Building Future-Ready Students

The State of Portraits of a Graduate Frameworks

May 2025

Jenna Howard Terrell, Robin Ahigian, Morgan Garvey, and Sarah Barzee

Portraits of a Graduate (POGs) have become popular in education over the past decade as states and districts work to better define the knowledge and skills that students should master before high school graduation. The impetus for the development of POGs comes from several converging factors in the educational landscape, including the following:

- **a focus on 21st century skills:** There has been a growing recognition that traditional education, which often emphasizes rote memorization and standardized testing, does not fully prepare students for the demands of the modern world. POGs offer a more holistic approach for districts and states to emphasize a broad range of competencies for students.[1]

---

[1] Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. Jossey-Bass.

- **flexibility in accountability and learning:** The enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 provided states with more flexibility to design their own accountability measures beyond federal standardized testing requirements. This has allowed states and districts to incorporate assessments to measure skills outlined in POG frameworks. ESSA also spurred a renewed focus on personalized education, for which learning is tailored to the needs, interests, and abilities of each student. POGs align with this movement by defining broad competencies that are achievable through various learning paths that can be tailored to each student.

- **educational opportunity and local customization:** POGs aim to address educational opportunity for all students by setting a high standard for all students to develop 21st-century skills while also allowing for local adaptations that ensure these standards are relevant and comprehensible to students from all backgrounds and communities. Furthermore, the development of POGs provides a more bottom-up approach than other educational innovations, offering opportunities for industries, businesses, community members, parents, and students to provide input on the competencies included in a POG.

As states and districts seek to align their educational systems with the demands of the 21st century, POGs continue to be foundational for systems to define the skills their students will have for success in their careers. This brief will summarize and compare how POGs are developed and implemented across the country.

State- and District-Level Development of Portraits of a Graduate

The approach to developing a POG varies widely among states and districts and is quickly evolving (Figure 1). About a dozen state education agencies, like those in Indiana, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, have led the development of a standardized POG framework that outlines the essential competencies that every student in the state must achieve.[2] The process used to develop a statewide POG requires coordination across multiple agencies and regions of the state. State education agencies typically convene committees or task forces that include educational leaders, policymakers, and industry partners to define the skills and knowledge students need for success after graduation. This process often includes aligning the POG with existing academic standards and graduation requirements, helping to ensure consistency across districts and clarity for educators and families about what all students should know and be able to do by the time they complete high school.

A state-developed approach can result in a cohesive educational vision across the state if it aligns the POG with existing academic standards and curriculum frameworks. By integrating the competencies defined in the POG with state standards, educators have a clear roadmap for curriculum development and instructional strategies. Furthermore, state-developed approaches can facilitate the creation of uniform resources and professional development programs that support teachers in bringing the POG skills to their classrooms. This ensures that all students, regardless of district, are exposed to a consistent set of competencies and skills and that educators

---

[2] Norville, V. (2022). States sketch "Portraits of a Graduate." *State Innovations*, *27*(1). National Association of State Boards of Education. https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2022/10/Norville_Portraits-of-a-Graduate-final.pdf

have access to similar resources, thereby promoting consistency and opportunity for all students across the state.

In contrast, in states such as California, Illinois, and Iowa, POG adoption is optional, and development is led by individual districts. This decentralized approach can allow for customization based on local needs and priorities. At the local level, districts and schools can choose to engage in collaborative processes with community members—including educators, parents, students, and community members—to define the knowledge, competencies, and skills that align with their communities' values, beliefs, practices, and future workforce demands. This process often results in highly tailored POGs that reflect the unique economic and educational context of each district.

