The Future is Now
Findings of the NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission
The Future is Now: Findings of the NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission

BY SUNNY DEYE

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization dedicated to serving the lawmakers and staffs of the nation’s 50 states, its commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado and Washington, D.C.
NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission

The future of learning and innovative policy options that enable student-centered learning to thrive were at the center of a national dialogue among state legislators participating in the NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission. The commission is a bipartisan group of state legislators and legislative staff that studied legislative policy options, obstacles and recommendations to help states move forward with systems that support student-centered learning opportunities. Formed in 2017 with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the commission explored policies that allow students to learn anytime, anywhere and have ownership over their learning.

Throughout this work, the commission prioritized understanding how student-centered learning provides opportunities for ALL students, but especially underserved students, to be successful in ways they could not in a traditional school system. Underserved students include those who may be several grade levels behind, have learning disabilities or speak English as a second language. The goal is to tailor instruction to each student’s strengths, needs and interests to provide flexibility and supports. To succeed, students must learn to be their own best teachers.

The principles laid out in this report represent a framework for policymakers to consider as they upgrade and remodel their education systems to ensure that today’s students are prepared for the future. These policy supports include competency-based learning and mastery-based progressions, personalized learning, and expanded learning opportunities, along with new approaches to classroom and school building design and staffing.

Learn more at www.ncsl.org/research/education/ncsl-student-centered-learning-commission.aspx
Executive Summary

The rate at which the world is changing has sped up dramatically. With technological advances driving exponential change, and a rapid move toward a knowledge-based economy, we must remodel our education system to prepare young people for the future. Today’s students must be flexible and adaptable enough to adjust to rapid changes in careers and the expectation of constant learning. Because the jobs of the future will require new skills and more and different education than a high school diploma alone, it is critical that we upgrade our state education systems. We must prepare students to thrive in a future economy that will look very different from today.

Our economy depends on a well-educated workforce that will be competitive in the global marketplace. The world is changing rapidly, and education is how we prepare students for the future. While the future of work is uncertain, commission members learned that work is being reshaped by two significant drivers of change: the rise of smart machines and the decline of the full-time employee. Mechanical processes advanced through artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics are increasingly performing tasks that people carry out today. Employers are accessing people with specialized skills on the open market instead of employing people full time. These shifts indicate that by 2040, we will likely see a significant decline in full-time employment, with more people piecing together careers that change dramatically over time.1 Our challenge today is to prepare EVERY student to succeed in an economy where many of the jobs they will hold do not yet exist.

FROM THE COMMISSION

“This is what employers keep asking about in their future employees, their willingness to learn on the job because the jobs change so quickly.”

—Maine Representative Richard Farnsworth (D)

Education has the potential to be the single most important economic, social and justice equalizer. Indeed, education is perhaps the most important function of government and is the foundation of our society and must be accessible to all. As the U.S. Supreme Court noted 65 years ago in Brown v. Board of Education, education is a principal instrument in awakening children to cultural values, preparing them for later professional training, and helping them adjust normally to their environment. Our system can alleviate or exacerbate issues of equity, the rich/poor divide and the rural/urban divide, and can encourage citizens to connect rather than isolate themselves. If we don’t evolve, too many students—especially those from traditionally underserved populations—will get left behind because the traditional education system doesn’t meet their needs.

Upgrading our current system of education is the responsibility of state legislators. It is crucial that we do it well, keeping learners as the priority over political tensions and adult challenges. We can’t afford to be stuck in the past. Our global economy demands well-informed adults who have analytic and participatory skills, and are flexible, adaptable and see themselves as lifelong learners. With an increasingly diverse set of learners entering our K-12 schools, we need to change our expectations: Instead of students being ready for system, the system must be ready to serve each student.
Commissioners suggest student-centered learning as the guiding principle for the necessary upgrades to our system of education.

