



Portrait of a Graduate: Wall Poster or Game Changer?

What is the meaning of a high school diploma? In the American school system, completion of the 12th grade is the most common final educational experience among the populace. Accordingly, the result of that experience – the preparedness of the graduate for adulthood, citizenship, economic and social life, and further learning – is of great importance to the well-being of the community and nation.

How do we determine whether a student is leaving the compulsory school system ready for the obligations and challenges of adulthood? Historically the measure was whether the teenager took and passed a collection of academic courses in core intellectual disciplines: math, literature, science, history. Over time lots of places added the passage of certain academic tests as proof that young people knew at least some basics in those core disciplines. Now, however, there is a growing realization that this formula is failing to produce the citizenry and workforce we need, and is shortchanging young people in cultivating the foundational skills, knowledge and habits that allow for individual self-actualization and community flourishing.

States and districts have increasingly developed a different set of criteria to determine what they see as the necessary attributes of a graduate of the primary and secondary school system apart from the ability to take and pass academic coursework. These so-called “portraits” or “profiles” of a graduate attempt a holistic look at the skills and competencies students need to master to thrive in work, postsecondary educational opportunities, community, and their personal lives.

The idea of the portrait of a graduate is to provide a well-rounded view of student success, which includes academic skills, social and emotional (or durable) skills and civic characteristics that students should master as they graduate high school. Ideally, they help guide school districts in how to undertake teaching and learning that develops the identified skills that students should have by high school graduation. Ultimately, a state’s portrait of a graduate is the vision that establishes the skills and aptitudes that they believe, based on a stakeholder input, graduates need to be successful as adults.

As conceived, portraits of a graduate align with and complement efforts to make education more relevant to students and make pathways to future success more personalized, instilling in students the social and emotional skills needed for their chosen path. For example, portraits of a graduate can be used to support competency-

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

and performance-based education that captures the full breadth of student skills, including social and emotional competencies. In addition, portraits of a graduate can be used effectively to measure students' career and college readiness and can be a meaningful indicator of such readiness in state accountability systems.

But does articulating a philosophy of what we expect from a high school graduate actually drive the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment that is necessary to fulfill and evaluate the achievement of those expectations?

If the portraits don't drive actual change in how we do school, they will be consigned to the dustbin of used poster art.

Where Are They Being Developed and Used?

At least 20 states have developed or are in the process of developing statewide portraits of a graduate. They are:

Arkansas, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming.

Additionally, 100s of districts around the country have developed their own local portraits of a graduate.

The trend has been captured by the AASA, the School Superintendents Association, which runs a [Portrait of a Graduate Academy](#) in partnership with the nonprofit Batelle for Kids. The Academy attempts to guide districts in coming up with their own visions of student success.

Importantly, this effort seems to transcend typical modern partisan politics. Both very blue and very red states have undertaken the effort. Having young people prepared to contribute meaningfully to society and the economy seems a fairly universal goal.

Elements of the Portrait of a Graduate

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a [state scan of Portraits of a Graduate](#) in February 2024. The most common characteristics outlined across state portraits were, in descending order of popularity:

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Critical thinking / problem-solving (18 states)

Social Awareness / being an active citizen (16)

Communication skills (15)

Self-management skills (12)

Academic and technical knowledge (11)

Collaboration / teamwork (11)

Responsible decision-making (7)

Digital literacy, technology tools (7)

Self-awareness (6)

Relationship / interpersonal skills (6)

Creativity, innovation (6)

Career exploration & development (6)

Financial literacy (6)

Lifelong learner, learner mindset (6)

Plainly each state values slightly different things in its portrait of a graduate. Interestingly, not all states view academic or technical knowledge as essential, preferring to focus on what might be called soft or durable skills broadly defined (like critical thinking, collaboration, self-management and communication).

Some state examples include:

- 1) In Kentucky, a successful student is an engaged citizen, critical thinker, effective communicator, empowered learner, creative contributor, and productive collaborator, according to [the state's portrait of a learner](#).
- 2) In South Carolina, successful students should be able to read critically, express ideas, investigate through inquiry, reason quantitatively, use sources, design solutions, learn independently, navigate conflict, lead teams, build networks, sustain wellness, and engage as a citizen, according to [the state's profile of graduate competencies](#).

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

- 3) In New York, [the proposed portrait](#), which the state's Board of Regents will vote on in an upcoming meeting, describes a successful graduate as someone who is a critical thinker, innovative problem solver, literate across content areas, culturally competent, social-emotionally competent, an effective communicator, and a global citizen.

Questions Raised by Portraits of a Graduate

Are the categories and descriptions in portraits of a graduate actually useful or do they reside at a level of generality that make them of dubious practical value?

How can states, districts and schools assess the characteristics contained in graduate portraits (particularly the soft or durable skills) and evaluate whether students are in fact leaving high school having achieved these competencies?

