



**REIMAGINING AND INNOVATING THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION:  
ADVISORY GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS TO  
GOVERNOR MARK GORDON**

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## Executive Summary

Governor Gordon established the Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education (RIDE) Advisory Group to recommend bold ideas for the transformation of Wyoming education. Governor Gordon and the Advisory Group knew that those ideas had to come from the people of Wyoming: students, families, educational professionals, employers, community leaders, and more. And after surveying more than 7000 stakeholders and holding 17 listening sessions – in seven communities around the state, and with a statewide virtual session – the Advisory Group agreed to a core recommendation: **Wyoming’s education future lies in creating a student-centered educational experience that allows students to advance through material based on their mastery, and offering them rigorous pathways to the workforce regardless of whether or not they attend a four-year college.**

- The Advisory Group believes that students should be able to progress through academic content as soon as they are ready; advancement should be a product of mastery, not of seat time. If children are behind, schools will need a plan to support accelerated learning so that they get caught up and are on track to graduate ready for college and careers. But a shift to student-centered learning should allow children more freedom and control of their educational experience.
- The Advisory Group also believes that students should have more expansive pathway opportunities for career and technical education. A strong focus on pathways leading to high skill, high wage, and high demand employment will benefit students – and the state’s economy.

Truly implementing these proposals will require relatively fundamental changes to the state’s education system – but those are the changes the public wants. In the Advisory Group’s stakeholder survey, the issue areas highlighted as critical by the most stakeholders were “learning outcomes and expectations” and “class content and structure.” In the listening sessions and the Advisory Group’s deliberations, student-centered learning and improved pathways to the workforce emerged as important strategies for improving learning outcomes and expectations, and changing class content and structure.

The RIDE Advisory Group saw its charge as proposing a direction for Wyoming education policy, not resolving all of the many important questions that will need to be addressed for implementation to succeed. Accordingly, the Advisory Group recommends that the Governor, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and State Board of Education work together to develop more detailed implementation plans. Those plans will need to address statewide definitions of competency, give strong guidance to schools, support education professionals in delivering student-centered learning, define impactful pathway opportunities, and communicate clearly to families and the public about just what the change means.

All of this work should continue to draw on the wisdom of students, families, education professionals, and the broader community. And it should be complemented by critical work on other key priorities for the education system, including improving mental health supports and raising kindergarten readiness. The RIDE Advisory Group makes this call to action on student-centered learning and career pathways because it believes that the changes it proposes are an essential strategy for improving student outcomes – and that improving those outcomes will have positive ripple effects throughout Wyoming society.

The group’s members ask you to join them in pursuing the better future Wyoming’s children deserve.

## I. Introduction

When Governor Gordon asked the Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education (RIDE) Advisory Group to make recommendations for the transformation of the Wyoming education system, he was looking for big ideas. Even more importantly, he wanted those big ideas to come from the people of Wyoming – the kids who go to school every day, the families to whom they return, the education professionals who teach and support them, the employers for whom they will work, and the community leaders who help make all of it a reality. Then he asked the Advisory Group to take some of the best ideas from that extensive outreach, consult with innovative education leaders -- from Wyoming, other states, and national organizations -- and propose a path forward. This report represents that proposal.

To hear from the people of Wyoming, the RIDE Advisory Group circulated a survey that generated over 7,000 responses and held 17 listening sessions – including 14 in seven communities around the state. Its members listened carefully to what the people of Wyoming had to say, and to each other. And at the end of the process, the Advisory Group identified two innovative changes it thought were most likely to lead to improvements in the educational experiences of Wyoming children. **The major takeaway from this report is that the state’s future lies in creating a student-centered educational experience, and offering students rigorous pathways to the workforce regardless of whether or not they attend a four-year college:**

- Students should move through new academic content as soon as they are ready, based on their mastery of knowledge and their demonstration of essential skills, not on how much seat time they’ve spent in a class; and
- Wyoming must reinvigorate career-connected pathways that allow students to cultivate skills and credentials that set them up for career and life success.

