

Arizona Innovation Guide

CENTER
FOR THE FUTURE OF
ARIZONA



ARIZONA INSTITUTE
FOR EDUCATION &
THE ECONOMY
NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY





Disclaimer

The policy context included in this Innovation Guide, including descriptions of statute and regulation, is accurate yet not exhaustive. The information included should not be considered a complete overview of Arizona's requirements or what a school system is obligated to do under them. Though not a legal document, the statutory areas included in this section originate from official state websites and documents and were reviewed in late 2025 by select state officials and leaders. Please consult the full and official version of these documents for context.

PERMISSION GRANTED

A Letter from Center for the Future of Arizona and Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy

Permission Granted, brought to you by [Center for the Future of Arizona](#) (CFA) and [Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy](#) (AIEE) at Northern Arizona University, is designed to help unlock the creative potential already present—and possible—in Arizona’s schools. For decades, Arizona has led the nation in adopting forward-thinking policies that create the conditions for innovation across the P–20 learning continuum. From seat-time flexibility to mastery-based graduation pathways like the Grand Canyon Diploma, Arizona’s school systems have a unique opportunity to disrupt traditional models of school, reimagine what’s possible in education, and transform learning experiences to ensure the success of **every** student. This work reflects what Arizonans consistently express as a [shared priority](#): an education system focused on opportunity, student success, and strengthening Arizona’s future.

Consisting of the *Arizona Policy Primer* and the *Arizona Innovation Guide*, ***Permission Granted*** is not simply a resource—it is a practical guide for action. While many school systems have taken advantage of Arizona’s flexible policy environment, others may not realize the latitude they already have to personalize learning, rethink time, or design new models of success. Developed with support from [KnowledgeWorks](#) and Arizona leaders across the state, the Primer clarifies what state policy allows, while the Guide illustrates how those flexibilities can be used.

At its core, ***Permission Granted*** is a tool for Arizona educators committed to producing uncommon outcomes for every child in every community. Outcomes that reflect not only academic achievement, but readiness for postsecondary education, meaningful employment, civic participation, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning. Traditional models of schooling were never designed to meet the unique needs of every learner nor to adapt to the pace of change facing today’s students and Arizona’s workforce. ***Permission Granted*** equips educators to use policy as a lever to design learning experiences that legacy models were never built to enable.

Finally, ***Permission Granted*** is not just a permission granter—it is a push. An invitation to create dramatically different learning experiences. Toward personalization. Toward redesigning school around a graduate profile—whether locally developed or the [State 48 Graduate Profile](#). And toward a future of school where every child realizes their full potential and graduates ready for the future of their choosing.

In short: permission has already been granted. Let’s get to work. Together.



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INTRODUCTION

The Arizona Innovation Guide is a practical tool for exploring how Arizona's existing education policies can support innovation and improve student outcomes. It is meant to inspire ideas, reduce uncertainty, and support school systems as they plan and implement innovative approaches. Using real and hypothetical examples in the context of current policy, this guide is a starting place for schools and school systems looking to take the next step in driving stronger outcomes for students.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Arizona Innovation Guide is designed for educators, school system leaders, and community members who want to understand how Arizona's existing policies can be leveraged to support innovative teaching and learning that advances student success. Whether you're just beginning or deepening work already underway, this guide was developed to help you explore, plan, and take action.

School system teams may find it useful to read through this guide together to think about which innovative approaches might be most impactful for your learning community. The Guide is also designed as a companion piece to the [Arizona Policy Primer](#), which highlights key policies that provide the flexibility needed to promote innovation and ensure education prepares students for their futures.

The guide is organized around five action areas. Each action area includes four sections:

- » **Imagine If...:** A high-level hypothetical example of how school systems can think about innovative approaches to education under the action area.
- » **Practices and Possibilities:** An explanation of how the policy can support deeper learning, innovation, and student success. It also includes a summary of the relevant state policy and how it enables innovative practices.

- » **School System Spotlight:** Real examples from Arizona that illustrate how school systems are leveraging policy flexibilities to innovate and improve student outcomes.
- » **...Go Even Further:** Additional boundary-pushing ideas for transforming teaching and learning practices that are allowable with Arizona education policy.

You can read this guide from beginning to end or skip directly to the action area or section most relevant to your school system's goals. The intent is not to prescribe a single path but to spark ideas, provide clarity, and help teams move from vision to implementation. However, if you're not sure where to start, we suggest beginning with **Action Area 1: Profile of a Graduate.**

ACTION AREAS AND ARIZONA EXAMPLES

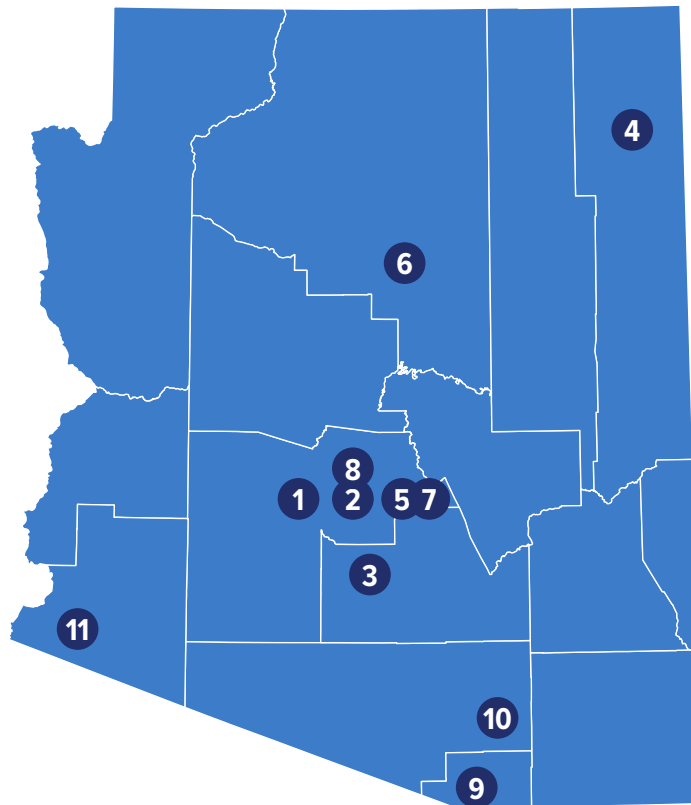
The opportunities and examples throughout the guide are organized into “action areas” that represent broad approaches that school systems interested in pursuing innovation and improving student outcomes may find helpful. These action areas are not exhaustive and there are many innovative approaches to education that school systems in Arizona may find most appropriate and helpful for their student population.

The action areas in the guide were identified through conversations with Arizona stakeholders, including educators and school system leaders. The areas are:

- » [Shared Vision for Student Success:](#) Implementing a shared vision of a graduate to help guide how you educate students
- » [Leveraging Technology:](#) Embracing technology to create new models of teaching and learning that reflect the world in which students live
- » [School Structure:](#) Leveraging flexibilities permitted through the Instructional Time Model (ITM) and other strategies to create a school day that fits the needs and goals of your students
- » [Early College Access:](#) Removing barriers and providing pathways that give students the opportunity to engage with postsecondary education
- » [Career Exploration and Learning:](#) Creating opportunities for students to learn about the different types of careers available to them and the types of certifications and degrees they'll need to meet those career goals



School system spotlights were selected based on recommendations from stakeholders interviewed at the beginning of this guide’s creation, as well as CFA’s and the AIEE’s experience working with many school systems in the state. These school systems represent the diversity of Arizona and include various school models, sizes, geographic locations, and student population demographics. The content of each spotlight was reviewed and approved by the individuals interviewed. We are appreciative of the time these school systems took to share their story with us for the innovation guide:



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|---|--|
| 1. Agua Fria Union High School District | 6. Flagstaff Unified School District |
| 2. Arizona State University Preparatory Academy | 7. Mesa Public Schools |
| 3. Casa Grande Elementary School District | 8. Phoenix Modern |
| 4. Chinle Unified School District | 9. Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District |
| 5. East Valley Institute of Technology | 10. Vail School District |
| | 11. Yuma Union High School District |

This guide was created through a collaboration among Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy, Center for the Future of Arizona, and KnowledgeWorks, a national nonprofit. The guide draws on the AIEE’s and CFA’s experiences in Arizona and KnowledgeWorks’ national lens on innovation in education.

Imagine if...

Imagine a vision for learning that intentionally shapes every educational experience to prepare each student for a successful future. In this system, learners talk easily about not just what they learned, but how they learned it. They explain how they navigate teamwork, solve problems, adapt when plans change, and communicate their thinking clearly. Families and community members are active partners. Some join students and teachers for goal-setting conversations, others support public exhibitions of learning, and all play a role in bringing the community's vision to life.

Beyond graduation, young adults describe school as preparation for life. Those who pursue college arrive with the knowledge, habits, and confidence necessary for success. Employers welcome new hires who collaborate well, communicate effectively, take initiative, and continue learning. These graduates contribute to their communities with clarity, adaptability, and purpose because they understand who they are as learners and citizens.

These outcomes stem from a fully activated, community-owned vision for student success, such as a Profile of a Graduate that guides instruction, curriculum, student success measures, and decision-making across the system. When this shared vision is embedded in classrooms and communities, it becomes a North Star that aligns learning to what matters most after graduation.

Practices and Possibilities

A [shared vision for student success](#) can take the form of a [Portrait of a Graduate](#). It grounds innovation in values, aspirations, and opportunities. Focusing on both academic achievement and broader transferable skills, this vision articulates the mindsets and skills that learners need to thrive in college, career, and life. When visions for student success are fully operationalized, learners enter life after school as critical thinkers, problem-solvers, innovators, and lifelong learners.

