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Bridging America's Future-Ready Learning Gap

Why Portrait of a Graduate frameworks struggle to reach classrooms — and what it will take to untangle the knots

Portrait of a Graduate

A school district's Portrait of a Graduate is a vision developed with the community to identify the durable skills and competencies students need for success. This vision embodies the aspirations of students, families, educators, employers, and community members, and it represents a shared North Star for future-ready learning.

The Portrait defines the outcomes; bringing it to life requires those outcomes to shape the everyday systems and experiences of schooling — from curriculum, instruction, and assessment to professional learning, policy, and leadership.

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Imagine Learning is a PreK–12 digital learning solutions company that ignites learning breakthroughs by designing forward-thinking solutions at the intersection of people, curricula, and technology to drive positive outcomes for every student. Imagine Learning serves more than 18 million students and partners with more than 10,000 districts nationwide.

The Core Challenge

Across the country, leaders have done the vision work. Graduate profiles exist. Communities have been engaged. Strategic plans have been updated. And yet, somewhere between the poster on the wall and the classroom, implementation stalls. The frustration is real and widely shared.

So why write another white paper?

Because the conditions for moving this work forward are stronger than they have ever been. The public is asking hard questions about the purpose of schooling. Employers are more specific about the skills graduates need. In 2026, the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicated that about 70% of employers surveyed reported using skill-based hiring practices (Gray, 2026). Communication competencies are in highest demand, mentioned in 53% of job postings, followed closely by leadership skills (America Succeeds & Lightcast, 2025). Based on an analysis of 76 million job postings from 2023–2024, "durable skills are not just in demand; they are defining the future of work" (America Succeeds & Lightcast, 2025, p. 1). States are beginning to name these skills explicitly in policy, with over 20 states having adopted Portrait of a Graduate frameworks or requiring districts in their states to develop their own Portrait approaches. And the tools for documenting student growth beyond test scores are more accessible than they have ever been.

In early 2026, a small group of state leaders, district practitioners, curriculum and assessment pioneers, and workforce partners convened in Tempe, Arizona, to tackle what no single organization can solve alone: how to develop future-ready learners at scale. Coupled with interviews with education leaders with deep experience implementing Portrait of a Graduate frameworks, this paper builds on what they surfaced.

Section 1: The Urgency

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Public education was built for a world that no longer exists. The industrial model of education was designed to produce graduates with foundational skills who could follow directions and contribute to a relatively stable industrial economy. That model is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of 21st century students (Evans et al., 2025). The economy has fundamentally changed. Jobs built around routine tasks have been automated. "As the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics continue to evolve, and the ways in which humans carry out tasks change as a result, education systems must begin to reassess the competencies required for life and work in the new context. These changes could be significant and fast" (OECD, 2025, p. 1). The pace of change is accelerating.

According to the World Economic Forum (2025), 39% of key skills required in the job market will change by 2030. Yet this is not simply a story of automation replacing workers. Indeed Hiring Lab's analysis of nearly 2,900 individual work skills found that less than 1% are fully transformable by generative AI, while roughly 40% remain minimally affected — skills that depend on judgment, physical presence, and human interaction (Hering & Rojas, 2025). Employers' own hiring behavior confirms this. Across sectors, communication and leadership skills have grown faster in job postings over the past two years than any other skill category tracked, including AI itself (Hering & Rojas, 2025). The lesson is not that technical fluency no longer matters. It is that as routine, codifiable tasks shift to machines, the durable human skills at the center of Portrait of a Graduate frameworks are becoming the primary differentiator, not a nice-to-have alongside technical knowledge.

At the same time, employers and colleges continue to report that graduates are arriving without the skills they need. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce reported that 84% of hiring managers surveyed indicated that high school students are not prepared to enter the workforce, with 80% agreeing that current graduates are less prepared to enter the workforce compared to previous generations (Swanek, 2025). The question is whether American education can shift to prepare students for a world defined by rapid change, technological disruption, and problems that do not have predetermined answers.

Portrait of a Graduate frameworks have emerged as a response to this moment. They name what communities actually want for their children. They invite a richer, more honest conversation about purpose. And they reflect genuine consensus that academic content knowledge, while necessary, is not sufficient for what the world now requires.

THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

Portrait of a Graduate frameworks now exist in many states and thousands of districts. Future-ready skills are prioritized in strategic plans, graduate profiles, and community presentations. The vision exists. The urgency is real.

Yet walk into most schools with graduate frameworks and instruction often looks nearly identical to a decade ago. Portrait frameworks stall at the classroom door because our systems treat future-ready skills as something separate from the core work of teaching and learning.

A strong vision will only go so far. Implementation infrastructure — the connected set of curriculum, instruction, assessment and data, professional learning, policy leadership and governance systems and structures — must be aligned and grounded in Portrait frameworks to ensure future-ready learning moves into the daily experience of teaching and learning and is integral to priorities and practices in school districts. The challenge is significant, as only a small percentage of districts provide implementation guidance and support for schools within their systems (Plate et al., 2026). To tackle this challenge, we need a clear-eyed account of the specific barriers blocking the path from portrait to practice and how to address them.

What Do We Mean by Future-Ready Skills?

The term "future-ready skills" is used throughout this paper to describe the competencies at the heart of Portrait of a Graduate frameworks: capacities like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, innovation, and citizenship that enable students to thrive in work and life regardless of how the world changes around them.

