



PRESIDENTIAL MEMO

How the Next President Can Reshape K-12 Education

WHY WE MUST ACT

COVID-19 has upended the education system, leaving parents and educators searching for solutions as many students struggle to learn without basic necessities such as a safe and distraction-free learning environment, digital devices, internet connectivity and school breakfast and lunch. While the pandemic highlighted inequities within our schools, a growing movement to spotlight systematic racism has elevated the sense of urgency to reform our educational institutions to better focus on the needs of each student. This divide is not new, but the significance of these events has underscored a national outcry to reshape our teaching and learning systems.

These recent events have exacerbated what many have known for years – that our education system needs systemic change. Remediation rates at the college level are astonishing, and millions of employers struggle to find employees with in-demand skills like complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity. While the transformation of our economy and the needs of businesses have changed, our education system has not. Policymakers must partner with educators to try new, innovative practices that will respond to evolving educational needs.

A presidential election provides a unique opportunity to elevate new ideas for improving the education system. This is particularly true this election year with voters eager to see America's schools reopen safely and recover from the disruptions of COVID-19. The next President, whether it be a

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

means meeting each student at their own level, challenging them with high expectations for academic achievement and growing student agency through:

- » Instruction aligned to rigorous academic standards and social-emotional skills students need to be ready for college, career and life
- » Customized instruction that allows each student to design learning experiences aligned to their interests
- » Varied pacing of instruction based on individual student needs, allowing students to accelerate or take additional time based on their level of mastery
- » Real-time differentiation of instruction, supports and interventions based on data from formative assessments and student feedback to ensure every student is on track to graduation
- » Access to clear, transferable learning objectives and assessment results so students and families understand what is expected for mastery and advancement

new leader or one returning for a second term, must come prepared with an agenda to ensure America's education system rebounds stronger than ever. KnowledgeWorks offers the following recommendations to help our nation's elected leaders achieve this goal.

At KnowledgeWorks, we believe in the power of personalized, competency-based learning to create engaging educational experiences and systems that are tailored to each student's strengths, needs and interests. This approach creates customized pathways that eliminate gaps in learning and ensures each student masters critical academic knowledge, skills and social and emotional competencies upon graduation.

As thought leaders, we work closely with other leaders at all levels of the system to design policies and practices that meet the needs of each student. We are encouraged by the growing demand from states and school districts to expand personalized, competency-based learning – an approach that creates engaging educational experiences and systems that are tailored to each student's strengths, needs and interests. But their success depends on an active partnership with the Federal government to help these states achieve their visions for student success. A lack of Federal leadership often hinders states' ability to take advantage

of existing Federal flexibility and pilot programs as well as to explore other practices to provide students with an equitable, relevant and authentic education. KnowledgeWorks believes through personalized, competency-based learning, each student – including students of color, students with learning differences, students from low-income families, English-language learners and other students our systems have left behind - can master critical academic knowledge, skills and social and emotional competencies upon graduation.

We believe that immediate and long-term change is needed in six specific areas:

Assessment

Accountability

Support for educators

Student learning pathways

Culture of innovation

Continuous school improvement

If we respond to needs in these areas, we can increase equity and provide a more holistic, personalized education to ensure each student succeeds.



RECOMMENDATION

Assessment

Empower states to design balanced assessment systems

This past spring, the impacts of COVID-19 left the U.S. Department of Education with no choice but to grant state requests for waivers of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Mathematics, English and Science assessment requirements. Now, schools are operating a range of different models including fully open, fully virtual or a hybrid of in-person and virtual instruction. With so much variation and continued uncertainty regarding COVID-19's impact on the remainder of the school year, it is questionable if states will be able to administer ESEA assessments or even use that data to draw accurate conclusions about learning gains and losses. This uncertainty comes on top of growing evidence that an over reliance on once-a-year summative assessments has unintentionally contributed to the further segregation of schools and the neglect of instructionally relevant assessments that help educators address student needs as they arise. In many ways, COVID-19 provides a platform to reimagine how we use assessments to drive more equitable outcomes and improve instruction.

Our country cannot afford to lose another year of momentum toward the design of better assessment systems – particularly at a time when assessment tools and practices are

essential to helping address instructional loss stemming from COVID-19. Rather than simply eliminating the requirement to assess these critical subjects for another year, the Federal government should empower states to start work on a plan for an improved assessment system that balances system quality with the tools to help improve instruction.

Specifically, we recommend the Administration permit waivers of ESEA assessments this spring if a state commits to one of the following actions:

1. The state provides a plan for how it will effectively resume administering statewide summative assessments through its current assessment system in the 2021-2022 school year; or
2. The state provides a plan for how it will redesign and begin to phase in a balanced assessment system beginning in the 2021-2022 school year. This could include approaches such as development of a new statewide performance assessment or a slimmed down summative assessment in combination with a system of authentic, curriculum-embedded performance assessments that educators can use to gauge and inform instruction.

