Bellwether

Five Roles for Public Policy in Assembly

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Introduction

Assembly in education has the potential to ensure that all families have access to an ecosystem of learning options that collectively meet students' needs, foster their interests, and help them achieve their goals. But, as discussed in our publication *Some Assembly Required*, Assembly also requires addressing several risks and limitations. Chief among these limitations is that Assembly as it exists today is disproportionately available to families with means, or the funds, time, energy, information, and relationships to seek out experiences for their children in addition to or in place of what they receive in school. Assembly also intersects with the age-old challenge of monitoring quality without stifling innovation; logistical barriers like transportation, access to internet and devices, and data privacy and security; and the question of how students demonstrate knowledge and skills.

However, pockets of innovation across the country demonstrate how these challenges can be overcome. Public policy is one important lever for doing so. It has at least five key roles in creating an environment where Assembly is possible and equitable. Policy must:

1. Give all families and students agency to shape their education.
2. Provide funding that all families and students can direct.
3. Address barriers to access, such as information, transportation, and broadband internet.
4. Minimize the risks to families and students from bad actors and low-quality providers.
5. Facilitate translation of information about students' learning between contexts.

While policy can enable new options and safeguard equity, it can also get in the way by stifling innovation or protecting entrenched interests. How policy plays these five roles can enable or constrain how learning options emerge and evolve, which families have access, and how private actors emerge to fill gaps.

Policy must give all families and students agency to shape their education

For Assembly to be equitable, all families must have the agency to shape their education — the freedom and power to identify a desired outcome and pursue it. Too many families lack this agency today because they are unaware of what's available, lack the financial or social resources to pursue it, are excluded by vestiges of racial and ethnic bias, or live in communities where few choices exist. Policy is essential in empowering families — especially those furthest from opportunity — to make their own choices.

Policy can play a role across the spectrum of educational opportunities available to families by directly enabling options within and outside the school system, as well as by protecting families' latitude to seek options without relying on policy for permission.

Policies encourage or require schools to offer various programs and supports, providing families and students with the agency to shape their education *within* their schools. Some options within schools include curricular and/or course choices, support for specific student needs, and postsecondary preparedness programming. Content and curricular choices allow families and students to select coursework aligned with student interests (e.g., computer science, studio art), which policy enables by mandating what schools offer, directing funding to such programs, or creating pathways for students to take courses online.

Policy also plays a role in determining whether and how students receive supports aligned to an individualized education program (IEP) or participate in a "gifted and talented" program. While families must have an opportunity to engage in the development of a student's IEP, their engagement in gifted and talented programs is less formalized. Both programs can raise implementation and equity challenges, since perceptions of race, income, or English fluency can introduce bias in how students are identified to participate.[1]

Policy is likewise essential for enabling and funding programs to prepare students for postsecondary success, such as dual or concurrent enrollment programs or work-based learning. These options, and others, provide families and students with some discretion over their learning experience even as schools rather than families often have the final say in whether and how students participate.

School choice policies also provide families and students with agency. State and local policies assign students to a "zoned" school based on where they reside; these policies reduce families' ability to make their own choices about their child's school. Several types of school choice policies aim to increase their options.[2]

Depending on the availability of seats, families can sometimes choose a different school within their district or in a nearby district through intra- and inter-district choice. Districts' magnet schools are another option. Usually requiring an application and setting specific enrollment criteria like strong academic performance, magnet schools provide advanced or specialized programming. Where available, families can also enroll in public charter schools, in which enrollment is typically determined by lottery. Private schools are an option for some families as well; though private schools often have admissions requirements, policies that provide public funding to help families afford tuition can at least reduce financial barriers.

District, charter, and private school choice policies provide families and students more agency over their learning by increasing access to options beyond those assigned by residential address.

