



EBOOK

Portrait of a Graduate Handbook: How to Successfully Build and Implement Your Portrait of a Graduate

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Executive Summary

This executive summary is excerpted from the "Portrait of a Graduate Handbook" (First Printing, 2025), authored by Michael Speziale, Ed.D. and Sharon James, Ed.D., with contributions from Chris Juhasz, Ed.D. The handbook draws from a three-year longitudinal study of Broken Arrow Public Schools and provides comprehensive guidance for educational leaders seeking to implement a Portrait of a Graduate framework in their districts. For detailed implementation guidance, comprehensive case studies, and additional resources, please refer to the [complete handbook](#).

Introduction: The Vision & Purpose of a Portrait of a Graduate

The [Portrait of a Graduate \(POG\)](#) represents an evolution in how we conceptualize educational success. Traditionally, schools have primarily focused on academic benchmarks defined by state or federal standards, measuring success through content mastery and standardized testing. While these elements remain important, they fall short in preparing students for the complex, interconnected world they will navigate after graduation.

A Portrait of a Graduate elevates this traditional notion, creating a comprehensive framework that captures a community's shared vision of the skills, knowledge, and attributes students should possess upon completing their K-12 education. It brings together educators, students, families, employers, and community members to define success more holistically, addressing the diverse competencies required for success in life, work, and citizenship.

This is not a concept that emerged unintentionally. Rather, it builds on education's enduring mission while addressing the growing recognition that the end game for graduates must include adaptability, creativity, and a strong sense of purpose. The POG challenges schools to reimagine their vision of success and engage all stakeholders in a collaborative effort to prepare students for the future.

The 21st century has ushered in unprecedented transformation fueled by technological advancements, globalization, and societal shifts. The rise of artificial

intelligence (AI) is redefining job roles and revolutionizing how we live and work. In this context, academic knowledge alone is insufficient. Today's learners require critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, emotional intelligence, digital literacy, and the ability to navigate emerging technologies responsibly and ethically.

Against this backdrop, the Portrait of a Graduate serves as a compass, guiding educational institutions in defining the attributes and competencies students need to succeed in this rapidly changing world. By fostering a shared vision, the POG ensures that schools equip students not only for immediate academic success but also for long-term fulfillment in an AI-powered and globally interconnected society.

The Research Foundation: Why a POG Matters

The Portrait of a Graduate concept is deeply rooted in research across multiple disciplines, providing evidence-based support for its principles and practices:

- **21st-Century Skills Research:** The National Research Council's report, "Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century" (2012), underscores the value of cognitive skills like critical thinking and problem-solving alongside interpersonal skills like communication and collaboration. Organizations such as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) have demonstrated that employers highly value individuals who possess these cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills.
- **Essential Life Skills Research:** Studies show that students who cultivate personal and interpersonal skills are better equipped to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions. A meta-analysis of school-based interventions demonstrates that focusing on such skills significantly impacts students' academic achievement, mental health, and overall well-being (Durlak et al., 2011).
- **Personalized Learning Research:** Research consistently shows that tailoring instruction to individual needs and interests leads to heightened student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019).





The POG framework serves as a catalyst for transformation throughout an educational system by:

- **Creating a Shared North Star:** Establishing a common language and shared understanding of student success, uniting diverse stakeholders around a collective purpose.
- **Empowering Student Agency:** Making expectations for learning explicit and transparent, encouraging students to take ownership of their education.
- **Shaping Purposeful Learning:** Guiding curriculum development, instructional practices, and assessment design to intentionally align with 21st-century skills.

Collaborative Development: Building Your POG

Creating a Portrait of a Graduate that truly represents the aspirations and needs of an entire community requires active involvement from diverse stakeholders. This diversity is crucial for several reasons:

- **Richness of Input:** Different stakeholders bring unique insights, knowledge, and experiences.
- **Enhanced Buy-In:** When stakeholders feel their voices are valued, they are more likely to support implementation.
- **Increased Relevance:** A diverse committee ensures the POG addresses a wide array of student needs and prepares them for various post-graduation pathways.

Building Your Stakeholder Committee

Your committee should include representation from:

- **School Staff:** Teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff
- **Students:** Current students and recent graduates from diverse backgrounds
- **Parents/Guardians:** Representing various grade levels and backgrounds
- **Community Leaders:** Faith-based leaders, civic organizations, and business leaders
- **Local Businesses:** Employers from various industries
- **Higher Education:** Representatives from colleges and universities
- **Technical and Post-Secondary Alternative Training Programs**



While diversity is essential, ensuring the group remains functional is equally important. Aim for a committee size of 15-25 members, considering subcommittees for larger districts.