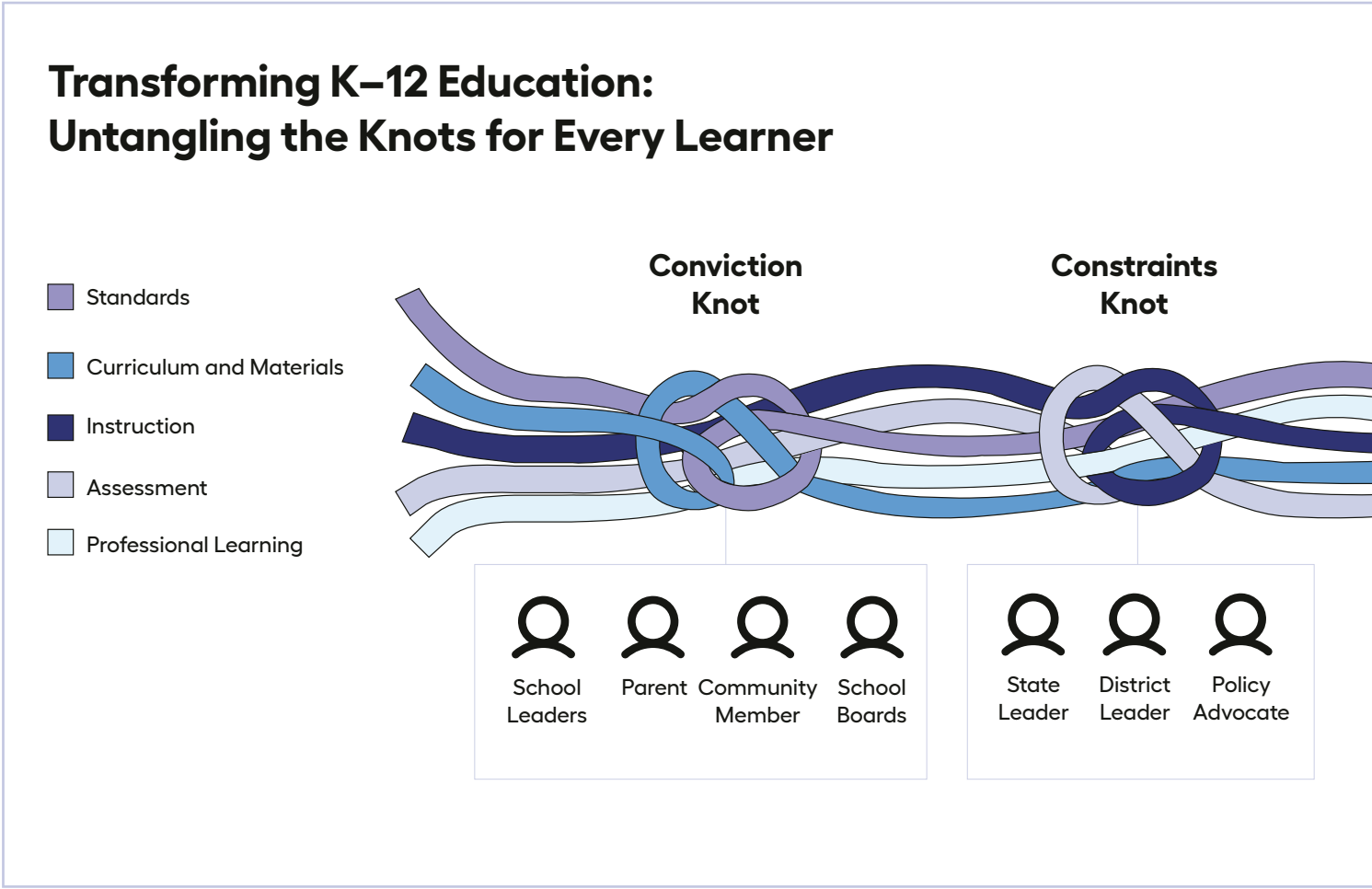
These are not soft skills or add-ons. They are the outcomes communities have said they want for their children when asked to describe a graduate who is truly prepared for what's next. Most Portrait frameworks name four to six core competencies, grounded in research on what employers, higher education, and civic life actually require. They vary in their specific language across states and districts, but the underlying intent is consistent: students need more than content knowledge alone.

THE SYSTEM AS A ROPE

The education system can be understood as an interconnected rope with five essential strands braided together. When these strands align coherently, with future-ready skills woven through each one, the system delivers high-quality learning experiences. When future-ready skills remain separate from these strands, or when the strands operate independently of one another, knots form. The rope tangles. The vision stalls.

We describe the five strands as follows:

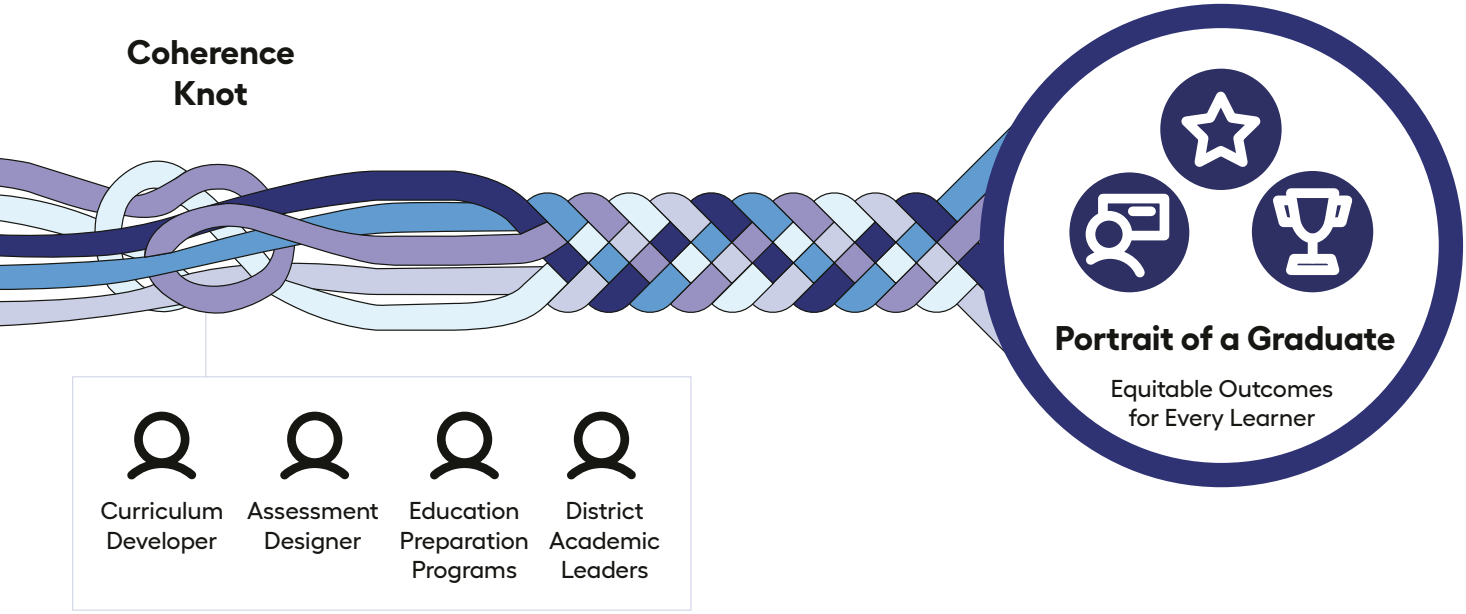
- Standards: what students should know and be able to do
- Curriculum and Materials: the content and resources educators use
- Instruction: how teaching and learning unfold in classrooms
- Assessment: how we measure student progress and mastery
- Professional Learning: how we strengthen educator capacity to deliver on the vision



