Future of High School Innovation Series | August 2026

MOVING BEYOND GRADES

A COMPETENCY RECORD



FEATURING

California Area School District, PA

Grand Rapids Public Museum High School, MI

Piper USD 203, KS

Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

Beyond Grades: A Competency Record

How Three School Systems Are Rewriting the Record of Student Learning

For more than a century, American high schools have used a common shorthand to summarize what a student knows: a grade point average, a course list, a class rank. These signals were not designed to capture what students can do: They were designed, in large measure, to sort. And for most of the students they sort, the message is the same — here is where you fall in the distribution — without ever answering the questions that actually matter: What did you learn, and how do you know?

A student who spent three years becoming a certified volunteer firefighter leaves no trace of it on a transcript. A student who organized a civic protest, submitted posters to a museum as historical artifacts, and wrote a cross-disciplinary essay connecting the experience to John Locke looks, on paper, like a student who completed an English assignment. A student who spent four years in a career academy, completed an internship, and defended their competencies before industry judges looks, on paper, like a student who passed a class.

> The Carnegie Foundation and XQ's Future of High School Network (FHS Network) brings together 24 school systems working to move American secondary education beyond the limits of the Carnegie Unit — the century-old system that measures learning in seat time rather than demonstrated competency. Across the network, systems work together, undertaking R&D to tackle shared challenges.

This story follows three systems in the Network that are communicating competency, each asking a version of the same questions: What would it look like to build a record of student learning that shows what students actually know and can do? How can school systems do a better job of measuring student progress in academic courses that tests alone cannot? How can learning and competencies be documented, communicated and made legible to students, families, the workplace and the institutions they enter next?

In California Area School District — a rural community in western Pennsylvania — a superintendent is redesigning the transcript itself by opening it to employers, community members and students, and filling it with everything the grade book has been leaving out. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a teacher-built platform is turning a student's learning history into a navigable story, organized by projects and competencies rather than by courses and credits. And in suburban Kansas, a district is building the shared language and grade-band progressions that would allow that story to be told consistently — across every classroom, from kindergarten through twelfth grade.





California Area School District, Pennsylvania:

VILLAGE TRANSCRIPT

California Area School District sits in Coal Center, Pennsylvania, a generational community where children being taught by the same teachers as their parents is not unusual, where the May Day Queen tradition stretches back decades, and where the steel mill that once anchored the local economy left a legacy of blue-collar pride and practical skill. The district serves fewer than 1,000 students. About one-third receive special education services. Forty students are on the homeless list. It is a community with deep roots and real complexity, and its superintendent believes the traditional transcript serves neither.

“Grades are useless,” says Dr. Laura Jacob, superintendent of California Area School District — not as a provocation, but as a diagnosis. What the district is building instead is a Village Transcript: a single platform that functions as a resume, a traditional transcript, and a portfolio, populated not just by teachers but by anyone in the community who knows what a student can do. The name comes from the African proverb. The design comes from necessity.

Consider Scott. By conventional measures, he is an average student. His grades say so. But the moment he can leave school and get to the volunteer fire department, he is there — earning certifications, logging hundreds of hours, doing

work that, as the superintendent puts it, makes him the one you want on the side of the road in an emergency. None of that appears on his transcript. The Village Transcript is designed to change that.

The system is organized around Carnegie's 21st-century skills framework. Students can add portfolio work — documents, photos, certifications — and link it to specific skills. Supervisors at work-based learning sites, volunteer coordinators and community members can contribute feedback and tag the skills they observe. A student earning 300 hours toward Essentials of Firefighting can have that documented and tied to state standards, and can potentially earn credit. A student working in a family restaurant can have that recognized alongside coursework. The system is still being built. Community education is ongoing. But the vision is clear: learning, wherever it takes place.

The change shows up in students before it shows up in systems. When Stephanie Hoesly, director of special education and student services for the district, sat with a student named Ajanae the first time she logged into the Village Transcript, Ajanae's opening instinct was familiar: Her grades weren't that good. Hoesly kept going. What else? Ajanae listed her summer work, her tutoring and her community involvement. The shift was visible in real time — from reluctance to something closer to pride. Her academic performance has improved significantly since.



Dr. Laura Jacob, superintendent California Area School District

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The hardest part is not the technology — it is the culture. Some universities have been slow to recognize what the Village Transcript documents. A student in the district's no-grades moonshot program required a letter from the principal and direct intervention just to gain admission. The district has made a pragmatic choice: The Village Transcript will contain a traditional transcript box for institutions that require it. But that box is not where the energy goes. The goal, five or six years out, is for the Village Transcript to be culture. Not a program. Not an initiative. Just what California Area does.