In Arizona, a community-owned vision for success aligns closely with the state's focus on student-centered and future-ready learning. Some school systems across Arizona have adopted local visions and profiles (some of which are highlighted in this Innovation Guide). Others have embraced the [State 48 Graduate Profile](#) which was developed by a multi-sector coalition representing early childhood education, K-12, higher education, industry, non-profit, state government, and philanthropy. This coalition leveraged the voices of thousands of students, parents, educators, and employers from across the state to construct a bold vision toward learning that is relevant, empowering, and anchored in the future Arizona wants for its children.

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Arizona's education priorities provide a strong foundation for developing a local vision. [Achieve60AZ](#), the state's education attainment goal, and the [Arizona Education Progress Meter](#), provide long-term goals in student success and workforce readiness. These priorities also help focus and galvanize action around what matters most for Arizona's future. A vision for student success builds on these priorities by offering a student-centered view of what success looks like for every learner. It makes the knowledge, skills, and experiences students need to thrive after high school tangible. It connects local values with statewide priorities. When fully activated, a shared vision (e.g., Profile of a Graduate) drives progress toward Arizona's shared education and attainment goals.

Local Policy Flexibility

Arizona offers flexibility for school systems to develop and implement their own Profile of a Graduate if they choose to do so. State frameworks such as the Arizona Education Progress Meter, Achieve60AZ, [Career Literacy Standards](#), and [Academic Standards](#) provide aligned indicators and tools to put the graduate profiles into action. Schools and districts can use existing flexibility in graduation requirements and local control over curriculum, assessment, and instructional design to integrate Graduate Profile competencies into learning pathways.

To learn more about the flexibilities that exist around graduation requirements and assessments, check out the [Post-High School Readiness Primer](#) and the [Assessment and Grading Flexibility Primer](#).



School System Spotlight

Mesa Public Schools

By adopting and operationalizing a Portrait of a Graduate, Mesa Public Schools has seen meaningful gains in student readiness and opportunity. Since launching the Portrait in 2019, the district's graduation rate has risen from 81.6% to 85.1%, all high schools increased their College and Career Readiness points in the 2025 state accountability model, and participation in early college opportunities has surged, demonstrating that aligning learning to a shared vision can drive both relevance and results.

As Arizona's largest and one of its most diverse school systems, [Mesa Public Schools](#) serves a community that is both deeply rooted and rapidly evolving. Many Mesa graduates return to raise their families and work in the same schools they once attended, creating a unique sense of continuity and local pride. Yet the district also serves an increasingly mobile and diverse population, with students from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This has positioned Mesa at a critical point for educational transformation, one where innovation must honor tradition while embracing the future.

In 2019, Mesa Public Schools developed and implemented its [Portrait of a Mesa Public Schools Graduate](#). Through an inclusive design process, district leaders, educators, families, students, and business partners determined the essential attitudes and skills that define what it means to graduate ready for life, learning, and work. The identified attitudes include being ethical, inclusive, and resilient. The identified skills include collaborator, communicator, community contributor, creative thinker and innovator, and critical thinker and problem solver. Once

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Urban and Suburban
Total Student Enrollment	55,600
Total Schools	82
Grade Span	PreK-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	52%
English Language Learner	12%
Students with Disabilities	18%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	48%
» White	37%
» Black/African American	5%
» American Indian/Alaskan Native	4%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

these attitudes and skills were established, the focus shifted to translating this shared vision into daily practice across schools and departments throughout the district.

Throughout the PreK-12 system, Mesa students are learning academic standards through hands-on learning that allows them to identify and solve problems, use design processes sparked by creativity, and challenges them to persist through multiple iterations. With a focus on increasing both graduation rate and relevancy, the district's [Graduation Plus](#) model ensures that every student earns a diploma plus college and career credentials such as industry certifications, advanced diploma seals, early college credits, work-based learning, and a postsecondary plan for success. A major indicator of this expanded opportunity is the district's rising participation in dual enrollment: enrollment grew from 2,005 students in 2020–2021 to 2,778 in 2024–2025, a 38.5% increase in just five years, signaling stronger access to early college pathways. In 2025, five of the six comprehensive high schools redesigned their schools to include ninth grade transition

teams to explore interests leading to education and career action plans; tenth and 11th graders select broad career academies (digital arts, health and medical sciences, design and production, public service, etc.) where their teachers work together to design career connected learning; and 12th graders have access to high school as well as college level coursework and work-based learning.

A defining feature of Mesa's innovation is its investment in career coaches and community partnerships. Career coordinators connect students to work-based learning opportunities, internships, and college pathways. For example, the district's partnership with a local construction equipment dealership resulted in an internship program that culminates with industry employment and/or an associate degree through Mesa Community College's "Think Big" program. The skills and attitudes in the Portrait guide innovation and partnerships between PreK-12 schools, businesses and community. By connecting innovation to the Portrait, the district is creating learning environments that are relevant and future focused.

Chinle Unified School District

By establishing a mission and vision focused on a commitment to high expectations and greater possibilities for students, Chinle Unified has made significant gains in student achievement, test scores, and district accountability ratings.

[Chinle Unified School District](#) is located in the four corners region of Arizona, in the heart of the Navajo Nation. The student population is primarily Native American and a large percentage of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Many of the district's families face exceptional challenges, such as a history of generational poverty and limited infrastructure including limited access to running water, paved roads, electricity,

and broadband. The Chinle District and community are deeply committed to the education of their students. To help identify shared goals and unite the community, the district developed a strategic plan that included a [vision and mission statement](#) centered on empowering students to be successful through an environment dedicated to the value of continuous learning.

District Superintendent Quincy Natay underscores the power of a [clear vision](#) and goals to guide strategic planning, calling it the key to the district's success. The purpose of the "vision is to empower all students to be Competitive, Unique, Successful, and Driven through an effective team of teachers, staff, school board, parents, and community; in an environment dedicated to the value of continuous learning." Superintendent Natay says, "Our vision was the tool that rallied stakeholders, educators, families, leaders, and community partners around a shared commitment to high expectations and greater possibilities. Now it serves as a continued reminder of the need to embrace the challenges and apply focused effort on sustaining a system defined by rigor, innovation, and belief in what our students can achieve."

Although the process of developing the community's vision was lengthy, Chinle Unified knew that including many stakeholders in its development would ensure the community saw value and would serve as an important foundation for the development of their strategic plan. Superintendent Natay intentionally engaged all five members of the governing board as well as key stakeholder groups of teachers, parents, students, administrators, classified employees, community members, and Indian Education Committee members.

During early phases of the process, stakeholders committed time to imagining and sharing bold possibilities for the future by envisioning what the schools could become at their very best. For example, stakeholders created a visual display—a mural of collages and pictures, depicting where they wanted to see Chinle students in the future. Their vision incorporated the Navajo way of life and applied the Navajo philosophy of education which

centers around thinking, planning, living, and assuring. Ultimately, these activities helped the district connect its goals and vision for students to the broader culture of the community.

The shared vision created widespread support for investing in several programs and resources. These investments increased student access to a variety of opportunities, preparing them with the knowledge and skills to secure a meaningful job or enroll in college after graduation. For example, STEAM activities are available from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. Students have access to Career Technical Education (CTE) experiences and Chinle is one of the only districts in the state that offers the CTE [heavy equipment class](#). Superintendent Natay says that he frequently talks with students about the types of courses to which they want access and need to accomplish their goals.

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Rural
Total Student Enrollment	2,908
Total Schools	7
Grade Span	PreK-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	96%
English Language Learner	7%
Students with Disabilities	12%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» American Indian/Alaskan Native	99%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

Superintendent Natay shared a glimpse into the academic progress Chinle has made. “Since launching our vision-aligned strategic plan in 2014, there was a 20 percentage point gap between our proficiency rate and Arizona’s average in math and 25 percentage points in ELA. Our 2025 raw state assessment data show our third through eighth grade students beat the state average in math and are within 6 percentage points for ELA. Our school letter grades have gone from two F’s, three D’s and two C’s in 2014 to five B’s and two A’s in 2025. We have a National ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) Distinguished School award, two Arizona ESEA Distinguished School awards, and a National Blue Ribbon School award.”

By activating a vision of shared goals and mindsets, Chinle Unified School District continues to help their students reach new heights. Over the years, they’ve seen dramatic increases to state test scores and their accountability rankings. Superintendent Natay’s advice to other education leaders ready to make change is that tremendous change demands a strong work ethic and the resolve to stay committed to the plan even when the process becomes difficult.

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District

As part of the [Santa Cruz Valley Unified District’s](#) strategic planning process, they collected input from community members (business owners, community partners, district partners, parents, alumni, district employees, and volunteers) to learn about their priorities. One community survey revealed that their [Portrait of a Graduate](#) is one of the community’s top three priorities, alongside career readiness and financial literacy.

In Santa Cruz, intentional effort has been made to create a sense of shared ownership around the Portrait. One way they have done so is by making it visible throughout the district. Posters of the Portrait hang in classrooms, offices, department buildings, and common areas, keeping the message consistent and embedded in everyday school life. As students, staff, and families see the same language and expectations across campuses, they develop a shared

understanding of the skills students are working toward. Beyond visually embedding the Portrait in the district’s physical spaces, the real impact comes from the opportunities and feedback students receive on the durable skills that comprise the Portrait. Throughout their K–12 experience, the Portrait guides instruction as students work toward mastering its attributes. To continue spreading information about the Portrait to the community and in response to survey results, the district may provide posters to local businesses, indicating full community support.

Megan Padilla, Teaching, Learning and Assessing Director, says to continue this work they “have plans within the next school year to have an official platform where our students track their Portrait progress and achievements and then turn those into a portfolio they can present and use for college and/or job applications.”

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...Go Even Further

Having a shared vision for success becomes transformative when it moves from a statement of aspiration to a tool for daily decision-making. Schools and districts ready to strengthen Profile implementation can start by examining how its attributes are reflected in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning. Identify where students are asked to demonstrate the competencies in current practice, and where there are gaps. Engage a broad range of stakeholders as Mesa and Santa Cruz did. Host conversations with students, families, tribal communities, local employers, and higher education partners to surface shared priorities and values. Expand visibility by embedding the Profile in advisory structures, exhibitions of learning, and student-led conferences.

