

## National Education Policy Platform: Leading in an Era of Transformation

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Now more than ever, the strength of America's school systems and the leadership of the individuals selected to manage them are critical factors in the success of our nation. Policy leaders and educators throughout the United States agree that there is a critical need to prepare all students for success in postsecondary pursuits, the global workplace, and as fully engaged citizens in society—or in other words, preparation for college, careers, and civic engagement. This will require deep changes, and in some cases the complete transformation of, present day models of teaching and learning.

Local school systems play a crucial role in efforts to achieve this goal. They are on the front line of systems reforms, investments in innovation, and unprecedented efforts to build capacity to meet current demands. From the implementation of new standards aligned with college and career readiness expectations, to the adoption of comprehensive assessment systems aligned to those standards; and from the renewed focus on educator development strategies to the transformation of

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instructional practice, district leaders are tirelessly focused on ensuring that student readiness equates to mastery of rigorous academic content and the ability to apply knowledge through higher-order skills.

To inform and accelerate the national movement toward transformative change that is both scalable and sustainable, the **Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium** [the Consortium], was established in 2012, as the only network of its kind. Its mission is to *significantly advance systemic education improvement and innovation in policy and practice to benefit all students*. Comprised of many of the nation's most successful districts and district

leaders, the Consortium is committed to supporting policy and practice transformation that will ensure that all students, regardless of their background or circumstance, can achieve their full potential through exposure to world-class learning opportunities. The members of this network have come

together with the belief that by working together, without regard to political affiliation, they can not only broaden knowledge and understanding (and, eventually, adaptation) of successful models based on their records of success, but also can provide much needed guidance and support regarding the kinds of research- and experience-based practices that should be promoted through policy development and the dissemination of replicable, systemic best practices.

The vision and work of the Consortium is grounded in a set of shared values:

1. Education leaders have a duty to reaffirm and strengthen the nation's commitment to equal opportunity for all students, regardless of background or circumstance, and to ensure that the needs of every learner are met.
2. The importance and promise of public education should be reaffirmed through policies and practices that ensure that every learner has access to effective instruction and supports. These policies and practices must be designed and implemented so that the strength of public education systems is not undercut.
3. Every student should have a seamless pathway from early learning to college and career readiness.
4. Accountability and transparency are and should continue to be hallmarks of education systems, but with greater focus on the use of multiple sources of meaningful data on all aspects of student, educator and system performance.
5. Accountability and support systems should promote systemic capacity building and continuous improvement through a focus on the cultivation of leadership skills and enhancement of instructional practice.
6. Education policy should be informed by best practice and foster--not deter-- innovation. Meeting the needs of every student requires the development of innovative models of learning, advancements in instructional practice, and the more effective use of limited resources.

This Platform identifies the Consortium's priorities, and outlines a set of principles that should guide the development of policy as well as the improvement of practice at all levels—to support the success of each and every student.

This National Education Policy Platform [Platform], draws upon these values, identifies the Consortium's priorities, and outlines a set of related principles that should inform and guide the development of policy as well as the improvement of practice at all levels—to support the success of each and every student. In short, this Platform is the Consortium's "blueprint for action," in all of the facets of its work. It also serves as the foundation upon which additional, more detailed policy positions and tools will be developed.

