

A Look at Competency Education in New England

A FOCUS SECTION FROM **Reaching the Tipping Point: Insights on Advancing Competency Education in New England**. Read the complete Issue Brief at **CompetencyWorks**.

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October 2016

About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative drawing on the knowledge of practitioners, its partners, and an advisory board. The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization, with project management facilitated by MetisNet.



For more information on competency education, you can visit CompetencyWorks.org, read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.

This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation or the Carnegie Corporation.

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A Look at Competency Education in New England

Competency-based districts and schools are developing in many places across the nation, even in the few states that continue to hold the time-based Carnegie unit firmly in place. However, in half of the New England states, there is a tremendous concentration of districts either in the planning or implementation stages of converting to competency education.

This section explores three questions:

1. Why are so many of the New England states embracing competency education?
2. What strategies are being used to advance competency education in the New England states?
3. Does New England have a strategic advantage that is enabling the transformation to competency education?

When referring to New England states, the discussion will be based on the efforts of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, as they have all introduced proactive strategies to allow for or expect schools to become competency-based. Of the six states, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has not invested in exploring, piloting, or expanding competency education, and thus will not be included in the following discussion. For those readers who would like to know more about each state, please turn to the detailed case studies of each of the states in the appendix.

A. WHY ARE SO MANY OF THE NEW ENGLAND STATES EMBRACING COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

We are clear that the rapidly evolving economy will not wait for our students if they are not prepared with the right mix of knowledge, skills and work study practices. – NEW HAMPSHIRE STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

New England states have a variety of reasons for turning to competency education: higher expectations, the demand for skills that prepare students for an ever-changing world, and an understanding that the traditional system has become a stumbling block to the future of their children and the strength of their communities. What is most striking about the fact that so many New England states are pursuing competency education is that several of these states boast high overall scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). They could easily pat themselves on the back when comparing themselves to other states. Yet, high levels of achievement are not shared by all students within their states, with wide disparities by income and race. The concern for maintaining and strengthening their schools, economies, and communities has led them to embrace a general mantra of *we can and must do better*.

How do the states themselves describe the rationales for moving to a competency-based system?

1. PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY IS NO LONGER ADEQUATE: COMMUNITIES EXPECT THAT ALL STUDENTS WILL GRADUATE PREPARED FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS.

Communities in New England understand that workforce needs are changing, with more and more jobs requiring some level of post-secondary education or training. Communities across New England have embraced the goal that all students shall be prepared for college and careers. No longer satisfied with providing students with opportunity, communities have lifted the expectations of districts and schools to actually prepare students for the next step in their educational journeys.

Concerns about under-preparedness also point to significant issues of inequity. Even though high school graduation rates are inching upwards, the concern that too many students are not receiving their diplomas is demanding new ways to keep students engaged and to support those who are over-age and under-credited.

Furthermore, of those students who do complete high school, too many are unprepared for college. For example, responding to their communities' expectations that all students become prepared for post-secondary education and training, Connecticut school district superintendents became advocates for a personalized, mastery-based system. They came to believe that it was impossible to meet the needs of all students to be fully prepared for college and careers in the traditional system: the only way to reliably provide the learning experiences and instructional supports that students need to reach proficiency is to redesign the system.



Connecticut, we've got a set of complex problems.

Just like many communities across the nation, Connecticut's public education system faces a series of complex problems – a mass of challenges that have multiple causes and cannot be solved in a set time period by using standard techniques and conventional processes. These complex problems include:

- *International and racial achievement gaps*
- *Low level of student engagement in their education and motivation for learning*
- *Limited measures of assessment and accountability*
- *Inadequate preparation for today's higher education and workforce*
- *Changing U.S. demographics*
- *Little emphasis on modern skills to meet the needs of a global economy*
- *Impact of disruptive innovations*

Obviously, solving these problems is not easy. Traditional solutions are inadequate...

The fact is, the only way to work on these problems is to redesign. The public school system must change.

– NEXT ED: TRANSFORMING CONNECTICUT'S EDUCATION SYSTEM, CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

2. COMMUNITIES WANT STUDENTS TO HAVE THE NECESSARY SKILLS TO BE LIFELONG LEARNERS AND TO BE ABLE TO ADAPT TO AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD.

