

# Building the Conditions for Cradle-to-Career Success: A Playbook for State Policymakers and Place-Based Partnerships

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Today's education system poses persistent challenges that schools alone cannot solve, and state policymakers are facing increasingly complex barriers to supporting today's learners. These important education policy challenges, such as chronic absenteeism or student health and wellness, are multi-faceted and require a variety of solutions to move the needle for student outcomes. Leaders are seeking to ensure learners are ready to meet changing workforce needs and fill job shortages. To address these cross-continuum issues, state policymakers are considering cradle-to-career and place-based solutions based in immersive supports and learning experiences at the community level.

A variety of supports, services and learning experiences fall under the umbrella of place-based education approaches, including community schools and community hubs, integrated or wraparound services, and neighborhood partnerships. All approaches share the intent of connecting students and families with the resources needed in a common community-based location through public-private partnerships.

With support from Blue Meridian Partners, Education Commission of the States (ECS) conducted listening sessions across four states, **Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio** and **Wyoming**, focused on state and community approaches to establishing place-based partnerships and cradle-to-career education policy efforts. These states were selected to reflect varied geographic, governance and policy contexts, as well as different entry points into place-based and cradle-to-career work.

## CHANGE Initiative Principles

The following six key principles of the CHANGE Initiative help guide policy creation and community engagement.

- Shared Vision.
- Authentic Engagement.
- Adaptability.
- Cross-Sector Collaboration.
- Holistic, Long-Term Support.
- Accountability and Transparency.

This work aligns with ECS Chair and Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon's Community Hubs for Addressing Needs for Greater Education (CHANGE) Initiative, which emphasizes partnerships between states and communities to ensure education systems reflect local priorities, deliver measurable results and prepare learners for success in life and

work. State leaders with these partnerships highlighted how cross-agency collaboration with a unified vision across education, labor and private sectors has aided progress toward state education goals. This collaboration is critical, but requires structure, leadership and clarity.

As with all education policy issues, states approach place-based learning with varying resources, political contexts and policy support, and states enter this work from widely different starting points in terms of their policy landscape. This playbook is designed to help state policymakers – no matter their entry point – create durable, community-driven place-based partnerships that improve learner outcomes from cradle to career.

## Key Terms and Definitions

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**Community Partnerships:** Collaborative relationships between schools and local organizations that provide resources and services. ([Health Politics, Policy and Law](#))

**Community Schools:** Schools that integrate academics with health, social services, and family partnerships to support the whole child. ([Learning Policy Institute](#))

**Cradle-to-College Pipeline:** A coordinated system of supports designed to improve outcomes from early childhood through adulthood. ([Education and Urban Society](#))

**Integrated Supports:** Coordinated academic, health, and social services designed to remove barriers to learning. ([RAND Corporation](#))

**Place-Based Education:** An approach to learning that takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful, and engaging personalized learning for students; and immersive learning experience that “places students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities and experiences—using these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum.” ([Getting Smart](#))

**Wraparound Services:** Coordinated, individualized supports organized around student and family needs. ([Learning Policy Institute](#))

## Enabling Conditions

Before the key principles of the CHANGE Initiative can be applied, states must first foster enabling conditions that allow localities and regional centers to conduct community-based work. Across listening sessions and state examples, **five enabling conditions** consistently emerged as foundational to support place-based partnerships, including questions state leaders can consider in establishing each:



Each enabling condition has served as a different starting point for state efforts, and states may be further along in some enabling conditions than in others. Additionally, local system leaders, policy influencers and philanthropies can examine their role in [advancing education research and development](#) to further this work.

The states highlighted in this playbook signal the versatility in establishing place-based efforts and cross-continuum education work. State and community leaders from the four listening sessions demonstrated the value of all the enabling conditions but also acknowledged the reality that not every state has fully established all conditions. States can begin creating the environment for successful place-based work through a combination of some of these conditions.

