

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN, RESPONSIBILITY TO LEAD



**EDUCATION
& SOCIETY**

 **aspen institute**

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Opportunity to Learn, Responsibility to Lead

The overwhelming majority of families rely on public education for a foothold in the American Dream, making it perhaps the most consequential expression of America's core value of opportunity for all. Our nation is facing many challenges, and the society we will become depends greatly on the opportunities and experiences students have in our public schools. Given the importance of education in addressing these challenges, and the current results we are achieving, it is imperative to improve students' opportunities to learn.

While we all share a collective responsibility for student success, state policymakers are the constitutional stewards and primary funders of America's public schools. They have the awesome responsibility of guiding public education toward its noble and essential mission of opportunity for all. Through standards, data systems, funding, accountability expectations and learning supports, as well as many other decisions, state policy significantly shapes and influences whether students have access to the opportunities they need and deserve. Opportunities to learn - the resources, experiences, and expectations students get access to - enable students to pursue their purpose, develop their agency, and contribute as community members and informed citizens. Policymakers can demonstrate leadership by systematically defining, measuring, and improving opportunities to learn in their state's public schools. Many efforts are already underway and built into data collection and public reporting systems; using opportunity-to-learn principles can make this work more systematic, more evidence-informed and reflective of parents' and other stakeholders' priorities, and ultimately more effective.

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What follows is a set of principles for state leaders to advance an opportunity agenda through public education. Principles 1-3 directly address instruction and the student experience; principles 4-6 focus on important enabling conditions; principles 7-9 address the state role in ensuring opportunities to learn. State leadership is essential to connect the things that students need and deserve to what public education provides. Accounting for opportunity is essential to reflect what we know about how people learn, and to ensure public education meets its obligation to provide opportunity to all. Pandemic disruptions make it especially timely for state policymakers to audit the policy and information ecosystem regarding opportunities to learn; an orientation toward the future is essential to address disruptive changes coursing through our democracy, economy, and American society overall.

These are principles, not prescriptions; no specific policies or one-size-fits-all approaches are advocated. The principles frame fundamental opportunities to learn for state leaders to prioritize, adapt, and augment as their context requires. The principles can facilitate a deliberative process, engaging students and educators, families, civic and business leaders, and other stakeholders in answering a profound question: **What do we want to be true about public schools in our state?**