To build coherence, map where Profile competencies appear across grade levels and courses. Strengthen the system by integrating them into hiring practices, coaching models, and educator evaluations. Celebrate progress often and elevate student stories that illustrate growth in the Profile's competencies. Most importantly, invite students to reflect on who they are becoming. When learners use its language in goal-setting, self-assessment, and reflection, the Profile becomes more than a vision. It becomes a living framework that drives opportunity, belonging, and purpose.



ACTION AREA 2

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Imagine if...

Imagine technology in Arizona schools serving as a powerful driver for learning. Across the school system, digital tools connect curiosity to creation and ideas to real-world impact. Classrooms are alive with inquiry as students question, design, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. Learners evaluate the accuracy and bias of information, understand how algorithms influence what they see, and practice responsible, ethical use of technology as part of civic life.

Online and blended learning expand access and flexibility, allowing students to personalize pathways and engage in experiences that were once beyond reach. Technology supports deep learning, not by replacing human connection, but by strengthening it. Students take ownership of their ideas, collaborate with purpose, and see themselves as active participants in shaping their world. School systems leverage assistive technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to support the success of students with disabilities.

In this system, educators and learners recognize the power of co-intelligence, where human insight and technological fluency work together. Technology is no longer about efficiency alone. It becomes a tool for critical thinking, ethical creation, and expanding human potential.

Practices and Possibilities

Technology continues to reshape how we live, learn, and work and education must evolve in response. Leveraging technology is not about devices or apps; it is about using digital tools to expand human potential, deepen learning, and connect students to meaningful, real-world experiences. Too often, technology has been treated as a quick fix or a digital version of low-level tasks such as worksheets and multiple-choice quizzes. Used this way, it does little to strengthen thinking or creativity. Arizona schools can move beyond this approach by viewing technology as an integral part of learning and school design rather than an add-on.

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a prominent focus in education. While research on its use in K–12 settings is still evolving, educators are exploring applications that support flexible pacing, mastery-based learning, timely feedback, and stronger connections to the workforce and the world beyond school. Using AI effectively requires thoughtful implementation aligned with learning science, student safety, relevant legislation, and national and statewide guidance.

Arizona educators can find support for this work through the [Generative Artificial Intelligence in K–12 Education](#) guidance published by the [Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy](#) at Northern Arizona University. This resource presents both the opportunities and risks associated with AI, offering a balanced perspective essential for adopting any emerging

technology. It includes sample use cases for teachers and students, as well as connections to [Arizona's Academic Standards](#). Educators may also engage with the [AZ AI Alliance](#), a statewide collective committed to the responsible, ethical, and effective use of AI, which provides reliable information and a community-of-practice learning network.

While AI has captured significant attention, it is not the only technology that can support innovative and relevant learning experiences. Virtual, augmented, and mixed reality, digital simulations, and collaborative platforms can all contribute to deeper learning. To leverage these tools, however, schools and communities must have equitable access to devices and broadband connectivity. Although access gaps remain, Arizona has mechanisms in place to help address these needs. The [Arizona Broadband Expansion Fund](#) provides state matching funds, paired with federal dollars, to expand connectivity for eligible schools, districts, libraries, and consortia. The federal [Lifeline](#) program further helps reduce internet costs for qualifying families.

As technology expands instructional opportunities, safety, and security must remain foundational priorities. Schools are stewards of sensitive student and employee data and protecting that information is essential to maintaining trust, continuity of learning, and operational resilience. Through the [Statewide Cyber Readiness Program](#) administered by the Arizona Department of Homeland Security, eligible Arizona schools can access no-cost cybersecurity resources to strengthen their cyber posture. Leveraging these tools allows schools to pair expanded access to technology with responsible, secure use.

Technology can also expand access to learning experiences that may not otherwise be available to students by increasing flexibility in how and where learning occurs. In Arizona, schools may provide up to 40% of instructional time in a remote setting while maintaining full funding eligibility by adopting

a local Instructional Time Model (ITM). This model allows state instructional hour requirements to be met through a broader range of learning experiences, including remote instruction. ***Additional details are available in the [ITM Policy Primer](#).***

When used intentionally, technology supports learning that is flexible, authentic, and connected. Teachers design experiences that reflect how professionals collaborate and solve problems, while students take ownership of their learning by creating original work and applying their understanding in meaningful contexts. Arizona's approach to technology in education is not about chasing every new tool; it is about empowering students as thinkers, creators, and citizens prepared to navigate complexity and shape the future with purpose.

Local Policy Flexibility

School districts and charter governing boards [are responsible](#) for creating technology policies related to students' Internet access. They must adopt policies that restrict social media use for non-educational purposes and limit the use of cellphones during the school day. However, substantial flexibility remains for using technology in classrooms. Arizona's ITM allows school systems to redesign when and where learning occurs by blending in-person, online, and community-based experiences to meet instructional requirements. The [Computer Science](#) and [Educational Technology Standards](#) support this flexibility by integrating digital fluency, computational thinking, and ethical technology use into instruction, helping schools embed technology literacy and digital citizenship across subjects.

School System Spotlight

Agua Fria Union High School District

By building a systemwide approach to AI literacy and innovation that enables clearer learning pathways, engagement, and digital fluency, Agua Fria Union High School District is seeing measurable improvements in student and teacher outcomes. All freshmen learn to use AI effectively and responsibly, teachers report higher productivity, and AI-informed structures help to reduce failing grades and absenteeism. These gains show what becomes possible when a district treats technology, including AI, as essential to future readiness.

[Agua Fria Union High School District](#) is redefining what it means to prepare students for the future. Serving more than 10,000 students across six comprehensive high schools, the district is leading the way in leveraging artificial intelligence and technology to create innovative, learner-centered experiences. What began as a vision for innovation has grown into a systemic transformation that blends workforce development, academic rigor, and digital fluency.

The district began its AI journey because leaders recognized a pressing need to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the world students were entering. Chief Innovation Officer Rachel Gross acknowledged: “We knew the longer we waited to prepare students for a future shaped by AI, the more we were doing them a disservice.” That urgency led Agua Fria to go “all in” on AI literacy and innovation.

Agua Fria started its strategic AI implementation by introducing models for responsible AI use. The [AI Stoplight Framework](#) gave educators and students a simple visual guide for communicating

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Suburban
Total Student Enrollment	10,074
Total Schools	9
Grade Span	9-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	51%
English Language Learner	3%
Students with Disabilities	10%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	54%
» White	27%
» Black/African American	10%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

expectations with students. Their [Use & Evaluate with CARE framework](#) provides a focus on clarity, accuracy, relevance, and ethics of AI use. Training teachers and staff on these two frameworks served as the first step in their AI implementation.

After laying the foundation of responsible and ethical use, Agua Fria created an AI Literacy course which is required for all freshmen. Through this course, every ninth grader participates in AI literacy lessons and completes an AI-integrated project, building a foundational understanding of how artificial intelligence shapes daily life, work, and society. Teachers also receive AI literacy training that focuses on ethical and effective use. Two years after introducing the AI literacy course for teachers, half have met AI literacy expectations, with 70% of teachers reporting that AI moderately or significantly improves their productivity and 71% stating they use AI weekly or more. Agua Fria's goal is for 75% of teachers to be AI-literate by the end of its third year of implementation, which is well within reach. This effort toward teacher training has paid off. As teachers have strengthened their own AI literacy and integration into their classes, Agua Fria has identified teacher leaders to serve as AI Ambassadors who pilot classroom applications, co-develop best practices, and mentor peers.

In classrooms, innovation comes to life through Academy-Based Learning, where students study core subjects in career-connected pathways supported by more than one hundred business partners. AI tools help personalize instruction and streamline interventions.

Beyond the impact in their own district, Agua Fria has led the way for other schools and districts. Their [AI Stoplight Framework](#) has served as a model for responsible AI use – it has been adopted and adapted in several districts statewide and has even reached national attention. They also host

an annual [AI Summit](#) which fosters statewide learning and creates space for collaboration among districts. Positioned as leaders of AI integration in Arizona and beyond, one district leader served on the authoring team of the [AI Guidance for AZ K-12 Schools](#) and two serve on the leadership team for the [Arizona AI Alliance](#). Agua Fria is not only a frontrunner with AI adoption, but a valuable resource from which others can learn.

Agua Fria also uses technology to support Response to Intervention (RTI). The district's technology team, composed primarily of former teachers, created a platform that facilitates scheduling for student/teacher coaching periods each week. This platform enables students to request meetings with specific teachers and teachers to request students. The system prioritizes requests and automatically schedules sessions based on student needs. This structure ensures timely, individualized support and better use of instructional time.

Technology at Agua Fria is thoughtfully and strategically embedded in the structure of its systems and creates alignment across all parts of students' learning experience. This is, in large, part due to the district's priority of leveraging teacher expertise in its technology department. The technology leadership team is composed almost entirely of former teachers, ensuring that every innovation is grounded in classroom realities. The result is a learning experience where students are creators, problem-solvers, and ethical decision-makers. They learn to question information, apply AI tools responsibly, and connect classroom learning to real-world opportunities. Agua Fria serves as a model for what's possible when districts treat technology and AI as essential components of a learner-centered system. By investing in AI literacy, building educator capacity, and fostering community partnerships, districts can create equitable access to the tools and mindsets today's students need most.

Arizona State University Preparatory Academy

By embracing emerging technologies as tools for deeper learning, Arizona State University Preparatory Academy has created conditions that increase student engagement, expand access to advanced learning experiences, and accelerate innovations that other Arizona schools can study and adapt. The charter network's deliberate investment in AI, immersive virtual reality, robotics, and mastery-based digital tools has resulted in growing student participation in STEM pathways, award-winning robotics teams, and strong enthusiasm for learning across grade levels.