During the course of our work, we found that the term “personalized learning” is often used interchangeably with “student-centered learning.” Personalized learning is where instruction is tailored to each student’s strengths, needs and interests. It includes enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn, and provides flexibility and supports to ensure mastery at the highest levels.²

We also found various uses of terms related to “competency-based learning,” including “mastery-based learning” and “proficiency-based learning.” These terms refer broadly to learning progressions based on mastery of content rather than passage of time.³

As the world around us changes at an unprecedented pace, state legislators have an opportunity to innovate now to create a future that supports every learner. This report outlines a series of principles and policy options for state legislators to elevate state policy discussions related to student-centered and personalized learning. It outlines possible actions to support schools and students in an education system that must be remodeled and upgraded for the future.

FROM THE COMMISSION

“Learning to learn is a fundamental skill set. Every community can take the basic principles of student-centered learning and design it in a way that works for their kids and their community.”

—Utah Senator Ann Millner (R)
Principle One: Set Vision

STRATEGIES

- Convene stakeholders.
- Communicate vision.
- Redefine educated citizen.

Convene Stakeholders

State legislators play a critical role in raising public awareness about the need to prepare students for a future that looks very different from today. With increasing employer demands for flexible workers, there is a risk to keep doing what we do now. Legislatures can make this issue a state priority by organizing and participating in powerful partnerships among key stakeholders, including legislators, governors, superintendents, state boards of education, community-based organizations, teachers, students, parents and business leaders.

Communicate Vision

Creating or participating in a statewide task force, advisory board, commission or other entity that can take a long-term view of the future of education indicates bipartisan support, brings statewide visibility to the challenge, and raises awareness among the media and constituents.
Redefine Educated Citizen

Legislators can set the vision for—and codify the efforts of—these stakeholder groups. Examples include the South Carolina Profile of the Graduate, the Virginia Profile of a Graduate, and the Washington state Mastery-based Learning Work Group. When legislators establish or participate in such a process, we send the message that upgrading our education system to meet the demands of the future is a state legislative priority.

State Examples

- **Montana HB 387 (2019)**: Offers funding to qualifying districts to create Advanced Opportunity Programs that will support advanced educational opportunities as well as students’ individualized pathways. **Montana HB 351 (2019)** provides a funding incentive for schools to create Transformational Learning Programs customized to address each student’s strengths, needs and interests. It includes legislative intent stating that, pursuant to Article X, Section 1, of the 1972 Montana Constitution, transformational learning is an appropriate means of fulfilling the people’s goal of developing the full educational potential of each person.

- **New Hampshire SB 276 (2019)**: Establishes a plan to achieve the state’s workforce needs, including accelerated entry into the workforce, reduced employer training costs, improved new employee success, reduced student time and cost for postsecondary education credentials, and contributions to long-term economic growth. Defines “career pathway system” as a system that spans high school and postsecondary education, blending rigorous academic and career instruction and offering focused career guidance. This includes high-quality work-based learning experiences culminating in postsecondary industry credentials, licensure and career-related technical skills. The “career readiness credential” includes completion of career and technical education courses, enrollment in concurrent or dual enrollment courses, internships, apprenticeships and extended learning opportunities.

- **Washington HB 1599 (2019)**: Requires the state board of education to convene a mastery-based learning work group to inform the governor, the legislature and the public about barriers to mastery-based learning. This means students advance upon demonstrated mastery of content; competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students; assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students; students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs; and learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include applying and creating knowledge along with developing important skills and dispositions.

- **Virginia SB 336 (2016)**: Directs the state board of education to develop and implement a Profile of a Virginia Graduate in consultation with stakeholders representing elementary and secondary education, higher education, and business and industry, including parents, policymakers and community leaders. The profile identifies the knowledge and skills students should attain during high school to be successful contributors to the economy, giving due consideration to critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication and citizenship. It also emphasizes the development of core skill sets in the early years of high school and establishes multiple paths toward college and career readiness for students to follow in the later years of high school. These could include opportunities for internships, externships and credentialing.

