KnowledgeWorks



Vision-Led, Learner-Driven

Supporting Student Success Through Personalized, Competency-based Learning

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Graduation
Is Just the Beginning

A learner's abilities and drive to pursue new ideas and approach problems with creativity and adaptability have always been important. Now more than ever, they're non-negotiable.

Every day, educators across the country work hard to prepare and inspire the next generation of thinkers, community leaders and entrepreneurs. The children in their classrooms come from different backgrounds and have distinct sets of experiences and various world views. Students' complex identities and variations in how they receive and manage information mean that the "one-size-fits-all" education model doesn't work.

What would happen if all educators could meet each student's unique learning needs and consider their personal strengths while ensuring high expectations for academic growth? Educators could spark a generation of confident, skilled learners ready to contribute to their communities and the workforce.

Personalized, competency-based learning gives educators the flexibility and necessary opportunities to understand each learner's needs, strengths and challenges. Learners thrive in environments where they reason, analyze, co-create and collaborate with others to develop solutions and apply what they are learning in real-world contexts.

Why Personalized, Competency-based Learning?

Personalized, competency-based learning does not happen in a single classroom. It is not subject- or age-specific. It cannot be fully implemented in one year or five. It is transformative. It is generational. It is systemic.

Transforming to a system of personalized, competency-based learning is a continuous, community-driven journey. In this way, the system is responsive to each learner, centering their strengths, needs and interests while providing differentiated supports and varied ways for learners to demonstrate what they know and know how to do, ensuring each learner graduates ready for what's next.

Learn more about personalized, competency-based learning:

- The Difference Between Traditional Education and Personalized, Competency-based Education
- Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Competency-based Education
- The Essentials of Personalized, Competency-based Learning

In a personalized, competency-based learning environment:

1. Students daily make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge and how they will demonstrate their learning
2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant and actionable evidence
3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs
4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery or competency, not seat time
5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing
6. Strategies to ensure equity are embedded in the culture, structure and pedagogy of schools and education systems
7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning are explicit, transparent, measurable and transferable

Source: Aurora Institute

“When school hasn’t changed at all to adapt to a changing world, it’s time for us to make that change.

Tom Klapp
Director of Personalized Learning
at Northern Cass, North Dakota

Transformational changes toward personalized, competency-based learning occur at the classroom and system levels.

Personalized Learning in the Classroom

There is a shared sense of responsibility around learning in a personalized learning classroom. Everyone, from students to teachers and administrators to parents, recognizes the need for students to have a voice in what learning looks like and how it is assessed. Teachers are facilitators who support students in their learning journeys. Students engage in partnership with their teachers; know what they are learning and why; and demonstrate their learning through relevant, authentic assessments.

A System of Personalized, Competency-based Learning

While personalized learning can operate at the classroom level, personalized, competency-based learning is a systemic approach focused on equitable opportunities and outcomes for all learners. To effectively transform district systems, learning communities must prioritize work on their shared vision, culture, collective and individual agency, transparency and other key conditions for scaling and spreading personalized, competency-based learning.

Why personalized, competency-based learning?

The ways we work, teach, live and learn are changing at an accelerating rate – and system inequities that limit meaningful educational opportunities continue to persist and surface. Education leaders must consider how our actions today will shape the future of learning tomorrow – and what roles students, community members and policymakers might have in shaping that future, too. By moving to personalized, competency-based learning, learning communities can address inequities and meet the needs of each learner.

Traditional education isn't preparing learners for college.

From 2010-11 to 2021-22, public high school students' national adjusted cohort graduation rate increased from 79% to 87%. While we should celebrate that more students than ever are graduating, traditional college- and career-readiness measures indicate significant gaps in their knowledge and ability to succeed in postsecondary pursuits. In 2023, only 21% of students taking the ACT showed proficiency in all four content areas, down from 27% in 2018. In 2020, 65.4% of first-year undergraduate students took a remedial course in math, and 42.1% did so in reading or writing.

Meanwhile, chronic absenteeism has risen to 26% nationally, a sharp increase from 15% pre-pandemic. This increase holds true across demographics and is fueled by shifting cultural values and growing mental health concerns. Furthermore, students are simply not engaged, exacerbating absenteeism. According to a recent report from Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation, only 52% of middle and high school students reported feeling like they did something interesting every day, and only 48% said they felt motivated to go to school.