Facilitating Stakeholder Engagement

Successful engagement requires careful planning:

- **Meeting Logistics:** Schedule meetings at convenient times, select accessible locations, offer remote participation options, create focused agendas, and designate skilled facilitators.
- **Communication Strategies:** Maintain transparency, utilize multiple channels, practice active listening, establish feedback loops, build relationships, and celebrate progress.
- **Community-at-Large Engagement:** Establish clear channels for gathering input from the wider community through surveys, forums, and social media platforms.

Core Attributes & Competencies

With guiding principles in place, you can concentrate on the core attributes that will shape your Portrait of a Graduate. These attributes embody essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions that empower students to thrive in the complex landscape of the 21st century. Below is a list of common attributes included by school systems. It is not exhaustive, and many other competing attributes may arise in your stakeholder conversations. Some may be





directly linked to your location and workforce development efforts. The key in this step is to filter the list of desirable attributes into a prioritized set of outcomes and competencies.

Foundational Literacies

- **Digital Literacy:** Navigating the digital world safely and responsibly
- **Literacy:** Comprehending, analyzing, and evaluating information
- **Numeracy:** Understanding and interpreting data, making informed decisions

Critical Thinking & Problem Solving

- **Analytical Thinking:** Breaking down complex information, identifying patterns
- **Complex Problem-Solving:** Approaching challenges from multiple perspectives
- **Critical Thinking:** Evaluating information objectively, questioning assumptions

Creativity, Innovation, & Curiosity

- **Creativity:** Generating original ideas and novel solutions
- **Innovation:** Turning creative ideas into action, creating new processes or products
- **Curiosity:** Maintaining a lifelong love of learning and exploration

Communication, Collaboration, & Interpersonal Skills

- **Communication:** Effectively conveying ideas across various media
- **Collaboration:** Working effectively with others toward shared goals
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Building positive relationships and navigating social situations

Adaptability, Resilience, & Growth Mindset

- **Adaptability:** Adjusting to change and thriving in uncertainty
- **Resilience:** Bouncing back from setbacks and persevering through challenges
- **Growth Mindset:** Believing abilities can be developed through effort and learning

Leadership, Initiative, & Entrepreneurial Mindset

- **Leadership:** Inspiring and motivating others toward common goals
- **Initiative:** Identifying opportunities and taking action without prompting
- **Entrepreneurial Mindset:** Thinking creatively about solutions and taking calculated risks

Student Agency

- **Self-Discovery and Awareness:** Understanding one's strengths, challenges, and values
- **Goal Setting and Self-Regulation:** Setting realistic goals and developing strategies
- **Responsible Decision-Making:** Considering ethical implications and consequences

Empathy & Civic Citizenship

- **Empathy and Perspective-taking:** Understanding others' experiences and viewpoints
- **Collaboration and Communication:** Building respectful relationships
- **Civic Engagement:** Understanding citizen responsibilities and contributing to the common good

Implementation Strategy: From Vision to Practice

Crafting a Portrait of a Graduate is a significant milestone, but it's only the first step in a transformative journey. Translating the portrait into reality requires a comprehensive effort to redesign educational structures and practices.

Curriculum & Competency Development

To bridge the gap between the POG and curriculum, translate broad attributes into specific, measurable competencies:

1. **Curriculum Mapping:** Analyze your existing curriculum to identify alignment and gaps with POG competencies.
2. **Vertical Articulation:** Ensure deliberate alignment across grade levels so learning experiences build upon one another.
3. **Horizontal Articulation:** Align curriculum across





- subject areas within each grade level so different subjects reinforce POG competencies.
4. **Balance Content and Skills:** Ensure the curriculum provides opportunities for students to apply knowledge in authentic contexts.
 5. **Align Instruction and Assessment:** Choose instructional strategies and assessment methods that promote active learning and development of 21st-century skills.

Educational Structures & Practices

Examine existing structures to identify opportunities for innovation:

1. **Scheduling:** Consider flexible scheduling options that allow for deeper learning experiences.
2. **Instructional Strategies:** Shift toward student-centered approaches like project-based and inquiry-based learning.
3. **Assessment Innovations:** Incorporate performance-based assessments, portfolios, and self-assessment.
4. **Professional Development:** Provide training and support for educators to effectively implement POG-aligned practices.

