

# Connecticut

## Making Room for Innovation

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## 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](http://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.

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## CONNECTICUT

### Making Room for Innovation

*Windsor Locks School District  
New Haven Academy*

In Connecticut, superintendents are among the strongest advocates for a personalized, mastery-based system, as they believe it to be the best way to help each and every student reach college and career readiness. Across the state, communities are raising expectations; providing opportunity is no longer adequate, they want greater accountability that districts will fully prepare each and every student for college and careers.

In 2009, a group of **Connecticut Association of Public Schools Superintendents** (CAPSS) members realized that the traditional system was not designed to offer the level of personalization necessary to reach this goal, so they began studying the issues and creating the vision for personalized, mastery-based learning. They brought in experts, read articles, and began to outline their vision. In 2011, CAPSS issued its first report, **NextEd: Transforming Connecticut's Education System** (2011), followed by **A Look to the Future: Personalized Learning in Connecticut** (2015), which was published in partnership with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), and, most recently, with a series of recommendations in the 2016 **NextEd: Next Steps**.

These publications were a major impetus in creating the policy environment for the legislature to pass the 2013 **Connecticut's Act for Unleashing Innovation in Connecticut Schools**. The legislation enabled mastery-based learning by giving districts the opportunity to use credits based on the demonstration of mastery.

In 2015, with support from Great Schools Partnership (GSP) and the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESCC), the Connecticut Department of Education (CDOE) issued **Mastery-Based Learning Guidelines for Implementation**. The guidelines are organized in three sections – community engagement, policy, and practice – with suggested steps in each. The section on equity identifies several important issues and suggests mitigating steps.

### *Connecticut Vision for Mastery-Based Learning*

*Ensure all students are prepared for college, career, and civic life through multiple and flexible pathways for learning, including mastery-based systems of accountability for student growth.*

– MASTERY-BASED LEARNING GUIDELINES  
FOR IMPLEMENTATION, CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Although budgetary issues in CT have drawn attention away from transformational work, the state continues to build capacity by taking advantage of national networks, having joined the **ACHIEVE Competency-Based Pathways State Partnership** in 2014 and the National Governors Association Competency-Based Education Network in 2016. It appears that the next big policy step will be to reconsider graduation requirements. At the beginning of 2016, a task force established by the legislature offered recommendations for strengthening attention to skills, improved alignment of requirements with standards and assessments, and considered a system that would lead to more students graduating fully proficient in college- and career-ready skills.

CAPSS knows that proof of concept is needed for mastery-based learning to expand within the state. Much of this is being accomplished thanks to a partnership with GSP and its networks, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium and the League of Innovative Schools. Together, they support educators with summer institutes and workshops during the school year. Leadership teams from approximately thirty secondary schools in the Mastery-Based Learning Institute have been trained so far, with additional supports for the actual implementation process.

Although mastery-based learning is gaining attention, CAPSS knows the importance of continuing to engage community leaders across the state, including unions, which need to be engaged and have their interests addressed early on. In 2015, they launched an effort to engage student voice in the discussion through a **contest for students to prepare short videos** about how schools should be changed to improve their learning. In the coming year, the effort to build public will involves working with twenty-three districts on Reimagining High School Education.



***Our instructional shift was from teacher-centered delivery of curriculum to personalized, student-centered, active learning. Student-centered doesn't mean that teachers aren't managing and teaching. There are many times that teachers will be in front of the classroom and many times that direct instruction will be the best way to help students. Our teachers are focused more on the different types of instructional strategies they might use to help students learn. What we seek is for our students to value learning and be active in their learning in the classroom.***

– DAVID PRINSTEIN, PRINCIPAL, WINDSOR LOCKS MIDDLE SCHOOL, CONNECTICUT

## **A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN CONNECTICUT**

### **WINDSOR LOCKS SCHOOL DISTRICT**

After clarifying and strengthening their pedagogical philosophy, Windsor Locks School District, outside of Hartford, realized they needed a way to focus more closely on how students were progressing and how to build a structure that would create more opportunity for students to apply their learning. Thus, they began the

transition to mastery-based learning to enable continuous improvement and increase the effectiveness of their instructional supports and robust learning experiences. After a two-year extensive community engagement process that included over 400 stakeholders, Windsor Locks set a deadline to have their fifth graders graduate with a mastery-based diploma in 2020.

The first step was to clarify the pedagogical philosophy. The district began the process of shifting from a teacher-centered delivery of curriculum to personalized, student-centered, active learning. Efforts included engaging teachers in developing a common instructional vocabulary and reflecting on their philosophies of what made the best instructional approaches. For example, the district has embraced a four-step learning cycle of Design, Apply, Document, and Defend. The district also focused attention on improving the capacity of teachers to provide effective formative assessments. With 40 percent of students considered Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), Windsor Locks also empowered teachers to meet students who are missing prerequisite skills to reach grade level content where they are.

Sixteen teachers, whose classrooms now serve as peer learning labs, were trained in the practices of Assessment in Daily Instruction offered by **EL Education** to build up student-directed learning practices. Windsor Locks Middle School has incorporated many of these practices, including student-engaged assessment, checking for understanding strategies, and helping students lead their learning by “owning” their learning targets.

The board-approved College, Career, and Life-Ready program has shaped graduation expectations based on five domains: responsible citizen, informed thinker, self-directed learner and collaborative worker, creative and practical problem-solver, and clear and effective communicator. These domains have also required the district to consider how instruction and assessment are aligned with deeper levels of knowledge. The district began to pay more attention to performance tasks and performance-based assessments to ensure students have opportunities to apply learning.