## Why Place-Based Partnerships Matter

Place-based partnerships are emerging because they coordinate supports around real community needs. [Studies](#) show that well-implemented place-based education opportunities and community schools can improve student outcomes by increasing student access to “expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities,” improving community and family engagement and streamlining the delivery of student supports. These approaches help align education, health, workforce and community systems.

## State Policy Landscape

Many states have established policies related to the five enabling conditions for place-based policy creation and community engagement. States have taken a wide range of approaches to establish enabling conditions, but a few common approaches exist across state policies. These include:

- 1| The creation of a shared vision or a statewide strategic plan to guide the work and monitor progress.
- 2| The development of statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDS) that connect data from early childhood through the workforce.
- 3| The inclusion of community members in governing bodies and task forces.
- 4| The creation of grant programs to promote place-based initiatives and incentivize community partnerships.

In some states, these policies are directly tied to place-based efforts, while in others, they simply strengthen enabling conditions that allow place-based initiatives to thrive.

## State Strategic Plans

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Across both place-based initiatives and broader educational efforts, state leaders note the importance of a shared vision and common goals to align priorities for coherent, scalable impact. Some state strategic plans for education include community partnerships in the mission and/or goals.

- **Colorado's** [Start Strong, Stay Engaged, Leave Ready 2025-2028 Strategic Plan](#) emphasizes strong family and community partnerships as a strategy to increase student engagement.
- The **Hawai'i** [Public Education 2023-2029 Strategic Plan](#) highlights “connections to and engagement with people and places as important drivers of action” as a core value for the state board of education.

## Longitudinal Data System Policies

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At least 33 states have established [statewide longitudinal data systems](#) with systems under development in an additional nine states. Twenty-six states maintain systems that span from early childhood to workforce, supporting their ability to monitor the full arc of student development and provide cradle-to-career initiatives with the data needed to evaluate what works and where further support is required.

## Community Voice in State and System Governance

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At least 25 states currently include community members in some education governing bodies, providing a mechanism for integrating diverse local perspectives into state-level education leadership and decision-making.

- **Alaska's** [Office of Tribal Affairs](#) was created in 2022 within the Department of Education and Early Development to facilitate collaboration between tribal entities, school districts, and state and federal education organizations.
- The **South Carolina** Department of Education [Family and Community Engagement Program](#) establishes partnerships between state agencies, school improvement councils, postsecondary institutions, civic organizations and religious groups to connect community resources to support learners and families.

## Funding for Place-Based Initiatives

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States have dedicated funding for place-based initiatives, often through grant programs that incentivize community partnerships.

- The **District of Columbia** [Community Schools Incentive Initiative](#) provides grants to “fund partnerships that coordinate educational, developmental, family, health and after-school-care programs.”
- **Maryland's** [ENOUGH Act](#) (2024) establishes a grant program to support place-based programs in high-poverty neighborhoods that, among other things, improve access to good schools and ensure transitions across K-12 to college and career.
- **Ohio** [S.B. 208](#) (2025) establishes the Regional Partnerships Program to offer grants to support early childhood to postsecondary regional partnerships across the state.

## Durable Governance Structures

Place-based initiatives require durable governance structures to move forward. Well-defined, formalized governance structures allow for better alignment across an initiative, fewer administrative obstacles to achieving change, and less internal conflict over roles and decision-making authority when governance is shared.

Programs established in statute have a more straightforward mechanism for establishing a clear governance structure. For example, the [legislation](#) that created **Ohio's** Regional Partnerships Program charges a mix of departments with creating, administering and overseeing the program, and assigns implementation powers and duties regarding the program to the department of education and workforce. Leaders in Ohio spoke about how building out the state's regional infrastructure provided longevity throughout state-level leadership changes in the governor's office and in legislative priorities.

“What I think is really important is that we're building out regional infrastructure... You've got people in the regions invested. They see it as an opportunity to leverage existing resources in the community to meet these metrics.”

