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# Redefining Student Success: Profile of a Graduate

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## Issue

**Redefining Success.** Today, conversations are happening in states that explore how to build education systems that prepare young people for success in postsecondary education, the workforce, and civil society. A new definition of success is crucial to drive system improvements that are built around students' needs — including instructional shifts, systems of assessments, expanded pathways and better learning environments connected to communities and to the real world.

This issue brief will explore the importance of creating definitions of success that reflect communities' aspirations for their students to drive coherence in policies and to improve outcomes. Policymakers can use new definitions of student success that enable student-centered learning systems to:

- » Support student learning and meet individual needs;
- » Empower educators to facilitate learning and growth toward a new, more comprehensive definition of success; and
- » Create coherence and alignment in state education systems.

## Background

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have an unprecedented opportunity to transform K-12 education systems to advance equity and help every student succeed with a new definition of success. The new law makes it possible for state leaders to redesign systems of assessments, accountability models, and educator preparation and development systems that coherently align to and support comprehensive student learning outcomes and equity.

As an important first step, state policymakers and stakeholders could collaborate to identify the knowledge and skills students will need to succeed in college, career and civic life. This could inform conversations around the strategic design of graduate profiles that describe what students should know and be able to do upon graduation from high school.

Basic skills are important for student success, but reading, writing and mathematics alone are not enough to adequately prepare students for successful futures. Unfortunately, the current system of education is leaving too many students behind. Across the United States, schools are graduating high school students at higher rates than ever<sup>1</sup>, yet by varying estimates, 37% of first-year college students require remediation.<sup>2</sup>

Such educational inequity disproportionately affects low-income students and students of color. According to a recent study, 56% of African American students and 45% of Latino students enroll in remedial courses nationwide, compared with 35% of white students.<sup>3</sup> These outcomes show that high school graduates are not being sufficiently prepared for postsecondary success.

Readiness for college, career and civic life should be a central purpose of education at all levels. According to the World Economic Forum, the top ten skills required by employers in the year 2020 will include<sup>4</sup>:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity
4. People management
5. Coordinating with others
6. Emotional intelligence
7. Judgment and decision making
8. Service orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive flexibility

And yet, current K-12 educational policies drive a near singular focus on the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics. These skills are important, but they are not enough to ensure every student can succeed in K-12 and beyond.

States and communities can help better prepare students for future success in careers and postsecondary education by rethinking what a high school credential entails.

An important concept for policymakers to consider as they build a vision for K-12 education systems is how to redefine success. With clear, comprehensive definitions of success, states can begin to transform their education systems, and do so in a coherent manner, so that everyone is working together to help students succeed.

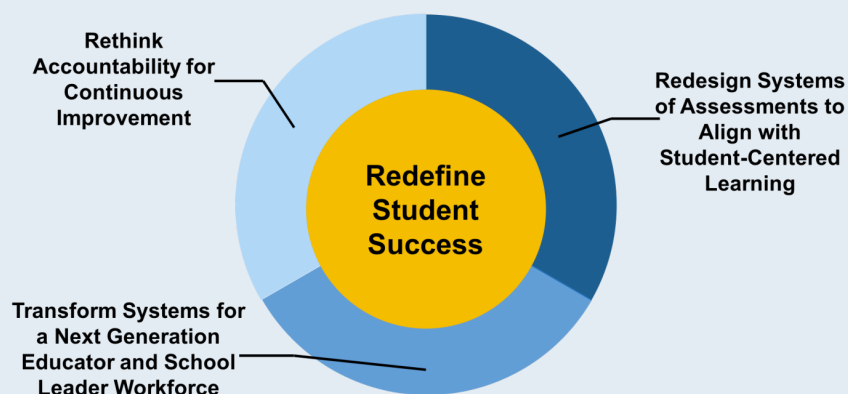
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1 Graduation rates are approximately 83%. (2017). National Center for Education Statistics. Public High School Graduation Rates 2014-2015. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_coi.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp).

2 Fast Facts — College Graduation. (2017). National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>.

3 Corequisite Remediation: Spanning the Completion Divide. Complete College America. Retrieved from <http://completecollege.org/spanningthedivide/#far-too-many-students-start-in-remediation>.