## The Consortium's Policy Priorities

- 1. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Outcomes.** Education systems must support all students in achieving readiness for college, career, and civic engagement, including the mastery of rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge through higher-order skills including critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. These systems must be driven by the establishment of clear, high, internationally benchmarked standards and expectations, as well as the design and implementation of comprehensive and robust assessment systems. Outcomes should be benchmarked against the highest performing systems in the U.S. and worldwide.
- 2. Accountability for Success.** Accountability systems reflecting 21<sup>st</sup> Century outcomes must utilize multiple measures of performance and growth, with a continued focus on achievement for all students. A wide array of data and information should be considered as part of a regular diagnostic review process that is integral to continuous improvement processes in all aspects of education systems.
- 3. Highly Effective Human Capital.** Human capital systems must ensure that every student has access to highly effective educators. Achieving this requires improvement in every aspect of current systems, from educator preparation programs to ongoing, embedded coaching and development – along with a willingness to try new approaches. Educators must have timely access to an array of actionable data and information directly relevant to their instructional efforts, even as their instructional strategies will continue to evolve in light of technological and related changes.
- 4. Capacity to Transform.** Education systems and practices must be transformed to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners and communities. This can only take place through efforts to build and enhance system-wide capacity so that the necessary guidance and instruction can be most effectively provided to students. Issues associated with capacity should be routinely assessed as a foundation for the development of plans for continuous improvement toward high standards. Strategic investments in professional development, better use of time and other limited resources, and the like are essential.
- 5. College and Career Alignment, Birth to 20.** Policies and programs across the education spectrum must be aligned to ensure seamless pathways toward college and career readiness outcomes, with the provision of an educational experience that purposefully builds on knowledge and skill acquisition at each stage of learning.
- 6. Comprehensive Systems of Student Supports.** Students and their families must have access to a wide array of support services including those focused on social emotional learning and positive behavior practices. These systems should be grounded in research and best practice, aligned with system-wide performance metrics to assess effectiveness and impact on student outcomes. They should be designed to meet the goal of preparing all students for college, career, and civic engagement.
- 7. Autonomy for Innovation.** Education systems must be reoriented to incent innovation. Districts and schools that have a record of promoting the success of all students must be encouraged to design and try new models and approaches without undue oversight or constraint (which may impede progress).

To achieve the goal of college and career readiness, far more students, particularly low-income students and students of color, must be supported in meeting the high expectations that life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands. Education systems should be redesigned and centered on students— operated and continuously enhanced to ensure that every student achieves success in mastering rigorous academic content and demonstrating the ability to apply knowledge through higher-order skills. This will require a renewed commitment to examine inequities in the nation's education systems and redouble efforts to provide historically underserved students with the educational opportunities and supports they need to succeed.

Federal and state policy changes, innovations in technology, and an increasingly interconnected global economy all point to the growing demand for education leaders to work together to advance effective, scalable models of teaching and learning designed to ensure that all students regardless of their background or circumstance have the opportunity to reach their full potential. In turn, federal policymakers have begun to recognize the imperative for providing greater flexibility to states and to promote autonomy for districts, often in return for a commitment to implement certain changes, such as personalized learning models and educator effectiveness systems.<sup>1</sup> That trend of enhanced flexibility—with meaningful accountability—should continue.

High capacity districts<sup>2</sup> like those in the Consortium, are well positioned to lead national policy efforts to achieve scalable, and sustainable improvement in education systems. In addition to developing policy and practice models for the implementation of new standards and assessments, a growing number are designing, piloting, refining and taking to scale new educator evaluation and development systems. In many instances they are innovators, pursuing new, promising strategies and models. They are revamping the supports that are made available to students, particularly those who need additional help meeting new, higher expectations. They are aggressively addressing all too persistent achievement gaps by targeting available resources to students who need help the most. Many are

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<sup>1</sup> This trend is reflected in the USED ESEA waiver process and the Race to the Top -District program both of which reflect expectations that states and districts will assume a greater role in developing and implementing innovative new models and approaches.

<sup>2</sup> The term "high capacity district" is used throughout this document to refer to school districts that have demonstrated an ability to effectively utilize resources (including funding, human capital, and community assets) to provide all students, regardless of background, with the kind of education that will meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century expectations, as reflected in more detail in this platform. To be highly effective, districts must be structured, led, staffed, and resourced appropriately based on the role(s) they are expected to play today.

working collaboratively with stakeholders (including boards, unions, and parent/community-based organizations) in crafting these reforms. Importantly, most are doing these things with fewer resources than they have had in the recent past and with no real budgetary rebound in sight.

The priorities detailed in this Platform in many ways reflect the pillars upon which the Consortium members have established often long-standing track records of success. The development of the Platform has not been just an exercise in looking back, however. The Platform has been developed with an eye to the future, informed by the present and past. It is grounded in collective practice, research findings and emerging evidence about the pathways forward— with an unwavering commitment to educational excellence and opportunity for all.

To state a point that should be obvious, the seven policy areas are all contingent upon meaningful access to and effective use of robust education technology and data systems. A sound infrastructure related to the effective use of data and technology—with educators who are prepared to analyze and use data to continuously improve practice and to integrate and leverage technology to enhance the learning experience for students—is essential for success.

