

A wide-angle photograph of a grand, ornate legislative chamber. The room features a high, vaulted ceiling with intricate murals and a large, central chandelier. The seating is arranged in a semi-circle, with desks and blue chairs. The walls are decorated with classical architectural elements like columns and arches.

# The iNACOL State Policy Frameworks 2015:

## 5 Critical Issues to Transform K–12 Education

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The mission of the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to catalyze the transformation of K-12 education policy and practice to design powerful, personalized, learner-centered experiences through competency-based, online and blended learning. iNACOL is a non-profit organization focused on research; developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access; developing quality standards for emerging learning models using online, blended, and competency-based education; and supporting the ongoing professional development of classroom, school, district and state leaders for new learning models. Learn more at [www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org).



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### Introduction

Over the last decade, the American education system has seen unprecedented transformation of teaching and learning as educators have grasped the power of new learning models to close achievement gaps and extend access to high-quality learning opportunities. During this time, states have established online courses in subjects or modalities that were not otherwise available to students in their schools. A majority of states have embraced internationally benchmarked college and career ready standards<sup>1</sup> and have developed aligned systems of online assessments.<sup>2</sup> To date, forty-two states have adopted policies to enable competency education, allowing for proficiency-based diplomas, waiving seat time requirements, creating credit flexibility, creating innovation zones and pilots, or initiating a redesign of accountability and assessment policies.<sup>3</sup> The availability of adaptive digital tools that use data to improve student learning has exploded as technology and innovation advance.

The next few years hold great potential to continue the incredible progress we have achieved—with new learning models that allow personalization of instruction for each student and a shift towards competency education that will ensure teaching and learning are built on a foundation of true mastery. These advances have the potential to close achievement gaps, prepare more students for college and career, and reduce inequities in our education system.

However, this shift cannot be sustained without changes in state policy. Laws, rules, and regulations written in the analog era must be adapted to support new learning models. States must ensure that students have access to a wide range of choices across the learning continuum, that those choices are of high quality, and that the necessary supports and infrastructure—funding models, secure, aligned data systems, and broadband connectivity—are in place to enable highly personalized pathways.

This policy brief provides concrete, actionable recommendations for state policymakers. There are five key issues in the iNACOL State Policy Frameworks:

1. Create Competency-Based Education Systems
2. Improve Student Access and Equity
3. Ensure Quality with Standards and Performance Metrics
4. Modernize Educator and Leader Development
5. Build New Learning Models Infrastructure

We provide background and specific policy recommendations for each of these issues in the following pages.



This policy brief provides actionable recommendations for state policymakers on 5 key issues:

1. Create Competency-Based Education Systems
2. Improve Student Access and Equity
3. Ensure Quality with Standards and Performance Metrics
4. Modernize Educator and Leader Development
5. Build New Learning Models Infrastructure

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<sup>1</sup> According to [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org), forty-two states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia administered assessments in 2015 that were specifically aligned to the Common Core State Standards and developed by one of the state assessment consortia. (Achieve, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2014)

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Taken as a whole, the recommendations that follow present a framework for sustainable, systemic change. However, we present them with the understanding that each state starts from a different place, with its own unique context in its education system and its policy landscape.

### DEFINITIONS

**Blended learning** – A formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace, and at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home, and in which the modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.<sup>4</sup>

**Competency education** – An approach to teaching and learning in which (1) students advance upon demonstrated mastery; (2) competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students; (3) assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students; (4) students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs; and (5) learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.<sup>5</sup>

**New learning models** – Personalized learning using competency-based approaches and are supported by blended and online learning modalities and environments.<sup>6</sup>

**Online learning** – Education in which instruction is delivered primarily over the Internet.<sup>7</sup>

**Online school** – A formally constituted organization (public, private, state, charter, etc.) that offers full-time education delivered primarily over the Internet.<sup>8</sup> Online schools typically are responsible for ensuring their students take state assessments and are responsible for their students’ scores on those assessments. Many fully online schools are charter schools, although there are a growing number of fully online district schools.<sup>9</sup>

**Supplemental online programs** provide individual courses to students who are enrolled in a school separate from the online program. Some states refer to these as part-time programs.<sup>10</sup>



*Taken as a whole, the recommendations in this policy brief present a framework for sustainable, systemic change.*

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<sup>4</sup> Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Staker, H. (2013)