Communities across the New England region, as across the country, are feeling the pressures of globalization and want their children to be strong lifelong learners who can adapt to changes in the economy. In addition to the foundational skills of reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, they want graduates to be skilled at problem-solving, creativity, and synthesis, as well as able to apply their skills in new contexts. Parents want their students to be competent to navigate a changing world and ready to take advantage of new opportunities.

Maine's strategic plan, **Education Evolving**, makes its case based on the changing economy and implications for the workforce:

For generations, the educators in Maine's public school system have worked tirelessly to meet the educational needs of the students in their care, and their unwavering effort has been evident. Maine's schools routinely score highly in national rankings of educational outcomes and Maine people have a long history of strong support for their local schools.

However, a new age is upon us. Where our schools once needed to prepare young people for work in a predominantly natural resource-based economy of forestry, farming and fishing, they must now prepare students for a global economy in which many of the jobs of Maine's past have become automated or moved offshore. Maine's young people need an entirely new set of skills to succeed in an information-age economy where ideas and innovation move at the speed of light. These new skills are not just related to advances in technology, they are a product of the way society and business work and think: flatter organizations that require more independent thinking and problem-solving; collaboration with people and teams across the aisle and in offices around the globe; and more advanced critical thinking, even in jobs that once were considered manual labor and did not even require a high school degree.

This new age poses a series of challenges that will require us to not simply reform our schools, but to re-imagine them; to build on the successes of the past while creating a model of schooling for this new age.

3. THE PREVIOUS REFORMS THAT FOCUSED ON ACCOUNTABILITY HAVE NARROWED THE CURRICULUM AT A TIME WHEN STUDENTS NEED A HIGHER LEVEL OF SKILLS.

Communities, educators, and policymakers have all grown frustrated by an accountability system that is seen as ineffective. True, it has brought much-needed transparency to achievement levels and gaps, but it has not led to significant improvements. There are concerns that it may have narrowed curriculum or redirected resources away from a well-rounded education that propels students toward self-directed learning and higher order skills. It has focused attention on the examination itself rather than on the learning. In search of greater achievement, it has created a rigid focus on standards that eclipses the needs of students. Our schools have become standards-driven rather than student-centered.



In short, recent efforts to improve schools through test-based accountability efforts have largely failed. The intense work undertaken to raise test scores in math and language arts has had little discernable impact on those test scores, and worse still, these efforts are driving educators from the profession and have resulted in a narrowing of school curricula at a time when the job creators of the 21st century are calling for more emphasis on creative and innovative thinking and skills.

– EDUCATION EVOLVING, MAINE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

B. WHAT STRATEGIES ARE BEING USED TO ADVANCE COMPETENCY EDUCATION IN THE NEW ENGLAND STATES?

We can't address challenges around engagement, relevance and student responsibility for learning without taking on this issue of personalization. – REBECCA HOLCOMBE, VERMONT SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

The story of how competency education is advancing in New England is not an easy one to tell. It is not a linear story, with a few bold actions leading to sudden transformation: it is much closer to a movement that has been growing simply because the status quo is unacceptable and the vision so compelling. There is not just one hero or heroine that led a state to a new vision: there are hundreds, if not thousands, of leaders sharing similar visions and values found in classrooms, running schools, redesigning districts, and shaping statewide strategies.

Nor is it solely a story of top-down policy or bottom-up innovation that is igniting change: state-district partnerships and regional collaborations are catalyzing deeper understanding, nurturing and distributing knowledge, and ensuring that policy is informed by practice. Across the New England states, local educators are helping to build the new systems through their innovative efforts. Competency

education is advancing in New England through a combination of shared vision and values, mutual respect and collaboration, and courageous leadership that is motivated by a sense of urgency to do better for students, communities, and the economy.

1. RESOLVING THE PARADIGM-CHANGING POLICY PARADOX

How can a state bring about a much-needed change when the only way to ensure effective implementation is for educators to want to make the change?