The Consortium seeks changes in federal and state policy, just as it seeks the transformation of key district and school practices, that, together will drive the transformation of our systems of education in America today. These principles have been drafted to reflect the nature and characteristics of the education systems that Consortium members believe must be established if the goals of college and career readiness and civic engagement for all students is to be achieved.

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## 1. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Outcomes

**What is the Consortium vision for this priority?** Education systems must support all students in achieving readiness for college, career, and civic engagement, including the mastery of rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge through higher-order skills including critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. These systems must be driven by the establishment of clear, high, internationally benchmarked standards and expectations, as well as the design and implementation of comprehensive and robust assessment systems. Outcomes should be benchmarked against the highest performing systems in the U.S. and worldwide.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Dramatically improving 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning outcomes is a Consortium priority because success in today's global, knowledge-based economy and interconnected society requires that every student graduate from high school prepared for college, career, and civic engagement. With some key foundations for this transformation in place (such as the near-universal adoption of the Common Core State Standards) much work remains. For example, the challenges associated with the design and implementation of comprehensive and robust assessment systems that measure the acquisition of rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge through higher order skills aligned to those standards are formidable—and should be central to both policy and practice reform discussions.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Promote Readiness for College and Career.** Federal and state policy should require that education systems be oriented to the goal of college and career readiness for all. States should be encouraged to define the type of content knowledge and skills students need to be prepared for success after graduation. Policy should support system redesign to ensure that every aspect of state, district and school operation reflects and supports efforts to achieve this goal including standards, assessments, accountability systems, and continuous improvement processes.

## 2. Accountability for Success

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Accountability systems reflecting 21<sup>st</sup> Century outcomes must utilize multiple measures of performance and growth, with a continued focus on achievement for all students. A wide array of data and information should be considered as part of a regular diagnostic review process that is integral to continuous improvement processes in all aspects of education systems.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Consortium districts support the redesign of accountability systems to facilitate college and career readiness for all students—among other things, to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> Century outcomes and utilize multiple measures and sources of performance and growth, with the continued focus on outcomes for all student populations (e.g., disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and more). Meaningful system-based accountability also requires robust data systems that support efforts by educators to fully evaluate the causes of success and failure—and then to address the picture of performance in meaningful ways. This means that current regimes should include as part of their continuous improvement process the step of diagnostic review in which a wide range of data (including perception data) and information can be fully assessed.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Enhance Accountability Systems to Drive Capacity Building.** Accountability policies should address the effectiveness of systems, not just individual schools, in preparing students for college and careers. Every actor (e.g., students, administrators, educators, parents) and institution in the system should be measured against a set of appropriate and meaningful indicators of performance and growth that are used to build capacity system wide toward robust goals.
- ✓ **Utilize A Wide Array of Actionable Data for Continuous Improvement.** Accountability systems should be based on multiple measures of performance and capacity that are valid and reliable and are indicators of college and career readiness. These should include measures of student performance on college- and career-ready assessments in at least reading, math and science; accurate graduation rates; and other context-appropriate measures such as reading proficiency in early grades, college entry and credit accumulation, and industry certification. These data and other student information derived from non-cognitive measures should be considered along with information on all

aspects of system performance as part of regular diagnostic review and continuous improvement processes.

- ✓ **Ensure Opportunity for All.** Accountability systems should require that annual performance targets be set so that students performing below expectation are required to make significant improvement toward college- and career-readiness. Accountability and support systems should continue to use disaggregated student group achievement data (such as by race, ethnicity, poverty, disability, and limited English proficiency) to help identify and address achievement gaps and ensure that the needs of subgroups are not masked by the aggregate picture of student achievement.



