

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ New State Strategic Plans Zero In on Learning Recovery

By Joseph Hedger and Valerie Norville

Most state boards of education create or collaborate on strategic plans to crystallize a vision, goals, and strategies for public education. These plans often include long-run goals around postsecondary readiness, high-quality educators, and student academic achievement. Many of the newest plans, however, diverge from preceding ones by addressing learning recovery and related issues that have come to the fore since the pandemic.

We looked at the strategies, goals, and objectives of 49 plans, inclusive of plans in the District of Columbia and Guam. Seventeen of these have been revised since the beginning of 2023 or are being revised now.¹ We also reviewed the vision and mission statements that anchor these plans, which are broadly similar. Most state visions for K-12 education

reference a desire for all students to have opportunities to receive an excellent education, one in which they are prepared for careers and work, college, citizenship, and for fulfilling lives.

GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Many of the strategic plans for preK-12 education share some similar goals and strategies (see figure). Thirty-five plans prioritize helping students achieve postsecondary success. Another top goal for students is early literacy or grade 3 reading proficiency (22), whereas other plans reference early learning more generally, kindergarten readiness, early math, or universal preschool. Several plans target academic achievement or growth (20), high expectations and access to rigorous coursework (19), and achievement or opportunity gaps (19).

Common goals related to school staff include attracting high-quality, well-prepared educators (26 plans), expanding the educator pipeline (18), and effective school leaders

(18). Plans frequently call for schools to create supportive, welcoming learning environments (18), and some call for increasing the physical safety of school buildings (7).

There are 29 plans that prioritize family and community engagement. Top goals for state systems include increasing the timeliness, utility, and transparency of data (16) and providing equitable funding and other resources (16).

But other goals and strategies range widely from state to state, with some plans incorporating elements such as middle school math attainment, personalized learning plans, cultural responsiveness, and educator diversity.

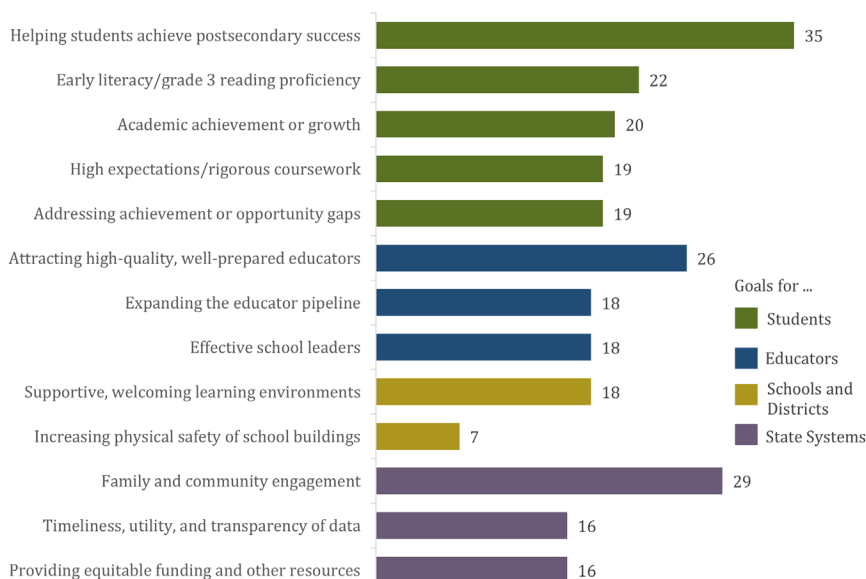
HOW THE PLANS ARE MADE

Perhaps as important as the plans' goals and strategies are the processes state boards devise to arrive at them. "Good strategic planning processes follow three distinct stages," said Pamela Westbrook-Hodge, who is chairing a committee on the Missouri state board's strategic plan revision. "You're assessing your current state, you're refreshing your priorities ... based on what you learned from your current-state assessment, and then you're using that to refresh ... strategies you need to execute on and what are the goals and objectives. Then, hopefully, all of that is measured with a scorecard. ... You can't manage what you can't measure."

"A strong process makes space for diverse voices and multiple perspectives in plan development that is sustained throughout implementation," write NASBE's Paolo DeMaria and Abigail Potts in the *State Education Standard*. "Significant information is gained from these processes."²

"We tried to be more thoughtful about reaching communities that are not engaging with organizations like ours," said Randy Spaulding, Washington State Board of Education executive director, of his board's efforts to revise their strategic plan. "The strategy we found that seems to be working well is partnering with community-based organizations."

Forty-Nine States Developed Strategic Plans for Education



What became apparent during stakeholder engagement in Washington State was the need for clear, shared definitions. “A fair number of community members tuned in for [our listening sessions] and helped us unpack our jargon terminology,” said J. Lee Schultz, deputy executive director with the Washington state board. “We took more efforts toward ‘plain talk’ and taking the feedback that the community was giving us.”