4 Gray, A. (2016). The 10 Skills You Need to Thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>.

**BUILDING COHERENT STATE EDUCATION SYSTEMS AROUND A NEW DEFINITION OF SUCCESS**

With a shared, statewide vision for student success, states could begin to build coherent systems in which every function and individual has a clear role to play in helping all students succeed. District and community stakeholders need to be part of conversations about redefining success and identifying the knowledge and skills that students will need to thrive and succeed. States and local communities have an opportunity to rethink student outcome goals and set a vision for what students should know and be able to do upon graduation to succeed in college, the workforce and civic life.

For example, states and districts could align curriculum, instruction and systems of assessments around shared goals and an understanding of what students need to know and be able to do to graduate ready for postsecondary success. Standards and competencies can be aligned to the state vision for student success around what students should know and be able to do upon graduation. Systems of assessments could provide timely feedback and allow students to demonstrate mastery and advance when ready. Chattergoon and Marion (2016)<sup>5</sup> explain that, “the assessments in the state must become compatible with the models of how students learn content and skills over time” and “curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be aligned to ensure that the entire system is working toward a common set of learning goals.”

Next generation accountability models can provide transparency and inform where students are from the goal of student success as well as support and improve schools toward reaching this vision over time. Diverse stakeholders in pre-K- workforce systems, including state education agencies, higher education, businesses, workforce development agencies, communities, families and students could share the goals and values in a new definition of student success and create policy for the long term.

Finally, systems for building educator and leader capacity could emphasize mastery of the skills needed to build personalized, competency-based learning environments.

5 Chattergoon, R., Marion, S. (2016). Not as Easy as It Sounds: Designing a Balanced Assessment System. National Association for State Boards of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Chattergoon-Marion.pdf>.

Along with redefining student success, states may want to consider how the high school diploma could more effectively signal to students, higher education institutions, and employers what skills, competencies and qualifications students should have upon graduation. Coherent education systems designed around student success help to connect student learning to outcomes in K-12 and beyond.

This issue brief will highlight promising policy approaches for making high school qualification more meaningful. With a more meaningful definition of student success, state leaders could consider the following areas to transform education:

- » Develop a Profile of a Graduate;
- » Align high school graduation requirements to college and career readiness;
- » Consider alignment of qualifications frameworks across systems; and
- » Explore proficiency-based diplomas.

## CREATING GRADUATE PROFILES THAT ALIGN TO A NEW DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

There is a need to move from the limited definition of success for high school graduates from the past based on transcripts and seat time, to a future-focused profile of success based on demonstrated mastery of core knowledge and skills. The concept of graduate profiles is one approach that communities and state leaders have taken to collaboratively redefine student success from the limited definitions of the past, toward the future.

In Virginia, a new initiative to examine the future directions of the high school diploma in the state led to the creation of a “Profile of a Graduate.” This initiative was born from a series of public conversations around whether students are adequately prepared with transferable skills, employability skills and college readiness with value to the learner, workplace and community. These conversations originated from the local level; it is an example of policymakers engaging with and listening to stakeholders to define what graduates should know and be able to do, and working together to begin to build system coherence. From across the state, a common vision emerged which is now adopted in a Profile of a Virginia Graduate policy for the state, districts and schools.

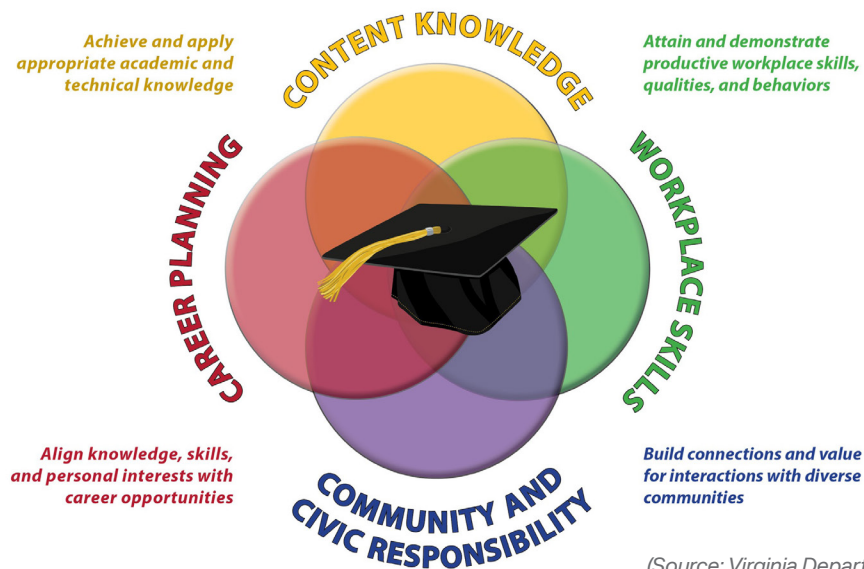
The [Profile of a Virginia Graduate](#)<sup>6</sup> “describes the knowledge, skills, experiences and attributes that students must attain to be successful in college and/or the workforce, and to be ‘life ready’ in an economy and world characterized by rapid change.” In the Profile, a “life ready” Virginia graduate must:

- » Achieve and apply appropriate academic and technical knowledge (content knowledge);
- » Demonstrate productive workplace skills, qualities, and behaviors (workplace skills);
- » Build connections and value interactions with others as a responsible and responsive citizen (community engagement and civic responsibility); and
- » Align knowledge, skills and personal interests with career opportunities (career exploration).

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6 Profile of a Virginia Graduate. (2017). Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/profile-grad/>.

## Profile of a Virginia Graduate In Virginia, the Life Ready Individual Will During His or Her K-12 Experience:



Local leaders and educators in Virginia are actively engaging in systems redesign around the Profile of a Virginia Graduate. For instance, the Virginia State Board of Education proposed changes to the state graduation requirements and accountability system to align with the Profile of a Virginia Graduate.<sup>7</sup> Further, under the state's ESSA State Plan, school counselors would be trained to assist students with individualized academic and career plans that align to the vision of college and career readiness under the Profile.<sup>8</sup>

This is an example of policymakers engaging with and listening to stakeholders to define what graduates should know and be able to do, and working together to begin to build system coherence.

### EXAMINING STATE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

High school graduation requirements in the U.S. are generally determined by states, with varying degrees of local authority, to interpret the requirements and award a diploma. Diplomas are typically awarded based on high school transcripts which record how many Carnegie units (seat-time) students have in the required subjects.

State policymakers might consider how the high school diploma could become a meaningful credential of students' readiness for the future; it should reflect success in rigorous academics, and signify that its holder has mastered the knowledge, skills, and habits of success needed in the new economy. If the high school diploma was aligned with a comprehensive profile of a graduate, and students advanced upon demonstrated mastery, not seat time, many more graduates would be prepared for success.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Department of Education Briefing: Progress Report on the Board of Education's Development of a Profile of a Virginia Graduate. (June 2016). Office of Policy, Division of Policy and Communications. Retrieved from <http://www.vcfae.org/Images/progress-report-for-profile-of-a-graduate.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Department of Education. Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act. Retrieved from [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/federal\\_programs/esea/essa/essa-state-plan.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/federal_programs/esea/essa/essa-state-plan.pdf).

## CONSIDERING QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

Internationally, at least 47 countries (not including the U.S.)<sup>9</sup> have developed a national qualifications framework,<sup>10</sup> or a system of competency-based qualifications that form linkages between K-12, higher education, and the needs of the future workforce.<sup>11</sup> Qualifications frameworks provide flexible pathways for learning and facilitate competency-based qualifications that are much more meaningful to students, higher education and employers. Qualifications systems foster coherence by forming linkages between K-12, higher education and the needs of the future workforce.

To take an international example, the New Zealand Qualifications Framework is aligned across K-12 education, higher education and the workforce certifications. According to the [New Zealand Qualifications Authority](#)<sup>12</sup>, the NZQF “is the heart of New Zealand’s education system. All qualifications...come with an assurance of quality that is recognised and trusted worldwide....This allows [students] to benchmark [their] level of skill and knowledge on the NZQF and makes it easier for countries and regions to compare qualifications. For employers it makes explicit what graduates can ‘do, be and know’ on completion of the qualification. And for all parties it lays out pathways to further education, employment and/or a contribution to their community.”

The NZQF is one example from abroad that state policymakers might examine as they think about policy strategies that support meaningful qualifications aligned across K-12, higher education and the workforce.

## EXPLORING PROFICIENCY-BASED DIPLOMAS

In the United States, a number of states are beginning to address what a high school graduate should know and be able to do by considering and adopting policies around the *proficiency-based diploma*. This is taking hold in state-level policy conversations and holds potential to drive a competency-based approach to the high school qualification.

Vermont and Colorado are two states that have adopted proficiency-based graduation frameworks:

- » Vermont’s [Education Quality Standards](#) were approved by the Vermont State Board of Education in 2013 and require schools to have proficiency-based graduation requirements for students graduating in 2020 and for each subsequent graduating class. The state allows students to demonstrate mastery through multiple means, including teacher-designed assessments, papers, presentations, portfolios, or projects.

