COMMENTARY

Advancing Towards a Student-Centered Approach to Education



AUTHOR

Roman Stearns | Scaling Student Success

PUBLISHED: March 8, 2024

Across the country, states are moving to education systems that are more student centered, equitable, and competency based. They are doing so because they understand that the legacy model for educating our young people is not working. Although graduation rates have increased, other markers of progress have not. Standardized test scores remain relatively flat. Achievement and opportunity gaps persist despite decades of increased funding and abundant strategies to reduce them. Chronic absenteeism is near an all-time high.

The reality is that too many students do not find school to be interesting, engaging, or relevant for their futures. This is particularly true for youth of color and other marginalized student populations. Rather than continuing to tinker around the edges, we can advance real change! Here's how.

Make Education Student Centered

1. PROMOTE COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Many states are turning to a competency-based approach to education, whereby *learning is the constant* and *time is the variable* rather than vice versa (as most schools operate today). Only when students demonstrate one competency do they move on to the next. Some may take longer and need more support, but they are guaranteed success if they persist. In California, Lindsay Unified School District serves as a national model. A few other local educational agencies (LEAs) are making advances towards a competency-based system, but the state does not provide either incentives or guidance for LEAs to make this shift.

2. NORMALIZE STUDENT-CENTERED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Many teachers, schools, and districts have experimented with project-based learning, service learning, civic learning, work-based learning, and other forms of instruction that (by design) engage students in solving real-world problems that have meaning and purpose for students. These schools and districts often engage students by giving them a voice in what they learn, a choice in how they learn and how they demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and a sense of agency to take ownership of their learning journey. Perhaps most important, these learning strategies enable students to center their own identities, cultures, and languages so that they find value, purpose, and relevance in their schooling. Despite the obvious benefits of these strategies, which students, families, and educators often prefer, they are far from the norm.

3. CENTER A WHOLE CHILD VISION

Several research reports and policy papers recommend that states and/or school districts create a whole child vision, often referred to as a "Graduate Profile" or "Portrait of a Graduate," to define student success more holistically and equitably. To date, 17 states have done so;[1] California has not. Lacking a statewide vision, dozens of California school districts have convened their community members to create their own Graduate Profiles and are working to move "from poster to practice"—that is, to operationalize this vision fully as a promise to students and families. Across the state, districts' Graduate Profiles include competencies like critical thinking, self-direction, communication, collaboration, innovation, global and civic engagement, and more. To view dozens of actual profiles from California and beyond, see this interactive map.

4. SHIFT FROM MEASURING KNOWLEDGE TO ASSESSING DURABLE SKILLS

As educators and society, we've been complicit: We value what we measure rather than measure what we value. Dozens of Graduate Profiles clearly articulate the competencies that communities value for their young people. But our state's accountability measures, the media, and society at large tend to oversimplify the intended outcomes of our education system, often limiting signs of growth or failure to scores on standardized tests. Although test scores serve a valuable function in assessing progress on key measures, they represent a very blunt instrument—a snapshot at a point in time on a no/low-stakes test for students—and they focus narrowly on a few data points for our education system. Standardized tests have, at best, given limited insight into student learning, especially for historically underserved students. They should not be the sole diagnostic for what each individual student needs. To complement test scores, we should measure what we value—that is, the durable skills articulated in the Graduate Profiles created by communities across the state.

5. MOVE FROM STANDARDIZED TESTS TO AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Graduate Profile competencies are not easily measured with standardized tests, but they can be demonstrated, observed, and assessed through essays, presentations, exhibitions, projects, portfolio defenses, and more. Many California schools and districts have begun to assess student progress on Graduate Profile outcomes. For equity reasons, students should be able to propose and/or choose methods that are culturally and linguistically affirming. In what ways might these forms of authentic assessment be deeper, more powerful learning experiences than taking a test?

Make Compatible Structural Adjustments

To begin achieving these shifts, California can make a few compatible structural adjustments.

1. BLEND IN-SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

Learning does not happen only in classrooms on school days; it happens at home, in the community, and in the workplace, during all waking hours throughout the year. The state has robustly funded community schools and expanded learning, but we continue to expect that "learning" occurs within the boundaries of the classroom, clock (school day), calendar (school year), and curriculum (core disciplines). This simply isn't true. We should value the many ways, venues, and times in which students learn and incorporate them into a broader vision for California education. Moving towards a competency-based approach honors diverse learning experiences. Transitioning from traditionally closed systems to open systems would honor learning that takes place across time and space.