K-12 Integration

While the POG often focuses on graduation outcomes, its principles should be integrated throughout the educational journey:

1. **Age-Appropriate Versions:** Create versions of the POG that express competencies in developmentally appropriate ways.
2. **Elementary Foundations:** Focus on sparking curiosity, developing foundational skills, and building awareness about the world of work.
3. **Middle School Exploration:** Help students identify strengths and interests, explore career pathways, and develop self-awareness.
4. **High School Application:** Provide opportunities for deeper exploration, real-world application, and preparation for post-secondary success.

Career Exploration: A Centerpiece of Student Success

Career exploration is a dynamic process of self-discovery and informed decision-making that empowers students to navigate their future pathways with purpose and clarity. It is an essential component of a holistic education, connecting academic experiences to real-world opportunities.

The Impact of Career Exploration

Research consistently demonstrates the significant impact of career exploration:

- **Enhanced Self-Awareness:** Fostering deeper understanding of oneself
- **Improved Academic Motivation:** Connecting learning to real-world applications
- **Informed Decision-Making:** Equipping students with knowledge to make better choices
- **Increased Career Success:** Aligning careers with interests and values
- **Smooth Transition to the Workforce:** Preparing students for workplace demands
- **Reduced Career Indecision:** Actively exploring options to reduce uncertainty



Integration Strategies

Effective career exploration requires intentional integration throughout the K-12 experience:





1. **Personalization:** Tailor exploration to individual interests through differentiated instruction, flexible pathways, and individualized learning plans.
2. **Collaboration:** Build networks with higher education institutions, local businesses, and parents to expand opportunities.
3. **Technology Integration:** Leverage digital tools like [Defined Careers](#) to enhance accessibility and engagement.
4. **Data-Driven Improvement:** Collect and analyze data on student engagement, career interests, and post-graduation outcomes.

Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) experiences provide students with opportunities to apply classroom learning in authentic settings:

- **Job Shadowing:** Observing professionals to gain insights into daily responsibilities
- **Internships:** Working in professional settings for hands-on experience
- **Apprenticeships:** Participating in structured training programs combining classroom instruction with on-the-job training
- **Capstone Projects:** Completing culminating projects demonstrating mastery of skills

Building Partnerships

Strong partnerships between schools, businesses, and community organizations create sustainable WBL programs:

1. **Chamber of Commerce Connections:** Partner with local chambers to access business networks
2. **Industry Advisory Boards:** Form boards with representatives from key industries
3. **Community Service Organizations:** Collaborate with nonprofits for service-learning opportunities
4. **Higher Education Partnerships:** Create dual-enrollment and early college experiences

Assessment & Accountability: Measuring What Matters

Implementing a Portrait of a Graduate requires a departure from conventional assessment practices. This section explores strategies for measuring student progress toward POG competencies.

A Holistic Approach

POG assessment should incorporate multiple measures:

- **Formative Assessments:** Classroom-based assessments providing ongoing feedback
- **Summative Assessments:** End-of-unit authentic assessments measuring mastery
- **Performance Assessments:** Real-world tasks requiring application of knowledge and skills
- **Portfolios:** Collections of student work showcasing growth over time
- **Surveys:** Feedback from students, parents, teachers, and community members
- **Longitudinal Tracking:** Data on graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment, and employment outcomes

Assessment Strategies for Core Competencies

Different competencies require different assessment approaches:

1. **Cognitive Competencies:** Use problem-solving scenarios, design challenges, and research projects.
2. **Intrapersonal Competencies:** Implement self-assessments, reflective journals, and goal-setting exercises.
3. **Interpersonal Competencies:** Assess through group projects, peer evaluations, and observation of collaborative work.
4. **Content Knowledge:** Balance traditional assessments with authentic application tasks.
5. **Civic and Global Competencies:** Evaluate through service-learning projects and community initiatives.

Utilizing Technology

Technology enhances assessment capabilities:

- **Digital Platforms:** Track progress, administer assessments, and facilitate communication
- **Data Dashboards:** Visualize assessment data to identify trends and inform interventions
- **Digital Portfolios:** Showcase student work and document growth over time
- **Online Surveys:** Gather feedback from various stakeholders efficiently





Continuous Improvement Through Data Analysis

Assessment data should drive ongoing improvement:

1. **Regular Analysis:** Review data to identify strengths and areas for growth
2. **Evidence-Based Decision-Making:** Use data to refine curriculum, instruction, and assessment
3. **Stakeholder Communication:** Share progress transparently with all stakeholders

Overcoming Challenges & Sustaining Success

Implementing a Portrait of a Graduate is a significant undertaking that requires navigating challenges and building sustainable systems.