Some policies allow families and students to exercise agency by shaping their education beyond or in place of traditional schooling. Policy enables agency by recognizing and rewarding credit for student learning outside of school, including athletic, academic, and extracurricular courses,[3] and provides flexibility for students to participate in some school activities even if they are home-schooled or enrolled elsewhere.[4]

Policy also enables agency by increasing families' ability to spend on education. In some states, families can receive a tax credit or tax deduction for education-related expenses.[5] In others, education savings accounts (ESAs) provide eligible families with public funds to support personal education choices ranging from supplemental tutoring to private school tuition to new models like microschools and learning pods.[6]

Finally, policy enables agency by defining the parameters of home-schooling, which vary significantly from state to state. Home-schooling has grown in popularity in recent in recent years. Two contributing factors are (1) school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) a rising parental awareness of traditional school programming or curricula that are mismatched with family values, culture, or ideology. For example, there has been a recent increase in Black families home-schooling their children with a more culturally relevant and supportive learning experience.[7] Policies create the space for families to home-school, but also impose different levels of oversight to ensure students receive the education they need.

These policies all increase the degree to which families have the freedom and power to shape their child's educational experience, beyond selecting their school.

In some cases, the absence of policy can also create agency for families and students. As we describe in *A History of Public Education and the Assembly of Services*, the U.S. Supreme Court protected family and student agency in 1922 when it struck down an Oregon law that would have compelled attendance at public schools in Pierce v. Society of Sisters.[8] There continue to be a range of state policies regulating school options — including "uniformity clauses" in state constitutions that restrict the diversity of options outside the traditional system[9] — but this fundamental ruling and long-standing precedent protects families' ability to pursue options outside of or in addition to the district system.

There are also multiple out-of-system options that families have the freedom and power to pursue, independent of permission granted by policy. For example, since 2020 the national nonprofit organization VELA has been providing microgrants to community-driven education providers designed to increase access to high-quality learning experiences by offering free or low-cost participation.[10] These options provide a wide variety of learning environments, content, and supports across the country and represent the ingenuity of a diverse group of founders — more than half of whom are people of color and many who serve their own children alongside those of other families.[11] Learning options need not be explicitly defined, allowed, or regulated by policy. Rather, they can be developed, offered, and accessed through individual choice.

Policies that increase family agency are necessary for reorienting the learning ecosystem and putting students at the center. Yet they are not sufficient. Policy must also address barriers that prevent families and students from exercising agency — starting with funding.

Policy must provide funding that all families and students can direct

For Assembly-based education to be equitable, policies must provide funding for families who cannot otherwise afford it. Funding policies vary along two key dimensions: (1) how funds flow and (2) the degree of flexibility they provide (Table 1).

1. **How funds flow** — Policies can provide funding by distributing funds to families who, in turn, direct funds to selected learning opportunities. Alternatively, some policies provide funding by stipulating that funds follow students depending on the choices they and their families make (or, in some cases, the choices others make on their behalf).

2. **How funds can be used** — Policies can provide funding with various constraints on how funds can be used. In some cases, policies give families flexibility in how they allocate the dollars, designated here as a la carte spending. In other circumstances, funds must be used for a single purpose.

Table 1: Dimensions of How Policy Shapes the Flow of Funding in Assembly

		How Funds Flow	
		Funding flows through instititions	**Funding flows through families**
How Funds Can Be Used	**A la carte spending**	**Ex: Dual Enrollment.** States or local educational agencies cover the costs of tuition for the individual courses a student selects, generally by providing payment directly to the higher education institution where the student enrolls.	**Ex: Microgrants.** Families receive a per-student amount to be spent at their discretion. Microgrant programs are often administered by a third-party organization that helps families direct available funds from their account toward one or multiple eligible expenses.
	Single-purpose spending	**Ex: Charter Schools.** Depending on varying state policies, all or most of per-pupil funding dollars follow the student to the charter school. Funds flow directly from the state and/or district to the charter school.	**Ex: Vouchers.** Families receive a voucher for a set amount of money that can be used to pay tuition and fees for a student to attend a private school. Families can only use funds for a single purpose and, if the voucher amount exceeds the cost, families do not receive the balance of funds.

Policy gives families more control over funds when the funds flow to them. A family receiving a microgrant for supplemental services or a voucher for private school tuition can independently determine their student's needs and select the specific provider or school they think is the best match. When funding flows through schools, access to a service and the funding associated with the service can be constrained if the school does not identify or recognize the student's needs or does not have aligned programs or partners to address them.

