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# BEYOND THE HORIZON

BLAZING A TRAIL TOWARD LEARNER-CENTERED  
SCHOOL QUALITY SYSTEMS



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## THE NATION'S CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEMS LEAVE YOUNG PEOPLE UNPREPARED FOR LIFE AFTER SCHOOL AND CONCENTRATES OPPORTUNITY TO A SELECT AND PREDICTABLE FEW.

Too much of a student's success can be predicted by their race, economic position, ZIP code and other markers of identity. Long-standing disconnects around the purpose of education, varied levels of investment, approaches to instruction and expected outcomes have all contributed to a growing chorus across the nation on what to do next: we must build systems that center learners and their communities.

Over the course of the past decade, [learner-centered education has grown from a small collection of leading practitioners and policymakers into a movement](#). As this work has deepened, student-centered learning communities have consistently bumped up against traditional notions for understanding school quality, citing current assessment and accountability systems as one of the largest barriers to progress. These systems were not designed to elevate nor encourage the types of vibrant learning experiences at the core of the student-centered classroom. In many cases, they provide disincentives to growth.

Ushered in by No Child Left Behind and the subsequent reauthorization of the nation's education law, the current era of assessment and accountability saw a fundamentally new approach to school quality. This approach sought to ensure high-quality education for each student by providing annual, disaggregated information about student academic proficiency, largely measured by standardized assessments. The hope was that transparency on state assessment performance, coupled with the promise of significant funding, would help struggling schools improve. Ensuring that every learner has a high-quality educational experience is a commendable goal. As a nation, we should reaffirm this commitment in any new school quality systems we develop. We must also acknowledge that [current assessment and accountability systems have failed to meet this goal](#).

The current approach to ensuring school quality centers the system, not the learner and their community. As a result, it fails to drive systemic equity and improvement at scale. Efforts to improve these systems have been compromised for too long by a false dichotomy that contrasts allegiance to the current system with growing demands to remove all federal systems for school quality. Fortunately, we see a way forward that builds on No Child Left Behind’s original commitment to equity while also evolving the approach to better align with a learner-centered paradigm. To move forward, we must move away from a broken theory of action for ensuring school quality and toward one which provides a flexible, equity-seeking and supportive environment for authentic, community-owned improvement. To do so, we should take key lessons from the trailblazing educators who have embraced a more learner-centered approach. In addition to moving toward more learner-centered practices, we must also name and repair harm caused by implementation of the current system to marginalized communities and the profession of teaching.

## The Trailblazers Summit

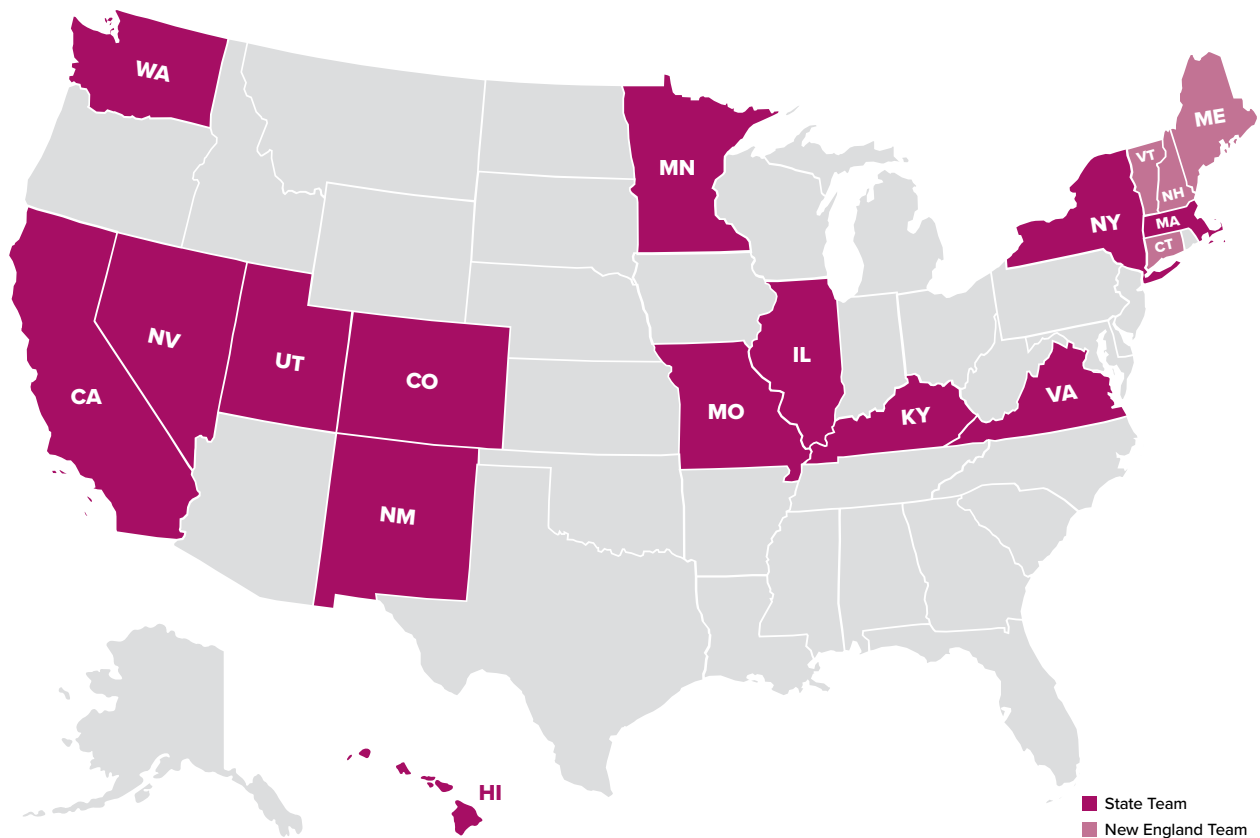
In June 2023, the Trailblazers Summit brought together learner-centered voices from across the nation to develop a bold new vision for assessing school quality, one that honors the unique context of each learning community while also ensuring the quality of each learner’s experience. Summit participants represented perspectives from across the nation and a diversity of roles within the education system (see Appendix A for more details on summit participants). Following the summit, partner organizations worked to synthesize what we heard from participants into this set of recommendations. We believe that, when our systems are equitable and student-centered, they can ensure each learner is supported in discovering and using their assets to build their desired future. This vision, articulated through five themes for transformation, has led to a set of co-created recommendations to chart the course for the future of assessment and accountability.



## TRAILBLAZER SUMMIT PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

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## TRAILBLAZER SUMMIT PLACE-BASED TEAMS



## The Learner-Centered Paradigm Shift

There is a fundamental disconnect between learner-centered approaches and traditional school quality systems. Current assessment and accountability systems perpetuate the same problematic dynamics that underpin tracking, assessment and grading inside the traditional classroom. In traditional classroom environments, students often receive labels, test scores or grades that create harmful narratives about achievement, fueling a fear of failure. This fear permeates the classroom and the actions that students take within the traditional system. Student-centered learning challenges these narratives by prioritizing assets and growth areas in all learners. Drawing upon a strong core of shared learning goals, student-centered learning classrooms employ innovative assessment practices to allow for students to demonstrate what they know and can do in a variety of ways. This flexibility is built on common learning expectations and shared practice, rather than requirements that all students have the exact same assessment experience. By adjusting what's held constant – learning – and what is flexible – how students demonstrate learning – student-centered learning communities ensure that all learners have the skills, habits and dispositions for success without requiring conformity to one mode of demonstrating learning.

We can learn from student-centered learning communities as we seek to evolve our school quality systems and ground them in common goals and flexible approaches to improvement.



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## CURRENT SYSTEMS TO LEARNER-CENTERED SYSTEMS

|   |    |  |
|---|----|--|
| Narrowed focus on discipline-specific content   | ←→ | Interdisciplinary mastery of essential knowledge and transferable skills   |
| Curriculum and instruction driven by test preparation                                       | ←→ | Curriculum and instruction centered around development of essential knowledge and transferable skills; assessments validate mastery when students are ready                              |
| Assessments focus on recall and basic reasoning   | ←→ | Assessments focus on higher order thinking   |
| Assessments designed with dominant culture and language                                     | ←→ | Assessments designed to be culturally and linguistically inclusive   |
| Emphasis on minimum academic proficiency  | ←→ | Emphasis on growth toward mastery for all  |
| Annual data delivered in subsequent school year defines previous year's student achievement | ←→ | Real-time data, collected throughout the year, grounds instruction and local supports; periodic, systems-level data informs resource allocation and state supports                       |
| Heavy weighting on student academic achievement in narrow, discipline-specific content      | ←→ | Balanced weighting of holistic indicators and a range of student outcomes, including measures of deeper learning   |
| Top-down development of indicators of school quality measure the same indicators statewide  | ←→ | Reciprocal development of indicators of school and system quality are a combination of statewide indicators to ensure equity and community-defined indicators to drive local improvement |
| School rankings trigger top-down consequences and supports                                  | ←→ | Holistic data empower communities to address growth areas for every school   |

Figure 1: System-Centered Paradigm to Learner-Centered Paradigm

## Key Terms

We acknowledge that learning communities have variations in how common terms are selected and used. We define these key terms here to ensure the reader understands how they are being used within this paper and how they were used by summit participants.

### **Closest to the Classroom**

We use the phrases “closest to the classroom” and “closest to the learning” to identify those who interact directly with teaching and learning experiences. These people include, but are not limited to, students, educators, families and caregivers.

### **Deeper Learning**

We use the term “deeper learning” to describe learning experiences that connect essential knowledge and transferable skills.

### **Essential Knowledge and Transferable Skills**

We use the term “essential knowledge” to describe the core concepts of academic knowledge. These are the concepts and ideas around which many academic disciplines are built, but that also transcend disciplines. We use the term “transferable skills” to describe critical skills which can be applied across a range of contexts. When used together, these concepts represent our collective vision for a reimagining of learning goals from overly complex sets of disjointed, discipline-specific goals and toward a coherent set of learning goals that connect learning across disciplines. In some learning communities, learning goals framed in this way are called competencies.