To accomplish these goals, the Advisory Group recommends:

- That the Governor and State Superintendent work with the State Board of Education to develop more detailed implementation plans for student-centered learning – plans that address statewide definitions of competency, that are feasible to implement, that hold schools to high standards to ensure student progress, that offer high-quality preparation and professional development, and that have an embedded communication strategy that informs families and the public of what student-centered learning will really mean.
- That the Governor, Superintendent, and State Board also work together to define a new set of pathways for career and technical education – pathways that lead to high skill, high wage, and high demand employment. This will require the state to both build capacity and clear out barriers to innovation, a process that will need to involve the Legislature.

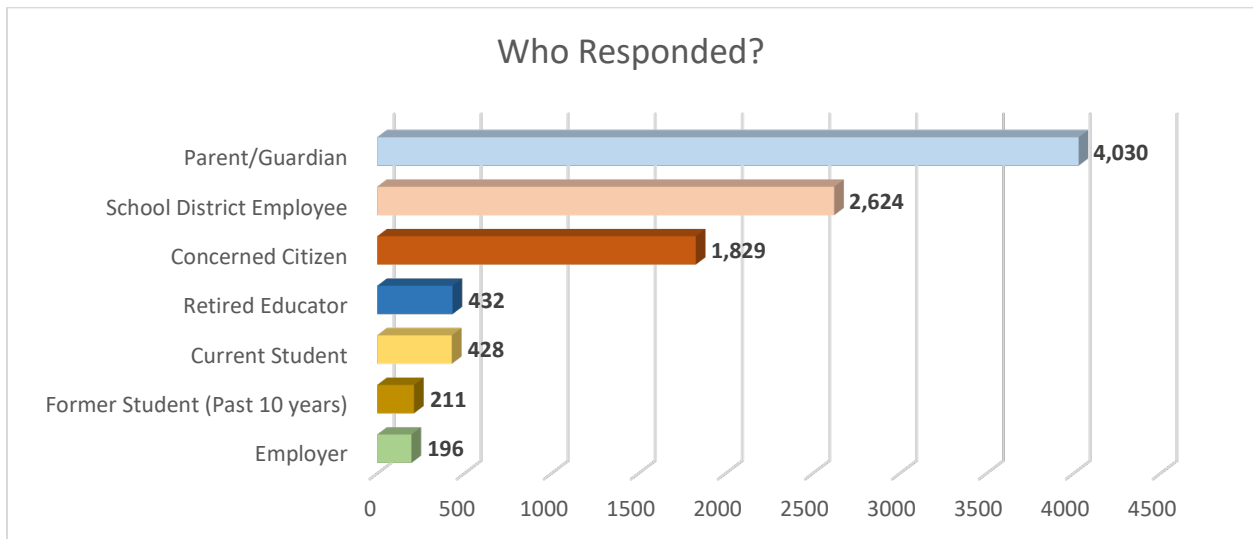
The Advisory Group also identified two other issues that it believes are urgently important to address for the overall success of the system: student and teacher mental health, and early childhood education.

Changing the system won’t happen overnight, but initiating the process of making the change cannot be delayed. The work ahead will not be easy. Yet it reflects important work that the people of Wyoming have identified as meaningful to the long-term success of our children. The RIDE Advisory Group never wavered in its focus on the hopes and dreams of those children, and the communities they call home. With that in mind, the Advisory Group offers its recommendations for the future of Wyoming education.

## II. Background and Process

In early 2022, the Advisory Group kicked off its process with a survey about education in Wyoming. The survey – administered by the Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center at the University of Wyoming – received 7,705 responses; the Survey & Analysis Center provided a summary of the results, which is available on-line [here](#).

Respondents were asked to identify themselves, and were allowed to choose more than one category:



Most of the survey respondents (59%) responded that they do not believe children are being adequately prepared for the future. When asked about key themes for improving the preparation of children, the two themes identified by the most respondents were:

- “learning outcomes and expectations”; and
- “class content and structure.”

Members of the RIDE Advisory Group also read through individual survey responses to identify trends and “Exciting and Innovative Ideas.” Themes that emerged from this broad question included addressing educator delivery methods, technology and virtual learning, innovative instruction, and mental health.

