

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ⊕ States Sketch ‘Portraits of a Graduate’

By Valerie Norville

Several state boards of education have adopted graduate profiles to better define the skills and knowledge students should master before they graduate high school. While their entry points and approaches to the work differ, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington have all drawn up profiles that many call the North Star of their state education systems.

Particularly since the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) opened the door to state-specific accountability measures, states have searched for ways to better shape and communicate the elements of school and system performance that more holistically reflect what preK-12 students should be able

to know and do upon graduation. Profiles of a graduate provide the broad strokes for a range of skills and dispositions that go well beyond reading and math. In creating them, states have sought to respond to the critique that a high school diploma is not sufficient to prepare all students to engage in the next steps in work, postsecondary education, and life.

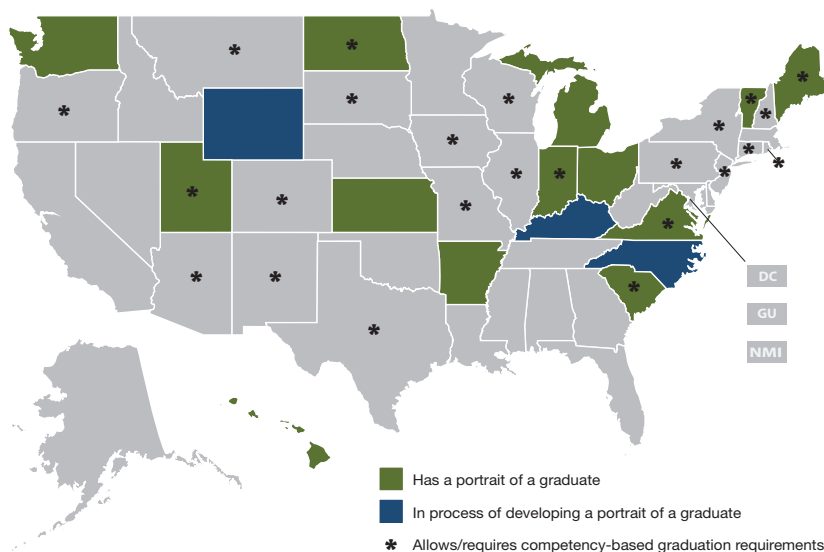
A focus on competency-based education (CBE) is one way that states have sought to make their high school diplomas more meaningful.<sup>1</sup> Also called mastery-based education, this approach bases student advancement on demonstrated learning—not on the course credits students amass nor the time they have spent sitting in a particular grade or credit-bearing course.

A shift to CBE requires education leaders

and stakeholders to “think deeply about the purpose of education in the modern era,” said Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the Aurora Institute, which advances personalized and competency-based education. “The idea of a profile of a graduate is fundamentally about rethinking purpose, and that can be done at a state level but really needs to be done with diverse stakeholders all over a state to set a new definition of success—what do students need to know and be able to do upon graduation?” She adds, “You can do a CBE model with standards from the 1990s, but do you want to?”

Graduate profiles or portraits lay out a handful of high-level knowledge, skills, and characteristics that a variety of state stakeholders and educators have said they believe each student should attain before graduating (see map). States that implemented graduate profiles have also specified intermediate attainments at various grades or band levels. Some also map specific competencies to the profile’s high-level elements and provide their school districts with rubrics for teachers and students to use to track their progress toward mastery of each competency. All profile initiatives have involved stakeholders in their creation. But the genesis of the profile and the approach to its implementation vary from state to state.

**Figure 1. States Create Portraits of a Graduate**



Source: Ben Erwin and Gerardo Silva-Padrón, “State Policies to Support Student-Centered Learning” (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, July 2022).

### SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina’s profile arose from the grassroots, as local superintendents in the state association met during 2012 to wrestle with the question of whether their schools were truly preparing students for life beyond graduation. They heard from local business leaders and chambers of commerce that they were not. A group of educators and business leaders

then formed TransformSC to draft a profile of a graduate, get feedback from across the state, and pilot it in several schools in 2013. Subsequently, the state board endorsed it and the state legislature codified it.

“It’s the promise that we make to our community that we are going to work together to make sure our students are ready for life and work,” said Stephanie DiStasio, who heads South Carolina’s Office of Personalized Learning.