Research confirms that when these five strands braid together with future-ready skills woven throughout, students are better positioned to develop important competencies (Crawford & Unger, 2026) — for example, critical thinking through science investigations, collaboration by solving real-world math problems, and communication skills through writing about history. **The competencies are not separate activities from core academic learning experiences. They are the medium through which content learning happens.**

In this coherent systems "rope" analogy, three types of knots often block progress toward genuine integration. Each manifests differently, requires distinct untangling strategies, and involves different actors. Understanding which knot is tangling your rope helps leaders focus effort where it matters most. The "rope with the knots" analogy purposefully highlights common implementation challenges to help system leaders anticipate and plan their organization's Portrait journey.

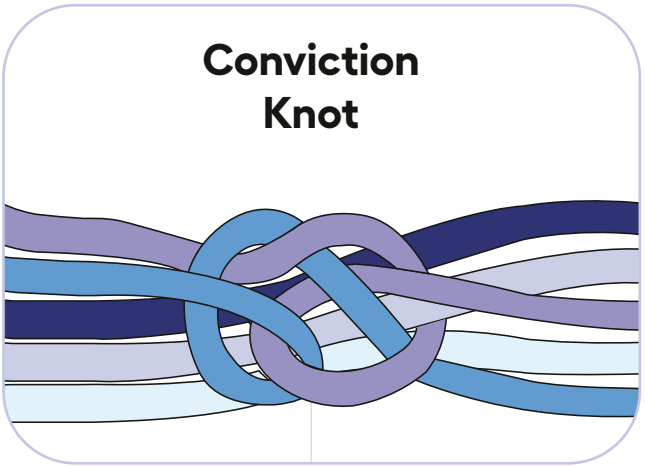
Note: The image of braided strands will be familiar to readers who know Scarborough's Reading Rope, a widely used framework for understanding how children learn to read. The two are unrelated — Scarborough's Reading Rope models the cognitive components of reading development, while this paper uses the idea of a rope to illustrate where the K–12 instructional system gets knotted, why those knots are so hard to untangle, and what to do about them.



Section 2: The Three Knots Blocking Implementation

KNOT 1: THE CONVICTION KNOT

The "why should we?" barrier



This knot forms when stakeholders are not convinced that change is necessary or worth the disruption. Even when leaders clearly see the need, transformation stalls if educators, families, and community members do not share that conviction.

It is common for conviction — or shared commitment — to appear stronger than it actually is. A district may pass a Portrait resolution, update strategic plan language, and offer some basic professional development. This type of adoption often sits at a surface level and does not lead to transformative classroom practices.

Untangling this knot requires sustained engagement, clear communication about the changing world students will enter, and visible evidence that the new approach works. Leaders who have done this well emphasize that conviction cannot be manufactured through presentations or mandates. It is built through authentic engagement, honest conversation, and repeated opportunities for stakeholders to see and experience what future-ready learning actually looks like and why it is so important. It is crucial to note, also, that different stakeholders respond to different messages. When shared commitment really sticks, it is frequently a result of highly strategic and ongoing communications and outreach efforts.

Key actors: school leaders, educators, students, parents, community members, school boards, employers, postsecondary leaders.

IN PRACTICE:
Building Community Conviction in Durango School District

When Dr. Karen Cheser arrived in the summer of 2021 as the new superintendent of the Durango School District, the district had no shared vision, weak coherence across schools, and a community marked by mistrust and uneven results. The school board was explicit that the district needed a unifying direction. Rather than moving quickly to adopt a Portrait of a Graduate framework, district leaders first stabilized foundational systems such as curriculum, instruction, and intervention systems. They then launched the Portrait process in the fall of 2021 through sustained stakeholder engagement. District leadership began with an industry and community think tank to ground the conversation in the realities of a changing world. They then expanded engagement to staff, K–12 students, educators, school administrators, families, and community members through meetings, surveys, and repeated rounds of review to refine the Portrait approach. This sequencing was intentional, leaders understood that authentic commitment would not come from a mandate, but from helping stakeholders see why future-ready skills matter and giving them meaningful opportunities to share their voices and shape the work.

That early engagement laid the foundation for a Portrait defined not just by skills, but by dispositions the community valued, such as being an empathetic collaborator or confident communicator. Just as important, district leaders were highly strategic about communication. They knew different groups responded to different messages, so they framed the work carefully and chose language that reflected community values while still pointing toward the future students will enter. Once the Portrait of a Graduate was established, leaders used newsletters, board meetings, student showcases, staff recognition, and the district strategic plan to keep the Portrait visible and relevant, building conviction through repetition, clarity, and public examples of what the work looked like in practice. Students' capstone presentations and their demonstrations of future-ready skills with authentic work have proven to be particularly effective in garnering family and community support.

