

THE FUTURE OF

# THE PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE



A Special Futurecast Report | June 2024

Battelle  
forKids

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Reflecting on two decades of high-stakes standardized testing, it's clear that while we've made strides in increasing support for marginalized students—improving academic outcomes in the process—the educational journey is far from complete. Escalating student absenteeism and a shrinking teacher workforce pose significant threats to our educational foundations.

The relentless focus on test scores often leaves students struggling to find personal relevance and joy in their education. This disconnection may drive potential educators towards other professions seeking greater flexibility and growth opportunities, prompting us to question if our educational strategies have sacrificed curiosity and discovery for the sake of performance metrics.

In response, innovative educators have embraced the Portrait of a Graduate. This framework, adopted by numerous districts across the nation, emphasizes skills like critical thinking and creativity, blending rigorous academics with inquiry-based learning to prepare students for a dynamic world. As a former superintendent, adopting this approach in my district shifted my focus from mere test scores to infusing education with meaning and joy, emphasizing real-world applications and fostering student independence.

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*For over a decade, Battelle for Kids and our EdLeader21 Network have spearheaded this transformation, helping districts nationwide to reimagine education through the Portrait of a Graduate.*

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This report aims to assess our progress and chart the future of this transformative educational movement. You will find tangible stories of how this work has impacted communities from coast-to-coast, preparing future-ready students along the way. I hope you find these insights in this report informative, but more importantly, it inspires you to act. Join us in shaping an education system that truly empowers the next generation.

Yours in Education,

**Mike Duncan, Ed.D.** | President & CEO

**Battelle**  
for Kids

# What is the Impact of the Portrait?



**Colon Lewis, Ed.D.**  
*Chief Learning Officer,  
Battelle for Kids*

What if I told you that most students will say that school is not working for them? People are aware that the world has changed, but rarely do they think about what this means for children in schools. There is still a portion of the population that believes the industrial revolution model of education is sufficient to prepare students for an uncertain future. That's where the Portrait of a Graduate comes into play.

The ultimate purpose of the Portrait of a Graduate is to equip students with durable skills that enable them to thrive as either employees or entrepreneurs upon entering the workforce. It should also align with the demands for durable skills across local, regional, and national economic landscapes. It should position students to be “owners” of their learning and drivers of the experiences that prepare them for life and workforce readiness.

To accomplish this, the Portrait of a Graduate should be created from a diverse array of community members to create a collective, unifying vision. The Portrait can never be completed without community voices, including the students who this vision will impact most. The community should also expect to be accountable for assisting the district in providing and developing opportunities for students to hone the durable skills they have selected to be the core of their Portrait of a Graduate.

From an educator perspective, the Portrait initiative aims to transform educators into facilitators of learning, moving beyond the confines of standardized testing. It encourages educators to embrace innovative teaching methods, allowing for a more dynamic and exploratory learning environment. This shift enriches the student learning experience and revitalizes educators by empowering them to experiment and take risks in their teaching practices.

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*Ultimately, the Portrait seeks to foster a more engaging and relevant educational atmosphere, preparing students for future challenges while invigorating the teaching profession.*

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Over the years, I've had the honor of leading numerous communities, from expansive urban districts to quaint rural areas, through the Portrait of a Graduate design process. This process transcends merely producing a poster or a set of terms. When communities come together for the purpose of shaping a vision of the future they want for their children, the outcome is a unifying experience. This shared vision paves the way for re-imagining education and optimally preparing students for a dynamic and intricate world.

# DEFINED: A GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Throughout this report, there are some common words and phrases that will be referenced. This glossary will help build a shared understanding of their meaning in the context of this report. Throughout the nation, school districts and organizations doing this work may refer to these common concepts differently, but the meaning remains the same.

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## Portrait of Graduate

Locally developed and globally positioned, a school system's Portrait of a Graduate is developed with the community to identify the durable skills students need for success in this rapidly changing, complex world. It is the community's collective, unifying vision for every student.

**Similar:** *Profile of a Graduate, Portrait of a Learner, Graduate Profile, Learner Profile, Vision*

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## Durable Skills

According to America Succeeds, durable skills are competencies we use to share what we know, such as critical thinking, collaboration, or communication, as well as character skills like fortitude and leadership. By better integrating these into education pathways, the power and promise of every student finding happiness and success after graduation can better be realized.

**Similar:** *Competencies, Soft Skills, Power Skills, Attributes*

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## Systems Transformation

Systemwide transformation is a comprehensive process that requires the commitment and collaboration of all stakeholders within the district and the community. It's about creating a dynamic educational environment that prepares students to succeed in a rapidly changing world. The Portrait of a Graduate is merely the first step in this process.

**Similar:** *Transformational Change, Organizational Change, Reform, Innovation, Continuous Improvement*

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## Portrait to Practice

Any district with a Portrait of a Graduate eventually must answer a key question: how will our vision become a reality for every student? This is the work that empowers and supports educators and leaders within the district to bring the Portrait to life. From capacity building to assessments, the impact of the Portrait comes when it moves from aspirational to measurable.

**Similar:** *Professional Development, Professional Learning, Leadership Development, Teaching and Learning*

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## Deeper Learning

This type of learning is the root of the Portrait in action. It equips students not only with rigorous academic content but also the ability to transfer their knowledge while using durable skills in new, even unexpected, situations. Deeper learning experiences empower students to be lifelong learners and contributors in our complex, ever-changing world.

**Similar:** *Future-Ready Learning, 21st Century Learning, Self-Directed Learning*

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## CONTENT & SOURCES

This special report, produced by Battelle for Kids, features original stories crafted by our marketing and communications team in collaboration with school districts and state agencies nationwide, many of which are part of our national network, EdLeader21. It showcases a variety of Portraits of Graduate, with many designed under the facilitation of Battelle for Kids and enhanced by our graphic design team.

The report draws on original research conducted by Battelle for Kids, including a recent survey of educational leaders from districts within the EdLeader21 Network. It also incorporates findings from various reputable sources such as America Succeeds, Populace, the World Economic Forum, McKinsey & Company, the National Center of Educational Statistics, Inside Higher Education, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Education Week Research Center, Hanover Research, Hart Research, and the U.S. Department of Education.

## SECTION 1

# A Look Back: What We've Learned

## CO-CREATION AND INNOVATION

Battelle for Kids has co-created Portrait of a Graduate visions for school districts and state agencies throughout the nation over the past decade. These visions have provided a North Star for student-centered learning experiences and innovation. What have we learned from being a force that helped shape this movement?

135+

SCHOOL DISTRICT  
PORTRAITS

3

STATEWIDE  
PORTRAITS



*“The Portrait of a Graduate provides the blueprint and framework for systemwide transformation. In an era where improving student outcomes and closing gaps have been the sole focus, the Portrait of a Graduate work elevates and reorients the conversation around the factors that matter most and provides authentic levers for real change and lasting impact.”*

**—Patrick Ward, Ph.D. | Superintendent, Willoughby-Eastlake School District (Ohio)**

## FROM ROOTS TO CANOPY:

# Insights from More Than a Decade of the Portrait of a Graduate



**Valerie Greenhill**  
Co-Founder,  
EdLeader21 Network

The evolution of the Portrait of a Graduate initiative stands out as a noteworthy example of innovative systems change. Starting as nascent roots in the rich soil of a few visionary districts, this concept has branched out extensively, spreading its canopy of support to school systems—and the students they serve—nationwide.

## ROOTS: THE EARLY BEGINNINGS

The early seeds of this national movement were planted when, by the early 2000s, it became clear that students needed bold leadership from U.S. policymakers and local education institutions. Ken Kay and I were leading the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), a coalition of education and business leaders promoting a future-focused framework for education. In the course of this work, we supported leaders in districts from Virginia to Ohio to Arizona to California who were using the Profile of Graduate as their vision for shifting their systems more intentionally toward skills such as critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration in the context of core academics. We were inspired by their stories and advocated for state and national policies to support their successes.

## GROWTH: SPREADING AND CONNECTING THE ROOTS

In 2011, Ken Kay, Alyson Nielson, and I launched the EdLeader21 Network to better connect these visionary leaders, many of whom were working in isolation from each other, as they sought to implement Portrait of a Graduate skills like the 4Cs in their districts and schools. With the help of partners such as the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the National Equity Project, EdLeader21 became fertile ground for educators to spread and connect the roots of their systems transformation work.

At that time, the Portrait of a Graduate was one of many practices we supported throughout our network, alongside learning frameworks, common performance assessments, equity initiatives, 4Cs rubrics, and instructional practices for cross-curricular literacies. We noticed a difference between communities that developed a Portrait of a Graduate to guide their work, and communities that did not. In systems where a Portrait was developed in collaboration with the school board and broader community of stakeholders, subsequent implementation efforts were more unified, coherent, and sustainable, even through dramatic shifts in district leadership, budget constraints, and political headwinds. We realized we needed to prioritize the Portrait of a Graduate as a critical, high-leverage, move in every system.



## FROM ROOTS TO CANOPY:

# Insights from More Than a Decade of the Portrait of a Graduate

## CANOPY: A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

We grew these connected roots into a forest in 2017, when we launched a national campaign to enlist hundreds of school systems in developing their Portrait of a Graduate. EdLeader21 then merged with Battelle for Kids to further scale the movement.

Today, the canopy of the Portrait of a Graduate covers a vast network of school districts—70% of EdLeader21 members have now developed a Portrait in collaboration with their communities, with a strong emphasis on student, parent, and teacher voices. As a result, each system's Portrait represents their community's unique vision for preparing their students not just academically but as agile navigators of their own futures. And each district is part of a larger community of practice—EdLeader21—dedicated to enacting the shifts necessary to bring Portrait of a Graduate durable skills to life for every student.

Such widespread adoption has transformed the national educational landscape, providing valuable fuel to drive significant shifts in educator, leadership, and system practices. Educational experiences in these systems are growing from a standardized, map-following exercise to a rich, exploratory journey through a garden of possibilities. School districts empowered by the Portrait of a Graduate are now places where education is not just imparted but discovered, where students learn to adapt to their surroundings and carve out paths that are uniquely their own.

## SUSTAINING GROWTH: LOOKING FORWARD

The journey from roots to canopy is not complete. As we look ahead, the challenge remains to address systemic barriers to equity so that every learner is supported in their individual path to success. The power of the Portrait of a Graduate—building consensus in each community around a vision of student success—is only meaningful if we shift how our systems, leaders, and educators practice together. We must commit to understanding how best to put the Portrait “into Practice.”

Thank you for learning more about this work. As stewards of this journey, we hope you will join us in preparing students not only for the challenges of today, but for the opportunities of tomorrow.