[Arizona State University Preparatory Academy](#) (ASU Prep) is pioneering innovative uses of technology that create new pathways for mastery, personalization, and exploration. A network of charter schools serving more than 10,000 students through campuses and statewide digital learning, ASU Prep blends in-person, online, and university-connected experiences to power technology-rich learning environments. This mission to innovate new models shapes every aspect of the network's technology strategy thereby pushing ASU Prep to explore how emerging tools can elevate learning in ways traditional practices could not.

ASU Prep's approach centers on four emerging technology areas that influence instruction across its network: artificial intelligence, immersive virtual reality, robotics, and semiconductor-related engineering experiences. Within AI, the network has taken a leadership role as both a designer and tester of tools that make mastery-based learning more manageable for teachers and more meaningful for students. ASU Prep was an early alpha tester for [Khan Academy's Khanmigo](#) and now partners with the organization on AI-driven assessment pilots. Leaders recognized that mastery-based learning requires students to produce many demonstrations of learning, which can become overwhelming for teachers who are responsible for monitoring

hundreds of artifacts across dozens of learners. Khanmigo helps teachers track progress, surface patterns in student work, and provide targeted feedback. Its writing coach supports students while keeping teachers informed so they can intervene

District Demographics

School System Type	Public Charter
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Urban
Total Student Enrollment	3,393
Total Schools	6
Grade Span	K-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	47%
English Language Learner	8%
Students with Disabilities	12%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	58%
» White	20%
» Black/African American	10%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

at the right moments. These tools reduce barriers to scaling mastery-based learning and allow teachers to focus on relationship building, coaching, and instructional design.

ASU Prep's collaboration with the [ASU Khan World School](#) further extends its mastery-based vision. Khan World School offers a fully digital mastery-based learning environment that incorporates seminars, advisory structures, and AI-supported feedback loops. This partnership shows what highly personalized digital learning can look like and helps ASU Prep test new ideas that can be adapted across its campuses.

Immersive virtual reality is another anchor of ASU Prep's design. Through a partnership with [Dreamscape Learn](#), the network of charters became the first in the country to install Dreamscape pods in a middle school environment. Students studying civics can step into a virtual parliament. Students exploring science can enter a simulated ecosystem. ASU Prep's leaders note that engagement increases as learners experience stories rather than simply reading about them. These immersive experiences help students form deeper conceptual understanding and strengthen their ability to transfer learning into new contexts. ASU Prep also serves as a preview site for other Arizona districts interested in exploring VR in their own systems.

Robotics and advanced manufacturing continue to expand across the network. What began as small exploratory [Vex Robotics](#) teams has grown to more than one hundred participating students. Several teams, including ASU Prep's first all-girls middle school group, have earned awards at state and national competitions. Robotics has become an entry point for STEM identity development, especially for students who may not initially see themselves as engineers until they program and build their first competitive robot.

Outcomes from this work are becoming increasingly visible. Student participation in robotics continues to grow, Dreamscape pods increase engagement in content, and AI-supported planning tools reduce teacher workload and improve instructional alignment of standards, competencies, and project design. Early indicators show increased enthusiasm for learning and deeper connections between technology and academic purpose.

These innovations show up in day-to-day learning. Leaders model the mindset they expect from staff, recognizing that innovation requires space to try ideas, reflect, and iterate. This culture, combined with strategic use of emerging technology, allows students to experience learning that is more personalized, relevant, and future-oriented. ASU Prep's advice to other districts is to begin with a culture that helps create space for curiosity, agency, and reflection. With thoughtful leadership and a commitment to innovation, technology can become a powerful catalyst for learner-centered, future-ready models across Arizona.

Yuma Union High School District

At [Yuma Union HSD](#) both teachers and students are learning how to integrate AI into the learning process; they've even developed an AI Framework to help guide the work. The framework helps create a vision that everyone in the district can use for guidance as they work to support students. They also have an EdTechnology team that includes the Director and three EdTech coaches that help lead this work. As Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Corey Semler said, "Literacy isn't just reading and writing, but it's also technology literacy and AI literacy."

To enable this work, the district has set up an agreement with OpenAI that allows them to have their own ChatGPT system. The ChatGPT system is closed, meaning that data is not used externally to the district's system. This allows educators and students to safely innovate in the classroom using AI without putting any student data at risk. The district has helped educators leverage AI to more quickly create things like personalized lesson plans and student-driven projects.

Students are able to access AI to provide them with a personalized tutor.

The EdTech team leads various professional development opportunities to disseminate best practices and help teachers better leverage technology. The team has led district-wide webinars on a variety of technology topics including things like "Differentiation Made Doable: Leveraging EdTech to Reach Every Learner" and "Mastery Plans: Choose Your Own Adventure in Canvas." Their webinars often see attendance rates of over 100 and they've even had as many as 300 educators attend. This is especially notable given that the district employs about 500 teachers. AI has helped make what used to take a teacher three or four hours to do, like developing Canvas courses, now take only minutes. Executive Director Semler notes that this shift enables teachers to focus on the human aspects of teaching, like the relationships and guidance that shape students' learning experiences.

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...Go Even Further

Integrating technology across a school system can benefit learners and educators throughout the K–12 continuum. School system leaders can build on the practices outlined in this action area, or expand beyond them, to deepen technology integration and strengthen student learning. Some districts, such as Agua Fria and Yuma, have leveraged dedicated technology teams to support this work and build shared understanding around effective technology use. How technology is implemented will vary based on student age, local context, and community needs.

At the high school level, technology can help bridge academic learning and professional practice. Through technology-enabled work-based learning, students can collaborate with industry mentors, apply field-specific digital tools, and develop competencies aligned with evolving workforce demands. Online and blended courses can further increase flexibility, allowing students to

personalize their pathways and access learning experiences that were previously out of reach. When used this way, technology becomes a connector between education and opportunity, preparing graduates who are adaptable, self-directed, and career-ready.

In elementary and middle schools, technology can support students as creators, collaborators, and critical thinkers. Students can use digital tools to explore local challenges, analyze data, create digital stories that elevate community perspectives, and collaborate with peers beyond their classrooms. These experiences encourage initiative, deepen engagement, and help students apply learning in authentic contexts. As systems grow, deepen, or scale their technology use, they can draw on the expertise of educators, community partners, and national organizations to support thoughtful and effective implementation.



Imagine if...

Imagine a school system where time and space flex to support learning. Each day offers meaningful opportunities for learners to demonstrate academic proficiency and develop skills such as collaboration, time management, and decision-making. The learning environment reflects the fundamental principles of Universal Design for Learning and adapts to students, not the other way around.

Learners take ownership of their day within flexible structures, making choices about how and when to engage with content based on their goals and progress. Larger blocks of time allow for deeper focus, reflection, and application. Feedback from students, educators, families, and community members continuously informs how learning environments evolve.

In this system, progress is defined by growth and mastery, not movement through a fixed schedule. Learning becomes dynamic and personalized, shaped by purpose and driven by learner agency.

Practices and Possibilities

Traditional models of education are built around bell schedules and a one-size-fits-all pace of learning. Redesigning when, where, and how learning happens creates opportunities for personalization and more meaningful outcomes. Arizona school systems have a variety of policy tools available to support educators and learners in developing innovative, relevant learning experiences.

While Arizona sets [minimum instructional time requirements](#) for K-12 students, school systems [are responsible](#) for determining what counts toward instructional time. This flexibility allows students to meet these instructional time requirements using a variety of innovative approaches beyond direct instruction including project-based learning, independent learning, and mastery-based learning. School systems can use this flexibility to ensure that instructional time requirements are met while allowing students to engage in innovative learning experiences like on-site career and technical education opportunities, a deep dive into a topic of interest, or the development of a unique deliverable like a documentary film. Not only can this flexibility empower learners and help them feel more engaged, it also allows them to lean into learning experiences tied to college and career interests.

Allowing students to move through learning schedules at their own pace, and with targeted support, ensures that students are both ready to move on once they've mastered the content and provides additional flexibility in their learning. In Arizona, [schools can award](#) credit for high school graduation through subject area course requirements or competency-requirements. Determination of this process is set by school system governing boards. Once students are able to demonstrate competency in required coursework they can engage in classes and career exploration opportunities that more directly align with their interest areas and postsecondary goals. Additionally, school districts and charter schools can use their ITMs to [vary learning times and schedules](#). This allows instructional time to occur during evenings and weekends, and allows students to complete their school day and instructional time requirements when it works best for them.

Blending the learning objectives and standards in a class may allow for more engaging learning experiences for students. While the Arizona State Board of Education (SBE) sets the [academic standards for Arizona](#), school systems have considerable room to innovate by selecting materials, designing courses, and structuring teaching to meet local needs and community expectations. By leveraging policy flexibility to teach academic standards, school systems can create a customized learning progression for each student.

Check out the [Transforming the Instructional Day Primer](#) to think more creatively about how to structure your school day.

Creating physical spaces and connecting opportunities for students can also support student learning. For example, schools may leverage communal spaces to create work areas for students across varying grade levels and disciplines to collaborate. Students can utilize a makerspace to get creative and apply what they're learning in classes to self-directed projects. A positive and supportive school environment can also better support student learning. Schools can leverage advisories or homerooms, peer-to-peer, and other mentorship opportunities to help create a school culture that is inclusive and enjoyable. When students feel seen and cared for, they are more likely to succeed.

Local Policy Flexibility

School systems can leverage the Instructional Time Model policy to customize the instructional time requirements to meet the needs of their students and the opportunities available at their schools. In the ITM policy, a school system defines what counts toward instructional time and they may [reallocate minimum instructional time](#) or instructional hours per course so that “students are able to spend more of their required instructional time or instructional hours on courses of greater depth or courses that require additional learning time.”

See the [Instructional Time Model Primer](#) for more details.

School System Spotlight

Phoenix Modern

By designing school structures focused on mastery, relationships, and learner agency, Phoenix Modern has created conditions that strengthen student confidence, deepen engagement, and generate strong academic growth. These structures have contributed to multiple years of A-ratings, maximized growth points in FY23 and FY24, and have received consistently high satisfaction ratings from families.

