

**PRESIDENTIAL MEMO**

---

# Supporting Students, Advancing Our Future




# Why We Must Act

**In an era marked by rapid technological progress and evolving economic demands, our education systems must adapt to meet the diverse needs of today's learners.** Change is necessary, not only for academic success but also to ensure students are able to navigate a complex and competitive world. Parents and students share this sentiment, demanding more real-world skill building in schools.<sup>1</sup> Yet, alarmingly, 55% of students do not feel that what they are learning is important to their future.<sup>2</sup> In addition, remediation rates in higher education are at an all-time high, while countless employers struggle to find candidates with vital skills such as complex problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity.<sup>3</sup> This disconnect underscores an urgent need for educational transformation.

We also face significant inequities in our education system that must be addressed, especially as advances in technology threaten to widen the divide. Many students from historically underserved communities encounter barriers that limit their access to high-quality resources – both technological and non-technological – as well as their access to challenging learning pathways that align with their interests. If we do not act proactively to address these opportunity gaps, we risk leaving vulnerable populations further behind.

To drive meaningful change, we must encourage strategic collaboration among the federal government and state and local actors. This memorandum outlines four key areas where immediate and long-term change is needed: K-12 assessment and accountability systems, high school transformation, educator recruitment and retention and a federal research agenda. An emphasis on each of these areas would ensure a more holistic and personalized educational experience for all students, better preparing them for success in an ever-evolving world.



**Personalized, competency-based learning** means meeting each student at their own level, challenging them with high expectations for academic achievement and growing student agency through:

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



## RECOMMENDATION

# Assessment and Accountability Systems

Federal law requires states to assess students annually from grades three to eight and once in high school on reading and math, as well as in select grades for science, and to assign substantial weight to these measures in state accountability systems. While these policies aim to provide much-needed transparency on student outcomes, they have left a heavy footprint in classrooms where stakeholders have long questioned their value. Perhaps their greatest concern is the overreliance on end-of-year, standardized assessments that have little instructional value and are not designed to measure mastery of deeper knowledge and durable skills.

Many states have demonstrated an interest in adapting their current assessment and accountability systems to better align to student-centered instructional approaches. However, the absence of a clear federal policy pathway to bring such systems to scale makes transformation challenging. Recent federal investments in assessment innovation have signaled an openness to change, but policy shifts are needed to ensure investments have a lasting impact.

To address this issue, we encourage the federal government to advance the following actions in support of state development and scale of assessment and accountability systems that align to student-centered learning approaches.

### Administrative Action Items That Can Be Taken in the First 100 Days

#### Expand CGSA and establish a shared learning network

The Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA) program is a critical source of funding for states seeking to improve their assessments and better meet the needs of students. Over the past two competitions, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has awarded 21 grants to help states fund assessment innovations that emphasize multiple sources of evidence or more engaging, competency-based tasks. Despite nearly tripling the size of the competition over the past decade, only

half of the states that applied during this last round received an award. With demand for assessment innovation at an all-time high, the President must urge Congress to increase funding for CGSA. In the incoming Administration's fiscal year 2026 Budget Request, we encourage an increase in appropriations for the State Assessment Grant program to \$425 million, ensuring roughly \$50 million in funding for the competitive portion of this program. Additionally, we encourage reserving \$500,000 of the CGSA funds to allow ED to establish a shared state learning network to boost state capacity and identify and disseminate best practices in assessment development and implementation.

## Longer-Term Action Items

### Host a convening on K-12 assessment and accountability

We encourage the incoming Administration to host a series of convenings to encourage states and federal leaders to identify what is and is not working with K-12 assessment and accountability systems. This should include White House staff, Congressional leaders and representatives from states across the country that are reimagining assessment and accountability structures. Participants should include states that have yet to receive funding through CGSA or approval to participate in the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA). Conversations will help leaders better understand the challenges states face when navigating these programs.