Grand Rapids Public Museum High School, Michigan:

THE STORY OF A SCHOLAR



Grand Rapids Public Museum High School occupies a building that was once the Grand Rapids Public Museum — a 1930s-era structure designed, unlike the classical museums of its day, to be entered from street level. No steps. No columns. Accessible by design. The school, which serves about 270 scholars through an open lottery, has embedded that same logic into its academic model.

Grand Rapids Public Museum High School, an XQ Super School rooted in strong community partnerships, began by developing a homegrown set of competencies, in the way of most schools doing this work, with instructors reviewing their existing projects and identifying where the competencies fit. No mandates, no prescribed assignments — an organic process rooted in faculty expertise, but often limited in depth of alignment due to the extensive time required to develop and implement competencies. In 2023, Grand Rapids adopted the XQ competencies, which break down the critical elements of lifelong learning into teachable skills, designed to be used with academic standards. Today, a school-wide competency map documents which courses assess which XQ Competencies and at which stage. About 30 percent of classes are currently mapped. The rest are in progress.

The next step lives in Galleria, a custom tech platform designed by tenth-grade instructor Ben Hoff. Where traditional learning management systems organize around classes, Galleria organizes around projects. Faculty create projects, attach them to the courses they span, and assign XQ's competencies to each

task. Scholars upload their work and receive feedback on the competencies demonstrated. This system allows students to track their progress. A planned timeline feature will eventually show every project a scholar has been assigned across their full time at the school — color-colored hexagons illuminating which competencies were demonstrated, with visibility to the actual work accessible underneath. Scholars will be able to add their own projects, select the competencies they believe apply, and choose what to share with a college or employer. The learning record becomes, as school founder Christopher Hanks describes it, the story of a learner.

Take, for example, the Persepolis Project, which shows what that story can look like when scholars build it themselves. Instructors Candice Anderson and Tom Peterson designed a joint module for all eleventh graders: an essay requiring a personal perspective, a current event, engagement with the book Persepolis, a pivotal Supreme Court case, and the writings of John Locke — with the explicit instruction to say something their classmates weren't saying. The unit was running when protests around ICE enforcement broke out in Minneapolis. More than 100 Museum High scholars made signs, walked out, organized speeches, and wrote a protest song. One scholar reached out to a local organization for support; another submitted her protest posters to the Grand Rapids Public Museum as artifacts of a civic movement. Then the scholars came to Anderson — not to ask permission, but to show her what they had done, align that work with the competencies, and ask whether it counted. She told them it did, and that it not only met the requirements, but demonstrated the competencies at the highest level, "excelling." They had already moved. The credit was a formality.

Chris Hanks describes the arc of this work using a phrase from Haitian folklore: mountains beyond mountains. The point is not that the view is discouraging. It is that one cannot see the next challenge until they have solved the one before it. Galleria could not have been designed before the school existed. The Persepolis module could not have happened without years of building faculty collaboration and scholar trust. The lesson Hanks draws is one that applies well beyond Museum High: the pursuit of a perfect system before starting is the surest way not to start.

Grand Rapids Public Museum HS, Principal Tamika Henry

Young folks are not cookie cutter and that's why we need to be so flexible in the way we deliver education and the frameworks that we use.



Principal Tamika Henry sees the same truth from the scholar's side. "Young folks are not cookie cutter," she says, "and that's why we need to be so flexible in the way we deliver education and the frameworks that we use." What Museum High has built — a culture where instructors take risks, iterate in public and trust that the system will support them — reflects two R&D priorities Carnegie identifies as foundational to high school transformation: a culture of trust, and the conditions for educator excellence. Neither can be mandated; both have to be earned. Galleria is currently live in the tenth-grade core team and piloting in one additional class, with a school-wide rollout planned for late 2026.



Piper Unified School District 203, Kansas City:

FROM POCKETS TO PRACTICE

Piper USD 203 is a district that built something and then had to reckon with what it built. Over several years, in partnership with the Kauffman Foundation's real-world learning initiative, Piper constructed a wall-to-wall career academy structure at the high school — six academies; 25 sectors; every student enrolled in a career-connected pathway from the time they enter as freshmen. Students pitch projects to industry partners, complete internships and defend their learning in a senior capstone presentation built around the district's Portrait of a Graduate competencies. This year, real-world learning coordinator Polly Vader matched 211 seniors with individualized work-based learning placements across the Kansas City region.