This is what might be called the paradigm-changing policy paradox shared by the New England states and most states across our country. This tongue-twisting, profoundly complex paradox is created because of two dynamics. First, given that competency education requires a paradigm shift or a change in values and assumptions, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to implement effectively without educators embracing those values. When the policies and practices of competency education are placed upon the old values of fixed mindsets and compliant students, classrooms become overwhelmed by linearity and checklists as students tediously climb a ladder of standards. It is very difficult to mandate or require people to believe differently or do something they don't think is valuable. There has to be an opportunity to engage, reflect, and learn. Second, the states in New England (similar to most states across the country) value local control and are resistant to policies or regulations that feel like a mandate. Thus, prescriptive policies are unlikely to engage districts, schools, and educators and may even produce substantial pushback.¹

Given that it is impossible to mandate that people accept new values and beliefs, state policy to advance competency education will not immediately translate to transformation of the entire education system, regardless of how bold, intricate, or high-leverage it is. What are state policymakers to do? How can they drive toward a new education system while not actually mandating that any school change? If competency education is more easily and effectively implemented by educators who have come to their own conclusion that it is needed, how do you engage districts and schools through state policy to want to convert?

Thus, states are challenged to find ways to engage districts in the learning that it is necessary to implement competency education. The goal is to get educators to *want* to convert to a competency-based system, not simply require them to do so. (By the way, this same paradox challenges districts, principals, and teachers as they seek to engage and motivate school leaders, other teachers, and students).

RECOMMENDED READING ON IMPLEMENTATION

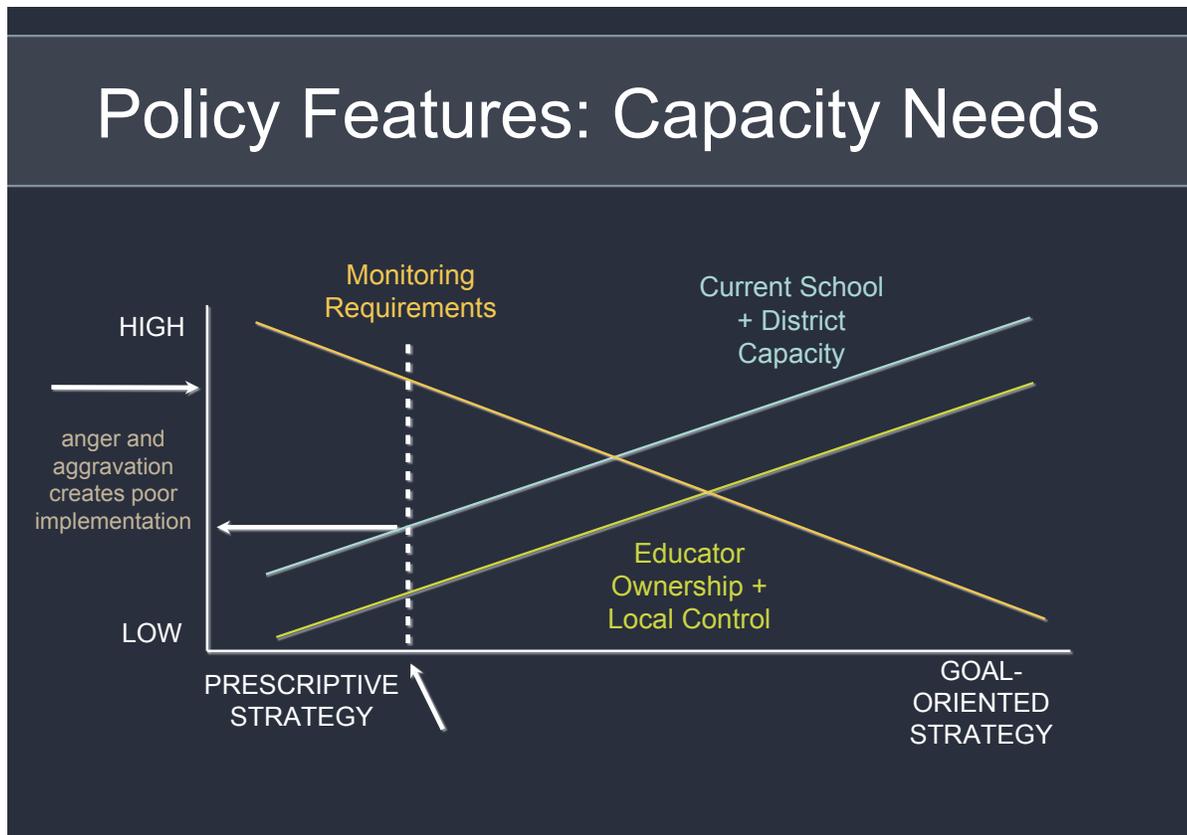
- **Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders**, CompetencyWorks
- **Looking Under The Hood Of Competency-Based Education: The Relationship Between Competency-Based Education Practices and Students' Learning Skills, Behaviors, and Dispositions**, AIR and Nellie Mae Foundation
- **From Policy to Practice: How Competency-Based Education is Evolving in New Hampshire**, Clayton Christensen Institute
- **Proficiency-based High School Diploma System in Maine: Local Implementation of State Standards-based Policy, Phase IV Policy Report**, Maine Education Policy Research Institute