Using the input collected at these convenings, we request that the incoming Administration work with Congress on the following:

- » **Pass a bill that aligns CGSA and IADA:** While federal and state leaders are trying to create coherence between CGSA and IADA, patchwork efforts fall short of Congress' original intention to seamlessly advance assessment innovation. States still face multiple, separate applications, reporting requirements and misaligned timelines. Additionally, the path to scale and sustain work statewide is not always clear — a risky bet for states working to build and advance a shared vision with stakeholders. An integrated approach is needed to better support states and district leaders as they embark on this necessary work.
- » **Launch an accountability pilot:** States all too often struggle to design a coherent accountability system that aligns to their state's vision for student success while still satisfying federal requirements. This is especially evident in states pursuing personalized, competency-based approaches that emphasize a holistic picture of student learning, including mastery of academic knowledge and durable skills. We believe that accountability systems must evolve to better align with state goals, incorporate community input and provide a complete view of student performance, ultimately supporting schools in addressing individual student needs. To begin to support these goals, we encourage the incoming Administration to work with Congress to establish an accountability pilot so states can explore promising strategies such as district accountability and inclusion of input-based and local accountability measures.



## RECOMMENDATION

# High School Transformation

Reimagining high schools and their related structures is crucial for aligning K-12 education with the skills needed in today's workforce. Personalized, competency-based approaches to graduation requirements, diplomas and credentials are an essential lever for high schools seeking to expand the types of flexible learning experiences available to students, as well as the types of credentials they can earn prior to graduation. This includes formal opportunities such as dual credit programs, work-based learning and career and technical education (CTE), as well as informal experiences like capstone projects and community engagement that help students develop the types of durable skills<sup>4</sup> valued by postsecondary education, business and industry.

We encourage the Administration to prioritize the following actions to create more relevant and effective high schools that prepare students to meet the demands of a rapidly changing job market.

### Administrative Action Items That Can Be Taken in the First 100 Days

#### Elevate examples of student-centered high school transformations

There are numerous effective state and district examples of high school transformation that incorporate personalized, competency-based learning, such as Kettle Moraine in Wisconsin, where the High School of Health Sciences (HS2) has seen 95% of graduates pursue further

education or careers in health sciences since its establishment in 2014.<sup>5</sup> HS2 enhances career-focused opportunities through competency-based education, community partnerships and flexible scheduling, allowing students to gain meaningful career exposure and earn health science credits through a blend of in-class and external learning experiences.

To bring greater attention to such strong initiatives and foster innovation nationwide, we urge the President-elect to do the following:

- » Issue an Executive Order within the first 100 days requiring ED and the U.S. Department of Labor to elevate state and district examples of high school transformation that center the essential knowledge and durable skills critical for success in the 21st century.
- » Convene experts on competency-based education and durable skills in the context of high school transformation alongside practitioners who are leading this work to create a repository of best practices. Participants should also help federal leaders identify future priorities for federal research, grants and policy initiatives. This convening will ensure that exemplary states, school districts and organizations can easily access high-impact strategies to advance high school transformation.

### **Propose a new federal CTE personalized learning program for rural districts**

We urge the incoming Administration to propose a new \$500 million CTE program focused on the expansion of personalized learning experiences for underserved rural districts in its fiscal year 2026 Budget Request. Rural districts often face unique challenges in providing students with access to high-quality career and technical education, which is vital for workforce preparation. States across the country, such as Vermont, North Dakota, Illinois and South Carolina, have policies on the books to support the innovative use of career and technical education in the context of personalized learning.<sup>6</sup> Funding a dedicated CTE program for rural districts ensures that all students, regardless of their location, have the chance to advance personalized and competency-based practices aligned to today's economy.

### **Invest in career connected high schools**

We urge the incoming Administration to provide \$50 million to empower more school districts and community colleges to implement competency-based approaches in CTE,

moving away from the traditional reliance on Carnegie Units and seat-time requirements that prioritize time spent in class over actual mastery of academic knowledge and durable skills. The adoption of a competency-based learning model enables students to progress at their own pace, receiving targeted supports to ensure they master the material and graduate ready for success in the workforce.

## **Long-Term Action Item**

### **Improve postsecondary admissions**

While change is needed in our K-12 systems, an enhanced focus at the postsecondary level on the value of competency-based education and durable skills is critical. This is necessary to build student and caregiver confidence that postsecondary institutions understand the value of a competency-based degree as well as to provide students with seamless educational experiences throughout K-16. To enhance this alignment, we request the following:

- » **Host a convening on postsecondary admissions:** We request the incoming Administration to organize a national convening to raise awareness about best practices in postsecondary admissions. This convening would explore strategies that colleges and universities are using to encourage a greater emphasis on competency-based K-12 programs that ensure graduates enter college without gaps in knowledge and skills acquisition. This event should bring together K-12 and higher education leaders, admissions officers and policymakers to foster collaboration and share innovative strategies.



