



CompetencyWorks

REPORT

Chugach School District: A Personalized, Performance-Based System

Insights from the Field

WRITTEN BY:

Chris Sturgis

Chugach School District: A Personalized, Performance-Based System

Insights from the Field

WRITTEN BY:
Chris Sturgis

MARCH 2016

About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative dedicated to advancing personalized, competency-based education in K-12 and higher education. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization with project management facilitated by MetisNet. We are deeply grateful for the leadership and support of our advisory board and partner organizations: American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, and the National Governors Association. Their vision and creative partnership have been instrumental in the development of **CompetencyWorks**. Most of all, we thank the tremendous educators across the nation that are transforming state policy, district operations and schools that are willing to open their doors and share their insights.

For more information on competency education (often referred to as proficiency-based, performance-based or mastery-based education), please visit CompetencyWorks.com, read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [CompetencyWorks Wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.



Please refer to this paper as Sturgis, C., Chugach School District: A Personalized, Performance-Based System, International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2016. Content in this report is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction to Chugach School District	4
A. THE HISTORY OF CHUGACH SCHOOL DISTRICT	5
B. GETTING RESULTS IN CHUGACH SCHOOL DISTRICT	7
II. The Foundation of Chugach’s Performance-Based System	8
A. SPIRIT OF EMPOWERMENT AND STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING	9
B. GROWTH MINDSET	9
III. The Infrastructure of the Performance-Based System	10
A. DOMAINS	10
B. INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS	11
C. THE SYSTEM OF ASSESSMENTS	12
D. CUSTOMIZED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM	14
IV. Expanding Experiences Beyond the Classroom	14
A. VOYAGE TO EXCELLENCE	15
B. EXPANDING COURSE ACCESS	16
V. Embracing the Culture of the Community	17
A. RESPECT THROUGH LISTENING AND PARTNERSHIP	17
B. COMPREHENSIVE CONTENT DOMAINS SHAPED AROUND THE WHOLE CHILD	18
C. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	20
VI. How do Educators Grow and Develop in this Kind of System?	21
A. ACT AS GENERALISTS (OR NOT-YET-SPECIALISTS)	21
B. FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT, AUTONOMY, AND CREATIVITY	22
C. INVEST IN A STRONG TEAM OF TEACHERS	23
VII. My Lessons Learned from Chugach School District	26
About the Author	27

It makes sense that one of the places competency education developed is in the rugged Alaskan landscape. With some of the harshest weather in North America—not to mention some of the best views—Alaska is a place where the essentials matter. Life here requires adaptability and humility.

Humility is the breeding ground for competency education. It is humility that allows all of the adults to become learners rather than decision-makers, experts, and teachers. It is humility that creates school cultures that embrace the concept of “not yet.” Students may not yet be proficient and educators may not yet know what students are capable of or how to best support their learning. However, with additional time, effort and instruction, students will eventually reach their targets. It’s this combination of essentials, adaptability, and humility that will enable us to go forth to redesign our education system, learning along the way how the pieces fit together best.

In the fall of 2014, I journeyed to Alaska to visit Chugach School District (CSD), where educators have been implementing competency education for nearly twenty years. It’s the first district to transform itself into a competency-based model (or what they refer to as performance-based). It’s the basis of the must-read *Delivering on the Promise*. CSD has stayed the course, developing a sophisticated system that provides flexibility to their schools while keeping a firm eye on student achievement and progress.

I. Introduction to Chugach School District

When I first started reading about Chugach School District (CSD) five years ago, it was difficult to truly understand the unique dynamic of their area. For most of us, rural means a small town an hour away from any major urban center. Not so in Alaska. The expanses of land and sky between each town are staggering. Rural and remote schools have to balance being deeply community-based (valuing the cultures, communities, and assets surrounding them) with the need to expand students’ horizons. To add to this, CSD also serves almost 300 homeschoolers who may live in one of three urban areas (Anchorage, Valdez, or Fairbanks), in the far-away corners of the Arctic tundra, on one of the 2,000+ islands, or amidst the five cloud-touching mountain ranges.

The CSD headquarters are located in Anchorage, AK, but the physical schools are based in much smaller towns or villages across 20,000 square miles of Prince William Sound. The Whittier Community School (WCS) usually serves between thirty-five and fifty students PreK–12 with a staff of three certified teachers. The school is multicultural with a mix of Native Alaskans, Pacific-Islanders (several families from Guam and Samoa have moved there recently), white, and multi-ethnic students. Tatitlek Community School (TCS) is even smaller, with two certified teachers and a preschool aide who work with thirteen students PreK–12. The highest enrollment at TCS in the last decade was thirty-four students. The third physical school site in

CHUGACH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Location: Headquartered in Anchorage, AK with schools spread across 20,000 square miles of Prince William Sound.

////////////////////////////////////
Established: 1975

////////////////////////////////////
Serves: Schools serve communities with 10 or more students as well as 300 homeschoolers.

////////////////////////////////////
The Problem: By 1994, community and school board members were frustrated by students’ low achievement levels.

////////////////////////////////////
The Solution: Chugach School District designed a personalized, performance-based education system, embedded in the culture of the community, that led to increased student achievement.



The headquarters of Chugach School District is located in Anchorage, Alaska.

the Chugach School District boundaries is Chenega Bay, with two certified teachers and fourteen students PreK-12.

Even though each of the schools is geographically distant from the other, they don't operate in isolation. School board members always think about how decisions will impact the entire school district.

A. THE HISTORY OF CHUGACH SCHOOL DISTRICT

CSD was formed in 1975 when the state legislature created rural school districts to serve communities with ten or more students. This was done through a combination of advocacy to improve Native Alaskan education and an increase in public funding due to the expansion of the oil industry. (See [A History Of Schooling For Alaska Native People](#) for more background information.)

However, by 1994 there was a problem. Community and school board members from across the school district were frustrated by many of their children's low achievement levels. Bob Crumley, CSD's current superintendent and, at the time, a teacher in Whittier, explained, "Our entire transformation started with the communities and school board asking us hard questions – they wanted to know why their children were not reading at grade level. Our communities were not sure they trusted the schools and teachers. The lack of trust was partially based on the history of Alaska and how Native Alaskan communities have been treated. However, it was also based on the fact that we were not currently effective in helping all children



