multilingual, adaptable, resilient, kind, curious, and more. Some PoGs add the need for students to have a healthy mind and body, sense of purpose, and sense of self. Together, these outcomes pose a renewed definition of student success and, to a certain degree, a reimaged purpose of education.

Many research reports and policy papers⁵ recommend that states establish a strategic vision to reimagine education. When they do, a clear roadmap for innovation can emerge.⁶

A. Support the State Board's Portrait of a Graduate.

By September 2025, the California SBE plans to approve a Portrait of a Graduate (PoG) to use as a policy framework to inform future decision-making. That's a great start to redefining student success. Depending on how it is designed and shared, it may serve as a *de facto* renewed vision for California education and a roadmap for innovation.

Policy implications: Through continued efforts by key stakeholders to support and inform the SBE's work, the California SBE PoG could become the vision we need. An intriguing consideration would be for young people to create a vision for California education, by students, for students.

B. Align the “parts and pieces” of the education system to the SBE PoG.

When school districts create a PoG, we know that's just a starting point. A poster on a wall has never changed student outcomes or professional practice. Only when a district commits to fully implementing its PoG do they see the desired impact on student outcomes. The same is true at the state level. When the SBE announces its new PoG, it should do so in a way that clearly communicates the intentions to adopt policies enabling the education system to align strategically with the new SBE PoG. Twenty-one states are doing just that.⁷

Policy implications: In order to build coherence across TK-12 education, legislation and/or SBE policy should align the many “parts and pieces” of the system to the CA SBE PoG, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- High school graduation requirements
- Format and priority areas of the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)
- Categories and metrics included in the California School Dashboard
- Measures included in the Cradle-to-Career Data System
- State standards, assessments, and curriculum frameworks and materials
- Standards and processes for credentialing teachers and other school personnel
- Grant program applications, review processes, and reporting requirements
- Teacher pre-service and leadership development programs
- Seat time requirements, which may cede to demonstration of competency
- Funding calculations, considering enrollment rather than attendance

C. Incentivize districts to create a whole child vision.

The SBE has communicated that they do not intend for their PoG to become the *de facto* PoG for school districts across the state. Each district operates in its own unique context. To date, 100+ California school districts have created their own PoGs (see [interactive map](#)) and many are moving “from poster to practice” — i.e., fully implementing it as a *promise* to its students and families. In order to build coherence among the many initiatives and programs underway, a district could begin its Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) with a whole child vision (like a PoG) and align goals, activities, metrics, and funding allocations to that vision.

Policy implications: As the SBE creates its own PoG, they should publicly signal to LEAs across the state that they believe doing so is considered best practice. The SBE, CDE or legislature could offer incentives and supports for LEAs to create/pursue a PoG. [New Mexico](#) and [Montana](#) require it. The SBE also could adjust the LCAP template to start with a whole child vision. Funding the creation and maintenance of a statewide PoG resource hub would be welcomed.

MAKE EDUCATION LEARNER-CENTERED & COMPETENCY-BASED

A. Normalize learner-centered experiential learning.

Many teachers, schools, and districts have experimented with project-based learning, service learning, civic learning, work-based learning, and other forms of instruction that (by design) engage students in solving real-world problems that give them meaning and purpose. Often these schools and districts engage students by giving them a *voice* in what they learn, a *choice* in how they learn and demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and a sense of *agency* to take ownership of their learning journey. Perhaps most important, they enable students to center their own identities, cultures, and languages so that they find value, purpose, and relevance in their schooling. Despite the obvious benefits of these learning strategies, which often are preferred by students, families, and educators alike, they are far from the norm.

Policy implications: Building teacher capacity to shift pedagogical approaches is a heavy lift. State investment is necessary to advance this imperative. State grant programs should expect LEAs to incorporate learner-centered experiential instruction to access funds.

B. Recognize learning that happens beyond the classroom.

Learning is not, and never has been, bounded by the classroom, clock (school day), calendar (school year), and curriculum. We all learn 24/7, 365 days per year. The state has robustly funded community schools and expanded learning, yet students continue to be judged by their academic record, which reflects only the learning that happens within those boundaries. How can we capture and value the learning that happens in after school and summer programs, family-run businesses, internships, community-based cultural centers, outdoor learning experiences, faith-based leadership groups, and more? How can we allow other youth-serving adults (beyond teachers) to act as “certifiers of learning”? Student portfolios⁸ serve as a promising strategy that enables youth to capture and import any and all learning experiences into a permanent digital record, even when learning happens beyond the boundaries of the classroom, clock, calendar, and curriculum.

