

Statewide districts: A way to unleash creative new learning options—and study them as they grow

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Imagine an education system where every young person could access any learning opportunity they wanted—in any school, museum, summer camp, or park, a nearby farm or a local business. Students could learn together in groups, with community members, and receive the tutoring, therapy, or support they need. They would have opportunities to explore their interests, make connections, form new relationships, and develop critical skills and knowledge. Learning would be individualized but also social and communal. Students would form friendships and discover opportunities for collaboration and leadership.

Young people and their families would work closely with trained guides, who would help them set learning goals and design customized plans to meet those goals. The education system would ensure all young people, especially youth who are in marginalized groups, could access learning opportunities that meet their needs and graduate ready to pursue their ambitions.

New visions of learning like this are far easier to imagine than they are to create in the real world. But ingredients that would make it possible have been falling into place for years—and that process accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Students, families, and educators discovered new possibilities and may have permanently raised their expectations about how much control they have over where, when, how, and with whom children can learn.

The rules defining how schooling works are up for grabs like never before. There may never have been so many opportunities to innovate in public education—or so much

need. School districts are struggling to keep teachers on the job and schools open, much less address the mental health and academic toll of the pandemic or translate the possibilities uncovered during the crisis into lasting systemic transformation.

How can school systems possibly find the bandwidth to act on these new visions for public education when their leaders are constantly trapped in crisis mode?

States can help by investing in dedicated structures to support innovation and alternative, flexible ways of learning. One particular mechanism might allow them to pull this off: statewide school districts. These entities could be dedicated to designing bold new visions of what public education can be and working with schools and communities to design local solutions. They could create space and flexibility for innovations to flourish—while also safeguarding students and protecting the public interest.

Statewide districts would be freed from some of the rules that traditionally constrain schools, like seat-time requirements or traditional graduation requirements. They would take responsibility for identifying problems and needs, leading efforts to design new solutions, testing those solutions, analyzing results, and elevating promising approaches so other school systems could learn from them.

Existing statewide efforts by governments and nonprofit organizations to create and support innovative new learning opportunities can help inform policymakers and illuminate some aspects of the benefits a statewide district could provide. Take, for example, the following:

[Florida Virtual School](#) operates as a statewide online public school system run by a state-appointed board. It partners with the state’s 67 local districts, allowing them to offer virtual schools of their own through franchises, but it also enrolls students directly—just like any other online public school—and enrolls tuition-paying students from all over the world.

[District C](#) in North Carolina isn’t a school district at all. It’s a nonprofit organization that partners with schools and districts to give their students access to high-quality, career-connected learning opportunities and trains teachers to support them.



In New Hampshire, the statewide virtual school is called [VLACS](#). VLACS offers a range of options for students to earn credits, work toward a diploma, or explore interests by taking competency-based courses. Most students take these courses online, but the school encourages a hybrid approach and offers an ecosystem of learning opportunities that include in-person job shadowing, micro-internships at businesses, and on-site apprenticeships. Students complete projects aligned to standards and competencies. They can complete their work when and where they want, advance when they're ready, and demonstrate knowledge and skills gained outside of school through performance-based assessments. VLACS assigns an advisor to every student to support their learning in whichever path they chose. Students can enroll full-time or part-time and attend other schools or education providers.

New Hampshire also created a policy that allows students to earn course credits by demonstrating mastery of the material, rather than the amount of time they spend in class. As a result, VLACS students can receive credit for learning wherever it happens.

FLVS, District C, and VLACS show mechanisms for statewide initiatives that overcome barriers that traditionally constrain schools or traditional districts. Building beyond these examples, statewide districts could provide many opportunities to unleash creative new learning options, including the following:

Provide infrastructure and supports to allow cities, community groups, or even individuals to form small learning communities

During the pandemic, many parents and communities formed learning pods. Some of these efforts live on as microschools, homeschool cooperatives, or other learning communities. Many of these learning environments are designed in ways that challenge the standard definition of school—or the traditional methods of staffing them, regulating them, measuring their effectiveness, and providing their students with transportation or other services.

We learned from [extensive research](#) on similar efforts during the pandemic that parents and teachers value the flexibility and close relationships these learning environments afforded. However, many pandemic learning communities have failed to continue due in part to the lack of connections to a larger system—including professional collaborations with other educators, assurances that students could access special education services and other essential supports, mechanisms to help families find the right fit, and access to reliable sources of public funding. Further, states have not created sufficient legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure security and stability for educators and families.