- Ohio state agency leader

Governance can look different for programs that are created by state leaders, organizations or communities outside of the legislative system. **Wyoming's** [Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education](#) (RIDE) initiative began as an advisory group to the governor tasked with reviewing and making recommendations for improving K-12 education. Rather than assigning governing authority to a single entity, the state formed [Wyoming's Future of Learning Partnership](#), a collaboration between the governor, the state superintendent, the department of education, the state board of education, the University of Wyoming College of Education, the Wyoming Community College Commission and the Wyoming Association of School Administrators, to oversee RIDE efforts. The Partnership provides a means to promote alignment across the state's full education governance structure regarding changes resulting from the RIDE recommendations.

**New Mexico**'s state community schools initiative was largely driven by a statewide coalition of the willing. However, as the initiative progressed, the coalition was codified in state [statute](#), creating a shared governance structure under which the coalition operated in partnership with the public education department. Community leaders involved in the work expressed that while codifying the coalition was essential for its long-term sustainability, the statute's lack of clarity regarding the group's decision-making authority led to a shift in power that forced the coalition into an advisory role with little real influence.

“On one hand, we codified the coalition. On the other hand, we didn't codify [the coalition] well enough to keep the actual influence of the coalition at the table with public education.”

- New Mexico community leader

## State Feature: **Maryland**



The [ENOUGH Act](#) establishes the Engaging Neighborhoods, Organizations, Unions, Governments, and Households (ENOUGH) Grant Program to fund neighborhood programs that, among other community improvement goals, provide cradle-to-career access to high-quality education and care for residents. The act requires that eligible neighborhood programs engage with the community, seek input from residents and establish long-term plans for community improvement.

In addition to establishing the grant program itself, the ENOUGH Act creates clear governance structures to oversee and support the program. The bill establishes the [Governor's Office for Children](#) as a dedicated executive-level entity tasked with administering the ENOUGH initiative and identifying eligible neighborhoods. The act requires and sets parameters for needs assessments to be conducted in each eligible neighborhood and provides for reporting and evaluation requirements related to the program.

Though the ENOUGH initiative supports community-driven neighborhood improvement projects, embedding the work in state-

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level governance structures allows the state to establish a broad direction for the initiative, and to provide technical assistance and clear accountability expectations.

The act also establishes meaningful governance for the program at the local level and clearly differentiates between state and local governance roles. At the local level, lead partners are primarily responsible for coordination of all aspects of neighborhood programs, including the completion of a needs assessment to inform both immediate and long-term plans for neighborhood improvement. On the other hand, the state-level Office for Children has only the authority to approve these lead partners and needs assessments.

By clearly defining the state's role as facilitative rather than directive, the ENOUGH Act ensures that communities maintain real ownership over their neighborhood action plans while still being held accountable for producing measurable improvements.

## Sustained Cross-Sector Leadership

Regardless of whether place-based initiatives are built from the ground-up starting through community efforts or advanced through state-level initiatives, they require strong leadership and champions to sustain momentum over time. Leaders at any level can serve as catalysts for place-based partnerships, but long-term success often depends on building broad ownership across sectors, agencies, and communities to maintain alignment through shifts in policy priorities and leadership transitions.

In **Maryland** and **Wyoming**, for example, place-based initiatives were prioritized and driven by the governor. In Ohio, regional work and pre-K through career (P-20W) efforts were prevalent in various forms for decades before the legislature established policy that codified those efforts and allowed regional centers to carry out place-based work.

**Minnesota** celebrates operating its P-20 Education Partnership as an autonomous entity and a true coalition. In **New Mexico**, the work was all community-led and driven. A coalition was created with 80 leaders from across the state, and the work was later codified. **Utah** centers its work around the Promise Partnership, a cross-sector, cradle-to-career place-based partnership initiative.

Each of these efforts revolved around generating bipartisan support and working toward local and statewide goals for student improvement. While state policy priorities can change over time, building strong support across various levels of leadership ensures consistency across coalitions to sustain the work over time.

## State Feature: Wyoming



Gov. Mark Gordon signaled the importance of place-based efforts by [launching](#) the RIDE Initiative in 2021. Following initiation by the governor, an advisory group was created. Advisory group members included former educators, legislators, parents and business community members. From the data collected through surveys and statewide listening sessions the advisory group provided recommendations to the Governor to shift Wyoming's education system to a more student-centered model.