The Portrait of a Graduate — competencies codeveloped with students, community, staff and the school Board — is the language Piper has built its work around. Ask any adult in the building whether these are the competencies every graduate should master, and the answer is near unanimous. The problem is not the vision. The problem is the gap between academy experiences and the rest of the school day. In the academy experiences, the language is alive. In core classes, it surfaces only in pockets — a math teacher here, a project redirected there. These are individual teachers reaching for a shared language that has not yet become common practice.

Piper's three-year strategic plan is designed to close the gap. Year one has focused on identifying grade-band progressions — K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12 — aligned to the Portrait of a Graduate, building teacher-leader groups at every level and developing rubrics for each band. The plan is phased by design: legible enough that

Piper Unified School District 203

On capstone day, every senior defends their Portrait of a Graduate competencies before panels that include teachers from across the district — elementary, middle and high school — all observing together.



teachers can see where they are headed, flexible enough to adjust as the district learns. The unintended consequence Vader names most clearly is the divide the academy structure inadvertently created between academy and core teachers. The Portrait of a Graduate, she believes, is the connector — the shared stake that belongs to everyone, regardless of which side of the building they teach on.

Once a year, the distance between aspiration and practice collapses. On capstone day, every senior defends their Portrait of a Graduate competencies before panels that include teachers from across the district — elementary, middle and high school — all observing together. The entire district takes a professional development day for the presentations. The design is intentional: Every teacher who has worked with these students, at every grade level, gets to see where the work is headed. A kindergarten teacher and a senior capstone judge are watching the same student. The strategic plan exists to make that connection visible not just once a year, but every day in between.

Common Thread: The Signal Shapes the Story

The work described here is unfinished by design. California Area School District is still educating its community about what the Village Transcript can hold. Grand Rapids is rolling Galleria to its full school in August. Piper USD 203 is in year one of a three-year plan that has already revealed unintended consequences.

The districts share a diagnosis: The tools schools have used for a century to communicate what students know were not built for the full range of what students know. They were built to sort and rank. The systems profiled here are building something different — tools designed to show, to tell and to invite the student into the process of making meaning from their own learning.

Two patterns run across all three schools. The first is that changing the signal changes the student's relationship to learning. Ajanae did not need a new curriculum: She needed a place to document what she already knew. The students who protested at Museum High did not need a teacher to tell them they had demonstrated competency in civic voice: They needed a teacher who recognized it when they brought it to her. Scott does not need his grades to be higher: He needs the record to include what the grades are leaving out.

The second pattern is that communicating competency is not primarily a technology problem. Galleria, the Village Transcript, and Piper's grade-band rubrics are useful tools. But the harder work — the work that takes five years, or three, or a career — is cultural. It is convincing all teachers that the Portrait of a Graduate belongs to them too. It is building enough trust with community members that a volunteer fire captain feels confident documenting a student's skills. It is earning the attention of a university that has never seen a transcript like this before. That work is slower. It also runs deeper.

Scott, Ajanae and the students who walked out of Museum High with protest posters and a question about credit — none of them needed a different education. They needed a system that could see what they already knew. These three districts are building that system.

> **“The districts share a diagnosis: The tools schools have used for a century to communicate what students know were not built for the full range of what students know…The systems profiled here are building something different — tools designed to show, to tell and to invite the student into the process of making meaning from their own learning.**

LEARN MORE

California Area School District, Pennsylvania

California Area School District is where opportunities are endless. We provide the tools for every child to thrive and build a brighter future for us all. California Area School District is dedicated to providing diverse learning experiences for every child to thrive in their community to build a better future in the world.

Learn more at: https://www.calsd.org.

Grand Rapids Public Museum School, Michigan

The mission of Grand Rapids Public Museum School is to use place-based design thinking and the museum context to create learning experiences that develop confident, creative, and competent thinkers, doers, and leaders. Scholars are part of small cohorts that work collaboratively, co-taught by teachers, creating a culture of community of learners. Greater emphasis is placed on community, as the school recognizes downtown as an extension of the classroom, providing scholars the opportunity to further build on place-based learning principles. Housed in the Grand Rapids Public Museum Archives downtown, scholars quickly learn that the community IS their classroom.

Learn more at: https://grps.org/schools/high-school/gr-museum-hs.

Piper Unified School District 203, Kansas City

Piper Unified School District 203 is located in Kansas City, Kansas, within Wyandotte County. The mission of Piper USD 203 is to provide each student with quality instruction, learning opportunities, and a safe educational environment which inspires academic success, personal excellence, and responsible citizenship. With a student body of more than 2,800, Piper caters to learners from Pre-K to 12th Grade. Our diverse community comprises of more than 40% of students hailing from various cultural backgrounds, collectively speaking over 27 different languages.

