

The First 100 Days and Beyond

How the new administration can advance a student-centered and equitable vision for K-12 education

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Why change is needed

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has disrupted education for millions of American students.

The pandemic's unprecedented impact won't be fully understood for years, but there is clear evidence of a growing educational crisis in at least three specific areas:

- Pandemic learning loss is particularly severe in mathematics.¹
- Students who struggled the most are those who were in upper elementary school grades and transitioned into middle school.²
- Educationally marginalized student groups are most vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic.³

While these challenges are unquestionably unique to this moment in our nation's history, they are not new. Our organization highlighted these challenges in two recent research publications. The first, called The Iceberg Problem, released in the fall

of 2019, showed how one-size-fits-all federal assessment and accountability policies designed to promote equity have inadvertently caused learning gaps in math to persist and exacerbate unfinished learning. The second publication released this summer amidst the pandemic, called Solving the Iceberg Problem outlined specific strategies to address significant student learning loss in middle-school math through a strategy known as "tailored acceleration."

What each of these papers suggests is that comprehensively addressing unfinished learning requires rethinking some of the basic grade-level oriented systems and structures that govern how schools generally operate. These structures have inadvertently exacerbated inequities by signaling that all same-aged students should

learn the same material at the same time. While the approach can help to mitigate the pernicious effects of systematic biases, it does not provide a viable pathway for students with learning gaps from prior years to catch up and move ahead. And as a result, students who are already behind, fall even further behind.

Enabling new pathways for students to accelerate in all subjects will require a bold agenda. The environment to develop innovative, scalable approaches to teaching and learning will enable schools to meet each and every student where they are and get them to where they need to be. Achieving this vision will require a new federal role centered on innovation — a role that is long overdue.



A new and essential federal role

The operating model of our nation’s school system—one centered on individual teachers guiding groups of students through a standard curriculum, often with the aid of a textbook — has governed teaching and learning for more than a century.

It was designed for a time when school systems were tasked by policymakers and industrialists to create “factory schools” that were charged with designing a system that focused on an efficient and standardized approach. And it was built to prepare for a largely industrial workforce during a time when tools to support learning for all students in an equitable way were largely non-existent.

While this basic structure of schooling has gone relatively unchanged, the educational foundation required for access to a middle-class life has increased substantially. Currently, only one-third of all students are graduating high school ready for college or career, a number that has barely moved over time as our nation’s equity gaps have grown.⁴ Efforts geared toward high standards, improved educator quality, high-stakes assessment and accountability, and school choice have done little to challenge the most fundamental notions of how schools are organized. While these endeavors are well-intentioned and sensible, they have been no match for the inadequacies of the operating model itself.

This year, our nation’s inability to evolve the current operating model itself was further laid bare in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While other

sectors were able to leverage modern tools to maintain their operations, K-12 education was caught flat-footed. Some states fully shut down any forms of education, while others relied upon free tools or products invented from other industries in order to provide some semblance of continuity, and are still doing so. For a system so essential and vital to our national identity, to our long-term prosperity, and to the values we hold dearly as a country, our national reliance on a century-old operating model has been devastating.

Evolving the current operating model cannot be achieved by simply demanding it of teachers or providing them with new training. Teachers and schools generally do not have the time, flexibility, and resources to fully reimagine and execute a vastly different learner experience. Nor will it be achieved at the local level. The combination of profound budgetary challenges, education and system structures built to operate (not innovate), and an utter lack of research and development (R&D) capacity have all prevented schools and districts from developing much-needed breakthrough innovations.

The private industry is also unlikely to address our sector’s innovation void. Investors have historically been skittish about supporting the

development of tools and approaches that must ultimately penetrate a fragmented and politically-fraught sector. Today’s ed-tech successes are generally centered on higher education or on K-12 services that are ancillary to the core business of teaching and learning.

Federal policy has not played a meaningful role to support education innovation either. It has focused largely on the following: funding for schools in lower income communities; funding and regulation to protect target student populations; and ensuring an assessment and accountability system is in place to provide clear and transparent data to all stakeholders. While these roles have been vital to promoting educational excellence and equity, some federal efforts have also inadvertently made it even harder for schools to break free of the existing operating model.