<sup>5</sup> Patrick, S. & Sturgis, C. (2013)

<sup>6</sup> iNACOL (October 2013)

<sup>7</sup> Watson, J. F., & Kalmon, S. (2005)

<sup>8</sup> iNACOL (October 2011)

<sup>9</sup> Watson, J., Murin, A., Vashaw, L., Gemin, B., and Rapp, C. (2013)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

## Issue #1: Create Competency-Based Systems of Education

**I Catalyze the transformation of the education system to personalized, competency-based learning.**

### BACKGROUND

Most schools and education systems are designed around seat time, or providing students with a minimum number of instructional hours. Seat time is the foundation of most education policies, from funding to credits to graduation requirements. Unfortunately, seat time does not ensure that students will develop the requisite knowledge and skills for success in college and careers. Thus, we need to redesign the foundations of our education system to be learner-centered and competency-based, so that students graduate prepared.

Our public education system needs to enable competency-based learning through an alignment of both policy and practice. Moving from a time-based system to a learner-centered system requires systemic transformation.

To date, forty-two states have some type of policy in place to provide flexibility for competency education models.<sup>11</sup> However, seat time waivers and limited flexibility provisions are not enough for schools to implement next-generation systems that support personalized learning and competency education. Policymakers should evaluate their state laws, rules, and regulations to uncover limiting time-based policies and provide flexibility to support high-quality new learning models through innovation zones and pilots.

To date, 42 states have some type of policy in place to provide flexibility for competency education models.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than simply applying for annual waivers of existing seat-time rules, schools need to define credits as competencies and have the flexibility to manage programs for blended learning, with personalized learning and anytime, everywhere mobility. By redefining credits as competencies rather than time-based units—and asking students to demonstrate mastery of the competencies—states will see students progress based on authentic proficiency and have the support to fill in gaps in their learning. Holding all students to high levels of rigor on academic standards is key. Finally, proficiency-based diplomas provide an important policy lever. They facilitate meaningful recognition of demonstrated knowledge, skills, dispositions, and abilities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allow flexibility for schools to base student progression on demonstrated mastery of competencies, rather than on seat time.
- Establish “innovation zones” to catalyze the development of new learning models; provide the flexibility to waive certain regulations and requirements to schools and systems that are ready to implement competency education.
- Fund pilot programs for schools and districts to implement high-quality, personalized, blended, and competency-based learning systems.
- Redefine Carnegie Units or credits as competencies aligned to state academic standards.
- Create a proficiency-based diploma.

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<sup>11</sup> Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (2014)

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- Establish a state task force on competency education that includes practitioners knowledgeable about competency education. The task force’s purpose would be to identify barriers to and opportunities for policy improvements and to align the full continuum of pre-K, K–12, higher education and workforce systems to competency-based learning.
- Rethink the state accountability system to motivate real-time improvement of student learning, not just to annually label schools.
- Redesign state systems of assessments to align with competency-based learning:
  - Measure individual student growth along personalized learning progressions.
  - Use multiple measures of learning, including performance-based assessments.
  - Include summative assessment data as a validator for student-centered accountability.
  - Allow students to take through-course and end-of-course assessments when ready.
- Examine strategies to align state data systems around systems-level supports for teaching and learning.

## Issue #2: Improve Student Access and Equity

**Ensure that each student has access to the continuum of student-centered blended and online learning opportunities.**

### BACKGROUND

Blended and online learning opportunities can leverage the talent of today’s best teachers with technologies that extend their reach and can personalize instruction at any time or place. Across the education system, licensed, effective teachers are developing skills in using digital content and platforms to provide highly differentiated instruction. Students in rural, urban, and underserved communities, who do not have access to courses, could take them from a licensed teacher online and might collaborate with students from across the state and with diverse backgrounds. Blended learning incorporates high-quality digital content and tools with the best of both worlds—traditional school locations and the flexibility of anywhere, anytime digital learning opportunities. Whether taking an individual course, enrolling in a full-time online school, or benefiting from blended learning in a brick-and-mortar school, students should have access to a continuum of high-quality services and programs that best fit their unique learning needs—from credit recovery, to college-level and career/technical education, to community-based learning opportunities.