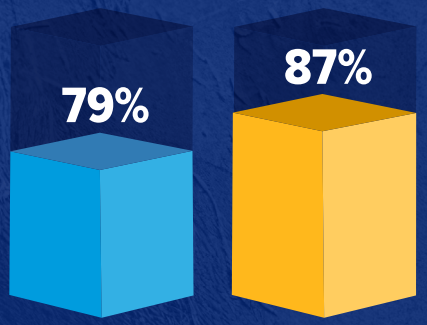
Traditional education isn't preparing learners for the workforce.

If the traditional education system can't prepare everyone for the jobs of today, how can it be expected to prepare people to fill the jobs of tomorrow? According to recent reports by the U.S. Department of Labor, a significant skills gap exists. At the time of writing, there were 7.4 million open jobs in the United States, with 7.2 million unemployed people nationwide. Many workers do not have the skills employers require to fill open positions. Moreover, as the rate of automation and the sophistication of artificial intelligence rise, smart machines continue to assume responsibilities formerly assigned to humans. Workers who can successfully adapt to the changing employment landscape will have not only the requisite substantive skills and knowledge for tomorrow's jobs, but also the social-emotional skills necessary to make decisions, complete tasks and foster relationships that machines can't.

Education systems that promote students based on time instead of proficiency or that fail to cultivate durable and social-emotional skills will fall further behind emerging workforce needs.

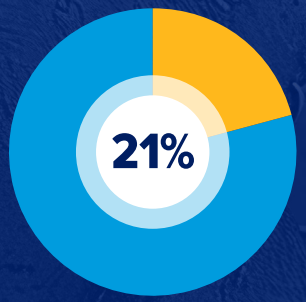
College Readiness by the Numbers

National Public High School Graduation Rates



Source »

2023 ACT Proficiency



In all four content areas covered by the college entrance exam.

Source »

Undergraduates Needing Remedial Math Courses



Over **42%** needed remedial courses in reading or writing.

Source »

“

We have to have conversations about teaching children to be irreplaceable.

Laura Jeanne Penrod
2024 Nevada Teacher of the Year

Traditional education isn’t preparing learners to thrive in an uncertain future.

With its hesitancy to embrace significant societal shifts, including demographic changes and technological advancements, the current education system does not prepare all students with future-ready skills. Rapid change requires a new look at what it means to be college- and career-ready. Personalized, competency-based learning environments center students’ needs and interests while holding them to the same rigorous academic and social-emotional learning outcomes, ensuring each learner graduates ready for what’s next.

Top Five Core Skills Required by Employers



- Analytical thinking
- Creative thinking
- Resilience, flexibility and agility
- Motivation and self-awareness
- Curiosity and lifelong learning

Source: [2023 World Economic Forum report]

Four Priority Conditions for Systemic Transformation

Systems-level reflection and action planning provide the foundation for learning communities to develop their own paths toward aligned, sustainable transformation. Through research with districts across the country that are working to scale personalized, competency-based learning systems, KnowledgeWorks has learned that to effectively move systemic transformation forward, learning communities must prioritize work on their shared visions, learning community cultures, collective and individual agency and transparency.

> These are just four of the 12 conditions that must be refined and aligned toward a learning community's shared vision for teaching and learning. Explore them all, along with guiding questions, in *Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-based Learning*.

1. Shared Vision

A shared vision unifies a learning community's commitment toward a common purpose, ensuring ownership through collective decision-making and accountability. An aligned and collaborative strategic planning process allows each person to understand their role in achieving equitable outcomes for each learner.

2. Culture

Culture is a set of collective behaviors, beliefs and values that can drive transformation toward the shared vision. In a personalized, competency-based system, a learning community's culture is built on relationships and sustained around expectations of innovative mindsets, inclusivity, celebrations of growth and continuous improvement at all levels of the system.

3. Agency

Agency grows from a culture of trust that enables individuals to have a voice in achieving the learning community's shared vision. The learning community operates with a collective capacity to overcome challenges and continuously improve through collective decision-making and shared accountability.

4. Transparency

Transparency builds inclusivity and trust through common language, shared decision-making, and accountability that are visible and accessible to all members of the learning community.



Shared Vision

A shared vision is central to everything learning communities do and hope to accomplish.

An essential first step for scaling personalized, competency-based learning is to develop and sustain a community-wide vision for transformation. A shared vision is a community-created, common agreement about the preferred future that the learning community commits to realizing through its change efforts. It serves as a touchstone for evaluating decisions and setting goals throughout the learning community.