How could states slim down their Federally required summative assessments to still monitor system quality? Here are some ideas:

- » Identify and assess annually a set of priority standards
- » Administer assessments to a sampling of students at the state and school district levels
- » Administer assessments once every grade span (elementary, middle and high school) rather than annually in grades three through eight

The Administration can use the general waiver authority under Section 8410 of ESEA to provide states with these opportunities or through entrance into the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), a program designed to help states pilot and scale innovative assessment systems. The Department should work with states seeking to design balanced assessment systems to establish an acceptable timeline for phasing in the new approach.

Prioritize investment in assessment redesign

National demand for better assessments is at an all-time high, yet states lack the resources to properly respond. State assessment funding under Title I of ESEA provides states with the bare minimum to administer federally-required assessments. Aside from a small federal Enhanced Assessment Grants competition, states lack dedicated resources to design new and improved assessment systems and approaches. States will struggle to address the impacts of the current pandemic without new assessments that are better aligned to personalized, competency-based learning and teaching practices. ***Working with Congress, we recommend including supplemental money through Title I of ESEA in the next COVID-19***

relief package to help states design new assessment instruments and approaches that will help educators better respond to student learning needs.

Expand and improve the IADA pilot program

In order to leverage IADA to empower states to improve their assessment systems, the Administration should prioritize three important actions. First, the Administration should lift the program's seven-state cap so any state with a compelling idea has the chance to redesign their assessment system. The U.S. Department of Education has already approved five states under this authority, with two additional state applications under consideration. If those applications are approved, no additional states would be able to leverage this opportunity to rethink their assessment systems.

Secondly, the Administration should seek resources from Congress to support states exploring this opportunity. The design of a new assessment system is complex and costly. Resources are needed to help states embark in this challenging work, particularly for states seeking to explore competency-based assessments and other approaches that help advance equity through personalized learning practices.

And lastly, the Administration should work with Congress to make several improvements to the IADA that address key learnings from the first round of state participants. Congress should act on these improvements quickly to allow states to address the current uncertainty surrounding assessment.

We recommend the following improvements:

- 1. Provide planning time for states*** to enable states to consult with diverse stakeholders and develop an assessment design that is responsive to state and local needs so they can transition their assessment system thoughtfully and effectively.

2. Strengthen professional development to build educator capacity to leverage information from innovative assessments to improve instruction.

3. Allow states to establish a reasonable timeline to scale statewide by replacing the requirement to scale the new assessment system statewide within five years with flexibility for states to propose the timeline that best fits their assessment design. The current time limit is arbitrary and jeopardizes thoughtful expansion to all school districts in a state.

4. Provide funding to help states develop new assessments. Lack of funding has become a major barrier for states seeking to participate under the IADA given they have to administer the traditional and innovative assessments simultaneously to prove comparability.

5. Modernize technical quality requirements to better reflect the goals of assessments that are designed to evaluate higher-order thinking skills. The Administration needs to convene experts in the design of performance-based, personalized and competency-based assessments to inform improvements to technical quality requirements and peer review processes.

RECOMMENDATION

Accountability

Empower states to create accountability pilot programs to address inequity

Despite well-intentioned policies, a decade of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress exams reveals little progress in closing achievement gaps between students of color and their peers. These concerning data trends combined with the glaring inequities exposed by the recent COVID-19 pandemic demand a new approach. Current state accountability systems, designed at the direction of Federal law, often lack alignment to state visions for student success. This is particularly true in states that are advancing personalized, competency-based systems that emphasize a holistic view of student outcomes. We believe accountability systems need to change to improve alignment to the state's vision, to center community voices and to reflect a holistic picture of student performance to better support strategies for helping schools meet each student's needs. The first step in this transformation is to enable innovation and a learning agenda that will guide long-term improvements to accountability systems.

A number of state and regional pilot programs have emerged to tackle this challenge. We

believe there is much to learn from these pilots to help federal leaders consider improvements to federal accountability policies. Some examples include:

1. A group of rural Colorado school districts created an initiative, the Student-Centered Accountability Program, that incorporates various indicators of school quality such as the whole child and based on local communities and networks of peers.¹ The Colorado General Assembly also passed “The Public School Local Accountability Systems,” which allows the Colorado Department of Education to provide grants to local education providers that adopt local accountability systems. It lets education agencies partner with institutions of higher education (IHEs) and nonprofit entities to create and implement systems.²
2. The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment is a network of Massachusetts public school districts working to shift the assessment and accountability in the Bay State. School quality is measured within a framework with multiple measures such as student engagement, teacher relationships and school environment,

giving a rich picture beyond what can be measured on a single standardized test. In this model, student achievement is captured with a rich system of teacher-created, validated and collaboratively scored performance assessments.³