Providing fair, equitable, and adequate funding ensures students have the opportunities and support systems they need to be successful. A recent iNACOL study found that the amount of per-pupil funding needed to enable high-quality teaching and learning in an online learning environment is between ninety-three and ninety-eight percent of the cost of providing the same excellence in traditional education on a *fully adequate* base cost.<sup>12</sup> Personnel costs in online learning are comparable to those in traditional environments; both administrative leadership and teacher leadership are required to run high-quality educational programs using blended and online learning. Equitable funding



***Providing fair, equitable, and adequate funding ensures students have the opportunities and support systems they need to be successful.***

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick, S. et al. (2015)

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does not necessarily mean equal funding, but the amount must be adequate to ensure that students of all abilities, needs, and backgrounds have the requisite support and resources to achieve success.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a course access program to provide public school students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers.<sup>13</sup>
- Provide equitable and adequate funding for a spectrum of new learning models with base funding amounts that are adequate to assure quality in each delivery method:
  - Blended learning should be funded at the same levels as brick-and-mortar settings.
  - Supplemental online courses should be funded at a level sufficient to cover the cost of the course curriculum and instruction.
  - Full-time online schools should be funded at a level sufficient to cover all operating costs, including teaching, learning, and student support services.
- Per-pupil funding formulas should be weighted to provide the resources necessary to support at-risk students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.
- Allow multiple authorizers to authorize, oversee, and evaluate multi-district, full-time public online schools (whether charter-, district-, or state-run), so that any student in the state has the opportunity to attend.
- Ensure that all digital, blended, and online learning is accessible to students with disabilities. Quality standards for course and school providers should ensure that any student can benefit, that content complies with Federal 508 accessibility requirements, that programs comply with student Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and that instruction incorporates the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

## Issue #3: Ensure Quality with Standards and Performance Metrics

**Ensure the system identifies and rewards quality providers, holding them accountable for results through transparent reporting of quality through appropriate student learning outcomes.**

### BACKGROUND

With the growth of new learning models comes the need to improve quality assurance systems across K-12 education to ensure that only high-quality, proven providers serve students. It is important to promote educational innovation while focusing on quality assurance by analyzing both the relationship between inputs of quality, such as reviewing courses and curricula for alignment with state standards, and the impact of programs on multiple outcome measures of student learning.

iNACOL has led the field in identifying quality standards for provider eligibility and appropriate outcomes-based performance metrics for transparency and accountability. One of the key challenges for the entire field of K-12 education in any delivery mode—traditional, blended or online learning—is the lack of independent, valid assessments spanning the entire K–12 curriculum. Outside of new assessments aligned

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<sup>13</sup> Worthen and Patrick (2014)



States should demand that all providers report the data they use to evaluate program outcomes and student success.

with state standards required for accountability, there are many untested subjects, grade levels and courses offered by online learning providers. Until appropriate independent, validated, third-party assessments are developed and adopted, true quality assurance will present a challenge.

States should demand that all providers report the data they use to evaluate program outcomes and student success. Given that blended and online learning modalities have unprecedented capabilities to collect data on teaching and learning, states should require transparent reporting on outcomes-based performance metrics.

States and authorizers should consider requiring each provider to have an approved quality assurance method to report on student learning outcomes and ask for entry proficiency level benchmarking and student learning growth on statewide valid metrics, at a minimum. Additionally, states and authorizers should require full-time online learning providers to report data on closing the achievement gap, success along learning progressions towards mastery of college and career ready competencies, and fidelity to student learning goals. States and authorizers requiring programs to transparently collect these metrics would assist the field in determining program quality based on multiple measures of data and in evaluating the inputs with relation to student learning outcomes.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require transparency and accountability for the quality of online learning providers, using outcomes-based student learning performance metrics for full-time and supplemental providers.<sup>14</sup>
- Shut down schools and discontinue course providers that persistently fail to achieve positive outcomes for students.
- Adopt an objective quality review process to ensure that online programs and courses offered in the state adhere to state academic standards and iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses, Online Teaching, and Online Programs.<sup>15</sup>
- Create a student performance-based funding model with the primary purposes of motivating programs to provide world-class instruction and to maximize student gains—not to drive cost savings. Performance incentives should reward attainment of competencies and student growth along a learning trajectory, based on objective, externally validated learning metrics.