### WINDSOR LOCKS’ VISION: THE SYSTEM THAT WILL GROW OUR GRADUATES



Our education system/structures will be flexible and adaptable to fit what students and teachers need to fulfill our mission.

All students’ learning will be personalized – and these individual plans will be tailored to meet student academic, social/emotional and career-interest needs.

All teachers will use their well-developed instructional skills to engage students at the highest levels to master and exceed both cross-curricular and content-based standards.

All students will be leaders of their own learning as they Design, Apply, Document and Defend their learning in active and visible ways.

All students will ALWAYS know where they stand in terms of meeting district-wide standards.

Parents and community members will be strong partners in this work in a variety of ways.



As the educators throughout the system began to use a common language and a similar set of instructional strategies, WLPS realized they needed an aligned teacher evaluation system. After determining that the Danielson and Marzano models wouldn't work for them, as they represented a different pedagogical philosophy, they decided they needed to create a rubric complete with their own instructional language. Building upon John Hattie's **Visible Learning**, they created a framework and tool that would consider what students were doing as part of their learning as well as the quality of learning and teaching.

Calibration is taken very seriously at Windsor Locks – and it's calibrating around the teacher and support rubric used in the evaluations, not just on the alignment around proficiency. Teachers have collaborative time once per week using early departures, and also do visible learning walks within their own schools.

**WINDSOR LOCKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
COLLEGE, CAREER AND LIFE-READY**

- Responsible citizen  
Informed thinker  
Self-directed learner and collaborative worker  
Creative and practical problem-solver  
Clear and effective communicator

**Revisiting How Learning is Communicated**

WLPS began the discussion about grading by looking at the problems with the traditional A-F system, including its averages, zeroes, and variability. Realizing how much these traditional grading practices impeded learning, they began to ask what it would mean to exclude these harmful practices and what the alternative might be. They started by transitioning K-5 to mastery-based grading and are entering the fourth year of implementation in the middle school. The Windsor Locks School Board recently adopted new high school mastery-based grading and graduation policies.

Discussions with staff started to identify many of the unproductive implications of the A-F grading scale. One of the biggest concerns was the grade inflation and deflation that occurs in the traditional system. They could see it clearly in AP classes where students might have a 95 but not do equally well on the actual test. Recognizing that traditional grades are made up of information about academics and behaviors, WLPS separated them by creating *habits of scholarship*, including completes homework, participates in class discussion, conducts self in appropriate manner, and maximizes time on task.

Windsor Locks used local media to help engage the broader community in the discussion on the shift to mastery-based learning and grading. They took out a four-part newspaper insert on What is a Grade? (**Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4**). They also prepared for conversations with parents and the community by hiring a director of community engagement. They have learned that community engagement—especially around grading – is an ongoing process that, when possible, is best done individually or in small groups. Parents understand the new grading practices when they realize their students will get the support they need to be successful.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Starting with Pedagogy**.*

## NEW HAVEN ACADEMY

Launched in 2003, **New Haven Academy** (NHA) is a 9-12 magnet school serving 300 students from New Haven and thirty surrounding towns, of which 70 percent are FRL. NHA began as a project-based school using inquiry-based learning, portfolios, and exhibitions before it introduced mastery-based grading in 2013.



*One of the biggest benefits of mastery-based learning is the transparency and intentionality.*

NHA values critical thinking – their goal is to “teach students to analyze information and ideas in depth, to consider multiple perspectives, and to become informed decision-makers.” Their pedagogical philosophy is that students need to be involved with inquiry-based learning, engaged in solving problems, able to reflect on their learning, and able to demonstrate their learning through performance assessments. Social action is a theme throughout the school, with students earning ten hours of community service every year and completing a social action project in twelfth grade.

NHA helps build critical thinking skills through six Habits of Mind:

- Ask questions
- Find evidence
- Make connections
- Recognize perspectives
- Consider alternatives
- Explain relevance

They also have three areas of Responsibility – completing homework, participating in class activities, and meeting assessment deadlines – that capture the habits of work that students need to be successful.

The move to mastery-based grading began in 2009-2010 as NHA started to contemplate how to have more **authentic education**. Traditional grading was getting in the way because it wasn’t consistent with their values, pedagogy, or how they wanted to engage and motivate students.

In 2012, they put together a team of teachers, all of whom had been with the school for over six years, to begin to think through some proposals. They looked at several models before creating a grading policy. NHA’s core beliefs that were used in shaping the grading policy include:

- Students must master critical thinking, academic skills, and essential knowledge in each academic discipline.
- Students need time to practice and learn from mistakes.
- Students should have multiple opportunities to show what they know and can do.
- Strong work habits and community involvement are critical for success in college, career, and citizenship.
- Learning cannot be averaged.

In creating their new grading system, they separated academics from responsibilities, removed Ds and Fs as an option, and introduced practice (formative) assessments and core assessments. Core assessment are designed to prepare students for the kinds of work and thinking required in college and the workplace. Students must successfully earn a number of credits in each discipline by creating a portfolio of Core Assessments that demonstrate their ability to do the essential work of that discipline. Although not part of the grading, practice work and practice assessments are used to inform instruction to help students progress.

New Haven Academy has found that one of the biggest benefits of mastery-based learning is the transparency and intentionality. Teachers began to engage in deeper conversations about what they are teaching, why they are teaching it, and what they want students to know and be able to do. Departments began to understand alignment as a natural and iterative process to improve teaching and learning. The next stage of capacity building is likely to be on unit development so that students will have more flexibility in how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Pedagogy Comes First**.*

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