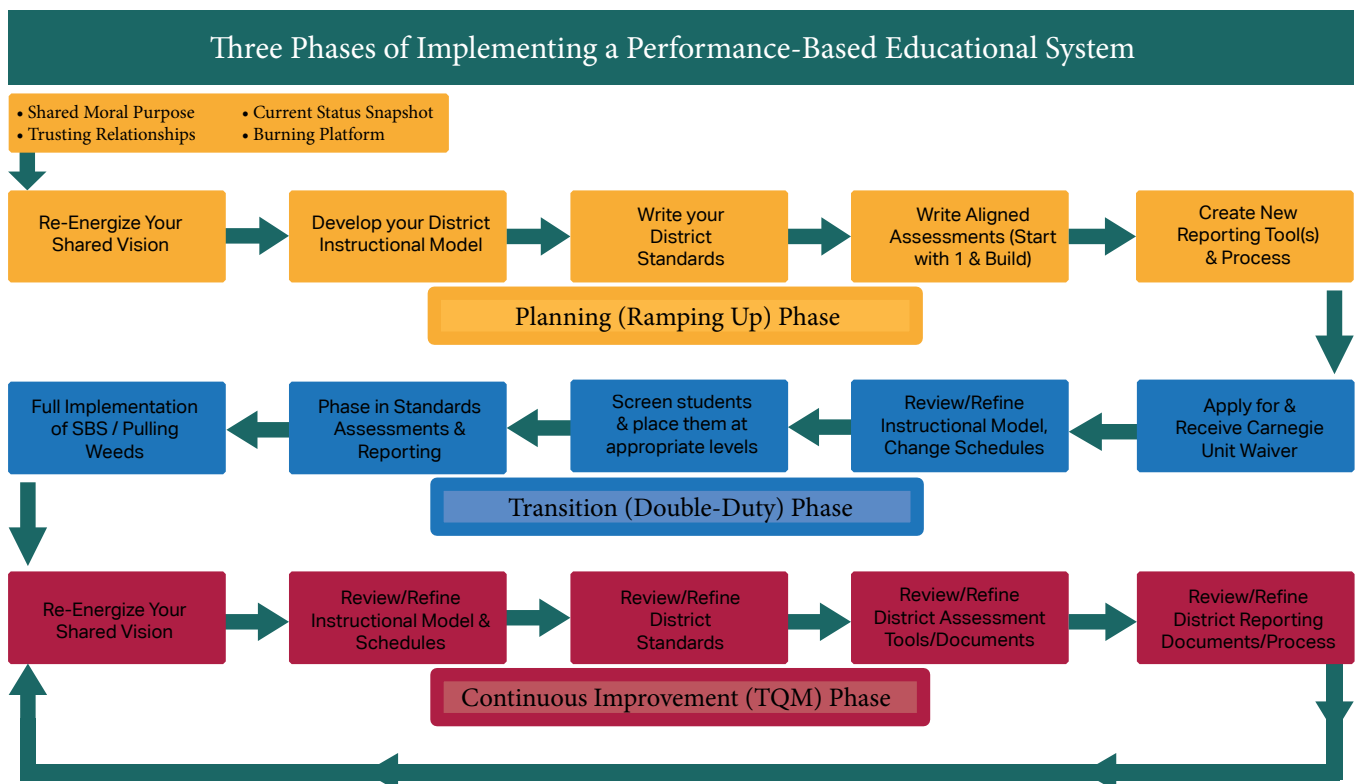
"We began to talk with community members about what they wanted for their children and their schools. We realized that first and foremost, we needed to center schools around our students. We needed to be more comprehensive as we structured schools that would prepare them for life beyond graduation."

– BOB CRUMLEY,
Superintendent, Chugach School District

learn the basics or in preparing them for success in their lives. We had to find a way to overcome that.”

Parents were concerned that their children were still struggling to read. They insisted that the CSD School Board, along with then-superintendent, Roger Sampson (later Alaska’s Commissioner of Education and president of the Education Commission of the States), improve the situation. He selected a K-12 scripted reading program that improved reading scores, but little else changed. This experience forced the district to face up to the fact that they were failing the students and their communities. As Crumley put it, “We began to talk with community members about what they wanted for their children and their schools. We realized that first and foremost, we needed to center schools around our students. We needed to be more comprehensive as we structured schools that would prepare them for life beyond graduation.”

To balance his traditional top-down management style, Sampson brought on Richard DeLorenzo as assistant superintendent. Together with community partners, the CSD teachers, with input from parents and students, began to restructure the district policies and practices. This process eventually became the first of three phases of implementation of their performance-based system.



B. GETTING RESULTS IN CHUGACH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Because Chugach serves remote villages and very small populations, their numbers can swing wildly as families move in and out of the area (life here can be very expensive during the winter, as residents have to ship in groceries and pay huge heating costs). However, as you can see for yourself, the improvements have been marked.

Table 1: Chugach School District Statistics

STATISTIC	SY 1992-93	SY 2005-06	SY 2009-10	SY 2013-14
Attendance	90%	96%	97%	93%
Enrollment	132	214	264	288
Language Arts	< 25%	78%	78%	80%
Math	< 25%	65%	65%	58%
Teacher Retention	55%	90%	95%	81%
4-Year Graduation Rate	N/A	45%	70%	76%

In the 2014 state assessments for Chugach students in grades 3 to 10, 84 percent were reading at proficient or advanced levels, 76 percent accomplished the same in writing, and 57 percent were proficient in math. Achievement in math has been as high as 94 percent of students proficient or above in the past, with the help of a major math grant. However, achievement has been slipping and CSD is working to strengthen math instruction. One strategy is to build the capacity of the teaching staff to teach math. CSD has set the goal of increasing the number of teachers who are highly qualified in math by 5 percent each year. In 2006, they had 5 percent of their teachers as HQ in math, and reached 71 percent in 2015.

Chugach School District takes the concept of continuous improvement very seriously. The cycle of Plan, Implement, Evaluate, and Refine, referred to as the PIER process, is used throughout the district. It's no surprise they received the National Baldrige Award in 2001 and the Alaska Performance Excellence (APEX) Award from the University of Alaska Anchorage in 2009. Chugach School District continues to be recognized for their innovation and leadership. Superintendent Bob Crumley has been recognized as the 2016 Alaska Superintendent of the Year by the Alaska Superintendents Association.

II. The Foundation of Chugach’s Performance-Based System

The community school conversation that started in 1994 continues even now, and forms the foundation of the district’s performance-based system. Strategic plans are created in partnership with the communities and turned into working documents that guide all the stakeholders. The most recent strategic plan developed in 2012 is actively used to guide decision-making.

What’s at the core of all these strategic plans? The students themselves. The spirit of empowerment, student ownership of their learning, and a shared understanding that the schools are preparing students for life, not just graduation, are all key components of the CSD approach. You can see it in their mission itself:

The Chugach School District is committed to developing and supporting a partnership with students, parents, community and business which equally shares the responsibility of empowering students to meet the needs of the ever changing world in which they live. Students shall possess the academic and personal characteristics necessary to reach their full potential. Students will contribute to their community in a manner that displays respect for human dignity and validates the history and culture of all ethnic groups.

This shared purpose of “empowering student ownership of learning and success” is supported by eight values (or elements):

- Performance-based learning
- Valuing stakeholders
- Resiliency
- Agility
- Shared leadership and responsibility
- Open and honest communication
- Continuous improvement and innovation
- Trust and teamwork

To cement this approach even more, each of the schools has taken these ideas and turned them into shared purpose that draws on their own community. For example, Tatitlek Community School created an acronym to capture what they want from staff based on “liiluni,” the Alutiiq word for learning: **L**oving Instruction from **I**maginative **L**ife-long learners **U**niquely qualified to **N**urture **I**ndividual students.



