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## People, Practice, and Policy:

# How Utah Turned the Portrait of a Graduate into a Powerful Lever for Systems Change

People, Practice & Policy: Utah case study  
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Preface, Introduction, and Conclusion  
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MASTERY  
TRANSCRIPT  
CONSORTIUM

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## WHY UTAH?

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[Mastery Transcript Consortium \(MTC\)](#) has partnered with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) for the last four years to support their efforts in building a statewide personalized, competency-based learning system. State leaders within USBE have been committed to these shifts since 2016, and they have adopted a flexible and evolutionary approach to supporting Utah Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in building capacity and designing student-centered models that shift the way learners learn and teachers teach. With innovative spirits and legislative backing, the LEAs engaged in the USBE personalized, competency-based learning grant program are capitalizing on the learning, support, and innovative flexibility provided to them in order to advance their collective vision of learner-centered environments and experiences.

Utah's change process is unique; while the initiative has been driven by USBE, the strategy is rooted in capacity building, a supportive and flexible consultation model from USBE, and competency-based learning priorities that are set by LEAs based on where they are in the change process. For instance, while some LEA efforts have focused on building more authentic and balanced assessment systems, other districts/schools are prepared to start measuring the competencies outlined in their own or in Utah's state-level Portrait of the Graduate. The flexibility with which the state has approached this work of supporting and nurturing each LEA's goals for its learners is a model from which other states can derive their own approach to shifting learning and teaching to meet the needs of learners within their state and local communities.

# PAVING THE WAY FORWARD — UTAH IN CONTEXT

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The education system in our country finds itself at one of the most significant crossroads it has ever faced. States, districts, schools, learners, and families are confronted with critical questions about the future of a system that has, pervasively, become irrelevant and unable to meet the needs of millions of children. The pandemic uncovered the deep inequities and rigid institutional structures that caused these current challenges. Having arrived at this crossroads, we face the choice between

- 1 “improving” an obsolete system that is set up to serve very few students or
- 2 imagining/creating a new paradigm that can and should serve all individual learners.

A path forward now exists that offers significant hope. That hope is spurring reinvention, re-imagination, and rejuvenation across the country; courageous state, district, and school leaders are challenging institutional rigidity to redesign their systems and prove that there are better paths forward, ones that offer all learners greater agency, voice, and choice in their chosen career and college pathways. In fact, the pace with which states, districts, and schools across the nation are strategically shifting to more authentic forms of learning that align with a skills-driven economy is cause for optimism and celebration.

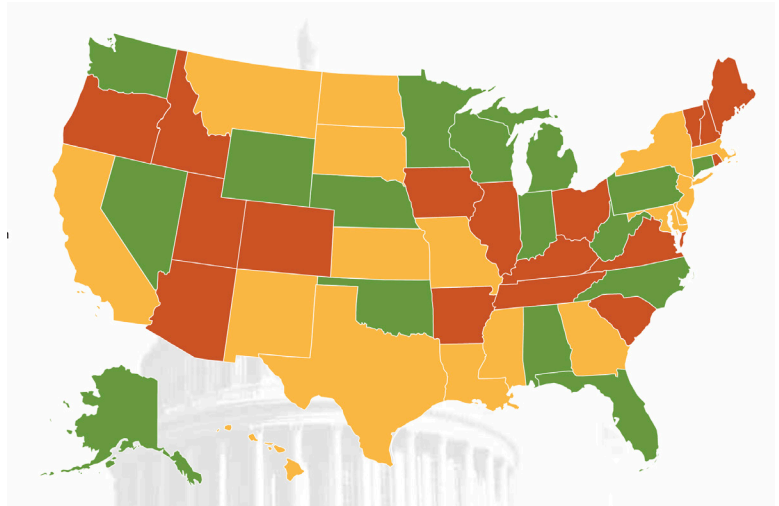
As school systems across America examine, redesign, and test new forms and systems of learning and teaching — methods that have a profound impact on learner preparation for life after PK-12 schooling — we see considerable promise. It’s important to understand, however, the need for redesign across the entire system — not only within the spaces where PK-12 learning happens, but also in the spaces measuring and reporting that learning. Each of the 50 states across the U.S. is working towards adopting more student-centered, personalized, and competency-based forms of learning. They are transitioning away from minimalist definitions of skills that matter, methods of measuring

learning that are divorced from the real challenges learners experience, and gatekeeping structures that promote compliance over personalization. To enable and support these transitions, they must also shift the paradigm of credentialing to encompass the outcomes of deeper learning.

The case study contained in these pages highlights the state of Utah’s efforts to build a personalized, competency-based approach to learning and the resulting guiding principles for

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## A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT OF K-12 COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION STATE POLICY ACROSS THE U.S.



- **Advanced States:** States with clear policies in support of competency-based education and established roles in building educator capacity in local systems for competency-based education.
- **Developing States:** States with pilots for competency-based education, and/or credit flexibility policies for school districts to transition to competency education.
- **Emerging States:** States getting started with task forces; some state policy flexibility requiring waivers for systems to shift to competency-based education.
- **No Active Policy in CBE:** States with policies focused on seat-time credits without competency-based pathways.

building a systemic, sustainable, and growth-based model. Utah's story serves as a thoughtful and exemplary change process for states on the road to system-wide educational change. Their journey illustrates a flexible and evolutionary process to reimagine, redesign, and repurpose learning and teaching to empower every Utah learner to achieve mastery, autonomy, and purpose. (See timeline on page 4.) The state's commitment to launch students far beyond just compliance with seat time requirements and a narrowly-defined set of courses can be a source of inspiration and guidance to other states moving in this direction. Unique to the Utah story in bringing the entire shift to fruition is the foresight they used in beginning to pilot the use of competency-based credentials. USBE leaders knew that long-term sustainability of the changes they envisaged required a new method of measuring what matters.

