



FUTURE OF LEARNING COUNCIL

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MEMO

To: Michigan Leaders and Educators

From: Future of Learning Council Leaders

Date: September 8, 2021

RE: Policy Analysis and Recommendations for Advancing Student-Centered Learning in Michigan

COVID Recovery: Five Strategies for Advancing Student-Centered Innovation

In response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and educators have begun to explore and implement innovative strategies to better meet the needs of individual students. These temporary innovations present opportunities for permanent solutions that will ensure systems are more resilient and equitable as our country rebuilds. Doing so will not only help states effectively address the delay in learning brought on by the pandemic - in the long term, it will also empower state K-12 education systems to produce more qualified graduates who are well prepared to succeed in postsecondary education, careers, and civic life.

As states seek to address challenges revealed by the pandemic, five strategies are rising to the top. They include:

- 1) Building a Culture of Innovation
- 2) Rethinking Seat Time & Student Engagement
- 3) Creating Transparent Competency-Based Learning Frameworks
- 4) Establishing Competency-Based Graduation Pathways
- 5) Balancing State Assessment Systems

Prior to the pandemic, Michigan adopted a series of policies to begin enabling student-centered practices at the school and district level. These existing systems and structures, combined with

the temporary innovations that the state has adopted during the pandemic, provide a foundation for Michigan to build on as the state continues to develop a more student-centered education system that advances the vision and goals articulated in the state's [Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#).

This document provides a brief overview of Michigan's current policies in each of these five areas and concludes with a series of high-level recommendations for Michigan policymakers to consider.

Strategy 1: Building a Culture and a System Oriented Towards Innovation

Current Status: Michigan provides numerous [waiver opportunities](#) for schools, which can be found on the Department of Education website and in the [Pupil Accounting Manual](#). The creation of the [Innovation Council](#) just five years ago in the Michigan Department recognized the ongoing need to provide schools with flexibility, support and guidance. However, it is not uncommon for school leaders to be unaware of existing opportunities to acquire flexibility from rules and regulations, either in Michigan or elsewhere. Furthermore, it is unclear from the department's website how many waiver requests or innovation proposals have been submitted nor their outcomes.

Recommendation: Create a Flexibility Guide with Annual Reports of Waivers

- Build off current efforts to increase transparency and ease of use by publishing a guide that catalogs the ways schools can seek flexibility, identify the enabling authority and simplify application. (Examples [WI](#), [UT](#), [IN](#), and [IL](#)). The goal of this process should be to spotlight areas where legislative or regulatory clarification is needed. Ultimately, the guides - coupled with an annual report of all waiver requests, approvals and denials - should serve as a communication strategy to bring greater awareness of the opportunities as well as a policy and regulatory reform roadmap. (See examples from [Colorado Annual Report](#) and [Arkansas Legislative Summary of Waivers](#)). The state should ensure that these documents are posted publicly in an easy to find online location to enhance their usefulness to districts and schools.

Strategy 2: Rethinking Seat Time & Student Engagement

Current Status: The Michigan State School Aid Act and the companion [Pupil Accounting Manual](#) are the foundation for school attendance reporting and funding. Like most states the core of these policies are tethered to traditional models and time-based policies. However, the numerous provisions for alternative models such as work-based learning, project-based

learning, participation in postsecondary programs, and virtual learning demonstrate Michigan's recognition of the need to develop alternate methods for reporting and funding.

COVID-19 laid bare the shortcomings of seat-time policies, and Michigan, like most states, moved quickly to grant significant flexibility from these requirements for the 2020-21 school year, waiving in-person instructional requirements for count days and allowing for attendance to be measured less frequently and through various communication avenues. As schools prepare for the uncertainties of the next school year, one thing is clear - there is an urgency to address instructional loss and close gaps that have been exacerbated. The goal is to leverage the lessons learned from this past year to evolve from a system that is based on 'seat-time' to one that emphasizes and measures student engagement and mastery across varied learning environments and modalities.