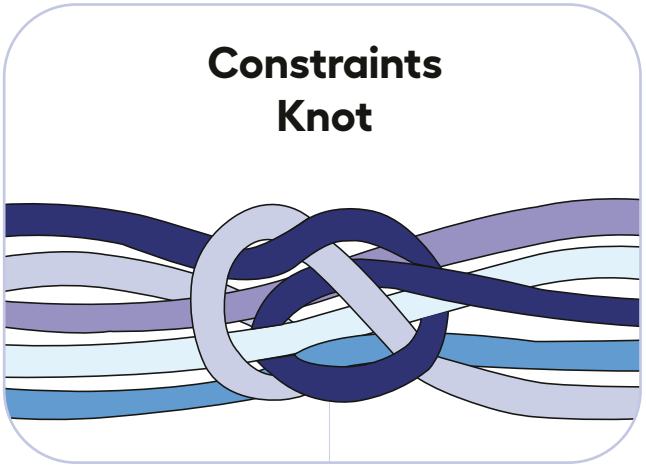
The Portrait of a Graduate work advanced as the district moved from awareness to implementation by creating blueprints — success criteria for Portrait competencies, that would support teachers in including Portrait of a Graduate skills in their learning targets and demonstrations of learning. Leadership also introduced capstone experiences across grade levels and initiated student portfolios that provided opportunity for PK–12th grade students to demonstrate Portrait skills, reflect on their growth, and curate examples of their work. When challenges emerged, leaders adjusted rather than retreating, they

simplified expectations, revised language for younger students, and created a network of teacher leaders to develop tools and exemplars for colleagues. Dr. Cheser also aligned principal accountability, board policies, and the Durango Education Foundation's fundraising to the Portrait of a Graduate, reinforcing that this was not a slogan but a district-wide commitment. The district's experience in addressing the Conviction Knot shows that shared commitment takes hold when leaders pair vision with sustained community engagement, tailored communication, practical support, and visible evidence that future-ready learning equips students with powerful skills for life.

Based on an interview with Dr. Karen Cheser, Superintendent of Durango School District, May 2026.

KNOT 2: THE CONSTRAINTS KNOT

The structural barriers that limit innovation



This knot is structural. The rules of the system can work against the vision, constraining innovation even when collective will exists. But this is where the policy environment is beginning to shift in meaningful ways.

Consider standards documents. Most states still do not explicitly name future-ready competencies alongside academic content expectations, leaving districts to define, interpret and integrate on their own. Standards that emphasize breadth over depth are still the norm. Until standards documents communicate expectations plainly, districts have no common reference point to work from, and curriculum, assessment, and professional learning providers have little incentive to create programs to support teaching and evaluating students' development of future-ready skills. A handful of states are beginning to change this in meaningful ways. North Carolina, Kentucky, and New York are among those doing the work of naming competencies explicitly, piloting ways to measure the attainment of competencies, and their approaches are showing others what is possible.

The misalignment compounds as students move through the system. Graduation requirements remain tied to seat time rather than demonstrated competency. Higher education admission requirements largely continue to rely on transcripts and test scores rather than portfolios, performance assessments, or other demonstrations of student learning. While there is a growing appetite in higher education to recognize competency evidence alongside traditional credentials, scaling that into systemic change requires coordination that has not yet materialized.

Multiple experienced school leaders who have implemented Portrait initiatives described operating with "two sets of books": the official system of compliance, seat time, and legacy accountability alongside the desired system of competencies, deeper learning, and performance assessments. This dual reality drives burnout, uneven adoption, and widening

implementation gaps. When only well-resourced districts can take on such efforts, the students who most need future-ready learning are the least likely to receive it. Addressing the Constraints Knot is ultimately a question of our collective commitment to all learners, not just a question of policy alignment.

Untangling this knot requires coordinated action across multiple levels simultaneously. Standards must name competencies explicitly. Accountability systems must measure what matters, not only what is easy to test. Higher education must develop and signal pathways for recognizing competency evidence alongside traditional credentials. The groundwork for each of these changes is already being laid in pockets across the country. What is needed now is coordination to turn isolated progress into field-wide movement to benefit all learners.

Key actors: state education leaders, district superintendents, policy advocates, accountability experts, higher education leaders, curriculum rating bodies, trusted conveners.

IN PRACTICE:
Navigating Policy Constraints in Kentucky

Kentucky illustrates how a state can begin loosening the Constraints Knot while maintaining accountability systems. Although the state's current system relies on standardized testing and metrics such as graduation rates, the policy environment is shifting. In 2024, the Kentucky Department of Education published prototypes of a new assessment and accountability framework and has since released a new version (2025) that illustrates a balanced approach for accountability (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025). Included within the framework are local accountability indicators that reflect district priorities and state accountability indicators such as summative reading and math assessments. This approach was codified in House Bill 257 (Kentucky Department of Education, 2026). With a balanced approach, Kentucky's law supports local control while preserving a separate state accountability system that meets federal requirements. This dual structure captures the reality many districts face: Kentucky has not eliminated legacy accountability, but it has begun creating an officially recognized space where communities can define and report a broader picture of student growth and success and focus on ensuring students have vibrant learning experiences.

Kentucky's assessment approach is designed to align with Portrait frameworks and support districts in measuring competencies rather than solely focusing on aggregate achievement. For example, districts are required to administer common statewide measures for science; however, districts may choose to include the assessment in local accountability and add other Portrait-aligned competency-based measures for science performance. Additionally, districts may determine their own interim assessments for reading and math. In practice, such flexibility gives districts a policy rationale for collecting evidence that traditional tests do not capture and that measure Portrait competencies through capstone projects, student-led conferences, and other demonstrations of durable skills.