### **Learner-Centered**

We are using the terms “learner-centered” and “student-centered” as umbrella terms to describe educational practices that move teaching and learning from one-size-fits-all experiences toward more authentic learning

experiences grounded in the assets, interests and agency of each learner.

### **Learning Communities**

We use this term to describe a group of people with a shared commitment to a specific set of learners. This may be at the school, district, state or regional level. The people involved in the community may be, but are not limited to, students, educators, families, caregivers, non-instructional staff, building/district/state leaders, community-based organizations and business leaders.

### **Performance Assessment**

We use the term “performance assessment” to refer to assessments that require the transfer of knowledge and skills to new and novel situations or scenarios. Performance assessments are generally multi-step activities ranging from quite unstructured to fairly structured. The key feature of such assessments is that students are asked to produce a product or carry out a performance (e.g., a musical performance) that is scored according to pre-specified criteria, typically contained in a scoring guide or rubric.<sup>1</sup>

### **School Quality Systems**

We are using the terms “school quality systems” and “assessment and accountability” to refer to the measurement systems, prescribed by federal, state and local policies, that provide information on the degree to which schools are serving students and communities.

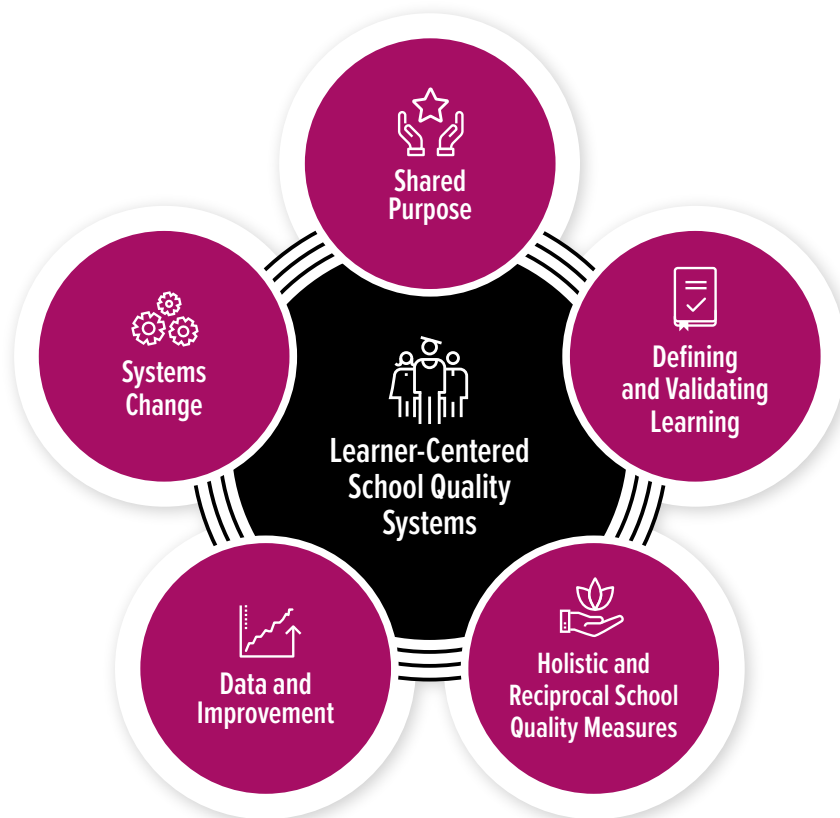
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<sup>1</sup> From: Marion, S.F. & Buckley, K. (2016). Design and implementation considerations of performance-based and authentic assessments for use in accountability systems. In Braun, H. (ed). Meeting the Challenges to Measurement in an Era of Accountability. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

# TRANSFORMATION THEMES

## FOR ACCELERATING LEARNER-CENTERED SCHOOL QUALITY SYSTEMS

Widespread adoption of student-centered school quality systems will require transformation at each level of the system, from support for those closest to the classroom to the evolution of federal policy. Alignment of these systems with clear roles and a shared commitment to equity and student success can have a transformative impact on the U.S. K-12 education system. To achieve this, leaders across the system will need to focus on five themes for transformation.



### SHARED PURPOSE

Shift from top-down school quality systems toward reciprocal systems that center those closest to the learning.

### DEFINING AND VALIDATING LEARNING

Shift from narrow notions of student success toward models that embrace essential knowledge and transferable skills.

### HOLISTIC AND RECIPROCAL SCHOOL QUALITY MEASURES

Shift from heavy reliance on a single assessment measure to systems that report on holistic data at each level of the system to strengthen reciprocity, transparency and ownership.

### DATA AND IMPROVEMENT

Shift from the punitive use of data to data use for continuous improvement.

### SYSTEMS CHANGE

Shift from incremental, disconnected change efforts toward sustained transformation.



## Transformation Theme One

# Shared Purpose

*Shift from top-down school quality systems toward reciprocal systems that center those closest to the learning.*



**Systems are most effective when stakeholders share a common mission and engage in collective action to ensure success, yet** today's K-12 education systems often suffer from competing visions generated by leaders far removed from schools and classrooms. This disconnect can be demotivating for communities as it neglects local needs and cultivates a culture of compliance.

Summit participants emphasized that student-centered systems require deep community engagement and ownership of learning across each level of the system. The process of determining the purpose of education must be driven by a diverse set of community members with intentional inclusion of those closest to the learning and facilitation that attends to complex power dynamics within those conversations. When voices from all levels of the system are engaged, they can develop a shared vision that balances equity, system alignment and local context to ensure students have access to vibrant and relevant learning experiences.

## Key Strategies

**Provide communities with greater authority and capacity to set locally contextualized goals and to hold themselves accountable for student success.** Policy systems must provide space for communities to set a vision for shared values and goals with clear mechanisms for integrating those goals with federal and state systems. This will require additional professional development and resources to help learning communities create inclusive engagement opportunities with specific support for elevating student, family, caregiver and educator voice. This visioning and alignment will also require adjustments to federal and state policies to honor local goals, in addition to common state-wide goals, in state report cards so that communities can track progress and partner on solutions for improvement.

**Reimagine student success to focus on both knowledge and skills.** Quality student-centered learning systems ensure all students graduate with core academic knowledge and transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and communication. Deeper learning experiences enable students to learn academic content as they develop the critical skills they need for future success. Community visioning with students, families, business leaders,

community organizations and postsecondary institutions can help identify and elevate these essential skills. The school quality system should ultimately integrate measures that help communities track student progress toward mastery of knowledge and skills.

**Center historically marginalized yet resilient voices to design effective and responsive solutions.** System leaders must establish inclusive decision-making processes to draw on the wisdom of those most impacted, especially students. Special consideration should be given to unintended consequences to ensure policies, and the behaviors they may elicit, do no harm to communities or students.

**Establish guardrails to ensure communities use data to design equity-seeking solutions.** While local visioning is a powerful way to generate buy-in and community commitment, guardrails are needed to ensure conversations remain focused on goal setting and solutions designed to address inequities in the education system. Data should be used to direct solutions to areas of greatest need while also guarding against prescriptive actions that are insensitive to local context and may harm or be resisted by students and communities.

## Policy Ideas to Explore

- » Provide funding and frameworks to help communities build capacity for inclusive community visioning and accountability processes
- » Establish common guidelines for graduation requirements but provide flexibility in the ways learners meet those requirements; for example, utilizing a Portrait of a Graduate or a Profile of a Learner
- » Provide mechanisms to incorporate local indicators in federal or state accountability systems and reflect them on state report cards

## TRAILBLAZER STORY **KENTUCKY**

United We Learn is the vision for the future of education in Kentucky. The vision was built by an inclusive coalition of stakeholders and codified in the [United We Learn Report](#). From this report the [United We Learn](#) Council was formed. Through the council, the Kentucky Department of Education has brought together a diverse set of stakeholders working and learning together in an inclusive and empathetic way. Members are exploring how they might create the future of education by advancing three connected ideas: vibrant learning experiences for every student; encouraging innovation in assessment and accountability; and collaborating closely with communities. [This effort is supported with funds from the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program through the U.S. Department of Education.](#)

As part of this effort, Kentucky is working to align the state's assessment and accountability systems to the United We Learn vision. The Kentucky Accountability and Assessment Project

is addressing equitable opportunities for each student by building support at both the local and state levels through an inclusive design process. The intent of the project is to create a new kind of multi-level accountability with students, parents, community and the state, based on emerging systems that accentuate the four habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation and reciprocity.

Additionally Kentucky has several groups focused on supporting the United We Learn Vision, particularly the idea of “more vibrant learning experiences for every student.” The [Kentucky Innovative Learning Network](#) is a 40+ district community of practice designed to promote and share innovative practices. The state has large scale professional development initiatives with PBLWorks and through a statewide initiative to spread deeper learning strategies as well as a pilot program to re-design the credentialing of learning through micro-credentials for students in Algebra 1.

## Transformation Theme Two

# Defining and Validating Learning

*Shift from narrow notions of student success toward models that embrace essential knowledge and transferable skills.*



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The integration of knowledge and skills, combined with a need for flexible, student-driven pathways, requires new mechanisms for defining and validating student success.

Traditional school quality systems reinforce narrow and disconnected learning goals and do not adequately capture the richness of learner-centered education environments. As a result, they mask the strengths of learners, schools and their communities. This disconnect with traditional school quality systems poses a disincentive for communities to design more vibrant learning experiences.

To bring such experiences to scale, summit participants felt education systems need transparent learning outcomes and authentic assessments that give students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know in ways that are meaningful to them. These new systems will also require a reimagining of how we credential learning and communicate readiness to postsecondary institutions and employers.

## Key Strategies

**Reimagine learning frameworks to emphasize depth over breadth.** Elevating a focus on transferable skills in addition to academic content will require the creation of new learning frameworks to provide educators, parents and students with clear criteria for success. Meaningful development and implementation of these frameworks requires a deep, collaborative and cohesive design process. Rather than adding skills onto existing standards, learning frameworks should build transferable skills over time through course content grounded in prioritized academic standards. Resources should be made available for states taking up this effort. Emphasizing depth in the design of learning goals will expand possibilities for richer assessment experiences across formative, interim and summative systems.