From there, Wyoming's Future of Learning Partnership was formed by state leaders to work together to remove any barriers to the work. Local leadership served as early adopters of the work. Nine school districts were [selected](#) to pilot student-centered learning approaches out of 17 districts that applied. Businesses, partners, university and community colleges all got involved in support of the work and, with a [second cohort](#) of districts added, half of Wyoming school districts are now actively conducting pilot programs.

The coalition of leaders worked to manage transitions across various positions. For instance, as the state superintendent of education changed while the RIDE Initiative was in progress, leaders worked to align with the new superintendent on the work to maintain momentum.

Although many of the pilots are still in the early stages of development, an [evaluation report](#) noted promising signs across the pilot sites, including resources and support provided to districts for implementation. Early findings noted success factors in district progress toward embedding student-centered learning through training, sustainability and expansion. Early impacts on students include improvements in behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, sense of connectedness, relevance of school and academic self-concept.

## Flexible and Reliable Funding

Adequate funding is necessary for place-based programs to launch and be sustained. Many policymakers pointed to the importance of seeking various sources for funding to continue to grow the pot of money available for community-based programs. One approach that was highlighted was braiding funds from various sources to support initiatives. Braided funding refers to a practice of securing funding from multiple sources; in many cases this can be philanthropy and government funds including federal and state funds that can be used for different purposes. For example, this could take the form of having programs supported by philanthropic investments which are then matched by state grant funds or using one stream of funding as a base to grow from and then attract more funds based on the initial success.

Additionally, for place-based initiatives to succeed, the community members and other decision-makers need to trust that program funding can maintain the programs and also support program growth and success in the long-term.

Policymakers also pointed to the importance of ensuring that funds match the desired outcomes once they are in place. One policymaker in **Wyoming** noted that while they had sufficient funds in place, the way they are allocated for use is crucial as it must align with the desired programmatic outcomes.

### State Feature: **New Mexico**



New Mexico's community schools work evolved through coordinated, community-driven efforts that combined cross-sector partnerships and sustained public investment. The initiative began as a [grant-funded initiative](#) of the Office of School and Adolescent Health within the New Mexico Department of Health.

At the local level, the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County (ABC) Community Schools Partnership, was formally established in 2007 through a Joint Powers Agreement among the City of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, Albuquerque Public Schools and the United Way of Central New Mexico. The agreement created a durable governance structure that aligned public agencies, schools, philanthropy and community organizations around shared student and family outcomes, while ensuring accountability through the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration. Over time, the partnership expanded to include

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the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce, the University of New Mexico, the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions and the Albuquerque Teachers Federation.

The ABC Community Schools Partnership grew from one school in 2007 to 75 schools by 2025, including 60 traditional public schools and 15 charter schools. The partnership demonstrated how communities could braid local, state and philanthropic funding to support integrated student services and neighborhood partnerships tailored to local needs.

In [2019, updates](#) to the Community Schools Act established dedicated state funding for community school development, beginning with a \$2 million legislative appropriation. Since then, New Mexico has allocated \$36.9 million to the New Mexico Public Education Department to support grants, technical assistance and program management.

That sustained investment has supported significant statewide growth and long-term stability. Today, New Mexico has 150 community schools, including [91 funded through state implementation grants](#). Schools receiving grants have [demonstrated numerous gains](#), including improved test scores, higher graduation rates, reduced chronic absenteeism and increased access to mental and physical health care, among other positive academic and social outcomes.

## Shared Data and Continuous Improvement

Place-based leaders spoke to the importance of implementing metrics and data to guide their efforts toward statewide goals, such as graduation requirements, kindergarten readiness, postsecondary involvement and other academic goals. Measuring progress is particularly important in place-based work where programming and supports vary depending on the needs of a given community. Having data that shows progress relevant to different communities ensures that efforts across a state are all marking persistent growth. Leaders also discussed data as a path to a common language between different role groups. Good metrics can build trust and buy-in to further the work.