A. SPIRIT OF EMPOWERMENT AND STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

The focus on student empowerment at CSD is rooted in the culture and the relationships as it is in the structure of the school itself. From a practical standpoint, students are supplied with clear roles and expectations right from the start – they know exactly what they are learning and what proficiency looks like. Transparency throughout the system enables students to make informed choices and monitor their progress. The information management system is close to real-time and is accessible by students and their parents. Process skills help students become aware of how they are learning. Students write reflections as part of the cumulative assessment used as they move to the next level. A culture of cooperation among students and a recognition

of mistakes as part of the learning process support students taking risks.



To accomplish much of this, the district relies on the PIER process, which is used in classes to help students learn skills to manage their learning. An individualized learning plan (ILP) is also created with each student. As described by Debbie Treece, Director of Special Education, the "ILP is designed to be project-based; engaging the student through their interests and addressing standards across multiple domains. It's a goal-setting tool, and a foundational process for Chugach students."

Tatitlek Community School created an acronym to capture what they want from staff based on "liiluni," the Alutiiq word for learning:



- Loving*
- Instruction from*
- Imaginative*
- Life-long learners*
- Uniquely qualified to*
- Nurture*
- Individual students.*

B. GROWTH MINDSET

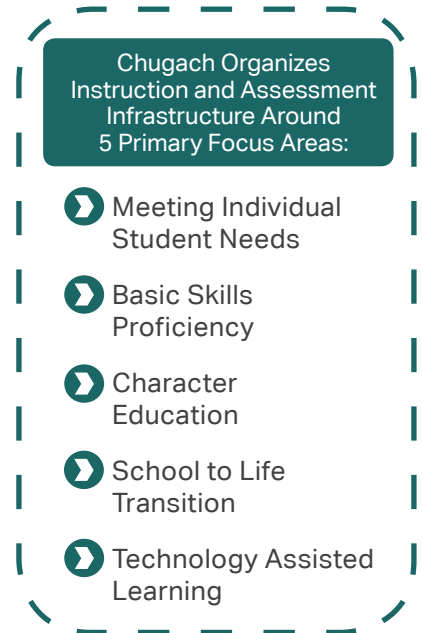
Treece believes that one of the most important ingredients in creating the culture of empowerment at Chugach is their growth mindset. "We are heavily steeped in the growth mindset. I didn't know how important it was in the beginning, but we are now at the point where staff understand that students must have a growth mindset to take on ownership and for continuous learning to occur. The research on brain science and how the brain changes as you learn is fascinating to both students and teachers. In fact, learning about brain science and growth mindset has been the catalyst for change for some teachers. It's now institutionalized in our work."

One example of this kind of growth-oriented student empowerment is the district's development of the Personal Learning and Career Plan (PLCP) by the student and CSD staff, with engagement of the family, as needed. The PLCP provides a framework to identify steps necessary to achieve career goals of interest to the student. Career Navigators provide support and guidance to the student as progress is made in completing each step toward each career goal. Students are empowered to complete postsecondary applications, internship opportunities, and apply for apprenticeships in preparation for life after high school.

III. The Infrastructure of the Performance-Based System

CSD has structured their instruction and assessment infrastructure around five primary focus areas:

- *Meeting Individual Student Needs:* Instruction must be motivating and developmentally appropriate to foster students’ potential. We believe that different cultural, language, and family traditions must be recognized and respected.
- *Basic Skills Proficiency:* Reading, writing, and math are the foundation skills necessary for students to reach their full potential in all areas of learning.
- *Character Education:* All students should have respect for self and others, including elders, teachers, parents, students, and community members. We believe that students should interact in a manner that reflects honesty, integrity, and a never-give-up attitude.
- *School to Life Transition:* Students should be provided with opportunities to apply what they have learned in school to real-life situations. They should be provided with the skills and knowledge necessary to make a successful transition from school to life.
- *Technology Assisted Learning:* We believe transition skills and technology-assisted learning are necessary to prepare our students to meet the challenges of an ever-changing society.



A. DOMAINS

When designing the content areas (standards), CSD did so based on what parents and communities said they wanted for their children. The result was ten equally important domains. They organized learning within the domains around levels and standards, rather than grade levels and courses. Graduation requirements are based on reaching specific levels for each content area:

- Mathematics
- Technology
- Social Sciences
- Reading
- Writing
- Culture & Communication
- Personal/Social/Service (the values and skills necessary to reach one’s full potential, and fostering the development of those around them)
- Career Development
- PE/Health (healthy interpersonal strategies applied in both rural and urban environments)
- Science



Chugach School District considers their community and natural environment as an asset. In this photograph, students working at various science performance levels dissect a pollock.

Of course, students progress through the levels at their own pace.

As Treece pointed out, “We’ve designed the graduation expectations to cut across the disciplines to indicate a level of knowledge that prepares students for their next step. It’s not just completing algebra 2 or trigonometry. We want students to be able to think like mathematicians and solve problems using the skills they’ve developed.” In fact, 50 percent of last year’s graduation class did so in less than four years.

B. INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS

For students with specific interests or all-encompassing passions, the individual learning plan is a structure that allows interest to drive instruction and gives them an opportunity to look for ways to find standards within their interests.

The ILPs are designed so that students learn the process of goal setting as well as the process of organizing projects. Shannon O’Brien, one of the homeschool teachers, explained how one of her students created an ILP centered on the theme My Life in Alaska. With developing his writing skills and using technology as the primary goals, he created a blog where he included descriptions about how to get wood ready for the winter, how he built a model airplane, and descriptions of other parts of his life.

Another student developed his ILP around his interest in computers. With the help of his CSD teacher, he created a plan that addressed multiple Technology and Career Development standards and built his own personal computer. Culmination of the project included writing clear directions regarding specific parts needed and steps to complete a successful computer build, as well as the creation of a Power Point presentation to share the process.

C. THE SYSTEM OF ASSESSMENTS


Districtwide Principal Doug Penn currently has oversight over the three schools, the statewide FOCUS homeschool program, and the Voyage to Excellence (VTE) Variable-Term Residential School. He started as a teacher in Chenega Bay in 1996 and knows the CSD performance-based system inside and out. According to him, "We need to always know the purpose of assessment. It is to help students and the teacher understand what students know and what they don't know, and to provide insights into the steps that are needed to learn it. Too often, assessment is used as a hammer and a gateway. For us, we see it as a process of helping students get from don't know to knowing."

CSD uses a common scoring (grading) system with Emerging, Developing, Proficient, and Advanced. Reaching 80 percent on an assessment indicates proficiency and 90 percent is advanced. Of course, determining what 80 percent means requires calibration among teachers. Students continue to work and develop their skills at each level until proficiency is achieved.