For example, a student participating in dual enrollment courses at the local community college has the option to build college credits and/or take specialized coursework debt-free. However, the student's access and options may be constrained based on whether their high school deems them eligible for such coursework, how well the student and their family are able to advocate for such options with the school's administration, and which postsecondary institutions have an articulation agreement with their school.[12] In contrast, Colorado's Path4Ward Program provides low-income high school students who graduate early 75% of their senior year per-pupil revenue (or $3,500, whichever is greater) to be used toward postsecondary education or training programs.[13] The student and family have direct control over funds and can deploy them to meet the student's needs, interests, and goals.

Policies also vary in the allowable expenses for which funds can be used and who can use the funds. Voucher and ESA programs illustrate the difference between a la carte and single-purpose spending. A family can only use a voucher for private school tuition; they cannot use a voucher to pay for supplemental tutoring.[14] ESAs impose some limits on how families can use funds but are generally much more flexible. A family may be able to use ESA funds to cover the cost of tuition, tutoring, test preparation, or college coursework but may not be able to use it for the cost of transportation to these options.[15] Both voucher and ESA funding mechanisms have limitations, but an ESA program provides more flexibility to families interested in customizing their child's education through a variety of learning experiences.

The funding policies most supportive of Assembly are those that deliver dollars directly to families and allow families to use dollars for a variety of learning experiences. Flexible microgrant programs and ESAs provide families and students control over their educational funds, which they can use for numerous educational expenses.

Arizona expands Empowerment Scholarship Account Program

Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account Program allows families to spend funds on private school tuition or on a range of supplemental educational options such as educational therapies, tutoring, test fees, and dual enrollment fees.[16] Recently, the state enacted legislation making all students eligible to participate, regardless of whether the student previously attended a public school.[17] While universal eligibility for the ESA program means that the policy does less to concentrate resources on families who need them most, the policy also eliminates barriers to access for families who otherwise had to provide documentation for complex eligibility requirements.

An effort to block the program fell short of the required petition signatures needed to put the ESA to a public referendum.[18] As of Oct. 5, 2022, the Arizona Department of Education received 23,502 applications.[19]

Policy can improve access by improving funding levels. Beyond how dollars flow and how families can use them, the amount of funding also matters. Within the traditional school system, funding constraints — felt most acutely in schools serving low-income and high-need populations — can limit the programs and supports that families and students can access through their school.[20] Outside the system, low dollar amounts also limit access. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, few private school choice programs will cover the full cost of special education.[21] EdChoice, which calculates the purchasing power of programs like ESAs and vouchers, reports that only two programs offer funding that exceeds the average public school per-pupil cost in that state.[22] Similarly, while families across the income spectrum invest personal resources into supplemental materials and activities for their children, historically high-income families have invested four to seven times more than low-income families in the bottom quintile.[23] More recent participation data indicate nearly 30% of low-income students do not participate in out-of-school educational activities, compared with only 6% of high-income students.[24]

Low funding levels not only constrain access to programs but also limit the options available. They disincentivize providers from serving those who rely on public funds for access. Just as low-income families often face limited choice among health care providers because of Medicaid's low reimbursement rates and high regulatory burdens, inadequate funding for families' educational options could create a similarly bifurcated market.[25]

An equitable approach to Assembly requires policies that provide family-directed, flexible, and adequate funding. Despite policies that increase their agency and provide them funding, families and students still face other barriers.

Policy must address barriers to access, such as information, transportation, and broadband internet

To ensure all families can access learning options, policy can also address other barriers: lack of information, limited nearby options, transportation, insufficient access to internet and devices, and the inability to securely collect and share data about what students have learned. Policy can help reduce these barriers by establishing guidelines and expectations, maximizing regulatory flexibility, and funding solutions — but it cannot solve the problem without the agencies or organizations to operationalize them. To complement the analysis of the role of policy, *Assembling Education* details the operational aspects of these barriers.

Families and students need information to access learning options. Policy can shape how families and students receive and use information about their options. At a minimum, policies can require more transparent information about the programs students may be eligible for and/or require schools to be more transparent about the timelines and procedures for how students can participate.[26] Policy can further dictate how state agencies publish information about learning options and what information they include. While helpful, these policies too often rely on families' ability to digest and synthesize complex information from multiple sources to inform their choices.