**Support students in designing flexible learning pathways.** Learning communities should partner with learners to co-design relevant and engaging learning pathways aligned to student interests, cultures and career aspirations. Pathway designers will need to ensure that learning experiences are based on students' interests and that students have the ability to move within and across pathways as they master common learning expectations. Policymakers must

also ensure policies recognize, support and validate flexible learning environments.

### **Collect student evidence of learning through portfolios and performance assessments.**

Assessment should be a positive experience for learners. Student portfolios and performance assessments embedded in learning experiences should feel seamless and represent a culmination of learning. Rich feedback in real time gives learners the specific support they need to develop competencies. Educator pre-service and professional development systems need to prioritize assessment design and calibrated scoring to ensure reliability and validity across classrooms and schools. Students should also be provided mechanisms and support for utilizing out-of-school experiences and expertise as evidence of learning.

### **Reimagine credentials and learning records.**

Shifting away from systems that award course credit based on seat time to systems that validate learning based on evidence will require a new approach to credentialing. System leaders will need to reimagine the ways in which learning is sequenced, validated and communicated to stakeholders across K-12, postsecondary and the workforce. Pilots to explore this concept should include local, state, postsecondary and industry.

## Policy Ideas to Explore

- » Adopt new learning frameworks that integrate essential knowledge and transferable skills
- » Update federal peer review guidance for state summative assessments to prioritize depth in standards coverage
- » Build assessment literacy in pre-service and professional development networks, with a focus on deepening the use of performance assessments
- » Provide resources and technical assistance to help learning communities establish pathways across K-12 and explore ways to report publicly on access and completion
- » Provide students opportunities to satisfy credit, promotion and graduation requirements through mastery of a competency-based framework
- » Provide funding, templates and technical assistance to help districts create competency-based transcripts

## TRAILBLAZER STORY **NEW YORK**

For years, New York City Public Schools has supported schools in thinking differently about how to articulate their goals for learning and the ways students can demonstrate competence in those goals. An opt-in, city-wide program called the [Competency Collaborative](#) supports schools in developing culturally responsive and sustainable learning environments as well as competency-based practices. While the district requires all schools to align curriculum to the state's standards framework, schools have significant flexibility in how they articulate learning goals. This flexibility creates ideal conditions for learning communities to articulate competencies that best fit their local context while also ensuring that the curriculum is grounded in shared standards. The networking opportunities provided by the collaborative have supported the spread of best practices across buildings spanning from K-12 schools. The opt-in, supportive approach has garnered authentic transformation in the member schools.

The Competency Collaborative has provided thousands of educators with training on [grading for equity](#). The New York City Public Schools has also placed its most innovative high schools in a single, networked district

within the larger district so they can receive custom support and deepen their practice. As the largest district in the nation, New York City is an ideal location for innovation, as new ideas can be tested and iterated across the city's vast array of individual learning communities.

At the state level, leaders have been actively engaged in reviewing state policies regarding assessments and graduation. The state granted a waiver under special circumstances for select schools to replace the high stakes Regents examinations, the state's graduation assessments, with performance-based assessment tasks. While additional schools and districts have expressed interest in similar flexibility, the state has not yet extended this flexibility to other schools. In response, the state convened a [Blue Ribbon Commission](#) in 2019 to study national best practices around graduation policy and engage constituents across the state in conversation around graduation requirements. In 2022, the state received nearly three million dollars from the U.S. Department of Education's [Competitive Grants for State Assessment program](#) to pilot new performance-based assessment approaches.

## Transformation Theme Three

# Holistic and Reciprocal School Quality Measures

*Shift from heavy reliance on a single assessment measure to systems that report on holistic data at each level of the system to strengthen reciprocity, transparency and ownership.*



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**For learner-centered school quality systems to succeed, reciprocal data systems should provide stakeholders with timely information on both student and system performance.**

Students and educators need regular feedback on progress toward learning goals, families and communities need information on school and district quality and policy-makers need data to guide resource allocation and policy improvements. Each level of the system contributes and monitors the data they need to drive collective action.

Summit participants celebrated past victories around data disaggregation by special populations and the inclusion of student growth measures in accountability systems. They expressed concerns about the outsized federal role in determining school quality measures. Participants felt the heavy emphasis on student academic proficiency on standardized assessments does not adequately capture deeper learning. They noted that technical aspects of current federal law, regulation and guidance limit the field's ability to use assessments of deeper learning for accountability. Participants expressed a desire to have access to some forms of school- and district-level input data, such as resources, funding and facilities, which cannot be used to make accountability determinations under current federal law. They felt that access to student-, school- and system-level data would provide a holistic picture with measures defined at the local, state and federal levels.

## Key Strategies

**Balance inputs and outputs in school quality systems.** Federal and state policymakers should seek to create school quality systems that communicate the information stakeholders want to know. While student outputs - most commonly measured through student performance on state academic assessments - are important, stakeholders also want information on inputs which provide learners and communities information on the quality of the system. Examples of such input measures could include access to rich course offerings and learning pathways, access to community enrichment experiences and teacher retention rates and satisfaction levels. Policymakers should weigh school-level input measures and student outcome measures in a balanced way so one does not trivialize the importance of the other.

**Develop reciprocal and holistic accountability systems.** Accountability systems should produce evidence that is relevant and actionable for each level of the system. Such evidence ensures that stakeholders at every level of education systems understand their role and receive the necessary data to support continuous improvement over time. Specifically, school quality measures should focus on the following types of evidence:

- » **Student-level** – Students and educators, sometimes in partnership with community and business leaders, collect evidence of student learning through performance assessments, capstones and portfolios

aligned to common expectations for mastery of knowledge and skills. Families and caregivers have access to the information to support the learner when they are not in the classroom.

- » **Schools** – Schools and their communities undergo a process, similar to accreditation, to collect evidence on a range of school quality measures; for example school climate, access to resources and quality of student teacher/relationships. A common rubric aligned to the conditions for learner-centered success articulates clear expectations of quality.
- » **Districts** – Similar to schools, districts and their communities undergo a process to collect evidence on a range of district quality measures. A common rubric guides this process, but it should reflect the roles and responsibilities of districts, such as equitable resource allocation and teacher recruitment and retention.
- » **State and Federal Governments** – Both state and federal systems identify a set of measures to inform strategies for equitable distribution of resources; support the spread of promising and proven practices through networking and technical assistance; and establish policies to address systemic needs emerging across a state or across the nation. The primary role for this level of the system is to drive more effective resource distribution and to safeguard education systems for equity.

## Policy Ideas to Explore

- » Adjust federal policy to expand states' ability to include measures of school-level inputs and new metrics for ensuring equity as well as district and state quality measures to drive improvement at each level of the system.
- » Permit states to include local indicators in federal or state accountability systems and conduct holistic data analysis to inform responsive improvement strategies.
- » Adjust the weighting of student academic proficiency measures to provide greater balance with school- and system-level inputs and emphasis on essential knowledge and transferable skills.
- » Align school accreditation processes to learner-centered approaches and explore ways to share data more broadly.



## TRAILBLAZER STORY MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) is a partnership of eight public school districts and their teacher unions. Enabled by a line item in the legislative budget, the consortium districts joined together to develop a fair and effective accountability system to offer a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test. The consortium is working to build proof points in their member districts in the hopes of deeper collaboration in the future with state leaders. To create a fuller picture of school quality, the consortium utilizes performance assessments to better understand student learning as well as a dynamic school quality framework that incorporates a much richer set of quality indicators than what is valued by the state's current accountability system.

The MCIEA performance assessments are developed by Massachusetts educators with technical assistance from national partners. These standards-aligned, curriculum-embedded tasks allow students to demonstrate what they know and can

do through real-world application. More than 140 performance assessments are publicly available in a [task bank](#) maintained by the consortium. In their proposed model for accountability, this information on student learning is fed into a five-part framework to understanding school quality.

The [School Quality Measures framework](#) employed by MCIEA is nationally recognized. It captures school strengths and areas of growth across a broad set of indicators that reflect school culture, student opportunity to learn and social-emotional outcomes in addition to student learning as measured by performance assessments. The data is triangulated using student and teacher surveys and administrative information. It is visualized on a [dashboard](#) that is easily understood by school community stakeholders, making it a valuable tool for strategic planning and family engagement. School-based teams in MCIEA districts receive ongoing support for data analysis and operationalization.



## Transformation Theme Four

# Data and Improvement

*Shift from the punitive use of data to data use for continuous improvement.*



### In learner-centered systems, data holds power.

It impacts classrooms, educator development and community conversations. Everyone in the community accepts responsibility for growth and relies on access to rich data to inform co-created improvement strategies. This data-rich culture contrasts sharply with current practice, where data analysis often happens too late to support improvement.

Summit participants shared a desire to move away from systems that rank, sort and publicly stigmatize schools furthest from opportunity, reflecting on the ways shame drives community division. Instead, they envisioned systems where every community leverages abundant and well-communicated data to engage in the design and implementation of improvement systems. This approach creates greater alignment to community values and increases commitment for results.

## Key Strategies

### **Aggregate information about district and school quality on a transparent dashboard.**

Learning communities should establish public profiles that districts and schools can use to communicate data reflecting a range of inputs and outputs. These profiles should tell the public a clear story of districts' and schools' strengths and growth areas to illustrate trends and signal to communities where to focus conversations on improvement. Similarly, schools should provide a learning management system that provides students, families, caregivers and educators with data that clearly communicates students' individual progress toward learning targets, features projects and accomplishments and communicates areas for growth. Information across all dashboards should be updated frequently to inform system and learner supports.

### **Ensure data is easily accessible and understood by a broad array of stakeholders.**

Effective community conversations about school quality require collective interpretation of data and co-designed improvement solutions. Learning communities must communicate data in multiple languages,

using the principles of universal design for learning (UDL).<sup>2</sup> Communicating data in this way will require increased investment in data visualization as well as strategies for engaging stakeholders in data analysis and action planning.

