

What Can We Learn about State Level Strategies from the New England States?

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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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.

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I. What Can We Learn about State Level Strategies from the New England States?

At this point in the evolution of competency education, there are few solid lessons to be learned from the New England region. Still, it is helpful to compare and contrast the different approaches of the states, looking for rich insights into the considerations of different strategies and approaches, as this provides deeper understanding and can shine a light on what is the best path for a state. Some states, such as Connecticut, may want to create permissive policies, while others, like Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, will contemplate bolder, more comprehensive steps toward transformation.

A. A FEW BASIC AND IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED

Once we turned to a student-centered, competency-based approach there was a palpable difference among faculty and the community in enthusiasm and hope. And their expectations for the kids have increased. A lot of the difference is in student voice – they just had to let it out. Students just needed a system and process that allowed them to express their voice. Their voice and the increased engagement has motivated the teachers. – TOBI

CHASSIE AND SUSAN BRADLEY, CO-PROJECT MANAGERS OF THE SYSTEMS CHANGE, PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Educators turn to competency education because it makes sense regardless of the state policy.

Given the strong state leadership in establishing comprehensive competency-based policy in four of the New England states, it would be easy to think that state policy is always the first step in making the transition to competency education. However, there are innovators and schools considering competency education in Massachusetts with little encouragement from state leaders. In Maine, one of the original sources of early innovation were the districts that formed the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning.

RECOMMENDED READING ON STATE POLICY



- **Competency-Based Learning: Definitions, Policies, and Implementation**, Regional Education Lab Northeast & Islands
- **Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning**, iNACOL
- **Communication Tool Kit**, Foundation for Excellent Education
- **Competency-Based Pathways Resources**, Achieve
- **Expanding Student Success: A Primer on Competency-Based Education from Kindergarten through Higher Education**, National Governors Association



Policy is important, but not sufficient.

Establishing high-leverage policy such as proficiency-based diplomas will direct districts toward competency education. However, it doesn't mean they will move quickly to implementation or that they will implement it effectively. Creating innovation space doesn't necessarily produce a groundswell of innovators. Statewide change requires a combination of innovation space, support, networks, and political coverage. Maine provided upfront training to a "coalition of the willing" before passing the policy that created the proficiency-based diploma. Vermont and New Hampshire have extensive support strategies, although they are very different in design. Most importantly, community engagement strategies need to be deployed to provide opportunities for shaping the vision of the district and schools as well as to learn about competency-based practices.



The culture of the district and schools is very, very important. If we don't get that right, the rest won't work effectively. It's important that schools begin to create new cultures now. If the legislature ever decides to make mastery-based learning mandatory, it will make it more difficult to get the culture right. Schools will be making the decision to become mastery-based out of compliance rather than doing what is best for kids.

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

Walk the talk by using similar guiding principles as those found in personalized, competency-based districts. The traditional change strategies used by states are unlikely to be effective in transforming the education system from the traditional model to one that is personalized and competency-based. The paradigm shift is too important to the process of transformation – educators and community members need the opportunity to learn, to reflect, and to decide that this is what they want to do.

Furthermore, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to implement competency education through compliance strategies. Compliance assumes that the state knows exactly what should be done, while the reality is that there are many ways to design personalized, competency-based models. Given that the large systemic changes have many implications to be considered, co-design or collaborative processes that draw on multiple perspectives will be needed.

Most importantly, state policymakers and administrators need to hold tightly to a growth mindset. In order to build systems that will create a sustainable competency-based system, we have to believe that educators, education leaders, district leaders, school board members, and state leaders themselves can all learn and build the skills necessary for making the transition.

B. EARLY DECISIONS

We took direction from the community about the kind of graduates they wanted and the type of school they wanted. As we began the high school redesign process, we have never backed off from engaging our community. Our community is in the driver's seat. – JOHN FREEMAN, SUPERINTENDENT, PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Early on in the process, states need to make a few important decisions that will lay the foundation for the rest of their efforts. These decisions make a difference.

HOW WILL THE VISION AND DIRECTION BE DESCRIBED/DEFINED?

