AURORA INSTITUTE

Written by
SUSAN PATRICK
ALEXIS CHAMBERS

Education Policy Issues for the COVID-19 Era: Policy Actions and Responses to Leverage the Moment for Future Readiness

August 2020

Education Policy Issues for the COVID-19 Era: Policy Actions and Responses to Leverage the Moment for Future Readiness

About the Authors

Susan Patrick is President and CEO of Aurora Institute, a national education nonprofit, providing policy advocacy and field-building, convening thought leaders, publishing research, and driving the transformation of education systems toward innovative student-centered learning models. She is the former Director of the Office of Educational Technology at the U.S. Department of Education. Patrick served as legislative liaison for Governor Hull from Arizona. She served as legislative staff on Capitol Hill. Patrick holds a master's degree from the University of Southern California and a bachelor's degree from Colorado College. She is a Pahara-Aspen Institute Fellow and a USA Eisenhower Fellow.

Alexis Chambers is a Policy Associate at the Aurora Institute. Prior to joining Aurora Institute, Chambers held a Policy Fellowship at KnowledgeWorks. Chambers began her career as a high school history teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio. She holds a master's degree from American University in Education Policy and Leadership and a bachelor's degree from Ohio University in Political Science and African American Studies.

About Aurora Institute

Aurora's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students through its work in policy advocacy, research, and field-building/convening. We work on systems change in K-12 education, identify root causes in structures, promote best practices, examine policy barriers, and make recommendations for change. Aurora has a national and global view of education innovation and lifts up promising policies and practices that yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world where all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

Suggested Citation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The nation is enduring a profound time of political and social reckoning. A deep economic recession plays against a backdrop of persistent inequality. Widespread protests for racial justice are awakening minds and causing us to confront bitter truths about the American experience. All the while, the specter of the coronavirus crisis is upending nearly every institution on which our way of life depends, especially K-12 education. Education policymakers, however, can wrest opportunity from this crisis by seizing the moment for change. There is great optimism among schools, districts, and communities, including those we surveyed for this report, that together we can make our education system better than it was before.

In the wake of COVID-19, teaching and learning are likely to undergo massive change. K-12 education systems and schools, once skeptical, are now eager to implement blended delivery models in response to community demands for safe conditions for continuity of learning in the coming school years. As education leaders and policymakers navigate these shifts and march toward higher ideals of what schools are and what they can be, communities can and should seek the solutions offered by competency-based education (CBE). CBE offers flexible pathways to integrate learning that happens anytime and anywhere, advances students when they are ready, and by design, dismantles inequitable structures embedded in K-12 as it exists today. Competency-based education models are powerful means to achieve the reforms that our surveyed communities desire, and they stand in stark contrast to the traditional, one-size-fits-all sequential pathway to a diploma.

The traditional K-12 education frame isn't working in today's reality; it isn't the right tool for the task of successfully preparing young people for a dynamic and evolving future. This lack of congruence between purpose and outcome is driving demand to rethink policies in accountability, assessments, accessibility, and equity, as well as delivery models. As of this writing, schools may continue to experience closures through 2022, with education funding dropping to previous recession levels. At the same time, the pandemic has exposed vast and systemic inequities.

Calls for a redesigned education system are growing in number and volume. If we are to realize this ambition of creating a better system, we must first surface issues to leverage to frame the conversation and light the path toward communities making good decisions for their children's futures. The top-of-mind issues like what reopening should look like and how to keep students and staff safe are incredibly important, but now is also the time to confront bigger-picture questions about the purpose of school and how to do it so that everyone has an equal chance for a successful future.

Our organization was founded nearly 20 years ago to examine how online teaching and learning could transform K-12 education systems. Since then, we have examined global best practices and have come to realize that for true transformation to begin, a focus on major changes to the structures, pedagogy, and culture that embody K-12 education and education policy frameworks need to be deeply explored, questioned and re-imagined with a

broader range of constituents, including educators, parents, students, communities, public health, housing, safety, and beyond.

We believe that flexibility for learning anytime and anywhere afforded through online and blended learning provides new ways to conceptualize how and where learning occurs, but this must be designed on a system built for excellence and equity. Any new rendering of K-12 should ensure every student, without exception, reaches mastery of high expectations, building the knowledge and skills needed for deeper, lifelong learning along the way. Achieving this vision requires a major shift in policy and practice toward competency-based education systems and structures to address the systemic inequities our current, outdated system is designed for—ranking and sorting kids with high variability in outcomes. We need to support educators to meet students where they are and inspire high-quality, meaningful learning experiences that can occur regardless of seat-time statutes and bell schedules.