Kentucky's progress toward a more locally responsive accountability system was also supported by intentional investment in building the educator capacity necessary to make a Portrait of a Learner meaningful in practice. Through a statewide RFP, the Kentucky Department of Education provided funding and support to advance vibrant learning experiences aligned with the durable skills and competencies communities identified for their graduates. Kentucky's regional educational cooperatives, working alongside a statewide director, provided the infrastructure to bring this work directly to educators and classrooms across the Commonwealth. This investment helped establish an important foundation for the assessment and accountability

changes that followed: districts were not simply gaining greater flexibility in how they defined and measured student success; educators were also developing the instructional practices, learning experiences, and authentic evidence of learning needed to bring their local Portrait of a Learner to life. Kentucky's experience demonstrates that creating space for local accountability is strengthened when policy flexibility is paired with sustained investment in educators' capacity to create the vibrant learning experiences that a broader definition of student success demands — structural changes that effectively address the Constraints Knot.

Based on an interview with Amy Razor, Executive Director, and Robb Smith, Chief Academic Officer, Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services, June 2026.

The Future of Assessment and Accountability in Kentucky

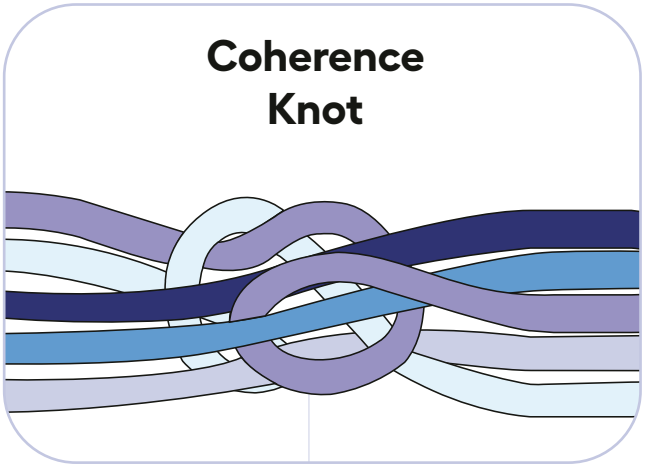
The balanced accountability system will include components that reflect local priorities, areas of choice, and components that are the same for all schools.

Together, these components support a local Portrait of a Learner, drive continuous improvement, and foster personalized, student-centered experiences.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education (2025, p. 2)

KNOT 3: THE COHERENCE KNOT

The operational barriers to implementation



Even with collective will and enabling policy, enacting change at the classroom level is challenging. This knot represents the operational and technical impediments that prevent coherent implementation of the Portrait of a Graduate, even when people understand the vision and want to make it real.

Schools of education do not prepare teachers for instruction that knits future-ready skills together with academic content. If teachers have not experienced future-ready learning themselves, and/or been supported in facilitating it, no amount of curriculum alignment or assessment design will move the needle.

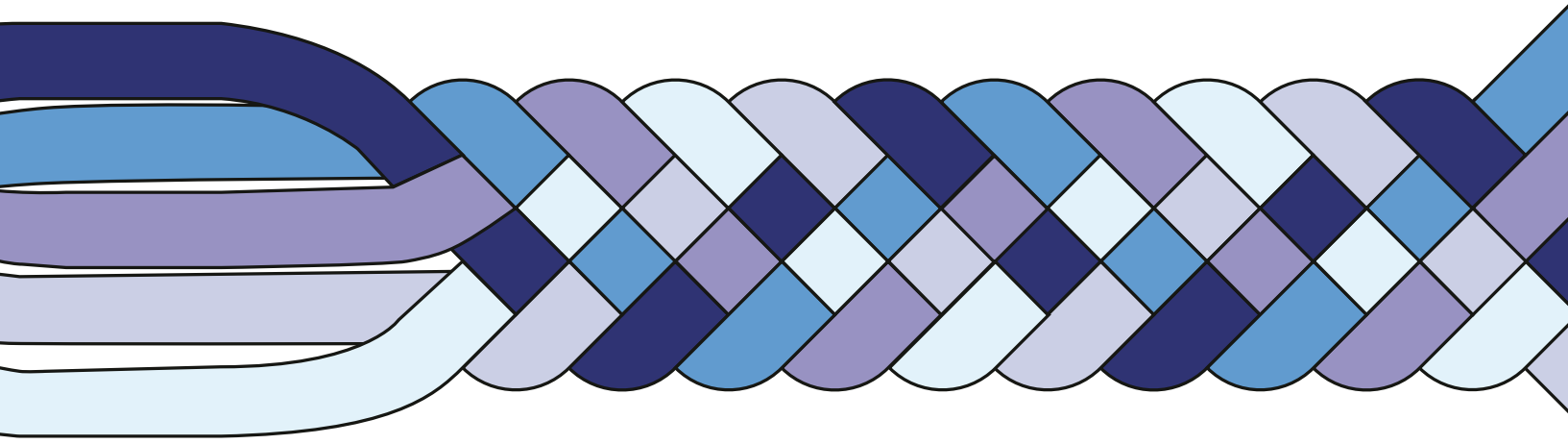
And as mentioned previously, without explicit future-ready standards, it is impossible to align assessment and professional development. Today's assessment systems are not designed to measure what integrated learning looks like. District structures often silo the work: one team oversees curriculum, another is responsible for assessment, and another owns the Portrait initiative. Who owns integration and implementation across all five strands? When districts adopt Portrait frameworks but curriculum, instruction, or assessment remain the same, the competencies remain aspirational.

Untangling this knot requires treating all five strands — standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning — as a single system. It means building genuine infrastructure for integration: shared planning time, learning progressions that show where and how skills develop, assessments that capture more than content knowledge, professional learning that prepares teachers to facilitate integrated instruction, and someone explicitly accountable for coherence across the system.