States vary in how they describe their vision. Vermont focused on a triad of personalization, proficiency-based learning, and flexible pathways. New Hampshire has stayed focused primarily on a competency-based system with a strong emphasis on creating a balanced assessment system. Maine's vision was outlined in the strategic education plan and has been communicated as a proficiency-based diploma supported by a standards-based system.

WHAT IS THE THEORY OF CHANGE?

What is the underlying theory of change of the state policy? As has been discussed in the earlier section on policy features, states will need to think beyond the specific authorizing policies to consider how to engage districts, schools, and educators in understanding the underlying values, building expertise in personalization and competency education, and initiating implementation. Clarifying the theory of change, building the relationships, investing the resources, and coordinating the supports are equally important, if not more so, than the policy that launches competency education in a state.



In Vermont, we want our students to have more personalized experiences and we want to make sure our students can meet proficiency-based graduation requirements so we're confident that they're ready for college and careers. Proficiency-based learning is the way to make sure that personalized learning plans and experiential learning lead to higher achievement.

– MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM & TECHNOLOGY, MONTPELIER PUBLIC SCHOOLS, VERMONT

WHAT IS THE IMPLICATION OF THE STRATEGY FOR ENGAGING COMMUNITIES?

Community engagement – not simply marketing an idea and buy-in, but authentic and respectful community engagement – is an essential ingredient for effective implementation. It both establishes dialogue and demonstrates respect, which are important first steps in transitioning from the traditional values to the new values and assumptions that create the necessary culture for competency education. When done well, it can catalyze trust-building and create opportunities to experience the new values. It also lays the groundwork to help parents and the community understand why the transition to competency education is important so they are not taken by surprise when policies that are visible to them, such as grading policies, eventually change.



Sometimes, superintendents think that if they engage the community one year, they are done with community engagement. But there is a new group of parents every year. We have to be committed to engaging the community and parents for the next twenty years.

– JANET GARAGLIANO, CONNECTICUT
ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL
SUPERINTENDENTS

The variations in policy in New England suggest that there are differences in the implications of policies for catalyzing statewide conversation. Connecticut’s policy that enabled mastery-based credits was tucked into a much larger bill, thus generating limited attention. The strategy used in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont assumes that the school board will set local graduation policies. Thus, it offers an authentic opportunity to engage communities in the conversation of what they want for their children upon graduation. Those that are most committed to introducing personalized, competency-based systems will likely engage communities early on. The challenge is to find ways to ensure that 1) even those districts that are more comfortable complying with the minimum expectations will consider robust engagement strategies, and 2) a new set of values and shared vision can be developed.



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WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BEGINNING STEPS TOWARD COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

States make early decisions that will shape the rest of their work. Some may start with an entry point of personalized learning or blended learning only to discover later on that competency-based structures are needed, while others start with competency education itself. The important step is to pivot the policy to serve all students to meet or excel beyond high standards.

The proficiency-based diploma is proving to be a high-leverage policy that gets the attention of districts. However, there will be details that need to be worked out at the state level (discussed below). Furthermore,

shifting political winds may leave policies vulnerable. Thus, states often build strong partnerships with independent organizations that can expedite the transition process and help sustain political support.

IS IT BETTER TO FOCUS ON ONE ISSUE OR AGE GROUP, OR INITIATE CHANGE THROUGHOUT K-12?

New Hampshire's entry point was improving high school graduation rates by converting secondary school credits to be competency-based rather than time-based. As they realized that there was a continuous flow of students coming unprepared to high school, they eventually took the step toward transitioning the entire K-12 system to competency education. The proficiency-based diploma policy in Maine balanced the emphasis on high schools with the call for a standards-based K-12 system. In comparison, Rhode Island continues to be more focused on secondary school, as there is with little policy or message that entire districts need to be transformed. Vermont's policy is primarily a secondary school strategy, but is expansive to include high school completion, career technical education, and adult diploma programs within flexible pathways.



Competency education has helped the entire school and students get on the same wavelength. With transparency in competencies, conversations focus in on learning. Transparency allows for an entirely different type of relationship between students and their teachers to form.

– BRIAN STACK, PRINCIPAL, SANBORN REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Districts tend to determine where they will start the transformation based on where there is a combination of leadership, interest, and either the greatest need or opportunity. Thus, some districts have started with elementary and moved up, while others have started with high school and rolled implementation down to lower grades.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE STATE EDUCATION AGENCY, AND WHAT CAPACITY IS NEEDED?