Common Challenges

Schools typically encounter several obstacles:

1. **Resistance to Change:** Teachers, administrators, and community members may express concerns about new initiatives and disruption to familiar routines.
2. **Resource Constraints:** Limited funding, staffing, or access to professional development can hinder implementation.
3. **Assessment Challenges:** Measuring growth in complex competencies requires innovative approaches beyond traditional testing.
4. **Time Constraints:** Educators juggle multiple responsibilities, making it difficult to dedicate time to POG implementation.
5. **Communication Barriers:** Ensuring consistent messaging across stakeholders can be challenging.
6. **Sustainability:** Maintaining momentum amid changing priorities or leadership transitions requires ongoing commitment.

Strategies for Success

Drawing from successful implementations, these strategies can help overcome challenges:

1. **Embrace Collaboration:** Form diverse committees, gather broad input, and establish clear communication channels.
2. **Start Early, Start Small:** Begin career exploration in elementary school and pilot programs before scaling up.
3. **Leverage Technology:** Use platforms like Defined Careers to enhance career exploration and streamline data collection.
4. **Align with Existing Initiatives:** Integrate the POG with current programs to create a cohesive system.
5. **Cultivate Continuous Improvement:** Collect and analyze data to refine strategies and adapt to changing needs.
6. **Celebrate Success:** Share stories, showcase student achievements, and recognize milestones.

The Broken Arrow Experience: Lessons Learned

The journey of Broken Arrow Public Schools (BAPS) in Oklahoma provides valuable insights into successful POG implementation. Their three-year implementation process, documented in research by Speziale et al. (2024), highlights effective strategies and lessons learned.

Building a Strong Foundation

BAPS created a diverse stakeholder committee of 50 participants, including educators, students, parents, community





leaders, and business representatives. They scheduled meetings after work hours with dinner provided, creating a welcoming atmosphere, and divided participants into smaller groups for focused discussions. Their partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce expanded community engagement and provided access to business perspectives.

Designing an Effective POG

BAPS developed a framework integrating core competencies into three readiness areas:

1. **College Ready:** Academic indicators such as GPA, coursework completion, and standardized test performance
2. **Career Ready:** Behavioral and experiential benchmarks including attendance, community service, workplace learning, and extracurricular activities
3. **Life Ready:** Personal competencies like financial literacy, resume writing, goal setting, communication skills, and coping strategies

Implementation Strategies

BAPS successfully implemented their POG through several key approaches:

1. **Curriculum Integration:** They mapped competencies across grade levels, creating a developmental progression from elementary through high school.
2. **Technology Utilization:** They adopted Defined Careers as a centralized platform for tracking student progress, providing personalized guidance, and collecting data.
3. **Advisory Program:** They restructured advisory periods to focus on career exploration, goal-setting, and POG competency development.
4. **Work-Based Learning:** They built partnerships with local businesses to provide internships, job shadowing, and industry experiences.
5. **Assessment Innovation:** They developed a comprehensive assessment system including performance-based tasks, portfolios, and self-reflection tools.

Continuous Improvement

BAPS maintained a commitment to ongoing refinement:

1. **Data Collection:** They systematically tracked student engagement, academic progress, and workforce readiness indicators.
2. **Stakeholder Feedback:** They conducted surveys and focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and business partners.
3. **Professional Development:** They provided ongoing training to equip educators with the knowledge and skills to implement the POG effectively.

Their experience demonstrates that successful POG implementation requires collaboration, intentionality, data-driven decision-making, and a commitment to continuous improvement.





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Note: This is an abbreviated reference list for citations used in this executive summary. The complete *Portrait of a Graduate Handbook* contains a comprehensive reference section with all sources cited throughout the full text.

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About Defined

Defined is a leading provider of career-connected deeper learning solutions for K-12 education. Our mission is to connect classrooms to careers through deeper learning, and our vision is to transform learning environments where every student discovers their potential through authentic learning experiences that bridge education and future success. Through our award-winning ecosystem of solutions—Defined Learning, Defined Careers, Defined Academy, and Defined Goals—Defined empowers educators to engage students in authentic, career-connected projects that develop essential future-ready skills while building academic mastery. Defined serves over 108,000 educators in over 5,000 schools worldwide. Visit www.definedlearning.com to learn more.