We are witnessing increased demand from practitioners and policymakers for strategic policy and practice advice to effect major systems change. This publication is an offering to the field sharing knowledge on high-quality blended and online learning, combined with our expertise in competency-based education systems. Competency-based education is being implemented at deeper levels in more schools every year, and the need for competency-based pathways is being realized in the wake of COVID-19, with increasing demand for anytime, anywhere, resilient, student-centered, and equitable education models.

In the summer of 2020, Aurora Institute's Center for Policy and Action Research Center surveyed the field for the key K-12 education concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing school closures. This inquiry yielded immeasurable knowledge and insight and enabled us to make recommendations on the 10 leading issues that emerged. They include the following:

1 Using Blended, Competency-Based Learning as an Entry Point for Innovation

2 Moving Away from Seat Time Credits to Awarding Credit Based on Demonstrated Mastery

3 Re-Examining Grading Policies

4 Rethinking Assessment and Addressing the Need for Balanced Systems of Assessments to Measure Student Learning

5 Examining the Purpose of Accountability

6 Creating Flexibility and Multiple Pathways for Graduation Requirements

7 Ensuring All Communities Have the Necessary Technology Infrastructure & Internet Access

8 Supporting Students with Disabilities

9 Ensuring Students Have Continued Access to Meals During School Closures

10 Prioritizing Future Readiness for Pandemic Preparedness and Continuity of Learning

STATES CAN SUPPORT BLENDED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING AS AN ENTRY POINT FOR INNOVATION.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the globe, school leaders and education policymakers are grappling with unprecedented decision-making about closures and equitable continuity of learning. This historic event demonstrates the need to orient our school systems toward high-quality, anytime, anywhere learning — and to modernize our systems to meet students' individual needs. Districts the nation over are confronting the need to transition from face-to-face to different forms of learning experiences. States and districts would be well-served to create space for engaging communities with real design challenges re-examining how schools traditionally use time and space.

State and district leaders can support blended learning as an "entry point" for innovation. States and districts are working to adopt a future-focused mindset for digital learning, planning, and implementation — one that reflects an understanding of the current trends and ensures appropriate strategic planning to address inequitable access and use. Blended learning can help expand access and ensure teachers are familiar with personalized learning tools, digital content, and data-driven instruction. Although this can be a helpful first step, it is important to recognize blended learning is a "sustaining" innovation focused on a delivery model rather than an ideological model focused on creating space to transform to student-centered, personalized learning through innovation zones or advancing broader systems change through competency-based education. State education leaders should embrace the principles of a competency-based, learner-centered approach to all decisions relating to the investment in and use of blended learning.

SOLUTIONS

States can work with districts to build capacity for blended learning by:

- Conducting a needs assessment for readiness for continuity of learning and remote learning;
- Evaluating local education agency (LEA) and school needs for:
  - Technology infrastructure
  - Professional learning for blended learning models and student-centered learning, anytime, anywhere
  - Platforms to support remote learning and student progress on competency development
  - Digital content repositories/open educational resources
  - Performance assessments and recognition of learning;
- Identifying partners to lead a short and long-term vision and engage stakeholders; and
- Creating a task force for short-term plans and long-term needs.

States can work with districts to build capacity for competency-based learning by:

- Enabling innovation zones to support innovating districts and remove barriers for modernizing education delivery;
- Launching competency-based education task forces to study CBE and related policies and practices;
- Offering credit flexibility to allow for multiple pathways for anytime, anywhere learning;
- Creating pilot programs to support the development of new models of teaching and learning;
- Allowing flexibility for multiple pathways to graduation to ensure students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful in postsecondary, and career;
- Ensuring meaningful credentials that articulate what students know and are able to do through mastery-based diplomas aligned to a profile of a graduate;
- Redesigning for balanced systems of assessments to certify student mastery of knowledge and skills and provide timely feedback on where students are in their learning;
- Launching state initiatives to intentionally build the local capacity of district and school leaders for innovation and competency-based education; and
- Designing a comprehensive statewide policy approach to competency-based education that supports the alignment of both education and workforce systems with a vision of future opportunity and prosperity.

MOVE AWAY FROM SEAT TIME CREDITS TO AWARDING CREDIT BASED ON DEMONSTRATED MASTERY.

With the transition to remote learning during COVID-19 school closures, it is time for states to seriously rethink how to redefine how students earn credits by demonstrating competencies. Seat-time is a poor, invalid proxy for learning. Learning should be visible in student work. It is time to decouple time and learning and focus on what a student has learned, knows, and can do. While states can consider seat-time waivers, they are not ideal policy because districts and schools must repeatedly re-apply for waiver status.