Policy implications: District leaders can adopt an ePortfolio platform⁹ that enables students to reflect on their learning and identify and post examples of quality work products that reflect demonstrated academic and durable skills, no matter where or in what language they occur. Universities can/should invite students to link to their portfolios to share the diversity of learning across contexts.

C. Promote competency-based education (CBE).

Most states are turning to a [competency-based approach](#) to education,^{10,11} whereby *learning is the constant and time is the variable*, rather than vice versa (as is typical). Only when students demonstrate one competency do they move on to the next. Some may take longer and need more support, but they are guaranteed success if they persist. In California, Lindsay USD serves as a national model. Other LEAs also are making advances, but there are neither state incentives nor guidance for LEAs to do so.

A competency-based approach requires schools to be more flexible in what, how, when, and where students learn. The goal should be a demonstration of learning, not sitting at desks. If the state moves in this direction, then it makes sense to fund enrollment rather than attendance (i.e., ADA). California remains one of six states¹² (CA, ID, KY, MO, MS, TX) that have not yet moved to enrollment-based funding. Other states have done so for many reasons, in part because our current funding structure undermines efforts by the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to fund schools more equitably. Attendance funding

exacerbates inequities — granting more funding to wealthy suburban districts that typically have higher attendance rates and less funding to poor communities of color often with lower attendance rates.

Policy implications: By creating innovative learning zones,¹³ CA could allow school districts flexibility to move away from “seat time” requirements in lieu of students’ demonstrated competency. Doing so may require a shift in financing — from funding attendance to funding enrollment.

D. Replace the Carnegie Unit with seals that recognize students’ readiness to transition.

A competency-based approach recognizes that each student learns at their own pace in their own way. The Carnegie Unit represents an outdated notion that a defined set of content knowledge requires a fixed amount of time to master. It is a one-size-fits-all approach with a false premise, yet it continues to drive the way we organize schools. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) have launched [Skills for the Future](#), a national pilot to phase out the Carnegie Unit in lieu of demonstrated mastery. Several states, like Indiana¹⁴ and Ohio¹⁵, have adopted a series of “seals” to recognize a student’s readiness for post-secondary opportunities.

Policy implications: The legislature, State Board, and/or Governor’s office (through its Master Plan for Career Education¹⁶) should explore issuance of competency-based seals to recognize student readiness to transition successfully after high school.

E. Augment our accountability system to include authentic assessment of durable skills.

As educators and society, we’ve been complicit—valuing what we measure, rather than measuring what we value. The 100+ PoGs across the state clearly articulate the competencies that communities value for their young people. But, our state’s accountability measures, the media, politicians, and society at large tend to oversimplify the intended outcomes of our education system, oft-times limiting signs of growth or failure to scores on standardized tests. While test scores may serve a valuable function of assessing aggregated progress on key measures, they represent a very blunt instrument—a snapshot at a point in time on a no-stakes test for students and focus narrowly on just a couple of data points. They should *not* be the sole diagnostic for what each individual student needs. To complement test scores, we should *measure what we value*, i.e., the durable skills articulated in the PoG created by communities across the state.¹⁷

While PoG competencies are not easily measured with standardized tests, they can be demonstrated, observed, and assessed through essays, presentations, exhibitions, projects, portfolio defenses, and more. Now, AI-powered tools can use a student’s natural language and reflections (written, audio, video) to assess durable skills,¹⁸ making the heretofore challenge easier, faster, and cheaper. With tools and strategies more readily available and affordable, many California schools and districts have begun to more robustly assess student progress on PoG outcomes. For equity reasons, when doing so districts should allow students to choose methods that are culturally and linguistically affirming.

Policy implications: California remains one of just a few states that has not defined “college and career readiness”.¹⁹ The current “College/Career Indicator” (CCI) of the California Schools Dashboard is often viewed as a hodge-podge of proxies that may be readily available, but were never mapped to a thoughtful definition of college and career readiness. If state leaders do not intend to define college and career readiness, they at least could allow local districts to adapt the CCI to capture students’ demonstration of the durable skills identified by their local community. When elevating locally-determined priorities, the SBE should allow local flexibility in how those competencies are demonstrated, measured and reported. Doing so would honor the spirit of local control preferred by constituents across the state.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For clarity, we've summarized the most high-leverage and high-impact policy recommendations drawn from the policy implications described in the paper.