Everyone has a voice in the process. A learning community can build buy-in that extends beyond school walls by requesting feedback and insight from learners, families and caregivers, educators, neighbors, business owners, community developers, higher education partners, and elected officials. That broad commitment can help ensure the shared vision guides decision-making and the investment of time, money and resources in pursuit of serving each child.

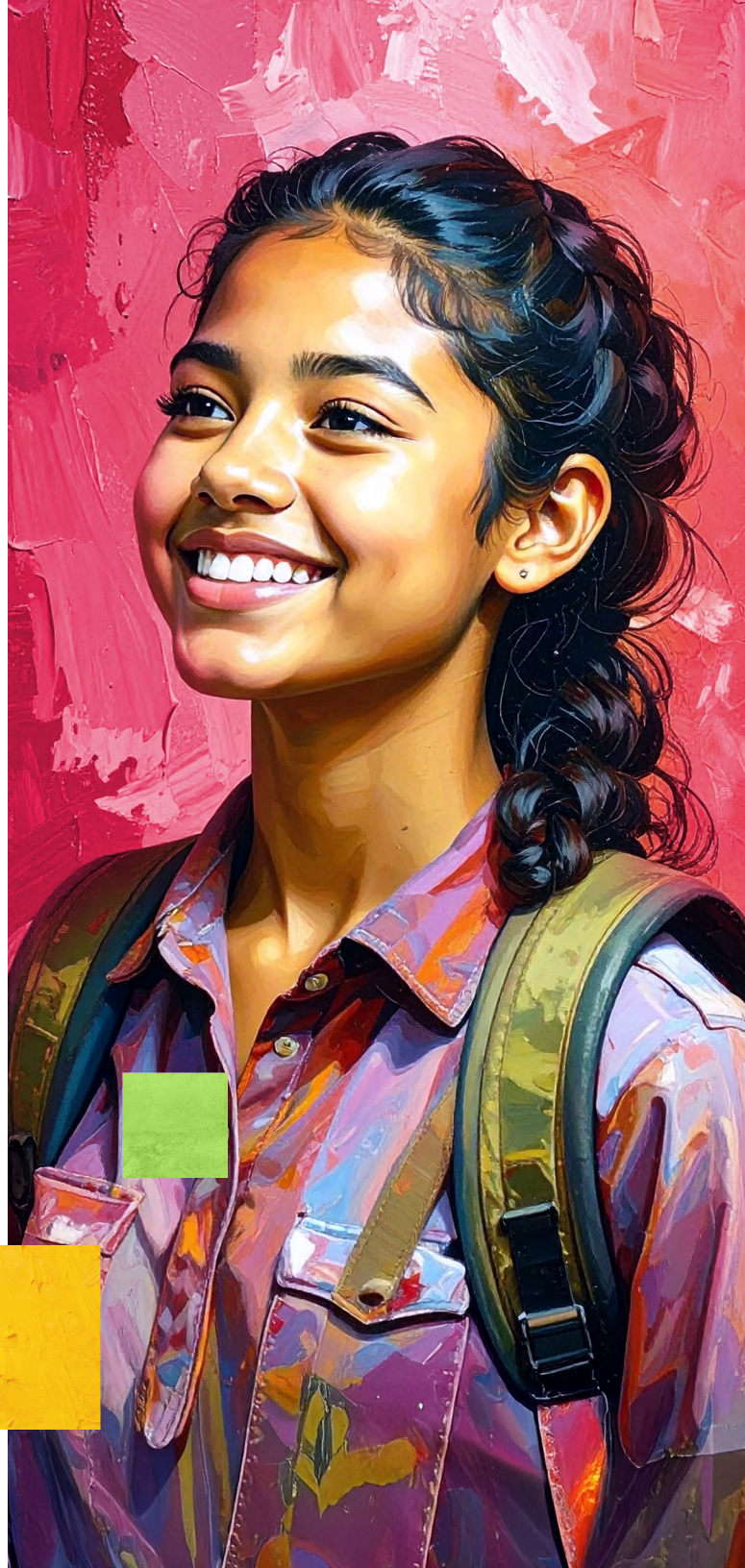
> Join our online community to connect with fellow educators leading learner-centered transformation.