CSD focuses on content and process skills. Penn explained why this was important. "We all have great ideas, we all have passion about one thing or another. But that doesn't mean we have the skill set to bring ideas to fruition. We want to make sure our students are learning the skills to make things happen. It's not by magic. And it's not just engaging students. You have to teach process strategically and systematically. You need the combination of the process and content skills to get to deeper learning."

To help them stay focused on where students are in their learning, CSD relies on those same ten content areas. Before a student moves onto the next level, there is a cumulative assessment based on up to three assessments. The first, described as the analytical assessment, is the student's reflection on his or her learning. Second, there is a skill assessment that focuses on the specific content. The third, a performance assessment, is often co-designed with students. In this assessment, they show evidence of their ability to apply their skill. (For example, in writing, it might be a portfolio of writing samples from different classes.)




As students progress within the levels, there is a great deal of flexibility for students and teachers alike in how they learn and how they are assessed. The instructional choices offer depth of learning and



"We need to always know the purpose of assessment. It is to help students and the teacher understand what students know and what they don't know, and to provide insights into the steps that are needed to learn it. Too often, assessment is used as a hammer and a gateway. For us, we see it as a process of helping students get from don't know to knowing."

– DOUG PENN,
Districtwide Principal, Chugach School District

Before a student moves on to the next level, there is a cumulative assessment based on up to 3 assessments:

-  Analytical Assessment
-  Skill Assessment
-  Performance Assessment

independence of students in how they learn and demonstrate their learning within a level:

- *Direct Instruction*: Student demonstrated proficiency through Direct Instruction followed by an instructor-generated, skills-based assessment
- *District Assessment*: Student demonstrated proficiency on a District Assessment such as Reading, Math, or Science
- *Performance Task*: Student demonstrated proficiency on the scoring guide above during a 2-3 day integrated, multi-grade instructional unit
- *Thematic Unit*: Student demonstrated proficiency on the scoring guide above during a 2-5 week integrated, multi-grade instructional unit
- *Individual Learning Plan*: Student demonstrated proficiency on the scoring guide above by accomplishing goals on the Individual Learning Plan (ILPs are ways that students take even more responsibility for their learning by organizing how they are going to learn and demonstrate knowledge on high interest topics)

Trece pointed out that teachers have a great deal of autonomy to assess student performance within a level. “We think it is important that students have the opportunity to apply what they are learning and pursue thematic units. Through AIMS (CSD’s web-based data management system), we are able to view how students are demonstrating their learning. We also believe that teachers must have the autonomy to make informed judgments about instructional strategies and the assessments used.”

Penn expanded with, “The traditional system wants to treat all the students the same way. Why is it that we trust doctors to diagnose patients, but not expect teachers to be able to prescribe strategies to help students learn? We need to trust the professional judgment of our teachers in a personalized school environment to know where students are in their learning, assess how they are progressing, and develop strategies. Empowering teachers and providing them with the authority to use their professional judgment and draw on the expertise of their colleagues is the only way to respond to the individual needs of students.”

Erika Thompson, a teacher at Whittier, noted, “We are supported in developing our skills as teachers and in using our professional judgment. Our colleagues support us, as does the district. As teachers, we are always learning, and there is always someone available to help.” Penn explained that the district wants to “create conditions for professional judgment to be used and developed. We can’t just say to teachers ‘Be autonomous.’ Our new teachers are mentored by other teachers, and we take advantage of the state mentoring program.”



“We need to trust the professional judgment of our teachers in a personalized school environment to know where students are in their learning, assess how they are progressing, and develop strategies. Empowering teachers and providing them with the authority to use their professional judgment and draw on the expertise of their colleagues is the only way to respond to the individual needs of students.”

– DOUG PENN,
Districtwide Principal, Chugach School District

D. CUSTOMIZED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM



Student learning is the core of the system. It's easy to see what level students are in, and their progress along the ten domains.

CSD developed a customized information management system, AIMS, to support their students, parents, teachers, and management team. Treece explained that they couldn't find anything off the shelf. All the systems were designed around compliance data, but nothing was available for tracking learning. They tried a few products but outgrew their capabilities, so they eventually had to create a customized web-based system.

Like everything else at CSD, student learning is the core of the system. It's easy to see what level students are in, and their progress along the ten domains. Teachers can also look at their individual students and see how they are progressing within the level. There is information about which type

of instruction and assessments were used in the demonstration of proficiency as well as notes from the teachers.

The team at CSD is finding that they are starting to encounter new growing pains. As Treece explained, "We don't want to wait until high school to identify students who are having trouble in school. We are designing reports to help us understand what is going on within schools and across the district to be more responsive."

To this end, they've designed "pivot reports" to see how students are progressing within content areas. They are also using "struggling student" reports that identify students who have been stagnant in their progress, students who are below grade level proficiency, and data on how far behind they are. The district is also beginning to think about what would be the important data on a dashboard, including current information to help monitor how balanced instructional models are being utilized (direct instruction, performance tasks, thematic, and real life application).

IV. Expanding Experiences beyond the Classroom

The design of the CSD's performance-based system enables creativity in the design of instruction and how students demonstrate their learning, allowing teachers and students to take advantage of place-based learning. The elimination of the structure of courses and organizing learning by ten content areas and levels allows more flexibility for teachers and learners. Standards can be easily organized into interdisciplinary projects and units rather than forced to do the work across the broader course structures. The size of rural schools can also be an asset, as they can be much more flexible about taking advantage of learning opportunities as they arise.

One of the biggest features of CSD is their commitment to learning beyond the classroom. Penn summarizes it best by saying, "We have to be a slingshot. There is a momentum that builds to propel students forward beyond their graduating high school. They need to have a wide array of



The design of CSD's performance-based system enables creativity in the design of instruction and how students demonstrate their learning, allowing teachers to take advantage of place-based learning.

opportunities. I don't know if we have to help them find their specific direction, as it is going to change a lot in their late teens and early twenties. It's a rarity for teens to know exactly what they want to do and successfully pursue it. We need to help them have the capacity to take advantage of changing interests."

Thus, CSD organized the content areas to include career development, as students having ideas for their future will also open up the reasons why college and/or advanced training is important. They also want to respond to the interests of students and the communities for students to be successful in subsistence living, including fishing, hunting, and using local materials.

There is also opportunity for students to explore and "embrace" their cultural heritage. One of the ways in which they do this is by inviting students across the Chugach region, including homeschoolers, to participate in Cultural Heritage Week, which is held in Tatitlek each year to celebrate and learn about the Alutiiq culture.

Daily life is also taken into consideration to a high degree. Andrea Korbe, a school board member from Whittier, described coming into the school one day to find the entire place empty. An employee in the harbor noticed that a fisherman had brought up a live octopus and called the school to alert them of this learning opportunity. Similarly, a waitress meeting an astronaut who was part of training happening in the area asked if he would be willing to meet with students, and a partnership with NASA was born.