# The Portrait Competencies

## DURABLE SKILLS RISING

As educational landscapes evolve, the competencies or durable skills listed below reflect a consistency in community voice. Over the years, Battelle for Kids has facilitated Portrait of a Graduate design meetings with communities to find common ground on the essential abilities that educators, parents, and local stakeholders believe are crucial for students to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

From critical thinking and collaboration to creativity and communication, this visualization highlights the most valued durable skills that rise to the top in communities nationwide each year. By examining this data, we gain insights into how communities are collectively shaping a future-ready generation.

**COMMUNICATION** Responsibility  
**Critical Thinking** Empathy **CREATIVITY**  
**ADAPTABILITY** PROBLEM SOLVING **INTEGRITY**  
 Leadership **Collaboration**

*Source: These listed competencies have consistently been the most agreed upon by communities over the past three years (2021-2023) during a Battelle for Kids Portrait of a Graduate community engagement session/design team meeting.*

# What Have We Learned?

## AFTER A DECADE OF THE PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE, WHAT LESSONS CAN WE TAKE AWAY FROM THIS MEANINGFUL WORK?

### The Portrait is the Catalyst, Not the Transformation

The Portrait of a Graduate is a powerful way to create a united vision with your community. But it isn't the transformation. It is the catalyst to spark transformation. Its outcomes will look different for every community. The Portrait is just the beginning, and it requires hard work and commitment by all stakeholders.

### Students Want a Voice

Part of the Portrait process is engaging with your students to elevate their voices. Students want better from their education system. After a decade, we have heard stories of students whose voices helped shape the durable skills. From one student after a recent Portrait design engagement, "I actually felt valued. I felt like the adults wanted to hear from me. I have never felt like this before."

### Durable Skills Create Common Ground

There's a strong need to focus on skills that are relevant for today and for the future. These are the durable skills that a community collectively rallies behind when a Portrait is created to provide a North Star for the everyday work in preparing future-ready students. They also have proven to be something nearly every stakeholder agrees upon. From parents and teachers to legislators and business leaders, durable skills have proven to be a common goal the community rallies around.

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# 71%

OF AMERICANS SAY THE EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS MORE CHANGES.

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# 21%

OF AMERICANS ADVOCATE FOR A NEAR-COMPLETE OVERHAUL.

*Source: Populace, 2023*

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# What Have We Learned?

## Community Engagement & Communication are Critical

Successful implementation of the Portrait requires deep engagement with the community. Regular, clear communication helps maintain momentum and buy-in from all stakeholders. Storytelling should be a key component of this work. Stories can create belief in a change and help shift skeptics into advocates, creating a groundswell of support. Most importantly, stories can motivate people into action.

## Education & Workforce Aligns Through the Portrait

Business leaders frequently express their desire to recruit individuals possessing essential attributes like teamwork, effective communication, adept problem-solving, and creative thinking. By integrating the Portrait's focus on durable skills with the district's rigorous academic content, this shared community vision sets the way in preparing future-ready students who are ready for not only post-secondary enrollment but also employment, enlistment, or entrepreneurship.

## Momentum & Sustainability Accelerates Through Practice

Strong leadership is essential to champion the initiative, maintain focus, and drive the systemic changes needed for implementation. Long-term success requires embedding the Portrait into district policies and strategic plans to ensure sustainability beyond leadership changes. But the real momentum that leads to sustainability is putting the Portrait into practice—empowering teachers, building leader capacity, tying durable skills to academic content to assess its impact.

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A large orange number '77' followed by a percentage sign, representing the statistic that 77% of job postings requested at least one durable skill.

OF JOB POSTINGS REQUESTED AT  
LEAST ONE DURABLE SKILL IN A  
STUDY OF MORE THAN 80 MILLION  
JOB POSTINGS IN 2020-2021

*Source: America Succeeds, 2024*

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# I USED TO THINK...But Now I Think

In the past decade, Battelle for Kids has facilitated the creation of hundreds of Portraits. Our facilitators have met thousands of teachers, community leaders, parents, students, and more during these engagements. During the first design team meeting, we ask the participants a simple question: **“I used to think this about our education system, but now I think this...”**

From those interactions, some common themes emerge:



**Shift in Perspective on Learning Methods:** Many respondents experienced a change in perspective, shifting from a focus on teaching methods to learning methods, recognizing the importance of how students learn.



**Developing Empathy in Education:** There's a realization that developing empathy among students is more achievable than previously thought, with new solutions and approaches being recognized.



**Global Connectivity and Understanding:** The feedback indicates an increased awareness of how global connectivity can enhance students' understanding of the world, contrary to previous beliefs about its limitations.

“

*I used to think that we needed to change how we teach; now I think we need to change how we learn.*

”

“

*I used to think that despite our global connection, we were just as far apart from understanding each other. But now I see how instant connections give kids a better understanding of events outside their local world.*

”

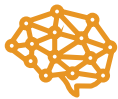
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From those interactions, some common themes emerge:



**Recognition of Potential for Improvement:** Respondents express a belief that, despite current achievements, there is significant room for growth and improvement in educational systems.



**Emphasis on Emotional Intelligence and Critical Thinking:** The importance of emotional intelligence and critical thinking in education is a recurring theme, with a strong affirmation of their value in the educational process.



**Complexity of Educational Processes:** A common realization is the complexity of educational processes, which is more intricate than initially perceived, necessitating the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

“

*I used to think that other subject areas did not care as much about creative thinking, but now I know that it is a key component in all shifting landscapes.*

”

“

*I used to think that teachers and administrators did not feel the urgency of the rapidly changing world and were stuck on old ideas and lesson plans, but now I think they do see and feel it. There are a variety of factors restricting certain changes including time constraints and state testing requirements.*

”

## SECTION 2

# Coast-to-Coast: Stories of the Portrait

70%

OF EDLEADER21 NETWORK  
MEMBER DISTRICTS HAVE A  
PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE

Source: Battelle for Kids, 2024



## ACCELERATING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COMMUNITY

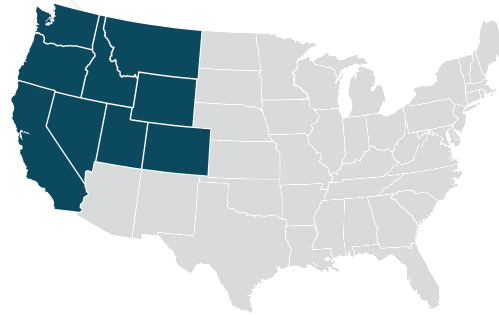
While engaging communities across the nation has been the bedrock of developing and designing the Portrait of a Graduate to reflect the shared hopes, dreams, and aspirations for all students, bringing the Portrait to life happens within the school experience.

This work is accelerated through a network approach, a community of like-minded education leaders focused on advancing education transformation together. Many of the stories in this section come from members of our EdLeader21 Network.

*“Thanks to the EdLeader21 Network, our Profile of a Graduate work has been significantly strengthened. Learning from others and sharing best practices has allowed us to enhance opportunities for teachers and students alike.”*

**—Justin Grigg, Ed.D. | Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, Louisa County Public Schools (Virginia)**

# STORIES OF IMPACT: WEST REGION



## Students and Teachers Bring the Portrait to Life

### San Gabriel Unified School District (California)

*“Above all, our work is about seeing that all students reach their greatest potential while maintaining wellness and discovering their passions in a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment.”*

—**Gary Thomas Scott, Ed.D.** | *Governing Board of Education President*

- Students have been an integral part of the process in putting the community’s vision into practice—from serving on the team that developed their competencies to most recently helping to create the Strategic Plan that is anchored in the district’s Portrait.
- The district has also ensured that teachers were part of the process and began honoring teachers who guide students in their Portrait of a Graduate journey and exemplify the competencies with a new honor, the Portrait of an Educator designation.

## The Portrait Journey: From Celebrations to Innovative Implementation

### Durango School District 9-R (Colorado)

*“We’re focused on getting every kid to dream big about their future, find their Ikigai, and find the thing that really drives them and is meaningful for their future.”*

—**Kristin Smith** | *Board of Education President*

- Durango’s desire is for every student to find their *Ikigai*, their life’s intersection of what they love to do, what they’re good at, what the world needs, and what they can be paid for doing. With that in mind, they launched their Portrait of a Graduate in 2022.
- Instead of immediately diving deep into implementation the first year, the district chose to put celebrations first, recognizing the shifts and iterations toward the full Portrait.
- From there, the district moved into the work of bringing their Portrait to life, including a field guide designed to support teachers as they implement the use of their unique Portrait blueprints, engage students in Portrait portfolios, and foster student celebrations of their Portrait in capstones.



# PORTRAIT GALLERY: WEST REGION

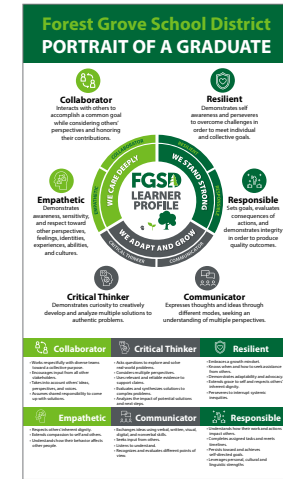
View more examples of Portraits of a Graduate from across the nation at [bfk.me/gallery](http://bfk.me/gallery)



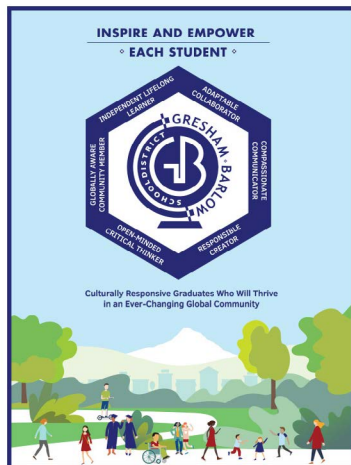
Alpine Union School District (Calif.)



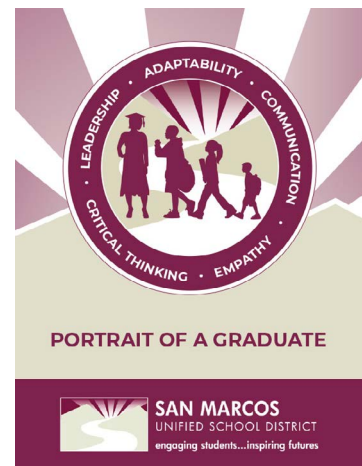
Desert Sands Unified School District (Calif.)



Forest Grove School District (Ore.)



Gresham-Barlow School District (Ore.)

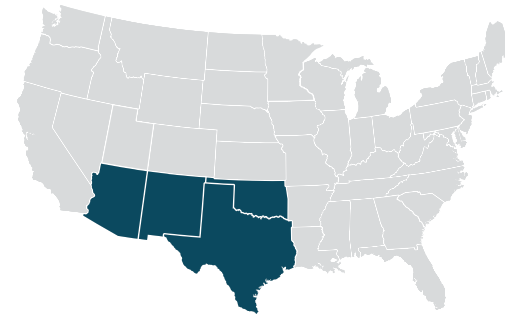


San Marcos Unified School District (Calif.)