More promising is how policies can better support families in navigating those options. For instance, to administer ESAs and microgrants, many states reserve funding for the development of online platforms through which families can access their accounts, identify eligible providers, and purchase services.[27] These web-based resources are a good start for helping families access funds and select learning options, but they are also insufficient. Organizations providing more hands-on support for families, such as Families Empowered,[28] RESCHOOL,[29] and EdNavigator,[30] have decades of experience helping families find the options that best align with students' needs, interests, and goals. They have relied heavily on philanthropic funding to do this, however.[31] Private sector actors will continue to have an important role in filling the information gap in educational choice, but for these supports to reach scale and sustainability, they will require reliable public resources.

Policy can help by recognizing that it must do more not only to create new options for families and inform families of what options exist, but also by providing families with more support to navigate those options. Whether used to directly fund organizations that support navigation or to allow families to spend public dollars on navigation support, public resources are necessary to ensure equitable access to a more complex ecosystem.

Families and students need learning options located close to where they live. Policies that increase the supply of facilities for learning options in underserved communities can help reduce the distance that students must travel to participate. In the charter sector, for instance, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a charter school advocacy organization, believes charter operators should have options such as prioritized purchase or lease options for a "closed, unused, or underused public school facility or property."[32] Unfortunately, few states have adopted this approach or implemented it with fidelity.[33] Similarly, few policies exist to help other providers of flexible learning options gain access to school facilities or other community-based facilities.

In fact, policy can often constrain the location of learning options via zoning regulations that limit where or in what types of facilities providers can operate (e.g., home-based settings, church buildings, community centers).[34] These requirements can reduce the supply of suitable facilities where providers can educate students and increase the distance that students must travel to access what they need.

Conversely, policies like the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Opportunity Zones and other place-based policies that provide tax relief, investment, and technical assistance to support economic activity can help address deserts in anything from grocery stores to learning options in high-poverty areas.[35]

Families and students need transportation that ensures students can safely move between their homes and where they learn. Learning options in theory do not translate to reality unless students can travel safely and reliably between locations. The school choice literature, for example, shows that students with better transportation not only have more educational options but also have access to higher-quality options that are otherwise inaccessible.[36] Policy can shape the transportation options available to families and students, and by extension their access to learning opportunities.

In urban centers, regulations governing public transit systems determine how residents travel by defining where and when bus routes serve different neighborhoods.[37] In addition, policy determines investments in infrastructure like sidewalks, crosswalks, and other pedestrian traffic.[38] The Safe Routes to School Program, for instance, "promotes walking and bicycling to school through infrastructure improvements, enforcement, tools, safety education, and incentives.[39]

Policy can shape the supply side of transportation by regulating the vehicles that can be used, such as whether schools are permitted to transport students in anything other than the iconic yellow school buses.[40] For instance, Maryland passed a law in 2020 that allowed for more types of vehicles and providers to transport students. While promising, subsequent regulations in 2021 significantly constrained the ability of new providers to augment the supply of transportation, including requirements that all alternative student transportation vehicles have backup alarms, fire extinguishers, and seat belt cutters.[41] Policy also shapes the supply of drivers, based on requirements for commercial licenses and additional safety training.[42] Finally, as it has in Arizona, policy can shape the future of transportation by increasing flexibility and investing in innovation.[43]

Families and students need broadband internet and devices to access online options. Online learning enables students to access various options without leaving their homes. However, online learning is not accessible to families without broadband internet or the necessary devices to participate.

When the pandemic forced schools to close in spring 2020, it highlighted the need for universal access to the internet and internet-connected devices so that schools could focus resources accordingly. Federal pandemic relief legislation included significant funding for expanding broadband access.[44] At the state level, the 2022 legislative session saw more than 40 states introduce or enact legislation to expand broadband, such as building or increasing access to infrastructure (e.g., utility poles) or implementing "dig once" policies that enable and encourage economies of scale by combining the laying of cables across providers or projects.[45]

Nonetheless, gaps in both broadband and device access remain. Rural families are less likely to have broadband internet in their homes and less likely to have digital devices like smartphones and computers.[46] The same can be said for low-income, Black, and Hispanic families.[47] Policy can do more to fund and incentivize the expansion of broadband internet access and ensure all students have devices that optimize their online learning experiences.

