

Scaling Student Success



Mission

To more holistically and equitably prepare young people in California for future success in college, career, and civic life.

Background

As a California partnership, Scaling Student Success is working to “redefine student success to encompass the competencies and skills needed to thrive in our modern world.”¹ Scaling Student Success organizes a variety of mutually reinforcing field-building strategies, including shared learning, partnerships, policy, research and communication, all powered by a whole child vision for California education.

In alliance with organizations across the state, Scaling Student Success, supports school districts and county offices of education in creating and implementing unique, locally-developed whole child visions, typically called Portrait of a Learner or Graduate Profile.²

¹ [Scaling Student Success](#), Who we are

² Districts use various terms - Graduate Profile, Portrait of a Learner, Learner Portrait, Learner Profiles. For simplicity's sake, this profile uses the term “Portrait of a Learner” unless referring to the terminology used by a specific district.

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with:

Lupe Gomez, Director of Community Schools, Santa Ana Unified School District

Andrée Grey, Superintendent, Encinitas Union School District

Roman Stearns, Founder and Executive Director, Scaling Student Success

Strategies for Coherence

Scaling Student Success elevates the Portrait of a Learner as the mechanism for defining school districts' vision for student success, driving transformational change, and setting goals and priorities, including if and how to engage with different funding opportunities and initiatives that become available. Education leaders are better able to sustain a focused approach and strategies because their interest-holders (students, families, staff and community partners) have co-created the shared vision of a successful learner and graduate.

Scaling Student Success advances this approach in partnership with districts by:



Focused Priorities

- (1) Developing a Portrait of a Learner
- (2) Advocating for local and state policies that advance whole child education



Capacity Building

- (3) Implementing the systems and structures to actualize the Portrait of a Learner



1. Developing a Portrait of a Learner

This looks like...

- Using the Portrait of a Learner as a communication tool and community engagement process
- Answering the question: “What skills and competencies do we believe our students need to be ready for future success?”
- Embedding the Portrait of a Learner into ongoing district communication at all levels

At its most basic level, the Portrait of a Learner (Portrait) is a communication tool, leveraged by education leaders to help communities develop and sustain a shared vision for student outcomes. A Portrait evolves from a community-wide engagement process that answers the question: “What skills and competencies do we believe our students need to be ready for future success?” The collaborative process of developing the Portrait strengthens the relationships and partnership between the district and its community.

“In essence, a Graduate Profile can be considered a contract between the school district, its students, and the community to do everything within its means to foster the learning outcomes that prepare students for future success, and hold themselves collectively accountable for the results.”³

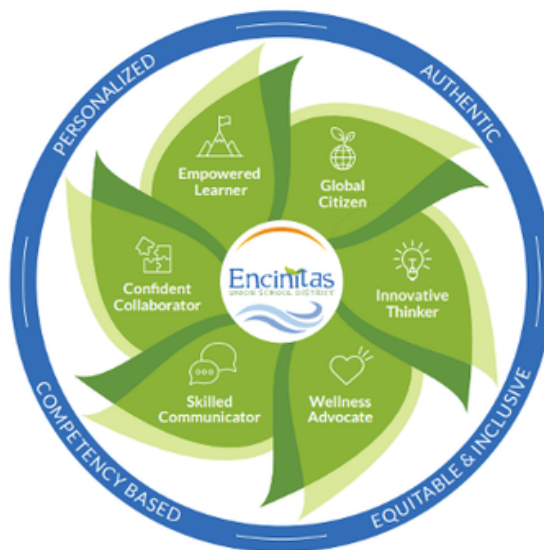
While Portraits vary from district to district, they usually include a mix of academic knowledge, workforce and career readiness skills, social-emotional skills and civic engagement.

Scaling Student Success provides online resources for districts hoping to create a Portrait. [Bringing a Graduate Profile to Life: A Blueprint](#) (2021) offers information about why and how to create a Portrait, as well as links to examples and references to organizations that can support the process. The Blueprint also highlights the essential role of the Portrait as a communications tool, including the very process of developing the profile as an opportunity to reach and engage the community.

³ [Scaling Student Success](#)

Perspective from the field:

- Superintendent Andrée Grey of **Encinitas Union School District** believes that communication is a major part of her role, and the competencies in the Learner Profile are at the center of her communication. A bi-weekly Superintendent newsletter includes dedicated sections for each of the competencies and bright spot profiles of school practices that advance the competencies. She embeds the Learner Profile values and competencies into communication to interest-holders at multiple levels in the district, including youth presentations to the school board, principal chats, the January “State of the District” speech, conversations with parents, and a weekly Superintendent message to staff. Department goals are intentionally connected to the district’s vision, mission and competencies. Every year, the district creates themed shirts related to the Learner Profile. Staff wear these shirts throughout the year, walking posters for the Learner Profile competencies and values. More examples from the Encinitas USD can be found in this Scaling Student Success Case Study.



Encinitas USD Learner Profile

2. Advocating for local and state policies that advance whole child education

This looks like...

- Convening the Reimagining California Schools Innovation Pilot - six experienced districts documenting proof points for policymakers
- Sharing policy recommendations through memos and presentations to state education leaders
- Advocating for a State Board Portrait of a Learner and alignment of the LCAP to whole child goals

Scaling Student Success convenes the Reimagining California Schools Innovation Pilot, a select group of six districts - Anaheim UHSD, Cajon Valley USD, Davis JUSD, Eureka City Schools, Lindsay USD and Vista USD - that have deep experience in

implementing Portraits of a Learner. In addition to supporting each other in the transformation of their own systems, the districts are working to identify proof points that demonstrate to state policymakers the positive outcomes when districts pursue a whole child vision.