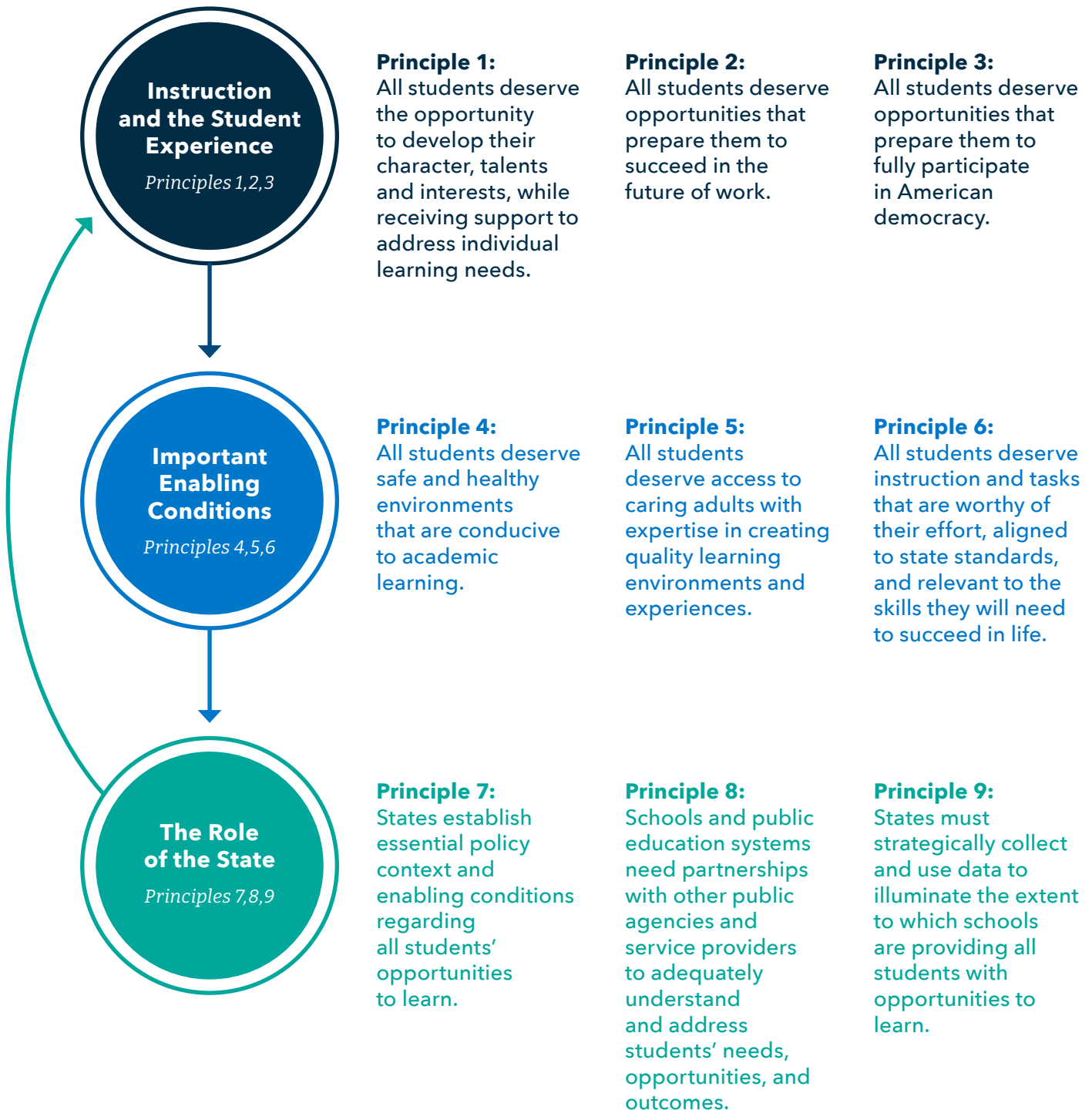
WHAT DO WE WANT TO BE TRUE ABOUT PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN OUR STATE?

When leaders are clear about the answer to this question, we can develop **effective policies, coordinate resources, and design data systems** to provide the information that's needed to understand and improve opportunities.



A working group of state policymakers developed these principles. They include state commissioners of education, members of state boards of education, state legislators, and governors' policy advisors who are diverse politically, regionally, racially, ethnically, and by experience. These leaders are united in their belief that public education must be an engine of opportunity and that state leadership has an important role in renewing and realizing the promise that public education represents.

Principles to Advance an Opportunity Agenda Through Public Education



PRINCIPLE 1**All students deserve the opportunity to develop their character, talents and interests, while receiving support to address individual learning needs.****LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

Learning opportunities should not be constrained by buildings or bell schedules, especially with the dramatic expansion of online offerings and technology infrastructure. Policy can enable greater flexibility and promote innovation in the how, when, and where learning happens. In secondary schools in particular, college and career pathways should allow for opportunities to identify and develop skills, talents, and interests through experiential learning as well as through coursework, both in-person and virtual.

Learning is a process of connecting new information to what the learner already knows, so teaching that intentionally builds on the funds of knowledge and experiences students bring from family and community strengthens the learning process. Students should have opportunities within and across academic disciplines to make connections between their experiences and interests and what they're learning in school.

Students are constantly developing responsibility and character through school experiences: through what they study in the curriculum, what is modeled and celebrated by adults, and how behavior expectations are defined and implemented. As students mature into adolescence, it is important for them to exercise greater choice and agency as practice for appropriate participation in the broader community. While many decisions about how to define good character and how to accomplish this work will be made at the local level, state leadership can signal the important role of schools in promoting good character through standards, guidance and resources, and public attention.

