As I write this, it is Day 372 of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was abundantly clear on March 11, 2020, that what happened next would be a path with no footprints. Our existence as individuals and communities has been forever altered. The pandemic drove home how dependent we are on each other. We suddenly realized our health is not our own but belongs to the community as a whole. People have begun to talk about “going back to normal.” What is that? More important, do we want that? I’m not sure I want to go back, at least not fully, to the way it was. Going back to normal without having learned and grown from the experience would be a tragedy.

State boards, working collaboratively, now have a chance to reimagine how to make our education system better. We need to consider the measurable value of changing the way we educate—maybe even making systemic change. If we do this well, our next generations will be better able to understand and deal with the complexities of our world with a much more systemic understanding than their parents have.

We have learned much about leading through a crisis. The pandemic has challenged us to be more agile in educating our children. Responding to new conditions and new data has prompted states to see school no longer as a single place and instead recognize that learning occurs everywhere and must be available 24/7—whether through remote instruction at home, a hybrid setting, or onsite. Rethinking school has already set in motion a cascade of consequences—some positive, like the increased evidence of, and appreciation for, parent and family engagement.

I hope we will double down on rethinking what success looks like in education and how that new version of success reshapes and realigns accountability. We must define this new version of success if the momentum the pandemic has generated is to catapult us toward a better education system—while simultaneously working toward recovery. We must have a shared vision of what success looks like for our students in order to benchmark what has worked, what has not, and what effect the influx of federal money to schools has really had. As we align accountability to our improved version of success, we need to consider what alignment between our schools and the workforce needs to look like. We need continued, improved alignments between higher education through dual credit, dual enrollment, and Advanced Placement. Industry certifications, internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities are important elements in this narrative of success.

Finally, we need to provide an education where schoolwork looks like real work and we produce more than the narrow, parochial outcomes to which we have become accustomed. We need to be guiding students toward their largest, best, life-long interests—not just the obstacle course we now control. Therefore, we need to create space and flexibility for educators’ creativity, curiosity, and innovation. It is my hope that we take advantage of this path with no footprints and make the world a better place for our students.