### 3. Highly Effective Human Capital

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Human capital systems must ensure that every student has access to highly effective educators. Achieving this requires improvement in every aspect of current systems, from educator preparation programs to ongoing, embedded coaching and development – along with a willingness to try new approaches. Educators must have timely access to an array of actionable data and information directly relevant to their instructional efforts, even as their instructional strategies will continue to evolve in light of technological and related changes.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** The ongoing development of highly effective human capital is a priority for the Consortium because only by ensuring that every student has access to highly effective educators and high-performing institutions can the goals of college and career readiness and preparation for civic engagement be met. Correspondingly, a new demand for a wholesale transformation in human capital policies and practices exists, given the (first) new generation of digital natives; the implementation of more rigorous state academic standards; and the shift to highly personalized instructional strategies and proficiency-based models that require both deep content knowledge and higher-order skills.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Teacher and Leader Development.** Teacher and leader development programs that have been demonstrated to have consequential impact on improving practice should be expanded, while those with questionable track records should be discontinued. State and federal policy should encourage the alignment of large-scale reform initiatives (such as the implementation of Common Core State Standards or School Improvement Grant funds) with teacher and leader development programs to ensure their effectiveness. These policies should also recognize that districts need flexibility in allocating resources to provide the right kind of development opportunities for the right groups of teachers.
- ✓ **Improving Educator Preparation.** All districts and schools should have meaningful access to teachers who have completed high quality teacher training programs. These programs should be held accountable for their ability to produce highly effective teachers and principals. Federal and state policy should support districts in efforts to better align preparation programs and K-12 school systems (including with the establishment of aligned and connected data systems) to ensure teachers and principals receive the training they need to be successful in their respective roles.

- ✓ **High Quality Educator Evaluation Systems.** The design and implementation of high quality teacher and leader evaluation models that contribute to the continuous improvement of teacher practice should be a focus of federal and state policy and support systems. Quality educator evaluations should include meaningful measures focused on student achievement and linked to professional development opportunities designed to improve instruction and student outcomes. Districts must have the flexibility to shape systems to reflect the needs and culture of the district, to integrate and align educator evaluations with other system reforms, and to continuously improve upon evaluation systems over time.

#### 4. Capacity to Transform

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Education systems and practices must be transformed to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners and communities. This can only take place through efforts to build and enhance system-wide capacity so that the necessary guidance and instruction can be most effectively provided to students. Issues associated with capacity should be routinely assessed as a foundation for the development of plans for continuous improvement toward high standards. Strategic investments in professional development, better use of time and other limited resources, and the like are essential.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Building capacity to drive the transformation of education systems, institutions and practices is a priority for the Consortium because it is becoming increasingly evident that the status quo cannot lead to the achievement of 21<sup>st</sup> Century outcomes at scale.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Recognize Capacity as a Condition Essential to Success.** Capacity is an essential element of successful practice and culture and must be recognized as such. Even though the concept of organizational capacity is well established in virtually every sector of industry and government, there remains considerable room for education leaders to clearly define what it means for a district to have the capacity it needs to deliver on its mission today. Federal and state policy should expressly recognize the essential nature of capacity as a condition for the success. In short, we should be as rigorous in gauging investments and inputs as we are in critiquing outcomes.
- ✓ **Learn from Successful Districts:** Federal and state policy should support research into the practices of high capacity districts and should support information-sharing opportunities between districts. Policy should reflect lessons learned from high capacity districts and should work to bring successful practices to scale.
- ✓ **Build Capacity for Transformation.** The capacity within education systems must be developed to support the transformation that is taking place to ensure 21<sup>st</sup> Century outcomes for students. In addition to longstanding responsibilities for carrying out core functions (such as establishing expectations, monitoring and reporting on performance, and developing skilled teachers and leaders), districts must design, test and scale effective

new models approaches for teaching and learning. This should include improvements in instruction based on the higher expectations of college and career readiness for all students; the expansion of learning time and/or the reconfiguration of time to allow for more instruction and educator collaboration; and the development of systems that allow for greater personalization in learning pathways (e.g., competency-based instruction, performance-based assessments, and blended learning opportunities).