A. VOYAGE TO EXCELLENCE

The VTE School is a hallmark of the CSD program, as it is designed around the "whole teen" and the comprehensive set of skills students need to be successful after high school. CSD recognizes that students are likely to be navigating both rural and urban areas in their lives. VTE is designed to support students from CSD and partner districts throughout Alaska as they build up their "city-skills," leadership, marketable skills, and a positive understanding of themselves within their communities and different environments. It is set up as a variable-term residential school (variable-term is a design that aligns with Alaska Native Culture as opposed to the historical boarding school design that damaged Alaska Native and Native American cultures and communities).

Based in Anchorage, the school provides students with the opportunity to strengthen life skills (CSD refers to these as Personal/Social/Service standards), helps students become familiar with urban life, enhances career development, and prepares students for the transition from high school to their lives – whether that be in urban areas, in their communities, or in college.

In addition to career certificates and certifications earned at the VTE School, participating students have opportunities to earn dual college credits. "Today, students who graduate with a diploma 'plus' are a step closer to the success they seek," says Bob Crumley. "Achieving higher graduation rates is an important goal, but providing individual students with opportunities to also earn industry certificates and college credits while they are earning their diploma has become increasingly important to us."



The VTE School is a hallmark of the CSD program, as it is designed around the "whole teen" and the comprehensive set of skills students need to be successful after high school.



Chugach School District responds to the interests of students and the communities – enabling students to develop skills in science, math and technical skills as well as subsistence living, including fishing and hunting.

VTE is designed to be seamless with students' personalized learning paths. The VTE staff use AIMS to gather information about where the Chugach student is in their progress and seek out opportunities for students to develop and apply skills. Ongoing contact is made with the partner district's teachers and students to understand current interests and abilities. Stephanie Burgoon, Head Teacher of VTE, explained, "As they demonstrate their skills, we use the same processes to assess and determine if they are ready to advance to the next level. It's seamless for the students and the teachers."

The program starts with First Trek, a four-day leadership program for sixth to ninth graders. There are then a series of Phases for high school students, which range from six to twelve days for ninth and tenth graders, and ten to fifteen days for older students. The Phases are designed around themes such as STEM, career exploration, and skill-building in areas such as culinary arts or wilderness first responders. The It's My Life Phase is for students who are getting closer to graduating from high school. Chugach students tend to be in Level 7 Career Development and Personal/Social/Service (CSD organizes content area standards into levels, not age grades or courses) to strengthen independent living skills such as financial literacy, opening a bank account, developing a career and college plan, creating a health plan, living and working with others, and getting a driver's license. VTE has a range of other programming that includes post-secondary preparation, career exploration, and building marketable skills.

VTE is open to students statewide. For some students, this is the first time in a large city or away from home. Staff are prepared to support students through bouts of homesickness, severe shyness, and, for some students from interior villages where families speak Yupik, helping them to strengthen communication skills. Given that students may come from a variety of Native Alaskan communities, VTE offers a rich opportunity for reflection upon identity and culture.

B. EXPANDING COURSE ACCESS

One of the current focus areas for continuous improvement is to create more capacity in the district for students to advance beyond the graduation requirements. In addition, CSD wants to be able to offer more opportunity for students to participate in high interest learning. One example is the partnership with Copper River School District, which significantly expanded access to online courses.

V. Embracing the Culture of the Community

Above all else, Chugach School District values its students, families, and communities; therefore, they value the culture of the Alutiiq people who live in Chenega Bay and Tatitlek. The CSD performance-based system has been co-designed with Alutiiq communities so that it works for *all* students.

A. RESPECT THROUGH LISTENING AND PARTNERSHIP

Respect in CSD is shown through the district's commitment to building a partnership with the communities they serve. Many school districts in the United States decide what they want to do and then design community engagement around "buy-in." Not so at CSD. Crumley explains, "It starts with partnership. If our schools don't work for students and families, then they aren't effective. We need to work in partnership to respond to new challenges and to encourage co-design to make sure new ideas will work. Students need to own the system. If they only buy into the system, then they can easily start resisting it. It is important that students, parents, and educators are in partnership toward a shared goal."

Korbe emphasized this importance with, "Bob and the school board members have a commitment to shared leadership. Each school has a different personality, select different themes every year, and have even identified different values that are rooted in their conversations with their communities. However, all the school board members, regardless where they live, take responsibility for all three physical school sites, FOCUS homeschoolers, and the VTE Statewide Residential School. This means that we, as a school board, have to listen to one another to understand the issues confronting each of the communities and their schools. We also have to design ways to resolve issues that strengthen the entire district."

The link between the communities, students, school board, district, and educators is constantly reinforced. For example, Korbe highlighted, "The school board feels very connected to our schools and our students. In fact, as students prepare to graduate, they make a presentation to the school board, sometimes in person but usually by phone or Skype. It's a way of creating a feedback loop, as we can see what students are learning, what they value, and hear feedback about their experience."



*The CSD performance-based system has been co-designed with Alutiiq communities so that it works for **all** students.*



"The school board feels very connected to our schools and our students. In fact, as students prepare to graduate, they make a presentation to the school board, sometimes in person but usually by phone or Skype.

It's a way of creating a feedback loop, as we can see what students are learning, what they value, and hear their feedback about their experience.."

– ANDREA KORBE,
School Board Member, Whittier Community School

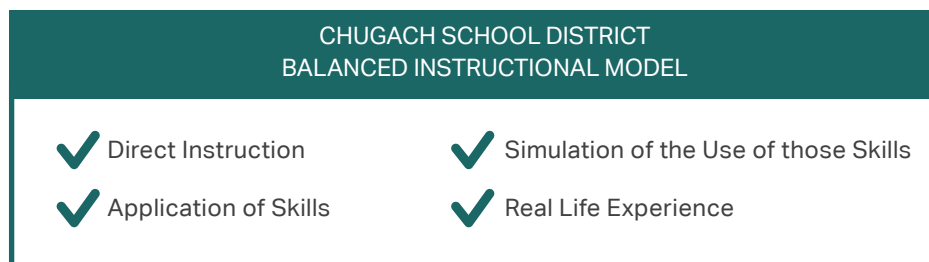
B. COMPREHENSIVE CONTENT DOMAINS SHAPED AROUND THE WHOLE CHILD

The ten domains are shaped around the whole child, reflecting the values of the community members who contributed to the design of CSD’s performance-based system. The domains provide flexibility to create learning opportunities that reflect the culture of community as well as the interests of students. Topics important to Alaska Natives can easily be woven into most of the content areas. For language and cultural preservation, it’s crucial to identify Elders who are able to pass along the Suqcestun language and Alutiiq drumming and songs. Another example lies within the Alaska State Standards that include subsistence living (fishing, hunting, and using materials from the natural environment to create living environments) within the science standards.

The domain of Culture and Communication was specifically designed to provide formal and systematic ways to make connections with Native Alaskan cultures. Treece explained, “The Alutiiq culture, and the culture of any of our students from other indigenous communities, are fostered in our Culture and Communication standards. In addition, the Personal/Social/Service standards provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate these skills by participating in tribal activities, engaging in their tribal council, attending the Alaska Federation of Natives, or participating in the Native Youth Olympics.”