Recommendation: Authorize Schools of Innovation

- Authorize schools of innovation to encourage new and creative approaches to teaching and learning and help identify the policies that hinder their implementation.¹ Prospective legislation should establish a clear timeline for decisions to be made, including application submissions, department approval decisions, and written feedback for applicants not approved. Evidence of stakeholder support, such as a letter of understanding from the education association, are also key requirements that will increase the chances of successful implementation. (See state examples from [Colorado](#) and [Kentucky](#)). Legislation should also consider what safeguards may be needed to ensure that new approaches deliver high quality instruction enabling all students to successfully master academic competencies at their own pace.
- A schools of innovation program should enable participants to submit an application requesting flexibility to waive policies that impede student-centered teaching and learning practices. All waiver requests should include a description of the new strategies or programs schools seek to implement and how a current law or regulation is impeding implementation. However, it must be very clear that the goal of flexibility should not be to simply provide freedom from existing mandates and accountability, but rather to provide the space for school leaders to develop new, innovative methods to meet the existing requirements and needs of students. Flexibility should also be provided for more than a single year within the waiver to allow for more time to develop innovative strategies. The waiver provision could also provide the state with a unique opportunity to consider ways to improve on existing pupil accounting procedures - waivers could be

¹ Twenty-four [states](#) have at least one innovation program in statute, however Michigan is not one of them.

used by districts to develop and incubate new methods to report attendance and engagement.

Strategy 3: Creating Transparent Competency-Based Learning Frameworks

Current Status: Following the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Michigan embarked on a year-long, iterative journey to develop shared learning expectations in the form of [the Michigan Academic Standards](#). In 2006, the [Michigan Merit Curriculum \(MMC\) legislation](#) enabled districts to award credit, at their discretion, for graduation by demonstrating proficiency of shared academic standards instead of seat-time. More recently, the state developed a [Profile of a Graduate](#) prototype, which names the highest-level outcomes that the state wants for every graduate. Through the establishment of the standards, their reinforcement in graduation requirements, and the development of a Profile of a Graduate, the state has committed to the value of shared goals as a driver of equity.

Michigan policy makers have collectively taken several actions in recent years to grow competency-based education (CBE). In 2016, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and State Board of Education approved a strategic plan for education called “Top 10 in 10”, which has since been strengthened and re-released in 2020 under State Superintendent, Dr. Michael Rice called [Michigan’s Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#). The original 2016 plan [named](#) CBE as one of its core strategies, and MDE subsequently created an accompanying [definition resource](#). Additionally, former Governor Snyder’s [Marshall Plan for Talent](#) included funding that has since been [distributed](#) in the form of grants to support CBE implementation. More recently, the state is [reportedly](#) in the process of developing model competencies in English-language arts and math with the goal of establishing model competencies in all subject areas, and MDE has [released](#) its own statewide Profile of a Graduate to support CBE implementation.

Though some districts have had notable success in using CBE strategies in their local context, the absence of a systemic approach and the need to focus on large sets of granular standards that were not designed to relate well to each other is clear – all of the state’s existing academic standards frameworks are organized in slightly different ways by content. This represents an opportunity to leverage CBE as a critical connector between academic standards and the lofty goals articulated in the Profile of a Graduate.

Recommendation: Explore a Systemic Approach to Competency-Based Learning Frameworks

- Provide space for stakeholders (e.g., students, families, educators, business leaders, postsecondary institutions, and colleges of education) from across the state to envision competencies as a critical component of the overarching framework for learning in

Michigan. Clear and focused competencies provide a way for educators to create learning experiences that more closely represent how skills and knowledge show up in the real world. Competencies tend to be critical skills and understandings that appear across academic disciplines and contexts. As a result, students are more clearly able to connect their time in school to preparation for the complex opportunities and challenges of postsecondary life. In using competencies as a frame for learning, educators can recognize mastery of the most important goals of the system (like those articulated in a Profile of a Graduate) while also making clear connections to the academic content set forth in the standards. Educators should be deeply engaged in the process of developing and building out the competencies as well as their implementation at the district and school level. Once created, these competencies should be optional, but not mandatory. (See these examples from Idaho: [Idaho Mastery Education Framework](#) and [College and Career Readiness Competencies](#); and these examples from Utah: [Utah Competency-Based Education Framework](#) and [Utah Portrait of a Graduate Competencies](#)).