Snoqualmie Valley School District (Wash.)

# STORIES OF IMPACT: SOUTHWEST REGION



## Portrait Helps Strategic Plan Align with Whole Child Approach

### Lubbock Independent School District (Texas)

*“The strategic planning process helped us narrow our focus on a series of deliverable goals that strengthen our core beliefs and ensure our students graduate with the skills they need to succeed, no matter which path they choose to pursue.”*

—**Kathy Rollo, Ed.D. | Superintendent**

- Lubbock Independent School District (ISD) prioritized completing its comprehensive strategic plan during the 2020-21 school year.
- During a time that demanded so much in-the-moment thinking, the strategic plan was an opportunity to step back, think about the big picture, and create a path forward. Anchored in its Portrait of a Graduate, the district’s strategic plan placed students at the center of all its work.
- In its Portrait of a Graduate, the district identified the skills and mindsets that align with the district philosophy that supports the whole-child approach to education, such as adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking.
- The Lubbock ISD Portrait competencies do not only relate to academics; they underscore the importance of a well-rounded educational experience.

## A Unifying First Step Toward a Future-Driven Education System

### Chandler Unified School District (Arizona)

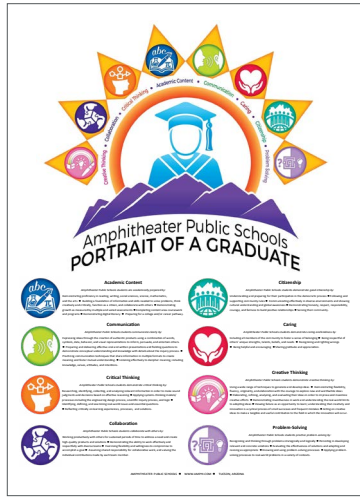
*“Typically, districts might bring together teachers, or they might bring together parents. But to have all those different voices in one place helped us adjust our expectations and reconsider other perspectives so that we could move forward in a united way.”*

—**Jane Anderson | Parent and Community Member**

- When Chandler Unified School District (CUSD) developed its Portrait of a Learner, the process created a unifying community experience with more than 100 members of the community involved.
- This is an important first step in redesigning the education system to meet the unique needs of today’s students, including parents, staff members, business leaders, and the students themselves.
- CUSD’s Portrait of a Learner now serves as the North Star that supports the district’s strategic plan focus area of prepared students, designed to support whole-child and post-graduation success for all students. They are also committed to constant connections with community stakeholders for feedback as they work to implement their vision.

# PORTRAIT GALLERY: SOUTHWEST REGION

View more examples of Portraits of a Graduate from across the nation at [bfk.me/gallery](http://bfk.me/gallery)



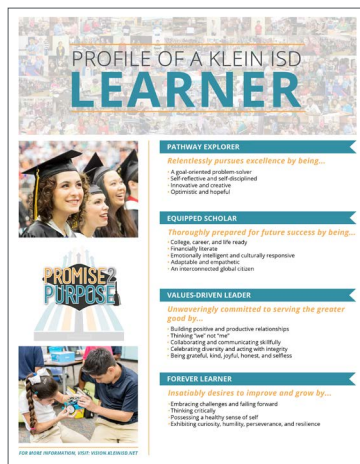
Amphitheater Public Schools (Ariz.)



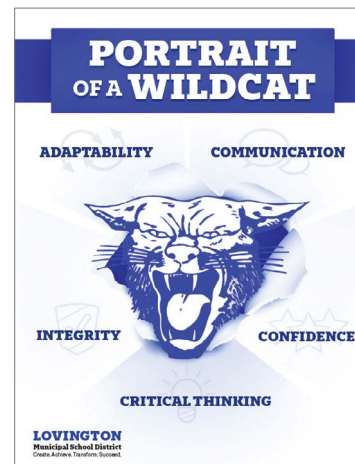
Belton Independent School District (Texas)



Boerne Independent School District (Texas)



Klein Independent School District (Texas)

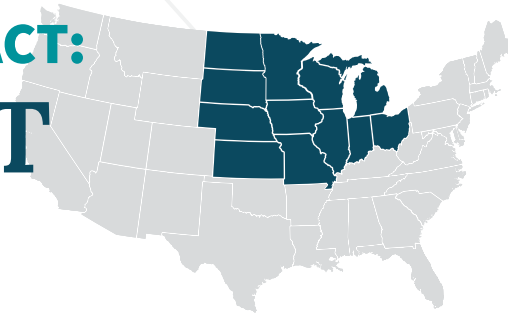


Lovington Municipal School District (N.M.)



Pinal County School Office (Ariz.)

# STORIES OF IMPACT: MIDWEST REGION



## Ensuring the Portrait of a Graduate is Accessible to All Learners

### Columbus City Schools (Ohio)

*“This work is a testament to our belief in an inclusive education that uplifts every student, regardless of their background. It’s about empowerment, equity, and fostering a future where every learner will thrive.”*

—**Angela Chapman, Ed.D. | Superintendent**

- When Columbus City Schools (CSS) was ready to launch its Portrait of a Graduate, it was important that all stakeholders were able to easily access and understand the attributes and what they meant for students. This included the district’s youngest learners.
- As a result, a team of educators took the original description of each of the six attributes and “translated” them into simpler language that elementary students could more readily comprehend. The district used these descriptors on “kid-friendly” posters designed as a self-portrait for students to see themselves within.
- Wanting to scale the accessibility even further, CCS created the posters in multiple languages beyond just English – Arabic, French, Pashto, Portuguese, Nepali, Spanish, and Somali – so students walking the halls could read them in their family’s native language.

## The Portrait as a Path Forward, Preparing Students for an Unpredictable Future

### Lincoln Consolidated Schools (Michigan)

*“That’s why we have a Portrait of a Graduate. We have no idea what the future is going to be for our kids, but we still need these important competencies. Everything is evolving so quickly. Having that Portrait to guide us is a help.”*

—**Robert Jansen | Superintendent**

- Lincoln’s Portrait and their Battelle for Kids-facilitated strategic plan have been prescient in the face of artificial intelligence’s evolution, according to Superintendent Jansen. Creating a North Star for their district’s educational focus has helped them be adaptable in the face of this latest challenge.
- “They’ll be prepared no matter what the world throws at them,” he said. “And if someday kids don’t need to, for instance, think critically because of AI, then we can eliminate that competency. But I don’t see that happening.”
- As the district engaged in discussions about how the world has changed over the last generation, it almost unanimously found technology to be a critical consideration.
- Jansen said he is grateful that his team had already focused on adaptability in day-to-day lessons as artificial intelligence began to emerge.

# PORTRAIT GALLERY: MIDWEST REGION

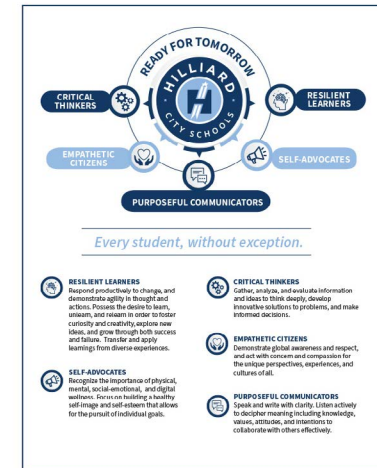
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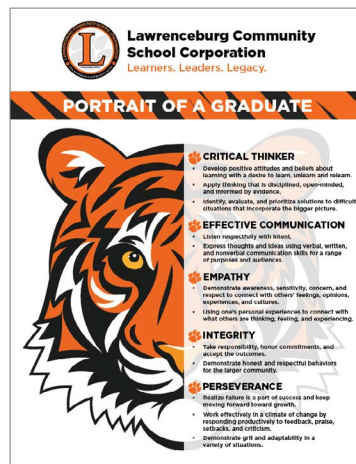
Affton School District (Mo.)



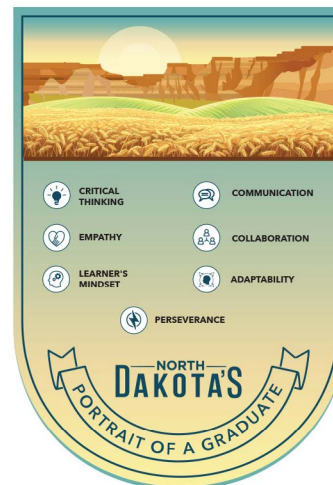
Fairfield Community School District (Iowa)



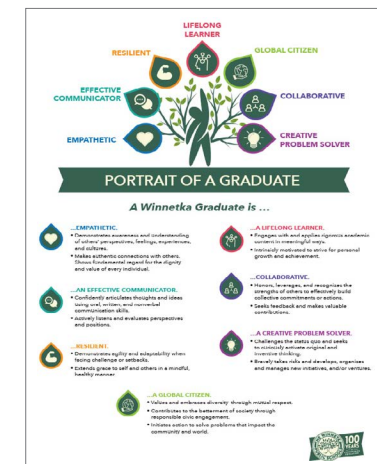
Hilliard City Schools (Ohio)



Lawrenceburg Community School Corp. (Ind.)



North Dakota Statewide (N.D.)



Winnetka Public Schools (Ill.)

# STORIES OF IMPACT: SOUTHEAST REGION



## How We Do Business: Implementing the Statewide Durable Skills

### Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (North Carolina)

*“Our strategic plan and the goals that we’ve set forth are truly rigorous goals, and we want every one of our students to be successful.”*

—**Tricia McManus** | *Superintendent*

- Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools Superintendent Tricia McManus’s approach to leading her district through the changes associated with integrating the North Carolina Portrait of a Graduate Durable Skills rests on her recognition that this is deep work that “doesn’t happen overnight.”
- Throughout the district’s initial Portrait of a Graduate implementation phase, system leaders carefully messaged how and why the North Carolina Portrait of a Graduate is an inspiring vision – rather than “just an initiative.”
- To get started with their implementation, senior staff engaged in a series of steps to build background about the durable skills and how to make the shift to deeper learning. They surveyed students about what it means to be engaged in learning and asked them to describe the characteristics of their most engaging learning experiences.
- They also launched powerful conversations with principals and other school-based leaders in which they discussed the questions of “Where do we see pockets of excellence,” “How do we scale Deeper Learning,” and “How do we make the durable skills a reality for all students?”