**Invest in professional development and support related to data literacy.** Educators and system leaders need support and training to interpret data and effectively communicate with stakeholders. Pre-service and professional development programs should prioritize data literacy as a core skill for professional success.

**Remove punitive identification policies for school support.** Policymakers should remove policies that sort schools into categories and rank list them in order of performance. In their place, every district and school should use measures to identify growth areas and develop plans for improvement. Resources should be allocated to areas of greatest need and fund improvement strategies shaped heavily by communities with a clear commitment to shared ownership of implementation.

## Policy Ideas to Explore

- » Create a public-facing dashboard featuring district and school profiles that highlight strengths and growth areas on a range of quality indicators
- » Invest in data visualization strategies to communicate trends and insights in an easily digestible format for stakeholders of multiple languages and abilities
- » Prioritize professional development on data literacy and communication for school leaders and educators
- » Incentivize and educate district and school leaders to host frequent community conversations on district and school quality data and include the community in data-driven action planning
- » Rather than identifying only a small number of schools for improvement, ensure all schools identify growth areas and advance plans for improvement
- » Develop decision-making rules that do not rely on ranking schools to distribute resources for improvement

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<sup>2</sup> Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for accessibility and inclusion defined by CAST: <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

## TRAILBLAZER STORY **CHICAGO**

Chicago Public Schools is involved in an effort to engage its community in [accountability redesign](#). Even though its previous school accountability system, the School Quality Rating Policy, was a national example of how to use data to inform school communities, Chicago Public Schools heard feedback from the community that the School Quality Rating Policy could be improved to account better for systemic inequities and could be optimized to support critical aspects of the district's work. In response, the district has engaged with their community to develop a new system to better serve school communities and the district.

The work is proceeding with the following four goals:

- » **Provide a more complete picture of school performance and progress:** The new system will work to better portray the various ways in which schools have improved and are serving the needs of their diverse student populations.
- » **Improve the district's capacity to support schools:** Effective accountability systems are tied to strong school support, and the new system should ensure that every school is effectively supported.
- » **Provide clear information to parents and the public:** By better understanding what parents and other stakeholder groups want measured and reported, the new system should help each family choose the school that best meets their child's unique needs and advocate for the support their school community needs.
- » **Evaluate and report on district effectiveness:** The entire district must share responsibility for improvements in student outcomes, and the new accountability system will develop and report measures of district effectiveness that will enable conversations about district accountability.

## Transformation Theme Five

# Systems Change

*Shift from incremental, disconnected change efforts toward sustained transformation.*



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### Systems change efforts are complex.

The right conditions must work together effectively to support sustained transformation. This includes funding to build capacity, space to test new ideas and experts to share insights and help with system refinements. Unfortunately, learning communities face challenges in each of these areas. Current policies require leaders to build and test new ideas while adhering to the processes and practices of the traditional system. This not only drains funding and energy, it creates system incoherence that is felt by stakeholders across the system and fosters mistrust for change efforts.

These challenges are most profound in assessment and accountability. States seeking to design learner-centered assessment systems face a difficult path, shaped heavily by federal requirements for summative assessments. The Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority provides no guaranteed resources and expects states to show that the new assessment is comparable to the existing test that does not currently meet their needs. Summit participants expressed particular frustrations with notions of innovation that bound ideas to traditional reporting and evaluation requirements that have failed to drive equity in the current system. Accountability innovation is even more challenging due to limited innovation opportunities at the federal level.

## Key Strategies

**Rightsize the role of summative assessments to provide a check on the system, but allow room to explore more authentic and innovative assessment approaches to support instruction.** Stakeholders are increasingly concerned about the impact of current federal testing requirements on instructional time. States and districts face an uphill battle convincing those closest to the classroom to embrace additional testing to pilot new forms of assessment. Federal policymakers should explore strategies for alleviating the pressure to test every student, every year on every standard. A lighter federal footprint would present new opportunities to innovate on summative assessments while enabling states and districts to invest more time and money in developing formative and interim assessments that support student-centered instruction and learning.

**Permit state and local innovation around accountability.** Federal policymakers should provide state and district leaders the opportunity to test new approaches to accountability that better align to learner-centered approaches. A pilot would provide a controlled way to study and evaluate potential improvements in preparation for a future reauthorization of the Elementary

and Secondary Education Act. States should have the ability to align these efforts with assessment innovation to design and test a cohesive theory of change.

**Provide funding to explore and build proof points focused on new approaches to assessment and accountability.** Bridge funding is an essential catalyst to innovation, particularly when current federal and state funding streams must support continued administration of existing assessment and accountability systems. Federal and state leaders should prioritize investments that support community visioning and planning, technical development, field testing and refinements before a state is ready to permanently transition to the innovation system.

**Develop and fund an aligned national research agenda.** Policymakers and learning communities should invest in research and development to accelerate innovation. Researchers will need to study innovations as they emerge as well as communicate findings and support the design of new solutions. Independent evaluations bring necessary credibility to steer stakeholders away from unproven strategies and toward those that show promise.

## Policy Ideas to Explore

- » Increase state and federal funding for state assessment and accountability innovation, including the federal Competitive Grants for State Assessments program
- » Pilot strategies for rightsizing federal summative assessments, with emphasis on instructionally-useful assessments
- » Make the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority more conducive to innovation by adding a planning phase, allowing more time for implementation and refinement and encouraging new ways of demonstrating quality
- » Establish a federal accountability pilot that enables states and districts to co-create learner-centered accountability measures with their communities, adjust indicator weights and develop new strategies for promoting school and district improvement
- » Prioritize state and federal education research to study and evaluate the impacts of emerging learner-centered assessment and accountability systems on students and communities

## TRAILBLAZER STORY **UTAH**

The state of Utah is a national example for how to reorient an entire system of education toward a learner-centered paradigm. It began with the development of a [Portrait of a Graduate](#), which grounds all other student-centered learning efforts, and 2016 legislation that established a focus on personalized, competency-based education. The state went on to develop [statewide competencies aligned to the Portrait of a Graduate](#) and provided [grants](#) for learning communities looking to deepen personalized, competency-based learning.

The Utah State Board of Education is now tackling policy innovation across a range of issues, including [seat time](#), [credentialing](#), [assessment](#) and [accountability](#). It has developed guidance documents that support local leaders in understanding existing flexibility and has worked with the legislature to adjust the way in which

student learning and attendance is counted to support student-centered learning models. The state has also convened deep policy conversations regarding its strategic plan, assessment and accountability, leading to [significant policy movement](#).

To transform the state's education system, Utah has established a shared purpose, redefined learning goals, supported local communities in implementation of learner-centered models and is actively engaging stakeholders in reimagining assessment and accountability systems. The deep collaboration between local learning communities, the Utah State Board of Education and the legislature has created conditions for aligned, systemic transformation which will ultimately guide the direction of the state's school quality systems to serve as a national model for states seeking to develop learner-centered school quality systems.

# LEARNING AGENDA

Summit participants worked through many issues, some of which held more questions than answers. These questions represent the start of a learning agenda to enrich the design of future policies and systems focused on school quality.

- 1. What system design elements are needed to ensure communities center equity as they collaborate on a shared vision for education, identify school quality measures and design strategies to drive success?** The summit was rich with conversations about working with communities to set goals and develop strategies for learner success. Summit participants also felt it was critical for there to be guardrails in place where the interests of the community majority diverge from those who are historically marginalized within that community. Greater exploration is needed to balance the conditions for community ownership with these safeguards.
- 2. What types of input or system-level measures would communities and states find valuable for designing learning environments that drive community success?** Many summit participants expressed a desire to see input measures included in accountability systems so stakeholders benefit from a holistic picture of how well the system is designed to support learning. Some noted that the well-intended federal requirement for disaggregation of all indicators by student subgroups poses a barrier to the inclusion of system indicators such as educator satisfaction or access to advanced coursework. Participants wondered how data might be analyzed to make space for valuable school- and system-level indicators while ensuring that stakeholders can still interpret implications for student subgroups. Additionally, they wondered what measurement strategies might be deployed to generate comparability of these measures across the state.
- 3. How might we align assessment systems to learning frameworks that contain both transferable skills and discipline-specific academics?** Summit participants were unanimous in their call for systems that focus on knowledge and skills. Yet many questions emerged about how to design assessments that better integrate skills in addition to academic content. Integrated competency frameworks promise to give assessment designers the content, but what challenges might designers face as they seek to design aligned, quality assessments?
- 4. What might be the implications of moving away from testing every student, every year, on every standard?** While summit participants advocated for right-sizing the summative assessment footprint, they debated how best to implement one. They recognized that various approaches have important implications to consider. For example, adopting matrix sampling could pose limitations to collecting disaggregated data, whereas moving to grade-span testing could jeopardize the ability to measure student growth. Additionally, testing a smaller set of priority standards would require strategies for bundling standards and building instructional capacity to cover appropriate breadth in learning environments. Participants wanted to explore these tradeoffs more deeply to understand their impacts and uncover new options.



- 5. How might accelerating technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) or blockchain, impact assessment and accountability systems?** The rapid pace of development in transformative technologies such as AI and blockchain has created both significant excitement and uneasiness about how these technologies might impact education. These technologies could dramatically increase education systems' capacity through developments such as AI-supported scoring or the use of blockchain to improve the security and accessibility of student data. However, summit participants signaled a desire to approach such technologies with caution because there could be positive and negative impacts that we do not yet understand. These impacts could be both technical and cultural; for example, many technologies risk replicating the biases of their human creators.
- 6. How might new school quality systems interact with postsecondary admissions, career pathway navigation and educator preparation?** Making a transformative shift in how we credential learning would have significant implications for postsecondary education admissions and employment. There is a pervasive fear in learning communities that changes in K-12 transcripts and assessment data may create confusion or challenges for postsecondary and career partners. We must build on the [growing research base that postsecondary institutions are open to accepting competency-based credentials](#) and support those institutions in learning from each other about best practice for integrating competencies into admissions and hiring processes. Summit participants noted that a more holistic credential might illuminate learners' skills that wouldn't be uncovered in a traditional credential, thereby supporting greater access for learners traditionally overlooked and marginalized in postsecondary admissions. Additionally, summit participants had many questions about how preservice teacher preparation would need to shift to prepare the educator workforce to support student-centered learning and implementing student-centered school quality systems. Further conversations with postsecondary, workforce and other leaders are necessary to ensure alignment as the K-12 education systems change.