States will want to think carefully about where they position the leadership for the transformational process and how broadly they engage the state education agency (SEA). Will one office have responsibility, or will the chief school officer drive the process through a collaborative process that reaches into the nooks and crannies of the SEA? In New Hampshire, the Department of Education



Personalized, mastery-based learning is catching on. However, many districts and schools jump in without taking the time to learn from others and think about the implications of changing the underlying assumptions of the current system. If they move too quickly, they risk setting themselves up for failure... Educators need to take the time to learn before they take action.

– JANET GARAGLIANO, CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

is seeking to turn its primary role into providing support for continuous improvement rather than compliance. The state is adamant that it wants to move beyond the blame-and-shame game to one of continuous improvement. For staff, this may mean having to build adaptive leadership skills, learn how to engage others in dialogue, create processes that enable co-design, and serve as a broker of expertise to expedite the process of districts finding peers that can help them.

WHO ARE THE KEY PARTNERS?

Even though states can change partners or bring in more at any point, the decisions about the initial partners will shape the flavor, tone, and emphasis of competency education within a state. Do the partners have greater expertise in student agency and self-directed learning, instruction, or systems of assessments?

In addition to the catalytic New England Secondary Schools Consortium, all of the states except for Massachusetts have participated in national networks on personalized learning and competency education sponsored by the Council of Chief State School, Achieve, or the National Governors Association. Vermont has worked with the Great Schools Partnership in offering the initial training. New Hampshire has partnered closely with the Center for Assessment in designing and implementing PACE; with 2 Revolutions in creating the professional development platform; and with the Center for Innovation in Education in strengthening approaches to work-study practices. Maine partnered with the Reinventing Schools Coalition (now part of Marzano Research Labs) in the initial stages and engaged Great Schools Partnership to create web-based resources such as policy exemplars for districts. Other partners in New England include Bea McGarvey's leadership in personalized instruction, and the Center for Collaborative Education on performance-based assessment.

Mapping out the organizations that are already operating within a state and comparing them to capacity-building needs can be helpful in determining if there are gaps and if there are existing partners positioned to operate at a statewide level. It's possible that the strong state intermediaries don't have the capacity in competency education. Engage them early in the process so they, too, are learning, and perhaps they can partner with other organizations outside of the state. Identifying the districts that are hungry to move forward with competency education, what we term the coalition of the willing, will also be helpful in thinking about partners.

C. BUILDING A STATEWIDE COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEM

We used to have teachers say that they wanted to give students who had worked hard the benefit of the doubt. Why is there any doubt? We need to have a system in which we can be confident of what students know. – DAVID PRINSTEIN, PRINCIPAL, WINDSOR LOCKS MIDDLE SCHOOL, CONNECTICUT

Once the competency-based policy is set, the hard work of implementation begins. States vary in their degree of system-building, reflecting both their approach and how much time they have spent on the implementation process.



We need systems of accountability that don't just tell us about the problems of inequity or low achievement – we need systems of accountability that help us improve

There are several areas that will need to be considered in building the systems that will drive toward equity, quality, and sustainability. The first is the question of what is needed to ensure consistency and reliability. Our students, families, taxpayers, and policymakers need to be confident that when a school says a student is proficient, they are in fact proficient. This requires a combination of calibration and a system of assessments that ensure students can apply skills to new contexts and problems. The second is that we need systems of accountability that don't just tell us about the problems of inequity or low achievement – we need systems of accountability that help us improve. This leads us to the third major element: We need systems of support to help ensure students are making progress, to help educators build their skills and knowledge in response to the needs of students, to help schools make the transition to competency education and continue to improve, and to help districts build the new capacities that will keep 100 percent of their students engaged in learning as well as manage dynamic continuous improvement. Most importantly, we need an education system that balances student needs with the skills that are required for success in college and the workplace. Backward mapping the graduation competencies is helpful only when balanced with research on learning and development of children.

Below are a few highlights of the statewide system-building efforts that are taking place in New England.

