

Schools Need to Teach the ‘New Basics’ to Prepare Kids for Careers, Leaders Say



By [Evie Blad](#) — March 10, 2025 ⌚ 6 min read



David Schuler, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, speaks at the organization's National Conference on Education on March 6, 2025, in New Orleans.

— Sandy Huffaker/AASA

In a divisive time for K-12 education, an organization that represents the nation’s superintendents plans to plant a flag on ideological common ground through a new campaign that emphasizes alignment with workforce needs, student-centered

learning, and “measuring what matters” in schools.

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, announced its “Public Education Promise” at its annual conference in New Orleans March 6. The campaign will provide district leaders with resources and support to carry out five priorities in redesigning their school systems:

- Emphasizing student-centered learning;
- Teaching “the new basics”—skills, like how to use artificial intelligence, to keep up with evolving workforce needs;
- Recruiting and retaining the best employees;
- Building strong family and community partnerships, and
- Collecting and reporting indicators of student achievement that go beyond year-end state test scores to “measure what matters.”

The effort follows the conclusion of [AASA’s Learning 2025](#), an effort in which districts collaborated to drive innovation in their systems.

At a polarizing time for schools, advocacy organizations have identified career-technical education and college and career readiness as a rare place of agreement from leaders of both major political parties. Lawmakers across the political spectrum have also stepped up scrutiny of test-based accountability in recent years.

AASA will survey superintendents about their needs as it designs resources and cohorts to help them pilot new approaches, said executive director David Schuler as he announced the new campaign.

“Prioritizing access to high-quality public education always was, and always should remain, a bipartisan American value,” he said at the conference’s opening session.

Schuler spoke with Education Week about the Public Education Promise and how

district leaders are navigating the moment.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

As superintendents met, news circulated about an executive order to dismantle the Department of Education. What is this moment like for leaders?

From my perspective, superintendents are ready for any moment, or they have to be, because that's the world we live in.

We are local. It's easier for somebody who's an elected official who may be in D.C. working on stuff. They're not going to get that phone call, necessarily. They've not had people show up at a board meeting.

If we don't continue to focus on the work, and we get distracted by other things, we're not helping move the world forward through public education.

How is AASA responding to concerns about funding cuts and federal instability?

We're telling our local superintendents, take a breath. Let's see what your state attorney general, your state officials, and your state's chief education officer say.

What we've been pushing out as an association is: what superintendents *must* do under the law, what superintendents *cannot* do under the law, and then what superintendents and boards can *choose* to do based on their current context [related to issues like diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and immigration policy]. Because we understand that local context matters.

What's the vision for the Public Education Promise? How did you come to this moment?

We just believe that there's a vision to transform public education to improve workforce readiness and for graduating citizens who can actively engage in our democracy. And [standardized] testing should not be the end result that everything else has to be backward designed towards.

Before No Child Left Behind, there was tons of joy in teaching. I'm not suggesting we were perfect, but what happened with No Child Left Behind is we ended up teaching to a test and annual metrics, and we took some of the joy and love out of the work.

You know, if an 18 year old graduates high school with a welding apprenticeship and they're making \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year, why does it matter what he or she got on their SAT or ACT [college entrance exam score]? But yet that school is judged on those scores, not on the fact that they graduated someone who's going to earn a family-supporting wage job. That's what the focus should be on—how successful our students are after they graduate.

The Public Education Promise was designed to provide resources, supports and toolkits to support changing the narrative and embarking on the work of really focusing real skills for this real world. We have to prepare graduates for a world that's going to transform itself multiple times over their lives and a world we can't imagine.

I'm not saying some testing in baseline in numeracy and literacy doesn't matter. I'm not suggesting that at all, but a student in a school should not be defined by a single test score that they take when they're 15 or 16.

There's no real talk about reauthorizing the Every Student Succeeds Act right now, but does AASA plan to advocate for changes to federal testing

requirements when those conversations start?

Yeah. I think one of the things that I feel strongly about is decoupling student performance from school accountability. We know ESSA is not going to get reauthorized this year, but we have to start talking now and telling stories of why the current situation doesn't make sense. It's just not fair to families, kids, school leaders, teachers, and education in general.

Do you want to eliminate school accountability linked to tests?

I'm not necessarily saying get rid of all requirements. I think we know the strong data on 3rd grade readiness and 8th grade readiness. I think that's terrific, but from a high school perspective, we really should be focusing on how successful those kids are after they leave us.

I know psychometricians will say that's almost impossible to figure out and measure, and it would definitely mess with longitudinal data. Our longitudinal data is going to have a gap in it anyway [due to pandemic-related testing interruptions]. Wouldn't this be a perfect time to figure that out?

You identified priorities where there seems to be some bipartisan agreement. Was this designed to focus on those commonalities?

We created these priorities through the lens of, what actually needs to happen. It's awesome that it aligns with different political perspectives, but that goes back to the fact that our superintendents were the ones that are on the ground, hearing from their local community all the time. So let's design something that's going to work for the students and the families and businesses.

We had 1,500 business partners in my last district, and we spent a lot of time talking

about, what is the return on investment we as a school system are providing our businesses when they partner with us?

What the toolkit around that the community engagement piece will do is talk about going out to businesses and saying, “OK, what are the skills your workers need in the next three years or the next five years?” And then we’ll build a pipeline to address that, we’ll create a certification program in our schools to make that happen that can work in a rural area, an urban area, or in a suburban area. The key is allowing the leaders and the community of the community to come together to determine what that looks like.

Schools talk a lot about soft skills, 21st century skills, career skills. How did you arrive at “The New Basics”? Did you brainstorm this language?

We don’t view the public education promise as being political, so we needed to ensure that the words we use are going to allow our superintendents to be able to do the work and not create a target on their back, or on the school board’s back, or the community’s back. We had to sit down and ask if any of these terms are sticky. Could any of them be misunderstood?

The new basics are skills like collaboration, making eye contact, showing up on time, teamwork, being able to write a generative AI prompt, and curiosity.

The challenge has been that people use all these other terms—soft skills, employee-ready skills, community skills—but all that can do is create confusion.

What do you hope superintendents take back to their districts from this event?

I hope they see that they’re supported. They’re doing great work. They’re energized.

Regardless of everything that's going on around us, the kids are going to show up on Monday, so let's do right by them.



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