# THE PATH AHEAD

Bringing these recommendations to life will require coordinated commitment from across the education landscape. While the Trailblazers Summit provided space for many critical conversations around a more flexible and innovative future for school quality systems, these conversations must continue. Although this paper summarizes key themes related to school quality systems transformation, the depth of the conversations regarding equity and repairing harm caused by the current systems demand we deepen this effort in collaboration. We need dedicated structures to support systems transformation along the two following paths:

## Path I: National Network

We need a space to provide sustained focus and momentum. This network should bring the national learner-centered community together to facilitate the collaboration between the field and policymakers to drive systems transformation. The network should provide space to test new ideas (pilots) and investigate specific systems issues as they arise (working groups). Coordinated supports would help accelerate change and communicate impact.

### ADVANCING THE FIELD

**Pilots:** Opportunities for the field to engage in testing new models and approaches with deep support from the network.

- » Competency-based assessment pilot
- » Accountability pilots
- » Locally-driven models
- » More holistic measures for school quality

**Working Groups:** Deep dives on key topics critical to pilots such as:

- » Equity and inclusion
- » New funding models
- » Technical quality in measurement, including a key focus on rethinking comparability

### SUPPORTS

#### Capacity Building

- » Community and stakeholder engagement
- » Assessment and data literacy
- » Models for sustained transformation (funding, governance, collaboration)

#### Thought Leadership

- » Research agenda
- » Policy framework
- » Storytelling

## Path II: Coalition for Federal Change

Systems transformation will also require a coordinated strategy to inform federal leaders of state and local needs. A federal partnership is necessary to create the conditions for innovation that will permit and support communities to explore promising ideas. In the near term, the work should focus on building federal knowledge of the learner-centered movement and how it might inform new models for school quality systems. This deeper national perspective will ensure our nation's leaders are equipped when the time comes to build a new framework for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

### Short- and Medium-Term Horizons

- » Coordinated storytelling of state and local innovative approaches and impact
- » Policy and funding development (Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority, Competitive Grants for State Assessments)
- » Translation of federal opportunities for state and local leaders

### Long-Term Horizon

- » Development of a new framework for the reauthorization of ESEA

Through the Trailblazers Summit, practitioners, students, state leaders, district leaders and experts in the field worked together to form a collective vision for equitable, learner-centered assessment and accountability systems that can create opportunities for all students to be prepared for life after school. We must now work together at all levels of our education system to embrace the vision set at the summit and take steps toward sustainable, transformative change to our school quality systems.



Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

## Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the collective wisdom and collaboration of the youth, classroom, local, state and national leaders who contributed to the Trailblazers Summit. The following organizations partnered to design and facilitate the conversation at the summit. Collectively, we are working towards a coherent vision of equitable education systems capable of supporting all learners.

The Aurora Institute is a non-profit organization that seeks to transform education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all K-12 learners. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students each year through its work in policy, research, and field-building convenings. We aim to build a world where all students, but especially for those who have been historically underserved, attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve long-term success, contribute to their communities and advance society.

Big Picture Learning believes that all students can and should live lives of their own design. Lives supported by caring mentors and equitable opportunities to achieve their greatest potential. The core distinguishers that defined the earliest BPL network schools – advisory, interest-driven learning and learning with and in the community – continue to shape the schools we work with today. Today, Big Picture Learning’s impact can be found in over 260 schools and communities around the United States and across the world. We are activists who believe that the best practices can and always should be available to all learners.

The Center for Assessment, founded in 1998, strives to increase student learning through more meaningful educational assessment and accountability practices. We engage in deep partnerships with state and district education leaders to design, implement, and evaluate assessment and accountability policies and programs, and to design technically sound policy solutions to support important educational goals.

The Center for Innovation in Education, is a national non-profit working at the intersection of policy, practice, innovation and equity. We work with state and local partners to transform learning, assessment of learning and systems of accountability in service of expanding opportunity, voice, and belonging.

Envision Learning Partners (ELP) is a nonprofit consultant and PD provider dedicated to helping school districts engage every one of their students in a high-quality system of performance assessment. An innovative and balanced assessment system is a powerful lever for deepening learning and driving toward equitable outcomes because it focuses every layer of the district on improving the quality of student work.

The Great Schools Partnership is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit school-support organization working to redesign public education and improve learning for all students. Working at all levels of the education system, from the classroom to the statehouse, the Great Schools Partnership provides school and district coaching, professional development, and technical assistance to educators, schools, districts, organizations, and government agencies.

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.


Learner-Centered Collaborative is a non-profit that emerged from decades of experience in education. Recognizing the complexity of change, driven by what's best for learners, and informed by research and practice, we work closely with schools, districts, and states to find their new way forward. Leveraging our learner-centered framework, along with an expansive set of tools, we have helped hundreds of schools and over one million learners realize more personalized, authentic, competency-based, equitable, and inclusive learning experiences that put learners at the center. We won't be satisfied until all learners know who they are, thrive in the community, and actively engage in the world as their best selves.

Founded in 2015, the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) is a non-profit organization that conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. LPI seeks to advance evidence-based policies at the local, state, and federal levels that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, LPI works with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

MTC is a national nonprofit membership organization that helps make mastery learning—or competency-based education—available to all learners. Because this approach does not generate traditional metrics, we co-create uniquely flexible and scalable learning records to solve the challenge of credentialing. MTC accelerates equitable access to and widespread implementation of mastery learning models, empowering students to showcase competencies and share evidence of their learning.

Transcend is a national nonprofit that supports school communities to create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments. Transcend pursues its mission by directly supporting design processes and then shares the tools, models, and insights from this work across its national network of schools and through engaging top leaders in school systems, philanthropy, and policy. To date, Transcend has worked directly with 300+ schools and leaders in over 30 states, and its resources have reached thousands more across the country. Ultimately, Transcend works to be part of collective solutions that enable significant leaps in education so all young people can thrive in and transform the world.

The Trailblazer Summit was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the funders.

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## Co-Signers

The following organizations have signed on in support of these recommendations:



# APPENDIX A

## TRAILBLAZERS SUMMIT



To kickstart a national conversation, it was critical to bring together voices from across all levels of the system representing diverse demographics, geographies and roles. The aim was to build a summit that would achieve three goals:



Explore the intersections of high-quality learner-centered education and school quality systems



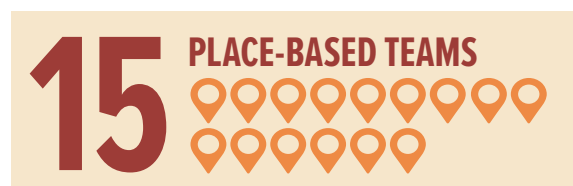
Define key priorities for the transformation of educational assessment and accountability systems



Gain key commitments from the field to advance progress toward learner-centered school quality systems

Led by KnowledgeWorks, 10 national partner organizations working at the nexus of learner-centered education and school quality systems joined together to help design and facilitate the summit.

Each partner recruited place-based teams, along with additional participants who were key to the conversation. These additional participants included parents and caregivers, representatives of postsecondary education, members of the civil rights community, technical experts and policymakers. The partners also contributed to the summit's design by surfacing themes that seemed ripe for transformation. With input from partners, KnowledgeWorks developed and administered a survey to pressure test emerging ideas (see [Appendix C](#) for the survey results).



Across three days, participants took part in rich working sessions to develop the recommendations presented in this report. The meeting began with an immersion into possibilities for the future of school quality systems that had been developed by KnowledgeWorks using research-based strategic foresight methodologies. Each participant dove into a scenario exploring what student-centered education and assessment and accountability systems might look like in ten years, depending on how different factors unfolding today might play out. Both a written narrative and visual images illustrating each future scenario helped participants imagine future possibilities. Beginning the conversation in this way helped participants look beyond what seems possible today and consider what it could look like to transform school quality systems to support student-centered learning. An overview of the four scenarios used during the summit appears below.



### **SCENARIO A** **Data-Driven Reciprocity**

Education focuses on developing students' agency in school and for life. Student-centered learning is widespread and deep, and school is very customized, with authentic input from learners and families. Responsibility and decision-making authority are widely shared. Assessment systems are highly personalized, and new technologies support a rich use of data in support of system-level learning and improvement for all schools.



### **SCENARIO B** **Vision-Based Accountability**

The economy and education systems have refocused around learner-driven preparation for STEM careers, with shared national standards reflecting broad input. Extensive learning ecosystems enable students to move across locations for relevant, applied learning. AI-driven, instructionally-embedded assessments provide regular feedback to educators. Trusted, supportive accountability systems use clear metrics related to workforce readiness and support innovation.



### **SCENARIO C** **Minimal Federal Footprint**

Amidst extreme political polarization that had stymied shared vision, the nation's education law was reformed to reduce the federal oversight role and focus on key indicators. There is now widespread support for student-centered learning but a lot of variation in what it looks like. In some communities, learner-centered education and next-generation balanced assessment systems drive equity, while in others equity has decreased.



### **SCENARIO D** **Monitoring Pathways**

Student-centered learning practices are widespread, but they are limited in scope to pre-set pathways. Out of concern for securing kids' futures, this menu of options is largely determined by the employment sector, which shares responsibility for education. School quality systems have a narrow focus on pathways' performance. Responsibility for them remains concentrated at the state and federal levels.



After exploring one scenario in depth, summit participants exchanged perspectives across the four scenarios to identify shared aspirations for future school quality systems. Shown below, these aspirations guided participants' work through the remainder of the summit.