SOLUTIONS

Many states allow for credit flexibility that gives schools and local districts the authority to develop competency-based alternatives to earning credits through seat-time. In New York, for example, there is a provision for flexibility in seat-time requirements. In districts where "distance and online learning methods are available, or other continuity of learning strategies are utilized, the priority for the instruction should be that which best prepares students to meet the learning outcomes for the course and prepare for the culminating examination, if applicable. Any student who achieves the learning outcomes for the course should earn the applicable course/diploma credit without regard to the 180-minute/week unit of study requirement in Commissioner's Regulations Part 100.1." [1]

A closer look at advancing state and local policies to support earning credits by building knowledge and skills—through competency development—needs to happen to allow high-quality, anytime, anywhere learning for the future. States leading are redefining Carnegie Units or credits as competencies aligned to state academic standards and also include important skills and dispositions, such as lifelong learning competencies, communication and problem-solving skills.

New Hampshire is one of the most advanced states to move fully down this path. Credits are based on students' mastery of competencies. New Hampshire coordinated with educators from across the state along with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, the Center for Collaborative Education, and the New Hampshire Department of Education developed state-level competencies to support and build capacity for local school systems. The state has approved competencies in mathematics, English language arts, science, art, and work-study practices. The work-study practices emphasize cross-cutting competencies such as communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction. Each school district adopts its own competencies.

Similarly, Oregon Administrative Code 581-022-1131 allows a school district or charter school to grant credit if a student demonstrates mastery by any one or more of the following ways:

- Successfully completing classroom or equivalent work designed to measure proficiency in class or out of class, where hours of instruction may vary;
- Successfully passing an appropriate exam designed to measure proficiency or mastery of identified standards;
- Providing a collection of work or other evidence which demonstrates proficiency or mastery of identified standards; and/or
- Providing documentation of prior learning activities or experiences which demonstrate proficiency or mastery.

GRADING POLICIES NEED TO BE RE-EXAMINED.

District leaders and educators are asking for guidance on how to equitably award grades and credit to students during the pandemic and how to take advantage of flexibility to award credit for graduation based on demonstrated mastery. Grade calculations are often used to sort students. Grades typically include behavioral elements (attendance, homework, participation, etc.) and send mixed messages to parents on student academic performance by conflating performance measures and hiding skill/knowledge gaps. Grades should clearly communicate what a student knows and can do, with consistency, transparency, and integrity. Expectations for earning a particular grade vary substantially between teachers and schools, and undefined expectations for what knowledge and skills are required for a specific grade also leads to lack of clarity on what a student knows and can do. These issues are exposed during COVID-19 school closures. Competency-based grading means that schools or districts have adopted or created competencies and rubrics students must demonstrate in each grade level and subject area. It is time to take a closer look at how schools design grading policies, to ensure that educators, students, and families have a clear understanding of levels of knowledge and a shared understanding of what proficiency means.

Leading states in competency education vary in their approach to establishing their grading policy. In 2012, Oregon's State Board of Education established a policy that parents will be informed whether or not their child is proficient in grade-level standards and that academic standards will be reported separately from behavioral factors. In addition, it establishes the expectation that students will receive additional services and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of academic content standards.

SOLUTIONS

To move to competency-based grading, districts should:
- Embrace explicit learning progression or standards so that everyone will have a shared vision of what students should learn and examples of student work as evidence of meeting standards;
- Develop a clear understanding of levels of knowledge so that students and teachers share an understanding of what proficiency means;
- Ensure transparency so that educators, students, and parents all understand where students are on their learning progression;
- Create a school-wide or district-wide standards-based grading policy;
- Offer timely feedback and meaningful reassessments so that students can continue to progress and stay on track; and
- Provide adequate information infrastructure to support students, teachers, and school-wide continuous improvement.

RETHINK ASSESSMENT AND ADDRESS THE NEED FOR BALANCED SYSTEMS OF ASSESSMENTS FOR MEASURING STUDENT LEARNING.

It is time for states to rethink how changes to instructional and assessment systems can support more equitable opportunities for all students to learn meaningful content and skills. Many states are wondering how to assess students during the pandemic and the shift to remote learning, and how these assessments will provide a clear picture of what students know. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Education waived assessment requirements and reporting due to the national emergency. The department granted waivers to all 50 states and Washington D.C., to bypass assessment requirements for the 2019-2020 school year.

Assessment is essential for understanding what students have learned and for providing transparency and fairness when it comes to certifying mastery of knowledge and skills. Assessment can provide timely feedback to students, parents, and educators on where students are in their learning and to inform the supports that they need to succeed, but this requires a necessary paradigm shift.

In Washington, the state has provided districts with the opportunity to use projects, portfolios, and other performance assessments in lieu of traditional tests this year. Going forward, states need to reshape assessment policies to enable models that provide valuable feedback throughout the process of teaching and learning. That feedback must be meaningful to students and provide transparency on academic attainment.