Initially, the superintendents conceived of the profile work as a district-level project, with each district creating its own, DiStasio said. But they realized that graduates don’t always stay put in the districts where they attended preK-12 schools. “Having one profile in common across the state was forward thinking. . . . It provided the state leverage to take advantage of their work,” she said, adding that the state board and state education agency “now have something that we can ground ourselves in as we look at all other work,” including content standards, assessments, and high school transcripts.

State superintendent Molly Spearman was determined to make the profile more than a “beautiful poster on the walls” of participating schools, DiStasio said. So Spearman kicked off a process of tying competencies to the profile, arranged in six levels of increasing skill complexity. The process involved parents, students, educators, and businesspeople and took a year and a half. Thus, for example, where the state profile specifies critical thinking and problem solving as a world-class skill for all students to attain, one of the 12 competencies in the state prototype is “investigate through inquiry,” which also touches on life and career skills such as “perseverance” and “self-direction” that are called out in the profile.<sup>2</sup>

While the profile is in evidence in two-thirds of districts in the state, implementation of the competencies has just begun with three pilot districts, DiStasio said. Although the state is credited as one of the first to adopt a profile, implementation is still in an early phase. Patience is required, DiStasio said. An iterative process that solicits feedback from many stakeholders takes time. “You have to go slow to go fast,” she said. But interest in aligning curriculum to the profile has already spread to places the state agency did not initially envision, such as apprenticeship programs and summer camps.

## UTAH

The state’s work in CBE stretches back a couple of decades, when the state board was charged with encouraging districts to let students test out of classes where they had already achieved mastery. Over time, legislation enabled innovation grants for CBE, and the conversation progressed to changing funding allocations that shifted from seat time to “validated learning,” and then later to changing middle school course requirements to focus on competencies instead of credits. At one point during the discussion of competencies, said Sarah Young, director of strategic initiatives at the Utah State Board of Education, state board member Laura Belnap asked the critical question, “What is our goal?”

In 2018, the state board set up a task force to develop a draft portrait of a graduate that maximized stakeholder engagement, including from local chambers of commerce and college freshmen in Utah, most of whom had just completed their K-12 years in Utah. The result was the Utah Talent MAP, which covers academic mastery, autonomy, and purpose. “We really see it as part of the everyday vernacular,” Young said, and the portrait is regularly referenced in meetings of the state board.

Young cited the portrait’s “purpose” section as the most challenging for policymakers to consider. It includes several character traits that Utah stakeholders deemed important, such as integrity and resilience. “There was a hard question that our board members had to consider,” she said. “Are we only going to include things we can measure? Or are we going to include all the items that we value, regardless of whether a measure exists?” The board ultimately decided that the ability to pair a desired trait with a discrete measure was not a requirement for inclusion in MAP.

Utah education officials took note of the work in South Carolina, paying particular attention to their advice on stakeholder inclusion and how to build an aligned set of competencies. However, Utah decided to align competencies with grade bands, unlike South Carolina.<sup>3</sup> The Utah competencies are designed to help grade-level teachers determine whether they are putting students on a path to eventual mastery and help students discern how they are progressing and what evidence of mastery they can produce, Young said.

Some Utah schools are enabling students to build a portfolio on a digital transcript

that graphically depicts how far a student has progressed toward mastery of each competency. Students can attach work to the web page alongside their transcript to demonstrate evidence of a skill or academic attainment.<sup>4</sup>

Utah fully expects districts to decide whether to adopt or adapt the portrait or come up with their own, Young said, with the state agency serving as a resource bank. To that end and in response to educators’ requests, state agency staff developed model rubrics that teachers could adapt to meet classroom needs. The rubrics were completed in June 2021.

The state board was a key partner in Utah’s profile work. Young appreciates the board’s willingness to take first steps without having first unpacked all the ramifications for accountability, grades, report cards, and the like. “So many times in education when we want to innovate, we kill it with questions,” she said. “Our board was willing to live in that moment of discomfort of not knowing and still advance the work.”

The pandemic provided additional moments of discomfort that both enabled the state board to reach more stakeholders virtually for feedback and made state officials hesitant to introduce new initiatives during a time of uncertainty. Thus the education department opted to publish the competencies in fall 2020 but did not make a big push for implementation. As Young put it, “Our teachers were already in an innovative zone” because of the pandemic.