- Establish long-term professional learning communities for educators centered on developing familiarity with CBE. These could be funded through federal COVID relief dollars, state grants to districts, or through Michigan’s federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) title funds. An authentic shift to competency-based teaching requires deep professional learning and collaboration time over several years. The state should leverage those who have already been working in CBE to lead these statewide professional learning communities and utilize these communities as testing grounds for future iterations of competency learning frameworks to achieve the state’s [future goal](#) of developing model competencies in all subject areas. The state should also consider how to effectively leverage the expertise of colleges of education in these professional networks.

Strategy 4: Establishing Competency-Based Graduation Pathways

Current Status: Michigan’s current policy environment provides several existing opportunities for students to explore college and career opportunities through competency-based graduation pathways. The state’s middle school [Education Development Plan](#) provides a gateway for middle school career exploration while the MMC gives students the opportunity to earn credits based on proficiency rather than seat time. Through the MMC, students are also empowered to pursue a personalized curriculum if they so choose. The MMC also requires students to have at least one online learning experience, and the state has established the [Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute](#) to support the growth of effective policies in this space. The state

has also taken steps to support alignment between the K-12 and postsecondary sector with its [Career Pathways grants](#), facilitated through MDE's [Career Readiness Initiative](#).

Recommendations: Establish More Clearly Defined Competency-Based College and Career Pathways and Strengthen Data Systems to Ensure Equitable Participation

- Strengthen the state's data capacity to analyze participation in existing competency-based pathways and identify gaps and opportunities for systemic improvement. The state could establish a pathways task force that includes a broad range of stakeholders to study existing pathways, leverage data to identify participation gaps, and consider how to strengthen and/or redesign its existing system as needed. The taskforce should include relevant state agencies, K-12 educators, students, and parents as well as postsecondary education and businesses. Stakeholders in this task force should first analyze whether the necessary data exist to create a complete picture of student participation in the full universe of college and career pathways, including career and technical education (CTE), dual and concurrent enrollment, and work-based learning experiences. Such data appear to exist already for [dual enrollment](#) and may exist for [CTE](#) programs. The state should then seek to use these collected data to inform strategies for addressing participation gaps across a wide range of student subgroups (e.g., race, gender, income level, students with disabilities) in existing competency-based college and career pathways as well as potential disparities that may exist by geography or school type (e.g., private, traditional public, charter).
- Establish more clearly defined college and career oriented pathways that are accessible to all students and that are aligned to state-defined competencies. Once the state has identified student participation gaps, the pathways task force from the previous section could recommend strategies to best address those gaps and create a broader range of pathways for students.² There are a variety of strategies that could be leveraged to create more equitable access to various college and career pathways (e.g., [intermediaries](#) to facilitate increased access to work-based learning, changes to dual enrollment [funding models](#), etc.). The state should leverage the data collected under the previous recommendation to identify the most appropriate strategies to pursue based on the state's revealed needs. To empower students to better take advantage of existing pathways, Michigan could consider a variety of approaches such as establishing a requirement that students participate in various pathways as a graduation requirement or creating a clearly defined menu of college and career pathways for students. (See examples from [Indiana](#), [Rhode Island](#), and [Louisiana](#)). The state should

² The state may also wish to develop an updated career pathways framework. The College and Career Readiness and Success Center at the American Institutes for Research has created several [modules](#) designed to guide state education agencies through the process of designing a career pathways system.

also consider how best to provide comprehensive technical assistance to empower local districts and schools to create and implement their own pathways. (See an example from [Vermont](#)). The state could also consider leveraging its federal relief dollars to empower schools and districts to build new pathways where disparities in financial and human capital resources are identified.