- **South Carolina HB 4936 (2015)**: Codifies the Profile of the Graduate as the educational goals for all high school graduates and the standards and areas of learning by which these goals are measured. In addition to traditional college and career readiness goals, the legislation includes world class skills such as creativity and innovation; critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration and teamwork; communication, information, media, and technology; and knowing how to learn. Students also must be offered reasonable exposure, examples and information on the state’s vision of life and career characteristics, such as integrity, self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, work ethic and interpersonal skills.
District Highlight: Digital Portfolios

Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Ky.: The districtwide Backpack of Success Skills initiative provides a platform for students to archive digital learning “artifacts” — assignments, creations, reflections, recordings and other files showing effort, challenge and accomplishment. The digital platform allows students to enter pictures, videos and a written reflection of what they have learned in five key areas — emerging innovator, productive collaborator, effective communicator, globally and culturally competent citizen, and prepared and resilient learner. Students collect evidence each year for each of the five skills. In fifth, eighth and 12th grade, students defend their growth and readiness in each of the five success skills before a panel using those pictures, videos or written reflection.

FROM THE COMMISSION

“A student-directed portfolio that students build themselves and put the work into becomes a product that can be the evaluation for a job or a next learning opportunity. It says what I wanted to accomplish, what I learned and what I want to do in the future. The students themselves begin to shape a path.”

—New Hampshire Senator Jay Kahn (D)

Principle Two: Prioritize Equity

STRATEGIES

- Identify underserved students.
- Use data and reporting to prioritize equitable access to educational opportunity.
- Direct resources toward equitable access.

Identify Underserved Students

Commission members believe that states must prioritize equity to help all students achieve readiness for the future. Educational equity is the assurance that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need during their education regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income. The commission encourages state legislators to directly identify and address the needs of underserved students, and be open to discomfort as they lead the charge toward educational equity.

Use Data and Reporting to Prioritize Equitable Access to Educational Opportunity

State legislation can require disaggregated data and plans to address access to quality public education with a focus on traditionally underserved students. School-level disaggregated data could reveal the per-
State Legislation Highlight

Massachusetts SB 2350 (2019)

The Student Opportunity Act provides a $1.5 billion new investment in Massachusetts public education, with a focus on school districts that serve high percentages of low-income students.

Updates the school funding formula:

- Increases special education enrollment and cost assumptions.
- Increases funding for English learners that is differentiated by grade level.
- Addresses the needs of districts educating high concentrations of low-income students by providing additional funding based on the share of low-income students in each district.
- Increases guidance and psychological services to support expanded social-emotional supports and mental health services.

Improves data collection and reporting:

- Establishes a Data Advisory Commission to help improve the use of data at the state, district and school levels to inform strategies that strengthen teaching, learning and resource allocation. The goal is to ensure greater financial transparency, including tracking funding for low-income students and English learners.

Provides new funding to improve student outcomes and close opportunity gaps:

- Establishes the 21st Century Education Trust Fund to provide flexible funding to districts and schools pursuing creative approaches to student learning and district improvement.
- Requires school districts to develop and make publicly available plans for closing gaps in student performance, including specific goals and metrics to track success.
- Requires the secretary of education to collect and publish data on student preparedness in each district and high school for post-graduate success in college and the workforce.

Identifies education policy areas requiring further analysis:

- Establishes a Rural Schools Commission to investigate the unique challenges facing rural and regional school districts with low and declining enrollment. The commission will make recommendations for further updates to help impacted districts and communities.

FROM THE COMMISSION

“To ensure that all students have access to a strong high-quality education, we must provide all districts with the resources to meet their students’ needs. Equally, if not more important, is ensuring that those resources are spent in ways that serve our neediest students. The Student Opportunity Act is carefully drafted to achieve these goals.”

—Massachusetts Representative Alice Peisch (D)
percentage of a school’s students who are affected by opportunity gaps. This could include students who are economically disadvantaged, racial or ethnic minorities, qualify for special education or accommodations with Individualized Education Plans or 504 plans, and English learners. Such data can help policymakers and the public prioritize equity in teacher assignments and compensation, school-level funding and other resources to address equitable access to educational opportunity.

**Direct Resources Toward Equitable Access**

Once states identify the students who are being underserved, and have data to indicate where resources are needed, they can begin to direct resources toward improving educational equity. Oregon’s African American/Black Student Success Plan Awards, for example, are available for early learning providers, school districts, postsecondary institutions and community-based organizations.

**State Examples**

- **Connecticut SB 1020 (2019):** Addresses school equity, includes instruction in culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in the preservice training, professional development and in-service training provided to teachers. Builds on **Connecticut SB 455 (2018),** which requires the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council within the state department of education to collaborate with a minority teacher recruitment task force to focus on equitable access to the teaching profession and closing the achievement and opportunity gap.