2. POLICY FEATURES AND CAPACITY NEEDS

In Exhibit C, Great Schools Partnership’s David Ruff offers an insightful analysis regarding the tradeoffs between prescriptive policies as compared to goal-oriented strategies that can help to resolve this paradox. If a state uses a prescriptive strategy, the top-down approach is unlikely to generate the deep commitment, shared vision, or sense of empowerment that is so necessary for the cultural foundation of competency education. Furthermore, state monitoring requirements are likely to aggravate districts and generate distrust. Thus, prescription and monitoring are unlikely to generate the transition to competency education.

In comparison, a goal-oriented strategy that outlines a powerful vision and clear outcomes depends on a complementary capacity-building effort, rather than monitoring, to accelerate high-quality implementation. Without capacity building, districts are left to reinvent the wheel themselves; some will produce dramatic innovations, while many will be burdened and frustrated by repeated trial and error. Thus, it is likely that goal-oriented strategies will struggle, and possibly fail, unless combined with a strong set of supports. Furthermore, in a goal-oriented strategy, innovation is likely to produce a variety of interpretations, approaches, and models of how to reach the goal. States will need to employ strategies to co-design new policies and construct the elements of the statewide systems to tap into the local expertise and ensure that they can accommodate the different models.

Exhibit C Policy Features and Capacity Need. Adapted from *Great Schools Partnership*



Each of the New England states has tried to navigate this paradox in different ways. On one side of the continuum is Rhode Island, with a suite of prescribed practices; on the other are Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire, with more goal-oriented strategies supported by a variety of capacity-building activities.

3. RHODE ISLAND: A CASE STUDY IN PRESCRIPTIVE POLICY

Before exploring the goal-oriented strategies, it is valuable to reflect upon Rhode Island's road to proficiency-based education. Like Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, Rhode Island established a proficiency-based diploma. However, their approach has been much more prescriptive.

Rhode Island's strategy for reaching a proficiency-based system was through a broad set of requirements for secondary schools, introduced through the Board of Education's regulations. The practices are primarily organized around: 1) multiple mechanisms for determining graduation-ready proficiency, including twenty credits and a performance-based assessment such as a portfolio or exhibition; 2) personalized educational experiences; and 3) responses to the needs of students who are below grade level or learning at a slower pace.

Given that few Rhode Island districts to date have fully embraced proficiency-based learning beyond those practices required in high school, this approach raises the question of whether proficiency-based learning can in fact be catalyzed through precise regulations. Rhode Island's high schools describe themselves as proficiency-based given the inclusion of performance-based assessments in the diploma requirements. Many have built capacity around personalizing learning plans, performance-based assessments, portfolios, and exhibitions. Yet, few districts have put into place more than the practices required by the policy, especially as it pertains to creating a K-12 proficiency-based system.

It's difficult to determine why the layers of regulations aren't adding up to more in Rhode Island. Are there too many regulations trying to drive specific models, practices, and behaviors in high schools? Do they need proof points to help education leaders understand what is possible in creating a proficiency-based K-12 system? Is it a problem of changes in leadership, partial vision, communicating a vision, or competing agendas? Is the problem a focus on secondary school practices rather than systemic change? Or is the approach too top-down, without enough school autonomy to allow for innovation and an empowered culture of learning? Certainly, the values that make competency education so powerful – growth mindset; transparency; agency, autonomy, and empowerment; and innovation and continual improvement – are unlikely to be introduced through regulations.

Or, perhaps, with this detailed policy foundation, it is simply that districts are moving at their own pace. Just like students who go a little slower to understand something deeply and then have a sharp trajectory of rapid learning, Rhode Island districts may be becoming skilled in each of the practices and are about to take off.