## 5. College and Career Alignment, Birth-20

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Policies and programs across the education spectrum must be aligned to ensure seamless pathways toward college and career readiness outcomes, with the provision of an educational experience that purposefully builds on knowledge and skill acquisition at each stage of learning.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Ensuring college and career alignment from birth to 20 is a priority for the Consortium given the reality that far too many students suffer the negative impact of unaligned or disconnected education systems that produce pathways that fail provide for seamless progression from one level to the next. This lack of alignment also results in gross inefficiencies and increased costs in the operation of educational systems.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Strengthen Systems Alignment.** Students need systems that offer high-quality early learning opportunities and provide for seamless progression from early learning through the successful transition to college and career. Districts should have incentives and support for efforts to fully align academic standards, expectations, data systems, resource allocation, etc. so that learning at each level of the system builds directly on prior learning and prepares every student for the next step.
- ✓ **Expand Pathways.** Students should have access to information on college and career options early in their education and support in making informed decisions about their future. Districts should be encouraged to develop clear pathways for students, aligned with expectations for college and career readiness, through partnerships with business, industry and higher education.
- ✓ **Ensure Successful Student Transitions.** Districts and institutions of higher education should have incentives and support for collaborative efforts to ensure the full recognition by higher education of post-secondary credits earned by students while in high school. Districts should also have support for the establishment of partnerships with local industry and businesses to facilitate the success of students in their transition from secondary schools into careers including through the provision of certification programs and other career training opportunities.

## 6. Comprehensive Systems of Student Supports.

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Students and their families must have access to a wide array of support services including those focused on social emotional learning and positive behavior practices. These systems should be grounded in research and best practice, aligned with system-wide performance metrics to assess effectiveness and impact on student outcomes. They should be designed to meet the goal of preparing all students for college and careers.

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Building and utilizing comprehensive systems of student supports is a Consortium priority, given the reality that college and career readiness goals cannot be effectively met without strategic focus on the social, emotional and learning needs of every student, which are often highly connected with a student's academic performance. Moreover, research demonstrates that the provision of effective support services increases student and family engagement in school, especially for those living in poverty.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Establish a Comprehensive, Interconnected Support Infrastructure.** Federal and state policy should provide incentives and support for district efforts to establish and operate comprehensive systems of student support that ensure that the needs of each learner are met. To be effective, these systems must reorient the operation of districts and schools in support of students and their families. They must leverage the efforts of existing community partners and service providers, and allow for the sharing of relevant data and information, so that a comprehensive understanding of students and families is built and appropriate social emotional, behavioral, and educational services are provided.
- ✓ **Develop Leadership Support.** For these systems to be effective, the individuals charged with their operation must receive ongoing training and development in diagnosing and addressing the needs of students and their families. Federal and state policy should provide incentives and support for district efforts to provide personnel with training and technical assistance. This may also include support for increases in support staff (social workers, nurses, guidance counselors, school psychologists, etc.) at the school level and appropriate developmental support.

## 7. Autonomy for Innovation

**What is the Consortium's vision for this priority?** Education systems must be reoriented to incent innovation. Districts and schools that have a record of promoting the success of all students must be encouraged to design and try new models and approaches without undue oversight or constraint (which may impede progress).

**Why is this a priority for the Consortium?** Autonomy that can spur sound innovative practices at the district and school levels is a priority to the Consortium because the goal of college and career readiness for all students necessitates the development of new learning models and approaches. These new learning models are likely to emerge from classroom and district practice but only if support and space exist for their development.

**How can this be achieved through changes in Federal and State policy?** The following principles should guide changes in Federal and State policy:

- ✓ **Promote Autonomy for Innovation.** Education policy and practice should be reformed to focus considerable resources on the promotion of innovation and the development, evaluation, and replication of effective new models and approaches. Districts that have demonstrated the capacity to leverage state and federal funds to support strong student outcomes should be provided with opportunities to implement innovative practice even if such practices would require freedom from compliance requirements. There should be similar incentives for district leaders to collaborate with one another and to create innovation zones through which pioneering schools would also benefit from greater autonomy and support for promising new practices.
- ✓ **Support for Evaluation and Dissemination.** Systems of support should be strengthened to provide districts and schools with assistance in evaluating the performance of new practice and impact of new policies. Where these practices and policies have proven successful, district, state and federal leaders can play a role in disseminating this information to other districts.

## CONCLUSION

The policy priorities and principles outlined in this Platform have been identified through collaborative and rigorous analysis and discussion by members of the Consortium regarding the key education issues that are facing America today. As these priorities and principles are further examined and evaluated, in light of the inevitable evolution in policy and practice that is to come, this Platform will evolve, as well. Throughout its iterations, it will continue to serve as the blueprint for the collective action of Consortium members, including with respect to the development of policy recommendations relating to specific legislative initiatives and proposals.