- **Louisiana HB 517 (2017):** Requires the superintendent of public education to prepare a report to assist policymakers and the public in assessing the extent to which the state’s students have access to quality public education. The report is required to include data such as the percentage of a school’s students who are economically disadvantaged, racial or ethnic minorities, and English learners. It must also include the percentage of teachers determined to be highly effective, the number of teacher absences and more.

- **Oregon HB 2016 (2015):** Directs the state department of education to develop and implement a statewide education plan for African American/black students. The plan addresses the disparities experienced by this student population in every indicator of academic success, the historical practices leading to disproportionate outcomes, and the educational needs of the students by examining culturally responsive and appropriate best practices. Provides grants to early learning service providers, school districts, postsecondary institutions and community-based organizations to implement strategies developed in the plan.

**Principle Three: Support Research and Development**

**STRATEGIES**

- Support new school models.
- Remove barriers to innovation.
- Provide for rigorous built-in evaluation.

**Support New School Models**

The commission studied a variety of school models that look very different from traditional classrooms. Rather than teachers simply lecturing students, students have greater agency in designing their learning goals and pathways and have some voice in making decisions about their own educational path. Models include student-centered pedagogy, with personalized approaches, on competency-based or mastery-based...
learning systems. Whether this model is called “personalized learning,” “student-centered learning,” “mas-
tery- or competency-based learning” or something else, there is room for new school models. These new
models experiment with learning environments that are participatory, relevant and help prepare students
to become self-directed, lifelong learners. These schools and districts might be thought of as “incubators,”
rather than as “pilots.” Pilots are expected to sunset at some point, whereas incubators are intended to be
grown thoughtfully with careful research and evidence-based decisions. We visited and were encouraged
by programs that allowed students to earn units of credit based on demonstrated mastery of a subject
without regard to seat time.

Remove Barriers to Innovation

State legislators can set the parameters for new models while also removing existing barriers to innovation
throughout the system. For example, the notion of seat time is embedded in multiple places throughout
statues, meaning that a course is defined by the number of hours a student spends in a classroom. Yet not
all learners need the same amount of time to complete a course, and not all learning must happen in the
classroom. School models that experiment with mastery- or competency-based learning are finding that
seat time requirements are a barrier. States such as Idaho and Utah have made statutory changes to allow
for seat time requirements to be waived or removed altogether. States are experimenting with new school
models through a variety of approaches, including innovation zones, pilot programs and full-state moves
toward competency- or mastery-based learning.

Provide for Rigorous Built-in Evaluation

As states work with schools and districts to alleviate barriers and provide targeted support, they must also
include intentional and rigorous built-in evaluation mechanisms. State departments of education can pro-
vide critical support and networking for schools and districts implementing new school models. Legisla-
tures can ensure that systems supporting new school models include rigorous evaluation, reporting and
fine-tuning.

State Examples

• Nevada AB 110 (2017): Requires the state department of education to establish a pilot program to
  provide competency-based education and revises provisions governing the requirements for a pupil
to receive credit for a course of study without attending the classes for the course. It also requires the
department of education to conduct a public awareness campaign regarding competency-based education and authorizes a competitive grants program to carry out the pilot program.

- **Utah SB 143 (2016):** Creates the Competency-Based Education Grants Program to improve educational outcomes in public schools by advancing student mastery of concepts and skills. Utah SB 34 (2017) establishes the Reimbursement Program for Early Graduation from Competency-Based Education, authorizing the state board of education to reimburse a local education agency that offers a competency-based education for a student who graduates early from the local education agency.

- **Idaho HB 110 (2015):** Directs the state department of education to begin Idaho’s transition to a mastery-based education system and conduct a statewide awareness campaign to promote understanding of and interest in mastery-based education for teachers, administrators, parents, students, business leaders and policymakers. The department must establish a committee of educators to identify roadblocks and possible solutions in implementing mastery education and develop recommendations for the incubator process. It must also facilitate the planning and development of an incubator process and assessments of local education agencies to identify the initial cohort. Requires annual reporting to the state board of education and the education committees of the Senate and House of Representatives regarding the progress toward implementing mastery-based education. Idaho HB 1059 (2019) lifts the statutory cap on the number of districts and schools in the state’s pilot program and formalizes the Idaho Mastery Education Network.