Finally, families and students need secure access to learner records. Policy has a vital role in protecting student privacy while enabling streamlined data access for the individuals and institutions that need it. Two key pieces of legislation designed to support student privacy were enacted in the 1970s. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA),[48] passed in 1974, protects the privacy of students and families by ensuring the right to inspect student records, correct the records if not accurate, consent to the sharing of private information, and file a complaint in the event of FERPA noncompliance. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), passed in 1978, regulates student surveys, analyses, or evaluations that involve eight "protected areas," including political affiliations, mental health, religious practices, and sexual attitudes or behaviors.[49]

Protections for student privacy are essential, but complex implementation and outdated systems too often prevent interoperability between the entities that house student data and those that need access to identify student needs and support student success. Policy has an important role in setting expectations around student privacy as well as incentivizing and enabling interoperability within and between systems — which could include technical assistance on privacy requirements, investments in data infrastructure, and procurement processes that accurately assess providers' ability to deliver.[50]

Policy can also support security and access to student records by incentivizing the private sector to develop solutions and offer new, optional services outside the school system to families who want them. For example, policy could provide funding and establish guidelines for third-party organizations to access student data, compile competency-based measures of key student milestones (e.g., literacy markers, numeracy skills), and communicate with parents about their child's growth and achievement beyond the information traditionally shared by schools. Parents eager for information about their child's progress, beyond what they might otherwise receive from their child's report card or parent-teacher conferences, could choose to opt into such services. This shift to shared ownership of key student records would increase transparency and access without compromising privacy.

Policy must minimize the risks to families and students from bad actors and low-quality providers

Increasing equitable access to learning supports and experiences is an essential element of Assembly, but it may not achieve its intended impact if the options that families and students can access are not trustworthy or high quality. Policy has a role to play in ensuring that the ecosystem of learning options includes providers who are well-meaning, innovative, and excellent and excludes those that are operating in bad faith or providing poor-quality services.

> In the best of all worlds, policy protects students and families from bad actors and maximizes the number and diversity of high-quality options, without stymieing new entrants that offer better or more innovative solutions.

How to balance the risks of low-quality providers or the misuses of public funds with the risk of stymieing a flourishing and dynamic ecosystem of options is the topic of long-standing debate. Some argue that the state should only provide minimum standards for entry into the landscape and trust market forces to guide quality control; low-quality providers will gradually lose business and exit the market. Others argue that market forces are insufficient, and the stakes are too high to tolerate the risks; the state should be responsible for monitoring quality, while sanctioning or excluding providers who fail to serve students well. There is significant room to explore the "just right" balance between these approaches, depending on measures and interpretations of effectiveness, the need for innovative solutions to tackle profound or specialized needs, and the perceived capacity of families and students to exercise discerning judgment on which options to select.

Different policy approaches to quality control have implications for equity as well. On the one hand, bad actors or low-quality providers may target underserved and more vulnerable populations in a market-based approach. On the other hand, those furthest from opportunity shouldn't be underestimated. At some point, state-led quality controls can veer into a distrust of disadvantaged families' and students' ability to make decisions for themselves and impede the emergence and growth of community-based programs designed to meet specific local needs.

Assembling education adds complexity to the well-trod debates about quality and accountability, due to the agency it entrusts to families and students and the wide variety of educational learning options and providers it seeks to foster. Traditional measures of quality like student growth and proficiency on annual state assessments are important, but they have never been sufficient to measure the full range of non-academic student outcomes that schools were asked to achieve and are insufficient to guide families' choice of school.[51] For flexible learning options that families and students leverage — especially those intended to support students' nonacademic needs outside of school — traditional measures of quality may be even less appropriate.

Assembly requires a tailored approach to quality control. The health care sector is far from exemplary, but it provides some illustrative examples of different approaches (Table 2).