1. PROFICIENCY-BASED DIPLOMAS

The trust in the conventional education system has been undermined by the tradition of awarding diplomas to students who do not possess the skills needed for college and careers. It has been possible in many districts to receive a diploma even though students are still reading at the elementary school level. In order to eliminate this practice of passing students on without the necessary skills, states are introducing policies that set the expectation that students will demonstrate proficiency at an agreed upon performance level in order to receive a diploma (i.e., a proficiency-based diploma).



The new diploma system requires students to apply their learning to their own interests or passions, which motivates students to pursue their own learning.

– THE RHODE ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA SYSTEM, 2005

The proficiency-based graduation policies developed in Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont appear to be high-leverage in terms of engaging districts; however, the diploma policy cannot stand alone. It is one thing to say that a diploma must be proficiency-based and an entirely different thing to create a system that will ensure students are making progress toward a diploma throughout each year of school. Even with proficiency-based diploma policies, states will find that they need to take additional steps to fully engage and support districts in ensuring that students can actually reach graduation-level proficiency.

First, there must be a strategy to engage all the districts beyond the coalition of the willing. For example, until Maine engaged districts through a self-assessment of their progress in implementation and offered flexibility in setting their own deadlines within state guidelines, there were many that had not yet demonstrated a commitment to change. Second, states may want to expedite the process by helping districts understand the elements of personalized, competency-based systems and/or the implementation process. Maine provided training opportunities early on and Vermont has complemented their policy with training for supervisory unions. Rhode Island used a more prescriptive approach in requiring secondary schools to implement a set of practices.

New Hampshire provides a valuable case study. The state essentially created a proficiency-based diploma through the introduction of competency-based credits and the expectation that districts would establish a set of graduation competencies. However, districts could initially minimize the impact of the policy by only focusing on credits instead of taking advantage of the policy to redesign the system. Only through the combination of competency-based credits, graduation competencies, revision of the education code to



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There are several aspects of equity that we need to pay attention to. First, if you aren't willing to put unequal resources for kids based on need, you won't reach equity. Second, you need to pay attention to what we know about child development...We have to meet students where they are. Children learn at different rates; therefore, the whole class will not be at the same place in a unit. Third, equity argues for a district-wide strategy for mastery-based learning so that every student in every school is benefiting. Districts have an important role in ensuring that high expectations are held at every school."

– LARRY SCHAEFER, CONNECTICUT
ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL
SUPERINTENDENTS

align with competency education, a strategy to offer personalized professional development to teachers, the powerful PACE initiative to calibrate and build the capacity for performance-based assessments, and the piloting of a new accountability policy more aligned with student learning was New Hampshire able to build a statewide momentum for the conversion to competency education.

As the states adjust their graduation policies, a number of issues are being raised that will require attention.

Is a proficiency-based diploma enough, or are other policies needed that can set the direction, clarify expectations, and generate greater flexibility for supporting personalized, competency-based systems?

In the hope of using the competency-based infrastructure to unleash more flexibility and greater personalization, states have also introduced additional policies to complement the proficiency-based diplomas. Vermont's proficiency-based diploma is complemented by legislation to support personalized learning plans and **flexible pathways**. New Hampshire introduced a policy for **extended learning opportunities** to support students learning in the community or online.

What areas will students be expected to demonstrate proficiency in to receive a diploma?

One of the variations across states is the number and types of domains (such as mathematics, science, health, career technical, or arts) that are included in the diploma policy. Vermont and Rhode Island require students to demonstrate proficiency in six domains. Maine requires proficiency in eight domains but recently adjusted their policy to allow for a staggered implementation, as districts needed more time to fully implement a system that would ensure students were proficient in all domains.¹ All states have included state-level cross-curricular skills such as communication and creativity and offered resources to districts to help them develop a structure and build capacity.

CROSS-CURRICULAR SKILLS



- **New Hampshire Work Study Practices** – communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction
- **Maine Guiding Principles** – clear and effective communicator, self-directed and lifelong learner, creative and practical problem-solver, responsible and involved citizen, integrative and informed thinker
- **Vermont Transferrable Skills** - communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem solving, and the use of technology



Are credits still required if the diploma is proficiency-based?