The pandemic presents an opportunity for state and district leaders to rethink the role assessments play at each level to advance important equity goals, provide a range of evidence for each student, and continuously monitor students' progress over time. States can use pilots to develop new approaches to assessment and accountability that better support student success, support school and district leaders in evaluating local assessment quality, promote educator and leader assessment literacy, and better connect curriculum, learning, and assessment.

SOLUTIONS

States and districts can re-envision assessments by:
- Investing in educators' assessment literacy;
- Auditing the assessment systems currently in use
- Inviting a diverse set of stakeholders to the table to re-imagine the state assessment system, leveraging flexibility in ESSA for balanced assessment systems;
- Collaborating to explore and pilot new, innovative systems of assessment under the Innovative Accountability and Assessment Demonstration Authority (ESSA Section 1204); and
- Convening a pilot to develop balanced assessment systems that include multiple types of assessments (including performance assessments), which are linked to specific competencies and provide a range of evidence over time.

EXAMINE THE PURPOSE OF ACCOUNTABILITY.

State and district leaders are greatly concerned about how the disruption in schooling will impact districts' ability to assess students and states' ability to identify schools for improvement. Due to the national emergency, the federal Education Department issued a waiver allowing states to forgo administering their annual statewide assessments and identifying schools for support and improvement. While this move abated accountability in the 2019-20 school year, it also highlights a major flaw of the current quality assurance frame for accountability of our educational system. We need more advanced evaluation and assessment approaches to provide ongoing transparency of student progress and for school quality.

Competency-based education systems provide data and evidence of student performance in real-time, with a portfolio of student work and performance assessments. Quality assurance requires thoughtful examination of inputs and outcomes. With better data, multiple measures, data literacy, quality assurance, and the requisite investments in educator capacity, we could evaluate proficiency, achievement gaps, and rate of progress. We could also understand growth based on individual student growth over time. We could also look across cohorts of students and disaggregate data by sub-group to ensure equity and transparency with a depth not possible today. We could examine resource allocations to have a fuller understanding of quality.

With multiple measures, states have the opportunity to redesign accountability around a broader definition of student success and quality assurance. States are creating accountability systems that go beyond single summative ratings to capture multiple measures of school quality, provide stakeholders with timely, relevant school data, and encourage all schools toward continuous improvement.

California's School Dashboard is an example of establishing a balance in state and local roles in monitoring different school performance measures. In this new system, districts will monitor four local indicators to determine if they have met, not met, or not met them for two or more years. This information is gathered into a local dashboard, allowing district leaders to focus their efforts on evaluating and building school-level performance and capacity. Additionally, six state indicators make up performance categories the state monitors as common measures of student performance outcomes. This approach allows the state to monitor the progress on the six indicators as they are reported through a statewide dashboard to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support.

Vermont offers a state example of accountability for continuous improvement. Under Vermont's ESSA State Plan, school performance will be measured using indicators aligned to five priority areas: safe, healthy schools; high-quality staffing; investment priorities; academic proficiency; and personalization. These priorities are aligned to Vermont's Education Quality Standards, a series of policy guidelines requiring all schools to provide educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, ensure continuous improvement in student performance and annually report to the community. Vermont adopted a comprehensive approach to statewide education policies that include proficiency-based graduation requirements, personalized learning plans, local systems of assessments, accountability for continuous improvement, and flexible pathways to graduation. Vermont is implementing multiple measures accountability, and Vermont's Education Quality Standards are tied to its proficiency-based graduation.

SOLUTIONS

States can establish new accountability systems for continuous improvement to achieve equity and excellence and empower stakeholders with multiple, balanced measures and reciprocal accountability. They can begin by:

- Engaging local and state-level leaders and stakeholders to redefine what student success is;
- Determining the measures the state will use for accountability purposes;
- Considering the inputs, processes, and outcomes that reflect a relentless and multi-faceted pursuit of equity for students;

- Developing a framework for reciprocal accountability to ensure that resources and supports are responsive to the needs of local communities, districts, and schools;
- Enacting school improvement models to support student-centered learning with personalized, competency-based education and to advance equity; and
- Embedding professional learning and improving leadership capacity into quality improvement processes.

DURING COVID, STATES ARE CREATING FLEXIBILITY AND MULTIPLE PATHWAYS FOR GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS.