3. In South Carolina, the Low Country Education Consortium (LCEC) comprises four school districts. The LCEC focuses on “skills and dispositions students will need to be college and career ready through a locally designed regional accountability system.”⁴

We recommend the Administration study these state-driven efforts and work with Congress to create an accountability pilot program under ESEA to encourage additional innovation. A pilot should emphasize creation of an education dashboard that provides

disaggregated data on a range of indicators to ensure stakeholders can identify student needs, particularly those of historically underserved students. States should be permitted to reexamine the weights of these indicators to ensure alignment to a holistic approach to learning. This will be especially important if states are permitted to design balanced assessment approaches, as states will want to ensure alignment of their accountability and assessment systems.

The Administration should also advocate to center state and community voices in the design of these accountability systems. This is especially critical given the COVID-19 disruption and the growing demand from states and districts to advance new teaching and learning approaches that enable stakeholders to better address instructional loss through holistic data and real-time improvements to instruction.



RECOMMENDATION

Support for Educators

Expand personalized and competency-based professional development for educators

The impacts of COVID-19 have elevated a growing need to ensure educators have the training and skills to personalize instruction for every student. While this was true before the pandemic shuttered schools, it is now even more imperative to empower educators with the strategies and tools to design and implement customized and culturally responsive learning experiences for every student. Learning loss from this disruption will be significant, and it will require an overhaul of professional development practices to prepare the teaching force for the challenges ahead. Additionally, advancement of balanced assessment systems under the recommendations above will require a refocusing of professional development to help educators better utilize assessments to support individual learning needs.

We recommend the Administration place priorities on discretionary grants under the U.S. Department of Education to focus resources on educator training and supports for personalized, competency-based learning environments.

Foster professional development in social-emotional learning and personalized learning

Students are experiencing significant upheaval from COVID-19 that will have lasting impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing. They have lost their sense of community and routine; they are trying to navigate unfamiliar virtual, hybrid or socially-distant in-person learning environments; many have lost a secure source of food and other social supports; and anxiety is on the rise as they try to make sense of what this change will mean for their future. National interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) has exploded in recent months, creating unprecedented demand for educational strategies and learning environments that seek to address student academic and social and emotional needs. We were encouraged when Congress prioritized funding for SEL in last year's appropriations process. It is critical that Congress build on this momentum to address the growing number of students suffering from trauma and anxiety during this uncertain time.

Building upon recent Congressional action, *we recommend including supplemental money through Title II of ESEA in the next COVID-19 relief package to provide professional development in SEL and*

personalized learning for teachers. Targeted professional development in SEL practices would provide educators with invaluable tools to help students manage the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and provide benefits in future years as social emotional well-being is prioritized as a component of student success.

Modernize teacher preparation

A rapidly changing education system will require a new workforce of educators trained to implement innovative, student-centered teaching strategies, yet far too few of the nation's pre-service institutions focus on these critical skills. Schools implementing personalized, competency-based approaches struggle to find educators with the skills to teach in these environments and educators often complain of not feeling prepared. To address this gap, we recommend the Administration work with Congress to amend Title II of the Higher

Education Act to require all grantees to ensure their graduates have the competencies to excel in personalized, competency-based learning environments. Priority should be granted to partnerships of IHEs and districts working together to redesign their education systems to be more personalized and equitable. An emphasis on personalized, competency-based learning will help give our educators the tools they need to help the country rebound from the disruptions of COVID-19 and ensure resiliency moving forward.

In addition, we recommend that Title II require grantees to survey their recent graduates to determine how well the program prepared them to enter the teaching profession. Grantees should review this feedback and create a strong feedback loop, directly identifying strategies from the survey to strengthen their preparation programs. In particular, surveys should be closely tied to how well grantees are preparing teachers to work in personalized, competency-based learning environments.



RECOMMENDATION

Student Learning Pathways

Create a new equity-focused block grant program to expand access and completion of student learning pathways

COVID-19 and the movement to address systemic racism in this country have highlighted a historic opportunity divide. This is apparent in many learning communities where historically underserved students do not have access to challenging learning pathways that align to their interests. We need to provide students of color, students from low-income families, students with learning differences and English-language learners access to both rigorous coursework and the opportunity to pursue relevant and engaging learning pathways. These opportunities, especially paired with community involvement, allow for every student to advance to deeper levels of mastery.