## Shared Aspirations for School Quality Systems

- » Repair past harm to youth and communities and restore dignity to the people affected by school quality systems
- » Build trust, collaboration and cooperation among people involved at multiple levels of school quality systems
- » Reject incremental system progress and push toward transformation
- » Be holistic and locally co-created and co-designed, with guardrails, not mandates
- » Reflect a broad range of success measures
- » Utilize a variety of data and sources of evidence
- » Articulate shared targets and varied pathways
- » Be responsive to students, aligning hopes and outcomes
- » Ensure accountability is supportive, not punitive
- » Strengthen local accountability with state and federal support
- » Center youth and focus on their personal growth
- » Leverage reciprocal funding and accountability between education and workforce
- » Balance students' passions with economic incentives and realities
- » Balance a focus on students as individuals and students as members of a wider community
- » Customize to local culture and aspirations and be affirming
- » Use federal oversight to promote equity and to guard against racism and other systems of oppression

Summit participants spent the remainder of the time in deep conversation about key aspects of school quality systems. Through a series of structured working sessions, they developed big ideas that grounded the recommendations made in this report.

## Youth Experts

A core element of the convening was to ensure young people had the opportunity to position themselves as leaders in the space. Fifteen youth participants from across the nation joined the summit as experts who have lived experience in the classroom with current educational systems.

To prepare, youth participants met virtually during the month leading up to the summit. The pre-summit meetings created space for youth to determine collaboratively how they wanted to lead and participate. During the preparation meetings, youth worked together to build background knowledge; develop connections activities for convening participants; discuss and reflect on their experiences with and understanding of current assessment and accountability systems; and determine approaches for supporting inclusion at the summit. During the summit youth provided inclusivity guidelines for facilitators and participants; led connections activities; shared their experiences with and perspectives on assessment and accountability systems; and engaged authentically in recommendation development.

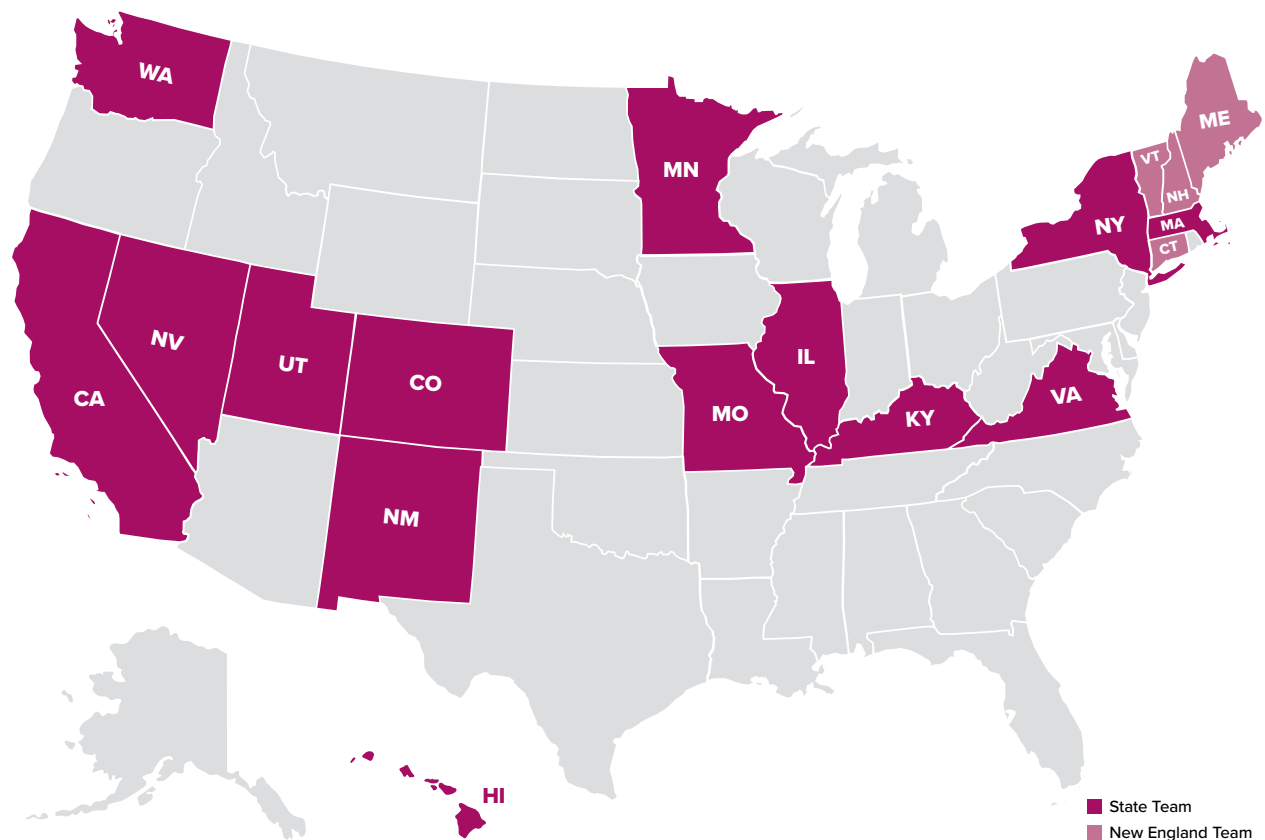
We are deeply grateful to the young people who took time and energy to be with us at the Trailblazers Summit.



## APPENDIX B

# TRAILBLAZER TEAM PROFILES

A key value we held when organizing the summit was to center those closest to the work. To do so, we invited people leading transformational change efforts and deep learner-centered practice to share their expertise at the summit. The following profiles share key work in Trailblazer learning communities that highlight where learner-centered practices and school quality transformation have already begun.



### CALIFORNIA

Shifting to a learner-centered paradigm requires new and different outcomes. The California Trailblazer team represented learning communities who are locally defining whole-learner outcomes, co-designing meaningful learning experiences and creating the conditions for all learners to know themselves, thrive in community and actively engage in the world as their best selves.

California school districts such as [Escondido Union School District](#) are engaging in a co-design process to engage their communities to create [Frameworks for the Future](#) that include their local vision, mission, values, learner profiles and learning models.

Listening to learners is foundational to learner-centered education and districts like Escondido Union School District and [Santa Ana Unified School District](#) are incorporating student forums and student surveys into their design and improvement process to ensure that their frameworks reflect the aspirations of the students.

Implementation of learning models that include experiences that are personalized, competency-based, inclusive, equitable and authentic are essential to achieve the whole-learner outcomes. Inspiring models such as the [design-thinking approach at Design 39 Campus](#) in [Poway Unified School District](#) and the [project-based emphasis from High Tech High](#) in San Diego are examples of bright spots in the learner-centered movement.

## CHICAGO

The [Chicago Public Schools](#) Trailblazer Team is involved in an effort to engage their community in [accountability redesign](#). Even though its previous school accountability system, the [School Quality Rating Policy](#), was a national example of how to use data to inform school communities, Chicago Public Schools heard feedback from the community that the policy could be improved to account better for systemic inequities and optimized to support critical aspects of the district's work. In response, the district has engaged with their community to develop a new system to better serve school communities and the district.

The work is proceeding with the following four goals:

1. Provide a more complete picture of school performance and progress: The new system will work to better portray the various ways in which schools have improved and are serving the needs of their diverse student populations
2. Improve the district's capacity to support schools: Effective accountability systems are tied to strong school support, and the new system should ensure that every school is effectively supported
3. Provide clear information to parents and the public: By better understanding what parents and other stakeholder groups want measured and reported, the new system should help each family choose the school that best meets their child's unique needs and advocate for the support their school community needs
4. Evaluate and report on district effectiveness: The entire district must share responsibility for improvements in student outcomes, and the new accountability system will develop and report measures of district effectiveness that will enable conversations about district accountability

## COLORADO

The Colorado Trailblazer team brought rich experience from the state's long history of work in learner-centered education and school quality innovation. In 2015, a grassroots network of districts from across the state began convening the [Student Centered Accountability Program](#). Currently including 18 member districts, the group's vision is to promote and implement an accountability system that is timely, meaningful, considers the whole child and engages community stakeholders in a continuous cycle of improvement and innovation supported by a network of peers.

In 2016, the [Colorado Education Initiative partnered with the Colorado Department of Education to support learning communities in embracing performance assessments aligned to learning](#)

[progressions](#). The project sought to increase educator capacity to develop, implement and locally score performance assessments in the service of increasing student agency. From around 2017 to 2018, [Denver Public Schools](#) undertook a broad reform agenda that included enhanced school-level autonomy for innovation, and [appears to have generated success on traditional measures of school quality](#). However, new school board members have reversed many of those policies in more recent years.

Legislation has played a key role in the development of more learner-centered approaches to school quality systems in Colorado. In 2019, SB 19-204 established a [grant program for districts seeking to establish local accountability systems](#) to supplement the state’s system. In the 2023 session, HB23-1241 established a [taskforce to study the statewide K-12 education accountability system](#) in order to address resource inequities contributing to student performance.

## HAWAII

The Hawai’i Trailblazer team shared several efforts underway to improve the quality and cultural responsiveness of assessments. Since 2018, the [Hawai’i Department of Education](#) has been pursuing new assessments through the [Innovative Assessments Project](#). While an initial application for the [Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority](#) was not accepted, the state was awarded a \$500,000 Competitive Grant for State Assessments to develop a new proposal. Through this process, the project has convened an Innovative Assessment Stakeholder Committee and an Innovative Assessment Design Team. Designers built tasks for a [task bank](#), which are currently being piloted, and are also developing implementation guides.

The state department’s [Office of Hawaiian Education](#) is also exploring the development of [culturally-responsive performance assessments using a six-part framework through Nā Hopena A’o or HĀ](#). These assessments are uniquely grounded in Hawaiian values, language, culture and history. Hawaiian-focused Charter Schools have developed a continua of capstone experiences, the [Hō’ike Capstone Project Continuum](#), aligned to the six-part framework as well as to their local Vision of the Graduate.