Extracurricular activities, including athletics, performing arts, and clubs, augment academic learning, activating students' passions and curiosity and creating important outlets for students to grow and develop. Participation in extracurricular activities improves students' attendance, engagement, and achievement in school, making them important opportunities. Tracking access to a range of extracurricular offerings offered by schools and community partners is an important aspect of understanding equity in students' opportunities to learn.

We must prepare and support educators to use teaching and learning strategies that effectively identify and address student needs, including differentiated instruction within classrooms and resources for high-dosage tutoring with high-quality materials. Intensive, proactive support for struggling students is a crucial opportunity for learning, especially in addressing learning gaps associated with pandemic disruptions.

PRINCIPLE 2

All students deserve opportunities that prepare them to succeed in the future of work.

Dynamic changes in work expectations are accelerating, in part because of rapid advances in automation and artificial intelligence. Both job growth and wage growth are concentrated in roles that demand technical knowledge and interpersonal skills. Communication, collaboration, data analytics, and proficiency on digital platforms are all foundational to accessing employment opportunities.

Schools should provide all students with high-quality pathways to prepare for careers, college, and achieving economic independence. Students benefit from early and ongoing exposure and exploration of careers, as well as opportunities to develop and apply useful academic knowledge, technical knowledge, and cross-cutting skills. States can provide guidance on quality to support the design of intentional pathways from K-12 through post-secondary and into employment, facilitate partnerships and engagement across sectors, and create new measures to assess impact. Attributes of high-quality pathways that states can encourage include: aligned advising, opportunities to earn college credit while in high school, technical course sequences, work-based learning experiences, and attainment of industry-recognized credentials of value.

Done well, these pathways enable students to prepare for their next steps while building social capital, providing access to economic mobility. The hard work lies in the details and design choices. Pathway design requires state policymakers to (1) facilitate thoughtful cross-sector collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary, and (2) create a meaningful role for employers in validating elements as relevant to actual work demands, leveraging labor market information, and signaling whether specific credentials have value.

States can play an important role in aligning career and technical education (CTE) and work-based learning opportunities with real-life demands. In 2020, Burning Glass Institute and The Foundation for Excellence in Education found that only 18% of credentials awarded in CTE programs were valued by employers, while many CTE programs that employers did value went under-subscribed. More broadly than specific CTE programs, internships and apprenticeships are valuable enablers of opportunity, especially in STEM fields and particularly among students of color, but these opportunities are much less likely to be available to these students.

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PRINCIPLE 3

All students deserve opportunities that prepare them to fully participate in American democracy.

America's republican form of government of the people, by the people, for the people requires educated citizens who can deliberate on political questions, serve as jurors, and hold public officials accountable. This purpose is foundational to the creation of public education. Of course, public education was denied and undermined for many Americans for much of our country's history, but the principle of public education as a bulwark of democracy is fundamental.

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Students need a deep understanding of how American government is structured and how it functions. Studying U.S. History is crucial for understanding how our government actually works in practice and to learn from the triumphs and tragedies that are the prologue to our future. Most states have made slow, steady progress in improving history standards to more accurately reflect the role of race and racism in American history and this work needs to continue. Teachers need more and deeper opportunities to practice facilitating serious and nuanced classroom discussions of these sensitive issues. **State leaders should center historians and educators to continue improving standards and expectations with regard to opportunities to learn history; as the old adage states: "those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it."**

There is an urgent need for education that empowers students to critically evaluate sources of information to distinguish credible from non-credible sources. Especially with the proliferation of websites and social media that can be used to spread misinformation, it is essential to explicitly teach students how to examine sources of potential bias, to evaluate credibility, and to make independent judgments about what sources to trust and what arguments or assertions need more research and confirmation. This skillset is especially important for strengthening selfgovernment and is also relevant to everyday life and work.

As the earliest and most intensive engagement with a civic institution most Americans will ever have, **public schools are vital to safeguarding and strengthening American democracy** and need to be reoriented to this mission.

Public education can embed civically-relevant content and inquiry into every academic subject, and the entire experience of school can give students practice in exercising vital democratic norms, such as actively participating in debates, disagreeing in a civil manner, respecting minority rights, and adhering to democratic decisions even when against one's own preferred outcome. As the earliest and most intensive engagement with a civic institution most Americans will ever have, public schools are vital to safeguarding and strengthening American democracy and need to be reoriented to this mission.