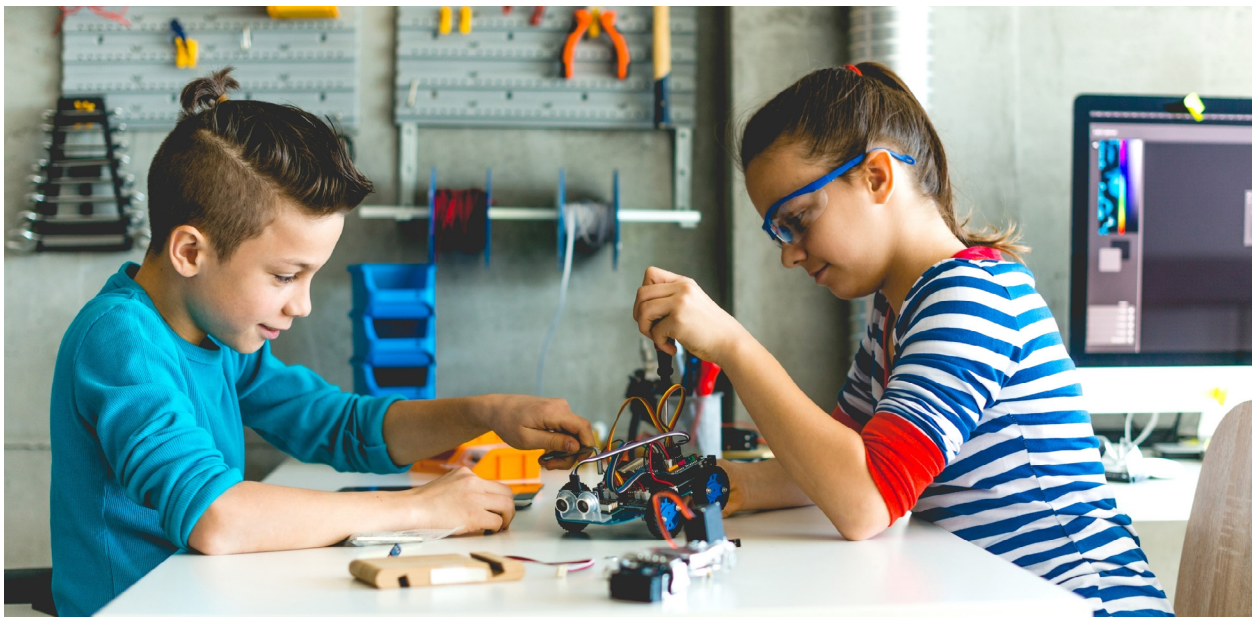
Some states are putting policies in place that would create a legal framework to allow parents and educators to work together to build these types of flexible learning environments—essentially creating a policy framework to support teacher-led learning pods.

Given the demands and need to continue to fulfill efforts in local districts, it might be unreasonable to ask every school district to provide comprehensive support to parents and educators interested in these models. A statewide district could help by assuming responsibility for special education services, providing professional

development and networking opportunities to teachers who would otherwise work in isolation, and creating centralized guides to help parents and teachers find each other.

In Arizona, the Black Mothers Forum enters subcontracting agreements with online charter schools, which allow its growing network of microschoools to receive public funding. In Nevada, the City of North Las Vegas started operating the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy during the pandemic, but the effort's long-term future hinges on sustainable policies to support microschoooling. Students are registered as homeschoolers, and the city is funding the effort with the help of pandemic relief funds.

Creating a statewide district would allow Nevada or Arizona to give microschoools direct access to public funding, without creating an unregulated, "anything goes" approach. Cities or community organizations that want to sponsor new learning opportunities could apply to join the statewide district and start receiving public funding. The statewide district would also take responsibility for ensuring that students are safe and that they receive high-quality learning experiences. Because it would oversee an array of learning opportunities that look nothing like a traditional school, the statewide district would provide opportunities to design new, more meaningful approaches to measuring student learning and ensuring quality.



Create a statewide system to validate students' learning, and give them credit for it

Learning happens in and out of school. But schools tend to undervalue learning that does not happen on their watch. New state policies are creating opportunities for students to receive course credit for learning outside the classroom, and initiatives like the Mastery Transcript Consortium are working on ways to verify learning that happens "beyond the confines of the school's physical plant and daily schedule."

VLACs enables students to demonstrate learning and get credit for it—whether learning happens through online courses, projects, jobs, or internships. Similarly, a statewide district could take responsibility for mapping the competencies students need to demonstrate for graduation, assessing and verifying their learning, and ensuring that learning is certified on their transcripts so other educators and institutions know what competencies a student has gained.

Allow youth to access a variety of service providers and mentors

All students should have access to diverse providers, including local schools, online courses, businesses that provide internships, youth development programs, and colleges or universities. The statewide district would curate these options and ensure all students have access to them.

Some schools already do this. In Indiana, the charter school operator GEO Academies encourages its students to enroll in classes at nearby colleges, universities, and technical centers. The school provides guidance, helps students choose postsecondary options that fit their needs, and covers their tuition.