One might expect that with the introduction of proficiency-based diplomas, the need for credits as a graduation requirement might disappear. However, courses and credits are one of the primary units around which the education system is organized. New Hampshire continues to use credits, with twenty credits required for graduation, but the credits are now competency-based. Students are expected to demonstrate that they have mastered the skills in each course even if it requires more time and instructional support. Maine does not require credits but requires students to have an "experience" in English and math each year. Vermont's **Educational Quality Standards** allow districts the option of whether they will still use credits or not. Rhode Island changed the definition of the course to unlock it from seat-time and requires a minimum of twenty courses.

Are all diplomas the same, specialized, or personalized?

Rhode Island appears to be going in the direction of adding seals and certificates to recognize additional skills or achievement beyond the expectations of the high school diploma. Maine introduced an interim policy where students have to demonstrate proficiency in four core academic domains while being given some choice in selecting other domains in which to demonstrate proficiency and receive a diploma. It is possible that over time, transcripts, seals, or other techniques can communicate specialized skills, with the diploma representing a minimum core set of expectations.

How do we respond to students who are not proficient at the end of four years of high school?

This issue relates to students with IEPs as well as what are often referred to as “gap students” – students who are not yet proficient. This has raised discussion on possible responses, including:

- More time (providing additional years of high school or opportunities to build in more time during high school, including summers);
- More instructional responsiveness (meeting students where they are to ensure they build foundational skills rather than solely focusing on covering the grade-level standards);
- Greater flexibility in using time (block scheduling and daily flex time for personalized support); and
- Starting earlier (creating proficiency-based K-12 systems to ensure elementary and middle school students are not passed along without foundational skills or lacking an intentional plan of action).



Many districts that convert high schools to competency education quickly find that they need to convert the entire K-12 system so that students are no longer passed on while missing important skills.

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How do we really trust that a student has the skills for college and careers when graduating with a proficiency-based diploma?

One of the most important, possibly the most important, issue in creating a proficiency-based diploma is having in place the mechanisms to ensure consistency in reporting proficiency toward graduation. States and districts can embed accountability into the system itself by ensuring consistency in determining proficiency for each of the different performance levels in each of the academic domains and cross-curricular skills. In the traditional system, grades are relatively subjective from school to school and teacher to teacher. Building capacity and calibrating teacher judgements of proficiency across schools and districts is critical for ensuring students are qualified for earning a diploma.

2. CALIBRATION

How can parents be confident that their children are making progress and becoming proficient in all the skills they will need to graduate ready for college and careers?

What needs to be in place within the system itself so that students, parents, college admissions, and employers can have full confidence in the diploma?



Through calibration, we build a deeper understanding of what we want students to be able to do before they advance and build the capacity of teachers around assessment and instruction. It's a powerful process.

– AMY ALLEN, PRINCIPAL, PARKER-VARNEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

These are the types of questions that must be addressed in redesigning the education system. As discussed previously, one of the most important elements needed to create a competency-based system is to create mechanisms that can calibrate (also referred to as moderation or tuning) what it means to be proficient for specific standards and competencies and at specific performance levels. If teachers, schools, districts, and states do not have a shared understanding of what it means to be proficient, then variability and inconsistency will continue to corrode the reliability of schools and undermine efforts to eliminate the achievement gap.

The strong local control in New England can be a deterrent in creating a calibrated system. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have offered exemplars of graduation standards with the expectation that districts will determine their own set and structure of requirements. To date, New Hampshire is the only state to begin to build new elements of the statewide system through its PACE initiative to calibrate proficiency. In PACE, districts and schools are working together to build capacity to develop and use high quality performance-based assessments as well as calibrate assessments of student work.



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New Hampshire has found that working collaboratively across districts statewide is paramount in the process of building capacity and consistency. In the report to the U.S. Department of Education on PACE, it states, “the leaders described noticeable improvements in teaching and learning and how the cross-district collaboration led to higher quality tasks than would be the case if districts were working on their own.” The initiative has been designed with collaboration among district leadership, content area leaders, and teachers. In terms of calibration, in its first year, 89 percent of scores were in the same category, with an additional 10 percent in adjacent categories, suggesting it is possible to train teachers to consistently or reliably assess performance-based assessments.²

Without some type of calibration mechanism across schools and districts, it is likely that variation in determining proficiency will continue. Rhode Island is a case in point. Its proficiency-based diploma has been in place for thirteen years, with several pieces of supplemental policy requiring practices that are helpful in creating a proficiency-based system. Yet, Rhode Island's assessment results illuminate that there is a long way to go before all students graduate while meeting college readiness benchmarks. This problem is not unique to Rhode Island – it is an issue that is going to challenge all of the states unless they begin to take the concept of “advance upon demonstrated mastery” seriously through calibration and eliminating the practice of passing students on without foundational skills or an intentional plan to build them.