## KENTUCKY

The Kentucky Trailblazer team shared about [United We Learn](#), which is the vision for the future of education in Kentucky. The vision was built by an inclusive coalition of stakeholders and codified in the [United We Learn Report](#). From this report the United We Learn [Council](#) was formed. Through the council, the [Kentucky Department of Education](#) has brought together their own diverse set of stakeholders and they are exploring how they might create the future of education by advancing three connected ideas: vibrant learning experiences for every student; encouraging innovation in assessment and accountability; and collaborating closely with communities. This effort is supported with funds from the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program through the U.S. Department of Education.

Kentucky is working to [align the state’s assessment and accountability systems](#) to the United We Learn vision. The goal is equitable opportunities for each student by building support at both the local and state levels through an inclusive design process. The intent of the project is to create a new kind of multi-level accountability with students, parents, community and the state, based on emerging systems that accentuate the four habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation and reciprocity.

Kentucky has several groups focused on supporting the United We Learn vision and the idea of “more vibrant learning experiences for every student.” The [Kentucky Innovative Learning](#)

[Network](#) is a 40+ district community of practice designed to promote and share innovative practices. The state has large scale professional development initiatives with [PBLWorks](#) and through a statewide initiative to spread deeper learning strategies as well as a pilot program to redesign the credentialing of learning through micro-credentials for students in Algebra 1.

## MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Trailblazer team shared the work of the [Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment](#) (MCIEA), a partnership of eight public school districts and their teacher unions. Enabled by a line item in the legislative budget, the consortium districts joined to develop a fair and effective accountability system to offer a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test. The consortium is working to build proof points in their member districts in the hopes of deeper collaboration in the future with state leaders. The consortium utilizes performance assessments to better understand student learning as well as a dynamic school quality framework that incorporates a much richer set of quality indicators than what is valued by the state's current accountability system.

The MCIEA performance assessments are developed by Massachusetts educators with technical assistance from national partners. These standards-aligned, curriculum-embedded tasks allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do through real-world application. More than 140 performance assessments are publicly available in a [task bank](#). In their proposed model for accountability, this information on student learning is fed into a five-part framework to understand school quality.

The nationally recognized [School Quality Measures Framework](#) employed by MCIEA captures school strengths and areas of growth across a broad set of indicators that reflect school culture, student opportunity to learn and social-emotional outcomes, in addition to student learning as measured by performance assessments. The data is triangulated using student and teacher surveys and administrative information. It is visualized on a [dashboard](#) that is easily understood by school community stakeholders, making it a valuable tool for strategic planning and family engagement. School-based teams in MCIEA districts receive ongoing support for data analysis and operationalization.

## MINNESOTA

The Minnesota Trailblazer team represented the [Pillsbury United Communities](#) (PUC) who, for more than 140 years, have been building a connected network of community centers and innovative social enterprises that serve the North, East Phillips, Powderhorn and Cedar-Riverside neighborhoods of Minneapolis and diverse communities across the Twin Cities. As part of this work, PUC authorizes 18 charter schools in Minnesota, including eight high schools.

In 2022, PUC's [Office of Public Charter Schools](#) (PUC-OPCS) co-created a [school evaluation framework](#) with high school students, families, educators and community members from their eight charter high schools in the Twin Cities. The High School Equity Framework is an equity-focused framework that celebrates schools' innovative, anti-racist, student-centered and community responsive practices as they work toward educating students for the 21st century. As a result of advocacy efforts at the state level, PUC-OPCS received support from the Minnesota legislature in 2023 that allows them to pilot the High School Equity Framework with their eight schools. Over the next year, PUC-OPCS will be working toward developing a corresponding K-8 Equity Framework.

## MISSOURI

The [Success-Ready Students Network](#) (SRSN) was created in August 2022 to implement recommendations from the [Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's \(DESE\) Success-Ready Students Work Group](#). Funded by the [Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) and in-kind support from members, [SRSN members](#) include Missouri school districts, educational organizations, higher education and DESE. The SRSN uses the [Missouri framework for personalized, competency-based learning](#) to reimagine assessment and accountability systems in ways that put students at the center and ensure that every child can master and apply the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to be high school, college, career and workplace ready.

Creation of the SRSN by Missouri educators was grounded in ten years of [foundational studies](#) that promoted ideas such as competency-based learning and workforce development, which encountered barriers to implementation. In Spring 2022 a mechanism to address some of these barriers was addressed through passage of [Statute 161.214 School Innovation Waiver](#). This statute gives school districts a process by which to request, and authority to the State Board of Education to approve, waiver of certain state statutes, rules and regulations identified as barriers to student readiness and teacher success.

During the 2022-2023 school year, SRSN members, in partnership with DESE, utilized Statute 161.214 to seek State Board of Education approval of a [Demonstration Project with Waiver Request](#). The [approved request](#) provides signatory districts with a three-year waiver from select Missouri assessment and accountability requirements. Participating districts are using a growth-to-readiness, or mastery, approach and engaging in [professional development](#) that supports personalized instruction, assessment for learning, curriculum design and real-world learning. A Federal Assessment Waiver request will be submitted for the purpose of using research from the Demonstration Project to inform creation of next generation state assessment design in ways that empowers student agency.

## NEVADA

The Nevada Trailblazer team included people from throughout the education system, from state leadership to youth leaders, working to transform learning to be more student-centered. In 2017, Assembly Bill 110 created the opportunity for schools in Nevada to participate in a competency-based education network and pilot program. In 2020, the [Nevada Department of Education](#) convened a [Blue Ribbon Commission for a Globally Prepared Nevada](#), which was charged with putting together [recommendations](#) for learning pathways and imagining the future of education in the state. This work led to [legislative action \(Senate Bill 215\) as well as the establishment of a transformation effort](#) to move the entire state toward learner-centered practices.

The state engaged in [visioning](#), [assessment of their current policy environment](#) and [community-led action planning](#). The effort has grown to include the [Nevada Portrait of Learner Project](#) to ground the state's work in a shared vision for student success, a [competency design fellowship](#) to actualize the state's portrait in the classroom and the establishment of the [Nevada Future of Learning Network](#) to create a space for ongoing community engagement in transformation efforts.

## NEW ENGLAND

The New England Trailblazer team represented the collaborative work of six state education agencies from New England who have been working together for 15 years with [Great Schools Partnership](#) and the [New England Secondary School Consortium](#) to build [proficiency-based education systems](#) (some states use the language of competency or mastery) with deep personalization designed by teachers and students.

This collaboration is working to create accountability systems that not only identify areas in need of improvement, but also unpack why learning environments are getting specific results. This process is designed to deliberately [collaborate with families and community members](#) to ensure that a commitment to accountability is shared with all participants. This shifts the system from an external, top-down structure to a collaborative system that addresses learning needs and identifies necessary changes for improvement. This work is deeply guided by a commitment to [equitable learning](#) for each student.

## NEW MEXICO

The New Mexico Trailblazer team represented the work of intermediary and advocacy organizations, including [Future Focused Education](#) and [Transform Education New Mexico](#). In collaboration with the state agency, team members are supporting schools in becoming more responsive to the aspirations and needs of local communities. The history of public schooling in New Mexico, which includes Indian boarding schools that removed indigenous young people from their families, is complex. [Litigation](#) and other forms of pressure have caused the current system to acknowledge that it does not serve all learners or communities well. There is a real effort to look at the situation more holistically, including interest in community health, attention to career pathways and supporting the development of local strategies rather than pushing out a narrow set of top-down solutions.

This work includes the formation of a graduate profile that identifies not just the kinds of competencies and dispositions wanted for young people, but also the [school climate, experiences and community partnerships needed to support each young person](#). Cohorts of local teams have worked to co-create their own local graduate profiles attending to the inputs. Because teams of educators, business leaders, students, families and community members worked together in equitable ways to construct them, local profiles represent the codification of new partnerships and the full community's commitment to helping each young person find a path that is fulfilling, independent and also connected to their community.

State and local leaders continue to grapple with the ways in which punitive accountability toward a narrow set of standardized outcomes has limited local systems' ability to innovate in response to student needs and community priorities. The state is supporting this work by sponsoring and learning from local efforts. Together, they are thinking about how the state could do a better job ensuring equity while also moving away from relying on the standardized test data to illuminate inequity.

## NEW YORK

The New York Trailblazer team represented classroom, school, district and state leaders. For years, [New York City Public Schools](#) has supported schools in thinking differently about how to articulate their goals for learning and the ways students can demonstrate competence in those goals. The [Competency Collaborative](#), an opt-in, city-wide program, supports schools in developing culturally responsive and sustainable learning environments as well as competency-



based practices. The networking opportunities provided by the collaborative have supported the spread of best practices across K-12 schools and the opt-in, supportive approach has garnered authentic transformation in member schools.

The Competency Collaborative has provided thousands of educators with training on [grading for equity](#). New York City Public Schools has also placed its most innovative high schools in a single, networked district within the larger district so they can receive custom support and deepen their practice. As home to the largest district in the nation, New York City is an ideal location for innovation, as new ideas can be tested and iterated across the city's vast array of individual learning communities.

At the state level, leaders have been actively engaged in reviewing state policies regarding assessments and graduation. The state granted a waiver under special circumstances for select schools to replace the high stakes Regents examinations, the state's graduation assessments, with performance-based assessment tasks. While additional schools and districts have expressed interest in similar flexibility, the state has not yet extended this flexibility further. The state convened a [Blue Ribbon Commission](#) in 2019 to study national best practices around graduation policy and engage constituents across the state in conversation around graduation requirements. In 2022, the state received nearly three million dollars from the U.S. Department of Education's [Competitive Grants for State Assessment program](#) to pilot new performance-based assessment approaches.

## UTAH

The Utah Trailblazer team shared their efforts to reorient an entire state system of education to be learner-centered. It began with the development of a [Portrait of a Graduate](#), which grounds all other student-centered learning efforts, and 2016 legislation that established a focus on personalized, competency-based education. The state went on to develop [statewide competencies aligned to the Portrait of a Graduate](#) and provided [grants](#) for learning communities looking to deepen personalized, competency-based learning.