[Phoenix Modern](#) demonstrates what school can look like when structure follows the learner, not the other way around. As a public charter school, Phoenix Modern was founded on a mission to help a diverse community of learners find their strengths, build lasting relationships, and make an impact in the world. That mission led to an innovative approach to instructional time, teaching, and academic progression, one that challenges long-held assumptions about what school should look like.

Instead of traditional classrooms, Phoenix Modern operates multi-age studios organized by grade bands (K–1, 2–3, 4–5, and 6–8). Within each studio, learners progress through skills and competencies at individualized rates, demonstrating mastery through a comprehensive badge system rather than traditional letter grades. Badges include clear criteria, evidence, and artifacts such as writing samples or performance tasks that are collected into a shared digital portfolio accessible to students and families. This structure aligns with Arizona’s academic standards while breaking free from seat-time expectations, allowing learners to advance when ready. The school’s charter explicitly supports this flexibility, enabling movement across studios for learners who demonstrate proficiency.

Learning at Phoenix Modern is organized across four domains: academics, social-emotional development, cognitive processing, and “wayfinding” which includes goal-setting, resourcefulness, and self-direction. Mornings focus on foundational skills in reading,

District Demographics

School System Type	Public Charter
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Urban
Total Student Enrollment	119
Total Schools	1
Grade Span	K-8
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	30%
English Language Learner	0%
Students with Disabilities	18%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	44%
» White	42%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

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writing, and mathematics, while afternoons are dedicated to “quests,” which are multi-week interdisciplinary projects that integrate real-world inquiry rooted in science and social studies. Guides, the school’s term for teachers, serve as mentors and facilitators, helping learners commit to goals, evaluate feedback, and reflect on progress.

The impact of this structure is visible in student outcomes, school ratings, and community feedback. Phoenix Modern earned A-ratings in both FY23 and FY24 and achieved the maximum possible growth points in those years, demonstrating strong academic progress across learner groups. Anecdotal academic evidence is equally compelling: students regularly advance beyond traditional grade-level expectations, such as middle schoolers beginning algebra early or elementary learners reading well above grade level because they have the autonomy and support to pursue advanced texts. Mixed-age studios have also reduced feelings of being “behind,” allowing learners to focus on growth rather than comparison.

Family engagement and satisfaction reinforce these trends. Parent survey data show exceptionally high levels of trust in the school’s learning promises, with families consistently noting that their children feel safe, known, supported, and challenged. Parents rate the school highly on clarity of communication and believe the learning model leads to persistence, curiosity, and resilience. Families appreciate the badge tracker system for its transparency and the visibility it provides into their child’s progress and mastery. Teachers similarly report that learners demonstrate increased confidence, collaboration, and communication.

Perhaps most striking are the qualitative shifts in learner identity. Students celebrate “leveling up,” encourage one another during quests, and take pride in meeting badge criteria. They see themselves as capable, creative, and self-directed and the structure of the school helps them understand their strengths and the strategies they need to be successful. These shifts matter; they are the foundation for lifelong learning.

Phoenix Modern’s story offers a glimpse of what becomes possible when schools are empowered to design structure around learning instead of tradition. With a mastery-based model grounded in relationships and agency, the school has built a system where academic rigor, personal growth, and authentic engagement reinforce one another and where every learner has the opportunity to thrive.

Yuma Union High School District

With the flexibility provided through the Instructional Time Model, 119 students at Yuma Union High School District were able to access and receive credit for critical work-based learning experiences. Following this early success, Yuma Union will expand the opportunities to more students throughout the district.

Yuma County encompasses three cities and includes both urban and rural areas. The City of Yuma is densely populated and urban, while much of the county consists of large areas of agricultural land. [Yuma Union High School District](#) (YUHSD) serves high school students across this community. The district has a large migrant population, and it's common for families to move in and out and within the district throughout the year. While individual students and families may have different aspirations, the community agrees about the importance for all students to graduate college and career ready. Yuma leverages the flexibilities provided through their ITM as well as creative scheduling to help ensure students have access to personalized pathways and educational opportunities.

As the first step in leveraging the flexibilities available through an ITM, the school district governing board had to adopt an ITM policy. Superintendent Tim Brienza says that the ITM model “allows the district to think differently about how time and learning are structured. Historically, it's been about seat time, but the ITM allows us to think about how learning should be measured based on mastery, outcomes and experiences.” Yuma Union utilizes their Instructional Time Model to meet the needs of both students and teachers.

The district had to create a process to monitor and manage students accessing courses through the ITM. Students log into Canvas to track their attendance using an attendance form and/or by uploading evidence of work. Students also complete forms that document what they're doing, their learning experience,

and their supervisor. Supervisors are the non-district staff members who oversee the experience. Students also receive formal feedback from supervisors, including a performance review, to enhance their learning through the experience.

Students leverage flexibilities provided through the ITM to help personalize their learning experiences. Most often, students will use the ITM flexibility to get credit for

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Urban, Suburban, Rural
Total Student Enrollment	11,201
Total Schools	7
Grade Span	9-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	60%
English Language Learner	17%
Students with Disabilities	9%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	87%
» White	10%
» Black/African American	1%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

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work-based learning and other off-campus learning experiences. About 120 Yuma Union students participate in work-based learning experiences. Students create a work-based learning plan to be approved by the school counselor before the experience begins. The Director of Academic Operations also monitors this process. Students can also take advantage of the ITM to help navigate life circumstances that prevent them from attending school in person. Since Yuma educators have already created online classes through learning management systems, students who cannot attend in person can use the platform to continue their learning.

Anytime the district needs to pivot to a remote learning day, they can leverage the ITM flexibility. For example, the district uses ITM flexibilities for YUHSD Professional Learning Institute, their all-day professional development day. This ensures that students make progress in their courses, working off campus while educators are engaged in their professional development. This flexibility can also be used if schools need to close for the day due to facility malfunctions, weather or any other reason.

But ITM isn't the only way Yuma Union meets the needs of their students and educators through innovative scheduling. Yuma Union HSD has an EdTechnology team that includes the director and three EdTech coaches. During half of the day, EdTech coaches are teaching in the classroom while they spend the other half of their day doing research and thinking about how to innovate with technology in their classroom. This allows EdTech coaches to apply their research directly to their classrooms and pass along best practices that work with other educators in the district.

Yuma Union High School District utilizes the flexibilities available in Arizona to create personalized learning pathways and offer innovative experiences to meet students' needs and interests. While they leverage the ITM to offer off-campus work-based learning activities and remote learning days, they also use other scheduling tactics to create school structures that meet their needs. Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Corey Semler said, "When we rethink how school time and learning experiences are organized, students gain opportunities that feel relevant to their goals. Flexible models let us design pathways that truly support each learner's strengths, interests, and future plans."

Arizona State University Preparatory Academy

[Arizona State University Preparatory Academy](#) (ASU Prep) is rethinking what it means to structure school around learning rather than routine. ASU Prep blends in-person, online, and university-connected experiences to create schedules that emphasize mastery, personalization, and family choice. Its models use Arizona's flexibility in instructional time and digital learning to rethink how time, space, and staffing can better support students. [Family Choice Days](#) exemplify this approach: a redesigned fifth day where students demonstrating proficiency shape their own learning plan while teachers use the time for collaboration and planning.

At [ASU Prep Tempe by The Levitt Lab](#), structural innovation goes even further.

Core academics are personalized and mastery-based, opening space for extended inquiry experiences such as wonder sessions, in-depth explorations, and Socratic seminars. Educators serve as guides who mentor rather than direct, helping students build agency, reflect on their growth, and tackle real-world challenges. With access to ASU's resources, students earn early college credits and explore career-aligned pathways that blur the lines between high school and higher education. Across the network, these structures have strengthened engagement, advanced student growth, and demonstrated how treating time as a design variable can unlock more learner-centered, future-ready models for Arizona schools.

Vail School District

[Vail School District](#) has built a system where families and educators have genuine choice in how learning happens. With multiple learning models (e.g., project-based, blended options, etc.), students and families can select the environment that best fits their needs. Vail also leverages Arizona's Instructional Time Model, which allows flexibility in how learning hours are structured. This means schools can

design schedules around mastery and meaningful learning experiences rather than rigid seat time. By combining family choice with flexible structures, Vail creates conditions for learner-centered innovation. One outcome of the utilization of the Instructional Time Model is reflected in the graduation rate of the 2024 four-year cohort of 93.1% and a five-year cohort rate of 95%.

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...Go Even Further

For student learning experiences to be the most meaningful, they need to reflect the complexities that exist in society. Students sitting in core classes for an hour a day won't result in the kind of critical thinking and skills required for success outside of K-12 learning.

School systems can design school structures that more closely align with postsecondary education and workforce environments. This may include using multi-aged grade bands and blending standards like Phoenix Modern, honoring where learners are in their learning progression rather than their age. Through structures like this, learners can move between learning experiences and at varying paces, with educators within a school system working together to meet the needs of students. In high schools, flexible scheduling can closely mirror learning in college and workforce environments. The length and frequency of classes may vary greatly, creating space for independent

learning, collaborative projects, or extended application. School systems can re-design schedules so that students can take classes for four days a week and use the fifth day to have unique learning experiences, like at ASU Prep. By using creative scheduling, students can access more work-based learning experiences like at Yuma.

In Arizona, school systems have a lot of flexibility. While ensuring standards are being taught, educators can design multi-disciplinary lessons that blend standards to support dynamic learning. With the flexibility provided with the ITM, school systems can completely re-imagine where, when and how learning happens. By engaging community businesses and other educational entities, school systems can think creatively about how to re-design courses and meet standards while offering students broader experiences.



ACTION AREA 4

EARLY COLLEGE ACCESS

Imagine if...

Imagine a school system where high school students spend part of their day in college classrooms, engaging in discussions with professors, collaborating alongside college peers, and realizing they belong in postsecondary spaces. Students earn credits that count toward a degree and see how their interests connect to real careers.

