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Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of November 18, 2026

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON COLLEGE READINESS AND CURRICULUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around the world, education systems are rethinking what students learn in secondary school, how deeply they learn it, and how they show they are ready for what comes next. Many of these changes bear directly on the questions California faces about college and career readiness.

This item will help the Regents consider how other countries define, teach, and certify readiness at the end of secondary school. The Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will draw on international comparisons to discuss how knowledge and its uses are changing and what that means for curriculum. Themes may include curricula that go deep rather than broad, using mathematics as an example; readiness defined by competencies, with course content in service of those competencies; and certification of secondary school completion that includes moderated, teacher-assessed performance tasks. He will also discuss how the United States compares internationally.

BACKGROUND

Other items in this series have examined the history and role of the A–G requirements, how changes in technology and work are reshaping what students will need, and how California high schools are changing instruction and assessment. This discussion places those questions in international context: how other education systems decide what students learn, how deeply they learn it, and how they certify readiness at the end of secondary school.

International studies have long compared what students are taught as well as what they achieve. Analyses of mathematics curricula from the 1990s found that the United States covered more topics per grade than top-performing countries, spending less time on each topic. Research on learning finds that knowledge developed in depth, organized around core concepts, and applied in varied contexts, is more likely to transfer to new problems and to build students' capacity to learn. The Common Core State Standards, adopted by California in 2010, were designed around focus, coherence, and rigor, with fewer topics per grade and standards for mathematical practice such as reasoning, modeling, and constructing arguments. Surveys of U.S. teachers in the years after adoption found that few regularly used instructional materials closely aligned to those standards, that many continued to teach topics outside them, and that about one in five regularly asked students to construct arguments or look for mathematical structure. The OECD has identified curriculum overload, defined as too much content for the time available, as a challenge that the U.S. and many countries share.

Many countries now describe the goals of schooling in terms of competencies: knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students develop and apply across disciplines. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 (Attachment 1), developed with participating countries and released in 2019, is one widely used framework. It treats knowledge as part of competency rather than an alternative to it. Countries are also defining transversal competencies, sometimes called durable skills, such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures how students apply knowledge to unfamiliar problems and interpret data rather than how they recall facts. It added assessments of collaborative problem solving in 2015 and creative thinking in 2022, and PISA 2029 will assess media and artificial intelligence literacy. In May 2026, the California State Board of Education adopted a Portrait of a Learner with seven competencies to guide its own decisions on curriculum, assessment, and accountability (Attachment 2). The Portrait does not create new requirements for school districts.

Systems also differ in how students show they have completed secondary school. In most countries, students finish with a school-leaving certificate or diploma that is often used for university admission. A January 2026 OECD report (Attachment 3) reviewed 71 of these certificates in 38 education systems. In more than half (42 of 71), a student's final result combines scores on examinations outside of school with assessments by the student's own teachers. Most (59 of 71) include at least one task that is set or scored in the school, such as a project, investigation, performance, or portfolio. When teachers' assessments count toward these high-stakes results, systems use a process called moderation to make them comparable across schools: an outside body reviews the tasks teachers set and samples of the student work they scored, and checks that scores are consistent. The report also notes that teacher-based grades, while less reliable than examinations, tend to be more predictive of success in higher education. California has no statewide system of moderated performance assessment at the end of high school. Admission to UC and CSU centers on completion of A–G courses and the grades students earn in them. A–G courses are approved against UC course criteria aligned to state standards. California's Smarter Balanced assessments in English language arts and mathematics each include a performance task that asks students to integrate knowledge and skills across multiple standards.

The presentation will also examine readiness from an international vantage point, drawing on comparative data from the OECD and on the practices of education systems that have redesigned curriculum and certification. Topics may include how the knowledge students need is changing and what that implies for curriculum; why depth of learning matters for transferable knowledge and the capacity to keep learning; how systems define readiness through competencies and use subject content to develop them; how international assessments measure the application of knowledge; how systems certify the end of secondary school, including moderated, teacher-assessed performance tasks; how those certificates are used in university admission; and how the United States compares internationally.

The discussion will consider the conditions these approaches require, including curricular materials aligned to standards, teacher expertise in designing and scoring performance tasks, and systems that make teacher judgments comparable across schools.

Presenter and Presentation Overview

Andreas Schleicher is Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris. He initiated and oversees the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and his directorate also conducts the OECD Survey of Adult Skills and the Teaching and Learning International Survey. Before joining the OECD, he was Director for Analysis at the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. He studied physics in Germany, earned a degree in mathematics and statistics in Australia, and holds an honorary professorship at the University of Heidelberg.

He will discuss how knowledge is changing in a world shaped by artificial intelligence and abundant information, which kinds of knowledge matter most as a result, and what that could mean for the design of curriculum.

Themes he will draw on include the international trend toward curricula that go deep rather than broad, and why depth matters both for developing knowledge that transfers to new situations and for students' capacity to learn how to learn. Mathematics offers one example: international studies have contrasted the United States with high-performing systems such as Japan, where lessons are built around fewer ideas explored in depth.

A second theme is the move to define readiness by competencies, with course content used in service of those competencies, as in the OECD Learning Compass 2030. PISA assesses students' ability to apply knowledge, including its assessments of collaborative problem solving and creative thinking and its planned 2029 assessment of media and artificial intelligence literacy.

A third theme is how systems certify the end of secondary school, often through a mix of classroom-based performance tasks assessed by teachers and open-ended external assessments, moderated so that results can be used by universities. The OECD's recent mapping of 71 certificates in 38 systems, and systems such as Queensland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United Kingdom, offer examples.

ATTACHMENTS (for information)

Attachment 1: OECD Learning Compass 2030

Attachment 2: Portrait of a Learner, California State Board of Education

Attachment 3: The Theory and Practice of Upper Secondary Certification, OECD, 2026.