The [Utah State Board of Education](#) is now tackling policy innovation across a range of issues, including [seat time](#), [credentialing](#), [assessment](#) and [accountability](#). It has developed guidance documents that support local leaders in understanding existing flexibility and has worked with the legislature to adjust the way in which student learning and attendance is counted to support student-centered learning models. The state has also convened deep policy conversations regarding its strategic plan, assessment and accountability, leading to [significant policy movement](#).

To transform the state's education system, Utah has established a shared purpose, redefined learning goals, supported local communities in implementation of learner-centered models and is actively engaging stakeholders in reimagining assessment and accountability systems. The deep collaboration between local learning communities, the Utah State Board of Education and the legislature has created conditions for aligned, systemic transformation which will ultimately guide the direction of the state's school quality systems to serve as a national model for states seeking to develop learner-centered school quality systems.

## VIRGINIA

The Virginia Trailblazer team shared about the work of several districts, interrelated partnerships and networks dedicated to embracing student-centered approaches and developing dynamic assessment systems. The [Commonwealth Learning Partnership](#) is a network of education nonprofit organizations and schools of education across Virginia that share a collective goal to modernize the Commonwealth's K-12 education system.

The [Virginia Leads Innovation Network](#), funded by the Virginia Department of Education and local divisions, focuses on implementation of the [Profile of a Virginia Graduate](#) with specific intentions to address equity, deeper learning and learning engagement. The network supports annual cohorts of innovation teams from up to 35 divisions.

The [Virginia School Consortium for Learning](#) is an organization of 85 school divisions with a mission to support professional learning, balanced assessment and leadership at all levels including students. The Consortium has worked for over 15 years to build an [assessment model](#) for member divisions that provides them with job-embedded professional learning through teacher work teams from across their membership who build, field-test, vet and then implement a continuum of assessments.

Across Fairfax County, students are engaging with the [Fairfax County Public Schools \(FCPS\) Portrait of a Graduate](#) for PreK-12. Students develop Portrait of a Graduate skills through curricular experiences, extracurricular experiences and share their growth through formal and informal [Presentations of Learning](#). Schools and students determine their pathway for presentations and engage the school community to participate. The [FCPS Strategic Plan](#) highlights the division's focus on Portrait of a Graduate growth as a Goal for Academic Growth and Excellence. Division and school leaders, along with teachers across the county, are collaborating to support and celebrate student growth in these lifelong learning attributes.

## WASHINGTON

In Washington, student-driven learning is supported from the top via state education policy, and from the innovative work of young people and educators across the state. This approach to shared leadership is the result of dedication, innovation and collaboration of educators in Washington state.

In Washington, stakeholders from every level of the system are committed to student-driven learning. Coordinated by [Big Picture Learning](#), the Washington state Trailblazer team members hailed from learner-centered schools and communities across the state, including a student/parent/leader combination from [Highline Big Picture](#) and educator expertise from [Maritime High School](#), both part of [Washington's Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative](#); leadership representation from the Big Picture Learning [Native American Initiative](#); and executive leadership representation from the Washington State Board of Education.

The combined perspectives and experience of the Washington state team highlight expertise in competency-based learning with attention to family and student voice, multiple measures, community-connected learning and equity work in education.

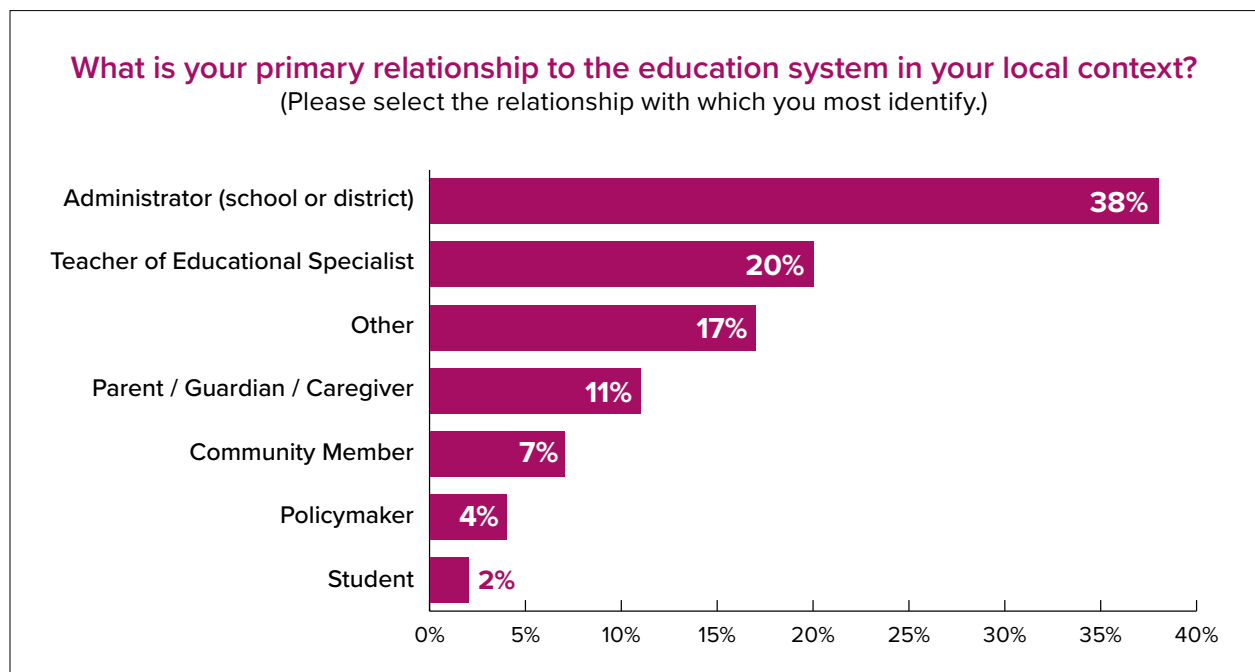
# APPENDIX C

## SURVEY RESULTS

### Convening Planning Survey

In planning the Trailblazer Summit, partners agreed that additional voices needed to be part of determining topics covered at the event. Those closest to the work could help select focus areas and problems of practice to discuss. We crafted a survey that we circulated to our collective networks asking education stakeholders to identify areas of school quality important to them as well as provide feedback on how they interact with current assessment and accountability systems. Results of the survey were used to identify the thematic areas on which participants worked at the summit.

The survey had 149 total respondents, a majority of whom were school or district administrators. Below is a breakdown by role of who responded to the survey.



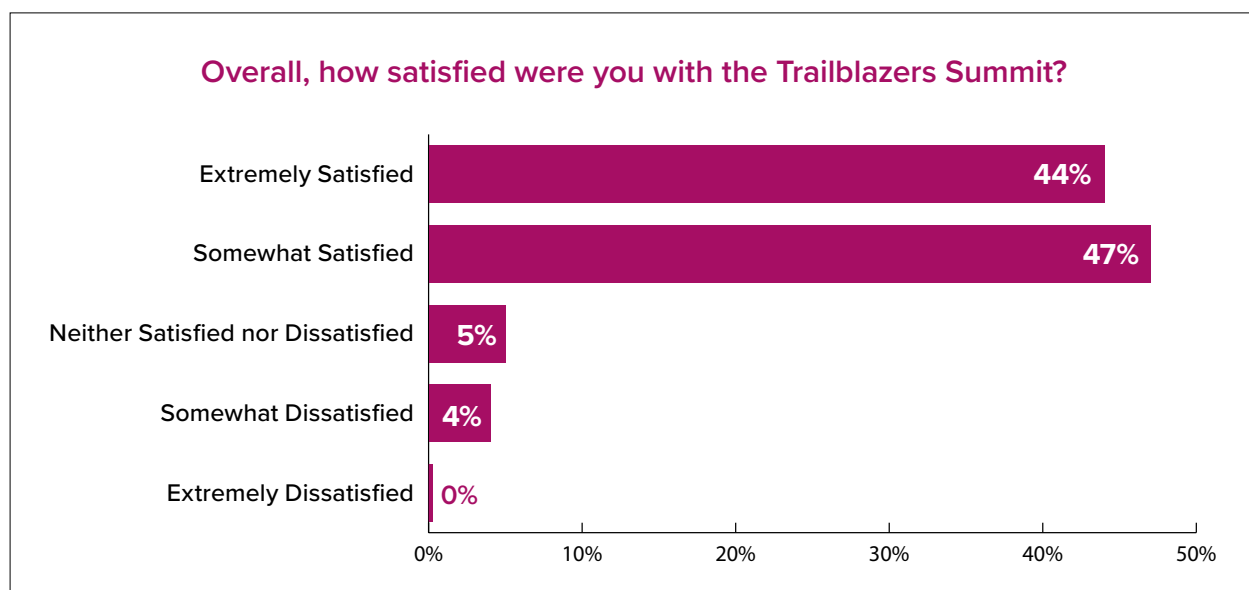
### Key Findings

- » Metacognitive skills development such as goal-setting and self-assessment is not encouraged by current systems at scale
- » A combination of traditional and performance-based assessment is the predominant classroom assessment strategy across district types
- » There is a high level of dissatisfaction with current state assessment systems but also a high commitment to common learning measures



## Post-Event Survey

We asked participants to take a survey following the summit to gauge their experience and inform both follow-up activities and future convening planning. The survey had 86 respondents, yielding a response rate of about 53%. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated that they attended all three days of the summit; the other 4% indicated attending at least two days. Below is a breakdown by role of who responded to the survey.



### Key Findings

- » 91% of respondents were satisfied with the Trailblazers Summit overall
- » 93% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the summit was centered around the right themes
- » 85% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the summit had the right stakeholders in the room
- » 89% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the summit had the right conversations to help map a path toward equitable, learner-centered assessment and accountability systems
- » A key takeaway that was expressed by multiple respondents was the importance of co-creation with local, community-based stakeholders to advance more student-centered assessment systems

If you could use one word to describe how you feel after participating in the Trailblazers Summit, what word would you choose?



[View the complete post-event survey summary](#)