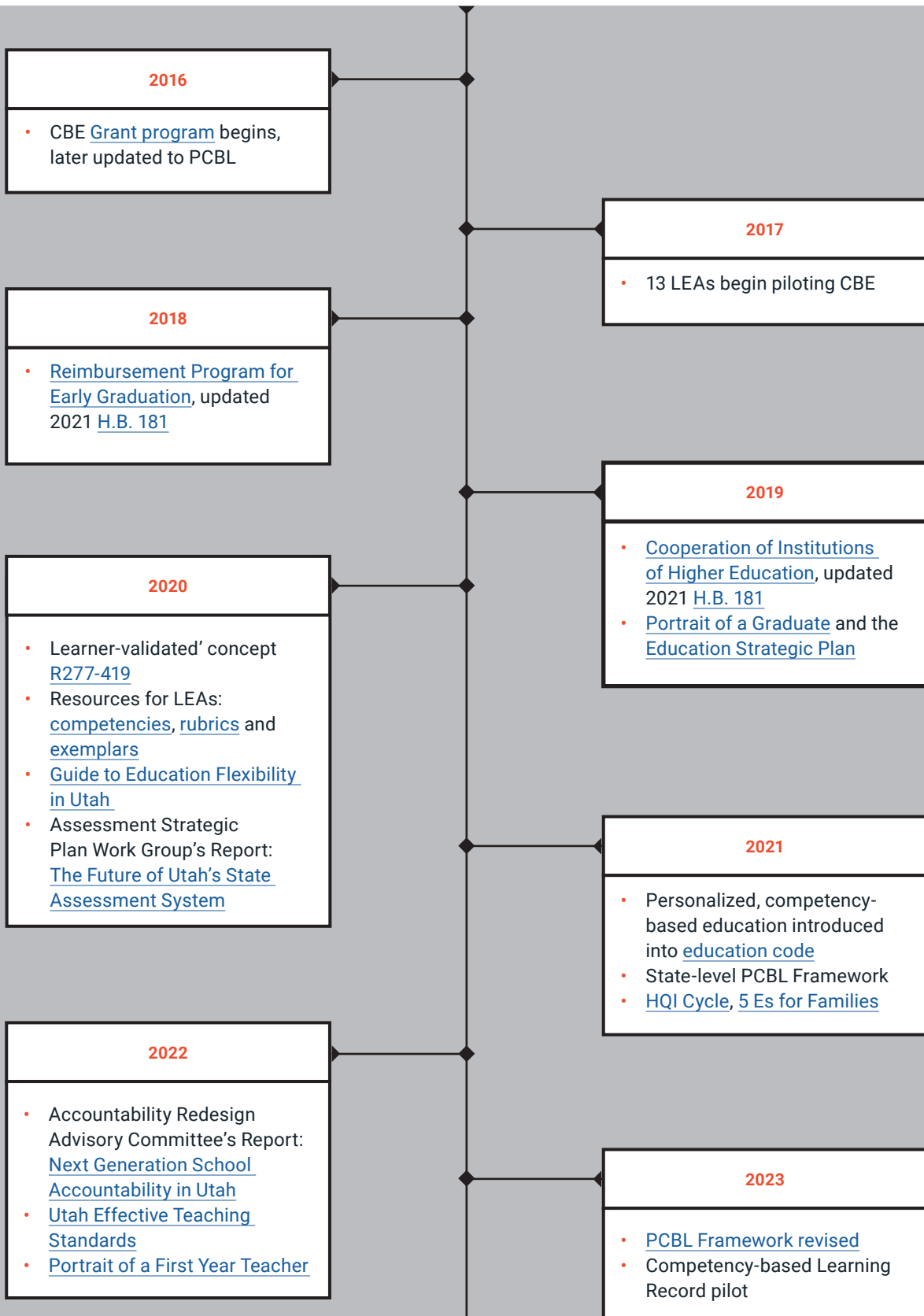
Competency-based learning records like the MTC Learning Record are designed to bring a Portrait of a Graduate to life; when well-designed, they both validate and illustrate the competencies contained in the Portrait and empower all students to tell their learning stories by attaching authentic evidence that illustrates what they know and can do. Further, implementation of competency-based learning records is a catalyst for schoolwide rethinking of assessment practices. When measuring growth in deeper learning skills that cut across academic disciplines, assessments must reflect a more authentic, real-world model; the traditional forms of assessment that have pervaded public schools for over a century, such as multiple choice quizzes and tests, are

insufficient. In short, it's our contention that when schools fail to fully implement personalized, competency-based learning, it's because they lack the tools and infrastructure to materialize and visualize their students' accomplishments in a way that's consistent with competency-based learning and assessment.

Let's be honest — these shifts are not easy to make. Creating a new system of education that scraps the status quo requires state, district, and school-level inquiry, cooperation, and collaborative decision-making to plan and implement effectively. While a growing number of schools across the country have abandoned the use of course-level grading and overall GPA as part of their transcripting practices, others have opted for a more gradual approach while still committing to shift the focus of learning to a more personalized, competency-based model. Whether a school opts for a competency-based transcript as a complete replacement of their traditional or "legacy" transcript, or competency-based learning records that put a school's innovative learning model on equal footing with legacy transcripts, states must move beyond traditional measures of school quality and shift the conversation of learning to a next generation accountability paradigm. The Utah case study on the following pages illustrates a powerful approach to introducing that change.

Susan Bell  
*Chief Program Officer, MTC*

# KEY MILESTONES IN UTAH'S JOURNEY



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PEOPLE, PRACTICE, AND POLICY:  
**HOW UTAH TURNED THE PORTRAIT  
OF A GRADUATE INTO A POWERFUL  
LEVER FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

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In 2016, conversations about education were popping up throughout the halls of Utah's state government. Elected officials at the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the state legislature were asking questions about the purpose and design of schools. As the state legislature created the [Competency-Based Education Grant](#) program to encourage local innovation, the elected members of the USBE began to discuss questions such as:

- What do students need to know and do to be successful at college, in the workplace, and in life?
- Whom do they need to be as people to be successful?

The conversation about the purpose of education soon spread across the state in stakeholder meetings convened by USBE's Graduation Requirements Task Force. The result of those conversations was the [Utah Portrait of a Graduate](#), featuring three qualities all students should have by the time they graduate: mastery, autonomy, and purpose.

# SETTING THE NEW DIRECTION FOR EDUCATION: **THE UTAH PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE**

The Utah State Board of Education’s Portrait of a Graduate, also referred to as the [Utah Talent MAP](#), describes the three characteristics students will ideally develop by graduation: mastery, autonomy, and purpose.<sup>1</sup> The expectation is that local education agencies (LEAs) will identify the specific [durable skills](#) and competencies they want students to develop in partnership with their communities.

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## **MASTERY**

is the ability to demonstrate depth of knowledge and skill proficiency.

- Academic Mastery
- Wellness
- Civic, Financial & Economic Literacy
- Digital Literacy

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## **AUTONOMY**

is having the self-confidence and motivation to think and act independently.

- Communication
- Critical Thinking & Problem Solving
- Creativity & Innovation
- Collaboration & Teamwork

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## **PURPOSE**

guides life decisions, influences behavior, shapes goals, offers a sense of direction, and creates meaning.

