

# Massachusetts

Home of the Early Innovators

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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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**MASSACHUSETTS**  
Home of the Early Innovators  
*Melrose School District*  
*Boston Day and Evening Academy*

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the only state in New England that has not taken proactive steps toward introducing or advancing competency education statewide despite there being no significant policy obstacles beyond the end-of-year grade level accountability exams. Massachusetts has deployed a state exit examination as its high-leverage strategy to improve student achievement and ensure proficiency. Currently, students must score at a passing level on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System in English, math, and science.

*We were evolving, with a greater range of learning opportunities for students. The question was how could we further institutionalize so that we offered a cohesive and consistent set of educational experiences that also allowed for personalized learning experiences? We think competency-based education is the answer.*

– **CYNDY TAYMORE**, SUPERINTENDENT,  
MELROSE PUBLIC SCHOOL, MASSACHUSETTS

As in other states, however, individual schools and districts often move ahead of the state leadership in building new approaches and working collaboratively around challenging issues. Massachusetts is home to two of the early models of competency-based education: Diploma Plus and Boston Day and Evening Academy. There are also a number of other schools across the state using rich, personalized learning strategies to engage students in their learning. For example, in Chelsea High School, a number of practices such as performance-based assessments and inquiry-based learning have deepened the learning opportunities. Plymouth high schools are creating more personalized approaches, including authentic assessments and involving students in leadership and decision-making.

Nine districts are participating in the newly formed Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment. The governing board is comprised of the superintendents and teacher union presidents from each member district, with staffing provided by the **Center for Collaborative Education**. The goal of the MCIEA is to “re-conceptualize assessment rather than tinker to refine a testing model that has limited value in furthering public education.”

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

### **MELROSE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Now in a period of investigation, Melrose Public Schools has not yet made a decision to go forth toward converting to a competency-based system. Yet, it offers insights into why districts in Massachusetts might want to become competency-based even if the state is not calling for modernization of the education system.

Many districts come to competency-based education because of demographic changes that are bringing more low-income families into their communities and because of their realization that they need a better way to respond to greater diversity. Melrose is experiencing the opposite trend – it has been increasingly becoming more affluent, and parents are becoming more demanding that the schools provide high levels of rigor and additional opportunities for their children. Melrose is considering competency-based education as a strategy that can benefit the traditionally high-achieving student while ensuring traditionally lower achieving students will thrive.

The competency-based structure allows for richer personalization, increased flexibility, and more opportunities for students, while also providing a consistent understanding of proficiency. In addition, Melrose sees competency-based education as a way to better align learning with deeper levels of knowledge.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study [Going Deeper with Competency-Based Education](#).*

## BOSTON DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY

**Boston Day and Evening Academy** (BDEA) is designed to meet students where they are – in terms of academic skills, credits, social and emotional readiness, and vision for their path after graduation. The **school is designed for students with a wide range of education and life experiences**, most of whom have not experienced success at their previous school or schools, as well as those who are enrolling after having disengaged from school altogether. One hundred percent of the students at BDEA are low income, and many are also teen parents and/or have experience with homelessness. Over 50 percent of students self-identify at intake as having mental health concerns, and over 90 percent carry one or more risk factors for trauma.

BDEA is highly personalized. It offers strong relationships with teachers, instruction designed to meet students where they are in terms of skills and knowledge, flexible pacing, choices of schedule that meets their needs, and options to pursue topics that are of high interest in the two-week project-based Symposium each year. A student's BDEA experience starts with a four-day orientation that includes diagnostic assessments, analysis of transcripts, and active efforts to understand what has happened and is happening in students' lives. Relationship building starts at orientation.



***If the school community or teacher is both consistent and transparent with their expectations, it will not take long for students to see the connection between practice and competence. Students become more confident as learners and see the value of persistence and hard work. Ultimately, they become engaged in the process as they understand that they are in charge of their learning.***

– ALISON HRAMIEC, HEAD OF SCHOOL,  
BOSTON DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY,  
MASSACHUSETTS

All students take Seminar in their first semester at BDEA. It is an eleven-week trimester to get students focused on where they are going and what they want to accomplish in school. Students are introduced to the competency model and the core elements of the school, including experiential learning, Habits of Mind, Symposium, Habits of Success, and the Capstone Project. They develop an individual learning plan with their advisor based on the assessments that begin in Orientation and carry through Seminar, and reflect on learning and how they think about themselves as learners. A key component of Seminar is allowing students to regain their academic confidence by providing them an opportunity to demonstrate benchmarks early. Students build the personal skills needed to succeed in school and discover their interests. Teachers have the opportunity to understand how to best engage and motivate the students.

The rest of the BDEA schedule is based on additional eleven-week modules that allow for proper placement based on skills, enabling students to work at their own pace and move forward through their Roadmap to graduation, when they demonstrate mastery of competencies attached to a particular module of learning. BDEA uses benchmarks to organize learning and monitor progress, each with their own rubric. Students earn benchmarks to mark their progress rather than traditional grades. BDEA knows that pace matters. They have weekly check-ins about student progress. They pull together a team from academic review committees, advisors, student support groups, and reading and math specialists as needed or if there are signals that a student needs help regarding attendance or progress. If there are problems, they begin to redirect resources and engage the family and the student.

Other districts are paying attention to Boston Day and Evening Academy. Every summer, educators from around the country participate in a **training institute** to learn how to establish the model in their districts.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Reading the Pulse of Students**.*

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