4. AN EXPLORATION OF GOAL-ORIENTED POLICY STRATEGIES

Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont all introduced goal-oriented policies for personalized, competency-based education with a message and vision that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that schools had to be redesigned for the sake of children, families, communities, and the economy. Powerful, yet highly conceptual visions were promoted that emphasized new skills, higher expectations, greater personalization, and a system that could more reliably help students become prepared for college and careers.

These states selected high-leverage policies of proficiency-based diplomas (Maine and Vermont) or competency-based credits (New Hampshire). These policies embody the vision that all students will be fully prepared for college and careers by the time they reach graduation without detailing how districts and schools will help students reach proficiency. Credits and diplomas based on student demonstration of mastery embeds accountability within districts instead of relying on one test a year. Students and parents should be able to trust that when they are awarded credits or a diploma that they actually have the skills they need for the next step in their educational journey.

Maine initially provided an opportunity for districts to train with the Reinventing Schools Coalition. After the policy establishing a proficiency-based diploma and standards-based system was introduced, the Department of Education created a district self-assessment process that has informed technical assistance provided by the Department of Education and allowed districts to set flexible implementation timelines. Limited support beyond the self-assessment process has been offered through the Department of Education in recent years.

New Hampshire's strategy starts with a belief that innovation takes place at the local level, drawing upon co-design strategies to build new systems such as graduation competencies and a new accountability system. It also emphasizes that in order to help students learn, schools need new capacities and teachers must be supported in building their skills. A NH Network Platform offers personalized professional development, and the Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) initiative supports teachers to create and use performance-based assessments that will allow students to engage in richer tasks and build higher order skills.



The only way to create the new systems to support personalized, competency-based districts is through partnerships between the New Hampshire Department of Education and districts. Districts and schools understand the implications of decisions on teachers and students and the state brings attention to system-building. This partnership creates mutual respect and understanding for the challenge of truly designing a student centered approach to learning. Together we are creating a new system of assessments and accountability that is aligned with the needs of our students.

– ELLEN HUME-HOWARD, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, SANBORN REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Vermont’s comprehensive policy of personalization, proficiency-based diplomas, and flexible pathways is complemented by a support strategy in which half of the supervisory unions have had the opportunity to participate in training provided by Great Schools Partnership. Work groups are being developed to address critical issues in creating the new system.

There are several common elements in the policy strategy, theory of change, and set of supports that are driving change in these three states at the school, district, and state levels.

#1 Theory of Change Based on New Values

In most of the New England states, competency education is advancing with a new set of values being used by principals, districts, and even state policymakers to catalyze the transformational process:

- **A growth mindset** that deeply believes that with the right conditions, educators can learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach within a personalized, competency-based system to help every student succeed.
- **A strong culture of learning and supporting communities of learners**, which eliminates the culture of “blaming and shaming.”
- **Transparency and mutual accountability** that builds trust and respect, establishes continuous improvement, and increases responsiveness.
- **Autonomy and empowering strategies** that engage others in problem-solving and co-creating new systems and practices.
- **Personalization** that responds to the unique contexts and needs of districts, schools, and educators rather than one-size-fits-all policy, technical assistance, and professional development.



Risk taking and valuing mistakes as learning opportunities are role modeled starting with the superintendent.

– TOBI CHASSIE, CO-PROJECT MANAGERS OF THE SYSTEMS CHANGE INITIATIVE, PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

These values are used to shape classrooms and the school day, upgrade district operations, and redesign statewide policies and structures. They are also driving the leadership approaches and change processes needed to transform schools.

#2 Coalition of the Willing

Working independently, courageous district leadership might have been seen as marshaling unique efforts. However, local collaboratives and regional networks such as the New England Secondary School Consortium amplified the lessons learned, created political coverage, and established avenues for communication with state leadership as well as other stakeholders such as parents and college admissions officers. Thus, the effort in New England to date has been driven through coalitions of the willing.

#3 From Compliance to Support

State leadership in these three states has begun to reduce the reliance of the state education agencies on compliance. Instead, they are seeking to provide more support to help create the conditions necessary for transformation. This is an important step in creating a statewide culture of learning and organizational agility so that districts, schools, and educators can be more responsive to students' needs. To do so requires that state education agency staff become substantially more sensitive to the context in which districts operate and their long-term strategies.