Additionally, English language acquisition for all CSD students whose primary language is other than English is taught through Sheltered English strategies. English language development goals include acquiring and demonstrating proficiency to speak, listen, read, and write in English at a level that ensures clear communication between the student and English speakers. Through the attainment of the goals in each domain, academic success is expected to increase. Utilization of the WIDA English Language Proficiency Standards provides the framework for the classroom teacher in teaching the dimensions of social and academic language for English language learners (ELL).

Chugach School District’s philosophy for academic success revolves around the belief that students are most successful when academic learning takes place based on the individual’s current knowledge level, and the cognitive demand for learning new information builds upon that knowledge base. Utilizing the state-approved ELL identification assessment, parent and teacher observations, and the CSD performance-based, standards-based system, the limited English proficient student is assessed to determine his or her current academic level of proficiency (appropriate testing accommodations are allowed local and state assessments), and then specific strategies for successful academic learning are deployed. These strategies include direct instruction, application of skills, simulation of the use of those skills, and real life experience. CSD refers to this as the Balanced Instructional Model.





Chugach School District believes that students are successful when academic learning builds on students' current level of knowledge. Using a Balanced Instructional approach, students advance upon mastery through performance levels. In this picture, a community partner engages students in conversations about making good choices, part of the Personal/Social/Service standards.

Specific strategies for teaching the content areas of mathematics and language arts include:

- Classwide Peer Tutoring (pair learning approach in which students take turns as teacher and learner)
- Cooperative learning combined with metacognitive instruction
- Mastery learning that accommodates student diversity
- Small group tutoring using Direct Instruction
- Peer-Assisted Learning (students work in pairs to learn structured sequence of literacy skills [phonemic awareness, phonics, sound blending, passage reading, storytelling])
- Labeling of objects throughout classroom and school in home language and English
- Creation of personal dictionaries that can be illustrated and annotated by each student

Additional strategies for academic success include the use of Sheltered English supports, ESL web-based individualized learning programs, and 1st language – English language dictionaries that are age appropriate.

Students with special needs benefit from CSD’s education model, as well. Building on areas of strength and focusing on areas of need – while also working at individual level and rate – provides a successful, positive education environment. The student’s Individual Education Program (IEP) Team or 504 Team develop the annual plans to align with CSD’s performance-based framework.



Students with special needs benefit from CSD’s education model as well. Building on areas of strength and focusing on areas of need – while also working at individual level and rate – provides a successful, positive education environment.

C. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A performance-based system generates tremendous opportunities for teachers to design and co-design with students to ensure that instructional experiences are meaningful, and this is something Chugach embraces to the fullest.

As Penn explained, “There are some formal ways that we embed Native education into the units, such as using Native literature. However, we are also opportunistic based on the season, what’s going on in the villages, and what’s happening with the students. In a performance-based system, the focus is on units, not daily lessons, to create interdisciplinary projects. This gives us a chance to be more flexible to create interdisciplinary projects that draw on the assets of the villages and the incredible natural world all around us.”

Additionally, Tatitlek hosts Cultural Heritage Week, which is held annually by community Elders and teachers in May to teach cultural knowledge to students throughout the Chugach region. Teacher Nichole Palmer summed it up with, “We don’t dissect frogs in science. We are going to look at the body systems of a fish that students know about and use in their lives in the village.”

Jed Palmer, head teacher at Tatitlek Community School, cautioned, “We don’t want to teach about the culture, we teach through it. The culture is all around us in the school because we are embedded in our communities. Our community members were part of writing the Culture and Communication standards. We utilize the community and the place as much as possible. Community members invited students to build the smokehouse and learn to fish. We partner with different organizations, such as dance groups, around cultural heritage. All of these are opportunities for students to build their personal skills, explore their identity, think about their futures, and apply academic skills.”



“We don’t want to teach about the culture, we teach through it. The culture is all around us in the school because we are embedded in our communities.”

– JED PALMER,
Head Teacher, Tatitlek Community School

VI. How Do Educators Grow and Develop in this Kind of System?

Chugach School District is a teacher’s district. Bob Crumley, Superintendent, started as a teacher in Whittier Community School (WCS). Doug Penn, District Principal, has worked in the communities of Chenega Bay and Whittier. Debbie Treece began her teaching career in California before she moved to Whittier two decades ago. It’s also a learner’s district, because everyone at CSD is willing to learn in order to do better by their students and their families.

Not every person is cut out to teach at CSD. You’ve got to want a bit of adventure. You’ve got to have a love for the incredible mountain-meets-sea landscape. You’ve got to be willing to live in small communities that have limited access. And you’ve got to love kids.

The teachers in CSD embrace all of this – but they also commit themselves to learning alongside their students. As professionals, they’re constantly growing and developing their teaching skills.



CSD is a teacher’s district and a learner’s district: everyone at CSD is willing to learn in order to do better by their students and their families.

A. ACT AS GENERALISTS (OR NOT-YET-SPECIALISTS)

Not exactly one-room school houses, but close, the CSD schools are PreK-12 with just a handful of teachers. Teachers start out as generalists, perhaps with a preference or skills in one discipline or another. Every teacher has a story to tell about how they were weak in one area or another when they started, and how they’ve been slowly building up their skills ever since. In the meantime, they know they can depend on each other for skill-building support, as well as for assistance working with individual students who need extra help. Ashley Reeves, a new teacher at Tatitlek Community School (TCS), remarked, “In your first year, you have to be ready to ask for help and cling to anyone who is willing.” Nichole Palmer confirmed this. “Your team is key. We capitalize on all of our strengths.”

In a school with student empowerment at its core, being a generalist isn’t a weakness. As Jed Palmer explained, “School culture is important if you are going to have a team of generalists. In our schools, teachers are learning along with the students. We do not position ourselves as experts. In fact, when we don’t know something, it creates the opportunity for us to role model continuous learning by saying, ‘Let’s go find out.’”



“School culture is important if you are going to have a team of generalists. In our schools, teachers are learning along with the students. We do not position ourselves as experts. In fact, when we don’t know something, it creates the opportunity for us to role model continuous learning by saying, ‘Let’s go find out.’”

– JED PALMER,
Head Teacher, Tatitlek
Community School

TEACHER RETENTION

Once CSD became performance-based in the mid-1990s, and the new district leadership valued and provided support for all staff and communities, the teacher retention rates shot up from a 50% annual turnover to 80-100% annual retention.

According to Penn, once the district became performance-based in the mid-1990s, and the new district leadership valued and provided support for all staff and communities, the teacher retention rates shot up from a 50 percent annual turnover to 80 to 100 percent annual retention. Because performance-based approaches encourage collaboration, they were able to create the conditions necessary to pursue professional development. Staff supports are in place as they pursue Master’s degrees in special education, become highly qualified in additional areas, and get administrative certificates.

