

What is Competency Education?

Across the nation, schools, districts and entire states are reshaping their education system to ensure students reach proficiency in the skills they need for college and careers. It may be called competency-based, proficiency-based, mastery-based or performance-based education, but it speaks to one goal – to lift academic expectations while ensuring that every student reaches them.

The concept is simple: Learning is best measured by mastery rather than time spent in the classroom.

Competency education ensures students gain the academic and lifelong learning skills they need to be successful in an ever-changing world. Schools can personalize the learning experience, offering a variety of ways for students to learn and demonstrate learning. Students have more voice and choice, taking ownership of their learning. Students get the instructional support they need to succeed, even if it takes them multiple attempts over a little more time to achieve mastery. Academic rigor is sustained by measuring achievement against a common set of standards.



Students soar when motivated and engaged

In competency education, students work at their academic level, understanding what they are learning and what they need to do next. Teachers provide timely assessments and extra support until students can demonstrate that they have mastered the concept. Students get the help they need, when they need it, so they can advance to a higher level of studies as soon as they are ready. This system ensures that our most underserved students are no longer left behind, and that all of our students can take their education as far as they are able.

The Five Elements of Competency Education

1. Students advance upon mastery.
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

A Snapshot of Competency Education State Policy Across the US

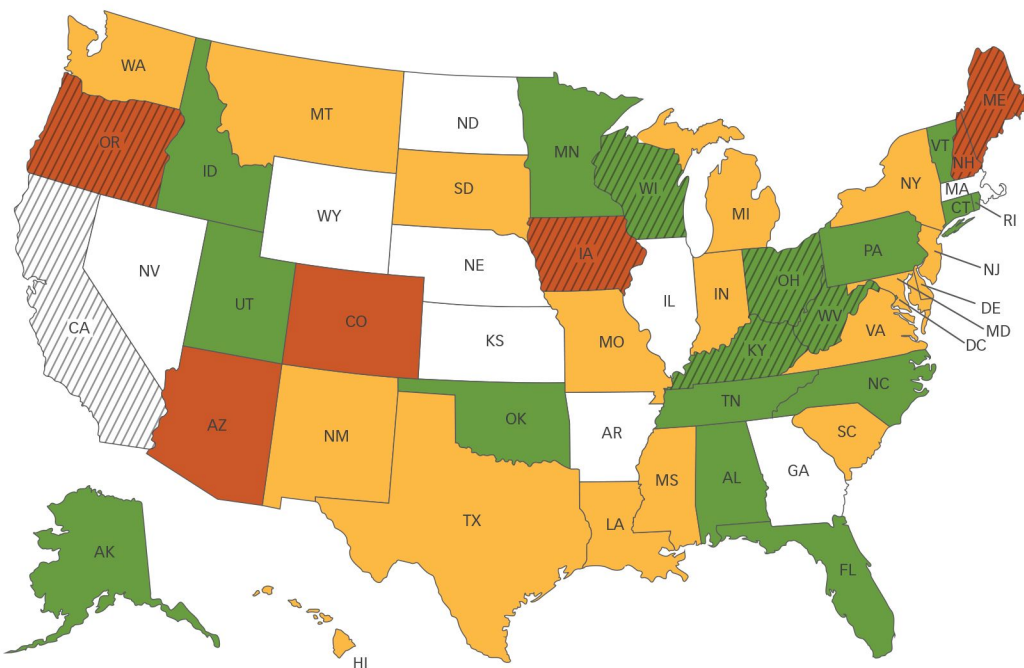
New Hampshire has embraced competency education because we know it is the only way we can fully prepare our students for an ever-changing world. Competency education allows us to take advantage of resources, in schools and the community, to personalize education so that every student is on a path to college and career readiness.




– New Hampshire Education Commissioner Virginia M. Barry



Transparency empowers students to have voice and choice

While states work to ensure all students are prepared for future success in a globally competitive society, emphasizing greater rigor and deeper application of knowledge and skills, they are confronted with the fact that the traditional time-based model of education may not be up to the task. States are now rapidly advancing competency education. Thirty-six states have already revised policies to allow for proficiency-based diplomas, waived seat-time to allow competency-based pathways, created credit flexibility, or initiated a redesign of their education system around student learning.