Getting Started with Creating a Shared Vision

- Build trust and partnership with families and caregivers and community members
- Organize visioning sessions and meetings in familiar gathering places for families and caregivers and community members to encourage turnout
- Plan focus groups that include learners to gain input and insight
- Be transparent about how community input will be used

Guiding Questions for Considering a Shared Vision

- What do we hope the future holds for our learning community and graduates?
- What changes are on the horizon for education and our community?
- What has been going well, and what are our opportunities for improvement?
- How might our shared vision reflect the uniqueness of our community in meaningful and authentic ways?
- How might our shared vision serve all students?
- How might our shared vision drive decision-making toward our desired future?





Portrait of a Graduate

A Portrait of a Graduate can help a learning community deliver on the promise of a diploma.

When formalizing their shared visions, many learning communities create a Portrait of a Graduate, sometimes called a Profile of a Learner. A Portrait of a Graduate builds upon a learning community's shared aspirations or formally stated vision to outline the essential skills, dispositions and knowledge that students need for success after graduation.

Often, it includes traits such as:

- Being an engaged citizen, as in Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District #35 in Rio Rico, Arizona
- Critical thinking and creativity, as in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate
- Communication, as in West Fargo Public Schools, North Dakota
- Civic, financial and economic literacy, as in Utah's Portrait of a Graduate

Just as with a shared vision, district leaders alone do not make the call about what a learning community values and aspires to for its graduates. Educators, families and caregivers, community members and students play a critical role in identifying what has meaning for them and what they believe a diploma should deliver.

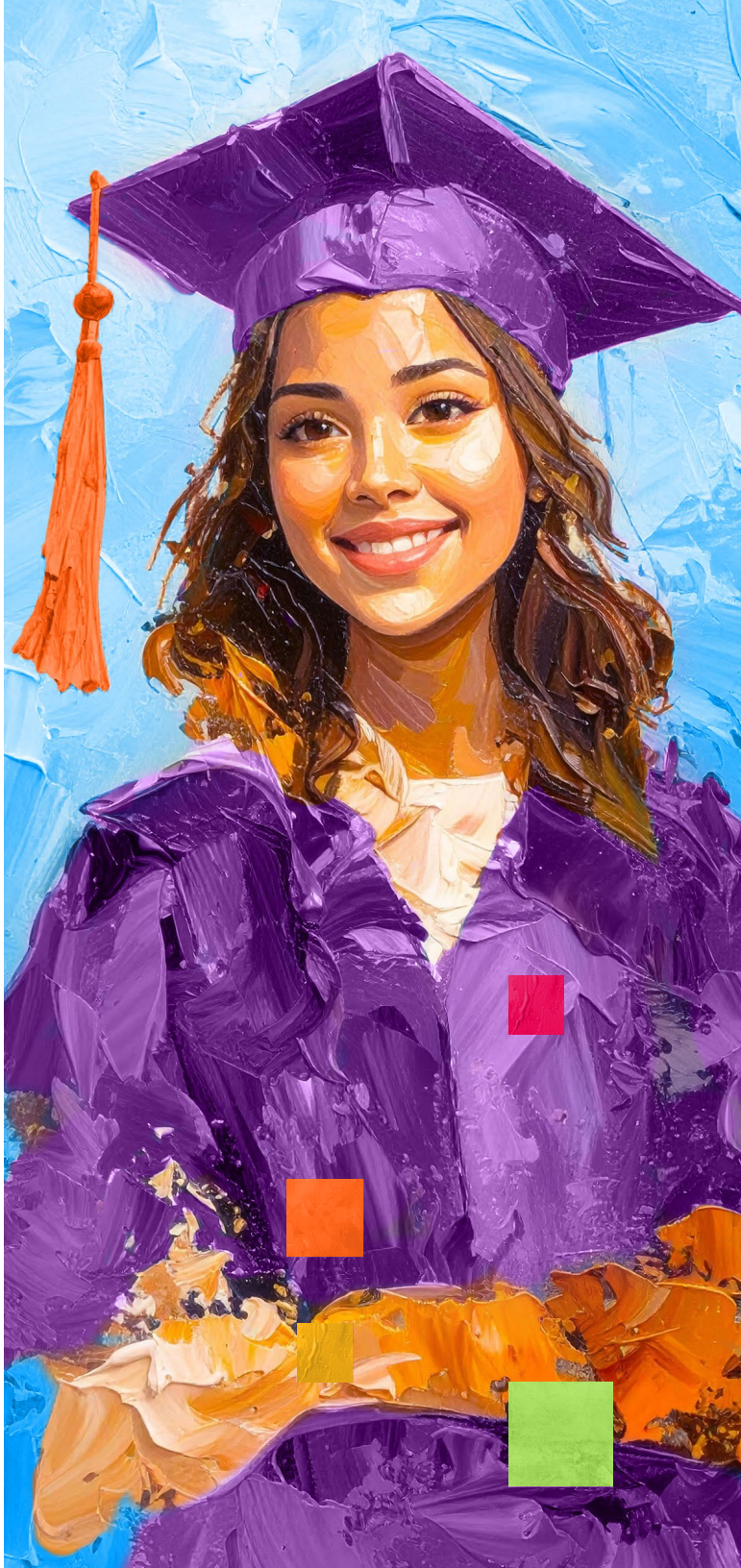
> Expert support for student-centered learning implementation is a click away.