In place-based work, a shared data infrastructure can ensure that communities understand their learners, can work towards improved outcomes, can adjust strategies and programs to drive achievement, and can support coordination

across organizations. A [mix of data](#) – including population-level, program-level and individual-level data – can measure overall performance and examine the utility of specific interventions.

These measures don't necessarily require the creation of new data collection. For instance, leaders in **Ohio** built improvement metrics around data already being collected at the state and regional levels. In [legislation](#) establishing the regional partnership program, partnerships are required to report on core performance metrics that span the P-20W continuum, including kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading proficiency, middle grade math proficiency, high school graduation rates, postsecondary credential or degree completion, and employment. Learn to Earn Dayton, one of the place-based partnerships that form the Ohio Regional Partnerships Coalition, maintains a [statewide data dashboard](#) including academic data, community data, and state fiscal data to “shape priorities and inform policymakers of ways they can act to support student success.”

While many states leverage existing statewide data systems, others have used surveys, stakeholder feedback and local outcome measures to monitor progress and build support as more comprehensive data infrastructure develops.

### State Feature: **Minnesota**



The [Minnesota Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System](#) (SLEDS) serves to measure and drive the state's cross-sector education goals. State leaders noted that the desire for state-level data assets to inform decision-making transcends stakeholder groups. There is a demand from education agencies, community entities, nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses to use longitudinal data to measure progress for the state's strategic plan. The state's accountability metrics and a commitment to the various connections between agencies to link cross-continuum data were the impetus for creating the [Minnesota P-20 Education Partnership](#).

As the partnership evolved alongside SLEDS, policy leaders understood the value of the dollars already invested into SLEDS and its essential alignment with the partnership's charge. The partnership's integrated data committee is focused on demonstrating quantitative impact through measures at three levels: on the ground impact, measures attached to the state's strategic plan priorities, and state-level metrics. Leaders noted that this work operates with a horizontal reach across the partnership's members, as well as the agencies, organizations and

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“ We knew our overall mission, our overall vision, could be measured by statewide outcomes for our learners and advancing mobility, and those statewide measures are captured in MN SLEDS.”

- Minnesota state partnership leader

community groups that it works with, and a vertical reach across all voices and roles from students and families through practitioners and community leaders, to understand pain points and innovative practices.

The state used its data systems to approach a [postsecondary attainment goal](#) established by the legislature in 2015. The state aimed to ensure that 70% of adults aged 25-44 would hold a degree or certificate by 2025. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education maintains a [website](#) tracking progress on the goal. A [2025 report](#) noted significant progress toward the overall goal and in attainment for various racial/ethnic groups, but highlights gaps that still need to be addressed. The attainment metrics continues to serve as a north star across sectors, and data seeks to measure and guide work toward that goal. This specific goal expired in 2025, but the P-20 Education Partnership and the Office of Higher Education are advocating for a renewed and expanded goal.

## Community Voice and Local Ownership

A defining strength of place-based strategies is their ability to reflect the unique needs, priorities and assets of local communities. Effective programs are shaped not only by state leaders and education systems, but also by community members, local organizations, businesses and philanthropic partners who help identify pressing challenges and inform solutions. This collaborative approach allows communities to bring local culture, expertise and lived experience into multiple points along the P-20W pipeline.

Several states prioritized community engagement from the outset. In **Wyoming**, RIDE conducted a statewide survey and listening sessions across the state to gather input on local needs before entering the planning phase. In **Minnesota**,

a policymaker highlighted the use of student roundtables to gather feedback directly from dual enrollment participants and incorporate their experiences into program improvement efforts.

**New Mexico** has also emphasized community leadership in its community schools strategy. The state maintains a [statewide coalition](#) focused on strengthening and expanding community schools aligned with the community schools framework. One policymaker noted that local communities — rather than the state itself — have been the primary drivers of the work. Reflecting that philosophy, New Mexico identifies “collaborative leadership, shared power and voice” as one of the six core practices guiding its community schools model.