In June and July, members of the RIDE Advisory Group held listening sessions around the state. These listening sessions allowed interested stakeholders to come and share their views in greater depth. Two sessions each were held in Afton/Star Valley, Rock Springs, Powell, Riverton, Gillette, Casper, and Cheyenne. A focused listening session for students was also held in Cheyenne. At the end of the process, the Advisory Group hosted two virtual sessions; in those sessions, stakeholders were asked to comment about nine major topics identified in the stakeholder engagement process:

Competency-based learning, and allowing students to progress based on mastery rather than seat time	Rethinking and expanding options and pathways that better engage and prepare students for careers and life, in addition to college -- including arts education and career and technical education, and other work-based learning opportunities	Increasing local control while expecting districts to work with their communities to define what success looks like – which will include reading and math, but beyond that can be flexible to meet community needs – and then expecting districts to measure progress toward those goals
Taking new approaches to teacher preparation and elevating the profession	Increasing the focus on the years before third grade, including pre-kindergarten	Authorizing “districts of innovation” that allow flexibility to try new ideas
Increasing supports for student and educator mental health	Taking new approaches to school and district accountability, including approaches to assessment	Building capacity for parent engagement

Stakeholders at the virtual sessions then identified which of those topics most resonated with them. The Advisory Group took that feedback into account when developing its priority recommendations.

### III. Priority Recommendations

#### A. *Students Progress Based on Demonstration of Mastery, Not Seat Time*

For decades, students have progressed through schools in a familiar manner: they are assigned to a grade based primarily on their age, they join classmates in spending a fixed amount of time taking classes based on their grade, and when they have completed the required hours of classroom time, they move on to the next grade. Yet it is well known that students learn at different speeds -- and each student’s pace may vary further across content areas, depending on their level of personal interest.

All of this has been true for as long as any of us have been alive. The overall rhythm of schooling has looked roughly the same for students moving at any speed, for generation after generation. Indeed, the way schools are funded is largely based on enrollment and seat time.

But what if it could be different? What if each student could progress at their own pace, moving forward when they have mastered the material and getting additional time and support on areas of need? What if each school supported each student based on their individual learning needs – the ones who want to run fast, the ones who need intervention to accelerate their learning, and every pace in between. The vast majority of students will move at varying speeds in each of their subjects, to say nothing of the variance each student may have across subjects. Individualizing the speed of progress -- as well as the intensity of support focused on accelerating learning to close gaps -- will fundamentally change how students engage with schools, how schools engage with students, and how students build habits for lifelong learning.

This approach to student-centered learning – also known to education professionals as competency-based education, mastery-based education, or personalized learning – has inspired excitement around the country as more and more states seek to move toward implementing it. Indeed, some Wyoming districts are already adopting some of its principles. The RIDE Advisory Group imagines a dramatic and

systemic shift in which student-centered learning becomes the norm, rather than the exception. More than any other issue, this topic energized stakeholders throughout the process, and the Advisory Group sees it as critical to the future of Wyoming's education system.

Of course, just calling something student-centered learning does not make it an improvement. As the Advisory Group considered what a successful system of student-centered learning might look like, it identified the following elements that would be essential to its success:

- Strong definitions of “competency” across all school subjects, which makes it possible to understand how students are demonstrating mastery and are ready to move on. Fortunately, the State Board of Education has already taken an important leadership role in this area, working to develop a “Portrait of a Graduate” that can anchor a student-centered learning system. The Advisory Group heard concern from many people about the volume of standards and assessments in Wyoming, and the definition of competency should ultimately relieve schools of the burden of trying to do too much.
- High expectations of progress for all students. While flexibility is a critical benefit of student-centered learning, it cannot be an excuse for allowing students to fall behind. Learning gaps left unaddressed today create even larger disparities as students move on to more advanced content. Student-centered learning plans must be designed to keep students on grade level – and if a student is too far behind to be brought up to grade level in a given year, there must be a clear plan for acceleration to get the student on track. If a student is ahead of grade level, their student-centered learning plan should give them the opportunity to continue at an accelerated pace. The Advisory Group makes this recommendation to ensure that all students are given their best chance to succeed; teachers and school leaders should be supported to help students meet these high expectations of progress (as discussed below), and the state should think about how it may need to adjust its assessment and accountability policies to facilitate these changes.
- Clear school-level plans for implementing student-centered learning. While there are models and frameworks for implementation emerging in other states, the Advisory Group believes Wyoming education professionals should be actively involved in developing models that are likely to work across the state. The models and frameworks will need to strike a balance between providing clear guidance and direction to schools based on research and practice, and leaving flexibility in implementation that allows schools to take ownership of the process.
- Substantial support for education professionals to adapt their practices to this new approach. While many educators already incorporate elements of student-centered learning, a systemic shift this seismic will require deep and ongoing training – arguably deeper than anything the state has previously attempted for its existing workforce. It will also force meaningful shifts in how teachers and principals are prepared for their roles. Fortunately, the Dean of the University of Wyoming College of Education has already expressed a commitment to competency-based preparation. Teacher recruitment and retention was a major focus of comments to the Advisory Group, and the state's approach to student-centered learning should be integrated with its recruitment and retention efforts (an issue that will require substantial work). Training superintendents and principals who are capable of supporting teachers will be an essential part of the state's strategy.
- Clear communication with families, so that they understand the changes going on in their child's school. This change in how education is delivered means that children's experience of school