The current profound need for innovation, combined with underlying conditions that make it unlikely these breakthroughs will otherwise emerge, all point to a major need for federal support to create new conditions to support innovation. It is a role the federal government has successfully played in other sectors — most notably defense, energy, and health care — that must now extend into K-12.

Challenging the limitations of the predominant, age-based classroom will require the development of innovative learning models that are more focused on tailoring instruction to the unique strengths and needs of each student. An innovative learning model is a holistic, school-based program that integrates teachers

and technology so that schools can systematically support a personalized approach to education for each and every student. These models — which can be subject-specific, grade span-specific, or apply more broadly — enable a different way of ‘doing school’ in ways that drive both excellence and equity.

Innovative learning models are developed by model providers— organizations that leverage research and development to create new models and then partner with schools to support high-quality implementation. While model providers are not the school managers, they still share in the accountability for student outcomes.

We believe this administration can support innovative learning models in three essential ways:

- I. By investing in the research and development required for model providers to develop innovative learning models that are impactful and scalable;
- II. By creating the space in policy for innovative learning models, most notably through assessment and accountability; and
- III. By providing near-term flexibility in state summative assessments.

I. Design a path forward for innovation: Invest in research and development to support educational recovery and innovative learning models

In order to enable transformative innovation, the nation needs federal investment in research to inform how to best address learning loss, as well as the development of innovative learning models that provide systemic solutions for the future.

The administration should appropriate funds to create grants, or enter into contracts of cooperative agreements for the development, testing, and implementation of innovative learning models. This work is needed to transform the system, not only to meet today’s challenges, but to reimagine our educational system for generations.

To achieve this vision, we recommend the following proposals be included as part of the Administration’s COVID-19 Educational Equity Gap Challenge Grant:

- A. Research the impact of school disruptions during the Covid-19 crisis and the best practices which emerged to address student learning loss, including those relating to remote instruction, student assessment, and social-emotional supports;
- B. Design and test innovative learning models, in particular those that can be especially impactful for students with special needs, including English Learners, students of color, low-income students and those facing systemic barriers to high-school completion; and;
- C. Scale the most impactful learning models through focused grants to states to support the creation of Innovation Zones, as the State of Texas has done.

II. Amend the Innovative Assessment and Demonstration Authority to Create the Space for True Innovation

The Innovative Assessment and Demonstration Authority (IADA) was intended to provide the foundation for longer term innovation. However, IADA is flawed in at least three critical respects.

First, states are still required to demonstrate comparability and accountability reporting that are wholly reliant on state grade-level standards. In math, for example, the number of items required to achieve that objective can make it nearly impossible to measure performance outside of students' enrolled grade span.

Second, even if states could measure performance on off-grade items, schools generally do not have the capacity to provide innovative and tailored instructional approaches that enable a strategic mix of pre-, on-, and post-grade skills for each student, particularly in the case of math.

And third, IADA is limited to seven states and needs to be amended to allow all states to participate in a revision to the Authority.

Below are several proposed recommendations to create the space for improved policy innovations to emerge while protecting the appropriate guardrails and safeguards that spurred the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

A. Establish a Competency-Based Assessment and Accountability Pathway within the amended IADA

The goal in amending IADA is to create space within the system for innovation to develop without undermining the need for systemic transparency, comparability and essential guardrails writ large. In doing so, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) could choose to have their schools follow either a) the grade-level aligned assessment and accountability path (the current system), which would be the default; or b) a competency-based assessment and accountability system. This choice (which could be for one or more subjects) would allow schools (via LEAs) that demonstrate both the will and capacity to implement competency-based learning and to do so under clear and carefully-monitored circumstances.

B. Regulate the number of schools that could select competency-based assessment and accountability

To further ensure that the competency-based pathway does not enable schools to circumvent assessment and accountability more broadly, IADA could limit the number

of schools opting for this pathway (e.g. no more than 15% of students) while creating opportunities for expansion as more evidence is gathered on long-term effectiveness. States should also report on the demographics of selected schools and how those demographics compare to the state overall.