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

- Have we defined clear learning progressions?
- Are teachers supported in facilitating future-ready learning experiences for students?
- Are curriculum materials high quality and do they explicitly intertwine the competencies in our Portrait with academic content?
- Does how we measure student learning match what we are actually asking students to do?
- Who [in our district and school systems] is responsible for ensuring the strands are woven together coherently and are free of knots?
- Have we changed how we plan curriculum, design assessments, and structure professional learning, or did we simply add Portrait language to existing documents?

Key actors: curriculum developers, assessment designers, educator preparation programs, district academic leaders, instructional coaches, students.



IN PRACTICE:
Building Integration Infrastructure in Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) is deepening its commitment to making the Future-Ready Profile a consistent and shared experience for every student they serve. The district has a long history with graduate profile work. With its newest strategic framework, *Compass to 2030: Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow*, launched for 2025–2030, the district sharpened that commitment — revising its graduate profile into a student learner profile by engaging students at each level to define the attributes in their own language. That process helped adults connect to the profile in new ways and sharpened a central challenge: "Students need to know where they are learning these skills and how they will know they have developed them."

The district's current approach is framed around taking the Future-Ready Profile from poster to practice. To do that, district leadership indicates that academic foundations and future-ready skills must be understood as inseparable. Rather than creating another top-down initiative or set of resources for educators that might or might not be used, the district is focusing on a "desire paths" approach: identifying the places where the profile already naturally lives in classrooms, schools, curriculum, extracurriculars, and student experiences — and where it doesn't yet — and using both to inform what needs to be created. The district is organizing efforts for design fellow cohorts that include teachers, instructional specialists, building administrators, and central office staff to surface where Future-Ready attributes are already alive in practice, identify where gaps exist, and develop the conditions needed to make the work non-negotiable across all schools. The district plans to surface what is working, clarify where the profile fits naturally, and codify the structures and conditions needed to make the work sustainable. Ultimately, the goal is not to force every future-ready attribute into every subject, but to help educators understand how and where skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, resilience, or cultural competence are genuinely taught, practiced, and reflected on by students.

Within Virginia Beach City Public Schools, the Future-Ready work is broader than instructional alignment alone. With a mantra of "no escape routes for the Future-Ready Profile," district leaders plan to make the profile visible and meaningful across every touchpoint in the system: classrooms, schools, central office, family and community engagement, partner relationships, new-hire onboarding, athletics, activities, and school leadership. To support shared learning across the district, leaders will visit schools, interview principals, collect artifacts, share exemplars of Future-Ready work internally, and create more peer-to-peer opportunities for school personnel to learn from one another.

The district is also building feedback loops through student surveys, parent familiarity data, and staff surveys about their role in supporting the profile. In this way, the renewed effort is both practical and developmental: VBCPS is addressing the Coherence Knot by using student voice, educator expertise, data, and cross-system collaboration to make the profile a shared language and a lived experience for every student.

Based on an interview with Dr. Lisa Banicky, Executive Director of the Office of Planning, Innovation and Accountability, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, May 2026.

A Note on How the Knots Interact

These knots rarely emerge in isolation. Policy constraints make it harder to demonstrate success, which in turn undermines conviction. Lack of coherence in implementation produces fragmented results, reducing stakeholder buy-in and making policymakers reluctant to provide flexibility. Without shared conviction, even enabling policies and available tools go unused.

The value of this framework lies in helping leaders identify which knot is most impeding progress in their context, and who has the leverage to help loosen it.

Section 3: Using the Knots to Take Action

The three knots are to help you diagnose where your system is stuck and plan the work that comes next. We invite you to use this framing to consider how to focus your efforts.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

To determine the best place to focus your efforts, consider three possible ways to prioritize:

- **Option 1:** Focus on where your rope is the most tangled. Which knot is the most acute at this time?
- **Option 2:** Focus on the one knot that is making it impossible to loosen the others. Is there one knot that must get resolved before you can make progress anywhere else?
- **Option 3:** Alternatively, you may want to focus on where you have a willing group of actors. If you have willing partners in a particular group (e.g. parents or policymakers), or within a certain subset of schools, consider starting there.

The action planning guides below provide a quick way to quantify where your highest priority needs are and what related action steps may be useful.

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Evaluating the **Conviction Knot**

Evaluate how strongly educators, families, leaders, and community members understand and support the case for future-ready learning.

1 — Not yet: little or no evidence is in place
2 — Beginning: some evidence exists, but practice is limited or inconsistent
3 — Developing: clear evidence exists across much of the system
4 — Established: strong, consistent evidence is embedded across the system

Statement	Score (1–4)
1. School leaders, educators, families, and community members can explain why future-ready skills matter for students.	
2. K–12 families understand how our Portrait framework connects to what students need for college, career, and life.	
3. Educators see future-ready skills as part of academic learning, not an additional initiative.	
4. We regularly make K–12 student work visible to show what future-ready skills look like in practice.	
5. Our district communicates consistently about why this work matters and what it looks like in practice.	
	Total Score: _____ / 20

Interpretation

16–20 = Strong conviction foundation
Shared understanding and commitment are evident across stakeholder groups.

11–15 = Developing conviction
Commitment exists, but some groups or practices need attention.

5–10 = Conviction Knot needs attention
A lack of shared understanding or commitment may be limiting progress.

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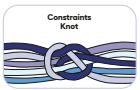

Evaluating the **Constraints Knot**

Evaluate the structural conditions shaping your work to identify where flexibility exists and where broader action may be needed.

1 — Not yet: little or no evidence is in place
2 — Beginning: some evidence exists, but practice is limited or inconsistent
3 — Developing: clear evidence exists across much of the system
4 — Established: strong, consistent evidence is embedded across the system

Statement	Score (1–4)
1. Our instructional systems align to state standards alongside future-ready competencies.	
2. Our K–12 accountability system creates room to measure future-ready competencies alongside required academic measures.	
3. Across our schools, educators consistently track and record students' demonstrations of competencies.	
4. Across grade levels, we have integrated flexible and grade-appropriate approaches to evaluate the development of Portrait competencies including portfolios, performance assessments, capstones and student-led demonstrations.	
5. We collaborate with higher education institutions and employers to ensure graduates have evidence needed to apply and qualify for postsecondary opportunities.	
	Total Score: _____ / 20

Interpretation

16–20 = Enabling conditions
Policies and structures provide meaningful support for future-ready learning.