## Rethinking Student Learning Experiences

### Frederick County Public Schools (Virginia)

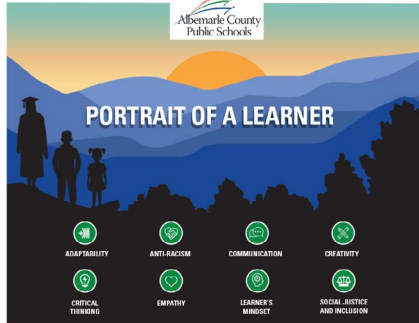
*“Student learning experiences are being designed in a way that connects with students interests and passions.”*

—**James Angelo, Ed.D.** | *Assistant Superintendent for Instruction*

- With its Portrait of a Graduate and Strategic Plan as the foundation, Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) took a critical look at its Teaching and Learning Framework, which serves as the connector between its vision, mission, and everyday practices.
- The district created resources to help plan and design learning experiences that integrate academic content standards with the durable skills identified in their Portrait of a Graduate.
- To help build capacity around designing and facilitating these learning experiences, district leaders provided several professional learning opportunities.
- As the district’s work continues building understanding and capacity around putting the Portrait to practice, FCPS remains committed to being “an innovative community where caring relationships and authentic learning inspire all students.”

# PORTRAIT GALLERY: SOUTHEAST REGION

View more examples of Portraits of a Graduate from across the nation at [bfk.me/gallery](http://bfk.me/gallery)



Albemarle County Public Schools (Va.)



Boone County Schools (Ky.)



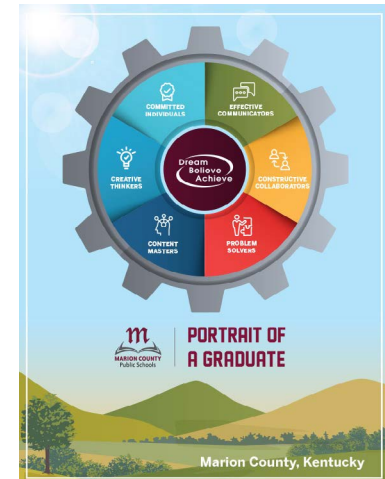
Chester County Schools (Tenn.)



Gwinnett County Public Schools (Ga.)



Henrico County Public Schools (Va.)



Marion County Public Schools (Ky.)

# STORIES OF IMPACT: NORTHEAST REGION



## Portrait of a Graduate Unites a Vision Across 17 School Districts

### Western Maine Education Collaborative (Maine)

*“We all want our students to be as prepared for their future—college, career, or life-ready—as possible.”*

—**Kristie Littlefield** | *Executive Director*

- WMEC is in the distinctive position of developing a unified, organizational vision that incorporates the experiences of 17 individual member districts committed to building a sustainable and regional collaborative.
- Each district created its own Portrait of a Graduate, which fed into and aligned with the collective WMEC vision for educator efforts across the region.
- “Our 17 districts are diverse,” said Littlefield. “The beauty of the Portrait for an organization like ours is that it supports our belief that, while each district has its own unique needs, there’s great value in collaborating in identified common areas of need.”

## Community Collaboration: A Path to a New Vision for Students

### Vineland Public Schools (New Jersey)

*“The inspiration [for this work] stemmed from our collective desire to shape a promising future for our school system. With the aim of formulating a fresh strategic plan and fostering a new vision, this initiative was born out of a strong commitment to unite our schools and empower our students.”*

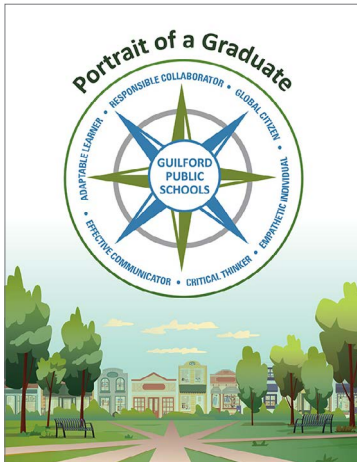
—**Gia Messore** | *Public Information Officer*

- More than 50 stakeholders—educators, business partners, parents, elected officials — set out to answer a question that seems impossible on its face: How does a community prepare its children for tomorrow, when “tomorrow” seems to change by the second?
- Stakeholders believed so much in the importance of what they were doing that they stayed engaged through nearly nine months of work. The work was made even more meaningful by input from two teams of current Vineland students.
- “In our discussions following the completion of the Portrait creation, our leadership team often discussed the power of collaborative input,” Messore said. “As we engaged in discussions and gathered insights, we discovered that their collective wisdom and diverse perspectives enriched the [Portrait] project in ways beyond what we anticipated.”



# PORTRAIT GALLERY: NORTHEAST REGION

View more examples of Portraits of a Graduate from across the nation at [bfk.me/gallery](http://bfk.me/gallery)



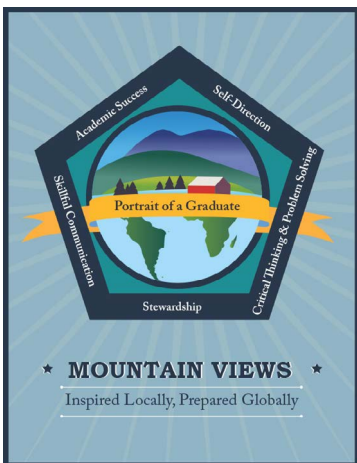
Guilford Public Schools (Conn.)



Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District (Mass.)



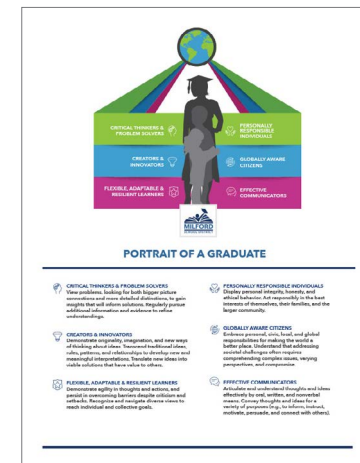
Hampton Township School District (Pa.)



Mountain Views Supervisory Union (Vt.)



New Hartford Central School District (N.Y.)



SAU40 Milford School District (N.H.)

# Insights from the Field



**Jessica Harding**  
Senior Director,  
Battelle for Kids

*Jessica Harding serves as a senior director at Battelle for Kids and has facilitated dozens of Portrait engagements in communities throughout the nation since 2021. Here, she shares her insights on the impact of the Portrait of a Graduate.*

## On Student Voice & Agency...

The competencies outlined in the Portrait of a Graduate serve as a gateway to enhancing student agency, which can be particularly beneficial for districts interacting with educators who might not yet be as committed as central office staff to this kind of initiative. Implementing these competencies in the classroom presents a chance to explore the concept of student agency more deeply with educators, offering them best practice examples and strategies for application.

## On Community Engagement...

The Portrait design team meeting does an excellent job of bringing diverse community groups together. It also highlights gaps for some and asks the question, “Who have we not included?” This is an important question, not just for the Portrait, but for all aspects of district work.

## On Educator Empowerment...

The effectiveness of the Portrait initiative often hinges on the involvement of educators from the outset. Ensuring educators are part of the creation process can significantly enhance their connection to the initiative and prevent any feelings of disconnection. Moreover, using the final Portrait as a tool for support is crucial for fostering teacher engagement. Achieving buy-in from teachers is vital for the success of a Portrait of a Graduate, and there is room for improvement in assisting districts to cultivate this engagement more effectively.

## On Assessment...

Portrait application can be assessed in many ways. I caution districts on developing strict and traditional assessment protocols too early after the start of Portrait implementation. A plan to track Portrait progress can and should be developed, with student examples of success being documented along the way.

## SECTION 3

# Portrait to Practice



*“For those teachers who have instinctively launched it, the Portrait of a Graduate has been vital in shifting focus to skills “and the using the content” to support their development, rather than simply teaching standards. It’s become our “why” our North Star for our students and our staff. We are just starting to talk about strategies and instructional practices, but we predict the Portrait will hasten our move towards project-based learning and inquiry.”*

**—Heather Wolpert-Gawron | Director of MTSS & Innovation, San Gabriel Unified School District (California)**

To bring the vision—the Portrait of a Graduate—to life, the entire system must be aligned, and educators must be empowered and supported. Any district with a Portrait of a Graduate eventually must answer a key question: how will our vision become a reality for every student? And there is no one right way to implement for impact as each community is unique.

# 28%

OF EDLEADER21 NETWORK MEMBERS SURVEYED SAID ADOPTING A DEEPER LEARNING FRAMEWORK WOULD BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FOCUS OF THE PORTRAIT IN THE NEXT DECADE.

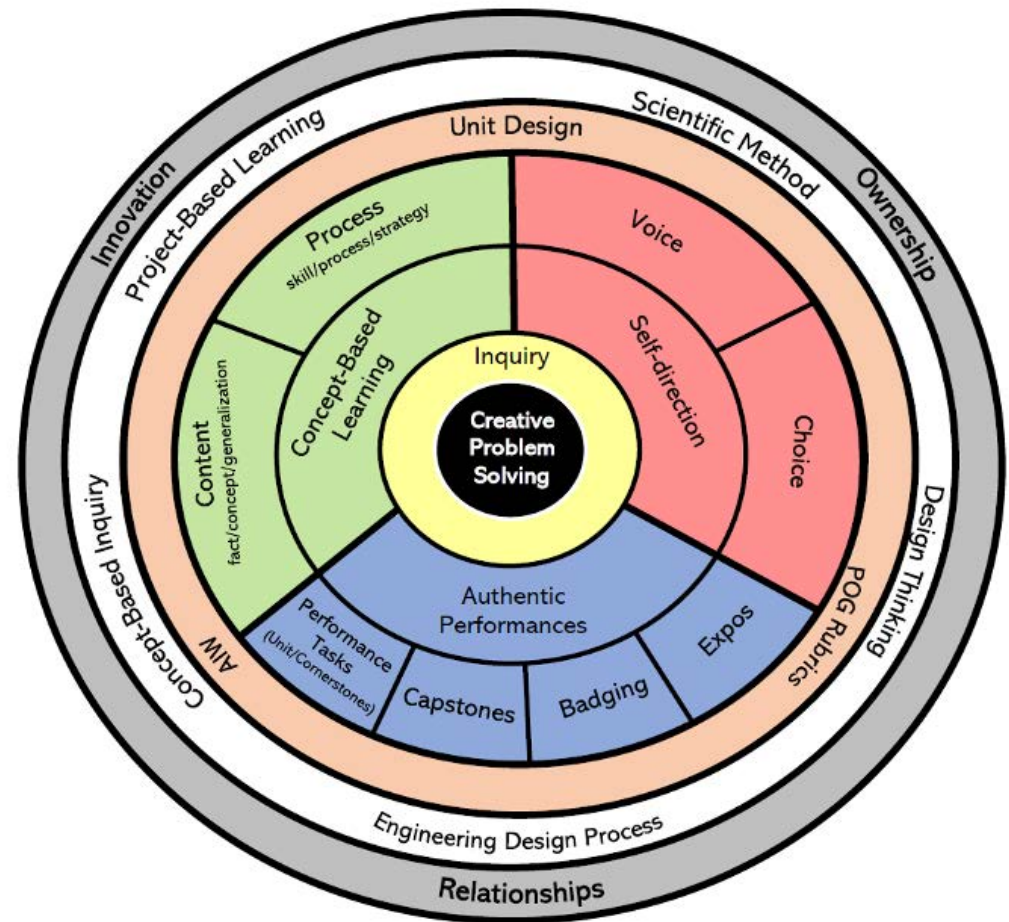
# Bringing the Portrait to Life



**Shannon King, Ph.D.**  
*Chief Learning Officer,  
 Battelle for Kids*

Creating a Portrait of a Graduate is not just about envisioning student success beyond test scores and grades. It's about igniting a transformative journey that prepares students for the world beyond the school walls. But why stop at the vision? Why not take bold steps to turn this vision into a reality? Why not harness the momentum gained in the Portrait process to propel your work forward? This can be the transformative next step for every student in your school system.