PRINCIPLE 4

All students deserve safe and healthy environments that are conducive to academic learning.

The quality and character of school life and the experiences of students, teachers, and other staff within a physical school or online learning environment profoundly influence student attendance, engagement, and academic achievement, as well as long-term measures of success, such as college-going and avoiding involvement with the criminal justice system.

Safety and belonging are fundamental human needs that enable learning but many students do not experience safety or belonging in their schools. One in three American 15-year-olds reports not feeling like they belong at their school. One in five public school students aged 12-18 reports being bullied at school. Improving school climate increases school safety and decreases school violence.

School climate affects how much students learn and whether they are prepared for the challenges of college, work, and life. State leaders are uniquely positioned to promote healthy school climates by defining a state-wide vision for what it looks like, while supporting districts and schools in measurement and improvement. Many surveys of students,

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parents, and teachers have proven useful for assessing school climate, with similar findings being replicated across states and across rural, urban, and suburban school contexts. The Foundation for Excellence in Education and the Aspen Institute have outlined a range of state leadership roles for ensuring availability, quality, and strategic use of school climate data, stating that a focus “on school climate represents an opportunity for a paradigm shift; from a system and policy frame that measures students, to one that measures systems, and holds systems and system-leaders accountable to students and their families.” Many states require collection of school climate data; some states offer guidance but leave most decisions at the local level, while other states have adopted a consistent measure across districts, and some incorporate school climate data into formal school rating systems.

Young people are experiencing record levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations leading to hospitalization. While these issues don’t exclusively develop in school, they are either ameliorated or exacerbated in school. Schools need to be designed for close relationships among adults and students and incorporate more counselors, psychologists, social workers, as well as mentors and others who support students’ mental health and development. State leadership is essential to coordinate partnerships and referral systems for students needing more specialized or acute care. A whole-of-government approach is needed to address mental healthcare workforce shortages, to create connections between schools and community providers, and to organize resources/reimbursement systems to meet student needs.

A school’s physical environment significantly impacts students’ learning outcomes, too. Many students attend public schools with harmful air and water quality, mold, asbestos, or lead exposure that decrease student learning and increase other risks. Environmental conditions in many schools exacerbate asthma, which affects up to one-third of American children and is a primary driver of chronic absence. Disparities in access to quality school facilities disadvantage students in low-wealth rural and urban districts, and disproportionately harm students of color and students from low-income families. The pandemic brought attention to the lack of consistency in schools’ air quality and the lack of data regarding this infrastructure. State leaders have a key role in ensuring all students have access to school buildings that support physical health.

PRINCIPLE 5

All students deserve access to caring adults with expertise in creating quality learning environments and experiences.

Educators are the most important school-based factor in students' learning, with significant measurable impact on long-term life outcomes.

Between 2008-2009 and 2018-2019, the number of people completing education preparation programs declined by almost one-third, exacerbating already existing teacher shortages. Ensuring high quality pre-service and inservice educator training and development is an important aspect of state leadership, in addition to increasing the pipeline and diversity of aspiring educators.

At the school level, principals significantly influence student opportunities to learn, primarily through improving school climate and supporting teachers' opportunities to learn. Schools where teachers report higher social capital in the form of mutual trust and willingness to help each other improve practice have higher retention and produce better learning opportunities for students.

Many teachers and school leaders are not adequately prepared to apply insights from the science of learning and human development. Knowledge about how children learn to read and compute is not consistently taught to aspiring educators and is not consistently implemented in instruction. This is illustrative of a larger problem in ensuring evidence-based practices are known and supported among educators in both pre-service preparation programs and ongoing professional development. In addition, teachers need high-quality curricular materials that incorporate evidence-based practices and aligned professional learning opportunities that help them apply curricular materials in their classrooms, including how to adapt and differentiate based on context and student need. State leaders can play a role in spotlighting quality materials and incentivizing their use.