11–15 = Mixed conditions
Some flexibility exists alongside structural barriers.

5–10 = Significant constraints
Structural conditions may be limiting implementation.

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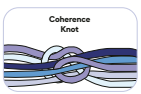


Evaluating the **Coherence Knot**

Evaluate how well standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning work together to make future-ready skills part of students' everyday learning.

1 — Not yet: little or no evidence is in place
2 — Beginning: some evidence exists, but practice is limited or inconsistent
3 — Developing: clear evidence exists across much of the system
4 — Established: strong, consistent evidence is embedded across the system

Statement	Score (1–4)
1. Our standards and learning progressions show where and how future-ready skills develop across K–12.	
2. Our curriculum and materials integrate future-ready skills with academic content.	
3. Educators receive the time, professional learning, and examples they need to facilitate integrated learning.	
4. Our assessments capture both academic learning and future-ready competencies in context.	
5. System operations reflect Portrait-aligned coherence across curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning.	
	Total Score: _____ / 20

Interpretation

16–20 = Strong coherence
Core systems work together to support integrated future-ready learning.

11–15 = Developing coherence
Some strands are aligned, but gaps or inconsistencies remain.

5–10 = Coherence Knot needs attention
Disconnected systems or practices may be limiting implementation.

Conviction depends on engaging families, educators, and community members and on making student work visible in ways that no framework document can match. Policy constraints are addressed when policymakers establish accountability systems that measure what matters and create room for districts and schools to innovate. Coherence emerges from curriculum and instructional practices that interweave future-ready skills with academic content, assessments that capture competencies in context and professional learning to help teachers make the shift.

This work is complex, but practitioners are already making strong progress. States are experimenting with and enacting new policies, and researchers and developers are building better tools to measure competencies and document future-ready learning. Additionally, students are often active contributors in making this work sustainable and real.

What accelerates progress is an investment in and coordination of what works, and the conditions that make a difference.

The invitation is the same regardless of where you sit: diagnose which knot is tightest in your context. Find others pulling on the same thread. Share what you learn to keep the momentum building.

This important work cannot wait for perfect conditions. The students sitting in our classrooms right now will not get a second chance at this stage of their lives. They are graduating into an economy being reshaped by artificial intelligence, into civic life that badly needs people who can think critically and communicate honestly, and into a world that will ask far more of them than content knowledge alone. They deserve schools built for the world they are actually entering, not the one their parents did.

That is what this work is ultimately about. Not a new framework, a new vocabulary, or a new set of tools, though all of those can help. Transforming K–12 teaching and learning, so that future-ready skills are genuinely taught, practiced, and evidenced for every student in every classroom, is how we ensure that every learner, regardless of circumstance, has the best possible opportunity to build a life of their own choosing.

We know what this requires: shared conviction, enabling policy, and coherent implementation, sustained over years and carried by many hands. What we cannot afford is more time spent admiring the problem. The urgency is real, and so is the opportunity in front of us.