At Battelle for Kids, we don't just view the Portrait of a Graduate as a beautiful concept. We see it as a practical, effective tool that can guide your decisions and actions. The districts I've worked with that adopted this practical approach have made significant changes that directly benefit their students. Let's delve into some key lessons we can learn from these districts.



*Figure 1*  
 Courtesy Pike County Schools (Georgia)

# Bringing the Portrait to Life

## Coherence is an essential aspect of Portrait to Practice work

As we've supported districts in bringing their Portrait to life, we always start by inviting them to look at the system. A systems approach is essential in this work, or you'll wind up with programs or priorities that are at odds with your Portrait vision. That leads to mixed messages and unnecessary barriers to implementation.

One of the first things we encourage is for districts to bring a team of leaders together to engage in self-reflection. We ask them to look critically at things you are already doing and hold them up considering your Portrait vision and determine which things bring coherence to the work and which things are out of alignment.

Districts finding success in this work create a learning framework to provide clear direction. The learning framework helps define the critical aspects of educator practice. Some elements of a learning framework include your Theory of Action for the change you want to see in your Portrait to Practice work, how you're defining key terms in your district, and how to approach the design of learning experiences that include your Portrait of a Graduate durable skills.

One great example of this is Pike County Schools in Georgia. Their leadership team worked to continually examine what their district was doing considering their Portrait goals and created the graphic shown in **Figure 1** to help show educators how all the pieces fit together in service of their mission.

## Get clear about what success looks like

Once you have your Portrait, unpack those skills and competencies to clarify how to nurture those things in your learners. Words like collaboration, critical thinking, and empathy are not new, and many of us have an existing definition in mind when we hear them. Unpacking the durable skills and defining what they look like as they develop for students will help educators use them as they plan, finding ways to incorporate them into learning experiences by cross-walking them with state standards.

Additionally, unpacking the Portrait durable skills to show their requisite competencies will help you create tools that educators and students can use. For example, many districts create "I Can Statements" for students to use in self-reflection. In contrast, others create observation tools to support learning walks or instructional rounds based on their Portrait vision. The possibilities for tools to support implementation are limitless if you have clearly defined what you're looking for.

San Gabriel Unified School District in California is an example of this approach. After establishing their goal to create tools for reflection and feedback to support the implementation of their Portrait, they brought a team of educators together to unpack their Portrait of a Graduate and create learning progressions: "I Can Statements," T-Charts, and overview documents to support educators with implementation.

Additionally, Durango School District 9-R in Colorado provided clarity for its educators and community by creating Portrait of a Graduate Blueprints and a Field Guide to support implementation.

# Bringing the Portrait to Life

## Balance is the Key

One thing I've heard repeatedly as I've supported districts in implementing their Portrait of a Graduate is that this work requires a mindset shift at every level of the system. Being willing to take risks, try something new, and then adjust if it goes differently than planned is not something we're necessarily comfortable with in education. To help support that mindset shift, there is a need to balance the "We are already doing this" mentality with the "This is too hard. We can't do it!" response. Efficacy is important. Learners need to feel like success is possible when asking them to try something new. Hence, the tendency is to lean into the "we're already doing this" mentality. However, this will leave you to settle for the status quo.

Even if things that are currently happening connect to the work, chances are high that there are still things you'll need your educators to do differently or more consistently. Affirm the connections your educators are making and invite them to take it further. Even if it is just one baby step, that is progress. "Go slow to go fast" is a mantra that fits here.

## Take Action

- Frame your vision for the Portrait and the deeper learning required to bring it to life as approachable AND aspirational.
- Unpack your competencies and create a learning framework that shows the connections between the vision for learning that aligns with your Portrait of a Graduate and the other vital things in your district.
- Once that clarity is provided, elevate teacher voice and student voice as you progress toward your goals.
- Celebrate those bright spots, but as Pam Betten from Sunnyside Unified School District in Arizona reminds us, don't stop there. "You have to have relentless focus, or you'll end up settling for bright spots instead of systemwide change."

# Scaling to Reach Every Student

How does the school district's Portrait of a Graduate become a reality for every student? To bring the vision to life, the entire system must be aligned, and educators must be empowered and supported. The Portrait is just the first move. Battelle for Kids believes in working to develop a shared understanding in the district of what it looks like to implement a Portrait of a Graduate. Every district's implementation journey will be different, but to ensure success, shared goals must be established.



## ADVANCE

YOUR SYSTEM'S CAPACITY TO ACCELERATE YOUR PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE OUTCOMES.



## DEEPEN

YOUR TEAM'S CAPACITY TO FACILITATE FUTURE-READY CHANGE USING A PURPOSEFUL, SYSTEMIC APPROACH.



## ENGAGE

IN AN INQUIRY PROCESS TO ARTICULATE A THEORY OF ACTION AND CREATE A ROADMAP WITH ACTION STEPS TO LEAD YOUR TEAM ON A PATH TO FUTURE-READY TRANSFORMATION FOR ALL STUDENTS.

Learn more about the ways professional learning and customized coaching and support can help establish a co-created roadmap to put your Portrait to Practice.



[bfk.me/p2p](https://bfk.me/p2p)

# Portrait to Practice

## WHAT DOES FUTURE-READY, DEEPER LEARNING LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOLS?

We know that deeper learning occurs when rigorous academic content is combined with the Portrait of a Graduate's durable skills. For each district, this comes to life in various learning frameworks. Here's a primer for just some of the ways Portrait districts have elevated their learning environments.

### Design Thinking

In 2020, Baker-Butler Elementary School in Albemarle County Public Schools (Virginia) was named a National Blue Ribbon School for closing achievement gaps between their overall student population and English Learners, special education students, and students from economically disadvantaged homes. School leaders and educators at the time gave credit to both project-based learning and design thinking, which provides both a mindset and a framework for solving human-centered problems through empathy.

### Inquiry-Based Learning

In Medina City Schools (Ohio), the district began to pilot their Capstone program in grades five, eight, and 12 during the 2023-2024 school year. Capstone provides students with the opportunity to actively explore and engage in a local, state, national, or world problem they want to impact—a passion project. The student Capstone presentations required that they detail the project problem, the research, proposal of impact, overview, reflections and how it relates to the district's Portrait of a Bee durable skills. Offered one instructor overseeing the course, "Some Capstone teams anticipated issues and planned accordingly; some made mistakes and revised; some dropped the ball and realized it too late to make an impact this time, but learned lessons that will continue to resonate as they pursue their dreams after graduation."

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*“Capstone utilized Portrait of Bee competencies, which is a roadmap of ways to achieve character, critical thinking, learning, and life goals. Applying these skills to our overall project led our group to complete a well-rounded representation of what we learned. We used the outline to make sure throughout the process we hit all the crucial points to fulfill the Portrait of Bee principles. These principles aren’t just points to be successful when creating projects, but in life.”*

**—Brooke B. | Student, Medina City Schools (Ohio)**

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# Portrait to Practice

## Self-Directed Learning

At Granville Exempted Village Schools (Ohio), self-directed learning is thriving across all levels of learning with students tying their district's Portrait durable skills to their experiences. For instance, a group of high school students attending a Teen Eco Summit were inspired to positively impact the school community and environment when they took the initiative, applied for a grant, managed donations, and ultimately built a pollinator garden at the district's middle school in collaboration with the environmental studies class. Their instructor offered that while they displayed many durable skills during this project, empathy rose to the top.

After encouraging more than 70 students to join her in astronomy club events, a Granville senior made an alumna's idea of a community Planet Trail a reality by working with officials in the district and community. By creating a "learning journey" of the solar system along a local bike path to a community park, this self-directed senior has collaborated on every facet including working with her AP Physics classmates to design display plaques positioned along the trail to educate local adventurers.

## Authentic Learning

At Howard-Suamico School District (Wisconsin), the district is currently in the process of formulating a strategy to cultivate deeper workforce readiness that resonates with the Graduate Profile. They aspire to intentionally educate their students about high-demand careers. They have also been crafting essential elements to immerse their students in authentic, real-world work settings where they can apply and hone their Graduate Profile skills. These elements include youth internships, career exposure events, Summer CTE Camps, and field-testing talent planning assessments and processes.

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*“The implementation of the Graduate Profile has fundamentally reshaped instructional practices. Guided by this foundation, educators have delved deeper into enhancing student learning through the integration of authentic learning. This commitment to authenticity, propelled by the Graduate Profile, breaks free from tradition, infusing aspects of instruction with practical applications of each characteristic.”*

**—Amanda Waldo | Director of Teaching and Learning , Howard-Suamico School District (Wisconsin)**

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# Portrait to Practice is...

## Self-Reflection & Evaluation Alignment

*“Our students use our Portrait of a Graduate self-reflection tools to self-monitor growth in each of our six competencies. All of our unit maps and teacher evaluation tools are aligned with our Portrait of a Graduate.”*

—**Melissa Creech** | Executive Director of Teaching & Learning, Glenbard Township D87 (Illinois)

## Deeper Learning & Collaboration

*“We can see evidence of deeper learning and heightened community engagement. I love seeing the collaboration and ‘work to the finish’ approach our students are applying in the classroom. There is work to do, but the impact in instruction is evident as we showcased the competencies this spring in a district-wide celebration.”*

—**Patty Truex** | Board of Education Member, Circleville City Schools (Ohio)

## Student-Engaged Assessment

*“Central to this transformative journey is our student-engaged assessment process. Empowered by the Graduate Profile, assessment for educators becomes more than just a measure of performance; it becomes a dynamic process of growth and reflection. Educators play a pivotal role in facilitating ongoing, meaningful feedback loops, nurturing continuous development in students. Meanwhile, students themselves are empowered to engage in reflective practices, goal-setting, self-assessment, and planning for their own growth and success.”*

—**Amanda Waldo** | Director of Teaching & Learning, Howard-Suamico School District (Wisconsin)

## A Common Focus, but a Work in Progress

*“It has given us a ‘North Star’ on which to focus activities generally. This has been important for us in establishing common language across multiple elementary and middle school buildings. We are still working on this. Specifically, we are attempting to figure out how to measure/assess how students absorb and manifest the competencies defined in our Portrait.”*

—**Mark Blanchard, Ed.D.** | Superintendent, Cumberland Valley School District (Pennsylvania)

## SECTION 4

# Shifting Landscapes



*“Our Portrait allows us to communicate our commitment to the community regarding what our graduates will be able to do, know, and understand. Our workforce demands key skills that can be found in our Portrait. It is helping us embrace skill development, not just content acquisition. Our Portrait will guide our professional practice and our strategic improvement efforts for many years to come.”*

**—John Malloy, Ed.D. | Superintendent, San Ramon Valley Unified School District (California)**

## A COMPLEX, CHANGING WORLD

The world is a rapidly changing landscape in PreK-12 education systems, in the workforce, and in the way our society thinks about what it means to achieve the American dream. There are big issues facing all institutions. How are we responding in education to ensure that every student is well-prepared and future-ready? It is important to understand the shifting landscapes to respond effectively.

