

NCSL 2026 DEVELOPMENT-BASED GOVERNANCE BRIEF

FROM CATEGORICAL FUNDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL COHERENCE:

Organizing public systems around what people need next

NCSL 2026 SUMMIT THESIS: The next generation of state reform may not be a new program. It may be a new organizing logic for existing public investment.

The governing problem

State legislatures appropriate through categories for good reasons: targeted populations, statutory protections, fiscal controls, federal requirements and clear accountability. Yet over time, institutions can begin to organize around the rules of funding rather than the developmental requirements of people.

The result is familiar across early childhood, K-12, higher education, health, child welfare and workforce systems: a person encounters multiple programs, eligibility rules, referrals and reporting structures, but no shared sequence for what must be strengthened first, next and over time.

CORE PROPOSITION
Public systems should be organized around the developmental requirements of people rather than the administrative requirements of institutions.

The game-changing shift and central proposition of Development-Based Governance

CURRENT ORGANIZING LOGIC	DEVELOPMENT-BASED ORGANIZING LOGIC
We go from identified category to appropriation to authorized program to eligible population to provision of service to compliance.	DBG proposes identifying developmental requirement understanding sequence, aligning with resources, which then leads to strengthened capacity resulting in measurable progress and flourishing
“What can this funding stream pay for?”	“What does this person need next—and how should public resources align to strengthen it?”

What is Development-Based Governance (DBG)?

Development-Based Governance (DBG) is a policy and public finance approach that organizes goals, coordination, sequencing, capacity-building and measurement around the developmental conditions people require to learn, progress, contribute and flourish—while preserving statutory protections, categorical entitlements and fiscal accountability.

1 RESOURCE FOLLOWS READINESS Public resources follow the identified developmental need and next leverage point—not only historical program lanes.	2 SEQUENCE BEFORE SERVICE A useful intervention delivered before its prerequisites are secure may underperform. Governance must ask what foundation is required first.	3 COHERENCE BEFORE ADDITION Before creating another program, determine whether existing authorities and investments can be aligned around a shared outcome.
4 CAPACITY BEFORE MANDATE States should not demand new outcomes from K-12 without aligning the higher education, licensure and professional learning systems that prepare the people expected to deliver them.		

Why the current model fragments

- Each funding stream carries its own eligibility rules, timelines, metrics, vendors and reporting structures.
- Multiple programs can serve the same person without sharing a developmental picture of need or a sequence for action.
- Outcomes that cross agencies can become the responsibility of no single system.
- New appropriations can add activity without correcting the developmental mis-sequencing that caused prior investments to underperform.
- K-12 reform can be legislated downstream while higher education, licensure and professional learning continue preparing people for the prior model.

More programs are not the same as more progress. The missing variable may be sequence.

What this is not

Development-Based Governance is not a call to erase categories. Many categories protect people and purposes that should not be diluted. The shift is to change the organizing logic above and between the categories.

- Not unrestricted pooling of funds.
- Not a weakening of federal requirements, individual entitlements or civil-rights protections.
- Not the replacement of professional expertise with a generic whole-person label.
- Not another program. It is an alignment layer for policy, appropriations, implementation and measurement.

THE DISTINCTION

The question is not whether categories disappear. The question is whether categories remain the primary organizing logic.

Six legislative levers for developmental coherence

The following levers can be used independently or combined in a demonstration statute. They are designed to preserve accountability while creating authority to align public investment around developmental progress.

- 1

Developmental purpose clause
State the human-development outcome the law exists to strengthen. The purpose clause becomes a lodestar for appropriations, implementation and oversight.
- 2

Cross-category alignment authority
Authorize agencies and local entities to coordinate eligible expenditures, timelines, data and implementation across funding streams—within explicit legal guardrails.
- 3

Developmental coherence impact statement
Require major proposals to identify the target developmental condition, prerequisite conditions, related funded efforts, duplication risk and intended measure of progress.
- 4

Demonstration and learning authority
Create time-limited pilots in high-need communities or schools where agencies can test sequenced, cross-system approaches and report implementation lessons.
- 5

Shared outcome architecture
Use near-, medium- and long-term indicators that track movement in readiness and capacity, not only units of service or isolated program outputs.
- 6

Public impact and ROI discipline
Connect investment to movement in human outcomes and, where feasible, downstream public costs avoided or reduced. Measure whether aligned investment changes trajectory.