But virtual schooling also underscored the value of the work, said Young, who is the parent of an elementary student. Young’s child was completing assignments in his school’s learning management system but still not advancing as he had been and not having the experiences Young knew were important to his development. “One of the things that helped me as a mom in that space was to be able to look at our Portrait of a Graduate,” Young said. “It gave me the words as a parent to have conversations with my child’s teacher.”

The next step will be to figure out how to transform the state accountability system to reflect the broader vision of what students should attain by graduation, she added. The board authorized use of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to

convene a task force on this question, which is scheduled to report to the Utah state board this fall.

## WASHINGTON

In Washington, state legislation in 2019 instigated creation of a work group on mastery-based learning, which first focused on a set of competencies. Legislation also charged the state board with reviewing a Profile of a Graduate, which the work group was to develop, and aligning graduation requirements with it.<sup>5</sup> The state's profile initiative drew on work already in progress in some Washington districts as well as initiatives in other states, including South Carolina and Utah, said Alissa Muller, director of the Mastery-based Learning Collaborative at the Washington State Board of Education. This cross-state collaboration helped crystallize some of the choices Washington would make about how broad its profile ought to be to allow for maximum adaptability at the district level.

The Washington Profile of a Graduate focuses on elements similar to those in other profiles, such as communication and critical reasoning. "Some profiles have an explicit focus on equity, but not all," Muller added. "That was something the state's Mastery-Based Learning Work Group has always had a very explicit focus on. . . . One of our big categories is around embracing differences and diversity and a real focus on cultural competency. We went further than some states in that regard."

There is much the state board can do to align its work with the profile, Muller said. Such a worklist could include a mastery-based transcript, redefinition of high school credits, and a crosswalk document to relate learning standards to the profile, she said. For example, what competencies can students expect to attain by mastery of English IV learning standards?

The work group has completed its work, so efforts will shift to building a collaborative community around the profile, aided by a set of sample rubrics to make the work tangible and concrete, Muller said.

## VIRGINIA

Virginia's Profile of a Graduate had its roots in state leaders' concerns about overtesting. In 2014, state legislation to replace existing exams with authentic assessments and portfolios also created a bipartisan Standards of Learning Innovation Committee, which

recommended that the state board develop a Profile of a Virginia Graduate. After stakeholder engagement that involved a couple dozen focus groups and public hearings attended by state board members, the state board approved the resulting profile in 2017, and it was subsequently codified in state law.<sup>6</sup> It is organized around what are called the five C's: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creative thinking, and citizenship skills.

"But we knew nothing would change if we didn't identify the other pieces that had to change in the other realms," said Gena Keller, executive director of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership, who was then in the Virginia Department of Education. Thus, the Profile of a Graduate became the first of a series that included profiles of a Virginia educator, Virginia leader, and Virginia classroom.

As has happened in Colorado and New Hampshire, the Virginia department recognized it did not have the capacity to expand implementation of its profile initiatives and its work in CBE across districts, Patrick said. Thus it identified third-party intermediaries to work on implementation with interested districts through professional learning and networks.

One of these partners is the Virginia School Consortium for Learning, whose director, Pam Moran, had spearheaded early district-level profile work as a superintendent in Albemarle County, Virginia, and now leads the Virginia for Learners Innovation Network. The network has convened dozens of teams from districts across the state to define problems of practice, share solutions, and receive coaching on making the profile "real" through strategies such as project-based learning. "We've seen strategies that have been enacted in one division pop up around the state," Moran said. "So there's no reinvention of the wheel, but [they] share the wheel."

## LESSONS LEARNED

Patrick urges states interested in CBE to learn from states who have developed profiles, "but the work is not replication," she added. Intensive engagement of a wide variety of state stakeholders is essential.

State leadership should first let go of their particular vision for what the final product should look like, DiStasio said. "Trust the process. Be willing to change," she said. "Stakeholder voice is critical." In South Carolina, she believes continually asking who was

not yet at the table was crucial to making their profile stronger. Utah's Young agreed: "Process is as important as product."

For Washington, where a work group led its initiative, Muller noted that it was critical to tap people who were part of other networks. These work group members could reach people that neither the state education agency nor the state board would otherwise have heard from, she said.