Strong partnerships with colleges and universities anchor this work. School systems intentionally align schedules, transportation, advising, and academic supports to ensure access for all learners. Students with disabilities are immersed in college campus experiences through college-based transition services. Hybrid models allow students to move seamlessly between high school and college learning environments.

In this system, postsecondary access is not an exception. It is a normal part of preparing every student for life after high school.

Practices and Possibilities

Making it possible for students to experience college-level courses during their time in K-12 cannot only help them prepare for the transition to postsecondary education but also broaden their K-12 educational experience. In Arizona, students can take college level courses while in high school through dual and concurrent enrollment opportunities. “Concurrent enrollment” typically means students take college courses through a college, while “dual enrollment” classes are college-level courses offered at the high school and taught by appropriately credentialed faculty. School systems can offer either or both of these types of courses. By creating structures that allow students to access higher education courses through dual or concurrent enrollment, students can accelerate their learning and take courses that may not be available at their high school. Arizona has numerous flexibilities and supports that allow students to access college early.



The local governing board is [responsible](#) for determining if courses taken at community colleges or universities for the purposes of concurrent enrollment meet specific course credit requirements. A school district or charter school [may continue to include](#) students enrolled in concurrent course work toward their average daily membership (ADM) as long as certain requirements are met, including that the school system pays for the tuition associated with the concurrent enrollment credit.

Both dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment allow students to earn postsecondary credit while completing high school graduation requirements. Access to college-level coursework in high school [helps students of all backgrounds build academic momentum, confidence, and familiarity with postsecondary expectations](#), making the transition to higher education more seamless after graduation. Arizona [statute](#) also requires that students with disabilities have access to any supplementary aids, services, or accommodations outlined in their IEPs or 504 plans when participating in dual or concurrent enrollment courses.

These experiences are especially powerful for first-generation college students, who often see even greater gains in college access, persistence, and completion. Early college opportunities can reduce time and cost to a degree, strengthen academic confidence, and provide early exposure to the supports and expectations that help students succeed in postsecondary education.

Students may also choose to access college experiences through early high school graduation obtained through competency-based methods. The [Grand Canyon High School Diploma](#), established in 2010, created a policy framework that allows schools to offer a pathway to high school graduation based on demonstrated college and career readiness rather than traditional seat-time requirements. Students who earn the Grand

Canyon Diploma—which can be as early as the end of 10th grade—can choose from several options: enrolling directly in a community college or university, pursuing advanced coursework such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), career and technical education (CTE) programs, and/or remaining in high school while continuing to participate in classes, extracurricular activities, and other experiences that matter to them. Arizona’s [funding structure](#) supports this flexibility by allowing schools to continue receiving per-pupil funding until the student’s expected graduation, ensuring resources remain available to support both accelerated learners and those who need additional time to master essential competencies.

Arizona has also laid the groundwork for an additional competency-based pathway to graduation through [existing state statute](#). While the Arizona State Board of Education (SBE) has not yet adopted rules to implement it, this framework provides another opportunity to innovate—enabling students to demonstrate learning through mastery, not seat time, and allowing schools to design personalized pathways that help every student achieve readiness for success beyond high school. Together, these approaches illustrate Arizona’s long-standing commitment to clearly defining college and career readiness and building flexible systems that help each learner reach it.

In Arizona, SBE sets the [statewide minimum course and credit requirements for high school graduation](#). However, local governing boards may choose to supplement the minimum program of study with additional local graduation requirements aligned to the community’s goals, needs, and interests. For example, school systems may set graduation requirements that exceed the minimum standard set by SBE and align with the additional course requirements set by the Arizona Board of Regents for enrollment at

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the state's public universities (see the [Post-High School Readiness Primer](#) for more details). Often, these locally-determined requirements also allow more students to pursue coursework—such as early college, work-based learning, or CTE that is more aligned with their interests and needs.

Lastly, through embedded credits in CTE courses or other early college options, students may even be able to complete the credits they need to be awarded associates degrees while in high school.

To go deeper into this topic check out the [Post-High School Readiness Primer](#).

Local Policy Flexibility

Local school boards have autonomy over many areas of policy that can help ensure students have access to and support for early college experiences. This includes setting local graduation requirements that allow students to have flexibility in their last few years of high school and funding dual and concurrent enrollment experiences. School districts and charter schools can leverage the ITM model to ensure instructional time requirements are flexible and allow for access to dual or concurrent enrollment.

Check out the [Instructional Time Model Primer](#) to learn more.



School System Spotlight

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District developed programs aligned to their goal to increase the number of students graduating high school with college experience and credit. Now, about 33% of their high school population participates in dual enrollment and during the 2024-25 school year, students earned a total of 876 college credits.

[Santa Cruz Valley Unified](#) is a tightknit community. Its proximity to the Mexican border means that it often has large populations of students, around 90% of elementary school learners and about 10% of high school learners, classified as English learners. To meet the needs, interests, and aspirations of its learners, the district has focused on creating flexible pathways that expand opportunity while keeping students connected to their school community. This approach spans the full K–12 continuum and includes a strong emphasis on early college access.

The district’s work to expand college credit opportunities has evolved over time. Santa Cruz Valley Unified first offered early college access through the [Grand Canyon Diploma](#), which allowed students to graduate early while earning postsecondary credits. While successful for some learners, district leaders wanted to broaden access and ensure that more students could benefit from college-level experiences before graduation.

The district then leaned into its Advanced Placement (AP) course offerings. To grow their AP programs, the district ensured that every student took an AP test at the end of the year, a cost that was covered by the district. In 2018, Santa Cruz Valley Unified was named a [College Board Advanced Placement District of the Year](#). While many students were finding success and passed their exams, Arizona

colleges require mostly a 4 or 5 for college credit. The district thought more students could still be earning college credit for their learning experiences.

The district then turned its focus to dual enrollment. Over the last five years, they’ve

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Rural
Total Student Enrollment	3,606
Total Schools	5
Grade Span	PreK-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	75%
English Language Learner	28%
Students with Disabilities	13%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	44%
» White	42%
» Asian	1%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

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grown their dual enrollment options from two to 16 courses. Dual enrollment allows students to remain on the high school campus, which Superintendent David Verdugo says they prefer because students remain part of the school community. The number of students participating in the program increased from 68 in the 2020-21 school year to 451 in the 2025-26 school year (accounting for 33% of their high school population). To increase participation, the district has counselors and teachers share information about dual enrollment options that exist before it's time for students to enroll in classes. Students who are participating in dual enrollment courses also share their experiences with younger students.

At Santa Cruz Valley, they've restructured courses at both the middle school and the high school level to help students get the most out of the district's dual enrollment opportunities. For example, they offer Honors Courses earlier so that students can complete those credits and progress to dual enrollment courses. Middle schools in the district offer Spanish, Algebra 1, and English 1. If successfully completed, students then have more course flexibility in high school.

The district is continuing to think through ways to expand early college opportunities for their students. They're starting to audit their K-12 staff to identify all of the teachers that are eligible to teach dual enrollment courses. The district is also thinking about how they can leverage evening classes and the flexibility that exists through the Instructional Time Model to provide more options to students. As they continue to build out the ways that students in their district can access college-level courses and experiences, they're continuing to think creatively about how they can remove barriers for their students.

Santa Cruz Valley Unified is committed to adapting their practices and opportunities to improve student outcomes. During the 2024-25 school year, students earned a total of 876 college credits through dual enrollment. Over the years they've seen growth in test scores and improvements in their accountability score. Superintendent David Verdugo says "Innovation is never ending because once we get there, we always find something else that we need to improve." Putting students at the center and thinking creatively about how best to serve them has led to big successes for the district and their students.

Vail School District

[Vail School District](#) partners with [Pima Community College](#) to give juniors and seniors the chance to earn college credit while still in high school. Through this [early college program](#), students take courses on the college campus, learning alongside postsecondary peers and earning credits that count toward both graduation and a degree. The district's partnership is made possible by Arizona's [concurrent enrollment statute](#), but could also be

accessed through an [Instructional Time Model](#), which allows students to split time between high school and college while remaining fully enrolled. Students are enrolled in coursework specifically designed for college success. The result is a pathway that expands opportunity and confidence for students, helping them see themselves as college learners long before graduation.

Yuma Union High School District

[Yuma Union HSD](#) partners with [Arizona Western College](#) (AWC) to ensure students have access to a variety of college courses during their time in high school. Last year the district had over 2,100 students enrolled in dual enrollment courses and over 1,600 students taking concurrent enrollment courses. AWC has helped ensure easy access to students by allowing them to enroll for only \$30 per credit.

The district and the college work together so that students enroll and are successful in these programs. For example, the district ensures courses offered at the high school feed into courses offered at the college. The district also has professional learning communities in which educators that teach similar courses across both the high school and college meet once a month to create greater cohesion between the campuses. The logistics go beyond just the classroom. Counselors and counseling teams meet once a month with the college to talk through any future changes and AWC comes to every campus once a week to provide support and coordination for class registration and upcoming opportunities.

While Yuma has high enrollment numbers in college credit courses, they are also thinking creatively about how to be even more innovative and better support students. Specifically, they are hoping to set up the third early college in the state, which would allow their seniors to spend most of their time on the college campus. They are also looking into paying for the concurrent enrollment credits for their students, since state statute allows it to count toward their annual daily membership. Executive Director Corey Semler says "We don't want to sell more college credit, we want to sell more college success."

To learn more about concurrent enrollment, check out the [Post-High School Readiness Primer](#).

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...Go Even Further

With the flexibilities offered in Arizona, school systems can creatively blend high school and postsecondary courses. This likely includes multiple pathways so students can choose the experience that works best for them. School systems may benefit from iterating over time, like Santa Cruz Valley, to find the programs that work best for their students and investing more heavily in those options. Arizona policy allows school systems to offer early college coursework and competency-based pathways like the Grand Canyon Diploma without losing ADM, both of which provide students with opportunities to directly experience postsecondary education while still being connected to and having support from their high schools.