## RECOMMENDATION

# Educator Recruitment and Retention

The national K-12 teacher shortage crisis is one of the most pressing issues in education, with 86% of public school districts reporting challenges hiring teachers in the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>7</sup> Addressing this shortage is crucial to maintaining quality education and ensuring that every student receives the attention and support they need to succeed. Personalized, competency-based learning systems empower educators to design vibrant learning experiences that more effectively address student learning needs. Research indicates that educators who have greater agency in their roles are more satisfied.

Evidence from regions like Arizona supports this. Our partners at Yuma Union High School District are experiencing their highest retention rate in 15 years, and Ector County Independent School District in Texas has significantly reduced teacher vacancies from 350 in 2019 to just 29 in 2024. Furthermore, in North Dakota and Arizona, 68% of educators implementing personalized learning report increased job satisfaction, an indication that investments in these approaches can lead to improved teacher retention and a more stable education workforce. To build a strong educator pipeline with expertise in personalized and competency-based education, we encourage the Administration to prioritize the following actions.

### **Administrative Action Items That Can Be Taken in the First 100 Days**

#### **Increase funding for competency-based teacher preparation and ‘grow your own’ programs**

We urge the incoming Administration to double funding for the Teacher Quality Partnership Program as part of its fiscal year 2026 Budget Request – with a priority for teacher preparation and “grow your own” programs that aim to build a pipeline of educators ready to lead in personalized, competency-based learning environments. Traditional teacher preparation programs do not equip educators with the competencies necessary for success

in these innovative learning environments, requiring many schools to retrain educators when they enter the profession. At the same time, many school districts face an alarming teacher diversity gap that further challenges their ability to hire and retain a high-quality workforce. In 2021, students of color made up 55% of public school students nationally, yet only 24% of public school teachers identified as people of color.<sup>8</sup> Greater investment in innovative teacher preparation initiatives and “grow your own” programs that recruit and prepare teachers from the communities in which they will teach is critical to addressing these challenges.

### **Leverage federal professional development funding in support of competency-based education**

» **Elevate best practices:** To advance professional development opportunities aligned to competency-based education, we urge the incoming Administration to develop and issue guidance to help states and districts leverage Title II, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Strategic investments in state activities, such as the development

of educator competencies, the facilitation of networks to build educator capacity for personalized, competency-based learning and the development of assessment literacy, are critical for building and sustaining a high-functioning educator workforce. Similar investments are needed at the district level to help educators implement competency-based learning frameworks, develop engaging formative assessments and cultivate strategies for customized student supports.

» **Expand the Supporting Effective Educator Development Program:** The Administration should also double funding for the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program as part of its fiscal year 2026 Budget Request and establish a funding priority for evidence-based strategies that enhance teacher satisfaction and retention. This program can be a critical tool for deepening the nation’s educator pipeline and maximizing educator effectiveness. Increased funding will bolster growing initiatives that better equip educators for success in next-generation learning environments, ultimately improving retention and contributing to a more stable and effective teaching workforce.



## RECOMMENDATION

# Federal Research Agenda

Education research plays a crucial role in determining what practices to emphasize in K-12 education. Both policymakers and practitioners benefit when they understand what works and what does not work in the classroom. This is especially true for those seeking to adopt innovative and student-centered education practices that foster stronger postsecondary and workforce readiness outcomes for students, including personalized, competency-based education.

Fortunately, the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) was established to fund high-quality research into evidence-based practices that inform practice at every level of the education system. However, IES often lacks sufficient resources to fund education research on the topics and at the volume our practitioners need to effectively embrace the rapid shifts influencing education. This is especially true of research into competency-based education and other innovative approaches that aim to keep pace with the evolving demands of the workforce.

The incoming Administration can bolster federal research capacity in alignment with national education and workforce trends by prioritizing the following actions.

### Administrative Action Items That Can Be Taken in the First 100 Days

#### Prioritizing investments in research for innovative education practices

We urge the incoming Administration to propose funding and authorities, as part of the fiscal year 2026 Budget Request, to expand research and evidence-based practices on innovative educational approaches, including:

- » **Prioritize additional funding for the Seedlings to Scale grant program:** The Seedlings to Scale (S2S) grant program was first initiated by IES with fiscal year 2023 funding. This program, which is set to make its initial awards in the coming

months, has great promise to support the growth and scale of promising ideas. This program emphasizes student-centered ideas developed and tested in partnership with communities. Dedicated and increased funding for this initiative in the Budget Request is critical to advancing innovative approaches that have been vetted and supported broadly by local communities.