- Honesty, Integrity, & Responsibility
  - Hard Work & Resilience
  - Lifelong Learning & Personal Growth
  - Service
  - Respect
- 

The Portrait of a Graduate, along with the legislature’s investment in competency-based education, sent clear signals of a new direction for education. Knowing that successful implementation depends on honoring the local context, the USBE’s [announcement of the Portrait of a Graduate](#) was structured as an invitation:<sup>2</sup>

*If our Portrait of a Graduate works for you, use it! But we encourage you to go through your own journey toward discovering the unique values and characteristics within your own communities.*

Thus, a challenge emerged: How can state policymakers catalyze statewide change using a locally-driven approach?

This is the story of how Utah’s educational leadership turned the Portrait of a Graduate into a powerful policy lever for systemic change. They have avoided policies that demand standardization or compliance. Instead, they are driving change with a three-fold approach: mobilizing innovators and early adopters, aligning practice, and increasing policy flexibility.<sup>3</sup> With their strategy focusing on people, practice, and policy, Utah’s vast K-12 system — 150 local education agencies (LEAs), 36,000 teachers, and nearly 300 pages of policy, rules, and regulation — has started to pivot.

<sup>1</sup> Mastery, autonomy and purpose are the factors that cultivate intrinsic motivation based on self-determination theory, as described by Daniel Pink in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (Riverhead Books, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Two LEAs, Iron County and Juab, had created Portraits of a Graduate before the USBE released the Utah version.

<sup>3</sup> The [Innovation Diffusion Model](#) developed by E.M. Rogers identifies five categories of people: innovators, early adopters, early majority, the late majority and laggards. The theory proposes that as the innovative concepts are communicated individuals will go through stages that eventually lead to a decision to adopt or not adopt the innovation. The distinction between innovators and early adopters is that innovators are the people who feel the urgency or value the process of creating the new concepts whereas early adopters want to build on the work of others.



# UNLEASING THE POWER OF THE PORTRAIT

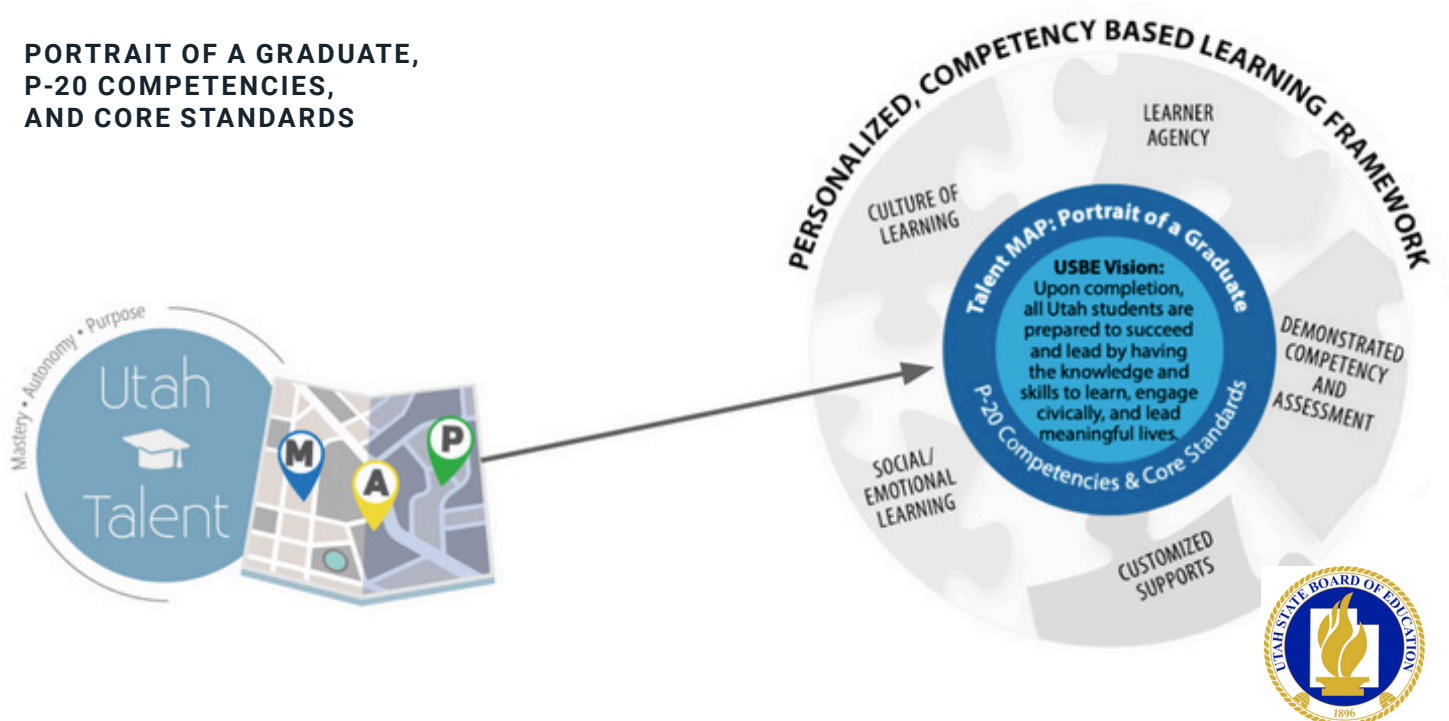
In order for the Portrait of a Graduate to become an effective lever for systems change, it needed to be embedded within the current policy infrastructure. USBE successfully did this by incorporating the Portrait of a Graduate into the 2019 Education Strategic Plan to drive education policy. The Strategic Plan also included as one of its four goals a complementary policy to advance Personalizing Teaching and Learning. (*Further discussion of how Utah's instructional model has evolved into Personalized, Competency-based Learning is below*). Several keystones for systemic change were now in place: a clear strategic direction, policy guiding an aligned instructional model, and financial incentives to seed innovation.

Over time, and with the help of leading LEAs, USBE staff explored key questions to determine what else was needed to catalyze change:

- How do schools need to change so that every student can develop the competencies they need for success in life after high school?
- What do schools need to make the transition?
- How does state policy need to change to create the conditions to sustain innovations and support students, educators and schools?

As they worked through these issues, Utah policymakers were faced with a creative tension: how to empower innovation in change-ready districts while permitting the status-quo in traditionally-minded districts. They needed a strategy that could seed and sustain the innovative LEAs while providing opportunities for those that need more time to build understanding and make the transition at their own pace.

## PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE, P-20 COMPETENCIES, AND CORE STANDARDS



# THE PATH OF THE PORTRAIT: PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

*How do schools need to change so that every student can develop the competencies they need for success in life after high school?*

Over the years and through the experiences of the innovative LEAs, Utah policymakers’ understanding of the instructional shifts needed to help students develop mastery, autonomy and purpose evolved. While they had started with competency-based education, they began to realize that it is only part of the equation. Personalization—rooted in relationships and responding to where students are in their learning—was equally important. Eventually, the two concepts were integrated into personalized, competency-based learning (PCBL) and entered Utah’s education code.