9 National Qualifications Framework wikipedia entry, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Qualifications\\_Framework#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Qualifications_Framework#cite_note-1).

10 According to UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2010), a Qualifications Framework is “the structure into which accredited qualifications are placed. This allows learners, training providers and employers to gain information about the broad equivalence of qualifications.” <http://www.unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=Qualifications%20Framework>.

11 For example, Lumina Foundation created the “Degree Qualifications Profile” that defines what students should know and be able to do to receive an associate, bachelor, and master degree. Lumina also aligned K-12 learning outcomes from Common Core State Standards to its Degree Qualifications Profile by proposing a set of reference points that benchmark what it should take for students to graduate, earn a degree at each of the three levels addressed, and transfer those skills to a future career.

David T. Conley, & Paul L. Gaston. *A Path to Alignment: Connecting K-12 and Higher Education via the Common Core and the Degree Qualifications Profile*. Lumina Foundation of Education, 2013. [http://degreeprofile.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/A\\_path\\_to\\_alignment.pdf](http://degreeprofile.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/A_path_to_alignment.pdf).

12 Background to the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Retrieved from <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/understand-nz-quals/nzqf/>.

- » In 2007, Colorado passed law [H.B. 07-1118](#), which guides district graduation requirements in order to meet or exceed requirements developed by the Colorado State Board of Education. In response, the Colorado Department of Education released its [Menu of College and Career-Ready Demonstrations](#). These options include minimum scores on college placement exams, college entrance exams, AP and IB exams, passing grades in different enrollment courses, and individualized success as demonstrated by mastery certifications or capstone projects.

State policymakers could focus on the potential of proficiency-based diplomas to credential the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary success and drive transformation of educational systems for student-centered learning.

## Recommendations for State Policymakers to Advance Student-Centered Learning With New Definitions of Student Success

State leaders have an opportunity to engage deeply with communities in conversations around what students should know and be able to do upon graduation. Conversations around new definitions of success could include academic competencies, social emotional competencies, skills and dispositions necessary for success.

After adopting a new definition of success to drive system coherence, states and local districts may begin to uncover areas of the state policy that require changes to better support the shift to student-centered learning.

States could consider the following action steps to work with communities and stakeholders to redefine success for all students in the state:

- » **Action Step #1:** Adopt a statewide vision by convening diverse stakeholders to redefine student success and create a comprehensive Profile of a Graduate based on the knowledge and skills that students need for college, career and civic life.
- » **Action Step #2:** Create a working group on meaningful qualifications to study other states' and countries' qualification frameworks.
- » **Action Step #3:** Consider opportunities in the state to improve K-12, higher education and workforce alignment of knowledge, competencies and skills.
- » **Action Step #4:** Adopt proficiency-based diplomas and support implementation by creating resources for school districts to effectively implement. For example, recognize the need for developing statewide processes for calibrating and moderating judgements using evidence across schools and districts to ensure consistency in grading and quality of proficiency-based diplomas.



## Learn More:

- » iNACOL - *Fit for Purpose: Taking the Long View on Systems Change and Policy to Support Competency Education*
- » iNACOL Issue Brief - *State Policy & K-12 Competency-Based Education*
- » iNACOL Issue Brief - *Redesigning Systems of Assessments for Student-Centered Learning*
- » iNACOL - *Meeting The Every Student Succeeds Act's Promise: State Policy to Support Personalized Learning*
- » iNACOL - *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning*
- » Virginia Department of Education - *Virginia: Profile of a Graduate*
- » KnowledgeWorks - *The Future of Learning: Redefining Readiness from the Inside Out*
- » Follow us on social media: [@nacol](#), [@SusanDPatrick](#), [@mariaworthen](#), [@DaleKFrost](#), [@ntruongedu](#)

## Contact Information

For more information or technical assistance, contact the authors of this issue brief:

- » Susan Patrick, CEO, iNACOL and Co-Founder, *CompetencyWorks*: [spatrick@inacol.org](mailto:spatrick@inacol.org)
- » Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy, iNACOL: [mworthen@inacol.org](mailto:mworthen@inacol.org)
- » Natalie Truong, Policy Director, iNACOL: [ntruong@inacol.org](mailto:ntruong@inacol.org)



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