- » **Propose funding for and the passage of the NEED Act:** The bipartisan New Essential Education Discoveries (NEED) Act has been introduced the past two congressional sessions. This legislation would create a National Center for Advanced Development in Education at IES authorized at over \$500 million annually to develop and disseminate innovative, cutting-edge practices. The S2S program highlighted above is partially designed on this approach. We request that the incoming Administration call for the passage of the NEED Act and propose substantial funding for it through the Budget Request.

- » **Propose funding for and the passage of the Developing and Advancing Innovative Learning Models Act:** During this past Congress, the Developing and Advancing Innovative Learning Models Act was introduced. This legislation would authorize over \$500 million annually to spur research and development of innovative learning models that support a focus on personalized education. This new authority, coupled with dedicated funding and an emphasis on community co-creation, would build capacity and fuel demand for dynamic and flexible learning environments that prioritize mastery through personalized learning.

## Conclusion

America's education systems must evolve in response to technological shifts and economic disruption. The issues identified in this document – K-12 assessment and accountability systems, high school transformation, educator recruitment and retention and a federal research agenda – represent natural and logical opportunities for the federal government to support and advance the work being done by states and districts across the country to advance student-centered and competency-based education practices. KnowledgeWorks urges the adoption of these recommendations as the incoming Administration begins to lay out its education and postsecondary and workforce readiness agenda.

## Endnotes

1. Pathways Matter to Families. (ExcelinEd, 2021)  
[ExcelinEd.PathwaysMatterToFamilies.Findin\\_xlVK.pdf](https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ExcelinEd_PathwaysMatterToFamilies_Findin_xlVK.pdf)
2. Walton Family Foundation-Gallup Voices of Gen Z Study: Year 2 Annual Survey Report. (Gallup, 2024)  
[https://nextgeninsights.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Walton\\_Gallup\\_Voices-of-Gen-Z-Year-2-2024-Final-Report.pdf](https://nextgeninsights.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Walton_Gallup_Voices-of-Gen-Z-Year-2-2024-Final-Report.pdf)
3. Title for Endnote. Grad Class Database. (ACT, 2023)  
<https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/services-and-resources/data-and-visualization/grad-class-database-2023.html>  
Future of Jobs Report. (World Economic Forum, 2023)  
[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf)
4. The High Demand for Durable Skills. (America Succeeds, 2021)  
<https://americasucceeds.org/policy-priorities/durable-skills>
5. Redesigning High School Around Competency-based Education and Pathways at Kettle Moraine. (KnowledgeWorks, 2023)  
<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/high-school-competency-based-education-healthcare-wisconsin/>
6. Connecting the Dots: Linking Student-Centered Learning and College and Career Pathways. (KnowledgeWorks, 2022)  
<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/connecting-dots-student-centered-learning-college-career-pathways/>
7. Most Public Schools Face Challenges in Hiring Teachers and Other Personnel Entering the 2023-24 Academic Year. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).  
[https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/10\\_17\\_2023.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/10_17_2023.asp)
8. Eliminating Educator Shortages through Increasing Educator Diversity and Addressing High-need Shortage Areas. (U.S. Department of Education, 2023)  
<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-initiatives/raise-the-bar/raise-the-bar-policy-brief-2>



# KnowledgeWorks, advancing policies that promote transformation in the education system

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 25 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.

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

We work closely with leaders at all levels of the system to design policies and practices that meet the needs of each student. We are encouraged by the growing demand from visionary states and school districts to expand personalized, competency-based learning. An active and useful partnership with the Federal government is key to accelerated adoption and impact. Federal and state leaders must work together to develop policies and align resources to create the pathway to transformation.

Together, they can identify best practices and execute a transformation strategy that aims to develop equitable, relevant and authentic education systems nationwide. KnowledgeWorks believes that through personalized, competency-based learning, each student – including students of color, students with learning differences, students from low-income families, English-language learners and other students our systems often leave behind — can have access to an education experience that ensures lifetime success.