The teacher/performance evaluation process (referred to as PEP) is designed to reflect the fact that teaching staff are generalists. The teacher evaluation they rely on emphasizes the process of teaching, not the content. Yet, at the same time, the investment in professional development helps to rapidly expand the skills of teachers. Jed Palmer noted, “I wouldn’t advise trying to be expert in everything. Start in one area and get comfortable. I was comfortable with social studies when I started and passionate about math. So I worked on math for two years. You aren’t going to be a rock star in all of them. After ten years at CSD, I am highly qualified in all subjects.”

The size of the district (remember—in terms of square miles, the district is huge, but in terms of staff numbers, it’s incredibly small) means that when hiring, Crumley and Penn think about the whole organization. They ask themselves how they can strengthen the district’s capacity as well as individual schools. Penn emphasized, “We don’t hire teachers, we hire members of a team. We don’t want people to compartmentalize. We want them to work with their colleagues to develop interdisciplinary projects. We want people who value being part of a team.”

B. FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT, AUTONOMY, AND CREATIVITY

At Chugach School District, teachers are encouraged in personal and professional development alongside their students – a process that can be intimidating, as many of the teachers noted. “We are open about it,” explained Jed Palmer. “It can be scary when you know you need to do better, but it’s not exactly clear how. We talk about it openly with each other. It may feel like a teacher is walking on a tightwire without a net, but our job is to not let each other fall off. It can be really rewarding.”

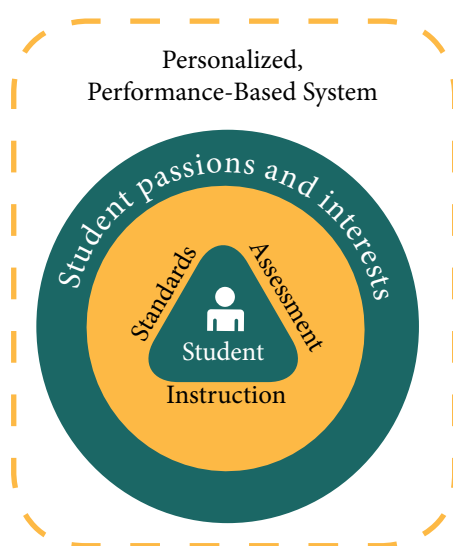
Of course, creativity means taking risks. For example, Jed Palmer went into detail about how he has developed really beautiful units balancing instructional strategies... which then fail because the students don’t have any interest in the content. By incorporating student input in designing units and highlighting collaboration, he’s been able to get better outcomes.



At Chugach School District, teachers are encouraged in personal and professional development alongside their students – a process that can be intimidating, as many of the teachers noted.

The homeschool program is even more individualized and flexible than the performance-based classrooms tend to be, as parents are the teachers and have chosen resources that address their children’s individual needs. CSD’s Homeschool Facilitating Teacher Shannon O’Brien sums up her experience as, “What I’ve learned is that when a teacher is first exposed to the standards-based classroom, we bring assumptions about teaching, standards, and assessments. It was more black and white than it needs to be. With the performance-based system, you can say yes more. You can be really creative about what learning experiences look like. I’m constantly asking ‘What about... Could the kids do it this way? What if we do... Could they meet the standards?’ Learning happens in so many ways. There isn’t one way to do it. There isn’t one script we have to follow.”

It’s important to note that this isn’t just creativity for the sake of creativity. Penn used a geometry analogy to describe the system. “Think about it as the three sides of a triangle surrounded by an enormous circle of students’ ever-changing interests and passions. Side one is where we always consider the standards that define what students need to know (but we don’t always start there, as it isn’t a natural place for how



we learn). Side two is how we consider the assessment in our design process, asking ourselves, ‘How will I know if the students really learned it?’ The third part of the design triangle is instruction that identifies how the students are going to learn it. This can be co-designed with students. This is where a lot of creativity comes into play. It’s often an iterative process to get it fully aligned.”

The underlying respect to allow this level of autonomy and creativity is based in the esteem between teachers, students, family, and the community. “Students are bringing their own unique experiences and perspectives,” Penn said. “The teacher’s job is to get to know the students and their families. Teachers are responsible to the students, the families, and the community to create an instructional environment where kids can succeed.”

C. INVEST IN A STRONG TEAM OF TEACHERS

Crumley’s commitment to creating a strong team was evident throughout my visit to Chugach, and he noted how important continuity of leadership across the district was for sustaining the work in such a small district. He also pointed out several structures that had been created to systematically support teachers – all of which reinforced a culture of collaboration, learning, and leadership.

- **Independent Teachers Organization:** In 1996, the teachers at CSD created their own teachers’ association, in lieu of the traditional union. The teachers were frustrated with the national union’s lack of support, high union dues, and political agendas, so they decided to represent themselves in order to better support their efforts in reinventing the education system.
- **Investment in Learning and Leadership:** Staff described that they turn to each other to support their learning and mentor each other, even across the schools. The districts offers up to thirty days of training

annually, and teachers are encouraged to expand their skills based on their individual learning plans. In addition, leadership development is embedded into the expectations and supports, such as Leadership PIER (Plan, Implement, Evaluate, Refine) plans.

- Performance Evaluation Process (PEP):** The staff development and evaluation process is remarkably similar to how students are assessed. It's all about learning. It's based on a continuum of growth within each PEP standard wherein staff provide evidence of their learning. All staff are expected to have at least one PIER plan (based on their focus areas and values) at all times to guide their learning. There are specific standards in the evaluation tool to encourage staff to share leadership and ownership. As part of the process, they provide documentation regarding their leadership efforts. The PEP domains focus on Professional Responsibility, Instructional Delivery and Assessment, Thematic Teaching, and Healthy Responses/Collegiality. The PEP has several components, including self-evaluation; comments and observations from students, parents, coworkers, and community members; individual meetings with the administrative supervisor; development of individual goals and action plan (PIER plan); collection and presentation of artifacts to support self-evaluation; and assistance in meeting district goals. The PEP cycle encompasses the entire school year: Start of Year, Annual (November), and End of Year Evaluations. Classified staff have a similar Performance Evaluation Process.
- Performance Pay:** Every teacher at CSD receives an annual composite score on the PEP rubric, based on a seven-point scale. Crumley explained, "This score is significant because it is the foundation of the district performance pay system. In 1997, the CSD Team of teachers and administrators developed performance pay to be structured in alignment with our shared purpose and team spirit. So the individual PEP scores are averaged across the work group each year, and the average score is used in determining annual performance pay. We've balanced individual improvement with incentives to support each other. While the score and the performance pay are significant, even more significant is the process of holding deep reflection-based discussions about our work; what is going well and what our individual and organizational opportunities for improvement are." Classified staff currently have individual performance pay due to the variety of work that is part of each staff member's job.

STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT TEACHERS & REINFORCE A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION, LEARNING & LEADERSHIP

-  Independent Teachers Union
-  Investment in Learning & Leadership
-  Performance Evaluation Process (PEP)
-  Performance Pay

Penn underscored this approach with a powerful statement. "Sure, we could make it easier for teachers, but then our students don't succeed. The other option is to admit that teaching is a complex system, invest in the systems, nurture the culture to support professional teachers...and have the kids actually learn. It's obvious which one is the better choice."