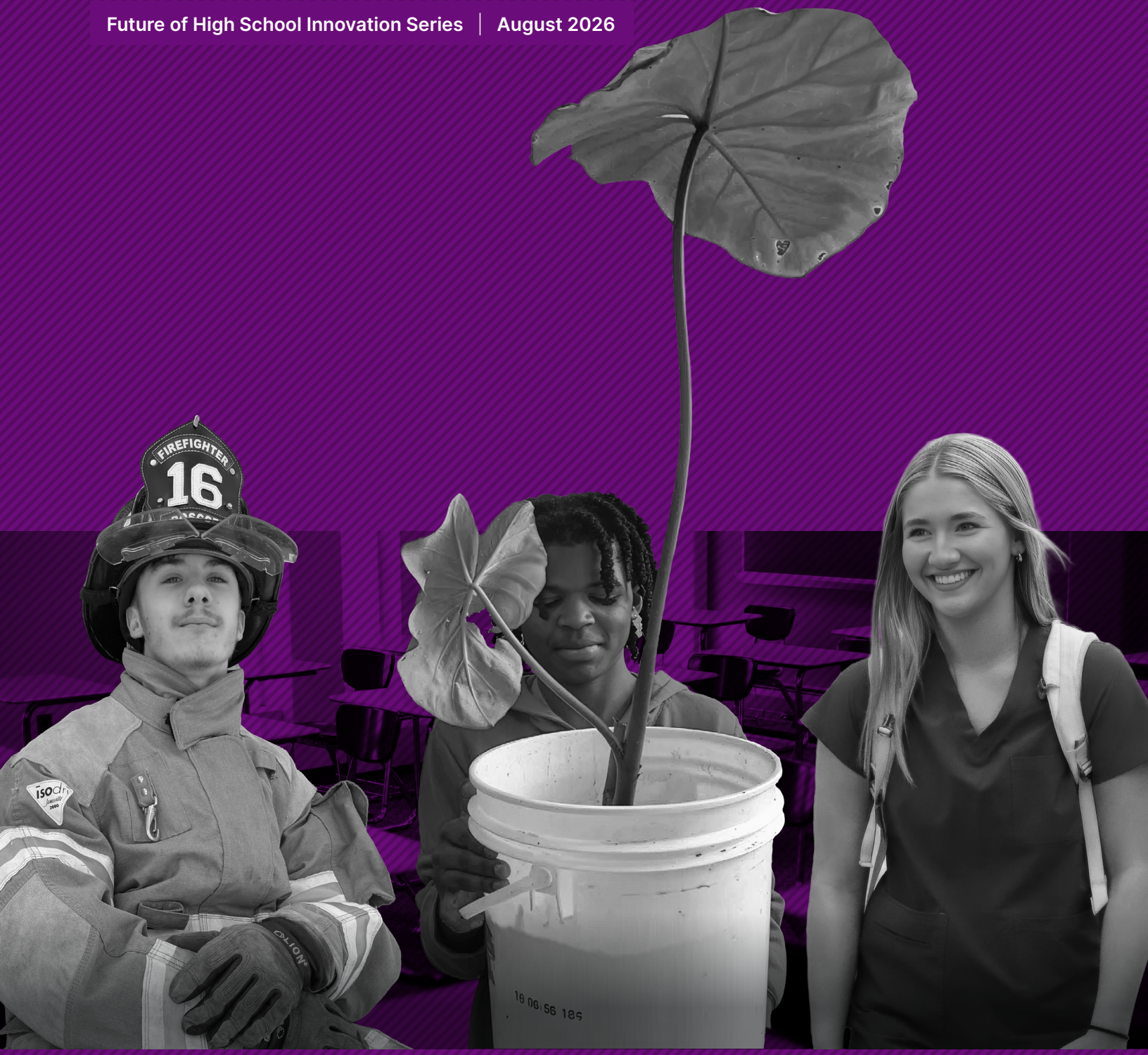
Learn more at: https://www.piperschools.com.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The mission of the Carnegie Foundation is to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified and fulfilling life. Established by an act of Congress in 1906, the Foundation has a rich history of driving significant change in the education sector, including the creation of TIAA-CREF, the Education Testing Service (ETS), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Pell Grants and the Carnegie Classifications for Higher Education. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of the American high school and making the postsecondary sector a more vital engine for economic mobility.

Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

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