COMMENTARY

It's Time to Create an Aspirational Vision for California Education



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Imagine a California where every child graduates not only academically prepared but also empowered by the innovative spirit and limitless dreams that have defined our state for generations. For decades, California has been the birthplace of bold ideas—the destination for dreamers seeking a brighter future. Today, as students and schools navigate a rapidly evolving world, the state must not just adapt—it must lead with purpose and vision.

A shared vision is essential for catalyzing collective action and building an education system that empowers students to become confident, creative, and compassionate leaders, ready to realize the California dream anew: "A clear vision engages all important stakeholders in a single, sustainable conversation and provides a north star that points them in the same direction across practice, policy, and research." Many research reports and policy papers[1] recommend that states establish a strategic vision to reimagine education. When they do, a roadmap for innovation can emerge.

When was the last time that California state leaders articulated a vision for educating its students? In the late 1980s and early 1990s, state agencies created several visionary guiding documents—such as *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public School* (1987), *Second to None: A Vision of the New California High School* (1992), and *It's Elementary! Elementary Grades Task Force Report* (1994)—that illustrated California's commitment to building a public education system that advanced educational opportunity at all grade levels and prepared students to thrive in a dynamic and diverse society. More than a decade ago, the state adopted the Common Core State Standards (2010) and Next Generation Science Standards (2013) to define what students should know and be able to do. More recently, California adopted the English Learner Roadmap (2017), which provides a vision of powerful education for emergent multilingual students but not the state's entire student population. In addition to these guiding frameworks, in 2017 the state launched the California School Dashboard: a measurement system intended to provide a more holistic picture of school performance across eight priority areas, with dozens of indicators and subgroup breakdowns.

These guiding documents and the new measurement system may be *necessary*, but they are *not sufficient* to ensure the whole child outcomes that young people need to succeed in an ever-changing world. They fall short of offering a comprehensive vision for *all* students enrolled in California schools that extends beyond core academics. **California's students deserve rigorous standards and frameworks as well as an expansive measurement system of school performance, but they also need a bold, unifying vision that prepares every student to thrive in a complex and evolving world.**

Seeking such clarity, more than 100 California school districts have engaged their community members to create a "Graduate Profile" or "Portrait of a Graduate" (PoG) as a whole child vision defining the skills, competencies, and mindsets that young people need for future success. While students benefit from mastering academics, they also must be self-directed lifelong learners, culturally competent and globally aware citizens, creative and critical thinkers, and effective communicators and collaborators as well as digitally and financially literate, multilingual, adaptable, resilient, kind, curious, and more. Some PoGs add the need for students to have a healthy mind and body, a sense of purpose, and an understanding of self. Together, these outcomes pose a renewed definition of student success and, to a certain degree, a reimagined purpose for education.

By September 2025, the California State Board of Education (SBE) plans to approve its own PoG to use as a policy framework to inform future decision-making. That's a great start to redefining student success. This is California's opportunity to lead, not just to follow: to redefine success for every student in every community. Depending on how the state PoG is designed and shared, it may serve as a de facto renewed vision for California education and a roadmap for innovation.

To ensure authenticity and relevance, let's empower students to help shape this vision. **A powerful companion effort would be for a representative group of young people to create a vision for California education**—by students and for students—and to examine where their aspirations align with, or diverge from, the adult-driven PoG.

When school districts create a PoG, we know it's just a starting point. A poster on a wall has never changed student outcomes or professional practice. Only when a district commits to *fully implementing* its PoG does it see the desired impact on student outcomes. The same is true at the state level. **When the SBE announces its new PoG, it should do so in a way that clearly communicates intentions to adopt policies enabling the education system to align strategically with the new PoG.** Twenty-one states are doing just that.

State leaders could leverage the adoption of the SBE's PoG as a critical opportunity to bring much-needed coherence across the TK–12 education system. **Aligning key policies and structures to the PoG could ensure that the many "parts and pieces" of the system are working towards a shared vision of student success.** This alignment could include but is not limited to:

- high school graduation requirements;
- format and priority areas of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs);
- categories and metrics included in the California School Dashboard;
- measures included in the California Cradle-to-Career Data System;
- state standards, assessments, and curriculum frameworks and materials;
- standards and processes for credentialing teachers and other school personnel;
- grant program applications, review processes, and reporting requirements;
- teacher pre-service and leadership development programs;
- flexible graduation requirements recognizing students' demonstrated competency (as an alternative to traditional seat-time-based measures); and
- stable, predictable funding based on enrollment.

The SBE has communicated that it does not intend its PoG to become the de facto PoG for school districts across the state. Each district operates in its own unique context, with its own values and priorities. To date, more than 100 California school districts have created their own PoGs (see this interactive map), and many are moving "from poster to practice"—that is, fully implementing

their PoGs as a *promise* to students and families. To build coherence among the various initiatives and programs underway, a district could begin its LCAP with a whole child vision (like a PoG) and align goals, activities, metrics, and funding allocations to that vision.

California stands in a pivotal moment. Today—with polarizing politics, climate threats, adoption of artificial intelligence, abundant inequities for communities of color, and more—we all could use a positive and aspirational vision for educating our young people to enter an uncertain future fully prepared for success. Now is the time for leadership and action!

California has always been a beacon of innovation, ambition, and progress. Imagine the transformative potential if we channel this pioneering spirit into reimagining education for every child: empowering all students with the skills, mindsets, and opportunities needed to thrive. By committing to this aspirational vision, state leaders, educators, families, and students can collectively write the next chapter of California's education story. Let's dare to envision a future where every young person graduates ready, resilient, and inspired—equipped not only to face the world's challenges but to lead us towards a brighter, more equitable future!

Let's take the first step to ensure that the California dream becomes every California student's reality.

For a more complete and concrete set of policy recommendations, read the full 2025 Policy White Paper: An Aspirational Vision for California Education *offered by Scaling Student Success, a California partnership dedicated to spreading whole child education to every student across every corner of the state by 2035.*

Suggested citation

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1 See: Aspen Institute. (2019). *From a nation at risk to a nation at hope: Recommendations from the national commission on social, emotional, and academic development*. eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22Aspen+Institute%22&ff1=locDistrict+of+Columbia&id=ED606337; Aurora Institute. (2020, April). *Future focused state policy actions to transform K–12 education*. aurora-institute.org/resource/future-focused-state-policy-actions-to-transform-k-12-education; and CASEL. (2024, February 2). *Portraits of a graduate: Strengthening career and college readiness through social and emotional skill development*. casel.org/portraits-of-a-graduate-2024.

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