HOME SCHOOL INTEGRATION

▶ In addition to serving remote communities, Chugach School District provides a performance-based FOCUS Homeschool for almost 300 students from both rural and urban areas across the state. The facilitating teachers, who also live all over the state, work with the families of between forty to sixty students at a time.

Homeschool teachers engage parents and students when they first enter the district's program. They look at the previous school transcripts and may use assessments to determine students' academic levels. The most important step in personalizing the education begins with conversations with students and parents to get a good sense about how to support them. The Homeschool team continues to develop a strong partnership with families throughout the student's education with CSD's FOCUS Homeschool.

This support happens across the spectrum of learning levels. "Performance-based systems are great for kids who are accelerating, those who are behind, and everyone in between," said Tanya Wimer, one of the homeschool teachers. "We know the brain research tells us that children's brains develop differently and at different times. It's very helpful when students can work through levels at their own pace." Another teacher emphasized that the CSD focus on the whole child is also compelling. "Parents are paying attention to the development of their children beyond reading and math scores. The comprehensive content areas allow parents to instill their values into their learning experiences."

The performance-based system creates a common language and structure to support the partnership between parents, students, and teachers. As teacher Janet Reed put it, "It is so helpful to have the backbone of standards and rubrics in every content area. Given that everyone has all these very different styles of learning and communicating, it makes everything easier when there is a clear focus for learning. It's also very powerful that we have process skills in every content area to help parents and students learn the

VII. My Lessons Learned from Chugach School District

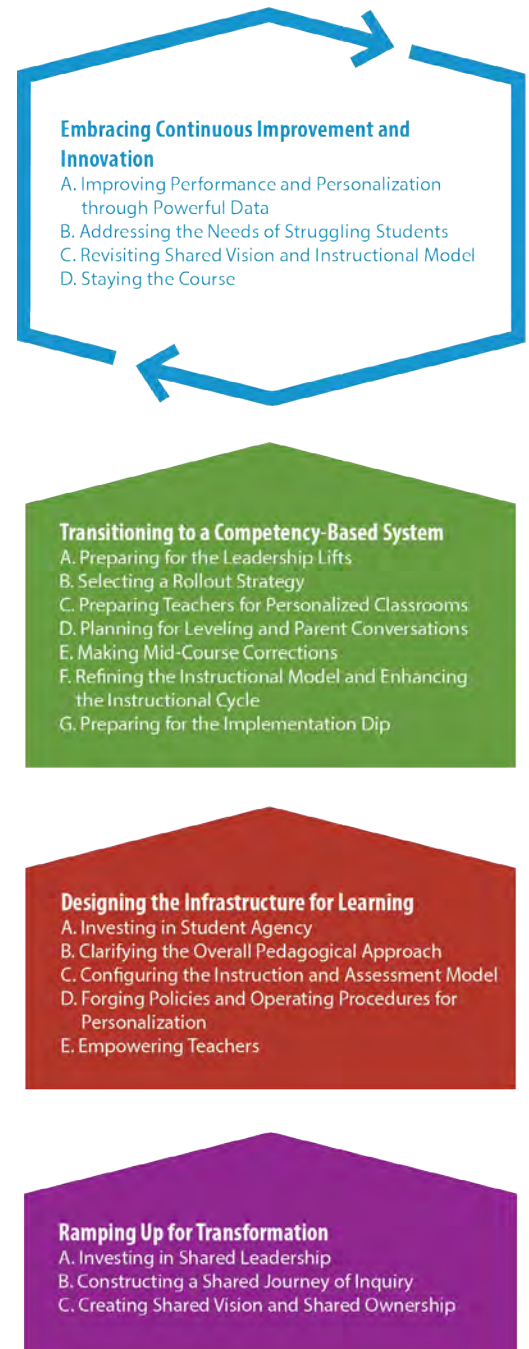
Competency education is going to create more flexibility than any of us have imagined. Competency education unleashes teachers' and students' creativity (or, at the very least, it can, provided teachers and school leaders have the courage and supports to explore new ways for students to learn and demonstrate their learning).

By having a comprehensive, whole-child approach that recognizes all the domains of learning across the age span, we can deeply embed child and youth development into the school system. Furthermore, by creating structures that recognize all aspects of learning (including culture, career development, and technology) along with the core academic standards, those powerful habits, and higher-order thinking, the door is opened to robust deeper learning opportunities.

Creating nimble, agile education organizations means that management teams at the school and district level need tools that help them keep an eye on how the organization is shifting. If we a) want to have students become proficient along an entire learning progression and b) also want them to have opportunities to apply their learning through projects and inquiry, then we need a sense of how to keep this in balance. And if the goal is to prepare students for lifelong learning and not just graduation, we are going to have to value those domains equally – even if national and state policies assert that only English language and math are important enough to be measured. To avoid more top-down summative assessments, superintendents and principals are going to have to ensure their organizations value lifelong learning and have the skills and tools they need to stay balanced.

If you are interested in learning more about how districts are implementing competency education, we recommend [*Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders*](#).

Stages of Implementation



About the Author

Chris Sturgis is the co-founder of **CompetencyWorks**. She is the Principal of MetisNet, a consulting firm based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She specializes in competency education, high school reform, re-engagement of students to complete their diploma, youth issues and community engagement.

Chris brings a commitment to drawing in local knowledge (metis) early in research and design processes to ensure that problem definition reflects the strengths and realities of communities. She has worked in philanthropy, state government, human service organizations, campaigns and consulted to the U.S. Department of Education. She is co-founder of the Youth Transition Funders Group.

Special thanks to Tamara Berry and Natalie Abel for making this issue brief possible.

Other Reports Available at CompetencyWorks

- *Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders* by Chris Sturgis, June 2015
- *Maximizing Competency Education and Blended Learning: Insights from Experts* by Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis, March 2015
- *A K-12 Federal Policy Framework for Competency Education: Building Capacity for Systems Change* by Maria Worthen and Lillian Pace, February 2014
- *Progress and Proficiency: Redesigning Grading for Competency Education* by Chris Sturgis, January 2014
- *Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills – A State Policymakers Guide to Competency Education* by Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis, February 2013
- *Re-Engineering Information Technology: Design Considerations for Competency Education* by Liz Glowa, February 2013
- *The Learning Edge: Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment* by Laura Shubilla and Chris Sturgis, December 2012
- *The Art and Science of Designing Competencies* by Chris Sturgis, August 2012
- *Clearing the Path: Creating Innovation Space for Serving Over-age, Under-credited Students in Competency-Based Pathways* by Chris Sturgis, Bob Rath, Ephraim Weisstein and Susan Patrick, December 2010



1934 Old Gallows Road, Suite 350
Vienna, VA 22182

888.95.NACOL (888.956.2265)
ph. 703.752.6216 / fx. 703.752.6201
info@inacol.org