Table 2: Examples of Quality Control in Health Care

Approach	Example
Prevent taxpayers from footing the bill for fraudulent actors	The Medicare program[52] reviews and approves medical expenditures for patients and providers to ensure public dollars are used for their intended purpose.
Protect patients from dangerous products, services, or people	The U.S. Food and Drug Administration[53] reviews and approves new pharmaceuticals before health care professionals are permitted to prescribe or administer them.
Ensure providers have adequate skills and expertise	Nursing certification requirements[54] and state medical boards[55] establish criteria that health care professionals must meet to be licensed to practice medicine; the greater the skill required for the role,[56] the higher the bar that professionals must meet.
Provide information to patients about the quality of various providers to inform their choices	Unlike education, which routinely shares student outcome data, transparency on health provider quality is limited; most efforts to increase transparency exist outside of policy, with platforms like ZocDoc[57] that collect and share data on patient satisfaction.
Remove bad actors or subpar providers from the market	Licensing boards can implement sanctions for health care professionals who are bad actors and/or provide low-quality or harmful treatments for patients.[58]

As discussed in Assembly Across Sectors, two helpful dimensions for nuanced analysis of Assembly-based education are its degree of externality and the degree of personalization. Another dimension is scale: the number of students served and public funds at stake.

Like health care, education has significant externalities. Students' proficiency in math and reading are foundational skills; when students do not reach proficiency, it has consequences for them and negative externalities for society. Proficiency in math and reading also have a common definition of success for which standardized tests are a reasonable measure. For the aspects of education that have high externalities and common outcomes (e.g., instruction in math and reading), polices that impose more quality control are warranted. They may require providers to have adequate skills and expertise to deliver instruction or use standardized assessments to sanction providers that promise but fail to achieve the desired student outcomes.

However, a standardized approach would not be suitable for monitoring the quality of an after-school arts program. For such a learning experience, the consequences of low quality are comparatively low. Moreover, students may participate with highly personalized goals in mind (e.g., some students may join to hone skills in different art mediums, while others may seek an opportunity to socialize with peers). In this case, policies that protect taxpayers from fraud and students from harm may be sufficient.

Finally, quality control policies should take into account the number of students served and the amount of public funding at stake. When fewer students participate in an innovative learning option, the consequences are smaller for society if that option fails to deliver. The lower the public funding for an innovative option, the smaller the potential for waste or fraud. For example, a family that home-schools four children without any public funding has much less potential for negative externalities than a company accepting ESA dollars to tutor tens of thousands of students in mathematics.

To mitigate risk and enable innovation, quality control policies must be tailored to the consequences of failure, the degree of personalization in outcomes, and the number of students and amount of public funding involved. A more nuanced approach to quality control has the potential to push past old entrenchments, tailor solutions to the wide variety of supports and experiences students need, and create a dynamic system in which quality and innovation coexist.

Policy should facilitate translation of credit between contexts

One of the biggest challenges to Assembly is how students earn, transfer, and document credit for the skills and knowledge they acquire. Policy can play several roles in facilitating solutions.

Policy should help make sure students can compile evidence of their experiences, knowledge, and competencies to earn credit both in and outside of traditional school settings. Policy can also help create a system that allows students to translate evidence of their learning across systems, whether between K-12 schools or between the K-12 and postsecondary systems.

Policy should enable common measures for demonstrating learning that are recognized across different providers and systems. Our current education system relies on the Carnegie unit developed in 1905 to measure "student exposure across subject matter," with one unit representing learning opportunities roughly equivalent to one hour daily, five days per week, for 24 weeks.[59] Carnegie units are central to the widely accepted "seat-time" model of education. The Carnegie unit system is neither flexible nor necessarily rigorous. It was never intended to measure content learned but merely time completed. However, a nearly universal reliance on this system throughout the American secondary and postsecondary landscape has made the shift to competency-based learning a daunting challenge.[60]

Some of the same policies that enable competency-based learning would enable Assembly as well, such as state-level guidelines for schools and districts interested in implementing mastery- or competency-based credit programs in place of restrictive seat-time requirements.[61] Schools and districts can leverage these policies to allow students to progress through content at their own pace. Under these programs, expectations for mastery are clearly defined for each competency or "learning target."[62] Students reach the learning targets and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways, such as a standardized assessment or a portfolio of their work.

In addition to enabling self-paced learning, competency-based learning policies also allow schools to recognize learning that happens outside of school. In Oregon and several other states, My Tech High blends traditional, home, community, and workforce learning experiences while meeting state standard requirements.[63] Rhode Island has an All Course Network for districts to use by supporting students in creating "individualized pathways to graduation" and awarding credit toward graduation for experiences like work-based learning, Advanced Placement (AP), and out-of-school enrichment experiences.[64] Policies that establish norms and expectations for capturing learning regardless of context are essential to the student-centered, customized approach to education that Assembly envisions.