Getting Started with Creating a Portrait of a Graduate

- Engage a representative design team that includes students, families and caregivers, educators, employers and community leaders
- Facilitate conversations that explore the skills, dispositions and knowledge that students need for success in life, learning and work
- Examine local data, graduate outcomes and workforce trends to ground the Portrait in community context
- Surface common values and aspirations that represent the whole community and its aspirations for students

Guiding Questions for Considering a Portrait of a Graduate

- What knowledge, skills and mindsets will graduates need to thrive in a rapidly changing world?
- How might the skills, dispositions and knowledge articulated in the Portrait align with our shared vision?
- Are the skills, dispositions and knowledge articulated in the Portrait future-facing?
- How might we ensure the Portrait of a Graduate reflects all students' diverse needs, backgrounds and aspirations?
- How might our Portrait of a Graduate inform and shape our curriculum, instruction and assessment practices?
- How might we measure progress toward enacting our Portrait of a Graduate?
- What role might educators, families and caregivers, students and community members play in carrying out the Portrait?





Instructional Framework

An instructional framework aligned to the shared vision and the Portrait of a Graduate can enhance learning experiences and ensure consistency across a learning community.

An instructional framework establishes a common language and shared beliefs about teaching and learning, enabling educators to discuss effective practices, give and receive feedback with a common reference point and monitor student growth in a coordinated way. An effective instructional framework drives professional learning, uses evidence-based teaching strategies to guide instructional decision-making and clearly outlines the role of assessment in supporting student learning and development.

> Cultivate educational leadership at all levels by aligning your professional development goals to the attributes in our Portrait of a Leader.

Getting Started with Creating an Instructional Framework

- Convene small groups of key stakeholders who require a strong understanding of instruction, such as teachers, principals, coaches, curriculum leads and department chairs
- Align the framework to the shared vision and Portrait of a Graduate
- Think outside the box: instead of being limited by current practices, imagine the possibilities grounded in great teaching and learning practices
- Build ownership through collaborative design and reflection
- Consider how professional learning efforts (funding, people, events and other experiences) support – or don't support – the shared vision

Guiding Questions for Considering an Instructional Framework

- How might our instructional framework embody our shared vision and make our Portrait of a Graduate a reality?
- What do students need and expect from the learning experiences offered in our learning community?
- What do we want to see/hear/feel when immersed in a teaching and learning experience?
- Does this framework promise to support and serve all students in our learning community?
- How might we evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional framework?





A Shared Vision Is the First Step Toward Systems Transformation

Systems transformation toward personalized, competency-based learning is a continuous, community-driven journey. Its purpose is to ensure the system is responsive to the needs of each learner, enabling individuals to meet their potential and prepare for their desired futures.

When created in partnership with individuals from across the learning community, a shared vision forms the foundation for sustainable, systems-level change, empowering schools and districts to:

- Act responsively to adapt to an evolving world
- Drive toward equitable, learner-centered outcomes
- Embrace continuous improvement driven by the local community
- Sustain change beyond economic, political, social and leadership and other staffing changes

In times of crisis or uncertainty, articulating a shared vision can feel unnecessary or even naïve. If we envision equitable, joyful, life-affirming and meaningful learning experiences for each child, and that future feels further from reality than ever, why bother?

However, there may be no better moment to reflect on our visions for education and society than when we feel untethered by the changes happening around us. A shared vision can serve as a touchstone for navigating uncertainty, grounding learning communities in what truly matters and providing consistent direction that helps them seize the opportunity to positively impact students' lives in a turbulent time.

KnowledgeWorks

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. KnowledgeWorks.org

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