Students, parents, and schools are concerned about fulfilling requirements for graduation, including meeting the credit-hour requirements for the remainder of the school year. Schools could not have reasonably been expected to plan for the current situation of school closures, when learning was disrupted, and students were expected to connect from home. States can use distance learning to meet requirements to support remote instruction and learning. This is more than just a shift in time and place, however, and schools and districts need to consider readiness for continuity of learning with connectivity, teacher professional development, platforms, content, performance assessment, as well as a redesign of the teaching model for supporting students and educators at a distance. States are providing regulatory flexibility and strategies to communicate with stakeholders on expectations for academic outcomes. Going forward, states and local officials need to review policies to examine new ways for ensuring graduation requirements are met with remote learning, health, safety, and wellbeing in mind with concerns of future pandemic outbreaks very much a reality.

It is important to challenge the primacy of seat-time as the only way to earn credit toward graduation. Education systems should focus on learning (what a student knows and can do) and enable students to earn credits based on demonstrated mastery. When students only earn credits based on the number of minutes in a course for a specific subject, it limits the ability for learning after school, in the community, through internships, and through online learning. State policymakers can enable personalized, competency-based education that provides "open-walled" learning opportunities—inside and outside of school buildings—by allowing students to demonstrate mastery of learning to earn credits toward graduation requirements.

In light of COVID-19, Washington state issued guidance that included options to support students in meeting the credit requirements for graduation. The state is urging districts to provide multiple options for students to demonstrate mastery. There are multiple pathways to graduation. Districts may award credit through work completion, which may include online coursework, portfolios, and work-based learning. Students may meet credit requirements through competency-based assessments, including formative and summative course content, dual-credit or industry credentials or certificates.

Vermont's Education Quality Standards were approved by the Vermont State Board of Education in 2013 and require schools to have proficiency-based graduation requirements for students graduating in 2020 and for each subsequent graduating class. The state allows students to demonstrate mastery through multiple means, including teacher-designed assessments, papers, presentations, portfolios, or projects. Local school districts may adopt their own specific graduation requirements but must adhere to state standards.

SOLUTIONS

Helpful strategies to create flexible pathways to graduation include:

- Establishing a profile of a graduate based on diverse stakeholder input;
- Rethinking and clarifying the skills, knowledge, and dispositions students need for college, career, and life;
- Implementing credit flexibility from seat-time policies;
- Creating competencies for mastery of learning;
- Offering mastery-based transcripts; and
- Being explicit about and show evidence for what diplomas and other credentials mean.

STATES NEED TO ENSURE ALL COMMUNITIES HAVE THE NECESSARY TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE AND INTERNET ACCESS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the inequities this nation faces around the digital divide and inequitable access to the internet amongst and within communities. Many communities are struggling with providing adequate and equitable access to technology and broadband services to students and families, as districts shift to distance learning. State and district leaders are grappling with the fact that many students, often the most vulnerable and marginalized, go without the technological resources necessary to continue learning through the pandemic.

Although many districts have implemented short-term solutions, such as equipping school buses with Wi-Fi to serve students in residential neighborhoods, a more sustainable infrastructure is needed to ensure that all students have unrestricted access to remote and distance learning.

In many districts without 1-to-1 technology, or in low-income communities, access to the required technology can be costly and a barrier to learning. The South Carolina Department of Education has dedicated 3,000 buses to serve as Wi-Fi hotspots for families. The state reports that more than 500 buses have been requested statewide and that the locations of the buses are at the district's discretion. The department has also allowed districts to disperse or loan computers to students who do not have devices at home.

Both state and federal policymakers must consider the ever-increasing need to modernize the tools we equip both our students and educators with, and this must include infrastructure to provide adequate internet to all schools, students, and communities. District leaders are asking for an increase in funding earmarked for increasing the quality of and access to the internet, inside and outside of the school.

To help alleviate the funding constraint on districts during the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education rolled out a waiver request process that states can use to repurpose existing federal funding to pay for new technology and teacher training associated with online learning. By requesting waivers of certain federal education laws, states could allow schools to repurpose existing federal dollars to pay for "technology infrastructure and teacher training on distance learning," according to the waiver.[2] Similarly, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued a waiver allowing schools and libraries to accept improved capacity, Wi-Fi hotspots, and networking gear to support teachers, students, and librarians. The FCC is also encouraging broadband service providers to partner with schools and libraries to provide hotspots and mobile connectivity services to communities.

SOLUTIONS

Moving forward, to understand the gravity of the need, schools and districts should:
- Complete a needs assessment to inventory home access for computer and internet connections and
- Work with state leaders to advocate for funding this initiative.

State leaders must ensure every school, district, library, and home in each community has the broadband internet access and the technology infrastructure to fully participate in, benefit from and access anytime, anywhere learning opportunities. Federal policymakers can continue to simplify the E-Rate application process and expand eligible expenditures to provide flexibility to meet local communities' needs. While many students do not currently have access to adequate internet service, Congress can enable this valuable resource by allocating an additional $4 billion for the E-Rate program from the Universal Service Fund, managed by the FCC.