We have to make sure there is a shared understanding of what mastery means and that students reach mastery before they progress. Making sure students have the prerequisite skills is the best way to achieve equity in a system. This means we have to create a different type of remediation. It doesn't happen later on; we need to reach students quickly and provide help on the specific learning targets they are having difficulty with.

– JANET GARAGLIANO, CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

3. NEW MODELS OF STATE-DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY

As has been pointed out, competency education seeks to embed accountability into the district and school levels through transparency, calibration, just-in-time support, and continuous improvement. The goal is to create a system that carefully monitors progress, ensures reliability in determining proficiency, and responds quickly to student needs and areas of school improvement.

Again, New Hampshire has gone the furthest in rethinking accountability through its **PACE Initiative**. PACE uses Smarter Balanced assessments to measure student performance for three grade levels and district-developed performance assessments for other grades.

Vermont offers an alternative approach by introducing benchmarking and continuous improvement through peer-to-peer quality reviews, supporting districts in the implementation process with a year of training and planning, and adjusting the education system to move responsibility of curriculum from school- to district-level to create more consistency.



The vision of the district and the philosophy of the school shape how people relate to each other, determine what is important and where attention is directed, and set the values.

– CAROLINE MESSENGER, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, NAUGATUCK PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CONNECTICUT

In general, the New England states with comprehensive approaches to competency education have moved away from blaming and shaming schools and educators toward strategies of engagement and support. However, there are always a few political leaders who continue to see value in this type of political rhetoric.

4. ALIGNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH THE DEMANDS OF PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

As competency education gains steam in the world of higher education, there is much discussion about creating more personalized, competency-based teacher preparation programs. Learning in a competency-based program will help teachers see the new approaches in action; however, personalized, competency-based programs that continue to train teachers in the traditional model are simply inadequate. Programs will need to prepare teachers for creating the cultures and routines for managing a personalized classroom, deeper knowledge of the learning progressions in academic domains, and coaching students in building the habits of work and cross-curricular skills.³



We aren't asking teachers what they are going to cover but what skills students will have when they leave their class. It is the difference between covering standards or uncovering learning. We are looking at the learning now and want to know what students can do with their new learning, not just the content covered. This is a high standard for a teacher and for a school to reach.

– MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM & TECHNOLOGY, MONTPELIER PUBLIC SCHOOLS, VERMONT

States are not waiting for higher education to redesign their teacher preparation. New Hampshire has taken a step in building a platform to support more personalized approaches to professional development. The strategy is to design a system that supports the development and capacity-building of educators over the long-term. They aim to build domain-specific instructional knowledge, new practices to support self-directed learning, instructional strategies of applied learning, assessment literacy, and the coaching strategies needed to help students build their work study skills. To date, the other states have all provided shorter-term training on a variety of topics, with districts holding primary responsibility for professional development. Many districts are modifying their teacher evaluations to reflect the new values and strategies. With a strong commitment to a growth mindset, districts are creating evaluations that inform more personalized professional development.

5. BUILDING BRIDGES WITH HIGHER EDUCATION

There are many areas of potential alignment with higher education. However, in the short run, the most important issue is to ensure that students who are educated within competency-based schools are not penalized within the college admissions process.



...sixty-seven colleges and universities, including elite colleges, have signed pledges to endorse proficiency-based learning and ensure that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged.

The New England Secondary Schools Consortium has helped to advance competency education by addressing the concerns of graduating seniors and their parents regarding proficiency-based transcripts within the college admissions process. In 2016, NESCC met with the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) and hosted a convening of admissions professionals from selective colleges and universities to look further at implications of proficiency-based learning. According to the report **How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate Proficiency-Based High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools** in the *New England Journal of Higher Education*, the findings were: "Overwhelmingly, these admissions leaders indicate that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in the highly selective admissions process. Moreover, according to some admissions leaders, features of the proficiency-based transcript model shared with the group provide important information for institutions seeking not just high-performing academics, but engaged, lifelong learners." The result is that sixty-seven colleges and universities, including elite colleges, have signed pledges to endorse proficiency-based learning and ensure that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged.