LEAs now applied to the [PCBL grant program](#) and USBE developed the [PCBL Framework](#), replacing the Competency-Based Education Framework that had been developed prior to the Portrait of a Graduate. The PCBL Framework provides guidance to educators about the instructional practices that will help students develop mastery, autonomy and purpose as described in the Portrait of a Graduate. To ensure that it was grounded in high quality instruction, the USBE staff turned to research about teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup>

The PCBL Framework highlights five sets of instructional practices that “empowers students in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Utah’s Portrait of a Graduate”:

- **Culture of learning:** Cultivate a culture of learning through communities committed to creating the conditions and instructional practices that allow each learner to find their pathway to success.
- **Learner agency:** Foster learner agency through empowering students in setting goals, co-creating learning experiences and self-assessing allowing them to demonstrate their learning.
- **Demonstrated competency and assessments:** Create conditions and provide feedback for students to demonstrate competency through multiple forms of assessments while progressing through learning.
- **Customized support:** Provide appropriate and timely customized supports to engage students and ensure equitable access to high quality instruction.
- **Social emotional learning:** Develop social emotional learning skills to support students collaborating, overcoming challenges, and achieving success in multiple settings.

The hope is that the PCBL Framework offers LEAs a map for building the instructional and assessment practices necessary for students to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions for success in today’s world. (See *Figure 1 PCBL: The Path to the Utah Portrait of a Graduate*)

*Figure 1 PCBL: The Path to the Utah Portrait of a Graduate*

<b>Why is PCBL effective?</b>	<b>How does PCBL lead to students developing the characteristics described in the Portrait of a Graduate</b>		<b>Why are the characteristics of the Portrait important?</b>
<b>PCBL is based on</b>	<b>PCBL Develops Self-Directed Learners through:</b>	<b>Student Outcomes of the Utah Portrait of a Graduate Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World:</b>	<b>Strengthen</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research about Learning &amp;</li> <li>• Evidence-based Practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture of Learning</li> <li>• Learner Agency</li> <li>• Demonstrated Competencies</li> <li>• Customized Supports</li> <li>• Social Emotional Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mastery</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utah’s families and the state’s economies</li> </ul>

4 The new framework draws upon evidence-based practices highlighted in [John Hattie’s extensive body of research](#).

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## ACCELERATING TRANSITIONS

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*What do schools need to make the transition to PCBL?*

Financial incentives to support capacity building and professional learning are useful in accelerating the transition to PCBL. Over the seven years of the legislature’s grant program, 30 LEAs, about 18% of the state total, have received funding to support the implementation of PCBL. The benefits of the grant program go far beyond seeding innovation. Knowledge is growing across the state about the design and implementation of PCBL schools. Each new annual cohort of grantees increases the number of communities and people who are experiencing and invested in PCBL.

USBE sought to further ease the upfront costs of shifting to PCBL by prototyping tools that LEAs could use or modify.

This was part of a larger cultural shift taking place in USBE. One person involved in this work explained, “We stopped thinking like scientists and began to think like engineers. We stopped using the scientific approach of creating a hypothesis and expecting schools to become proof points in three years. Instead, we started thinking about design and prototypes. We began to use a cycle of plan-do-check-adjust in everything we do.” With the support of [KnowledgeWorks](#), [competency progressions](#) and [rubrics](#) were developed that would help schools integrate competencies into their instructional model. In the future, USBE hopes to offer a bank of performance tasks as well.

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# PIVOTING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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*How does state policy need to change to create the conditions to sustain innovations and support students, educators and schools?*

USBE realized that pivoting the education system begins with pivoting the agency itself. Before the development of the Portrait of the Graduate, there had been a handful of people at USBE leading the charge to advance competency-based education. Now, empowered by the [Education Strategic Plan](#), everyone in the department was expected to contribute towards advancing the Portrait of a Graduate and PCBL. To do so effectively, staff needed to build knowledge about PCBL. With help from the [Learner-Centered Collaborative](#), 140 USBE staff have participated in site visits and/or training. The current focus is on integrating PCBL practices into USBE-sponsored meetings and events in order to dramatically increase the number of educators and administrators who have experienced PCBL practices firsthand.

With a deepening understanding of the Portrait of the Graduate and PCBL, staff are examining implications for current policies and programs. To quickly leverage the existing breadth of expertise, USBE has embraced teamwork—multi-level and cross-organizational — as its standard mode of operation. With knowledge of the implications of PCBL growing within USBE, leaders are now better able to identify short-term opportunities for alignment and to understand where complexity requires further analysis and creativity.

## SUSTAINING INNOVATION

As much as policy can catalyze change, it can also be a stumbling block. The primary areas of concern for LEAs were funding when progress was not based on seat time and transcripts used in college admissions. The state legislature responded by creating a reimbursement method to hold LEAs harmless if students accelerated their learning

and graduated in less than four years. It also set the expectation that Utah's [institutions of higher education](#) must hold diplomas from PCBL schools and traditional schools on "equal footing."

USBE sought to help LEAs address perceived policy barriers by publishing the [Guide To Education Flexibility in Utah: Empowering Local Innovation for School Systems](#), prepared by [Foresight Law & Policy](#). It was designed to help LEAs and schools navigate the complex sets of rules defining what schools can and cannot do via real-life examples. It also identified areas of limited flexibility where more intentional adjustments to policy are needed: educator standards, educational leadership standards, and educator evaluation systems; student assessments; school accountability and accreditation; data collection and reporting; and transportation.

To sustain the innovative PCBL models developed by LEAs, USBE needed to move PCBL from its status as a non-traditional program to a feasible and research-based option. Thus, they introduced two new policy concepts: **learner-validated** and **attendance-validated** pupil accounting in [Board Rule R277-419](#). The traditional time-based model was no longer a default. Schools would have to choose whether they wanted to be funded based on the time students spent in the four walls of the school (attendance-validated) or based on demonstration of learning (learner-validated). Support for learner-validated programming — online, blended and competency-based — grew during the pandemic as absenteeism and health issues reached all time highs. Thus, Utah demonstrated that it is possible to have dual policies operating side-by-side to accommodate both PCBL and traditional models.

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## LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW POLICY INFRASTRUCTURE

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The longer-term work of creating a policy infrastructure aligned with the Portrait of a Graduate and PCBL is underway in Utah. Significant policy shifts will require a deep analysis of the ways policies intersect and thoughtful consideration of options before additional changes are made. For example, the [teaching standards](#), a potentially powerful lever, have been revised to be aligned with PCBL. These standards will have implications for teacher preparation, accreditation, professional learning, and evaluation.