Illustrative statutory language

“In administering funds under this Act, agencies shall align eligible expenditures, to the maximum extent permitted by law, around the developmental conditions and sequence required for the intended population to progress. Nothing in this authority shall reduce a categorical protection, individual entitlement or required accountability.”

Illustrative policy language only; not legal advice or final bill drafting.

What changes in practice?

CATEGORY-FIRST RESPONSE	DEVELOPMENT-FIRST RESPONSE
A child with absenteeism, dysregulation and reading delay may receive an attendance initiative, tutoring, counseling and a family referral—each managed separately.	The system asks what must be strengthened next: regulation and connection, the family barrier affecting attendance, then targeted literacy acceleration. Resources remain legally distinct but act on a shared sequence and shared measures.

A common question for different public systems

Developmental coherence does not make every system the same. It gives different systems a shared way to ask what progress requires next, then clarifies which authority, expertise and resource should act in what sequence.

PUBLIC SYSTEM	DEVELOPMENTAL QUESTION	PROGRESS SIGNAL
Early childhood	What foundations must be secure before school readiness can be expected?	Health, attachment, language, family capacity
K-12 education	What must be strengthened so the learner is ready to learn, progress and contribute?	Engagement, regulation, literacy, on-track progress
Higher education	How must higher education develop learners while preparing the capacity K-12 and other public systems need next?	Completion, field readiness, licensure, placement, retention
Special education	What individualized access and developmental prerequisites must align?	Participation, access, skill growth, independence
Child welfare	What sequence best strengthens safety, relational stability and family capacity?	Safe continuity, caregiver capacity, durable permanency
Workforce	What converts potential into sustained contribution?	Agency, skill, credential, connection, employment

Why higher education is upstream

Higher education has a dual role: it develops its own learners and builds the upstream professional capacity on which K-12 and other public systems depend. It shapes the supply chain of teachers, leaders, counselors, psychologists and other professionals; states cannot sustainably legislate a new model downstream while preparing people for the old model upstream.

Questions for lawmakers

- What developmental condition is this appropriation intended to strengthen?
- What must be true before the funded intervention can work as intended?
- Which other public systems already touch the same population and outcome?
- Who has authority to align sequence, timing and accountability across those systems?
- What higher-education or workforce capacity must exist before this policy can succeed?
- What progress measure can show movement across categories—not merely activity inside one program?

An applied architecture for human flourishing

Development-Based Governance (DBG) is a nonpartisan policy proposition independent of any single organization or platform. Rethink Learning and Dr. Ivy Bonk’s broader work offers one applied architecture across K-12, higher education and, over time, other public systems.

GOVERNANCE

Development-Based Governance: organize public authority and investment around developmental requirements, sequence, capacity and shared outcomes.

DEVELOPMENT

Universal Equity Pedagogy (UEP) / STRYPATH Tiered Development Continuum: FIND, BUILD, DISCOVER, CONTRIBUTE.

CAPACITY

Higher education and professional preparation: align educator preparation, clinical practice, licensure and continuing development with the capacities public systems must deliver.

IMPLEMENTATION

STRYPATH: The New Operating System for Educational Coherence. Diagnose, Map, Activate, Personalize, Convert, Measure. The operating principle is simple: map before you solve.

PUBLIC IMPACT

Human Flourishing Public Impact Index™ (HFPI): measure readiness across identified domains—connecting human outcomes to public return.

The policy proposition in one sentence

Resource follows readiness: policy, funding and accountability should align around what people developmentally need next, in the order most likely to help them progress.

The Big Hairy Audacious Question

“What developmental condition must be strengthened next—and how should existing public resources align around it?”

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Sources and context

- 1. National Conference of State Legislatures, 2026 Legislative Summit, Chicago, July 27-29, 2026; official Summit agenda accessed July 7, 2026.
- 2. NCSL, “Principles of a Sound State Education Finance System” (2025), including its emphasis on aligning resources with statewide goals, flexibility close to students and accountability for outcomes.
- 3. Framework language developed from Dr. Ivy Bonk’s June 2026 inquiry. Core phrases include: “Resource follows readiness”; “Capacity before mandate”; and “What does this child need next?”