**PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE: INFORMING GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS**

**Introduction**

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: mathematics, 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 flourishment.

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 stakeholder input, graduates need to be successful as adults.

**State-Level Portraits Nationally**

**Landscape**

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.

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a [state scan of Portraits of a Graduate](https://casel.org/portraits-of-a-graduate-2024/?view=1) in February 2024. The most common characteristics outlined across state portraits were, in descending order of popularity:

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)

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.

**Examples**

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.](https://www.education.ky.gov/school/innov/Pages/Portrait-of-a-Learner.aspx) Local districts have devised their own graduate portraits based the broader state formulation. Kentucky has a robust collaborative statewide process on accountability and assessment – the United We Learn framework – that enables development of local district versions of a portrait that are responsive to particular community concerns.

1. **South Carolina** divided its Portrait into three broad categories: World-Class Knowledge, World-Class Skills, and Life and Career Characteristics.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **World Class Knowledge**  | **World Class Skills**  | **Life and Career Characteristics**  |
| Rigorous standards in language arts and math for career and college readiness  | Creativity and innovation  | Integrity  |
| Multiple languages, science, technology, engineering, math (STEM), arts, and social sciences  | Critical thinking and problem solving  | Self-direction  |
|   | Collaboration and teamwork    | Global perspective  |
|   | Communication, information, media and technology   | Perseverance  |
|   |  Knowing how to learn   | Work Ethic  |
|   |   | Interpersonal skills   |

South Carolina then went further and created a set of [competencies](https://personalizesc.ed.sc.gov/pscg-competencies/) that were necessary for graduates to achieve the elements of the portrait. The competencies cross-referenced to the elements of the portrait of a graduate. For each competency, the state developed an elaborate set of [frameworks and rubrics](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/17bTvodxwodNhpLiIZqjY7su_jU9PHssSCtbMndahnRM/edit#slide=id.ged35865c9e_0_689) so that practitioners can work towards students developing these critical competencies aligned with the Portrait.

The competencies are: the ability 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.

1. In **New York**, [the proposed portrait](https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/grad-measures/nys-blue-ribbon-commission-graduation-measures-report.pdf) 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. The new portrait is designed to animate New York’s rethinking of its graduation requirements as it moves away from requiring five Regents Exams and towards a system of multiple pathways.

1. In **Washington** State, the [Profile of a Graduate](https://sbe.wa.gov/our-work/graduation-requirements/profile-graduate) lays out the purpose of a diploma, which is to signify “students are ready for success in postsecondary education, gainful employment, citizenship, and are equipped with the skills to be lifelong learners”. The portrait lays out the skills and dispositions a Washington state graduate should have upon receiving their diploma, including personal knowledge, problem-solving, communication, physical and emotional well-being, and embracing diversity.

Getting to the final portrait was a multi-year process that began with state legislation in 2019, which led to the creation of a [Mastery-Based Learning Working Group](https://sbe.wa.gov/our-work/mastery-based-learning/mbl-workgroup) (MBLWG). The MBLWG contained a diverse cast of stakeholders, including elected officials, state education administrators, local school board members, and local educators.

The state then undertook a process to align its graduation requirements with the Profile. 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.

1. **North Carolina**’s portrait of a graduate identifies seven durable skills for student success: adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, learner’s mindset, and personal responsibility. These skills were chosen because they show “that student academic success matters, but so does a student’s ability to adapt, to collaborate, to communicate, to think critically, to show empathy, to learn, and to take personal responsibility” illustrating the holistic view of future readiness many states are highlighting in their portraits of a graduate.

North Carolina’s process engaged nearly 1,300 stakeholders representing K-12 educators, administrators, families, employers, communities, and higher education institutions. The state hired a vendor to facilitate community stakeholder discussions throughout the state. Volunteers were organized into design teams, which collaborated over three months to determine the competencies included in the portrait. Teams consisted of students, teachers, parents, and administrators joined with cross-sector partners including:

• North Carolina Community College System;
• North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities;
• The University of North Carolina system;
• Best NC, a nonprofit coalition of business leaders;
• myFutureNC, a nonprofit cross-sector organization focused on educational attainment;

• North Carolina Department of Commerce; and
• North Carolina Chamber of Commerce.

The NC Department of Education is developing rubrics to assess the durable skills in the portrait as well as sample and model performance tasks in different subject areas and grade levels that will be used to assess these skills. This is an ongoing process.

**Implementation of Portraits**

Determination of whether students have achieved elements of a graduate portrait tends to be a more holistic process embedded in multiple tasks and assessments rather than passing a single instrument. This is particularly true of non-academic content specific knowledge, the so-called “21st Century Skills” like critical thinking, self-regulation and collaboration.

A recent (Jan. 2025) [paper](https://www.nciea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Assessing21stCenturyCompetencies-Report-FINAL.pdf) 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. It is up to the state and district to define the learning construct and develop a clear understanding of how performance is expressed along a continuum from novice to expert. (Developing standards for these 21st century skills can be analogized to the creation of learning standards for content areas). Once tasks and performance continua are developed, the paper recommends to “pilot and scale 21st century assessments in service of creating robust performance assessments, which have proven useful for instructional purposes.”

The measurement of these skills and their reflection in graduation requirements is a developing reality. For example, currently, the Skills for the Future project (ETS/Carnegie Teaching) is working with Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin to build these systems.

North Carolina has done some of this work. 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](https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/portrait-graduate#Tab-RubricsICanDocuments-5210), “[I Can Statements](https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/portrait-graduate#Tab-RubricsICanDocuments-5210),” [Suggestions for Use](https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/portrait-graduate#Tab-GuidanceDocuments-5607) and, most recently, [Performance Tasks](https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/portrait-graduate#Tab-PerformanceTasks-5839).  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.

**Conclusion**

In considering and developing a Portrait of a Graduate, it is important for the state or district to engage in a process whereby input from the broader community is taken into account. Once the Portrait is constructed, in many ways the difficult work begins. How are the characteristics of a graduate developed and assessed? Overlapping those characteristics on existing learning standards and creating frameworks, rubrics and assessments to implement the goals of the Portrait is where the rubber hits the road. States and districts would do well to engage educators, parents and students to develop the courses, curriculum, tasks, and assessments that engender desired skills in students and give schools the means through which to ascertain students’ levels of skilland competency attainment.