School systems can also think about providing support for students through collaboration with institutions of higher education. High school counselors and college staff may work in tandem to help students understand the course options and access resources available to help them succeed. School systems can work with institutions of higher education to ensure their students have access to resources like writing centers and tutoring services that can help students meet the academic demands of college-level coursework. Yuma plans to create an early college campus similar to that of Vail, where eligible students spend their entire senior year on the college campus. These types of bridge programs allow students to experience college at a discounted tuition rate and with additional support from both their high school and the institution of higher education.



ACTION AREA 5

CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING

Imagine if...

Imagine a learning environment where students clearly see how what they learn connects to who they want to become. From an early age, learners explore interests through real experiences. Younger students investigate how food grows with local farmers or design solutions after visiting construction sites. Curiosity opens doors to possibility.

As students grow, exploration deepens. Middle and high school learners engage in projects, CTE labs, and early college coursework. They talk confidently about solving challenges, building skills, and adapting when new thinking is required. Teachers design learning that reflects real careers, and industry partners collaborate with students to set goals and provide feedback.

After graduation, young adults move forward with purpose. Some enter high-demand careers with certifications in hand. Others pursue higher education with direction and confidence. Employers describe these graduates as prepared, resourceful, and eager to contribute. Students describe school as the place where they discovered their strengths and found pathways to meaningful work.

These outcomes emerge when career exploration is intentional, ongoing, and embedded throughout K–12 learning. When connected to standards and driven by student interests, career exploration helps learners build futures they are ready to pursue.

Practices and Possibilities

Career exploration helps students connect their learning to purpose. It gives them the time, tools, and experiences to discover who they are, what they value, and how their strengths and interests can lead to meaningful work. When career exploration is embedded throughout the K-12 experience, students learn from a young age how their course content, technical skills, and personal interests synergize, leading to more meaningful and engaging academic experiences.

Rather than treating “career readiness” as a high school milestone, Arizona schools are using career exploration to help students of all grade levels make informed choices about pathways that fit their lifelong goals. Arizona’s [Education and Career Action Plan \(ECAP\)](#) further supports this work by requiring students to reflect on their goals, document experiences, and update plans annually, helping them build a clear, personalized pathway beginning in middle school.

Arizona state policy sets the stage for purposeful futures-aligned learning experiences. Since local districts and charter schools have authority over curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they can design learning experiences that align to state standards while connecting directly to real-world applications. [Per state policy](#), students can earn credit by demonstrating competency—perhaps through career-aligned learning experiences—rather than completion of a course sequence defined solely by seat-time. School systems may

also award academic credit embedded in Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses and for learning demonstrated through internships, community projects, or work-based learning experiences.

The Arizona Department of Education offers guidance on embedding meaningful [work-based learning experiences](#) in local CTE programs. Additionally, Center for the Future of Arizona offers [support for workforce programs](#) to help schools design meaningful work-based learning opportunities. Federal [Perkins V funding also supports early career exploration](#), allowing school systems to begin using resources for career awareness and exposure activities as early as fifth grade. These flexibilities allow school systems to design authentic, interdisciplinary experiences that count toward graduation while supporting career exploration at every grade level.

School systems can begin by building a coherent career exploration continuum. Elementary learners can start by discovering interests and local industries. Middle grades can engage in job shadowing, guest speakers, and exploratory projects that connect standards to career themes. High schools can expand this through CTE pathways, early college coursework, internships, and capstone projects that integrate academic and technical standards. Embedding career exploration into K–12 education ensures every student has access to information, mentors, and experiences that broaden their understanding of future possibilities.

Career exploration for Arizona students matters because it creates a learner-centered system where every student discovers their interests and develops the confidence, knowledge, and skills to make informed choices about their future. By leveraging the opportunities built into Arizona’s standards and credit policies, and the Arizona state system more broadly, schools can move beyond one-size-fits-all models to design personalized pathways that connect learning to life. When career exploration is intentional and connected to standards, it becomes a catalyst for innovation, relevance, and belonging across the education system.

Local Policy Flexibility

Arizona has opportunities to embed meaningful career exploration across K-12 education. School systems can award competency-based credit for demonstrated mastery rather than instructional time and may use embedded CTE credit to meet academic requirements through interdisciplinary, career-connected coursework.

To learn more about flexibility related to instructional time, check out the [Instructional Time Model Primer](#).

In addition, Arizona’s local control over curriculum and grading allows school systems to align instructional materials and reporting systems with community priorities aligned to state standards.

To learn more about flexibility related to reporting requirements and standards, refer to the [Assessment and Grading Flexibility Primer](#).

School System Spotlight

East Valley Institute of Technology

By providing access and support for students in CTE, EVIT has grown their enrollment and helped 3,250 students earn industry certification in 2025 (up from 953 in 2022).

[East Valley Institute of Technology](#) (EVIT) is a career technical education district (CTED) with two central campuses and satellite programs across 12 partner districts and charter networks. EVIT’s programs span a large geographic area, from Northeast Phoenix to Queen Creek, serving both high school students and adult learners. Because of this broad reach, EVIT’s student population reflects Arizona’s diverse demographics. The district continues to expand the number of students it serves, proactively reducing barriers and increasing participation in high-demand pathways.

Every EVIT graduate completes a career certificate, apprenticeship, or associate degree. Unlike most high schools, which typically offer pre-apprenticeship experiences, EVIT provides access to full apprenticeship programs in HVAC, welding, plumbing, electrical, and aviation. Students begin their registered apprenticeship in their senior year, and the training hours they earn beforehand count toward apprenticeship requirements. In 2024, EVIT [received a \\$6 million federal grant](#) to expand registered apprenticeships in in-demand fields, allowing them to establish a statewide apprenticeship hub for both high school and adult learners. Superintendent Dr. Chad Wilson notes, “Being a registered apprenticeship hub allows EVIT to lean in and support students across the state. Workforce shortages in rural Arizona are as challenging—if not more challenging—than in urban areas. Allowing students to remain in their local

community while accessing high-quality apprenticeship programs is good for our communities and our state.”

Supporting this model requires flexible scheduling. High school students who attend the main EVIT campus spend half of their day at EVIT and half at their home high school. Adult learners follow schedules aligned

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District, CTED
Urban/Rural/Suburban	Urban and Suburban
Total Student Enrollment	8,736
Total Schools	2 (120 High School Partners)
Grade Span	10-12
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	22.9%
English Language Learner	Unavailable
Students with Disabilities	12%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	46%
» White	43%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

to their goals, whether they are pursuing high school equivalency, apprenticeship training with embedded certifications, or associate degrees. Adult learners under age 22 who have not completed a high school equivalency can enroll in EVIT at no cost. EVIT prioritizes front-loading apprenticeship and degree coursework, helping adult learners minimize tuition costs and accelerate their progress.

While all CTEDs in Arizona are allowed to offer associate degrees, EVIT is currently the first and only CTED doing so. To launch these programs, EVIT demonstrated labor-market need, secured governing board approval, completed accreditation requirements, and coordinated with local community colleges. EVIT now offers associate degrees in Nursing and Surgical Technology and is planning additional programs aligned with industry demand.

To learn more about how Arizona policy allows CTEDs to offer associate's degrees to high school students, check out the [Post-High School Readiness Primer](#).

Removing barriers to access has been central to EVIT's work. Historically, students who struggled with their grades or attendance were not admitted. After reassessing these requirements, EVIT tracked outcomes for students who previously would not have qualified. The results were clear: these students performed just as well as their peers. As Dr. Wilson explains, "We believe if

a student can find a passion, that will provide a purpose." Today, the only requirement for EVIT high school enrollment is that students must turn 16 during the first year of their program. EVIT's experience demonstrates how rethinking entrance requirements can expand opportunity without lowering expectations.

The district has also prioritized serving students with the greatest need. Recognizing that foster youth are among the least likely students in Arizona to graduate on time, EVIT used state funds to build on-campus housing, called Hope Tech, to provide a safe, stable environment for these students. Staff work with Hope Tech students to develop a "13th-year plan" to support long-term success while they complete an EVIT program, entering young adulthood with a diploma and industry-recognized credential, as well as additional financial and housing stability. EVIT also serves students with disabilities at high levels. The district finds that these students achieve outcomes comparable to their peers, which Dr. Wilson attributes to intentional planning, individualized support, and helping students identify a meaningful pathway.

EVIT continues to think creatively about how to expand access to high-quality career pathways and ensure strong outcomes for every learner. They've increased the number of students earning industry certifications from 953 in 2022 to 3,250 in 2025. In 2025, 87% of their students passed their technical skill assessments. EVIT's commitment to improving the lives of Arizona students through CTE is evident. In the words of Superintendent Wilson, "CTE can change lives. It's not just a slogan—we see it every day."

Casa Grande Elementary School District

By treating career exploration as a catalyst for relevance, belonging, and purpose, Casa Grande Elementary School District has seen students articulate stronger connections between their learning and future careers. As a result, students are expanding their interests in emerging fields and demonstrating stronger engagement. Importantly, one of their school's—the Center of Innovative Learning—learner-centered model is also contributing to improved attendance outcomes. While still early, the school's chronic absenteeism rate decreased from 26.5% last year to approximately 20.85% year to date, remaining consistently below the district average.

Located halfway between the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas, [Casa Grande Elementary School District](#) (CGESD) serves more than 6,700 learners from early childhood through eighth grade. Its community sits in a unique position as it's geographically distinct from the suburbs yet deeply connected to Arizona's emerging high tech manufacturing corridor. In a city of about 70,000 residents surrounded by tribal lands, Casa Grande's schools reflect the area's diversity and cultural roots. The diversity of cultures and histories has shaped a district identity grounded in community pride, resilience, and the belief that every student should see a hopeful future within their own city.