Missouri shared a similar strategy. “Different people had different definitions, and it was important that we had clarity in what we were setting out to achieve,” said Missouri state board member Kerry Casey, who also serves on the board’s strategic plan committee.

PLANNING FOR RECOVERY

Strategic plans typically tether a state board’s ongoing work to a stable set of goals that state leaders expect to be addressing over several years. Nonetheless, states often do address pressing issues in new strategic plans.

During a virtual conversation with NASBE members in April 2024, Casey said her board addressed the need to balance long-term planning with the ability to be nimble and responsive. Her board is opting for regular “light touch” refreshes to the plan in order to address new contexts. “Our one- and three-year refresh process would enable us to continuously keep our plans current,” she said. “It would also ensure that we would have increased stakeholder engagement and would continue to monitor and provide full transparency to the results.”

“As you move through the pandemic . . . you look at the plan and those challenges, and there’s a disconnect,” Westbrooks-Hodge said. “We realized that the plans weren’t keeping up with how the world was shifting and how the educational climate was shifting.”

Several plans that were revised during and after the pandemic sharpened goals around learning recovery and related topics such as digital instruction, tutoring, mental health, and chronic absence. For example, the five-year plan approved by the Mississippi state board in 2023 is built on the six goals from its previous iteration, but the update weaves digital learning into its goals and strategies, including increas-

ing teachers’ capacity to deliver instruction effectively using technology and expanding access to advanced coursework and career and technical skill building through digital platforms.

In December 2023, the Virginia Board of Education approved a plan for 2024–29 that shifted focus toward addressing learning loss, high-dosage tutoring, staffing vacancies, special education needs, early childhood care, and chronic absence. Other elements include apprenticeships and alternative pathways for teacher licensure, graduation pathways that include work-based learning and industry credentials, increased transparency, and guidance on safe, evidence-based use of artificial intelligence in the classroom.

In the opening letter to Nevada’s Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils, which the state board adopted in July 2020, State Superintendent Jhone Ebert wrote, “[W]e are facing challenges to our public health, our livelihood, and our sense of justice. . . . We must take ownership of the obstacles we are facing and commit to creating lasting change.”³ Nevada plan goals emphasize equity in access to educational opportunities, safe learning environments, student-centered funding, reduction in disproportionate discipline, and improved ratios of students to school-based health professionals. Aligned with pandemic-driven school shutdowns and a student mental health crisis, these topics also reflect the strife over racial injustice that state boards were examining following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others.⁴

A number of recently drafted plans address mental health. Illinois’s plan for 2024–27 references creation of a Resiliency Toolkit for students and educators, development of resources to support mental health screening, and an update of the state’s social-emotional learning standards. Strategies to promote safe and healthy schools in the Utah state board’s plan include providing educators trauma-informed microcredentials and guidance on selecting and implementing mental health curriculum.

North Carolina’s plan calls for increased access to school mental health professionals: “By striving to increase access to mental health professionals in schools, decrease exclusionary discipline practices, improve school

climate measures across schools, and more . . . we hope that students have more opportunities to experience success in schools.”⁵

INTEGRATING PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE

In states that have adopted a portrait of a graduate to define a holistic range of knowledge and skills that students will need to be successful after high school, the state board has often sought to align or embed the elements of that portrait into their strategic plans. These portraits or profiles are typically crafted with input from students, parents, educators, and business and community leaders.⁶

A draft of the revised strategic plan in Washington State calls its Profile of a Graduate integral to the strategic plan, with both furthering the board’s vision for education. The strategic plan asks, “How well do the [state’s] existing graduation requirements and learning standards align with the skills and abilities outlined in the Profile of a Graduate, and where are the gaps?”⁷ Kentucky’s plan, under “Priority 2: Accelerating Innovation” reads, “Promote the implementation of Portraits of a Learner which identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all Kentucky learners need to become successful citizens.”⁸

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NOTES

1 Not all these plans have been substantially revised, but many have.

2 Paolo DeMaria and Abigail Potts, “Roadmap to Excellence: Strategic Planning for State Boards,” *State Education Standard* 23, no. 1 (January 2023).

3 Nevada Department of Education, “Battle Born, Globally Prepared: 2020 Statewide Plan for the Improvement of Pupils,” [web page](#) (July 2020).

4 Kimberly Charis, “State Boards Advance Equity Agendas in Challenging Times,” *State Innovations* 25, no. 2 (December 2020).

5 North Carolina State Board of Education, 2025 Statewide Strategic Plan, [web page](#).

6 Valerie Norville, “States Sketch ‘Portraits of a Graduate’ ” *State Innovations* 27, no. 1 (NASBE, October 2022).

7 Washington State Board of Education, “Profile of a Graduate,” [web page](#).

8 Kentucky Department of Education, Kentucky Board of Education [web page](#) (December 8, 2023).

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