One of the most powerful set of policy levers is realigning how the education system measures growth and achievement. The Portrait of a Graduate expands K-12 student outcomes to include academic skills as well as mastery, autonomy and purpose. A local leader explained, “We are good at working towards the target. It’s just that the target was inadequate. Academic mastery is only one of the 13 Portrait of a Graduate competencies. Students need to know so much more than that. We could move the needle if we changed the measurements.”

USBE is laying the groundwork to revise assessment and accountability policy. A USBE staff person explained, “The process of realignment begins by unpacking assessment and accountability. Only then can you see the possibilities of what policies aligned with PCBL might look like.” USBE convened two indepth policy discussions to explore what might be possible:

- Utah Assessment Strategic Plan Work Group supported by the [Center for Assessment](#); and,
- Accountability Redesign Advisory Committee supported by the [Center for Assessment](#) and [KnowledgeWorks](#).

The two reports, [The Future of Utah’s State Assessment System](#) and [Next Generation School Accountability in Utah](#), offered recommendations for how USBE can provide additional support to LEAs and modify policies to be more aligned with PCBL and the Portrait of the Graduate. For example, one recommendation was to include indicators on school climate and student agency in the accountability system.<sup>5</sup>

There are two other efforts underway that are related to how schools measure and communicate achievement. The pilot of the competency-based MTC Learning Record will inform the eventual introduction of a competency-based transcript that offers a viable credentialing option for PCBL schools. The Graduation Redesign Work Group is revisiting graduation requirements as expectations have expanded from courses and credits to include a broad mix of competencies. As these efforts evolve, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) and institutions of higher education will play an instrumental role in helping to pivot the K-12 system.

*The most valuable part of Utah’s story isn’t found in policies, reports, or tools. It’s that Utah’s leaders crafted an approach that enables the K-12 system to navigate second-order change. In the next section, a set of guiding principles are introduced that have been culled from interviews with state and local leadership. It is these principles—focused on people, practice, and policy – that are empowering Utah policymakers to align the education system to the Portrait of a Graduate.*

<sup>5</sup> Based on the recommendations, the Utah legislature eliminated the use of A-F ranking in the accountability system in [HB 308](#).

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## PRINCIPLES FOR PIVOTING

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The interviews with state and local leaders, as well as informal conversations in classrooms and hallways, revealed that a set of common principles is guiding Utah's efforts. These principles recognize that **how** the work is done is as important as what practices and policy issues are being addressed. The guiding principles are **what** has enabled Utah leadership to respond nimbly to opportunities and challenges as they emerge.

Utah's principles are designed for second order change. When education reform initiatives focus on improving specific system components, such as programs or curriculum, these efforts are considered **first order change** because the overall purpose and functioning of the system remains the same. **Second order change** aims to influence the underlying purpose, values, or beliefs to cause the entire organization or system to pivot.<sup>6</sup> The consequence is that every part of the system has to adjust, eventually leading to system wide transformation. New capacities, knowledge, and skills are needed.

It's a big job to lead second order change, and the one thing leaders know is that they can't do it on their own. The distributed leadership model can help, as it taps into the expertise of people with different perspectives who are given the authority to co-design solutions. However, this model only works when there is a shared vision, clear outcomes, and guiding principles.

Education leaders in Utah often turn to the metaphor of being on a journey in describing their work. The Utah Portrait of a Graduate is the **North Star** and the PCBL Framework is the **compass**. Leaders are developing expertise in **navigating** change. There are different paths that LEAs and schools take in making the transition to PCBL. The first statewide PCBL convening was called the **Magellan** Summit to capture the spirit of exploration. Thus the language of journeying towards the North Star will be used to present the guiding principles.

6 R. Marzano, T. Waters, and B. McNulty, *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* (ASCD, 2005)

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## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PIVOTING THE STATEWIDE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Set the direction towards the North Star

- Cultivate a shared vision & outcomes
- Measure what matters

### Mobilize networks and knowledge

- Seek out and expand the 'coalition of the willing'
- Build and transfer knowledge

### Map out the new normal

- Signal the new direction
- Follow the research
- Prototype the future
- Walk the talk of new normal values

### Clear the path for change

- Reduce risk
- Increase flexibility

## SET THE DIRECTION TOWARDS THE NORTH STAR CULTIVATE A SHARED VISION & OUTCOMES

In the same way that a shared vision is a vital step in transforming schools, a North Star is essential to drive system change at the state level. The Portrait of a Graduate can highlight the problem that needs solving, introduce a new purpose, and be a call to action to transform schools. However, Utah policymakers believed it was important that LEAs have the chance to create their own local vision with their communities. Thus, USBE chose a path of flexibility and distributed leadership. Districts were encouraged to establish their own visions in order to build real and meaningful ownership within communities across the state. Thus far, this strategy looks like it is working. Each year more LEAs and schools apply for the grant program, and each year a few more introduce Portraits of a Graduate and/or PCBL practices.

Building a shared vision among leadership, staff, and broader networks is also critical. A staff member emphasized, "If you don't have shared clarity it is going to hamper

implementation." Given turnover through elections and staff changes, it takes ongoing attention to ensure that the people leading the efforts are all moving in the same direction.

Even with the state department of education moving full force towards the North Star, it isn't going to be enough to turn the education system. To become a powerful policy lever, the vision has to be translated into results.

## MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Once a state has defined its North Star, policymakers will need to illustrate that vision in meaningful ways. Describing the desired results in measurable terms affirms the aspects of the vision that are the most important. USBE has been facilitating discussions and creating tools to build understanding about the implications of the Portrait of a Graduate for how learning and achievement are assessed. The prototypes of competency progressions were a first step. The department has also launched ongoing policy discussions about assessment and accountability, given the strong influence these topics have on people's perceptions of the priorities and parameters for innovation. Throughout their efforts, USBE has been careful in policy conversations regarding outcomes and measurement to recognize the interests of both PCBL and traditional schools.

## MOBILIZE NETWORKS AND KNOWLEDGE EXPAND THE 'COALITION OF THE WILLING'

Over the past seven years, the PCBL grant program has done more than prototype PCBL school designs and build knowledge. It has developed a groundswell of innovators and early adopters. Parents and educators become advocates when they see the power of learner agency in the classroom and at home.

Utah continues working to create the conditions for educators to become more interested in learning about and trying to use PCBL practices. One state leader noted, "Innovators need the ability to take risks without being penalized. Early adopters need to see someone has been successful. The early majority needs to know it is working for a large number of people."<sup>7</sup> For USBE to move to the next stage of engaging the early majority, they'll need to expose more people to PCBL as well as offer evidence of the benefits for students, educators and schools.