We all know the ground is shifting beneath our feet – the world is changing and our schools need to, as well. In New Hampshire, we have recognized the disconnect, and we are focusing on transforming instruction by empowering educators and students.

– NEW HAMPSHIRE STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

State education agencies are building systems of support using the values and beliefs of competency education. For example, the Maine Department of Education developed guidelines for implementation that draw from the same values and beliefs of competency education; based on each district's self-assessment, timelines were set for implementation and for informed technical assistance, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches that responded to the unique needs of districts. In New Hampshire, a platform was created to offer more personalized professional development for teachers.

There still remains the problem of what to do about those districts that simply do not want to change, do not have the capacity to change because of risk-averse leadership, lack trust within schools or between the community and district, or disagree with the proposed change to competency-based systems. It is likely that at some point states will need to begin to develop strategic incentives and disincentives to make it more and more uncomfortable for those districts to maintain the status quo.

#4 Informed by Innovation

An enormous yet exciting challenge of transitioning to a new architecture for the education system is that no one knows exactly what the new system will look like. The states using goal-oriented strategies create opportunity to be informed by practitioners and establish mechanisms to co-design policies and new processes. For example, New Hampshire has embraced co-design, involving a partnership between the state and districts, as the only way to make sure that any statewide efforts are fully informed and shaped by the insights of the practitioners. The New Hampshire Department of Education creates formal process by which to create the new system, including establishing graduation competencies, work study practices, and the PACE initiative to inform the new approach to assessment and accountability.

#5 Courageous, Creative District and School Leadership

It is unlikely that the New England states would have advanced as far as they have without extraordinary leadership at the district and school levels. Early innovators helped educators think differently about how to engage students and structure schools. However, many communities have demanded that the education

system better meet the needs of all students. School boards and district leaders have had the courage to respond to the community call for greater personalization, deeming competency education the architecture for modernizing education.

A good example of this type of leadership is found in Connecticut. A permissive policy, **Connecticut’s Act for Unleashing Innovation in Connecticut Schools**, allowed for credits to be mastery-based but did not require any district to change. Yet two districts, **Windsor Locks** and Farmington, have made substantial progress toward mastery-based learning because they think it is in the best interest of their students and teachers. Most notably, Windsor Locks has seen improvements in achievement in their elementary schools. If and when Connecticut state leadership decides to take the next step toward a comprehensive policy to have all districts become competency-based, these districts and other early adopters will be positioned as invaluable partners.



We believe it is essential that local education leaders help build the new system through their innovative efforts.

– PAUL LEATHER, ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION, NEW HAMPSHIRE

For more information on how districts are managing the transformational process, please see [Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders](#).

If there is to be a lesson learned from the goal-oriented strategies used by Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, it is that the state policy can set the direction but it is the theory of change and capacity-building strategies that are proving to be catalytic.