The introduction of competency education in institutions of higher education is also allowing new possibilities for creating a competency-based pipeline for students. The most promising example to date is in Presque Isle Maine, where the University of Maine's campus is transitioning to a proficiency-based model that is very similar to the approach of the surrounding districts. In addition, Southern New Hampshire University's College for

New England Secondary School Consortium

COLLEGIATE ENDORESEMENT OF PROFICIENCY-BASED EDUCATION & GRADUATION



In a collective effort to join other institutions of higher education and the New England Secondary School Consortium in the support of stronger academic preparation for postsecondary study, leading to increased collegiate enrollments and higher completion rates in our degree programs, we, the undersigned:

- Endorse proficiency-based approaches to instruction, assessment, graduation, and reporting that establish universally high learning expectations and standards for all students in K-12 schools.
- Accept a wide range of student transcripts if they meet our stated admissions requirements and provide a full and accurate presentation of what an applicant has learned and accomplished.
- Pledge that applicants to our institutions with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in any way.

This endorsement recognizes that strong educational preparation benefits our students, our faculty, and our institution, and towards these ends we strongly support proficiency-based teaching practices, assessments, report cards, graduation decisions, and other strategies that can increase student preparation for higher education, modern careers, and lives of active, informed citizenship.



America is exploring partnerships with districts and schools across the region. For example, students at **Our Piece of the Pie® Academy** in Hartford, Connecticut will be able to take advantage of competency-based dual enrollment courses at College for America, thereby opening the door to accelerated pathways from high school to a post-secondary certificate or degree.

It is helpful to remember that the development and implementation of competency education is evolving. Thus, what might look problematic today could soon be revealed to be catalytic. Vice versa, what looks like a brilliant policy may eventually result in painful unintended consequences. When this happens, it will be important to have the space to quickly learn from mistakes and failure. To prepare for this, states will likely need to further clarify regulations, modify implementation timelines, and add or tweak policy over time.

II. On Scaling, Equity, Quality, and Sustainability

The early lesson from New England is that the scaling strategies for competency education require a combination of schools and districts that have the courageous leadership to convert to competency education and state leadership willing to commit to goal-oriented policies supported by long-term capacity-building strategies. Again, over time and as more states move forward, we are likely to learn about where there might be additional issues that need to be addressed. In particular, districts and states need to consider equity, quality, and sustainability.

EQUITY

Even though equity resides at the very heart of competency education, it still requires unrelenting commitment to challenge institutional patterns, understand how individual bias creates lower expectations, and develop strong management practices that can lead to much greater responsiveness. The focus on equity should be found in the accountability designs within school, district, and state systems and processes as well as the schoolwide instructional philosophies and strategies.



Too often in schools with high poverty rates, we lower the bar. You can't lower the bar or kids don't understand where they need to get. They will reach the bar that we set. Calibration is helping us to hold the bar up. Instead of lowering it, we need to have constant communication with students about helping them learn.

— AMY ALLEN, PRINCIPAL, PARKERVARNEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Although states are trying to increase responsiveness by embedding expectations that schools and educators respond to student needs, conversations with educators across New England suggest that courageous leadership is still needed. Under the pressure of the end-of-year accountability exams and reinforced by traditional practices, too many schools and educators, even in the most developed competency-based districts, are still providing grade-level curriculum to students regardless of whether they have already learned the content or are lacking the prerequisite skills. In addition to leadership, we will need to engage a broad range of experts, both practitioners and researchers, to identify the best ways to help students fill knowledge and skill gaps without falling back into the trap of tracking.

QUALITY

The field is currently challenged by not having enough research and evaluation to determine the quality indicators that will lead to a high-quality model or effective implementation. This task is further complicated by what might be called waves of innovation that take place once districts become competency-based: As educators and schools become more intentional about what they want students to know and be able to do, there are improvement efforts to build assessment literacy; build the capacity for performance assessments to support the development of higher order skills; develop stronger instructional strategies based on **learning progressions**; introduce practices that support student agency, voice, and choice; integrate more personalized learning practices; and introduce digital tools and online learning. Thus, schools and districts are taking different paths with different sequencing as they build the full range of capacities needed to operate a high-quality competency-based system.