- Provide additional transparency in how the state informs the public regarding participation in competency-aligned college and career pathways. At present the state's [parent dashboard](#) for high schools includes an advanced coursework [metric](#) that aggregates these pathways together. The state should break down this metric into different program subcategories and clearly report them on the parent dashboard. The state could also pass legislation requiring annual reporting on participation trends in competency-aligned pathways. This public reporting will not only help to inform the public, but also provide an additional measure of accountability to ensure that the state is actively tracking gaps in pathways participation and can allocate adequate resources to address them.

Strategy 5: Balancing State Assessment Systems

Current Status: The [Michigan State School Aid Act](#) and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) dictates the administration of the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP) to students online in grades 3-7 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics and in science and social students in grades 5 and 8. The PSAT 8/9 measures ELA and mathematics in grade 8 and 9 and the PSAT 10 is administered in grade 10 to help prepare students for the SAT college entrance exam given to every high school junior as part of the MME. The MME consists of a free SAT with essay that also measures student knowledge on state ELA and mathematics standards, M-STEP science and social studies, and ACT WorkKeys.

The state secured a federal waiver to suspend summative assessments in Spring 2020 in response to COVID-19 and passed [a law](#) during the summer of 2020 requiring public school districts to administer locally chosen, national benchmark assessments to measure student progress. Despite a [resolution](#) from the Michigan State Board of Education urging the legislature to remove all summative assessment and accountability requirements for the 2020-2021 school year, and a [public statement](#) from the State Superintendent emphasizing the need to focus on teaching, learning, and social emotional needs instead of test preparation this year, the Michigan Department of Education was unsuccessful in securing a [federal assessment waiver](#) for Spring 2021. The state had specifically requested to replace state summative assessments with locally chosen national benchmark assessments. As such, the only flexibility the state was able to offer districts for Spring 2021 test administration was additional test days

and extended testing windows. The state also clarified that students receiving remote-only instruction would not be required to enter a school building for the sole purposes of taking a test.

Recommendations: Build Performance Assessment Literacy and Explore Integration in the State's Accountability System

- Build educator assessment literacy to leverage high-quality formative assessment practices and performance tasks to better personalize instructional practices. A dedicated investment in formative assessment practices can be funded through federal COVID relief dollars, state grants to districts, establishment of a district professional learning network on performance assessment practices, or Michigan's federal funding for state assessments and Title II professional development activities. (See this example from [Colorado](#)). This assessment literacy could also be built through the long-term professional learning communities recommended elsewhere in this document.
- Add a performance assessment to Michigan's graduation requirements to measure the essential skills that students need to be successful in postsecondary and career. This could include a graduation portfolio or a performance task aligned to state-defined competencies and expanded career pathways recommended in this document. The state would need to identify a transparent set of essential skills or competencies and support districts in the development of evaluation rubrics to ensure quality implementation across the state as well as consider the school-level logistics of implementing such a system. (See this example from [Rhode Island](#)).
- Explore replacement of the MSTEP social studies examination in 11th grade with a performance assessment requirement that students could complete through either a graduation portfolio or a performance task aligned to state-defined competencies. (See this example from [Virginia](#)).
- Establish a formal planning process to explore an amendment to the state's accountability system to integrate performance assessments as an indicator of school quality and student success. This planning process should consider possible amendments to the state's federal ESSA plan as well as further exploration of the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority program. This would enable a cohort of districts to pilot an innovative assessment in one or several subjects in lieu of the state's summative assessment. (See this example from [South Carolina](#)).

Recognition of Limits

While the strategies listed above are promising practices to improve academic achievement and equity in student learning, it is important to acknowledge that much more needs to be

done to ensure access is available to ALL students. This should happen regardless of the city, county, intermediate school district, or region in which a student attends school. For example, all students need access and resources to create flexible learning environments in multiple areas including career and technical education, dual enrollment/early college, and balanced calendar schools. If a district does not have access to adequate financial resources, a partnership with a career center, or a community college/four-year university, it is difficult to take advantage of the flexible learning environments that are possible using the proposed flexibilities recommended in this document.

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