### FROM THE COMMISSION

“If we are really going to be student centered, we cannot rely exclusively on the sit-and-get delivery model for education. The heart of student-centered learning is student engagement.”

—Washington Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos (D)

### Principle Four: Elevate the Teaching Profession

#### STRATEGIES

- Invest in new models for teacher preparation and preservice training.
- Support efforts to diversify the teacher workforce.
- Strengthen support for teachers.
- Develop strong school leaders.

#### Invest in New Models for Teacher Preparation and Preservice Training

States including Idaho and New Hampshire, as well as districts and schools throughout the country, are transitioning to student-centered learning models. In these environments, students advance upon mastery rather than seat time, have increased voice and choice throughout their school day, learn both inside and outside the traditional school building, and pacing is flexible. Today’s students need cognitive approaches
that are rooted in the science of learning and development. This type of teaching requires new models for teacher preparation and preservice training.

**Support Efforts to Diversify the Teacher Workforce**

Recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher workforce is key to improving outcomes for all students, particularly for students from low-income families and other underserved populations. Research shows that students of color benefit when they see adult role models who are people of color in positions of authority, and from having higher expectations placed on them by teachers of color. All students benefit from teachers who bring diverse knowledge, experiences and role modeling to the classroom.

**Strengthen Support for Teachers**

A group of 28 legislators, staff and NCSL education policy experts studied 10 countries with world-class education systems from 2015 to 2017. The group found that at the core of these countries’ education systems is the conviction that world-class teachers are essential to a world-class instructional system. They share the following characteristics: rigorous preparation, thorough induction, career ladders, professional work environment, high-quality school leaders, good compensation and world-class instruction. Given that teachers are the single most important school-based factor in student success, the commission urges states to lift up the teaching profession. They can do so by developing community recognition of the importance of this profession in the transfer of knowledge, skills and culture in our society, and strengthening support for teachers throughout the system.

**Develop Strong School Leaders**

Research demonstrates that school leadership is second only to teacher quality in its impact on student achievement. Leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for the difference between underperforming schools and schools that foster student learning. Today’s schools require dynamic, well-trained, talented leaders who understand the social, economic and political forces that influence education. Such leaders are committed to fresh ideas and solutions, are willing to take risks to implement them, and have a student-centered approach to instructional leadership.

**State Examples**

- **Colorado SB 190 (2019)**: Directs the department of higher education and the department of education to work with the deans of the schools of education to review, research and identify best practices in teacher preparation. By Jan. 1, 2020, the departments must jointly adopt guidelines to assist educator preparation programs in adopting and implementing the best practices. Creates the teacher mentor grant program to provide training and stipends for teachers who serve as mentors for teacher candidates participating in clinical practice.

- **New Mexico House Memorial 40 (2019)**: Requests the Legislative Education Study Committee to study the efficacy and logistics of implementing paid teacher residency programs in New Mexico.

- **Connecticut SB 455 (2018)**: Directs the department of education, in consultation with the Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Council, to:
  
  - Identify relevant research and successful practices to enhance minority teacher recruitment throughout the state.
  - Identify and establish public, private and philanthropic partnerships to increase minority teacher recruitment.
  - Use, monitor and evaluate innovative methods to attract minority candidates to the teaching profession, particularly in subject areas in which a teacher shortage exists.
  - Support new and existing educator preparation programs that commit to enrolling greater numbers of minority teacher candidates.
Monitor, advise and support local and regional boards of education’s efforts to prioritize minority teacher recruitment and develop innovative strategies to attract and retain minority teachers within their districts.

Provide demographic data of applicants for positions requiring educator certification to the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force.

- **Maine SB 368 (2015):** Establishes the Task Force on School Leadership to conduct a comprehensive study on excellence in school leadership in prekindergarten to grade 12 public schools. Relates to strategies to enhance the identification, recruitment, preparation, mentoring, evaluation, professional development and retention of effective public school principals and other public school leaders.