State leaders must decide what they want to spread versus what they want to scale, DiStasio said. In South Carolina, they elected to scale competencies but have districts spearhead the work of bringing them to life. So the state agency is training district leaders to lead implementation work and working intensively with a few districts to learn from what they do.

Moran also underscored the importance of a state focus on district leadership, as Virginia educators have observed that what distinguishes those farthest down the road toward implementation is a growth mind-set in district leaders.

Moran added that one barrier to implementation was the need to keep mobilizing community support in the face of challenges to normative practices, and she cited introduction of performance assessments as one such challenge. Or naming a valedictorian, suggested Young, which for some is a beloved practice but one that makes little sense in a system based on everyone attaining mastery of competencies before graduation. "That's an area the SBE continues to work in—to make sure communicating with parents is not forgotten during implementation, not an afterthought," she said.

To get ready for conversations during the implementation phase, some forethought about what data will help state leaders tell a story about outcomes is important, DiStasio said. Adopting a graduate profile and related competencies is a slow process in which hard data will not be immediately available. "If I were to do it again," she said, "I would make sure that I could quantify it in ways that we didn't do as well the first time around. Those might not be about student outcomes, but I would have made sure I ask the questions of, what does success look like?"

As more districts and schools embed the competencies in their work over time, student

growth will be a metric, DiStasio said. The districts that are receiving intensive state support on profile implementation are already reporting such data, she added. For example, such a metric might be the percentage of students who have mastered eight competencies at level 3 or higher or how many are earning endorsements on diplomas that are tied to the defined competencies.

The pandemic posed a barrier to states' work on profile implementation. It was appropriate for the Washington work group to shy away from asking schools to do something new amid the coronavirus, Muller said. "But the fact that there isn't a clear directive to schools that are about to implement this is challenging, because I'll get questions from schools: 'Well, that's great, but what do you want me to do with it?'"

Accountability systems are a barrier to all work on CBE, Patrick said: "What we know from schools and districts implementing this work is that the biggest barrier they run into is an accountability system that has really narrow metrics and is time based, age based, and grade based."

## CONCLUSIONS

Several states have adopted portraits or profiles of a graduate, and a few—Kentucky, North Carolina, and Wyoming—are developing profiles now. A few state boards continue to ground their work in the profiles they have adopted. Those who have led work to create statewide graduate profiles attest to the long-term commitment that the work requires: the ongoing need for professional networks to advance CBE at the local level, state board commitment to align decisions on the range of policies it touches to the profile it adopts, the support of state policymakers across administrations, and communication with school communities about why the work is important. For those who have stayed the course, a key benefit lies in giving students a clear picture of the purpose of their schooling and the steps they can take toward proficiency.

For Aurora's Patrick, the proof that frameworks centered on competencies are beneficial to

students is in the pudding. In competency-focused schools she has visited, where elementary students are building community gardens to overcome food deserts and high school kids are working with veterans, she saw the evidence of learner agency and the change in how teachers talk about students in previously low-performing schools, from "a deficit frame" to pride. She also heard the joy in competency-based learning from a student, who said, "I didn't think I was ever going to want to go to college, but being able to learn in this way made me realize I could do anything."

*Valerie Norville is NASBE's editorial director.*

## NOTES

1 Susan Patrick, "Transforming Learning through Competency-Based Education," *State Education Standard* 21, no. 2 (May 2021).

2 South Carolina Department of Education, "Profile of a South Carolina Graduate: Competency Framework" (August 2021), <https://personalizesc.ed.sc.gov/competencies-based-ed/documents-for-competencies/revised-pscg-competencies-full-continua/>.

3 Utah State Board of Education, "Utah Portrait of a Graduate Competencies" (2020), <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/4b9d1341-ddaa-47bc-8052-f029e794d513>.

4 Mastery Transcript Consortium, "MTC Mastery Transcript," web page, <https://mastery.org/what-we-do/mastery-transcript/>.

5 Washington State Board of Education, "Profile of a Graduate," web page, <https://www.sbe.wa.gov/our-work/profile-graduate>.

6 Commonwealth Learning Partnership, "Virginia Is for Learners: How One State Modernized Public Education to Better Prepare High School Graduates for a Changing World" (March 2020); Diane Atkinson, "Virginia Rethinks High School in Its Profile of a Graduate," *State Education Standard* 17, no. 2 (May 2017).