Figure 1. Map of Portrait of a Graduate Development Approaches

Locally Developed POGs   State-Developed POGs
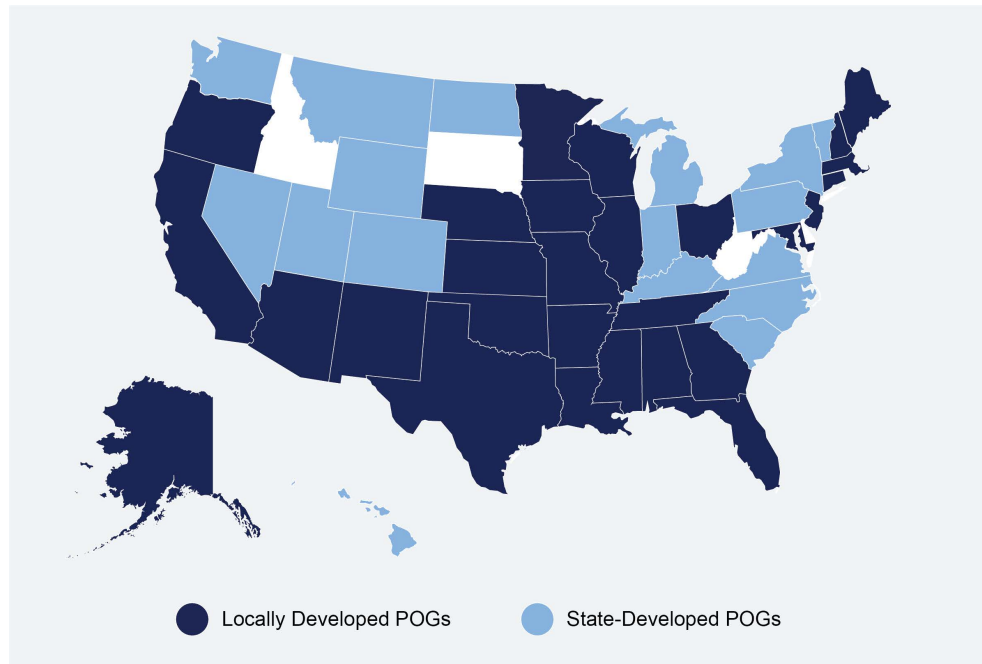
Note. This figure is based on a scan of publicly available documents and websites as of October 2024. Dark blue states (AK, AL, AR, AZ, CA, CT, FL, GA, HI, IA, IL, KS, LA, MA, MD, ME, MO, MN, MS, NE, NH, NJ, NM, OH, OK, OR, RI, TN, TX, WI) indicate states that have documentation about district-led POGs, but there is no formal, statewide effort. In these states, individual districts have independently developed and implemented a POG. Light blue states (CO, IN, KY, MI, MT, NC, ND, NV, NY, PA, SC, UT, VA, VT, WA, WY) indicate states with a state-led POG effort, where the state education agency has developed or is actively developing a statewide Portrait of a Graduate. States in white (DE, ID, SD, WV) do not have publicly available documentation of either a state- or district-led POG effort.

POG Competencies and Skills

POG competencies share several commonalities across states and districts, reflecting a broad consensus on the essential skills students need to graduate college and be career ready. Based on a scan of POGs across the country, these frameworks often emphasize a combination of academic, personal, and social competencies. These indicators are often supplemented by a focus on behavioral skills, such as self-management, and on civic responsibility and an awareness of the needs of a global economy. Common competencies and skills include critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and problem-solving (Table 1). For example, states like Kentucky, Michigan, and North Carolina have defined specific competencies such as being an engaged citizen, demonstrating effective communication, or embodying a learner's mindset.

However, there are also notable differences in how these competencies are prioritized and articulated. For instance, some states and districts place a stronger emphasis on career readiness, incorporating technical skills and practical knowledge that are directly related to local industries. Others may highlight good citizenship or the ability to manage a wide variety of situations and interactions. For example, the San Marcos Unified School District in California emphasizes adaptability, communication, relational competence, leadership, and critical thinking. These competencies suggest a focus on preparing students to navigate complex business and social environments successfully. On the other hand, Indiana's statewide POG mandates a combination of academic mastery and career and postsecondary readiness alongside civic, financial, and digital literacy.

Figure 2. Frequently Used POG Competencies and Skills

Indicator name	Frequency
Communication	25
Critical thinking	24
Collaboration	18
Perseverance and adaptability	16
Problem-solving	11
Interpersonal understanding	10
Citizenship	9
Creativity	7
Growth mindset/lifelong learning	5
Digital literacy/technology use	5
Academic proficiency	5
Self-awareness/management	4
Leadership	4
Health and wellness	4
Economic literacy	3
Ability to value varied perspectives	3
Ability to work independently	2
Organization	2

Note. This table reflects WestEd's calculations from a scan of publicly available district and state POGs.

Assessments and Proficiency Measures

Strategies used to measure and assess POG competencies and skills also vary significantly across states and districts, and this aspect of POGs remains fluid as states work to balance their accountability systems with multiple measures for capturing student proficiency in standards and competencies.