**FROM THE COMMISSION**

“Teacher preparation and training are critical. Asking a student, what do you want to know? Also, what problem do you want to solve? Now you find out what students are interested in. Sometimes the ways we ask questions move students to the right answers.”

—Colorado Senator Nancy Todd (D)

### Principle Five: Address the Whole Child

**STRATEGIES**

- **Meet students where they are.**
- **Centralize services.**
- **Provide expanded learning opportunities.**

### Meet Students Where They Are

The commission finds that schools can serve as the new civic center—serving students, families and communities all day, every day, including evenings and weekends. An example of this is community schools, a model in which school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Whether through a community school or other model, the commission suggests that states can better serve students by integrating academics, social and emotional skills building, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.

### Centralize Services and Opportunities

Poverty, family circumstances, limited access to health care and other social supports have a substantial impact on a student’s ability to successfully learn and develop. These are realities that students, families, teachers and principals address daily. By supporting a whole family and community approach to learning, schools can make connections to important health care and other social and biological supports. They can centralize services and opportunities so that community health agencies, dentists, mental health practitioners and nutritional resources are available in schools to serve students and families.
Provide Expanded Learning Opportunities

Expanded learning opportunities are structured learning environments that occur outside of the traditional school day through before-school and afterschool, summer, and extended-day, -week, -year programs. These programs offer more personalized learning opportunities for students in areas such as the arts, civic engagement, science, technology, engineering and math, as well as mentorship and general academic support. Expanded learning opportunities offer a safe place for students to be outside of school hours where they can supplement and support their education.10

State Examples

- **Maryland SB 661 (2019)**: Establishes community schools, which are required to have a community school coordinator and a community school leadership team, and authorizes local school systems to form a school-community partnership.

- **New Hampshire HB 131 (2019)**: Establishes the Commission on Mental Health Education Programs to develop and promote mental health programs and behavioral health and wellness programs in kindergarten through 12th grades.

- **Delaware HB 92 (2019)**: Creates an Expanded Learning Opportunities Council to provide research, recommendations and coordination regarding before and afterschool programs and summer learning opportunities for school-age children.

Policy Highlight: Individualized Learning Plans

**Massachusetts Individualized Learning Plans (ILP) Pilot**: Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are a long-term and comprehensive approach to education and career planning; they span multiple grade levels and courses and are personalized to each student. ILPs empower all students to think early and often about their postsecondary plans, continually check the alignment of their interests and skills with their college and career aspirations, and select academic and extracurricular options that support achievement of these aspirations.11

FROM THE COMMISSION

“Talking about this openly is important. Until we wrap infrastructure around students and their families, it will just be more of the same.”

—Executive Director for the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity Steven Hernández (Connecticut)
Call to Action: State Legislators Must Lead

The future will require more adaptable and portable skills that transfer from one workplace, position and industry to another. There will be an increased need for skilled work training to pair and coexist with soft skills. Traditional jobs will look very different and we can’t expect a 20th century academic model to prepare our students for a 21st century economy.

While the future is uncertain and will require students to become lifelong learners who embrace new skills, including flexibility and adaptability, the future is bright. The opportunities have never been more exciting and varied for student learning and preparation for a new and changing world.

We are involved in the next major reworking of our economy right now. There are huge opportunities associated with this if we can get everyone ready. This is both our challenge and our opportunity.

FROM THE COMMISSION

“The social emotional piece is so important in student-centered learning. It will carry through their lives.”

—Massachusetts Representative Kimberly Ferguson (R)
State Highlights: How Two States are Implementing Student-Centered Learning

NCSL’s Student-Centered Learning Commission visited two states in 2018: Idaho and New Hampshire. The Commission visited three schools in each state where schools are adapting to meet the needs of the future, including development of systems that are personalized, flexible and student-centered and that prepare students to embrace lifelong learning.

Idaho

“I think my parents are happy with what we’re doing because I actually get what I need,” says a fourth-grade student at Greenhurst Elementary in Nampa, Idaho. “Before, things were too easy for me in math—now that we switch classes to the right level, I’m learning more.” At the mastery-based Greenhurst Elementary, fourth-grade students might be working in fifth-grade math standards and third-grade grade literacy standards. Another student explains, “We all move up or down when we meet standards or when we are struggling. In fourth grade they put me in fractions; once I got it they moved me to decimals. I like to know where I’m at. If I move up, I completed the thing I was working on and will learn new things to challenge me.”