## BUILD AND TRANSFER KNOWLEDGE

One important trait of Utah's educational leadership is that they are hungry to learn. They turn to the research on evidence-based practices. They value feedback. They consistently seek out perspectives from educators at the



local level and other stakeholders to shape their efforts. The culture of learning growing in the halls of state government is as powerful as the cultures being cultivated in schools. However, as a leadership strategy, success in this arena requires both discipline and dedicated resources. State policymakers have to be willing to stay open-minded and listen to ideas that counter their own perspective and experiences. This requires strong relationships with local leaders so that they will candidly share their insights, which is not always easy given the power dynamics.

Utah state leadership is always thinking about how to build and transfer knowledge. Prototyping contributes to the ever-expanding knowledge base about what works and what doesn't work (and why) in designing and implementing PCBL. Multi-level working groups bring together diverse perspectives. A state conference helps to build networks. Leaders are also thinking about the internal capacity of USBE. A member of the USBE leadership team said, "We are preparing for turnover by building knowledge across teams and documenting what we are learning and our ideas about how to advance."

## MAP OUT THE NEW NORMAL SIGNAL THE NEW DIRECTION

The cohesiveness between the Utah Board of Education's actions and those of the legislature sent a strong message that state education policy was pivoting in a coherent way. Utah leaders know that it is important to continue sending these signals, especially when leadership changes. To maintain adequate cohesion at the state level requires constant attention. Newly elected and appointed leaders need the opportunity to experience PCBL and understand why each of the five components are so important.

However, signaling that there is a new direction isn't the same as ensuring that people understand what it is. "Confusion about what you are talking about is going to be one of the biggest, even the primary barrier," reflected a member of the USBE management team. The best ways to build understanding are through experiencing PCBL practices and hearing the stories of students and educators. State and local leaders are becoming skilled at facilitating conversations that can lift up assumptions, misunderstanding and concerns.

## FOLLOW THE RESEARCH

There are always questions when an organization or system starts to change. **Why are we doing this?** and **What is it that I need to do?** are frequently heard. When it comes to explaining the value of PCBL, Utah policymakers point to the research on effective teaching and learning. This research is an important foundation, as it is something that students, families,

educators, and policymakers can all agree is important. Given that many teachers already use some evidence-based practices, USBE staff frequently refer to the shift to PCBL as "an evolution, not a revolution." They are seeking to ground PCBL in existing high-quality instruction, not introduce it as something entirely new.

There are other benefits to using the research to guide decisions. It deepens the discussion about implementation and focuses it on how research informs practice. It enriches policy discussions, as some current policies are deeply embedded in out-of-date beliefs about teaching and learning. And, it can create confidence as people experience the uncertainty and ambiguity that often follows second order change.

## PROTOTYPE THE FUTURE

Prototyping, a key process in design thinking, produces early models to test a concept or process. It creates a bridge to the new normal by introducing new concepts and language that are shared across the state. It also opens the door to educator collaboration within and across districts. In Utah, prototyping is happening at every level. Competency progressions were prototyped for LEAs to adapt, and new school models continue to be finetuned. The MTC Learning Record pilot is currently prototyping ways to align credentialing and competency-based transcripts with the Portrait of the Graduate.

Utah policymakers know that no one is going to get everything right on the first go around. Everyone has to be willing to take the time to revise their own work. (*The PCBL Framework has gone through five revisions!*) Those interviewed were all comfortable talking about missteps: conflation of competency-based education with education technology or standards-based grading; failing to include personalization from the very beginning; and difficulty in reducing the data entry burden on PCBL schools. They are explicit about where their thinking has changed and how they have responded. In their willingness to reflect, they are building invaluable knowledge about statewide systemic change.

## WALK THE TALK OF NEW NORMAL VALUES

Utah's educational leaders, at the state and local level, have taken the education system's new direction to heart. They are 'walking the talk' of the Portrait of the Graduate and PCBL. Examples were plentiful throughout the interviews. They are cultivating a culture of learning in how they do their work by valuing relationships, respecting different perspectives, being open about their insights, and quickly responding when something isn't working as well as it can. None of this is particularly easy to do in a political environment.



Local and state leaders mentioned paying attention to people's sense of belonging. They've discovered it is important to be jargon-free. Even acronyms, useful as a shorthand between coworkers, can create feelings of confusion, distrust, and exclusion. Agency and autonomy were another theme. Knowing that it is important for people to have a sense of control over their lives, Utah state leaders have been vigilant in creating options for local education agencies that would allow them to move towards Portrait of a Graduate outcomes and personalized, competency-based education in their own time and in their own way.

### **CLEAR THE PATH FOR CHANGE** **REDUCE RISK**

Innovators know that the risk of failure comes with the territory of trying to improve schools. However, if there are additional risks associated with success, education leaders may be hesitant to move forward. The legislature has been proactive in addressing two of these risks: financial implications for schools if students graduate early, and consequences if colleges won't consider competency-based

transcripts. USBE also sought to to reduce the financial cost of innovation by prototyping competencies and rubrics. Schools can test the prototypes and make adjustments based on their model and the student outcomes driving their system.

### **INCREASE FLEXIBILITY**

To support innovative LEAs and schools, USBE developed the [Guide to Education Flexibility in Utah: Empowering Local Innovation for School Systems](#). This resource outlined what LEAs can do within the current set of education policies and waivers. However, USBE didn't stop there. Knowing that second order change adds complexity to a system because there needs to be room for different actors to move at different rates, leaders have started to create options within policies. For example, the introduction of the learner-validated or attendance-validated pupil accounting approach for determining funding allows PCBL and traditional LEAs to select from two policy options. By doing so, they are embedding the new normal directly into policies. Similarly, the competency-based MTC Learning Record pilot initiative seeks to offer students and schools a choice between competency-based transcripts and traditional ones.

*It's important to remember that each guiding principle is less effective when used in isolation. The power of principles to inspire creativity and drive strategies lies in their combination.*

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# PEOPLE, PRACTICE AND POLICY: A REFLECTION TOOL FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

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*This reflection tool can help state policymakers explore options for creating a range of levers that mobilize people, upgrade practice, and realign policy. It won't help with sequencing. That's dependent on leadership, the demand for change, available capacity and what will create a few wins along the way.*

## SET THE DIRECTION TOWARDS THE NORTH STAR

### **Cultivate a shared vision & outcomes**

How can state policymakers build shared ownership across statewide organizations and with local communities? What is the right mix of consistency and flexibility to build understanding and commitment to the vision?