All students benefit from interacting with adults from other races, ethnicities, and cultures, which can reduce stereotypes and biases and prepare young people to thrive in America's diverse, pluralistic society. At the same time, research is clear that Black students who are taught by Black educators achieve significantly better outcomes, and recent research finds diverse teacher workforces produce strong benefits for students of color more generally. Nationally, the teacher and principal workforce in public schools does not reflect racial-ethnic diversity of students; states can and should demonstrate leadership in addressing the challenge of developing a diverse educator workforce, using promising practices to emulate and adapt.

PRINCIPLE 6

All students deserve instruction and tasks that are worthy of their effort, aligned to state standards, and relevant to the skills they will need to succeed in life.

Rigorous and engaging instruction, aligned to state standards and high expectations, is foundational to improving student outcomes. Many students go through a whole school year without being expected to do grade-level work or have access to assignments that spark their love for learning. Students report being frequently bored in school, with students reporting their school experience was engaging only 55% of the time (and just 42% of the time for high school students).

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Students deserve the opportunity to complete tasks that model work that is valued in the world beyond school, including completing long-term assignments, working in teams, and applying knowledge to novel situations. These are important school-based opportunities to learn problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that are essential for life and the ability to adapt to new challenges. In randomized control studies commissioned by the George Lucas Education Foundation, students engaged in project-based learning improved achievement more than those who experienced traditional curricula, including among struggling readers.

Learning how to respectfully disagree and give and get critical feedback are important aspects of ambitious academic instruction—and develop skills that are vital in life, work, and civic engagement. This kind of instruction and modeling is only possible when certain norms and values are manifested in the school; psychological and physical safety are crucial to productive environments for academic and other learning.

Students need a rich curriculum that includes attention to foundational skills, higher order thinking, and skills grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning opportunities in arts, sciences, history, world languages, math, physical fitness, and health. State leadership influences these opportunities.

PRINCIPLE 7

States establish essential policy context and enabling conditions regarding all students' opportunities to learn.

States are the primary guarantors of public education under America's federal, constitutional system. Each state constitution explicitly enumerates public education as a state responsibility.

States govern much of what is expected in schools through policies that include funding systems, standards, graduation requirements, accountability systems, data/public reporting systems, educator preparation and licensure rules, as well as other policies, regulations, and guidance.

States are responsible for collecting data and providing the public with important information about education priorities, including outcomes of education as well as opportunities and resources students are expected to have access to in schools. Identifying and addressing unequal opportunities across communities and groups of students is a crucial role for state leadership.

The governance structure of public education is complex. Legislatures, governors, state boards, and state departments of education, as well as locally elected school boards, district offices, and public charter schools all have a role in policy development and implementation. This requires state leaders to coordinate and prioritize collaboration from state to local and across state agencies. State leaders need to break down silos to ensure students have the opportunities to learn they need and deserve.

As policy leaders establish the vision for education and the policies that ensure opportunity, they have the responsibility to engage stakeholders, including students, parents and families, and educators. When parents/families or educators feel unheard, policy decisions are vulnerable. Including multiple perspectives and seeking broad coalitions of support, for instance bridging across civil rights and business groups, has been a historical strength in education policy and will be important in framing and sustaining effective opportunity-to-learn policies.

State policymakers should be strategic about the exercise of state leadership, including what measures and indicators are collected statewide, to balance adequate guidance regarding opportunities and expectations with respect for local context and different approaches across different communities.

PRINCIPLE 8

Schools and public education systems need partnerships with other public agencies and service providers to adequately understand and address students' needs, opportunities, and outcomes.

Policymakers should examine what schools are being asked to do and explicitly reallocate some of these responsibilities to other agencies and community providers, while streamlining bureaucratic processes so that services can be seamlessly delivered to students and families.

Young people cannot succeed in school if their basic human needs aren't being met, including housing, nutrition, safety and healthcare. Schools are crucial in addressing some of these needs and can be a connector to additional services, but schools cannot and should not be asked to provide all the support children and families need.