In Utah, My Tech High enables mostly homeschoolers to access a percentage of per-pupil public funding for online courses, local district classes, educational resources such as computers, or locally provided learning experiences, ranging from horseback riding to math tutoring and community college courses. Parents of students who participate get access to online curricula that are usually only available to those enrolled in higher education institutions. My Tech High also provides learning advisers who meet with students and families weekly.

A statewide district could ensure all students have access to these services: advisers, a wealth of quality curricula, and access to diverse learning options—such as internships, mentors, and community colleges—from multiple providers they could sign up for, free of charge.

Ensure all families can access educational options

Opening up an array of different learning options that go beyond traditional school threatens to amplify a problem that already affects families choosing schools: low-income families, students with special needs, or parents who lack expert guides to the local education system wind up not knowing about or having barriers to accessing options that should be available to them. They might lack information about potential choices or transportation that would help their children access them.

The statewide district could take charge of reducing barriers to the panoply of learning options by ensuring every family has access to information about the options that are available, advisers who can help them make sense of that information, and clear guidance on how families can navigate an array of options that includes microschoools, part-time schooling, “anytime-anywhere” learning, and other departures from traditional schooling that might not make sense at first.

Conduct or commission research on promising innovations

As more families and educators seek new approaches to technology-enabled, smaller, or unbundled learning environments, states will need rigorous evidence on their effectiveness.

A statewide district could take responsibility for commissioning studies to document emerging best practices, test the efficacy of different approaches, and collect data to inform parents and teachers who are considering new learning approaches.



Now is the time to invest in innovation

As they confront staffing shortages, mental health challenges, and the academic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, public education leaders are coming to grips with the reality that the system that failed so many students during the pandemic and has left educators burned out, frustrated, or on the hunt for other jobs will not support an effective recovery from the pandemic.

But they must also be left to wonder: When can we possibly find the time to focus on building a new and better system? States have an opportunity to help local schools and their communities solve that problem—an unprecedented infusion of federal funding to help them pull it off.

Making a statewide district operational will require state policymakers to consider the following:

- **Divisible funding.** Funding should follow students to the learning options they choose—and allow students to choose multiple options. Some students might only take a single course through a provider offered by a statewide district and take the rest of their courses through a conventional school. Florida's

funding approach, in which state funding flows to public schools and online learning providers based on the courses each student takes from different providers, offers one potential model for divisible funding that does not rely on a politically contentious voucher mechanism. But funding does not need to be confined to courses, strictly defined. My Tech High, for example, brokers a wide range of learning opportunities for students, and provides families an allowance they can spend on learning opportunities or supports that they choose.

- **Governance structures.** The statewide district should have statewide jurisdiction and be insulated and distinct from conventional education policies and governance. The district’s governing board should be made up of people who are aligned with the purpose and charge of the district. Students and families should have representation on the board or other formal channels to offer feedback.
- **Application processes.** Educators and community organizations should have clear processes to apply to become part of a statewide district.
- **Staffing flexibility.** Many of the roles within a statewide district or its partner organizations will look different from typical teacher job descriptions. Learning guides, advisers, or community-based learning providers could still have the same job protections as traditional educators. The statewide district should have the flexibility to employ educators in these capacities and to share staff with its district and community-based partners.
- **Research and development.** Blurring the lines between high school, college, and career preparation. Reimagining the educator profession. Supporting academic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. States likely have a long list of priorities a statewide district could help solve. They should strike a balance between prioritizing key statewide challenges and embracing bottom-up approaches that allow communities to define their own needs and devise new ways of meeting them. The statewide district should study the innovations it supports, share lessons and practices that emerge with educators and community leaders, and identify new challenges future innovations should address.

The pandemic underscored the need for a public education system that is responsive to the needs of students and families. Communities and educators are eager to build that system. States can help by designing policies that support their efforts, ensure all students have access to new options, and surface lessons in real time about what works and what doesn’t.

We can’t afford to allow possibilities that came into view during the pandemic to vanish in a rush to return to normal, nor can we afford to watch innovations flourish outside of public education but remain inaccessible to students who stand to benefit from them. We need to build public education systems that encourage and support innovation—and we need states to help.

About Education Reimagined

Education Reimagined is a non-profit organization committed to making learner-centered education available to every child in the United States. Education Reimagined unites and ignites learner-centered leaders – young people, educators, administrators, policy advocates, and leaders from higher education, business, unions, youth development, and philanthropy – who are building the models, systems, public will, and policy conditions to transform education in the U.S. Over the last 8 years, Education Reimagined has built a diverse community of hundreds of cutting edge practitioners and leaders who have worked to envision and bring to life a whole new view of education.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.



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