A recent (Jan. 2025) [paper](#) from the Center for Assessment by Chris Brandt, Carla Evans and Chris Domaleski, "Assessing 21st Century Competencies: Guiding Principles for States and Districts" evaluates the challenges of transforming assessment to support an education system that cultivates many of the characteristics outlined in graduate portraits. These characteristics are much better developed and assessed through performance-based assessments at the classroom and school level rather than traditional large scale standardized tests.

Attempts to Parlay Into Genuine Reform

The power and promise of portraits of a graduate can only be realized if states and districts develop and support efforts to sustain pedagogy, curriculum and assessment that lead to students developing the valued competencies. Stating what we want graduates to be able to do is nice; if it doesn't actually impact education the words ring hollow.

There is evidence that some jurisdictions are trying to align systems to further the goals of their portrait of a graduate.

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

For example, in Washington State in 2022, the state conducted six listening sessions on [alignment](#). Approximately 600 people participated in these sessions. In January 2023, the report was submitted to the legislature. Based on research and public engagement, the SBE made 10 recommendations to the legislature on how to align the state's graduation requirements with the Profile of a Graduate. These included:

1. Creating more flexibility in physical education and health to allow for mental health content, including SEL learning standards (that should also be embedded across all subject areas);
2. Re-focusing requirements on learning standards rather than on seat time to support mastery-based learning and interdisciplinary learning;
3. Improving the high school transcript to better support reporting on mastery-based and multidisciplinary learning;
- and 4. Expanding graduation pathway options to include a performance-based and work-related pathway (Drake, 2023).

In North Carolina, the state agency has released multiple resources to support the implementation of the Portrait in North Carolina's schools, such as the Portrait of a Graduate Playbook, Communications Toolkit, and additional tools like [Rubrics](#), ["I Can Statements"](#), [Suggestions for Use](#) and, most recently, [Performance Tasks](#).

These resources are intended to serve as a guide for developing, understanding, monitoring and measuring student progress from pre-K to high school graduation. They were created and informed by more than 120 stakeholders, including North Carolina's very own educators, who provided their invaluable classroom perspectives with the goal of assisting students in their acquisition of durable skills to help them excel both in and outside of the classroom.

New York is using its development of its Portrait of a Graduate as a way to change its graduation requirements away from seat time and standardized testing and towards demonstration of proficiency in required areas through multiple measures and pathways. It comes with an accompanying policy eliminating passage of five Regents exams as a high school graduation requirement. Over the next several years students will have to demonstrate proficiency as a critical thinker, innovative problem solver, global citizen, and effective communicator as well as show social-emotional competence, cultural competence and be literate across content areas. While it's unclear how exactly this will happen – the details of these pathways and measures have not been articulated – it seems that the articulation of the desired characteristics of a high school graduate is designed to drive genuine assessment reform.

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

As the above state examples show, working backwards from the competencies and skills within their portrait of a graduate can provide tools and resources for implementation and quality assurance. Progressions can help inform rubrics that help educators understand what skills students should be exhibiting and ensuring that they are on-track to success. They can serve as a building block towards possible assessment in the future, as in the case of North Carolina, where the state first created learning progressions and is working to develop assessments as part of the next phase of their portrait of a graduate.

This development can only progress fruitfully, however, if the school system: a) removes barriers to mastery of core competencies in the form of high stakes standardized tests, excessive interim, formative and summative assessments, stringent seat time requirements, Carnegie Units, and scripted curriculum; and b) creates capacity in the form of educators engaged in inquiry-based pedagogical practices, innovative curriculum development, and performance-based assessments with consistent and actionable feedback. The devil is, as always, in the implementation details.

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

References

Brandt, W.C., Evans, C. M., & Domaleski, C. (2025). *Assessing 21st century competencies: Guiding principles for states and districts*. Center for Assessment. <https://www.nciea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Assessing21stCenturyCompetencies-Report-FINAL.pdf>

CASEL, CIVIC, Portraits of a Graduate: Strengthening College and Career Readiness Through Social and Emotional Skill Development, February 2, 2024. <https://casel.org/portraits-of-a-graduate-2024/?view=1>

Getting Smart, *The Portrait Model: Building Coherence in School and System Redesign*, Portrait of a Graduate Gallery <https://www.gettingsmart.com/whitepaper/the-portrait-model-building-coherence-in-school-and-system-redesign/>

Libby Stanford, “More States Are Creating Portraits of a Graduate: Here’s Why,” *Education Week*, December 11, 2023. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/more-states-are-creating-a-portrait-of-a-graduate-heres-why/2023/12>

Next Generation Learning, Portrait of a Graduate In Practice <https://www.nextgenlearning.org/portrait-of-a-graduate-in-practice#bullitt>

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Portrait of a Graduate. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/portrait-graduate#Tab-PerformanceTasks-5839>

New York State Graduation Measures Initiative: A Transformational Vision, June 2024 Meeting of the Board of Regents. <https://www.regents.nysed.gov/sites/regents/files/FB%20Monday%20-%20New%20York%20State%20Graduation%20Measures%20Initiative%20-%20.pdf>

SCASA Association of Superintendents’ Roundtable, Profile of a South Carolina Graduate, <https://ed.sc.gov/about/profile-of-sc-graduate/>