STATE AND DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DURING THIS TIME.

States and districts face an equity issue with ensuring the most vulnerable students, in particular students with disabilities, continue to be adequately served during school closures. As schools move to virtual and remote learning environments, educators, and families are concerned about the barriers that students with disabilities face in the virtual environment.

The United States Department of Education released a statement to offer guidance with some flexibility: "As school districts nationwide take necessary steps to protect the health and safety of their students, many are moving to virtual or online education (distance instruction). Some educators, however, have been reluctant to provide any distance instruction because they believe that federal disability law presents insurmountable barriers to remote education. This is simply not true. We remind schools they should not opt to close or decline to provide distance instruction, at the expense of students, to address matters pertaining to services for students with disabilities. Rather, school systems must make local decisions that take into consideration the health, safety, and well-being of all their students and staff." [3]

SOLUTIONS

States, districts, and schools must focus on using instructional resources and strategies aligned to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. UDL is grounded in the principles of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, which are critically important to removing learning barriers. Districts need to ensure that data and student outcomes are transparent and that they take care to train educators on best practices in remote learning to ensure rigor and systems accessibility. State and district leaders should also make an intentional and concerted effort to engage stakeholders regularly to ensure that student and family needs are being met, especially vulnerable families.

DISTRICTS MUST ENSURE THAT STUDENTS HAVE CONTINUED ACCESS TO MEALS DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES.

More than 21 million K-12 students rely on free or reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches that they eat in school. Now that schools across the country are closed due to the coronavirus pandemic and given the dire economic circumstances in which families find themselves, our nation is facing the risk of massive child hunger. Hungry children don't learn well. Districts and communities have been rightfully concerned about ensuring that the most vulnerable students, students who receive free and reduced lunch, continue to receive meals in coming school years regardless of whether they are in a school building or elsewhere.

SOLUTIONS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided states flexibility and contingencies in providing meals for students during the pandemic, allowing them to continue providing meals to students outside of the school walls. Many communities have responded to the need by offering daily grab-and-go meals from a centralized location. The USDA offered an extension on the waiver that allows districts flexibility in the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. This will allow districts to continue providing meals for students who are learning remotely through the 2020-2021 school year. Currently, 43 states have applied and been approved for the waiver extension. Schools, districts, nonprofits, and communities should explore new ways of working together to develop cross-sector solutions to strengthen cohesion for food security, health, and wellness.

STATES NEED TO PRIORITIZE FUTURE READINESS FOR PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS AND CONTINUITY OF LEARNING.

States are grappling with myriad issues surrounding preparedness. They must invest in human capital to ensure all parts of the school community are able to respond to future emergencies. They must invest in the infrastructure that provides access to technologies and broadband internet. They must ensure that continuity of learning measures are equitable, and they must be ready to set clear communication plans in motion should a future event require the scale of change and coordination of COVID-19. Schools can be certain in a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected global economy, that they will again in the future need to transition from face-to-face to different forms of learning experiences.

SOLUTIONS

Now is the time for both rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term planning to ensure smoother transitions in the future, as well as to enable innovative, student-centered learning pathways. At the state level, policymakers must establish a statewide continuity of learning task force to plan, implement, and evaluate academic continuity and preparedness statewide. A continuity of learning plan ensures students can stay on their learning pathways during an interruption, such as a prolonged school closure or absence due to illness, natural disasters, conflicts, or weather events. Decisions about instruction, curriculum, methods, delivery models, tools, and resources are made locally. States, therefore, must consider the needs of all students and support every district and school to create action plans for continuity of learning to ensure equity and availability for all students. Local education agencies can determine which tools work best for their schools and districts based on the anticipated length of the closure, current resources available, student access, and other needs.

Federal policymakers should incentivize states to conduct a readiness assessment to ensure that they are prepared to continuously provide a high-quality education for all students under emergency circumstances. In the long term, local education leaders need to ensure districts assess readiness for continuity of learning (at least once annually). This process includes:

- Providing educators, students, and parents with training and the infrastructure to carry out the plan remotely;
- Providing access to high-speed broadband, platforms, materials and the tools needed for remote and online learning; and
- Ensuring accessibility and options for students with disabilities.

In Singapore and China, best practices for continuity of learning and preparedness include ensuring online learning by piloting school-wide e-learning days annually. The SARS outbreak challenged Singapore, for example, to make e-learning a key strategy in the nation's continuity planning. The plan also included:

- Training all educators to teach online, including use of a learning management system that helped deliver course materials and track student progress;
- Placing all instructional materials in digital and online formats; and,
- Ensuring students who needed equipment or internet access could be enabled within a day.

