

# The State Education Agency's Role in Supporting Equitable Student-Centered Learning

Leaders from across the education field are well-aware of the skills that young people need to excel in today's workforce; from collaboration and critical thinking to communication and creativity.

At the same time, we can tap into a wealth of research on the science of learning and development to ensure our children learn in ways that reinforce these essential skills. We now have an opportunity to create transformative learning environments that expand access to meaningful relationships, promote deeper learning, enable student agency, and encourage exploration of identity.

In doing so, state education agencies have an equally extraordinary opportunity to shape a new, **STUDENT-CENTERED** vision of learning; **one that reflects what we know about how students learn best. This vision also hinges on a recognition of the unique supports, resources, and skills students need to realize their full potential.**

We must also ensure this student-centered vision is equitable, expanding it to reach all young people. As a part of this effort, we must address the unique needs of every child, an important step on the pathway to equity in education.

CCSSO continually strives to realize this imperative. In February 2017, we partnered with The Aspen Institute Education and Society Program to publish **Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs**, a series of actions states can take to advance equity for all students. Our pursuit of equity is particularly urgent for students who grow up in poverty and are especially vulnerable to the lasting after-effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

States across the country have begun to take strides to implement policies that support a new, student-centered vision for learning. However, we recognize that many states still need additional supports and resources to enable all communities to realize the promise of student-centered learning. Therefore, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has created this research-driven, actionable guide for states as they empower their local districts to structure student-centered learning systems that work for all young people.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

**State education agencies can use this guide to:**

- 1 Outline a vision for student-centered learning experiences in their communities.
- 2 Explore how to transform learning environments in ways that support student-centered learning.
- 3 Identify and highlight the characteristics of student-centered learning experiences.
- 4 Explore Policy in Action examples from peer states across the country to pinpoint, adapt and implement equitable practices and policies that support student-centered learning.



## SHAPING STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

**Chief state school officers can provide these four criteria to schools and districts as they define and establish student-centered learning experiences in their communities.**



## WHAT IS STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING?

Student-centered learning approaches empower young people with the opportunities to proactively shape and own their learning experiences. Educators and adults across the community then help create learning opportunities uniquely tailored to students' individual strengths, needs, and interests, ensuring that they can reach their full potential.

States can take the following action steps to realize each of these four criteria for student-centered learning experiences.

- **REINFORCES RIGOR.** Promote high-quality, rigorous standards, equipping students with the skills they need to succeed in the workforce.
- **PROMOTES AGENCY.** Empower students to shape learning experiences that reflect their emerging sense of self and align with their interests and needs.
- **FOSTERS LIFE SKILLS.** Enable students to build relationships, make well-informed decisions, and develop social and emotional skills and competencies.
- **ENSURES RELEVANCE.** Ensure that ideas and theories from the classroom connect to students' lived experiences and interests in their communities.

State education agencies play an important role in infusing these characteristics in student-centered learning, informing what success looks like for students in their state. Some states have taken the approach of developing a portrait of a graduate, a representation of the skills, knowledge, and characteristics that students need to excel in the 21st century. State education agencies can convene gubernatorial staff, state legislators, business leaders, educators, students, families and education partners. The state also has an important role to play in building consensus for the types of student-centered learning experiences that support this vision.

We encourage you to explore [the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate](#), which arose from broad stakeholder engagement and elevates the importance of rigorous, empowering, and relevant learning experiences. The South Carolina Department of Education is using this profile to develop the Office of Personalized Learning and [Framework for Personalized Learning](#), which districts and schools across the state are using as they shift their instructional approaches to reinforce the knowledge, skills, and competencies outlined in this profile.



**POLICY IN ACTION**  
South Carolina





## POLICY IN ACTION Kentucky

### Elements of Student-Centered Learning Environments

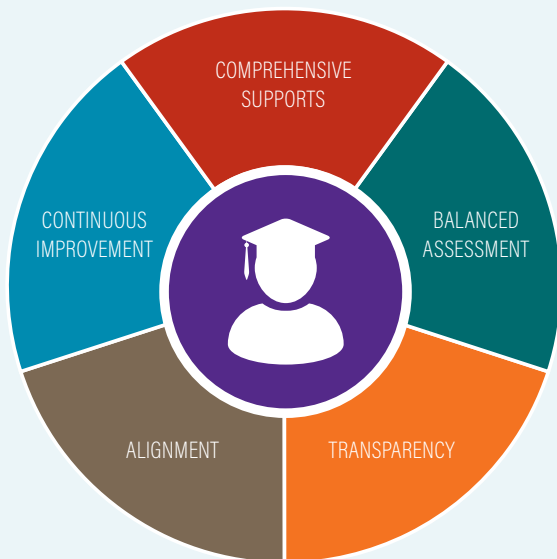
States are uniquely positioned to help districts and schools shape and deliver engaging, enriching, student-centered learning experiences that reinforce the skills needed to excel in the workforce.