ESEA does not directly support a system of pathways for every student. *Thus, we recommend the administration call upon Congress to set up a new flexible block grant that states can utilize to create a system of high-quality learning pathways.*

This block grant should provide states the resources and flexibility to give students access to rigorous coursework as well as

opportunities such as work-based learning, internships, career technical education (CTE), college in high school programs, competency-based pathways and service-based learning experiences. As part of this effort, states should set goals to increase access and completion of pathways for historically underserved students including students of color, students with learning differences, students from low-income families and English-language learners.

Make Pell grants available to low-income students in college in high school programs

College in high school programs are an essential and effective strategy for increasing student pathways to postsecondary education. They enable students to accelerate and go deeper into areas of interest, a critical feature of personalized, competency-based learning environments. Numerous rigorous, multi-institution and statewide research studies in more than a dozen states have proven that early college high schools and dual and concurrent enrollment programs significantly increase high school graduation rates, college readiness and college access, persistence and completion. Additionally, these models enable students to pursue college coursework that is challenging

and aligned to their interests so they can accelerate their college and career plans.

Unfortunately, college coursework is often more costly than traditional K-12 programs, and postsecondary institutions bear the burden of that funding gap. This financial structure threatens the sustainability of college in high school programs and remains a barrier to scaling these pathways for other students who stand to benefit. ***We recommend the***

Administration work with Congress to extend Pell eligibility to high school students participating in college in high school programs to help scale proven solutions for increasing postsecondary access and completion. Additionally, we recommend that any Pell grants received in high school not count toward the 12-semester Pell lifetime eligibility cap to ensure pursuit of challenging coursework without fear of future changes to career interests.



RECOMMENDATION

Culture of Innovation

Improve the EIR program by building state capacity to advance innovative, personalized and competency-based practices

The magnitude of disruption caused by COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that our educational institutions need to rapidly evolve to embrace the future of learning. Federal and state governments must place a greater emphasis on investment in research and development that aligns with the emerging trends impacting the education system.

The Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program has a compelling track record for driving innovation in the absence of state and private investment. It has empowered educators and researchers to design and advance new learning models. *Given the rapid pace of change in our economy and world, we recommend the Administration take a two-fold approach to ensure the EIR program helps prepare the education system for the future of learning.*

1. The Administration should call for a \$50 million increase in the EIR program to focus exclusively on the growing demand for innovative personalized, competency-based learning solutions.
2. At the same time, states cannot rely solely on Federal programs to spur innovation and research and development. Congress should include a reservation in the EIR program to empower states to create their own innovation-focused programs. Under such a proposal, the Federal government would provide grants to states to run competitive grant programs committed to funding and scaling promising ideas that will help the states adapt to emerging trends and better prepare for the future of learning. This investment will spur state and local innovation, ensuring that state education agencies and local educational agencies are better able to adapt to a rapidly changing education system.



RECOMMENDATION

Continuous School Improvement

Build local capacity to help schools farthest from opportunity design personalized learning solutions

Despite decades of strategies to reform schools farthest from opportunity, states find they consistently identify the same schools year after year for interventions. Our nation needs to advance a new strategy that aims to strengthen local capacity to design and advance personalized, competency-based learning. This should include transparency of school and student performance on a range of holistic indicators that help contextualize a school's needs as well as investment in regional coaching teams to help diagnose challenges and build capacity of districts, communities and stakeholders to design personalized strategies that meet the needs of each student.

We recommend, Congress empower states with the resources and authority to empower personalized coaching teams to leverage information-rich dashboards to help schools farthest from opportunity meet the needs of their students.

If the Administration, and Congress, invest in this data-driven approach, then state and local stakeholders can partner to develop their own improvement strategies that respond to local needs.

Vermont offers one example of how a state may be able to create a dashboard and regional coaching model. In 2016, Vermont created the Integrated Field Review (IFR) process in which educators from the neighboring school districts perform an in-person evaluation based on indicators. These include:

1. academic proficiency
2. high quality staffing
3. personalization
4. safe, healthy schools
5. investment priorities⁵

Although not all states will be able to take this specific approach, we believe this approach offers important lessons that can inform strategies in other states.

ENDNOTES

1. Asp, Elliot and Holmes, Rebecca (February, 2018). A Grass Roots Approach to Rethinking Accountability. <https://www.coloradoedinitiative.org/grass-roots-approach-rethinking-accountability/>
2. Colorado General Assembly. SB19-204: Public School Local Accountability Systems. <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb19-204>
3. The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment. <https://www.mciea.org/about.html>
4. Low Country Education Consortium. <https://lowcountryeducationconsortium.org/college-career-readiness-project-2/>
5. State of Vermont Agency of Education. Vermont Annual Snapshot. <https://education.vermont.gov/education-quality-assurance/annual-snapshot>

KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with schools and communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what's next.

Get more resources to help make personalized learning a reality at KnowledgeWorks.org.