Stateside, districts like Lindsay Unified School District in California, and Kettle Moraine Schools, in Wisconsin, were nimble enough to make swift transitions and quickly trigger continuity of learning plans because they had spent years transforming to competency-based, student-centered learning models. Readers can watch this archived webinar to learn from their strategies, which over time, included:

- Total systems alignment toward producing results for learners;
- Virtual and at-home learning policies and practices;
- Implementation of personalized learning with student agency; and
- Graduate profiles and comprehensive learner records.

10-Step Program

01 — Learner Profiles
02 — Whole-Child Learning
03 — World-Class Knowledge and Skills
04 — High-Quality Curriculum Redesign
05 — Technology Infrastructure to Support Competency-Based Learning Anytime, Everywhere
06 — Educator Leadership
07 — Recognition of Learning
08 — Responsive Interventions
09 — Continuous Improvement
10 — Equity as the Driver

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR EDUCATORS TO REDESIGN TOWARD A COMPETENCY-BASED, LEARNER-CENTERED SYSTEM

I n this unprecedented time, we will do well to acknowledge that our long and firmly held beliefs and assumptions about school, teaching, and learning will never be the same again. Our educators and students have a daunting year ahead as the pandemic and its perils persist. We are fortunate to have the liberty to seize the moment, rewrite the narrative, and fundamentally reshape this public good. The closures of schools during COVID-19 are shining a light on the lack of educational infrastructure in K-12 education to support students' needs.

We recommend a 10-step program for building capacity for educators to redesign toward a competency-based, learner-centered system. It includes:

1. **Learner Profiles**. Each student has a comprehensive learner record (personalized learning plan) with data that supports meeting students where they are every day academically and holistically.

2. **Whole-Child Learning**. Student success is redefined with broader goals and outcomes in building skills, knowledge, and dispositions. Learning is embedded in safe and healthy learning environments that foster mental and emotional health, wellbeing, inclusion, and strong relationships.

3. **World-Class Knowledge and Skills.** Learning progressions offer a framework to build knowledge, skills, and competencies to meet students where they are and focus on development over time. Students advance on demonstrating mastery.

4. **High-Quality Curriculum Redesign.** A future-oriented curriculum follows global best practices to provide a framework and guidance that allows anytime, anywhere learning inside and outside of formal structures. The curriculum frameworks hold all students to the same high expectations to ensure equity and focus on building essential skills and knowledge. Providing a redesigned curriculum supports high-quality student learning experiences and wellbeing.

5. **Technology Infrastructure to Support Competency-Based Learning Anytime, Everywhere.** When students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning, technology can help support expanding access to resources, managing the "learner profile" and provide a place to house e-portfolios and evidence of student work. Assessments in competency-based learning systems result in practices that provide meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experiences for students that yield timely, relevant, and actionable evidence. When students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing, this necessitates different technologies to support contemporary learning designs. The technology infrastructure to support competency-based education systems requires transparent reporting of student progress, student-centered learning management systems, e-portfolios, and access to curriculum frameworks. It is recommended that schools, teachers, families, and students have ubiquitous access to the tools and bandwidth to fully participate in innovative instructional models at any time and place.

6. **Educator Leadership.** As more schools shift to personalized, competency-based learning, it is important to build educator professional capacity to keep pace and lead in designs that are learner-centered, flexible, adaptive, equity-oriented, and promote lifelong learning. Modernizing professional development to be embedded, personalized, and competency-based is key. Micro-credentials and personalized pathways for educators are one strategy for building knowledge and skills for new models. Understanding the science of learning should also be an important part of professional learning.

7. **Recognition of Learning.** Educators need to build assessment literacy and be able to understand performance assessments designed to measure student achievement. They should also be able to verify whether a student has mastered a specific learning objective using evidence from projects, place-based learning in communities, and informal settings. Recognition of learning is a process used around the world to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of recognizing competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or learning outcomes.

8. **Responsive Interventions.** Students' needs are met with interventions and supports in real-time. Using competency-based progressions, students work at their own level and progress at their own pace as they demonstrate proficiency on time-bound targets. Students receive research-based interventions and supports along all steps of the learning progression in real-time to address any difficulties they may be experiencing. Thus, the focus is on mastery—step by step —and failure may be part of the learning process, but is not an outcome.

9. **Continuous Improvement.** Schools and districts should have an orientation toward putting students' individual strengths first, rather than characteristics that indicate their risks, and a focus on equitable resource management to make sure student's unique gifts are recognized and their needs are met. Ensuring a growth mindset around effort and learning while using an asset frame to drive a culture of continuous improvement are keys to success.