These committed districts work with Scaling Student Success to document and share policy recommendations through policy memos and presentations to state education leaders. Their practitioner experience and perspective are helpful both in developing and communicating changes in state rules and regulations that would support more coherent education systems. The *2025 Policy White Paper*, for example, calls for the creation of a State Board Portrait of a Learner and alignment of the state's education policies and systems toward the Portrait of a Learner. It also recommends changing the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to include space for districts to document their whole child vision and align LCAP goals to that vision.

Capacity Building



3. Implementing the systems and structures to actualize the Portrait of a Learner

This looks like...

- Using the Five Cs from *Bringing a Graduate Profile to Life: A Blueprint* to guide implementation
- Joining the Community of Practice to learn from other districts implementing Portraits
- Participating in study tours to experience Portrait implementation in action

Beyond creating and communicating a Portrait of a Learner, Scaling Student Success emphasizes the critical need to implement the Portrait into daily classroom practices and district strategies to deliver whole child education. The majority of *Bringing a Graduate Profile to Life: A Blueprint* is dedicated to operationalizing the Portrait of a Learner. The Five Cs (see right) describe five interdependent phases of work:



The Five C's, Scaling Student Success

Coherent vision, Communication strategy, Culture & conditions to enable progress, Capacity to advance and Continuous improvement. The Blueprint details promising practices in each of these phases based on the expertise and experience of school districts that are already well along in their Portrait implementation journey. For each promising practice, the Blueprint provides links to organizations and publications with more strategies and tools for implementation.

Scaling Student Success also offers an ongoing Community of Practice for school districts that have Portraits and are interested in learning with and from one another about effective implementation strategies. The Community of Practice is organized into content strands based on common problems of practice and facilitated by a Scaling Student Success partner organization with expertise in the content area. The strands for the 2026–27 Community of Practice are:

- Strand A: Building Coherence: Mapping Connections to the Portrait of a Learner
- Strand B: Moving from Portrait to Daily Classroom Practice
- Strand C: Making Portrait Competencies Visible through Reflection, Evidence & Demonstration
- Strand D: Quantifying Portrait Success: Measuring Student Growth through Authentic Voice Data
- Strand E: Creating High Quality Performance Assessment: Authenticity, Rigor & Student Voice
- Strand F: Aligning Grading Practices to Portrait Competencies

The Community of Practice is supplemented by full-day study tours to experience the journeys of districts well on their way to realizing the competencies articulated in their Portraits. Scaling Student Success publishes brief case studies about each host district. To date, forty school districts have participated in the Community of Practice, learning from each other about effective practices and addressing their challenges with peer input and support from content experts.

Perspective from the field:

- The **Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD)**'s Graduate Profile is at the center of its coherence efforts. The district has connected its many state initiatives - Community Schools, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Expanded Learning - to the Graduate Profile, demonstrating how they work together to build student competencies. With this perspective, they have integrated the tiered supports of MTSS into their



Santa Ana USD Graduate Profile

Community Schools work and are holding monthly meetings with the directors of different departments - Expanded Learning, Family and Community Engagement, Teaching and Learning, Early Education - in order to better understand each other's work and how they are collectively supporting the Graduate Profile competencies.

Challenges

While writing a Portrait of a Learner can be a relatively straightforward process, it is far more complicated to create an authentic Portrait that includes the voices and perspectives of all interest-holders in the community, especially those who historically have been most marginalized. It is even more difficult to move the Portrait from a hallway poster to actual practice change in school buildings and classrooms. District and school staff may resist the mindset shift and disruption required to consider and plan for a broader set of skills and competencies beyond academics. Similarly, families are used to traditional school practices, including letter grades. They may be concerned about alternative grading systems that are more learner centered and measure skills beyond academics and that may be outside of the usual process for college admission and other post-graduate opportunities. The districts in the Reimagining California Schools Innovation Pilot are actively working with the California university systems to build awareness of alternate forms of assessment that align with the broader set of competencies and skills defined in Portraits of a Learner.

Impacts

Portraits are shifting the way that school districts and their communities are defining the skills and competencies of a successful graduate. A 2024 analysis of over 100 California district Portraits found that they expanded the definition of student success beyond academic measures to include durable skills - such as communication, cultural competence, adaptability - as well as civic and community engagement that young people need to be college, career and community ready.⁴

The number of districts with Portraits continues to grow. To date, 111 California school districts have created Portraits of a Learner. County Offices of Education - Yolo and San Diego, for example - are building their capacity to support Portrait development and implementation in their counties' districts, further accelerating the movement.

Scaling Student Success policy efforts have also impacted statewide infrastructure for coherence. The California State Board of Education recently adopted its Portrait of a Learner that "...provides a framework that can be used to connect curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student supports around a common purpose."⁵ The State Board's Portrait supports coherence by serving as a consistent north star to inform the board's policy decisions and guidance. It is an option, not a requirement, for districts and county offices of education to adopt as their own guiding document. The State Board's Portrait of a Learner is part of a broader set of changes in the California education system currently being proposed and gaining momentum.

⁴ California Graduate Portrait Analysis 2024: Trends & Patterns in K-12 Graduate Competency Frameworks, Impacter Pathway, 2024, p. 1.

⁵ California Department of Education Portrait of a Learner.