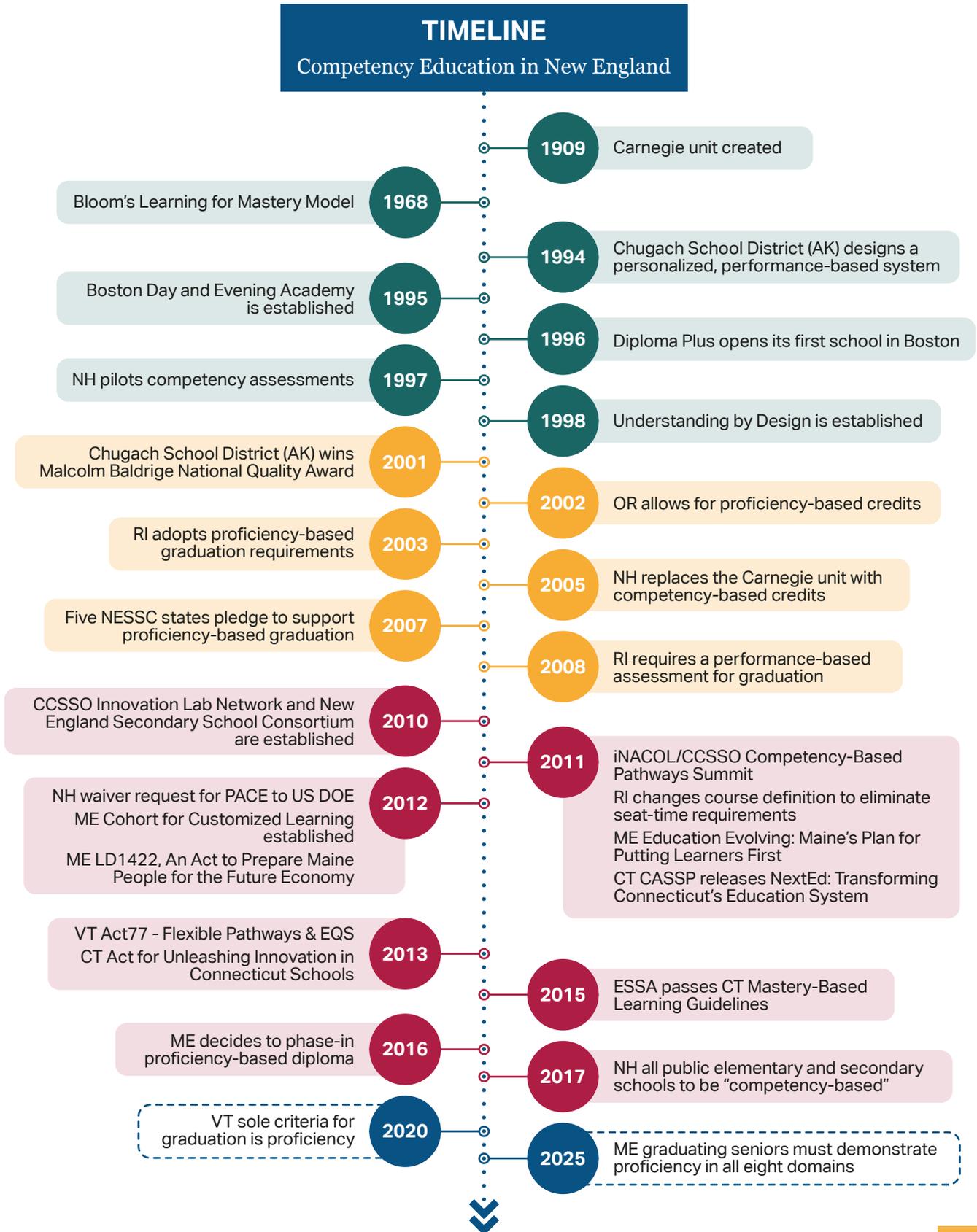
C. DOES NEW ENGLAND HAVE A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE THAT IS ENABLING THE TRANSFORMATION TO COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

Once I started teaching in a proficiency-based school, I never looked back. The traditional classroom just didn’t make sense anymore, and my students felt the same way. I was able to support my students much more effectively and efficiently, and they were able to take on so much more of the responsibility for their learning. Once you and your students experience the power of proficiency-based learning, it is unfathomable to go about learning and teaching in any other way.

– COURTNEY BELOLAN, INSTRUCTIONAL COACH, RSU2, MAINE

The New England region stands out for its early innovations, bold vision, and high percentage of districts becoming competency-based. Yet, a quick glance at the timeline in Exhibit D shows that the earliest models popped up on both sides of the country – in Boston and Anchorage – around 1995. So why is it that competency education has taken hold in New England with such momentum?

Exhibit D Competency Education in New England Timeline



Let's take a look at a few of the possibilities.

1. A GOOD IDEA CREATES CONTINUITY

The New England states have not had continuity in leadership. Governors have changed, as have the Secretaries of Education and other key personnel. Complicated budget issues, volatile political dynamics, and redistricting have demanded attention. Yet competency education has continued to be a major priority. Why? Because there are enough people in influential positions who believe in it. Some have argued that because students in New England states are relatively high-achieving, there just isn't any other way to generate improvement except to create a more personalized, flexible system. Moreover, many educators will vouch for it, affirming that once you understand what competency education can do, there is no going back. With strong local control, this makes it harder for state leadership to change course because the policy is perceived as beneficial to students and educators.

2. GEOGRAPHIC SIZE

The small geographic size of New England states helps, but can't fully explain the momentum. Small states can make it easier to bring people together to build a cohesive vision and understanding of competency education. Small districts can also be an advantage in creating a dialogue within schools and with communities about why the change is important as well as managing mid-course corrections in implementation. Yet, every state big or small faces the same challenges of scaling beyond the coalition of the willing.