10. **Equity as the Driver.** We believe that equity is the central goal of competency-based education systems. Competency-based education is driven by the equity-seeking need to transform our educational system so all students can and will learn through full engagement and support and through authentic, rigorous learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. Communities aspiring to achieve educational equity must work toward a system that is built on every child achieving mastery and getting the supports they need when they need them. Strategies to ensure equity for all students must be embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.

Schools need to recognize and validate learning by assessing each student by collecting information on their learning experiences and mapping back to the learning plan. It is equally important to understand students' overall health and wellbeing. Competency-based pathways, recognition of learning, daily empowerment of students through regular goal-setting (inside and outside of school) to build agency, skills, and strong relationships with adults who know students well (educators, counselors, aides, internship coordinators, work-based advocates, advisors, etc.) are the secret "recipe" for building flexibility needed for modernized teaching and learning enabling anytime, anywhere remote learning.

Delivery models, such as blended or online learning, can expand access to teachers at a distance, but the pedagogy, structures, and culture must shift from traditional models that rank and sort students (and leave large gaps in learning) to competency-based education systems. Competency-based education is foundational to ensure each student has mastery of learning targets, with transparency of data to eliminate gaps and responsive interventions to immediately address student needs.

The alignment of systems and structures toward every learner's growth requires knowing students, who they are, where they are, meeting students where they are, with culturally responsive, inclusive, and personalized learning approaches to ensure every student is on a path toward their goals, and setting targets and meeting learning goals, day by day, one step at a time. Imagine the data our students, parents, educators, and policymakers would have to better resource student needs with a competency-based system. This also illuminates the need to build an architecture for local accountability and reciprocity with the community on the very frameworks—graduate profiles—for what competencies a student needs to know and be able to do. These learner-centered and future-focused systems will shift and become more aligned to learners, as well as community and workforce needs, by making a series of changes led locally by the leadership of empowered educators, working closely with communities, and in partnership with students and families.

We recognize, however, that to act on these changes, even more profound structural changes—not the least of which are funding levels and finance formulas for schools—are needed to adequately and equitably support transformation and innovation. In the short term, extra funding from the federal government is desperately needed to plug the holes caused by the pandemic and support the safe reopening of schools. We must call on our policymakers to tackle massive structural issues of inequality, including addressing their root causes. At the top of that list is the way our schools are currently funded. Across the United States, school communities bear some of the most inequitable finance formulas, by the very nature of funding being based on local property tax coupled with inequitable tax policies writ large. This is a call for change to innovate, provide equitable and adequate funding for our education system, and support all students to achieve their dreams. Taken together, the case for fundamental systems change in K-12 education is made clear.

Learn More

Future Focused State Policy Actions to Transform K-12 Education

Federal Policy Priorities to Accelerate Education Innovation

What Is Competency-Based Education? An Updated Definition

Current to Future State: Issues and Action Steps for State Policy to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

State Strategies to Develop Teacher Capacity for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

Designing for Equity: Leveraging Competency-Based Education to Ensure All Students Succeed

Moving Toward Mastery: Growing, Developing and Sustaining Educators for Competency-Based Education

Quality Principles for Competency-Based Education

Fit for Purpose: Taking the Long View on Systems Change and Policy to Support Competency Education

How Systems of Assessments Aligned with Competency-Based Education Can Support Equity

Redesigning Systems of Assessments for Student-Centered Learning

Rethinking State Accountability to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in K-12 Education

Learning in the Time of Coronavirus: District Leaders on Change, Maintaining High-Quality Learning for All, and Innovating for Future Success

Lessons from Advanced Online Teachers and Advice for Getting Started in Online Teaching

Protecting Equity & Access: Online Learning, Special Education, and Serving Students with Disabilities

Endnotes

1. New York State Education Department. (March 13, 2020). *Preliminary guidance on the preparation for novel coronavirus* (COVID-19) *outbreak in New York State*. Retrieved from http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-second-guidance-3-13-20.pdf

2. U.S. Department of Education. (April 6, 2020). Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos authorizes new funding flexibilities to support continued learning during COVID-19 national emergency. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/secretary-education-betsy-devos-authorizes-new-funding-flexibilities-support-continued-learning-during-covid-19-national-emergency

3. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (March 21, 2020). *Addressing the risk of COVID-19 in preschool, elementary and secondary schools while serving children with disabilitie*s. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf

AURORA INSTITUTE

A New Dawn for
Every Learner

The mission of the AURORA INSTITUTE is to drive the transformation of education systems
and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure
high-quality learning for all.

1934 Old Gallows Road, Suite 350
Vienna, VA 22182 -4040

ph. 703.752.6216 I fx. 703.752.6201

www.AURORA-INSTITUTE.org