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick, Wicks & Watson (2012)

<sup>15</sup> iNACOL (2011a), iNACOL (2011b), Pape & Wicks (2009)

## Issue #4: Modernize Educator and Leader Development

**States can catalyze educational innovation by building educator and leader capacity to create student-centered, personalized learning models.**

### BACKGROUND

Personalized, competency-based learning environments will require educators and school leaders to take on new roles and develop new skills. Unfortunately, the current systems of pre-service preparation, licensure, and professional development do not lay an adequate foundation for educators and leaders for these next generation learning models. States can accelerate innovation by modernizing educator and leader development. In order to do so, states need to revise laws and regulations that were created for an outdated, one-size-fits-all model of K-12 education.

Time- and subject-based teacher licensure, and “teacher of record” requirements create barriers for schools seeking to offer interdisciplinary, competency-based pathways, to use non-traditional personnel in instruction, such as community leaders and career professionals, or to better serve students who are ahead or behind academically.

To build capacity in the field, educators, administrators, and teacher leaders need ongoing, job-embedded professional development to transition to new models of learning, to create competency-based learning systems and leveraging blended and online learning to personalize instruction. It is critical to support teachers and leaders to develop skills for planning, managing, and leading evolving system requirements in new personalized, digital learning environments.



***Personalized, competency-based learning environments will require educators and school leaders to take on new roles and develop new skills.***

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support modernization of pre-service and in-service professional development for educators and leaders to implement personalized, competency-based, blended, and online learning environments.
- Create a pipeline of school and district leaders to catalyze the transformation of K-12 education systems to student-centered learning.
- Provide true teacher licensure reciprocity for online teaching.

## Issue #5: Build New Learning Models Infrastructure

**Provide adequate broadband telecommunications connectivity to support media-rich new learning models, with secure, aligned data systems and high-quality digital content that enable personalized learning and continuous improvement of learning and programs.**

### BACKGROUND

The shift towards highly personalized, mastery-based learning models will be enabled by blended and online learning pathways that will allow each student to customize learning trajectories toward college and career readiness. To drive this vision, we must narrow the “digital divide” and equip our schools with

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high-speed broadband connectivity that meets the demands of media-rich, adaptive online instructional content, adaptive assessment, and real-time data collection that supports personalized instruction accessible anytime, anywhere.

Next generation accountability will require robust data systems capable not only of personalizing teaching and learning but also of “rolling up” data on teaching and learning for accountability that reflects actual student competency.

Within the proper safeguards, data collection is key to personalized learning. It is critical to enact balanced policies that provide good governance practices to ensure proper protection and use of personal and personally identifiable student data, while at same time enabling new learning models and modalities to personalize learning and close achievement gaps. Policymakers should take care not to stifle innovation through prohibitive policies on student data, which can result in unintended consequences.

Finally, building systems and policies to ensure that high-quality Open Education Resources (OER) are widely available will provide a foundation of customizable content for personalizing learning and increase opportunities for educator collaboration and engagement.



***Within the proper safeguards, data collection is key to personalized learning.***

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish policies for the protection and good governance of student data privacy and avoid prohibitions on the collection and use of student data that can hamper personalized learning environments.
- Expand and improve state broadband connectivity to ensure opportunities for anytime, anywhere learning:
  - Examine contracting strategies and pooled purchasing agreements to support statewide enterprise telecommunications services with multiple categories to aid cost-effective contracting for schools and districts.
  - State contracts should allow eligibility for any K-12 education program to buy off of statewide enterprise contracts to maximize telecommunications investments with public dollars and E-Rate funds.
  - Explore state strategies to make free or discounted broadband connectivity available to economically disadvantaged students at home and in their communities for anytime, anywhere learning.
- Improve state data systems to collect standards-based, baseline, and longitudinal data to measure growth over time. This would improve accountability and better measure student proficiency, productivity and program effectiveness in real time.
- Ensure that publicly created learning materials for public education have an open license.<sup>16</sup>
- Include OER on approved state instructional materials lists and support the development and maintenance of openly licensed instructional materials, devices, or infrastructure needed to help implement online curriculum and assessments aligned with state standards.

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses>.

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### The iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy

The iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy leads the multi-stage evolution of policy necessary for the growth of effective personalized learning models toward the goals of quality, equity, access, closing the achievement gap, and promoting world-class learning. The Center provides lawmaker education and technical assistance in drafting transformational policy. It responds to requests for support from policy makers, develops the vision of the future of education, and builds knowledge on policies to support student-centered, competency-based, personalized learning.

For more information, including how the iNACOL State Policy Frameworks can be adapted for your state, contact the iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy staff via <http://www.inacol.org/>.

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