may look very different than that of their parents. Helping parents understand those changes will be key to maintaining support.

- Local and state engagement with employers and post-secondary education leaders, to help build understanding of the shift to student-centered learning. As the meaning of a high school diploma evolves, that evolution will need to be explained to multiple audiences.

Members of the education community will understandably and correctly want to see a lot more detail about all of these elements before being asked to implement student-centered learning. It was beyond the scope of the RIDE Advisory Group to develop detailed plans for all of this work; however, its members stand ready to continue working with the education community to support the implementation of its recommendation. A shift of this magnitude will require policy change – but more importantly, it will likely require changes in the habits and routines of education professionals around the state. It will also require deep support in the communities that surround schools; those communities will need a clear understanding of the metrics of progress, and a long-term commitment to sustaining the work. Those changes will not be reflexive or instantaneous, but the Advisory Group believes deeply that over the long haul they will be impactful.

### *B. Pathways to Opportunity for All Students*

The Advisory Group believes strongly that students should have many high-quality options to prepare them for lifelong success. That should include an ongoing commitment to rigorous education for all of Wyoming’s students, including those going to four-year colleges. But the Advisory Group sees that much of Wyoming’s economic growth is in sectors that do not necessarily require a four-year degree, but do require some form of postsecondary education, skill certification, or training beyond a high school diploma. Already there are extraordinary programs in Wyoming’s seven community colleges that help prepare students for the workforce, and some exceptional Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in its K-12 school systems. The next step is to systematize those successes, and a new approach will be needed for the state to experience success at scale.

The Advisory Group recommends that the state identify a set of priority career clusters and related pathways, including programs of study, through a process led by the Wyoming Department of Education – and involving education professionals from K-12 schools, community colleges, the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, and Wyoming employers, among others. The work should be informed by the local needs assessments already being conducted by districts receiving federal CTE funding. Those career pathways will be most impactful if they are focused on filling positions that are High Skill, High Wage, and High-Demand (H3). Many of Wyoming’s future jobs haven’t yet come into existence, and for the state to prepare its students to succeed in these sectors will require a new approach to CTE.

“Career clusters” represent specific segments of the labor market focused on similar subjects or skills. The four most popular are currently:

- Health Sciences;
- Business Management & Administration;
- Manufacturing; and
- Agricultural, Food, and Natural Resources.



Once the state has identified its prioritized career clusters, it should build rigorous career-connected pathways around them. Updated CTE programs of study and course curriculum can be developed, and outdated programs that no longer align to the state’s needs can and should sunset. This will increase the rigor and relevance of CTE in Wyoming, and help employers engage more effectively with schools. There should also be an opportunity for communities to add pathways that meet the H3 criteria, if they can demonstrate a specific need in their area.

Such an effort should include a focus on developing opportunities for students to engage in quality work-based learning aligned to their studies -- and multiple opportunities to earn credentials of value as defined by the state. It should also include an increase in dual credit and concurrent enrollment opportunities, where students can earn postsecondary credits in high school facilitating the transitions between learning levels. Importantly, these pathways should be flexible, so that students can enter and exit at various points throughout their educational experience.