These students are describing how Greenhurst meets students where they are, ensuring they have mastered the content before moving on to the next level. This means that students are in mixed-grade classrooms, working toward the same learning standards as peers from throughout the building. Students are pre-assessed on end-of-year standards; students who have already mastered grade-level standards go right up to the next grade to work on the next standard. Students who are not yet on grade level are able to work on and get extra support with their learning gaps before progressing. One student reported that it “helps to know exactly where we are—knowing where I am in math and reading helps because I won’t forget, I actually have it in my head and know where I am.”

Greenhurst is one of the 32 incubator schools in 19 districts that participated in the first cohort of Idaho’s Mastery-based Learning Network. Idaho’s transformation to a mastery-based education system was first brought forward in 2013 as a recommendation of the Governor’s Task Force for Improving Public Education and was codified in HB 110 (2015). The legislation directs the state department of education to begin Idaho’s transition to a mastery-based education system, including conducting a statewide awareness campaign to promote understanding and interest in mastery-based education for teachers, administrators, parents, students, business leaders and policymakers. It also establishes a committee of educators to identify roadblocks and possible solutions in implementing mastery education and develop recommendations for the incubator process. Finally, it facilitates the planning and development of an incubator process and assessments of local education agencies to identify the initial cohort.

In 2019, Idaho HB 1059 lifted the statutory cap on the number of dis-
districts and schools in the state’s pilot program and formalized the Idaho Mastery Education Network. The January 2019 “Idaho Mastery Education Progress Report” reviewed its implementation, celebrating successes throughout the state and identifying challenges and opportunities for the network moving forward.12

New Hampshire

“I don’t get bored anymore. Instead of sitting in full group, I work in small groups on what I need.”

That’s how a fourth grader at Parker-Varney Elementary School in Manchester, N.H., described the experience of working with small groups of peers at the same level during a visit by NCSL’s Student-Centered Learning Commission.

At Parker-Varney Elementary School, students are assigned to grade bands—teachers share groups of students in first-second grade and third-fourth grade bands. Commission members saw classes that were buzzing with a quiet energy with children engaged in their learning and, occasionally, acting as mentors to peers in their groups. Parker-Varney is an example of a school embracing and thriving using competency-based learning, in which students advance and move ahead on their lessons based on demonstration of mastery. For students to progress at a meaningful pace, schools and teachers provide differentiated instruction and support.

The commission next visited the Manchester School of Technology, a Career and Technical Education Center and a four-year competency-based high school. It offers competency-based learning, opportunities for internships and real-world learning, preparation for post-secondary learning and employment. At MST, students study advanced manufacturing, learn horticulture in a greenhouse, and build a house from start to finish each year. Students told the commission, “I’m not the kind of kid who can sit at a computer and type. I need to be hands-on” and, “It’s just so much better than sitting in a classroom.” MST’s academically and professionally rigorous classes send graduates off to postsecondary programs at high rates—often in three years instead of the typical four—and uniquely prepare young adults for the future of work.

Schools throughout the state have moved to student-centered learning environments, and every high school must award credits based on demonstrations of competency. New Hampshire standards require that local school districts adopt policies that enable extended learning opportunities for students. Extended learning means the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills occurs through instruction or study outside the traditional classroom, including apprenticeship, athletics, community service, internship, independent study, online courses, performing groups, private instruction, travel and work-based learning.13 Districts throughout the state are designing different ways to expand learning beyond school as part of students’ college and career pathways.

In 2015, New Hampshire pioneered the Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) pilot program, a first-in-the-nation accountability strategy offering reduced levels of standardized testing together with locally developed common performance assessments. In the fall of 2018, the New Hampshire Department of Education applied for and was granted an Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority by the U.S. Department of Education to continue the PACE program.
NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission Members

STATE LEGISLATORS AND LEGISLATIVE STAFF

Senator Sal DiDomenico, Massachusetts
Representative Richard Farnsworth, Maine
Representative Kimberly Ferguson, Massachusetts
Representative Mary Heath, New Hampshire
Steven Hernández, Connecticut General Assembly
Senator Jay Kahn, New Hampshire
Representative Joseph McNamara, Rhode Island
Senator Ann Millner, Utah
Representative Alice Peisch, Massachusetts
Representative Jeffrey Roy, Massachusetts
Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos, Washington
Representative Monica Jurado Stonier, Washington
Senator Nancy Todd, Colorado

NCSL EDUCATION STAFF

Sunny Deye, Program Director
Marilyn Villalobos, Research Analyst II

Commission Meetings

Introduction to Student-Centered Learning
May 12, 2017: Washington, D.C.