-  **Advanced States**
Those states with clear policies that are moving towards proficiency-based education; more than just an option.
-  **Developing States**
Those states with pilots of competency education, credit flexibility policies, or advanced next gen policies for equivalents to seat-time.
-  **Emerging States**
Those states with waivers, task forces, and limited policies.
-  **No Policies in Competency Education**
States with seat-time and no competency education policies.
-  **ILN States**
The Council of Chief State School Officers is working with states to identify new designs to be scaled for widespread implementation..

How States are Advancing Competency Education

Drive Policy by Student Learning Outcomes:

Focus on student learning and student learning outcomes. First and foremost, policies support the needs of students.

Guard High Academic Standards:

States are vigilant to ensure that academic expectations do not slip and result in lower achievement for groups of students. Focus is on equity with high expectations for all students.

Expand Student Options:

State policies expand, not limit, the options that students have to reach learning outcomes.

Create Shared Vision:

Policy development is not top-down. It keeps communication open, inviting stakeholders to contribute to the vision and the steps to get there.

Offer Districts and Schools Flexibility:

States are clear about desired outcomes and provide incentives for educators to take different pathways to achieve the goal. Process rules and regulations are removed to allow and encourage innovation.

Commit to Continuous Improvement:

Policies can evolve as we learn more about the dynamics of next-generation learning, allowing ongoing improvement efforts.



Through the application of knowledge comes deeper learning

Just listen to students and teachers to know why schools, districts and states are turning to competency education:

I feel like I had one of my best years. I got to set my own goals and watched myself grow. I'm getting excited to go to school. Now I want to come every day.

- Maya, fifth-grade student

The number one change is my students are excited about learning. They are taking control of their knowledge and they are keeping track of it. They stay on top of things because they know what is expected and what is coming up next. They ask more questions and are more willing to participate.

- Mrs. Collins, fifth-grade teacher

The teachers have a better relationship with you here. They genuinely care about your success rather than just trying to push you through so you graduate even though you don't understand the subjects you are passing.

- Catherine, tenth-grade student

Eight Ways to Upgrade State Policy

States investing in redesign around personalized, competency education are upgrading policies and operations in the following areas:

1) Innovation Zones

States are encouraging districts to innovate and develop new learning models by offering exemption from administrative regulations and statutory provisions in an effort to improve the learning of students.

2) Competency-based Diplomas

States are replacing credit-based graduation requirements with proficiency-based requirements. For the first time, diplomas will have consistent value. States and districts are creating new transcripts that reflect what students know and can do.

3) Supports and Advancement

Some states are requiring districts to provide additional supports to students who are not yet proficient. Others are eliminating barriers to advancement so that students can access curriculum above their grade level.

4) Systems of Assessments

Leading states are beginning to address the damaging misalignment of current assessment systems that have become intertwined with accountability policy. In competency education, the systems of assessments should be designed to provide feedback and monitor how students are progressing. Formative assessments are emphasized, providing timely feedback to students so they can address areas of academic weakness and teachers can fine tune instructional support. Summative assessments play an important role as a quality assurance mechanism by validating proficiency levels. Students who are struggling with the material have opportunities to take assessments again. Success is the only option.