Here too there will be substantial work needed to help educators deliver on the promise of career-connected pathways – and a need to educate students about their potential benefits. The RIDE Advisory Group also believes that children need awareness of career opportunities and career pathways well before they get to high school; not all students will choose a CTE focus, but all students should be aware of CTE opportunities. The Advisory Group is aware that in some parts of the state these practices are already being implemented with great success, but believes that statewide implementation would offer great benefit to Wyoming’s entire student population. The Advisory Group also recommends that the Legislature ensure that, if needed, the Hathaway Scholarship requirements be updated to support students taking advantage of the policy changes recommended here.

#### **IV. Additional Priority Issues**

As noted above, the Advisory Group heard from stakeholders around the state about a range of important issues. There were two of these issues that the Advisory Group wanted to highlight as areas where future work could be particularly impactful. In raising these issues, the Advisory Group wants to emphasize that it believes deeply in the importance of parent responsibility, and that any policy and practice changes should take account of that critical value.

##### *A. Mental Health and Behavioral Issues in Community Context*

Around the state, the Advisory Group heard stories about both children and education professionals struggling with their mental health, and multiple stories about disruptive student behavior preventing learning. Wyoming has the nation’s highest teen suicide rate, and does not rate well in other indicators of mental health. The struggles of recent years have highlighted the need for better mental health support for everyone in schools, stronger attention to their mental health needs (which can also be tied to physical health), and better behavioral supports for students. Simply put, this is a capacity challenge, and more capacity will be needed for schools to be successful.

While student-centered learning and a new approach to career pathways represent potentially significant changes in approach to how education is delivered, adding more mental health support capacity to schools does not – but it could have a transformative impact nonetheless. Having more capacity would benefit students, whose mental health needs would be more likely to be met; it would also benefit teachers, who simply lack the bandwidth to serve as counselors to all of their students.

When students struggle with mental health it can have a negative impact on other children around them – meaning that helping those students can not only help the child, it can help to create a more positive learning environment for other students (and teachers).

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of mental health professionals in many communities, and schools cannot magically make counselors appear. Moreover, the range of mental health needs can vary substantially within and across communities, and different kinds of trained professionals will be needed to fully meet community needs. It will take real resources to attract and retain professionals in roles that make a difference in students' lives.

There are already innovative models of mental health support in Wyoming. The Advisory Group does not believe that the only approach is for schools to hire more mental health professionals; indeed, the best approach may frequently be partnerships with other public agencies focused on mental health, or even private providers. Telehealth is another option that might provide significant benefits in rural areas.

The Wyoming Department of Education is already working on a mental health framework for schools that will be launched next year; there are already grants in place to support substance abuse prevention, suicide prevention, and professional development for teachers. Behavior issues in school are intertwined with mental health in complex ways, and the Advisory Group heard about the need for behavioral supports as well. WDE's emerging framework talks about supports for students – and also the role of families.

Wyoming's efforts should be part of a broad strategy that not only builds the capacity of schools to address mental health issues, but the ability of entire communities to meet the needs of children and families. There are successful models in place that support families in working with schools, and help individuals and businesses participate in the life of a school system. Focused resources to support these community-led efforts could better integrate schools into the community, and help improve the educational experience for children and families.

Moving toward student-centered learning and pathways will be a process that takes place over the next few years; addressing the mental health crisis and disruptive behaviors demands urgent action. The Advisory Group suggests the Governor and Legislature ensure that communities and schools have the resources they need to address this crisis, so that students and teachers can work together in the learning environments they deserve. Over time, the Advisory Group believes that student-centered learning, improved career pathways, and early childhood education will also have a positive impact on child mental health, allowing the state to better focus its efforts in this area.

### *B. Getting Kids Off to a Great Start Before Kindergarten*

Across the country, third grade test scores are highly predictive of high school outcomes; in Wyoming, that is even more true than in the rest of the country. A shift to student-centered learning may lead the state to rethink its approach to testing and accountability, and improve the state's ability to help children succeed even if they start out behind. Nonetheless, there is no question that the first five years of life are developmentally important, and that child experiences in those five years can influence long-term child outcomes – for better or worse. The Advisory Group wants to highlight the importance of kindergarten readiness, and the need for a thoughtful strategy toward supporting children to achieve it.