#1

DEVELOPING PRACTICAL SKILLS IS NOW SEEN AS THE TOP PRIORITY FOR EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES ACCORDING TO A RECENT REPORT FROM POPULACE.

# Scaling Future-Ready, Deeper Learning for Every Student



## Q&A with Fresno Unified School District's Misty Her

The opportunity of future-ready, deeper learning is not just for some students—it should be the standard for every student. Through the Urban District Cohort, Battelle for Kids brings together educators leading urban school systems to fuel the acceleration of deeper learning outcomes for every student, everywhere. There are unique challenges, of course, in developing and scaling the Portrait of a Graduate in large, complex school systems.

For Fresno Unified, the third largest school district in California serving 74,000 students, their involvement in the Urban District Cohort has helped prepare for the work ahead as they get ready to engage their community in the design of their Portrait.

Bob Nelson, Ed.D., who recently retired as the superintendent of the district and still serves as an advisor, laid the groundwork for the district's Portrait. Now, Misty Her, who began her stint as interim superintendent in May 2024, will guide the district through the Portrait process. She served as the deputy superintendent since 2021 and has been heavily involved in the Urban District Cohort experience.

**Q | As Fresno Unified begins its Portrait of a Graduate process, what are the most significant challenges you anticipate in transforming education within such a diverse and complex urban district?**

**A |** In such a big and complex system, trying to get everyone to understand, own, and shift the mindset to how we are preparing our students for a future we can't even predict yet has been difficult. This involves many stakeholders, and people cannot feel like something is being done to them. We must be intentional in conveying the “why” to this being critical to the future of our district and city. I am not sure our staff realizes that what we design today must be sustained and be able to evolve to meet the times our students will be heading into. Significant challenges are not limited to the following:

- Change in mindset. There is a lot we can learn from our students and what they bring to their own learning. I am not sure our adults believe that our students can teach us in designing learning and specific skills that can prepare them for 21st century careers.
- Ensuring all stakeholders are involved in a very intentional way. This process cannot be rushed or haphazardly done. Each session will need to be tailored to the specific stakeholder groups.
- Understanding what are 21st century skills and what must we do to innovate, create, and engage students in ways that we have not done before.
- Mapping out a clear communication plan. We all must be on the same page with our messaging.

# Scaling Future-Ready, Deeper Learning for Every Student

- Q | How do you plan to prioritize and navigate these challenges to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students during this initiative?**
- A |** The Portrait work must be a priority as it will become our North Star. This will take precedence as everything else that comes with our strategic plan will be aligned to the Portrait. As we work through the transition of a new superintendent this work becomes even more critical as it will be the direction our district needs to go.
- Q | Being a part of Battelle for Kids' EdLeader21 Network and Urban District Cohort has provided insights into necessary shifts for sustaining the Portrait of a Graduate work (System, Leader, Educator). Could you share some key lessons learned from this experience and how they will inform your district's strategic direction moving forward?**
- A |** A good lesson for us is that someone must champion this work. The first year we did it we were in a learning phase and too many hands got into it so we couldn't move the work. The second year we assigned a lead over the work, but it was off the side of someone's desk. The person leading this work must have full authority to make decisions and move work.
- Moving forward we are going to designate a champion. This person will convene the cross functional team, lead the team, map out the work, direct the communication, and work directly with the Battelle for Kids team to ensure alignment. The person will have the authority to speak for the superintendent and have the superintendent's voice when making decisions.
- Q | With the evolving landscape of both education and the workforce, how is Fresno Unified aligning its educational strategies with future workforce demands to better prepare students?**
- A |** We have to redefine, predict, and study what is the future for our students and realign strategies to meet the demands of the work world. We are working with industry partners, going into the use of AI and how it can help improve teaching and learning. We must keep up with the pace and even work to exceed it.
- Q | Why is it crucial to involve a broad spectrum of community members in the Portrait of a Graduate process, and how do you plan to engage these diverse voices?**
- A |** There is such a great opportunity in engaging diversity of voices, and not to just engage but to have them actively participate, and design with us what skill sets are needed for the future. To have a strong Portrait that reflects what we need for the future we must engage not just our local community but state and national experts. This is the only way to ensure we develop a Portrait that is sustainable and can evolve over time.

# The State of PreK-12 Education

It goes without saying that the challenges are abundant in the current educational landscape, including chronic absenteeism, teacher shortages, staff retention, academic recovery, and many more.

## MAJOR ISSUES FACING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

### Chronic Absenteeism

**28%**

EARLY DATA FROM THE 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR SHOWED A MINOR IMPROVEMENT FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR'S 30% ABSENTEEISM RATE, BUT IT REMAINS WELL ABOVE PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS OF 16%.

### Teacher & Leader Pipelines

**9 IN 10**

THE NUMBER OF EDUCATORS WHO EXPERIENCE BURNOUT.

### Artificial Intelligence

**72%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO SAY THEY WOULD LIKE TO GET SOME HELP FROM ADULTS IN LEARNING HOW TO USE DIFFERENT AI TOOLS.

### Student Engagement

**81%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS WHO SAY AN EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING HAS A POSITIVE EFFECT ON ENGAGEMENT IN THEIR CLASSROOMS.

### Mental Health & Wellness

**16%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO ARE CONFIDENT ABOUT THEIR SCHOOL'S ABILITY TO SUPPORT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

*Sources: EdWeek Research Center, Hanover Research, U.S. Department of Education, Hart Research*

# The State of the Workforce

In an era where the United States faces significant labor shortages and a mismatch between education outcomes and workforce needs, leaders across education, the workforce, and government must address the disconnect between K-12 education and the evolving demands of the job market.

## MAJOR ISSUES FACING THE WORKFORCE

### Labor Shortages

**7** OUT OF **10**

THERE ARE ONLY 7 JOB APPLICANTS FOR EVERY 10 AVAILABLE POSITIONS.

### Reskilling Needs

**44%**

OF WORKERS' CORE SKILLS ARE EXPECTED TO CHANGE IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS.

### Skills Mismatch

**60%**

OF EMPLOYERS COMPLAIN OF LACK OF PREPARATION, EVEN FOR ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS.

### Underemployment

**52%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO FACE UNDEREMPLOYMENT UPON GRADUATION.

### Connecting Workers with New Opportunities

**1** IN **16**

WORKERS MAY HAVE TO SWITCH OCCUPATIONS BY 2030.

Sources: McKinsey & Co., Bureau of Labor Statistics, World Economic Forum, National Center for Educational Statistics, Inside Higher Education

# The State of the American Dream

Recently, research by Gradient and YouGov was analyzed and released in a special report from Populace called “Misunderstanding the American Dream,” published in 2023. The report highlights two indexes: The Success Index and the Purpose of Education Index.

## The Success Index

*“The most important insight from this report is that Americans are profoundly wrong about how other Americans define success and the American Dream...There is not a single demographic group in the country that has an accurate view of how most Americans define a successful life and the American Dream.”*

—From the 2023 Populace Report “Misunderstanding the American Dream”

## Key Findings:

### Success is about a meaningful life, not getting rich.

- Half of the top 10 priorities for Americans relate to a meaningful life.
- Priorities include positive impact on others, enjoying work, being good company, having life purpose, and community involvement.
- Wealth ranks low in priorities, falling in the bottom third.

### The American Dream is personal, not financial.

- Most Americans view the American Dream as personal success in meaningful areas.
- However, they perceive others to primarily define it in economic terms.

### Americans choose character over status.

- Character traits are valued significantly more than status indicators.
- All character-related attributes outscore status-related ones in defining success.

### College diplomas are devalued.

- College degrees are seen as less relevant to defining success.
- Both bachelor’s and postgraduate degrees rank in the bottom 10 priorities for a successful life.



# The State of the American Dream

Recently, research by Gradient and YouGov was analyzed and released in a special report from Populace called “Misunderstanding the American Dream,” published in 2023. The report highlights two indexes: The Success Index and the Purpose of Education Index.

## The Purpose of Education Index

*“The Purpose of Education Index represents the first of its kind private opinion study of the American people’s priorities for the future of education in America...In revealing what the American public wants most — and least — from K-12 education today and identifying where the current system is doing well and where it is falling short, the Index offers unique insights that are consequential for anyone interested in the future of the education system in America.”*

—From the 2023 Populace Report “Misunderstanding the American Dream”

## Key Findings:

### College should no longer be the end goal of K-12 education.

- Before COVID, college preparation ranked 10th as a priority.
- Post-COVID, the emphasis on college enrollment has significantly declined.

### Practical skills and outcomes should be the end goal.

- Practical skills development is now the top priority for educational outcomes.
- Respondents favor practical, tangible skills over lofty ideals and short-term goals.

### Individualized education is the future, one-size-fits-all is the past.

- Standardized tests and uniform educational strategies are becoming less favored.
- Tailored education that meets individual needs is increasingly prioritized.

### Education priorities vary immensely by race.

- Critical thinking and practical skills are common priorities across racial groups.
- However, significant differences exist in priorities among different racial groups, underscoring the inadequacies of a uniform educational approach.

# Insights from Portrait of a Graduate Districts

We asked education leaders from across the nation what the impact of the Portrait of a Graduate has been.