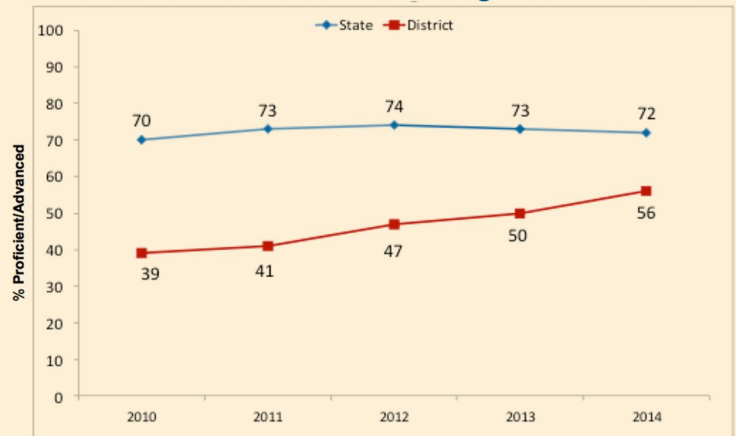
5) Accountability and Quality Assurance

The primary accountability metric—driven largely by requirements and state responses to the federal No Child Left Behind law—has been to use end-of-year state assessments. The system does not need to be designed this way. First, using the core philosophy of competency education that progress in learning requires access to support, states are considering continuous improvement frameworks that provide feedback and support to schools. The accountability system can provide meaningful supports that promote improvement and innovation in schools rather than branding schools as failures. Second, accountability is a quality assurance mechanism with feedback loops measuring student pacing and academic rigor that emphasizes deeper learning.

Getting Results

Adams 50 School District in Colorado serves a diverse population with 81% of students on Free and Reduced Lunch and 45% English Language Learners. The district was considered a Priority Improvement district in 2009 with a third of their schools designated as lowest performing. Within two years of implementation of competency education, all the schools were out of turnaround status and the number of schools in the accredited status had doubled. The graduation rate continues to steadily increase, reaching 74% in 2013.

Adams 50 Third Grade CSAP/TCAP Reading Results for 2010–2014



6) Expanding Learning Opportunities

Policies enable students to demonstrate learning and receive credit through community-based learning such as work experience or service learning. Policies have also ensured that online learning is competency-based and available for students to accelerate learning beyond their grade level.

7) Information management systems

Although competency education has been in development for over two decades, recent technological advances—digital learning and information systems—are causing it to flourish. Competency education generates enormous amounts of data on student learning that is best supported by an information system organized around student profiles and evidence of student work. Yet, much of today’s information management infrastructure was designed around top-down accountability and compliance policies. Almost all are time-based systems that offer only weak snapshots of student progress at a point in time. As competency education continues to advance, states and districts will need to consider demand for portability of student records, meaningful student profiles, personalized learning maps, proficiency-based transcripts, portfolios of student work and evidence of learning, and new ways to measure performance in accountability systems.

8) Educator Workforce

Updated policies reflect an expansion of educator roles. Teacher preparation and professional development emphasize assessment literacy, deep understanding of the disciplines, and managing personalized classrooms.



With clear learning goals, teachers have flexibility in how they teach

Why it Matters

- About 1 million students a year leave high school without a diploma.
- 70% of higher education instructors said **their students do not comprehend** complex reading materials; 66% said students cannot think analytically.
- The current system allows students to progress because of age, not demonstrated ability. This is resulting in **gaps – some small, some big, all damaging**.
- Students, families and states bear the burden of a time-based education system. College remediation costs **\$2.3 billion per year**.
- Our graduates do not achieve the level of academic and career skills as those of other countries. This makes them **less competitive** in a global economy.

In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student's learning curve, but it is not an outcome.

– Proficiency-Based Instruction and Assessment, Oregon Education Roundtable

About Competency Works and iNACOL

CompetencyWorks provides information and knowledge-sharing about competency education through a website, a blog filled with practitioner knowledge and policy advancements, and a wiki that makes it easy to get examples of materials.

CompetencyWorks provides resources for new innovators and early adopters so they can rapidly learn about lessons learned and different approaches to inform their work. CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative, led by iNACOL in partnership with American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, MetisNet and the National Governors Association.

The mission of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to ensure all students have access to a world-class education and quality blended and online learning opportunities that prepare them for a lifetime of success. iNACOL hosts the iNACOL Blended and Online Learning Symposium, the premier K-12 blended and online learning conference that provides a dedicated strand of workshops and sessions on competency education.

Stay on top of advancements in competency education at CompetencyWorks.org and visit iNACOL at www.inacol.org

For More Information on State Policy

- Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills – A State Policymakers Guide to Competency Education, available at CompetencyWorks: www.competencyworks.org
- Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness: The Imperative for State Leadership, available at Achieve: www.achieve.org
- State Strategies for Awarding Credit to Support Student Learning, available at National Governors Association: www.nga.org
- From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire, available at Christensen Institute: www.christenseninstitute.org
- Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire's Competency-Based System, available at the Alliance for Excellent Education: www.all4ed.org