The Advisory Group believes strongly in the importance of families in educating children of all ages, and particularly in the first five years of life. The Advisory Group believes that families should have a range of educational options for their children, including a mix of private and school-based early learning experiences; all of these should be entirely voluntary, and should be designed to cultivate a love of learning that carries beyond the early childhood years. As the state focuses on readiness, the Advisory Group believes it is essential to educate families about developmental milestones, the developmental importance of the early years, and the services available to help them – both through broad publicity, and through individual work with families (which is already an important part of the state’s home visiting programs).

The RIDE Advisory Group did not develop specific recommendations on how best to raise kindergarten readiness. The Advisory Group has been made aware of stakeholders in Wyoming working on recommendations regarding a whole host of issues relating to the early childhood system; it encourages policymakers to keep a focus on this issue, and to engage with knowledgeable stakeholders to learn more and set a direction for the state. The first five years of life matter a great deal to long-term educational outcomes, and the Advisory Group hopes that in the near future the state will develop more concrete plans to address those first five years – plans that are respectful and supportive of the central role of parents, and build on the full range of existing public and private community resources.

## **V. Conclusion**

The RIDE Advisory Group is deeply grateful to everyone who took the time to participate in its process. There were many great ideas that people shared with the Advisory Group, and in time the Advisory Groups hope that many of them will find their way into reality. At this moment, the Advisory Group thought it was important to focus on two primary strategies that would have a meaningful long-term impact on student outcomes, student-centered learning and career pathways.

The Advisory Group wants its report to lead to action. To that end, the Advisory Group recommends the following specific next steps to keep momentum going:

- A shift to student-centered learning will require changes to both policy and practice. The State Board of Education has already laid important groundwork for that shift; the Department of Education and Governor’s Office need to partner to keep the work moving. When a new Superintendent of Public Instruction is seated, the Superintendent and Governor should work with the State Board to establish a public and accountable work group (“RIDE 2.0”) to develop more detailed implementation plans for student-centered learning. The process can be modeled on similar processes in other states, but should be tailored to the needs of Wyoming. At a minimum, the group should address:
  - Ensuring there is a shared vision for student-centered, student-centered learning, through which every Wyoming public school student is afforded high-quality opportunities;
  - Developing statewide definitions of “competency” that anchor school-level work;
  - Developing school-level models and best practices that are feasible to implement;
  - The possibility of creating “Innovation Centers” or “Innovation Zones” that allow interested communities to pilot student-centered learning;

- Identifying and proposing specific changes to preparation and professional development that will help educators to be successful at meeting student needs; and
- Developing a communication strategy to inform families of how student-centered learning will impact their child’s experience.

The Governor, Superintendent, and State Board may provide the group with more detailed guidance on how best to complete the work. The group should also include representatives of schools, families, and other stakeholder groups, to ensure that a broad range of perspectives are heard. The Advisory Group also encourages the executive branch leaders to include legislative representation.

- Similarly, the Governor, Superintendent, and State Board should initiate a transparent and accountable process of developing a proposal for implementing H3 pathways for career and technical education in Wyoming. The process should focus on establishing pathways that lead to high skill, high wage, and high demand employment – and removing any policy barriers to successful implementation. Here too the process should engage schools and families; it should also engage employers and leaders from the workforce, to ensure that the pathways established meet Wyoming’s needs now and in the future. This effort should be coordinated with the student-centered learning conversation as part of RIDE 2.0, but again, the Advisory Group defers to the executive branch officials on the exact design of the process.

These recommendations cannot be fulfilled with any specific intervention or product – they are all focused on changes in policies and processes that will take real engagement to achieve.

The Advisory Group’s recommendations were built with input from students and families, education professionals, policymakers, employers, and the public at large. It recognizes that each of these topics will require further discussions to implement, which may require some patience – but the Advisory Group members stand ready to contribute to those discussions, collectively and individually. It has been an extraordinary opportunity to hear from so many passionate stakeholders with informed and diverse perspectives; the Advisory Group hopes that all of those stakeholders will remain involved as implementation continues.