As schools and districts focus on student-centered learning, it has been equally critical to shape supportive environments, which are defined by new processes and equitable conditions.

At the foundation of a strong student-centered learning environment is access to focused professional development for school leaders and educators, aligned with changes in instruction, learning, and assessment. States can convene districts in learning communities, giving them dedicated time and space to share promising practices, elevate successful strategies, and collectively address challenges.

**Kentucky’s Innovative Learning Network (ILN)**, a partnership between local school districts and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), provides a space for the sharing of innovative strategies to transform our education system. In addition, KDE commits to the Innovative districts by providing ongoing technical assistance, a platform to showcase educational innovation within Kentucky schools, and access to sources of funding that support personalized learning opportunities. KDE also convenes districts across the state interested in providing their students with the option of a competency pathway toward graduation through the Kentucky Competency Education & Assessment Consortium (KCEAC), which is now focused on designing and implementing a competency education and assessment system. KCEAC began in 2018 as a pilot program, but has since taken on a consortium approach modeled after the **New York Performance Standards Consortium**.

## FIVE HALLMARKS OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



Each student-centered learning environment is marked by the following elements:

- **ALIGNMENT.** High-quality teaching and learning experiences that are aligned to the knowledge, skills, and competencies students need to thrive in college, career, and life.
- **BALANCED ASSESSMENT.** A mix of interim, formative and summative assessments that emphasize deeper learning to gauge student progress toward—and mastery of—key skills.
- **TRANSPARENCY.** Reporting systems that leverage data from multiple sources to identify and clearly communicate students' progress on their learning pathways, including assessment, school climate, and student engagement measures.
- **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.** Use of data to instantly identify and offer additional resources that students need to reach their goals, providing solutions in real time.
- **COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS.** Offer trauma-informed approaches that address students' full mental, physical, and behavioral needs, serving as the basis for safe, supportive learning environments.



## POLICY IN ACTION Arkansas

Every student should have the opportunity to shape personalized learning experiences that pave the way for lifelong success. States can establish these equitable conditions by elevating the perspectives of young people and adult mentors—and convening stakeholders to streamline and align essential services.

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has worked closely with LEAs to ensure each of its eighth graders has a personalized **Student Success Plan** to reach their postsecondary goals, developed through conversations between students, school personnel, and parents. These plans are updated annually and informed by students' strengths, needs, and interests. ADE has provided trainings across the state on implementation of these plans—and expanded access to a **college and career readiness tool** for use in grades 8-12, which provides students with insight into their personal strengths and interests. To help ensure quality, ADE provided districts with a list of viable vendors to facilitate the trainings, all of who met minimum research-based qualifications. From there, districts were empowered to select a tailored, no-cost tool that, combined with the Student Success Plan, better positions all students for a future that meets their personal needs and work values.

## States' Roles in Soliciting Widespread Support for Student-Centered Learning

States and their chief state school officers can lay the foundation for a shift to a student-centered learning system by taking these action steps:

- **CONVENE DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS.** Unite diverse stakeholders across the state, including district and school leaders, school board members, policymakers, families, students, businesses and community organizations, to create a vision for student-centered learning that reinforces the skills students need to succeed in a changing economy.
- **SET A VISION.** Ensure that all stakeholders, including young people, align on a definition and supporting vision statement for student-centered learning that provides students with the full range of supports they need to succeed in the workforce.
- **ALIGN.** Position staff across the SEA to align existing assessment, curricular, instructional, and funding-related policies in ways that support this equitable vision.
- **MONITOR.** Engage in a progress-monitoring process, with data at a subgroup level, to track implementation progress and communicate effectively with stakeholders.





## POLICY IN ACTION

### North Dakota

### Implementing Equitable Conditions for Student-Centered Learning

To realize the equitable promise of student-centered learning, states should ensure that funding, policies, and conditions center on:

- **THE WHOLE CHILD.** Develop services, programs, and resources that collectively address students' individualized physical, mental, behavioral, and basic needs.
- **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE.** Equip educators, school leaders, and adults with the tools and resources to fully support students.
- **MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS WITH ADULTS.** Ensure young people have the guidance, mentorship, and supports they need from adult mentors to realize their aspirations.