2. DE-EMPHASIZE THE CARNEGIE UNIT

A competency-based approach recognizes that each student learns at their own pace in their own way.The Carnegie unit represents an outdated notion that a defined set of content knowledge requires a fixed amount of time to master. It is a one-size-fits-all approach with a false premise, yet it continues to drive the way we organize schools. Even the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recognizes that it is time to phase out the Carnegie unit in favor of a competency-based system.

Students should earn credits for demonstrating mastery, not for sitting in their seats ("seat time"). Educational Testing Service is working with the Carnegie Foundation to launch a national pilot (guided by this concept paper).

3. MODIFY THE LCAP AND CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DASHBOARD

Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) set the course for all 2,500+ LEAs across the state, defining growth goals, metrics, activities, and expenses. The California School Dashboard is a reporting mechanism that reflects results. Although the spirit of local control is strong in California, these documents tend to elevate state measures and diminish local ones. Neither the LCAP nor the Dashboard requires LEAs to create or pay attention to a whole child vision as a means of clarifying student-centered outcomes and building coherence across initiatives, programs, and funding sources.

4. FUND STUDENTS, NOT ATTENDANCE

These changes require schools to be more flexible in what, how, when, and where students learn. In fact, the goal should be learning, not sitting at desks. If we commit to advancing a competency-based approach, then it makes sense to fund enrollment (sometimes called "membership") rather than attendance (i.e., average daily attendance or ADA). California is one of only six states that has not yet moved to an enrollment-based funding model. Other states have made this shift for many reasons, not the least of which is that our current funding structure undermines efforts by the Local Control Funding Formula to fund schools more equitably. Attendance funding exacerbates inequities by granting more funding to wealthy suburban districts that typically have higher attendance rates and less funding to poor communities of color, which often have lower attendance rates.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These adjustments can (and should) inform several policy recommendations. For clarity, we have identified a handful that we believe would be high leverage and high impact:

- **Create a statewide "Graduate Profile"** or at least a holistic definition of college, career, and civic readiness that incorporates the durable skills, competencies, and mindsets young people need for future success. If LEAs lack the interest, capacity, or resources to create their own profiles, they could voluntarily adopt the state's profile.
- **Establish education innovation zones** where interested LEAs receive waivers from Education Code statutes and regulations to pilot and pursue student-centered strategies (i.e., assessing and reporting locally defined whole child outcomes through a competency-based approach, enabling students to learn through engaging projects and demonstrate learning through alternative assessments, blending in-school and out-of-school learning, and doing away with the Carnegie unit). To advance the lessons learned by the innovation zone districts, seek associated modifications to the Education Code.
- **Promote competency-based education and authentic forms of assessment** through grants, professional development, leadership coaching, and accountability measures.
- **Elevate local indicators on the Dashboard** (at least for an interested group of pilot districts) to equate with statewide indicators (i.e., those with five-color speedometer dials) to adhere more closely to the spirit of local control and give LEAs more ownership of their high-profile growth goals. See these models (9-min video) created for Scaling Student Success by Parsec Education.
- **Modify the LCAP template** to begin with a whole child vision—whether by adding a simple statement or developing a Graduate Profile—with an expectation for LEAs to map each of their goals to the whole child vision to promote coherence.
- **Shift to enrollment funding** (or "member funding") rather than attendance funding.

For more information, see the full policy paper.

Roman Stearns is founder and executive director of Scaling Student Success, a California partnership dedicated to educating the whole child. For much of his career, Roman has directed regional and statewide partnerships focused on bringing greater relevance to education through student-centered experiential learning, college and career pathways, and learning that goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom, curriculum, clock (school day), and calendar (school year). He is a lifelong champion for equitable and scalable systems change, assuring that each and every child, especially those most marginalized, has a voice, choice, and agency to self-direct learning in ways that affirm their identity, culture, and language.

Suggested citation

Stearns, R. (2024, March). *Advancing towards a student-centered approach to education* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/advancing-towards-student-centered-approach-education

1 "More States Are Creating a 'Portrait of a Graduate.' Here's Why" (Education Week, Dec 2023).

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org