Over the course of the pandemic, schools have shouldered unsustainable burdens in meeting the needs of students and their families. For instance, while teachers needed to pivot to online learning, school systems were primarily responsible for ensuring students had access to broadband connectivity and devices—while also addressing students' more basic needs for food, stable routines and relationships, and protection from abuse.

"Community schools" explicitly focus on using the school as a hub and taking advantage of community assets, usually employing a dedicated specialist to assist in assessing needs and forging partnerships in response. State policy can assist these efforts by defining community schools, resourcing their staffing needs, and directing adjacent agencies to facilitate more seamless service provision to children and families.

Children's cabinets, typically made up of heads of state agencies that provide services to children and families, can be important resources for state leaders to situate schools within the broader ecosystem of child-and-family-serving agencies. Children's cabinets enable goal-setting and improvements that are not possible for school systems or any other public agency to accomplish on their own. State leadership is needed to connect K-12 data with early childhood, higher education, and workforce systems to create more seamless services and to better understand the relationship between investments, programs/practices, and outcomes.

PRINCIPLE 9

States must strategically collect and use data to illuminate the extent to which schools are providing all students with opportunities to learn.

Data regarding opportunities to learn should be disaggregated to identify disparities as well as bright spots in opportunity across localities and groups of students. There is a long history of unequal opportunities in public education, shortchanging students of color, students from low-income families, students in rural and low-wealth communities, students with disabilities, and English-learners. State leadership is crucial to identifying and addressing opportunity gaps so that public education can meet its mission of serving all students.

States can audit available data regarding students' opportunities to learn: what's collected at the state-level, how data submitted to the state are actually used by different stakeholders, and what measures don't need a single state definition but can be left to local discretion. Data should only be collected with a clear theory of action regarding how it will be used to improve educational opportunities and outcomes.

States can audit available data regarding students' opportunities to learn: what's collected at the state-level, how data submitted to the state are used by different stakeholders, and what measures can be left to local discretion instead of being defined by the state. States can engage families by designing report cards and dashboards that present data in intuitive ways that address common concerns, reserving more technical presentations for the few who want to conduct independent analysis of the data. Data can also be provided to district and school leaders for formative or continuous improvement purposes without expectation for public reporting or accountability.

Any new data reporting or collection that is required should be clearly accompanied with use-case and the lowest capacity demands on local education agencies and school-based personnel. States should be sensitive to the capacity and resources that are needed to enable data collection and use of the data for transparency and improvement. States should eliminate existing data reporting when there is insufficient clarity on the use-case or value the data are creating.

Data should only be collected with a clear theory of action regarding how it will be used to improve educational opportunities and outcomes.

State policymakers are best positioned to determine what data are needed to understand opportunities and outcomes in public education and the multiple agencies, in addition to education systems, that have or can collect those data. For example, post-secondary education, healthcare, child protective services, juvenile justice systems, and workforce agencies all have essential data about youth, informing the support they need and outcomes they achieve. Only state leadership can forge collaborative agreements regarding data sharing across agencies.

Call to Action

These principles outline the opportunities to learn that public schools should provide—that students, families, and communities need and deserve. They reflect wisdom from experience, insights from research, and America’s aspirational values of opportunity and fairness that are bedrock to enabling every person to pursue life, liberty, and happiness as they see fit. State leadership is essential to make these principles real.

We call on state leaders to use these principles to take stock of and ask questions to evaluate the opportunity equation in their public schools.

This will look different in every state. Some states might adapt and adopt a set of opportunity principles in their vision and strategic plans; others might start with an audit of their data and reporting systems, determining where they have adequate information about opportunities to learn, and where they need more robust measures; others will develop action plans to remedy opportunity gaps that are revealed in the analysis. There is no one path to ensuring students have the opportunities to learn they need and deserve, but every path requires state leadership, vision, and commitment.

Public education is a vital expression of America’s ethos of opportunity. The relationship between schools and society needs renewal to overcome the effects of discrimination, heal from pandemic wounds, and prepare young people to thrive in a dynamic future. Students need opportunities to learn—state policymakers have a responsibility to lead.

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For citations, please visit <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OTL-Principles-Citations.pdf>.

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