## Impact on District & Community

**54%**  
HIGH IMPACT

**15%**  
MODERATE IMPACT

**12%**  
LOW IMPACT

**12%**  
TOO EARLY TO TELL

## Impact on Student Learning Experiences

**35%**  
HIGH IMPACT

**30%**  
MODERATE IMPACT

**17%**  
LOW IMPACT

**17%**  
TOO EARLY TO TELL

## Impact on Instructional Practices

**12%**  
HIGH IMPACT

**48%**  
MODERATE IMPACT

**20%**  
LOW IMPACT

**20%**  
TOO EARLY TO TELL

*“We’ve made incredible strides in the classroom and now are working to scale the improvement across the district. We’ve observed that teachers are taking more calculated risks to try different instructional delivery models. Learning experiences are more authentic and learners are more engaged and excited about their education!”*

—**Kim Halley, Ed.D.** | Superintendent, Circleville City Schools (Ohio)

## SECTION 5

# What's Next?



*“The Portrait has helped develop connections with our business partners and parents on common language and desires for skills necessary to the success of our students. In addition, it has focused our learning towards incorporating those skill sets embedded into experiences offered students. It is the bridge from educational setting to the workforce. We see the partnership benefitting both of us—the district and business and industry.”*

**—Wendy Nance, Ed.D. | Associate Superintendent,  
Chandler Unified School District (Arizona)**

## ENSURING TODAY'S STUDENTS ARE FUTURE-READY

According to America Succeeds, 85% of job success is attributed to highly developed durable skills. These skills are critical in the modern workforce and play a pivotal role in both personal and professional development. The Portrait has always placed value in these (often referred to as soft skills or competencies) but how are these durable skills being brought to life inside of school districts? This is just one of the critical questions educators face in a shifting landscape as we consider what comes next for the Portrait of a Graduate and education transformation.

# 70%

THE PERCENTAGE OF JOB POSTINGS THAT NOW REQUIRE DURABLE SKILLS.

*Source: America Succeeds, 2024*

# Portrait of a Graduate: Envisioning a Future Landscape



**Insights from David R. Schuler, Ph.D., Executive Director,  
AASA, The School Superintendents Association**

*“It’s our privilege and responsibility as educational leaders to prepare our students for a future they cannot yet imagine – for careers that don’t yet exist, built on technology that has not yet been developed.*

*And while we cannot yet paint the most detailed picture of that future landscape, we have a very good idea of the qualities, frameworks and mindsets we will need to cultivate, build, and embrace to ensure that picture is bright.*

*Through collaboration with teachers, staff, students, parents, business leaders, and community members, the Portrait of a Graduate can act as a catalyst for education transformation by fostering a shared sense of ownership and commitment to educational excellence beyond standardized test scores. The leadership emphasis on adaptability, access, and equity requires a renewed commitment to learning, re-learning, and even unlearning at every opportunity. These ingredients are essential for not just envisioning, but actively driving, the future of education and the workforce as district leaders.*

*When we cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and resilience, our students leave high school equipped to thrive in an increasingly complex global society. And when we allow students to co-author their learning journey, we set them—and all of us—up for future success.”*

# Insights from Portrait of a Graduate Districts

There are hundreds of school districts nationwide who have engaged in the meaningful work of the Portrait of a Graduate. Not only in launching their collective, unifying visions, but also the deep work of implementing and bringing the Portrait's durable skills to life in classrooms and across the system.

We posed the question to education leaders from around the nation to tell us what they believed the future of the Portrait of a Graduate should be focused on moving forward.

## What will be the most important work for the Portrait of a Graduate in the next decade?

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| • <b>Adopting a deeper learning framework</b>                        | <b>28%</b> |
| • <b>Aligning human capital and people systems with the Portrait</b> | <b>15%</b> |
| • <b>Professional development in deeper learning pedagogy</b>        | <b>13%</b> |
| • <b>Constructing inquiry-based transfer tasks</b>                   | <b>10%</b> |
| • <b>Community engagement</b>  | <b>8%</b>  |
| • <b>Creating valid and reliable measurements</b>                    | <b>8%</b>  |
| • <b>Fostering career-connected learning environments</b>            | <b>8%</b>  |
| • <b>Workforce and education alignment</b>                           | <b>5%</b>  |
| • <b>Other</b>   | <b>5%</b>  |

*"We are focusing our professional development and federal program applications to align with our Portrait. We are looking forward to partnering with the community as we work to align what we do as a district with the needs of our community and our Portrait."*

**—Kerry Parker, Ed.D. | Assistant Superintendent, Lovington Municipal School District (New Mexico)**

*"We finished the Portrait of a Graduate and then went right into strategic planning. I expect that in the next couple of years, we will see significant implementation. For us, it will be the lever that we can use to continue our shift to deeper learning and the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment."*

**—Bill Olsen | Superintendent, Rutland City School District (Vermont)**



# Improving Pathways from Education to the Workforce

What is a durable skill? Simply put, they are the skills, mindsets, and dispositions necessary for students to navigate a complex and rapidly changing world. Durable skills are portable and transferable across careers, industries, and any future pathway a graduate chooses. And it's more critical than ever as the world of work is shifting rapidly.

## Demanding Durable Skills

**91%**

OF MANAGEMENT JOBS

**86%**

OF BUSINESS OPERATIONS JOBS

**81%**

OF ENGINEERING JOBS

## Employers Seek Durable Skills

**4x**

MORE FREQUENTLY THAN THE TOP 5 TECHNICAL OR HARD SKILLS.

*Source: America Succeeds, 2024*



## Insights from Tim Taylor, Co-Founder & President, America Succeeds

*“We are optimistic about the widespread inclusion of Durable Skills within Portraits of a Graduate, as it signifies a collective commitment among influential stakeholders to pursue a unified vision and goal.*

*We encourage all Portrait of a Graduate stakeholders to adopt thoughtful and innovative practices that align the investments of people, time, and money with the desired outcomes in the Portraits. To produce graduates that look like the Portraits, we must be intentional about the ways we weave Durable Skills development into existing curricular practices. Durable Skills are not designed to be taught as stand-alone classes; the best models for developing these skills embed them into curriculum in math, science, English, and social studies courses.*

*Ultimately, transforming classroom experiences will be essential to accomplish the radically different outcomes outlined in these Portraits.”*

# North Carolina Portrait of a Graduate Aligns Education with the Workforce

## A Case Study in What Happens When K-12 Education, Business & Industry, and Higher Education Convene

Durable skills are in demand for jobs across the workforce, regardless of educational attainment level, industry sector, or geography. A real-world example of education and workforce alignment in action comes from the work done in North Carolina over the last several years.

With the support of Battelle for Kids and the help of 1,200 North Carolinians across the state, this grassroots-informed statewide Portrait launched in October 2022 as a North Star for the state's students and their future workforce success. A key part of its success came during the design process when post-secondary partners, workforce boards, the state's Chamber of Commerce, as well as business and industry were all engaged in the process.



### Insights from North Carolina State Superintendent Catherine Truitt

*“All K-12 learning is in service to postsecondary planning, and I want every North Carolina student to leave the public school system prepared to enter the workforce, join the military, or pursue higher education. In order to do this, we know that durable skills need to be embedded in classroom curricula so that students can hone these skills every day.”*

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*“You can be the most knowledgeable person in the room, but if you don't have the ability to collaborate and communicate with others, adapt to challenging situations and think critically about the information presented to you, you're not going to be able to excel in the 21st century workforce.”*

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*Our Portrait of a Graduate team understands these needs and is finalizing their first set of performance tasks, which will be shared with school and district leaders this summer so they can start appearing in classrooms this fall. What is so exciting about these performance tasks is that they were created by teachers for teachers! They are student-tested, standards-aligned, and ready to be used across the state.*

*My hope is that educators will use this initial set of performance tasks as inspiration for incorporating durable skills into their existing lesson plans. Infusing hands-on learning and career exposure into everyday lessons is going to increase student engagement and show them the real-world relevance of their education.”*



# The Future of the Portrait is...

## A Guide to Workforce Development, Customized Experiences

*“As we look to the future, workforce development and innovative programs that are Portrait-inspired become paramount. Our focus remains leveraging the Portrait so that we can provide a customized educational experience for each child.”*

—Patrick Ward, Ph.D. | Superintendent, Willoughby-Eastlake School District (Ohio)

## A Move to Everyday Practice

*“Currently, there remains more to be done to translate the vision of the Portrait of a Graduate to everyday practice.”*

—George Steinhoff, Ed.D. | Superintendent, Penn-Delco School District (Pennsylvania)

## A Connection to Hope and Belonging

*“The Portrait of a Graduate should continue to evolve as we embrace a future that is changing rapidly. Reflecting on the skills and competencies in each district’s Portrait will be necessary along the way, but the connection between Portrait skills and content, to produce deeper learning should continue to be the focused work of districts. The Portrait has a throughline that connects to the science of hope and belonging which needs to be intentionally connected and explored.”*

—Danielle Prohaska, Ed.D. | Superintendent, Mechanicsburg Exempted Village Schools (Ohio)

## A Framework of Best Practice

*“It would be ideal if the Portrait of a Graduate developed into a framework of practices of highly successful school districts, something that any school could use to align programs, communication, support systems, curriculum, assessments, instruction, best practices.”*

— Kelly Williams, Ed.D. | Executive Director of Teaching & Learning, Oak Ridge Schools (Tennessee)

## A Replacement/Enhancement to Standardized Assessments

*“It should be used to represent what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are essential for all students to attain a base level of proficiency to be successful in pursuing their goals in life. It should replace/enhance the use of standardized assessments when looking at graduation requirements.”*

—Brian Troop, Ed.D. | Superintendent, Ephrata Area Schools (Pennsylvania)

# Insights from the Field



**Beth Silveira**  
Senior Director,  
Battelle for Kids

*Beth Silveira serves as a senior director at Battelle for Kids and has facilitated dozens of Portrait engagements in communities throughout the nation since 2022. Here, she shares her insights on the impact of the Portrait of a Graduate.*

## On Education & Workforce Alignment...

Setting a clear vision marks the beginning of transformative work in education. It establishes a foundation for fostering a sense of ownership among all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, students, and parents—regarding the necessary shifts in learning environments. This clarity offers an entry point for members of the wider community, including local businesses and higher education institutions, to understand their place within the educational ecosystem. Often, this sparks meaningful discussions about their roles and contributions to the collective efforts of the school district.

## On Student Voice & Agency...

Incorporating student voice in the development of their Portrait of a Graduate is crucial. In districts where additional student sessions are possible, it not only empowers those participating by building their agency but also demonstrates to other students the impact of their voice. While having students on the design team is beneficial, hosting separate sessions can engage even more students. This could serve as a valuable opportunity for districts to establish student think tanks as part of the Portrait implementation process.

## On Educator Empowerment...

Many educators are naturally inclined to cultivate the durable skills featured in their Portrait, though they often feel their efforts go unrecognized or are even critiqued. The Portrait serves as a validation of these instincts, affirming that educators should indeed focus on intentionally developing these skills in their students. While most educators aspire to create classroom experiences that captivate both their students and themselves, a lack of support can hinder these efforts. The introduction of the Portrait signifies a needed change in perspective, with its implementation demonstrating a tangible commitment to this vision. For such a transformation to take root, leaders must recognize the importance of fostering agency not just among students but among educators as well. This entails using the Portrait as a blueprint for student development and a guide for the professional growth and support of educators.