- For example, Colorado utilizes the Colorado Graduation Guidelines, which requires high school graduation requirements to align with several measures, including Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAP), 21st-century essential skills, and the Colorado Academic Standards. Local school boards select from a state-provided menu of assessment options to determine how students will demonstrate their POG competencies. Other states, such as Nevada and Virginia, use aspects of experiential learning to capture proficiency in POG skills. These skills may be demonstrated by performance assessment, such as portfolios and capstones or hands-on learning opportunities.

- Other assessment methods include formative assessments that provide ongoing feedback to teachers about how the skills are integrated into the learning process. For example, Michigan emphasizes the use of formative assessments that are embedded in learning—providing opportunities for students to work toward mastery—and summative assessments that measure deeper learning and application of skills.

- In states with competency-based education systems, such as New Hampshire, POG assessments are integrated into a broader framework in which students advance based on their mastery of specific competencies rather than the time they spent in class.

Assessing POGs presents challenges, particularly in states that rely heavily on traditional accountability systems centered around standardized tests. Integrating POG assessments into these systems can be complex and

difficult because POG competencies often require more nuanced assessment methods that may not be captured by state-mandated standardized tests. In some cases, identifying and integrating assessments for POGs is left up to individual districts or schools. This lack of a standardized framework across the state can lead to inconsistencies in how competencies are measured, making it difficult for education systems to track progress on students' mastery of essential skills across different regions and compare educational outcomes at a broader state or national level.

Policy Implications

The adoption and implementation of POGs across states and districts have highlighted the need for flexible education policies that can adapt to the evolving demands of the 21st century. POGs provide an example of how states and districts are advocating for the inclusion of a broader set of student skills that are aligned with the realities of today's evolving requirements for workforce skills.

The variation in POG frameworks allows for diverse strategies regarding how POGs are developed and used. The approaches to putting POGs into practice vary significantly, with some districts crafting customized frameworks to reflect their unique community values, whereas others adhere to state-mandated guidelines that seek to standardize educational outcomes across wider regions. This difference in the level of development and adoption, from local to state, highlights the flexibility and adaptability of the POG initiative to different educational contexts. Furthermore, the differences in the priority and articulation of POG competencies demonstrate a collective, yet nuanced, effort to produce students who are well equipped for the workforce.

Policymakers should consider the implications of locally developed versus state-mandated POGs in promoting educational opportunity and consistency. Although locally tailored POGs can reflect community needs and values,

state-mandated POGs offer a uniform framework that can simplify the support structure for schools and ensure all students have access to a consistent set of competencies and resources that are achievable.

In addition, as POGs become more popular, there is a need for clear policy guidance on assessments. Moving away from traditional standardized testing to more authentic assessments requires significant shifts in teacher training, resource allocation, and flexibility in state accountability measures. This transition calls for policies that support a more diverse set of assessment strategies—such as performance-based assessments, portfolios, and experiential learning—to ensure that students are evaluated on the full range of competencies outlined in their POGs. States and districts must work collaboratively to develop assessment systems that align with POG competencies and provide teachers with the tools and professional development necessary to administer and score these assessments effectively.

Moreover, there is a need for clear communication strategies to help interested parties understand the goals and benefits of POGs. This includes developing resources and training materials that can assist educators with integrating POG competencies into their instruction and assessments.

Finally, ongoing dialogue among interested parties at all levels—state education departments, local school districts, educators, parents, students, and industry partners—is crucial for the continuous improvement of POG frameworks. As POGs continue to evolve, it is imperative that policy and practice work in tandem to ensure that these frameworks are not developed and left on a shelf or a website for viewing. Rather, the framework should be integrated into curricula and assessed fairly to understand whether the goals of the POG framework are being met.

WestEd

WestEd.org

Suggested citation: Terrell, J. H., Ahigian, R., Garvey, M., & Barzee, S. (2025). *Building future-ready students: The state of Portraits of a Graduate Frameworks*. WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that aims to improve the lives of children and adults at all ages of learning and development. We do this by addressing challenges in education and human development, increasing opportunity, and helping build communities where all can thrive. WestEd staff conduct and apply research, provide technical assistance, and support professional learning. We work with early learning educators, classroom teachers, local and state leaders, and policymakers at all levels of government. For more information, visit WestEd.org. For regular updates on research, free resources, solutions, and job postings from WestEd, subscribe to the E-Bulletin, our semimonthly e-newsletter, at WestEd.org/subscribe.