States can empower and convene local districts in an effort to establish these conditions for their students—and lay the groundwork for student-centered learning strategies—by establishing mechanisms for, and removing barriers to, innovation-focused policies.

Engaging a diverse array of stakeholders is critical to the creation of a blueprint for student-centered learning. State education agencies are best positioned to cultivate a broad consensus around this significant shift in how young people learn, particularly by leveraging relationships across schools, districts, communities, government, and the private sector.

North Dakota shaped a strategic, personalized and student-centered vision for education—with lots of stakeholder input from an **Innovation Task Force**. This group included district and school leaders, parents, policymakers, business officials, and community liaisons. Once the **North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI)** convened diverse stakeholders from across the state in June 2016, the Task Force supported their efforts to create and adopt its first ever **PK-12 Education Strategic Vision** in January 2018. The vision defined six long-term outcomes for students and outlined five areas of focus, including high-quality instruction of personalized learning. Moving into the future, the DPI and its statewide education partners will research, define and support personalized learning methods and tools, ultimately ensuring that districts and schools have the capacity to implement them.



## States' Roles in Aligning Policy and Practice to Support Student-Centered Learning

States can advance these concrete strategies that ultimately support the realization of student-centered learning.

- **PROMOTE FLEXIBILITY.** Equip local education agencies with waivers, flexibilities, and other innovative policies to effectively implement, evaluate, and refine student-centered learning.
- **PRIORITIZE EQUITY.** Promote equitable access to rigorous, student-centered learning experiences and environments for students who have been historically marginalized and embed culturally responsive policies and practices that can close achievement and opportunity gaps for all students.
- **RE-THINK FUNDING.** Identify and help districts flexibly leverage funding streams that expand access to high-quality, student-centered learning experiences.
- **BUILD CAPACITY.** Provide educators and school leaders with the strategies, resources, and supports to promote student-centered learning.
- **FOSTER ENGAGEMENT.** Encourage local districts and schools to engage with families, students, and their communities to collectively remove barriers and advance strategies for high-quality student-centered learning.
- **ALIGN MEASUREMENT.** Include multiple measures of proficiency, progress, and growth to surface additional, whole child supports that students may need, prioritize schools in need of additional resources, and ensure that states align accountability and public reporting systems to their vision for success.



As state education agencies implement these significant shifts in learning, they must consider inventive policies and funding streams. For example, innovation zones empower local districts to re-purpose or expand the use of existing funds, report data in new ways, and introduce other assessments. At the request of the Idaho State Department of Education, the Idaho Legislature established the Idaho Mastery Education Network and funded grants for professional development in participating districts and schools. With the support of a **\$1.4 million appropriation**, districts and charter schools can explore, plan, design, and implement a mastery educational system based on student-centered learning.

While the initial bill limited the network to 19 incubator districts and charters consisting of 32 schools, a statute change in 2019 opened the network to all districts and charters. As of October 2019, up to 80 Idaho schools now share the common goal of implementing a student-centered learning educational system that promotes equitable, relevant, and flexible learning. Over the past three years, the network has drafted a common definition for Idaho Mastery Education, defined Idaho's Profile of a Graduate, and established Idaho Competencies with K-12 Learning Progressions.

The department, under Idaho Code § 33-1632, continues to manage the network by providing grants and professional development, conducting action research, and hosting workshops on issues related to evidence-based recommendations.



States can use this guide to articulate and realize an equitable vision for student-centered learning that empowers all students with the skills they need to realize lasting success in the workforce.

## MAKE YOUR STUDENT-CENTERED VISION A REALITY

If you would like to learn more about how states are taking action to support student-centered learning, or have questions, please contact Ryan MacDonald at [Ryan.MacDonald@ccsso.org](mailto:Ryan.MacDonald@ccsso.org).

For more background on student-centered learning, we encourage you to explore the following resources:

- CCSSO's **reference guide for state policymakers**, which highlights how to advance equity through personalized learning.
- KnowledgeWorks' **State Policy Framework for Personalized Learning**, designed to help states build awareness of what it will take to evolve policy systems that support exploration, replication, and statewide transformation of practices that ensure personalized learning opportunities for all students.
- iNACOL's **state policy recommendations**, positioned to modernize the teaching workforce for learner-centered, competency-based, equity oriented education.
- The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's **policy agenda**, which offers support of how learning happens.
- The Center for Assessment's **policy brief**, which elaborates on the challenges and opportunities of balanced systems of assessment.
- ExcelinEd and Foresight Law + Policy's **examination of state innovation and pilot programs**, which support next-generation learning.
- Next Gen Learning Policy Toolkit, which offers **key policy components** and **model policy language** to promote next-generation learning.