- **Create a statewide vision for California education.** The State Board of Education (SBE) should align the “parts and pieces” of the education system to their Portrait of a Graduate (PoG). They also should explicitly encourage and incentivize districts to engage their communities to customize their own PoG designed to meet local needs and priorities. To complement the SBE PoG, we should support young people to create their own vision for CA education — for students, by students.
- **Define “college and career readiness” and create/issue “seals” for graduates.** Align the College/Career Indicator of the CA School Dashboard to a well-researched definition of college and career readiness. Create an open architecture for the CCI to allow districts to insert the competencies called out in their local PoG. Follow other states in crafting “seals” that have real currency as portable credentials to ease students’ transition to postsecondary options.
- **Establish education innovation zones** where interested LEAs receive waivers from statutes and regulations to move toward a competency-based approach, enabling them to pilot and pursue strategies articulated above (i.e., assess and report PoG outcomes through competency-based education, scale experiential learning with skills demonstrated through alternative assessments, blend in-school and out-of-school learning, and do away with the Carnegie Unit). To advance lessons learned by innovation zone districts, seek associated revisions to the Ed Code.
- **Beyond the innovation zones, create and modify existing grants to build educator capacity** around competency-based education, experiential learning, authentic assessment, and more.
- **Modify the LCAP template** to begin with a whole child vision – whether a simple statement or a PoG – and expect LEAs to map their goals to the whole child vision in order to promote coherence.
- **Shift to enrollment funding** rather than attendance funding to offer local flexibility as we move toward a competency-based approach.

SUPPORT:

To **support** this policy white paper and/or discuss specific policy actions, please contact Roman Stearns (Roman@ScalingStudentSuccess.org) and Austin Webster (austin@wstrategiesllc.com). Thank you!

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See “[Student Voice Report](#)”, Challenge Success, Stanford Graduate School of Education, June 2024.
- ² [CDE reports \(2023-24\)](#) 56% Latino, 20% White, 10% Asian, 5% African-American, 5% two or more races, 2% Filipino, 1% non-reported, <1% Native American & Pacific Islander. Many of these students also fall into other marginalized categories, such as emergent multilingual learners, special needs, foster/homeless youth, etc.
- ³ Including It’s Elementary (1994), Caught in the Middle (1987), and Second to None (1992).
- ⁴ To view them all, see this [interactive map](#), Scaling Student Success, 2025.
- ⁵ See [Portraits of a Graduate: Strengthening Career and College Readiness through Social and Emotional Skill Development](#) (CASEL, 2023); [Future Focused State Policy Actions to Transform K-12 Education](#) (Aurora Institute, 2020) and [From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope](#) (The Aspen Institute, 2019).
- ⁶ See “[Seizing the Opportunity for State Education R&D: Findings and Recommendations for Action](#)”; Sarah Bishop-Root, Education Reimagined & Leslie Colwell, Transcend; 2024.
- ⁷ Source: “[More States Are Creating a ‘Portrait of a Graduate.’ Here’s Why](#)” (EducationWeek, Dec 2023).
- ⁸ See blog post, “[Student Portfolios: A Powerful Way to Operationalize a Graduate Profile](#)” (Stearns, 2024).
- ⁹ Examples include [Unulr.com](#), [Inkwire](#), [Seesaw](#), Google Sites, and more.
- ¹⁰ See this [map](#) from the Aurora Institute, showing that CA is among the 17 “emerging” states, while 16 states are “developing” and 17 are “advancing”. See also these [examples](#) in states across the country.
- ¹¹ For analysis, see “[2024 Legislative Session Recap](#)”, Emily Brixey, KnowledgeWorks, July 2024
- ¹² See “[Student Counts in K12 Funding Models](#)”, Eric Syverson & Chris Duncombe, Education Commission of the States, January 2022.
- ¹³ For more, see Aurora Institute’s issue brief, [Innovation Zones: Policy Flexibility to Reimagine and Modernize K-12 Education Post-COVID-19](#) (2021).
- ¹⁴ See Indiana’s seals of enrollment, employment, enlistment (see [January 2025 SBE slide deck](#), [December 2024 overview slide deck](#)).
- ¹⁵ See Ohio’s “[Graduation Seals](#)”.
- ¹⁶ See “[Master Plan for Career Education](#)”, California Governor’s Council for Career Education, 2024.
- ¹⁷ For example, see this [Competency-Based Reporting Playbook](#) from [Learner-Centered Collaborative](#).
- ¹⁸ For example, see [Impacter Pathway](#) and [UC Irvine’s DapLab](#) work with [eKadence](#) and [Anaheim UHSD](#) (TV news report), funded by the [Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative](#) (video). See also this [EdSource commentary](#) (Michael Matsuda & June Ahn, February 2025).
- ¹⁹ See “[Overview: State Definitions of College and Career Readiness](#)” (Anne Mishkind, American Institutes for Research, September 2014).