Lessons on portability and flexibility from the U.S. Department of Defense[65]

The Department of Defense has long recognized the disruption to families, including school-age children, when military personnel are relocated to other states or countries. In response, the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children* was created "to alleviate many of the school transition problems military families encounter."[66] Military children in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and any Department of Defense Education Activity school benefit from policies focused on eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation.

- Eligibility policies include the ability to remain enrolled in a school district where a student previously met residential requirements if their caregiver provides transportation (e.g., the student lives with a noncustodial relative outside the district). Students must receive accommodations for flexibility in extracurricular activities (e.g., if they missed a try-out or application deadline due to a transfer).

- Enrollment policies facilitate ease of enrollment regarding compliance in the areas of education records, immunizations, and kindergarten/first grade entrance ages.

- Placement policies protect a student's placement in specialized classes and programs (e.g., AP, special education services) based on the student's previous enrollment. Students may also receive waivers of prerequisites.

- Graduation policies include course waivers for similar coursework completed elsewhere, flexibility on state exams, and the ability for seniors who have transferred to receive a diploma from their previous school if the receiving school cannot make accommodations for graduation there.

Source: The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children – Fact Sheet for Service Providers[67]

Policy should define a process in which credits from a range of learning experiences and programs can be carried or transferred between the K-12 and postsecondary systems. The most common forms of recognizing credit between K-12 and postsecondary systems are AP,[68] International Baccalaureate (IB) programs,[69] and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP)[70] as well as dual or concurrent enrollment programs.[71] Students can receive credit toward a postsecondary degree based on completing AP, IB, and CLEP exams and achieving a score that meets the institutional criteria, and by completing college-level coursework while still enrolled in high school.

Despite relatively broad participation in these programs, whether and how these learning experiences count toward postsecondary credit varies depending on the institution. State policy can play a role in the transfer of credits toward a postsecondary degree at public colleges and universities. District policies, through articulation agreements, dictate which credits transfer to which institutions, whether public or private. Private postsecondary institutions can set their own policies for how they award credit for courses and exams completed. Other industry or community actors can likewise validate a learning credential by endorsing or recognizing it in how they assess individuals' potential, job readiness, or qualifications for hiring. This creates significant complexity and uncertainty for families and students to navigate.

State policy is not well positioned to dictate how systems recognize credit earned through flexible learning options. Even in today's traditional school systems, such policies would significantly constrain the independence of colleges and universities, especially private institutions. A similar policy mandate in an Assembly-based education system would be even more challenging.

Instead, policy can help ensure families and students have the information they need to make informed decisions. Too often today, families and students are responsible for assessing which institutions accept which credits, with the complexity of the system creating confusion and incorrect expectations. Some states provide websites outlining the program requirements for some or all of this early college coursework by identifying what grades in specific courses will transfer to which institutions for college credit. For example, Pennsylvania has a website where students can explore potential postsecondary value for college-level coursework programs taken in high school.[72]

Policy can play a role in ensuring this type of clarity is available. It can require colleges and universities to clearly communicate their practices, and it can facilitate the collection and dissemination of information across institutions in user-friendly formats.

Conclusion

Across a range of vital dimensions, public policy can help create the conditions for Assembly-based education. Policy can provide agency, address barriers to equitable access, establish guardrails for quality, and facilitate the translation of credit between contexts. Unfortunately, the issue-specific silos and political entrenchments that describe so much education advocacy and policymaking are poorly suited to make progress on the range of essential policies that Assembly requires.

A broader coalition and unifying agenda are both necessary and possible. The effects of the pandemic on students and their families, school systems struggling to meet profound academic and non-academic needs often on their own, and a cross-cutting constituency of families looking for solutions has the potential to create a swell of public support for more flexible and student-centered learning. And a bigger tent of policy issues that contributes to enabling equitable access and empowering families can create new and unexpected coalitions, especially among policymakers and advocates who value finding new solutions over winning old debates.

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Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

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