

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reaching the Tipping Point

Insights on Advancing Competency Education in New England

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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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Executive Summary

Competency education is expanding across the country under a variety of different terms, including competency-based, mastery-based, proficiency-based, and performance-based. Educators turn to competency education when they realize the traditional system isn't working for many students – and is never going to work for all students.

In the upper northeast corner of the United States, the commitment to competency education has grown so strong that entire states are embracing it through high-leverage comprehensive policies. Of the six New England states – Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont – four have established comprehensive state policies that seek 100 percent of districts to offer competency-based diplomas; one has created a permissive policy so that any district that wants to can become competency-based without expectation that they do so; and only one, Massachusetts, continues to stay the course despite the obstacles created by the traditional time-based system.

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.



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

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.

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

The transition to competency education requires replacing the old values and assumptions about what and how students learn with new ones that emphasize growth mindset, developing intrinsic motivation, and developing higher order skills. Given that it is difficult, if not impossible, to mandate changes in beliefs, states are challenged to find ways to engage districts in an inquiry process 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. Each of the New England states has

SNAPSHOT OF NEW ENGLAND STATES



- **CONNECTICUT:** 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. With the introduction of a permissive policy enabling mastery-based credits, districts are beginning to make the transition to competency-based education.



- **MAINE:** Maine's journey to a proficiency-based diploma can best be described as a bottom-up and top-down process. Maine began the journey to personalized, proficiency-based systems as early as 2007 with training for districts on how to implement proficiency-based learning. Strong networks such as the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning have been catalytic in building knowledge and influencing state policy. In 2012, the Maine legislature passed *LD1422, An Act To Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy*, which called for a proficiency-based diploma and standards-based system in 2012.



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tried to navigate this challenge 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.

These states selected high-leverage policies of proficiency-based diplomas (Maine and Vermont) or competency-based credits (New Hampshire). The 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 students are awarded credits or a diploma, they actually have the skills needed for the next step in their educational journey.

The states using comprehensive, high-leverage policies are doing so using the very same principles that undergird competency education in schools:

- A growth mindset that believes educators can learn with adequate supports;
- Transparency of expectations and assessments;
- Emphasizing support over compliance;
- Engaging the coalitions of the willing as partners;
- Informing policy with local innovation; and
- Autonomy and empowerment that enable creativity and innovation.

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.

- **MASSACHUSETTS:** Massachusetts is the only state in New England that has not taken proactive steps toward introducing or advancing competency education despite there being no significant policy barriers. However, individual schools in the state are building capacity to be competency-based – most notably Boston Day and Evening Academy, one of the earliest innovators.



- **NEW HAMPSHIRE:** Even as one of the top performers in education in the country, New Hampshire knew they could do better to stay economically competitive. In 2005, they replaced the Carnegie unit credit based on seat-time with a competency-based credit. In 2013, they took another step forward, revising the *Minimum Standards for School Approval* so that the structures of schools within the K-12 system would be designed for students to reach proficiency rather than allowing them to be passed on without addressing their gaps and weaknesses. They are clearing the path for other states by creating statewide systems to calibrate performance-based assessments and introducing new designs for accountability.



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WHAT CAN OTHER STATES LEARN FROM THE NEW ENGLAND EXPERIENCE IN ADVANCING COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

There are two primary insights from New England that all states should consider in developing their plans.

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, many educators do not wait for state leadership – they innovate because it makes sense for their students. Education leaders in schools and districts are a powerful source of change and can become catalytic partners when they form networks and collaboratives.

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. States will want to create intentional theories of action that draw upon the same values that are the foundation for competency education to create a combination of innovation space, support, networks, and political coverage. 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.

- **RHODE ISLAND:** Rhode Island was the first state to establish a proficiency-based diploma. The initial policy, passed in 2003 by the Board of Education, established proficiency-based graduation requirements in six content areas. Additional requirements for practices, such as personalized learning plans and support to students, was also added. Their Diploma System requires students to demonstrate learning through at least one performance-based assessment to receive a diploma.



- **VERMONT:** In Vermont, authority from several governing bodies was needed in order to put into place a comprehensive policy that could serve as a platform for a personalized, proficiency-based system. In 2013, the Board of Education approved the *Education Quality Standards*, introducing personalized learning and a proficiency-based diploma, while the state legislature passed *Act 77* to expand flexible pathways.



HOW IS NEW ENGLAND PROGRESSING IN TERMS OF SCALING, SUSTAINABILITY, QUALITY, AND EQUITY?

As described, New England is making great progress in scaling and sustainability of competency education. However, more attention needs to be paid to quality and equity. 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. Without understanding the major levers that will produce high-quality, equity-boosting achievement, districts must rely on benchmarking – learning about the most effective processes their colleagues are using across the region.

Even though equity resides at the very heart of competency education, it still requires unrelenting commitment to challenge institutional patterns, an understanding of how individual bias creates lower expectations, and the development of strong management practices that can lead to much greater responsiveness. 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 the willingness of educators to seek out new approaches, 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.

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 marshaling 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.

It also tells us that school- and district-led transformation is insufficient to create system change, and that goal-oriented policy and implementation that build capacity and learning across networks of practice are 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.

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