## SECTION 6

# Join Our Movement

## ACCELERATE THIS WORK

At Battelle for Kids, the work we do in concert with school districts and state agencies across the country is much more than just developing a vision. It can best be described as a movement. The work of the Portrait is a collective endeavor that brings together educators, students, business leaders, and community members to prepare students not just academically, but also with the durable skills demanded by the modern world. This movement focuses on being visionary and aspirational, collaborative and inclusive, action-oriented, scalable and adaptable, and accelerated and sustained by a network, a community of like-minded educators.



*“We just completed our Portrait of a Graduate, and we will roll it out in August. As we have worked as a team on this, it has drawn us closer to each other. Meaningful, deep, and rich conversations have taken place. There is excitement in the air! For our district, it will be our North Star and keep us focused, which in turn creates energy instead of draining it from our staff.”*

—**Pamela Quiñones** | Superintendent, Lovington Municipal School District (New Mexico)

# 17

THE NUMBER OF STATES WHO HAVE ALREADY ADOPTED A STATEWIDE PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE (ALSO KNOWN AS A GRADUATE PROFILE). THIS NUMBER IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE TO GROW.

*Source: Education Week, 2023*

# Join the Portrait of a Graduate Movement



## Insights from Mike Duncan, Ed.D., President & CEO, Battelle for Kids

At Battelle for Kids, along with our national network EdLeader21, we have worked to create a movement around an expanded vision of student success using the Portrait of a Graduate. Over the past decade, we have had the distinct honor of supporting the creation and implementation of collective visions for communities nationwide. School districts from coast to coast have embraced this work to identify the durable skills their students need for success in this rapidly changing, complex world.

As we've showcased in this report, the landscape of both education and the world of work continue to shift at a faster pace. We, too, must be quicker in responding to these shifts to create an educational system that leaves the past behind and meets the future. The movement needs to change and accelerate in response to these demands.

Becoming part of the Portrait of a Graduate movement is a call to engage deeply with the vision of reimagining education. It is an invitation to be at the forefront of a cultural shift that values and cultivates the full potential of every student.



THE FUTURE OF

## THE PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE

Before Dr. Duncan joined Battelle for Kids as the president and CEO, he was a longtime member of the EdLeader21 Network and led his Georgia district, Pike County Schools, in this important Portrait work. Watch the video series he helped produce showcasing how his former district puts the Portrait to practice for every student.



# Key Action Steps

How can you take action and engage with Battelle for Kids in the Portrait of a Graduate movement? Here are three key steps you can take today:

## 1. Remove Barriers

- **Take Action:** Identify and dismantle systemic, pedagogical, and institutional barriers that hinder student-centered learning and the implementation of the Portrait of a Graduate. This involves auditing policies, practices, and mindsets that limit educational innovation and equity.
- **Strategic Engagement:** Foster a culture of openness and flexibility that encourages experimentation, adaptation, and the adoption of practices that support every student's journey to success.

## 2. Build Community and Find Community

- **Take Action:** Actively seek out and engage with communities of practice that are committed to the principles of the Portrait of a Graduate and movement. This includes joining networks, participating in professional learning, and attending events focused on educational transformation.
- **Strategic Engagement:** Contribute to building a vibrant, supportive community by sharing expertise, resources, and support. Collaboration and collective wisdom are invaluable in navigating the complexities of this work.

## 3. Share Your Stories of Student Success

- **Take Action:** Amplify the impact of the Portrait of a Graduate by sharing compelling narratives of student success. These stories not only serve as inspiration but also as tangible evidence of what is possible when education is reimagined around student-centered principles.
- **Strategic Engagement:** Utilize various platforms—social media, your website, conferences, and publications—to share these success stories. Highlight the innovative practices, strategies, and outcomes that exemplify the transformative potential of the Portrait of a Graduate.

# Growing the Movement

## A COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOR

### Be Part of This Movement

Engaging with the Portrait of a Graduate movement means committing to ongoing involvement and contribution. It's about being an active participant in a community dedicated to educational excellence and equity.

### Stay Involved and Be Part of Our Collective Work

Continued engagement ensures that the movement grows, evolves, and remains responsive to the changing landscape of education. It's a commitment to shared learning, support, and advocacy.

### Help Us Chart the Path for the Future

Your insights, experiences, and contributions are crucial in shaping the ongoing development and refinement of the Portrait of a Graduate. This is an open invitation to influence the direction and impact of this transformative initiative.



Ready to join the movement alongside Battelle for Kids as we work to shape the future of the Portrait of the Graduate and transform education?

Visit [bfk.me/movement](https://bfk.me/movement) to learn more about what we have planned, get access to additional resources, share your school district's Portrait stories, and more.

# The Path Forward

This report is just the start of Battelle for Kids' continued commitment to not only supporting school districts and state agencies in engaging their communities to design a shared, unifying vision, but also in leading the way to the next stage of this critical work.

Over the next year, Battelle for Kids will engage in several ways as we work to create a path forward for the future of the Portrait of a Graduate.

## Futurecast Newsletter

Battelle for Kids will debut a new subscriber-based email newsletter to accompany this work. Futurecast will provide on going updates on the topics raised within this report and also provide information on Futurecast webinars, events, white papers, research, and upcoming reports. We will continue to share stories of impact and elevate the importance of durable skills, rigorous academic content, and more.

## Futurecast Webinar Series

Over the course of the next year, Battelle for Kids will host several live and on-demand webinars focused on many of the critical issues mentioned in this report. Watch for details about these webinars soon and the special guests who will join us. Topics will include a deeper dive into durable skills, career-connected learning, and more.

## Futurecast Special Report on Portrait to Practice

In our next special report, Battelle for Kids will focus on Portrait to Practice, the heart of bringing the Portrait of a Graduate visions to life. This report will offer practical ways to accelerate systems transformation and will highlight best practices from across the nation.

Visit [bfk.me/future](https://bfk.me/future) to stay connected.

## Let Us Help



**Book a Speaker**  
[bfk.me/speaker](https://bfk.me/speaker)



**Explore Portrait of a Graduate**  
[bfk.me/portrait](https://bfk.me/portrait)



**Explore Portrait to Practice**  
[bfk.me/p2p](https://bfk.me/p2p)



**Engage Your Community**  
[bfk.me/futurescolab](https://bfk.me/futurescolab)

# About Battelle for Kids

Battelle for Kids (BFK) is a national, not-for-profit organization with the mission of supporting educational leaders to realize the power and promise of future-ready learning for every student.

Supported by an initial grant from Battelle Memorial Institute, BFK was established in 2001 by the Ohio Business Roundtable to advance student academic achievement and growth in Ohio. In 2005, BFK became an independent, national not-for-profit organization focused on developing innovative services and solutions to empower and support educators and school districts to reach every learner.

We are honored to serve education systems, state departments of education, and other partners through our extensive history of developing innovative, responsive services, solutions, and products.

## OUR PROVEN PROCESS



## Battelle for Kids | Core Values

**1**

**Be Relational**

**2**

**Be Reliable**

**3**

**Be Innovative**

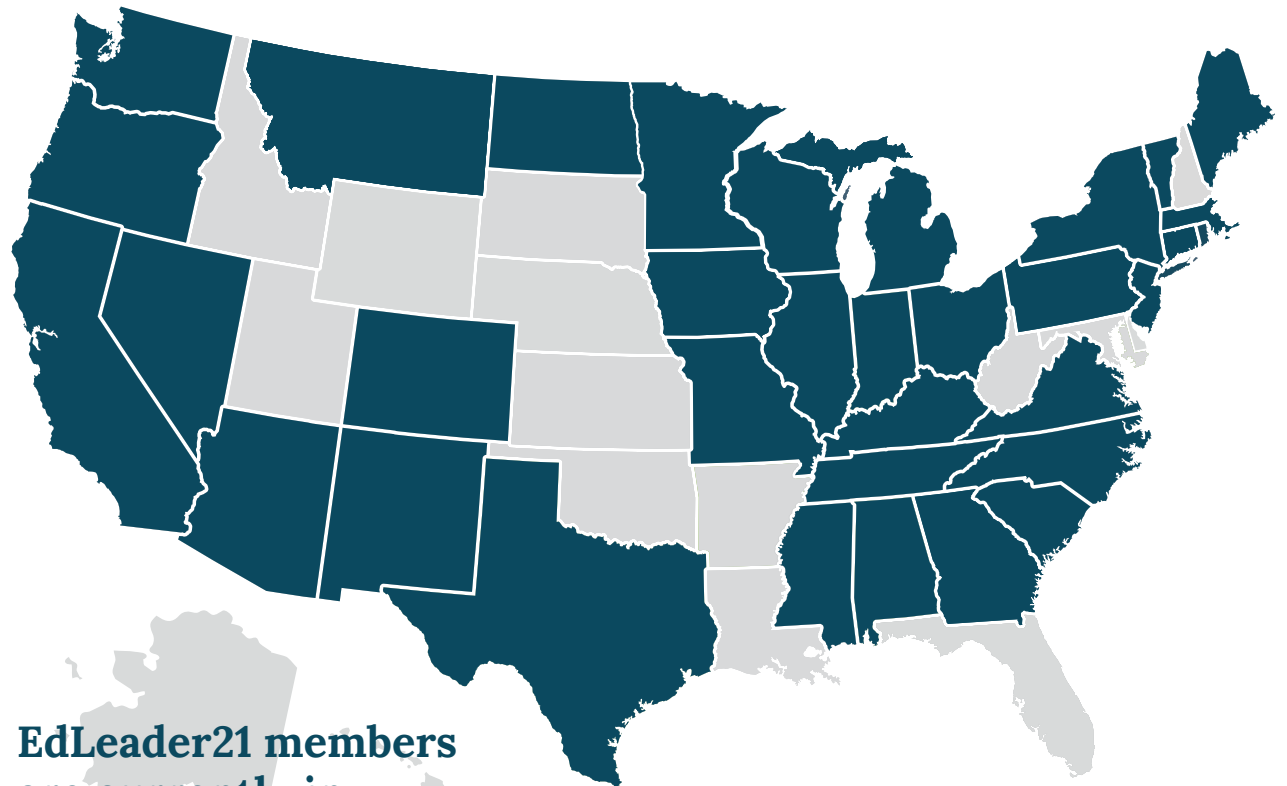


# About EdLeader21 Network

EdLeader21 Network members are united by a common mission – a movement – to equip our students with the durable skills, knowledge, and mindsets they need to thrive in an ever-evolving world. This means not just preparing them for college or a career, but empowering them to become adaptable, resilient, and compassionate individuals who can navigate life’s challenges with confidence.

## THE PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE NETWORK

This is the network dedicated to Portrait of a Graduate. If your district is exploring the idea, preparing for launch, or aiming to maintain transformative progress, our community stands as the sole professional group dedicated to the conception, initiation, and realization of these shared, inspirational community visions.



EdLeader21 members are currently in

MORE THAN **30** STATES!

# BattelleforKids



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