Overview of K-12 Competency-Based Education
June 28, 2017: Webinar

State Legislatures and the Future of Learning
Aug. 6, 2017: Boston

ESSA and Personalized Learning
Aug. 16, 2017: Webinar

Performance-based Assessments for Teaching and Learning
April 13, 2018: Webinar

New Hampshire School Visits and State Study
May 9-11, 2018: Manchester, N.H.

Idaho School Visits and State Study
Sept. 26-28, 2018: Boise, Idaho

Support for Teachers and Leaders in Student-Centered Learning Environments
Nov. 14, 2018: Webinar

Student-Centered Learning for All Learners
April 26, 2019: Webinar

Navigating and Financing the Future of Learning

Commission Reflections and Recommendations
August 5, 2019: Nashville, Tenn.

Overview of Research on Student-Centered Learning
Jan. 24, 2020: Webinar

Experts Consulted

Amy Allen, Assistant Superintendent, Manchester School District, New Hampshire
Kelly Brady, Director of Mastery Education, Idaho Department of Education
Ed Cervone, Executive Director, Educate Maine
Carmen Coleman, Chief Academic Officer, Jefferson County Public Schools, Kentucky
Richard Dichard, Principal, Manchester West High School

Jeff Dillon, Superintendent, Wilder School District, Idaho

Nick Donohue, President and CEO, Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Eve Goldberg, Director of Research, Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Ellen Hume-Howard, Executive Director, New Hampshire Learning Initiative

Wendy Johnson, Superintendent, Kuna School District, Idaho

Colin Jones, Senior Policy Analyst, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center

Steve Kossakoski, CEO, New Hampshire Virtual Learning Academy Charter School

Mark Kostin, Associate Director, Great Schools Partnership, Maine

Paul Leather, Director of State and Local Partnerships, National Center for Innovation in Education

Karen Machado, Principal, Manchester School of Technology, New Hampshire

Scott Marion, President and Executive Director, Center for Assessment

Dan Neddo, Founder, Project Impact STEM Academy, Idaho

Jennifer Nichols, Director of Research Interpretation and Application, Frameworks Institute

Lillian Pace, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, KnowledgeWorks

Ace Parsi, Director of Innovation, National Center for Learning Disabilities

Susan Patrick, President and CEO, Aurora Institute

Karla Phillips-Krivickas, Senior Director of Policy, KnowledgeWorks

Jim Rickabaugh, Senior Advisor, Institute for Personalized Learning

Katie Roy, Executive Director and Founder, Connecticut School Finance Project

Shawn Rubin, Chief Education Officer, Highlander Institute

Rob Scully, Principal, Souhegan High School, New Hampshire

Brian Stack, Principal, Sanborn Regional High School, New Hampshire

Nick Stern, Principal, Greenhurst Elementary School, Idaho

Chris Sturgis, Co-Founder, CompetencyWorks

Jason Swanson, Director of Strategic Foresight, KnowledgeWorks

Natalie Truong, Policy Director, Aurora Institute

Tom Vander Ark, CEO, Getting Smart

Rebecca Wolfe, Vice President of Impact and Improvement, KnowledgeWorks

Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy, Aurora Institute

Acknowledgements

NCSL is grateful to the state legislators and legislative staff of the NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission whose curiosity, commitment and collaboration contributed to the commission’s activities and to the development of this publication. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation has been a wonderful partner in this work, and we are particularly grateful to Charlie Toulmin, director of policy at the foundation, for his support and insights. The author extends a special thanks to Susan Patrick and Maria Worthen at the Aurora Institute for their review of this report and for their helpful ideas and feedback.
Notes


