

Catapult Learning 

Portrait of a Graduate Principal Reflection Guide

Supporting New York School
Leaders Through NY Inspires
& Graduation Pathways
Conversations



The Big Picture

What principals need to know right now

Reflect. Align. Strengthen.

If you're like many school leaders across New York right now, you're probably hearing a mix of excitement, questions, uncertainty, and strong opinions about the Portrait of a Graduate and Graduation Pathways work connected to NY Inspires.

At the same time, principals are still leading instruction, supporting teachers, managing student needs, and trying not to overwhelm staff with "one more thing."

This guide was created to help school leaders pause, reflect, and focus on what matters most right now.

The good news: many schools are already doing more Portrait-aligned work than they realize.

As NYSED continues phased implementation through 2029, this moment is less about rushing into major change and more about noticing strengths already present in your school, grounding conversations in strong instruction, and preparing thoughtfully for what's ahead.

You do not need to have all the answers right now. But creating space for reflection, alignment, and honest conversations with staff are important first steps.

➔ What Is Changing?

- NYSED is expanding graduation pathways
- Portrait of a Graduate emphasizes readiness beyond test scores
- Additional demonstrations of learning will emerge over time
- Implementation is phased through 2029

➔ What Is Not Changing Right Now?

- Regents diplomas still exist
- Current graduation requirements remain in place
- Districts are not expected to redesign systems immediately
- No immediate overhaul is required for grading practices or report cards

What Principals Should Focus on in 2026

1

Instruction

- Increase authentic learning opportunities
- Encourage student discussion, inquiry, and collaboration
- Begin identifying existing performance-based practices

2

Staff Leadership

- Build staff understanding gradually
- Prevent panic or misinformation
- Frame this as evolution and continuous improvement

3

Student Readiness

- Expand student voice and reflection opportunities
- Explore advisory, capstone, and portfolio structures

4

Equity

- Review who has access to advanced learning and pathways
- Monitor participation in enrichment and CTE opportunities

Principal Readiness Reflection Tool

A few reminders before you begin:

- This reflection tool is not intended for evaluation or compliance monitoring.
- Schools are in very different places and that's okay.
- Many Portrait-aligned practices may already exist in your building.
- The goal is not immediate overhaul, but thoughtful reflection, alignment, and growth over time.

As NYSED continues phased implementation through 2029, this tool is designed to help leadership teams identify strengths already present in their schools, notice opportunities for alignment, and guide meaningful next steps without creating unnecessary urgency.

Use this reflection collaboratively with leadership teams, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, or school improvement teams to support conversation, planning, and shared understanding.

Where are we right now?

	Beginning to Explore	Building Momentum	Embedded in Practice
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Staff Understanding: Staff can connect instructional practices to Portrait goals, student readiness skills, and future-ready learning experiences	☐	☐	☐
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Student Voice & Agency: Students reflect on learning, collaborate, lead discussions, make choices, and contribute ideas or feedback	☐	☐	☐
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Authentic Learning: Students demonstrate learning through projects, presentations, portfolios, inquiry, or real-world application	☐	☐	☐
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Career Readiness & Pathways: Career exploration, pathway conversations, internships, guest speakers, or work-based learning opportunities are visible	☐	☐	☐
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Interdisciplinary Learning: Students make meaningful connections across content areas or engage in cross-curricular learning experiences	☐	☐	☐
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Community Connection: Families, community partners, educators, and students contribute to learning experiences and school culture	☐	☐	☐
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Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Practices: Student identities, lived experiences, languages, and perspectives are reflected in instruction and school experiences	☐	☐	☐
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Alignment to Current Initiatives: Portrait work naturally connects to existing instructional priorities, SEL work, pathway initiatives, or school improvement goals	☐	☐	☐
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Portrait of a Graduate: Key Questions for Leaders

Practical guidance for school leaders navigating NY Inspires and Graduation Pathway conversations

As New York State begins phased implementation of the Portrait of a Graduate and updated Graduation Pathways, leaders are balancing the need to prepare thoughtfully without creating unnecessary urgency or initiative fatigue. This reflection guide is designed to help school leaders focus conversations, identify strengths already present in their buildings, and support staff through this transition.

1 | What do my teachers need to hear from me right now?

Key Message:

This is an evolution of student readiness — not an immediate overhaul of instruction, grading, or graduation requirements.

Staff Messaging Points:

- Regents requirements remain in place
- NYSED implementation is phased through 2029
- Many strong practices already align to Portrait competencies
- The goal is deeper student readiness, not “one more initiative”
- Schools should focus on reflection and alignment before large-scale changes

Leader Move:

Use existing staff meetings and PLCs for gradual awareness-building rather than launching standalone initiatives.

2 | Where are we already seeing this work in action?

Leaders Should Look For:

- Project-based learning
- Student presentations
- Collaborative tasks
- Capstone experiences
- Student leadership opportunities
- Advisory and reflection structures
- Career exploration activities
- Cross-disciplinary learning experiences

Reflection Prompt:

Where are students already demonstrating communication, collaboration, critical thinking, or agency? This is HUGE because it lowers anxiety.

3 | How do I avoid overwhelming teachers?

Guidance:

Avoid framing Portrait of a Graduate as:

- a new program
- a compliance initiative
- a replacement for strong instruction that may already be happening

Instead:

- highlight current strengths
- identify small instructional shifts
- integrate conversations into existing priorities
- protect teacher capacity

Important Leadership Reminder:

Teachers are more likely to engage positively when leaders emphasize refinement and alignment rather than wholesale change.

4 | What conversations are worth having now — and which ones can wait?

Suggested Discussion Topics:

- Which Portrait competencies are already visible in classrooms?
- Where do students demonstrate learning beyond tests?
- Which student groups have access to advanced or authentic learning opportunities?
- How are career readiness and student voice currently supported?
- What existing structures could support future implementation?

Immediate Focus Areas:

- awareness
- alignment
- equity
- instructional reflection
- pathway access

Not:

- grading redesign
- transcript redesign
- major schedule changes

5 | How does this connect to instruction?

Portrait-Aligned Instruction Often Includes:

- inquiry and problem-solving
- student discussion and collaboration
- authentic application of learning
- reflection and revision
- interdisciplinary connections
- student voice and choice

Important Clarification:

Strong Tier 1 instruction remains the foundation.

The Portrait of a Graduate expands how readiness is demonstrated — it does not replace academic rigor.

Leadership Takeaway

Many leaders are wondering how much they should change right now. The reality is that some of the most important work may simply be slowing down enough to notice what is already working in your school community.

Students are already collaborating, presenting, creating, reflecting, problem-solving, and demonstrating readiness in ways that extend beyond traditional testing. The Portrait of a Graduate work gives schools an opportunity to build on those strengths intentionally and thoughtfully over time.

For now, strong instruction, authentic learning experiences, student relationships, and clear communication remain the foundation.

Catapult Learning partners with NY districts on Portrait-aligned instruction.

From job-embedded coaching to leadership development and high-impact tutoring, we help schools translate the Portrait of a Graduate from framework into daily classroom practice.

www.catapultlearning.com