C. Require LEAs and schools to apply for authorization to pursue a competency-based pathway

As part of an application process, LEAs and schools would need to demonstrate their capacity to successfully implement a competency-based approach to learning, which could include a) overall approach to implementation; b) approach to teacher training; c) means of tracking individual student progress; and d) approach to parent engagement.

D. Limit participation in a competency-based pathway to students in grades 3–8

To make clear that the competency-based pathway is not a “lower bar” than the current grade-level approach to assessment and accountability, imputed scores from adaptive assessments should only be used for students in grades 3–8. High school summative assessments under ESSA would still need to be uniform.

E. Leverage and develop innovative assessment systems

Schools choosing a competency-based path will need the flexibility to use alternate assessment systems aligned to this pedagogical approach as the basis for their accountability. This could include the use of adaptive assessments (some of which can be statistically-linked to state summative assessments for accountability purposes) and/or program-embedded assessments (which might ultimately have the validity to replace summative assessments). Current technical quality requirements, particularly those focused on peer review, must also be updated to enable their use.

F. Ensure rigorous accountability in the competency-based pathway

Schools choosing a competency-based path and using innovative assessments will need to operate under an accountability system that is aligned to this pedagogical approach while still advancing transparency, accountability, and equity. This could include measuring learning growth across multiple years and/or weighing key transition points more heavily.

III. Provide Near-Term Flexibility For Summative Assessments

One of the administration's top priorities in leading our country's fight to beat COVID-19 is to call on Congress to pass an emergency package to ensure schools have the resources and guidance to adapt effectively this school year and beyond.⁵ As part of that process, the administration must provide states with clear guidance on standardized testing waivers due to the impact of COVID-19.

Reliance on grade-level assessments would send the wrong signal about how to best address student's learning needs during an unprecedented year of disruption. It could also further erode political support for assessment in the future.⁶

Yet it would also be a failure of innovation and systems thinking needed for this moment if the U.S. Department of Education issued blanket waivers for a second straight year.

Instead, a third, alternative way could provide students, parents and schools with the information they need and could help states lay the foundation to design and implement rigorous, teacher-supported, high-quality assessments of learning.

The Secretary of Education has broad authority and is authorized to waive most statutory and regulatory requirements pursuant to section 8401(b) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

This can be accomplished in the following ways:

A. No blanket waivers: The

Secretary should not issue blanket waivers for section 1111(b)(2) regarding the requirements to administer assessments.

B. Provide assessment flexibility to State Education

Agencies and Local Education Agencies: Having data on student performance matters this year and the administration should allow for the use of rigorous alternative assessments in grades 3–8 aligned to holistic learning growth. The criteria should:

- 1. Allow for the use of existing and statistically-linked adaptive assessments.** LEAs should be permitted to use adaptive assessments that span multiple grade levels so long as those assessments can be statistically-linked to current state assessments as a validation measure. Examples of existing adaptive assessments that LEAs could use include NWEA's

MAP Growth, Renaissance Learning's STAR, or Curriculum Associates' i-Ready Assessment.

- 2. Allow for a new determination for measuring student growth to be calculated and publicly reported for the 2020-2021 school year,** in alignment with the alternate assessments. As noted in the October 2020 U.S. Department of Education letter and FAQ to state chiefs regarding the "Impact of COVID-19 on Accountability Systems Required under ESEA," a SEA that includes a measure of student growth should be allowed to amend its plan to measure pre-grade, on-grade, and above-grade growth in line with the assessment waiver as noted above. These growth determinations should be used for informational purposes only, not in service of accountability comparisons for this year.⁷
- 3. Waive the accountability and school identification requirements** in sections 1111(c)(4) and 1111(d)(2)(C)-(D) that mandate states to a.) meaningfully differentiate all public schools and b.) identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support based on data from the 2020-2021 school year.

Endnotes

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3. “Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis,” Bellwether Education Partners, October 21, 2020, <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis#Introduction>
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6. Diliberti, Melissa and Julia H. Kaufman, “Will This School Year Be Another Casualty of the Pandemic?,” https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-4.html
7. 7 “Template for Addendum to the ESEA Consolidated State Plan due to the COVID-19 National Emergency under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act,” October 2020,