In Albuquerque, [community school programs](#) have connected students and families with academic, health and social supports designed to meet local needs. These partnerships help ensure learning and care extend beyond the classroom, while positioning schools as trusted neighborhood hubs that support students and families holistically.

### State Feature: **Ohio**



Across Ohio, education leaders have recognized that no single statewide strategy can fully reflect the needs of communities that differ widely in their economies, cultures and local priorities. In response, the state has built much of its education work around regional collaboration and community-driven decision-making. Ohio [code](#) provides for the establishment of an educational regional service system to deliver services and resources that help schools meet the needs of all students, creating a structure that allows regions to shape approaches around local strengths and challenges.

State leaders described these regional differences as both a challenge and an opportunity. While varying local contexts can make statewide scaling more complex, they also allow communities to develop strategies grounded in local strengths and needs. To support collective impact across statewide goals, Ohio has intentionally emphasized flexibility over prescriptive statewide approaches, allowing regional partnerships to adapt strategies that make sense for their communities.

Pilot programs have been one way the state has elevated community voice in policy development and implementation. These efforts vary by region and reflect differing local priorities and assets. For example, the Cincinnati region established 10 community learning centers across

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Cincinnati Public Schools through Cradle to Career Cincinnati, while the West Central Ohio Regional Education Partnership focused on strengthening career pathways from early childhood through workforce entry and aligning local partners around shared regional goals.

These locally driven efforts also helped inform broader policy and systems change. In Dayton, Learn to Earn Dayton launched [Preschool Promise](#) in 2014 as a regional initiative to expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities before later evolving into a stand-alone, voter-funded organization. The initiative contributed to gains in kindergarten readiness in Montgomery County that outpaced statewide growth. Local partnerships supported through Learn to Earn Dayton also helped improve student attendance in Trotwood Public Schools, demonstrating how community-informed approaches can support measurable progress while helping shape broader statewide conversations about education and workforce alignment.

## Considerations for State Policymakers

In addition to the themes that emerged around enabling conditions, state and community leaders in the listening sessions spoke about things they wish they could change over the course of their work and offered advice to state policymakers beginning place-based efforts.

- **Patience:** Leaders expressed the importance of patience and stressed that these efforts can take time to come to fruition. State policymakers in Ohio noted that the efforts recently codified in legislation had been in the making for over 30 years through the long-term work of community organizations.
- **Legislative Support:** While not the only way to weather changes in state priorities and leadership, leaders discussed the importance of having legislators on board to support sustainability. For legislators to be effective, they must engage in the process to understand what is happening at the local level and how state policy could complement those efforts.
- **Rightsizing the Goal:** More than establishing a shared vision, leaders must decide on the correct vision. Goals and metrics should reflect the realities of a state's or community's context. States and localities should ensure that broad target outcomes are adjusted to be a realistic finish line for their contexts.

## Conclusion

Place-based partnerships and cradle-to-career learning initiatives improve student outcomes through coordinated, community-centered approaches beyond the classroom. While states may enter this work with different policy landscapes, resources and goals, this playbook demonstrates that common enabling conditions can create the foundation for durable and responsive place-based efforts.

States cannot address today's complex education challenges in isolation. There is an opportunity to weave in existing local supports to align systems around learners. State policymakers can play a vital role in supporting this work by fostering durable governance structures, providing flexible and reliable funding, strengthening shared data and continuous improvement efforts, and establishing policies that center community voice and local ownership. Together, these conditions can help communities build partnerships that align local priorities with shared statewide goals and sustain long-term opportunities for learner success.

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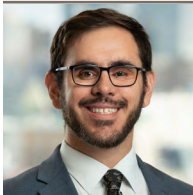
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As a senior policy analyst, Lauren provides quality research on a variety of education topics. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Lauren earned a master's degree in public policy from the University of Michigan. Before attending graduate school, Lauren spent four years teaching and three years working with a community-based neighborhood center in Denver. Lauren strongly believes in the importance of creating education policies that allow all children to excel. Contact Lauren at [lpeisach@ecs.org](mailto:lpeisach@ecs.org).

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