As Superintendent Adam Leckie describes it, CGESD seeks to create “pathways to prosperity,” opportunities for students to see themselves as valuable community contributors in a local workforce. This drives the district's focus on career exploration and community partnerships, especially as new industries establish roots in the area. The district's Business Advisory Council connects teachers with local employers to co-design experiences that link classroom learning to workforce skills. Engineers from industry partners lead mini-lessons in design thinking, while educators participate in professional development days to understand how companies apply STEM concepts in real settings. These partnerships provide

elementary learners authentic glimpses into high-tech manufacturing, renewable energy, and other growing sectors in their community, and students are increasingly able to articulate clear connections between their classroom learning and future careers.

District Demographics

School System Type	Public District
Urban/Suburban/Rural	Urban and Rural
Total Student Enrollment	6,582
Total Schools	13
Grade Span	PreK-8
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	74%
English Language Learner	10%
Students with Disabilities	17%
Most Common Student Races/Ethnicities	
» Hispanic/Latino	64%
» White	20%
Black/African American	6%

Sources: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) and [Arizona Department of Education](#)

Many students now express interest in pathways such as agrivoltaic system design, computer programming, sustainable food production, drone technology, robotics, and 3D printing, all fields they had little exposure to before these critical partnerships. Internal surveys show that even young learners are beginning to “see themselves” as engineers, scientists, and innovators.

At the center of this work is CGESD’s school [COIL](#), or Center of Innovative Learning, a repurposed campus dedicated to project- and problem-based learning. COIL serves as a learner-centered lab school, where students lead their own inquiries, design year-long capstones, and engage in continuous cycles of reflection and improvement. Using a “plan-do-study-act” framework, learners set goals, gather feedback, and refine their work much like professionals in real industries. Teachers act as facilitators, helping students connect Arizona’s academic standards to authentic projects that matter to them. As learners take shared responsibility for group projects and build strong relationships with staff, they are

more eager to attend school, not wanting to miss project launches, collaboration with teammates, or sessions with visiting experts like planetary scientists from the National Air and Space Museum.

CGESD’s approach shows how career exploration can start long before high school. By inviting community partners into classrooms, empowering students to co-design learning, and connecting standards to real opportunities, the district helps every learner envision a pathway to purpose. The model also demonstrates the power of local flexibility: even without direct access to high-school CTE funding, Casa Grande leverages partnerships and project-based design to bring career learning to life. For other districts, this is a reminder that innovation begins with relationships. Career exploration can bring a sense of belonging, relevance, and possibility for every learner when schools treat their community as a classroom, and when students see their hometown as a place of opportunity.

Flagstaff Unified School District

[Flagstaff Unified School District](#) (FUSD) is intentional about access points and making sure students are exposed to CTE fields early. Assistant Superintendent Dr. Jaime Festa-Daigle says, “We know exposing students to CTE fields early allows them to make better path choices.” The district offers a variety of STEM magnet programs, engineering courses, and pre-CTE options at both middle schools. Students from the high schools often travel to middle schools and elementary schools in the district to engage younger students in CTE activities

and offer insight into opportunities that lay ahead. Flagstaff Unified School District’s high schools offer a wide variety of CTE and college credit bearing courses for students. FUSD’s class of 2025 earned a total of 249 industry credentials. In addition, 331 completed one or more CTE programs and 50% of FUSD graduates passed at least one core college level class while attending high school. Counselors help ensure that students understand the pathways available to them and have the required credits they need for graduation.

Chinle Unified School District

[Chinle Unified School District](#) has leveraged grants to fund many of the career exploration opportunities they have available. Superintendent Quincy Natay explains that when the district identifies a new program opportunity or a specific need, they actively seek grant funding to make it possible.

In addition to formula grants, the district has successfully secured several competitive grants such as a five year school improvement grant worth \$8 million dollars, multiple 21st Century grants with varying awards up to \$875,000 per year, four High Quality Early Learning Grants worth \$3.8 million, A for Arizona Transportation Modernization Grants worth \$3.2 million,

an EPA Clean School Bus grant worth \$5.9 million, and a SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) grant worth \$8.8 million.

The district used federal [School Improvement Grants](#) to implement many of their CTE programs, including buying their first [zSpace Lab](#). While some grants are not directly tied to career exploration, the district’s ability to leverage these funds enables it to redirect other resources toward priorities such as career exploration. Superintendent Natay advises education leaders seeking grant funding to craft a compelling narrative that clearly articulates how the investment will improve student learning and outcomes.

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...Go Even Further

School systems ready to expand career-aligned academic experiences can begin by treating the community as an extension of the classroom. Start small by inviting local professionals into classrooms to co-design projects, mentor students, or offer mini-lessons. Consider how Casa Grande utilizes community showcases and exhibitions to help students practice presenting their learning to real audiences. Build pathways early. Elementary students can explore local industries and practice foundational career skills through projects, field-based inquiry, and hands-on creation. Middle schoolers can engage in structured job shadowing or industry-aligned challenges. High schoolers can participate in internships, paid work-based learning, capstone projects, or early college coursework aligned to workforce needs.

Review your district's policies and Instructional Time Models to ensure standards-aligned career learning counts toward required instructional time. Map out where career exposure, exploration, and preparation already exist, then identify gaps. Ensure counselors, teachers, and community partners work together so students can change pathways without losing momentum. Importantly, gather student voice. Ask learners what they are curious about, what industries spark interest, and what skills they want to build. When career exploration is responsive to student interests and community opportunities, schools and districts create pathways that help every learner find purpose, agency, academic success, and a meaningful place in Arizona's workforce.



CONTINUING THE WORK

From Permission to Purpose

Across Arizona, school systems are demonstrating how forward-thinking policy can be used to improve student learning and expand opportunity. From urban centers to rural, tribal, and border communities, school systems are using existing policy flexibilities to design learning that better reflects students' strengths, interests, and aspirations. These efforts show how intentional innovation can translate into stronger learning experiences and outcomes for students.

Arizona's growing network of innovators reflects this commitment. Through partnerships led by the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy and Center for the Future of Arizona, educators, policymakers, and community leaders are working together to design learner-centered systems grounded in local context and shared accountability. State-level flexibility related to instructional

time, graduation pathways, standards alignment, and career-connected learning creates the conditions for this work—but it is intentional use at the community level that turns flexibility into impact.

The examples in this guide show how policy can serve as a lever to remove barriers, expand opportunity, and ensure that every student—regardless of zip code—has access to meaningful, relevant learning experiences that lead to success after graduation. By lifting up what's working and clarifying how to act, this guide is designed to help school and system leaders move forward with confidence—using the flexibility that already exists to support student-centered transformation and design what comes next for students, including postsecondary access, completion, and entry into meaningful careers. This guide is not about admiring problems and challenges; it is about using policy to help every student realize their full potential.



NEXT STEPS

Turning Flexibility into Impact

This guide is a starting point not a finish line. Arizona’s innovation journey depends on thoughtful action grounded in student success. Schools, districts, and communities can take steps today to deepen their work by:

- » **Start with shared purpose:** Revisit your local graduate profile or adopt the State 48 Graduate Profile to clarify what success means for learners in your community.
- » **Use flexibility with intention:** Leverage tools such as the Instructional Time Model, competency-based credit, early college pathways, and CTE integration to design learning around mastery, relevance, and readiness.
- » **Meet your system where it is:** Recognize that innovation looks differently at different stages—whether emerging, developing, or scaling—and use this guide to support next steps that match your system’s readiness and capacity.
- » **Build strong ecosystems:** Partner with local businesses, higher education institutions, and community organizations to expand real-world learning and postsecondary opportunities.
- » **Invest in educators:** Create time and support for collaboration, professional learning, and reflective practice so innovation is sustainable and grounded in classroom reality.
- » **Center student voice:** Engage students as partners in designing, testing, and refining learning experiences to ensure innovation reflects their needs, aspirations, and lived experiences.
- » **Integrate technology with purpose:** Use technology intentionally to expand access, flexibility, personalization, and relevance—supporting new models of teaching, learning, and assessment aligned to student goals.
- » **Learn and share:** Document progress, elevate student experiences, and share lessons so others across Arizona can learn from your journey.

Arizona’s future will be shaped not by permission alone but by purposeful action. As partnerships deepen and innovation evolves, the goal remains constant: to ensure every learner in Arizona graduates ready for what comes next—equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to thrive and contribute to a strong economy, a healthy democracy, and a bright future.

Notable Resources

- » Center for the Future of Arizona - Arizona Education Progress Meters
<https://www.arizonafuture.org/progress-meters/education/>
- » Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy – State 48 Graduate Profile
www.State48GP.org
- » Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy – Generative Artificial Intelligence in K-12 Education
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64398599b0c21f1705fb8fb3/t/66b66995e1b1fc7f24f9d780/1723230615694/AZ+NAU.GAIGuide.pdf>
- » KnowledgeWorks - Aligning Competencies to Portrait of a Learner
<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/aligning-competencies-portrait-learner/>
- » KnowledgeWorks - Defining a Competency
<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/define-competency/>
- » KnowledgeWorks - District Conditions for Scale
<https://knowledgeworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/district-conditions-scale.pdf.pdf>
- » KnowledgeWorks - Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning
<https://knowledgeworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/finding-your-path-navigation-tool.pdf>

State Statutes and Regulation of Interests

- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-120.05](#) – Student access to internet; student use of wireless communication devices; policies and procedures; annual notice; definitions
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-701.01](#) – High schools; graduation; requirements; community college or university courses; transfer from other schools; academic credit; report
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-792.03](#) – Grand Canyon diploma
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-795.01](#) – Competency-based college-ready educational pathways
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-901](#) – Definitions
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-901.07](#) – Concurrent coursework; calculation of average daily membership; definition
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-901.08](#) – School year; school month; instructional time models; requirements; funding; definition
- » [Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-1821.01](#) – Dual enrollment information
- » [Ariz. Admin. Code R7-2-302](#) – Minimum Course of Study and Competency Requirements for Graduation from High School

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