### **Measure what matters**

What are all the ways that state policy and operations drive measurement of learning and achievement?

Which of those ways are aligned with the Portrait of a Graduate and PCBL and which are not? How might policies and practices be modified to be aligned?

## MOBILIZE NETWORKS AND KNOWLEDGE

### **Expand the network of the 'coalition of the willing'**

What do innovators need to seed and sustain innovative models? How can early adopters learn about different models of PCBL and be supported? What evidence needs to be collected to engage early majority educators?

### **Build and transfer knowledge**

How will state and local leaders learn about PCBL and the implications of a Portrait of a Graduate? What types of support do LEAs and schools want in designing and implementing PCBL? How can people interested in implementing PCBL access knowledge?

## MAP OUT THE NEW NORMAL

### **Signal the new direction**

How can the state signal that there is unified support for upgrading the education system and what

changes it will entail? How will state leadership be cultivated over the long term so that there is coherence in moving PCBL-aligned policy forward?

### **Follow the research**

In what way is policy and practice in alignment (or not) with the research on teaching and learning? Where are there areas of misalignment that are making it more difficult for teachers to help students to learn?

### **Prototype the future**

What types of capacities, tools and resources are needed for implementing PCBL and a Portrait of a Graduate? How can prototyping opportunities be developed that build knowledge across LEAs and schools?

### **Walk the talk of the new normal values**

What are the values, rituals and routines that state policymakers can use to help shift the culture of compliance and top-down accountability to a culture of learning and improvement?

## CLEAR THE PATH FOR CHANGE

### **Reduce risk**

What are the biggest fears held by LEAs, schools, teachers, students and parents regarding the Portrait of a Graduate and PCBL? What can be done to reduce the risk and allay their fears?

### **Increase flexibility**

What are all the ways that the current system provides flexibility? For those areas where there is little flexibility, how might some be created? What opportunities are there to establish an option for PCBL schools as equally viable as the traditional approach?

## A FUTURE OF PROMISE

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Utah's approach to system-wide change illustrates the power of cultivating, catalyzing, and empowering people, policies, and practices to achieve a well-articulated North Star vision of what school and learner success can and should be. While their work is far from done, the degree to which different levels of the Utah system – Utah State Board of Education, Local Education Agencies, individual schools, and their leaders and faculty – have committed to the change is cause for optimism as they write the next chapter of their future learning ecosystem. Policy shifts that enable innovators to seek flexibility as they navigate decades of rigid code and regulations, as well as resource commitments that enable schools to fund reimagined learning environments and experiences for students, have created promising pathways for schools and districts to deliver on Utah's North Star promise. More and more districts are engaging with the USBE personalized, competency-based learning grant program to jumpstart their plans and priorities, as evidenced by the addition of seven new LEAs to the grant program as Cohort E in spring of 2023.

As momentum builds in Utah and across the country for state adoption of competency-based education models, the introduction and integration of aligned competency-based learning records will help ensure full implementation and sustainability. The use of these records at individual PK-12 and higher education institutions requires explanation, translation, and shifts in current instructional practice. While Utah is making progress, no state has yet been successful in fully shifting to a competency-based educational model. System-wide, state-level adoption of these educational models and the credentials that showcase the outcomes they generate will require operational changes at multiple levels – interagency collaboration replacing siloed strategic planning and incentivizing competency-based achievements as the basis for higher education financial aid/merit aid decisions, just to name a few. Mastery Transcript Consortium's work to develop competency-based records is

directly related to supporting states', districts', and schools' interests in enacting these changes within their sphere of influence.

As noted above, in 2023, the state of Utah launched a pilot of competency-based learning records in collaboration with Mastery Transcript Consortium and funded by the Walton Family Foundation. The intent of this project was to seed opportunities for districts already engaged in competency-based learning (with varying levels of implementation) to further their progress while also allowing learners to lead the curation of their own competency-based credentials. With the support of USBE and the cooperation of multiple Utah institutions of higher education, this pilot signals important progress toward broader systems change. Visible representations of learners' achievement across a set of durable skills enable and encourage more LEAs to implement their plans for student-centered approaches to learning and teaching. In the arena of higher education, the pilot launch of competency-based learning records offers an opportunity for these institutions to consider additional information about learners' accomplishments and skill sets, as well as gain a more holistic understanding of their learning journey.

### KEY QUESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

While much has been accomplished, there is more we can learn and do to make the promise of personalized, competency-based learning a reality. The key to unlocking that learning rests in the questions state agencies and their various stakeholders must consider as they iterate on their plans for designing and implementing a truly student-centered system. As the work continues, we offer the following questions to guide Utah's and other states' ongoing efforts to build sustainable systems that align with statewide goals and meet the needs of all learners.

*What does it take to scale a system that measures what matters – one that includes the use of competency-based learning records? How can these data be translated into meaningful metrics that allow a state to analyze and share results around the skills they want their growing citizens to acquire?*

Utah is one of the first states to begin using competency-based learning records to document learners' achievement related to graduation-level competencies. An important next step is to consider the data infrastructure needed to securely store, share, and translate these new measures in ways that can be easily understood and used to satisfy both individual learner needs and system-level analysis. This has implications for cooperation among state agencies as they generate sustainable workflows, as well as the creation of new policy guidelines around the use of these data for school quality (accountability) determinations. An example of an infrastructure advancing towards maturity is taking shape in North Dakota, where a system exists to provide every North Dakota citizen with a digital wallet. This wallet captures learning and educational achievements across one's entire career – high school and beyond. By authorizing learners to curate, own, and share their historical records of learning, state leaders are revolutionizing the ability of North Dakota's workers to both demonstrate competence across multiple skills and contribute further to their record as they master new skills through varied learning and work experiences. We can learn much from this example of empowering each individual to celebrate their achievements and continue learning to contribute positively as a North Dakota citizen.

*What role do other connected agencies—such as Higher Education and Workforce Development—play in the development and achievement of a state's "North Star"? How are these agencies engaged within the guiding principles?*

It's no secret that a similar wave of change is taking shape within institutions of higher education across the country; exacerbated by the pandemic, policy shifts have shaken admissions processes formerly steeped in the use of traditional metrics. State agencies overseeing PK-12 systemic shifts in how learning is measured must consider how changes in preparing learners to live and thrive in their communities will also affect the type of learning and training they seek after 12th grade. There is a significant role for state-level higher education agencies and workforce development partners to play in creating a state's North Star, prototyping the process by which to achieve it, and finally redesigning the P-16-and-beyond system to honor and deepen results to positively impact the state and its citizenry. Higher education partners have already been exposed to new credentials: learners using the Mastery Transcript as their sole summative record have gained admission to over 380 colleges and universities across the country, and those admission offices are adjusting their policies to utilize the rich information contained within these records to better evaluate the readiness and depth of learners they admit to their institutions. With even more intentionality, state agencies can partner together in building the bridges and coherent systems that serve their collective goals.