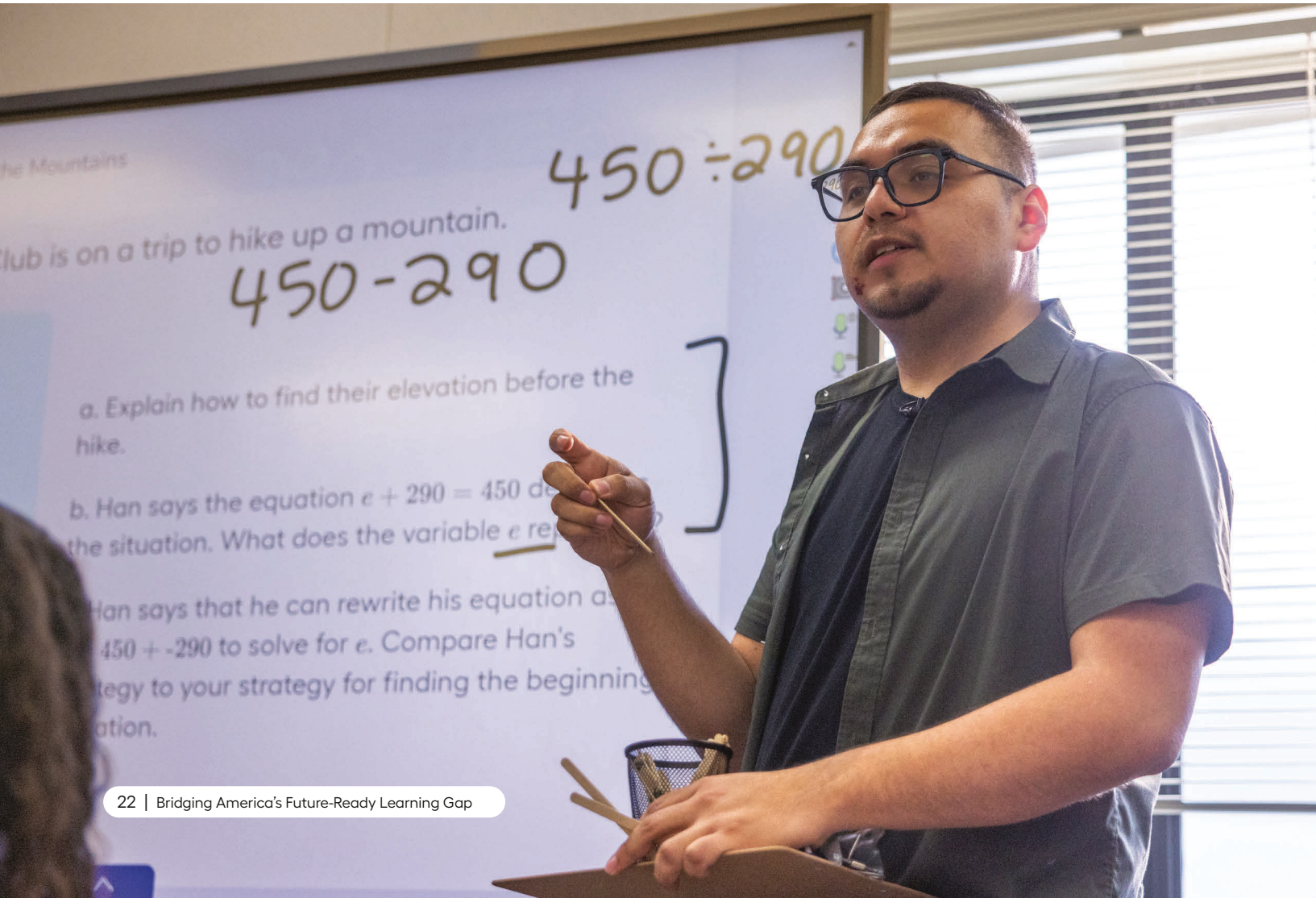
Appendix

From Dialogue to Action

Evaluating the knots is necessary, but evaluation alone does not untangle them. State and district leaders, practitioners, and pioneers in curriculum and assessment development with extensive experience implementing Portrait of a Graduate frameworks convened in early 2026 to address the harder question: *given what we know about why implementation stalls, what should we actually do first?*

What follows reflects that collective intelligence. It is not an exhaustive list of everything that could be done, nor a prescribed sequence that every system must follow. Think of it instead as a set of starting points drawn from the lived experiences of leaders.

Taken together, they reflect a shared conviction: the field has diagnosed this problem long enough. The question now is whether we are willing to act on what we know.



Initiatives Worth Exploring

Convening participants evaluated a range of potential initiatives with an effort-impact lens. Three emerged as near-term starting points, not because they are the only things worth doing, but because they are achievable, build on existing systems, and generate visible evidence quickly.

AGREEMENT ON CORE COMPETENCIES AND DEFINITIONS

A shared definitional framework for future-ready skills, crosswalked to existing frameworks, that provides common language and grade-level progressions across systems. Participants described this as "high impact with large effects" and identified it as a prerequisite for almost everything else: sharing performance assessments, building portable curriculum resources, enabling districts to implement without reinventing terminology district by district. The effort is significant, comparable to major standards work. But without it, the field will continue talking past itself, and curriculum, assessment, and professional learning providers will continue building to incompatible frameworks. This is the kind of work that, once done, becomes infrastructure everyone uses without noticing it is there.

HIGH-QUALITY STUDENT WORK LIBRARY WITH CALIBRATION TOOLS

One of the highest-leverage investments a district or state can make requires no new curriculum, no policy change, and no large upfront cost: a curated library of student exemplars demonstrating what future-ready skills look like in practice across grade levels and subjects, with calibration tools that help educators develop shared understanding of quality.

The need is acute. Most educators, families, and policymakers cannot picture what "critical thinking" looks like in a third-grade math class or what collaboration looks like in an 11th-grade history essay. Competency language stays abstract until student work makes it concrete. Convening participants noted that calibration becomes especially powerful when built into existing planning routines rather than treated as a separate professional development event and that technology can significantly reduce the time it requires.

A district can begin with a modest set of examples, build shared understanding internally, and contribute to a broader collection over time. The strategic value extends beyond instruction. When families can see what their children actually produce, Portrait frameworks earn a kind of credibility that no vision document can provide. Visibility is not a communications strategy. It is how this work builds the public trust it needs to last.

SYSTEM-READINESS DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

Diagnostic tools can help schools, districts, and states honestly assess their readiness to implement Portrait frameworks before launching ambitious initiatives. Too many Portrait efforts fail not because the vision is wrong but because systems move before foundational conditions exist. Diagnostics surface what is in place and what is missing, helping leaders avoid the predictable failures that erode momentum and stakeholder confidence. Curating existing tools from across organizations is more feasible than building from scratch and gets useful resources into practitioners' hands faster.

CURRICULUM-EMBEDDED ASSESSMENTS WITH FUTURE-READY SKILLS

Rather than creating parallel assessment systems for future-ready skills, the most promising near-term path embeds these competencies within existing high-quality instructional materials. Districts already use curriculum. Starting there builds on what is in place rather than asking exhausted systems to stand up something new alongside it. When assessments are embedded within curriculum, teachers see what integrated instruction looks like, students get regular practice with competencies in context, and leaders can track progress without adding new testing burdens.

Participants described this as a high-impact, achievable initiative. In this work, it is important that competencies be genuinely taught and evidenced in the materials, not just labeled after the fact. Labeling is layering by another name, and the field has seen enough of that already.

SUPPORT FOR FUTURE-READY SKILLS NETWORKS

A network through which districts implementing Portrait frameworks learn and problem-solve together, share examples across different contexts, and generate the kind of momentum that isolated pilots cannot produce on their own. Participants observed simply that "districts help each other," and that visible progress through shared convenings and ongoing communication has impact even in lighter-lift forms. When districts see peers succeeding under similar constraints, conviction grows, proof points accumulate, and shared solutions to coherence challenges emerge. Existing infrastructure through organizations like AASA or states' regional service centers can provide a foundation to build upon rather than starting from nothing.

Acknowledgments

This white paper builds on insights shared by state education leaders, district superintendents, assessment pioneers, curriculum directors, workforce partners, and education innovators who convened in Tempe, Arizona, in early 2026. Additionally, 15 district leaders and superintendents granted in-depth interviews about their experience developing and implementing their Portrait frameworks. Collectively, candid dialogue, grounded in real implementation experience, shaped every section of this paper.

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