3. A CATALYTIC INTERMEDIARY

Great Schools Partnership (GSP) has played a vital role in advancing proficiency-based learning. It has provided technical guidance to states in their efforts to create policies, helped to develop exemplars of graduation expectations, convened admissions offices in higher education to eliminate any potential barriers of proficiency-based diplomas, and provided training and technical assistance to districts and schools. They have demonstrated enormous generosity in sharing their resources under Creative Commons licensing. As an intermediary, GSP has also developed expertise across states, thus building extraordinary capacity in understanding the choices and implications of different policy and design decisions.

4. HISTORY OF INTER- AND INTRA- STATE COLLABORATION

The New England states have a history of collaboration across states and within states. For example, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont have used the same standards and same state assessment system, the New England Common Assessment Program.² All of the New England states, with the exception of Massachusetts, formed the **New England Secondary Schools Consortium** (NESSC) and its regional professional learning community, the **League of Innovative Schools** (LIS), which has spurred on the efforts to introduce personalized, competency-based education. In 2007, the commissioners of five states signed a **pledge to implement proficiency-based graduation, flexible**

learning pathways, and redesigned student-centered accountability systems. This common commitment has meant that the states are advancing together, with no state too far behind or too far ahead. NESSC and LIS have also generated and disseminated effective practices across the networks so that districts and schools receive support even when state resources are not available.

5. STRONG PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS

There is no doubt that philanthropy has played a catalytic role in advancing competency education in New England. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation has played a powerful role through the combination of strategic investments throughout New England to support student-centered learning and the inspirational leadership of one of the early leaders of competency education, Nicholas Donohue, the Commissioner of Education at the time that New Hampshire redefined the Carnegie unit credit and now the foundation's President. With the addition of another regional foundation, the Boston-based Barr Foundation, with a team of program officers knowledgeable in personalized learning and competency education, it is likely that these foundations will have even greater catalytic influence.

6. LEADERSHIP

Leadership matters. We know it does. There has been extraordinary leadership in the New England states at the school, district, and state levels – too many to list here. There are leaders willing to convert to competency education before the idea takes hold because they feel it's the right thing to do for students. There are leaders who have created the early models and provided opportunity for others to see it in action. There are leaders who excel in engaging others in sharing a vision and the belief that it is possible to transform the education system.

There are policy leaders working together to support each other across states. There are leaders who possess an imagination big enough to begin to put into place the new systems based on transparency, empowerment, and responsiveness that will help students succeed no matter what their backgrounds.



Principals and district leaders have the power to make sure there is freedom to have hard conversations in safety. It starts with distributed leadership models that understand and value teacher leadership in creating a dynamic learning culture within the school.

– JONATHAN VANDER ELS, PRINCIPAL,
MEMORIAL SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

There are two qualities of leadership that abound in the state policymakers, districts, and schools leading the way in New England. First, they are leader-learners, always seeking to better understand, to become more effective, and to seek out the best ideas even if it means accepting that theirs might not be. Second, many district and school leaders possess the participatory leadership styles (referred to as distributed, adaptive, or transformational leadership) needed to help educators move from the traditional system to embrace the values and create the conditions for a more personalized, competency-based system. Are these qualities we can only find in New England, with its history of town meetings? Doubtful. They can be found all across our nation. However, it is possible that the multiple networks and collaboratives in New England have helped to nurture and popularize these forms of leadership.

What does this all mean for other states that are geographically larger, operate in isolation, or lack catalytic intermediaries and foundations? It means they will need to figure out their own strategic advantages, develop partnerships, and, if necessary, seek to form partnerships outside their region to tap into the expertise they need. They, too, will need to create cultures of learning, engage communities in defining what they want for their children, and develop their own shared vision and values to ignite the transformation process. Other states without these same advantages are making big leaps toward competency education. For example, Colorado has developed a strong supportive approach, with districts working in cohorts to learn about and develop strategies to advance competency, while Idaho is building knowledge and networks through nineteen district pilots of competency education.

Endnotes

1. The challenge of statewide policy in states with high levels of local control is described in **From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire** by Julia Freeland, Clayton Christensen Institute.
2. New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont established NECAP in 2005 to provide reading, writing, mathematics, and science assessments. Maine joined in 2009. With the introduction of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, the participating states are now only collaborating around the science assessments.

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