For us, developing a flexible time each day to provide intervention and enrichment to our students has been a key to allowing us to provide all of our students with the differentiation and personalization that they need to be successful in our competency-based system.

– BRIAN STACK, PRINCIPAL, SANBORN REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Without understanding the major levers that will produce high-quality, equity-boosting achievement, districts must rely on benchmarking – learning about the most effective processes that their colleagues are using across the region. Thus, at this point, states must depend primarily on their strategies to deliver supports to engage districts, principals, and educators in conversations about quality. Vermont’s strategy for peer-led quality review of schools may be the most promising until greater research is in place.

Another consideration is whether districts are converting to competency education because they see it as meaningful for students or if it is done solely under the weight of compliance. In some districts, there has been extraordinary commitment of the community and school board to develop high-quality competency-based schools. However, we do not know what the impact will be of districts converting because of state policy rather than because they see real value of it.

SUSTAINABILITY

The momentum in New England for creating a personalized, competency-based system continues to grow in the New England states. Most of the strategies used in New England have required a strong consensus that the traditional system is obsolete; to date, that commitment has remained fundamental even through major leadership changes.

There are some signs of pockets of opposition. Ironically, those who have raised their voices against competency education as a door to privatization are responding to private education software vendors, who label their products as competency-based. To date, those who oppose competency education appear not to understand that competency education, rooted as it is in the growth mindset, deeply values teachers and the critical judgments that teachers make to help students learn as well as creates conditions for teachers to strengthen their knowledge and skills.

One of the crystal clear lessons learned from districts that have transformed their systems is that community engagement is not something you do once or twice. It becomes an ongoing process in which the districts open up dialogues, listen to feedback to inform their efforts, and, when possible, co-create strategies that meet the needs of communities, parents, students, and teachers. Community engagement is equally important as a mechanism to create the respect and trust needed for empowering school cultures and continuous improvement as a sustainability strategy.

III. Conclusion

The New England story tells us that competency-based systems are first and foremost being created by individuals who feel the urgency to do better – for students, for teachers, and for their communities. Leaders are marshalling a transformation. They are engaging others in building powerful shared visions, creating trust and respect so people can safely operate outside their comfort zones, and committing to engage and empower others around them. They are individuals who deeply understand that we are all on a journey of learning.

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Over the course of our journey to a proficiency-based learning system, we, as is the case with most districts, have experienced a change in district leadership. While a change in superintendent often causes a concern when second order change is in process, we have not only survived the change, we've thrived... The common thread is a school board with a clear vision to which they are committed, and a hiring process with purpose. They sought the right person to lead the district to the next level of change.

– STEVE LAVOIE, PRINCIPAL, RICHMOND MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

It also tells us that school- and district-led transformation is insufficient to create system change, that goal-oriented policy and implementation that builds capacity and learning across networks of practice is needed. Even though districts can develop competency education without waiting for state policy, states are playing powerful roles in advancing competency education – and not in the traditional sense of simply passing new laws or mandating reforms. In fact, those states acting in ways that are consistent with the values and elements of competency education appear to be making the most progress.

A growth mindset that believes educators can learn with adequate supports; transparency of expectations and assessments; co-design that builds upon the respect and trust for different expertise and perspectives; autonomy and empowerment that enables creativity and innovation – these are the strategies that states with the highest concentration of districts embracing competency education are using. These strategies create the conditions for change and engage the innovators in shaping policy and statewide structures that any state or region can employ in their own journey toward a system to ensure that each and every student graduates prepared for their next steps.

Endnotes

1. The article **Update on Maine's Proficiency-Based Diploma Policy**, *CompetencyWorks*, May 11, 2016 highlights the changes in implementation of Maine's proficiency-based diploma.
2. "New Hampshire Performance Assessment of Competency Education: Progress Report to the United States Department of Education," October 30, 2015.
3. See **Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching**, Council of Chief State School Officers and Jobs for the Future, 2015.

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