Despite these open questions, the evidence is clear. Education systems in our country are in need of transformation, and promising models fueled by innovative and future-focused leaders like those in Utah are providing positive outcomes for learners. It is our hope that this case study of Utah's move to personalized, competency-based learning provides states desiring to enact similar policies and practices with valuable insights and strategies to employ in their local context. As the educational ecosystem continues to evolve, Mastery Transcript Consortium will continue supporting innovative schools, districts, and states in bringing the most promising learning models to life.

Susan Bell  
Chief Program Officer, MTC

# UTAH RESOURCES

[Utah Education Roadmap: 2018–2027](#)

## **Portrait of a Graduate**

- [Portrait of a Graduate](#) (PG) also known as Utah Talent Map
- [Utah Board of Education announcement of endorsement](#)
- [Competencies](#)
- [Model Rubrics](#)
- [Exemplars](#)

## **USBE Strategic Plan**

- [Strategic Plan](#)
- [Annual implementation updates](#)

## **Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Framework**

- [PCBL framework](#) (2022 and 2023)

## **Effective Teaching**

- [High Quality Instructional](#) (HQI) Cycle (2021)
- [Portrait of a First Year Teacher](#) (2022)
- [Utah Effective Teaching Standards](#)

## **Administrative Rules**

- [Guide To Education Flexibility in Utah: Empowering Local Innovation for School Systems](#) (Original 2020, Updated 2022)
- [R277-705-3](#): Secondary School Completion and Diplomas explaining student credit
- [R277-419](#): Pupil Accounting introducing “learner validated” and “attendance validated” pupil accounting

## **Utah State Legislature**

- [House Bill \(H.B.\) 181](#): Personalized Competency-based Learning
- [Title 53F-2-511](#): Reimbursement Program for Early Graduation From Competency-Based Education
- [Title 53F-5-501](#): Competency-Based Education Grants Program: Planning, Implementation and Extension

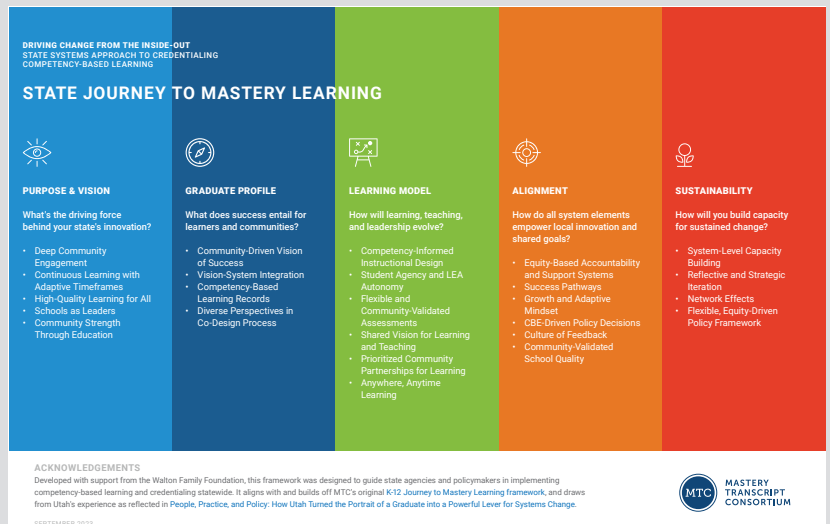
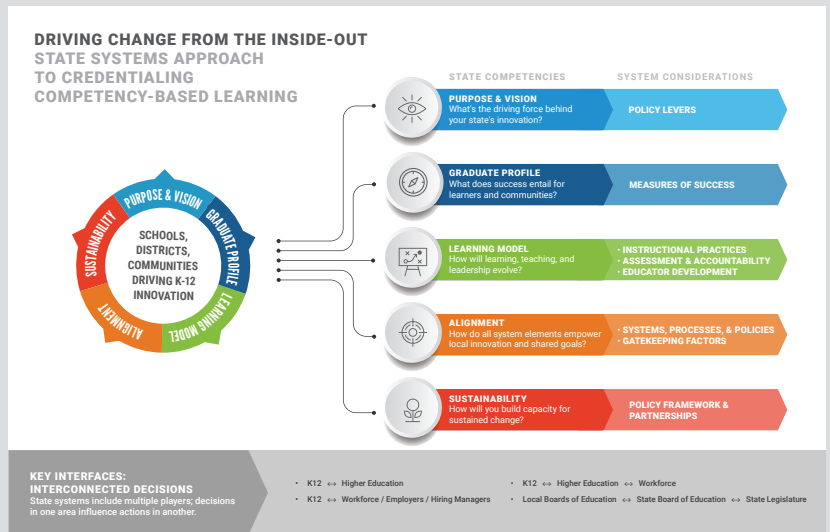
## **Reports from Work Groups and Advisory Committees**

- [The Future of Utah’s State Assessment System: Recommendations from the Utah Assessment Strategic Plan Work Group](#) (2020)
- [Next Generation School Accountability in Utah: A Report of the Utah Accountability Redesign Advisory Committee to the Utah State Board of Education](#) (2022)

# MTC RESOURCES

## DRIVING CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE-OUT STATE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CREDENTIALING COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Developed with support from the Walton Family Foundation, [this framework](#) was designed to guide state agencies and policymakers in implementing competency-based learning and credentialing statewide. It aligns with and builds off MTC's original [K-12 Journey to Mastery Learning framework](#), and draws from Utah's experience as reflected in this report, *People, Practice, and Policy: How Utah Turned the Portrait of a Graduate into a Powerful Lever for Systems Change*.



## TAPPING INTO EXPERTISE AND CAPACITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

*Utah has benefited from strong partnerships with a range of organizations in implementing its strategy, including: Aurora Institute, CCSSO, ExcellnEd, KnowledgeWorks, the Learner-Centered Collaborative, Mastery Transcript Consortium, the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, and The New Teacher Project.*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*As the co-founder of CompetencyWorks, Chris Sturgis developed a deep understanding of competency-based education by visiting over 100 schools in the U.S. and New Zealand. In 2018, she was awarded the Outstanding Individual Contribution to Personalized Learning Award by iNACOL. You can learn more about her contribution to personalized, competency-based education at [learningedge.me](http://learningedge.me).*

*Chris Sturgis was the lead researcher and writer in preparing the case study on Utah's efforts to advance a Portrait of a Graduate and identifying the guiding principles used by state education leaders.*