

New Hampshire

Building an Integrated Competency-Based System

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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NEW HAMPSHIRE
Building an Integrated
Competency-Based System
Parker-Varney Elementary School
Pittsfield School District

All children deserve and are capable of a rigorous learning environment where they demonstrate competence and confidence to move on when ready.

– NEW HAMPSHIRE'S STORY OF
TRANSFORMATION

New Hampshire's move toward competency education started with the pilot of competency assessments in 1997, expanding from the original four high schools to nearly thirty by 2003. The pilots sparked conversation about the importance of measuring what students can do, not just what they know.

Even as one of the top performers in education in the country, New Hampshire knew they needed to do better to stay economically competitive. In 2005, they decided to redefine the Carnegie unit credit based on seat-time and replace it with a competency-based credit. Districts were charged with creating competencies and awarding high school credit based on those competencies by the 2008-09 school year. New Hampshire wanted credits to mean something.

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. The updated minimum standards made the expectations explicit that students should be able to access educational opportunities customized to their individualized needs and circumstances. Their boldest move of all was to believe so deeply in their teachers and their ability to create a system of calibrated, performance-based assessments that it opened the door to a new method of accountability.

NEW HAMPSHIRE'S THEORY OF ACTION

New Hampshire's theory of action is two-fold. First, it seeks to create a culture of improvement based on support and incentives rather than blame and punitive techniques. Second, it assumes that state policy and local control must be balanced with formal processes for input or, whenever possible, co-designing. Even though the Department Education has substantial administrative authority, it consistently uses collaborative processes to create a shared vision, reach consensus on major systems changes, and build capacity within districts and schools. The state consults with education associations and creates formal processes to enable those districts that want to roll up their sleeves to participate.

CREATING AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM

Co-Designing Competencies

At first, the Department of Education created a validation rubric to provide guidance to districts in creating their competency framework, including explicit skills, content, and traits students should know and be able to do. The assumption that each district would want to create their own was soon challenged, as it was a substantial amount of work for each district, many of them small, to do alone. Thus, a process of co-design was established, with approximately one-quarter of the districts working in partnership with the Department. By 2013, the ELA and mathematics graduation competencies were available, with other academic domains and work-study competencies created in the following years. In 2016, the K-8 competencies developed by thirty educators from ten districts were released. In this way, the state has been able to create a set of competencies and work-study practices that were developed with districts, not for them. Districts that do not want to adopt the graduation competencies always retain the option to develop their own. However, the end result is that the state has the foundation around which to build an integrated system.

Extended Learning Opportunities

In 2006, New Hampshire began to pilot **extended learning opportunities** (ELO) to learn what would be needed to expand options for students to learn anywhere within their communities. The ELO policy is strategically valuable, as it emphasizes how a competency-based structure can enable real-world applications of knowledge and create unique pathways for students to demonstrate their learning. ELOs can help students pursue and develop interests to make learning meaningful, explore areas of interest, seek out challenging opportunities, and have opportunities to more deeply apply the skills they learn in school. Strategically, the ELO policy, developed in 2005, sends a strong message to districts about the power of the competency-based structure to allow more creativity in how learning experiences can be constructed.

When New Hampshire updated the Minimum Standards for School Approval, they further strengthened ELOs by requiring districts to: (1) create and support extended learning opportunities outside of the physical school building and outside the usual school day, (2) provide learning opportunities to enable students to achieve the district's graduation competencies, and (3) allow students to demonstrate achievement of additional competencies aligned to student interests in elective courses, career and technical education courses, or extended learning opportunities.



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Virtual Learning Academy Charter School

In 2007, New Hampshire Board of Education approved the charter for the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School as a competency-based model available to any New Hampshire student, tuition-free. Although many districts were hesitant of taking advantage of VLACS in the early years, the school has served as another mechanism to demonstrate the value of the competency-based approach and how it can be used to be more responsive to student needs. For example, VLACS developed a “competency recovery” model available to students anywhere in NH who need to learn and demonstrate their learning on specific skills rather than having to retake entire courses.

Over the past two years, VLACS moved from a highly individualized approach with online courses to a more personalized one with revised programming that offers Flexible Learning Paths. Students now have options to organize their learning through several avenues, including learning in a traditional class, online, in the community, through self-study, or by participating in a project.

System of Supports for Educator Support and Evaluation

New Hampshire has embraced the Instructional Core model (Exhibit E), developed by Richard Elmore, as a framework to think about how students learn. This model emphasizes student engagement, meaningful content and skills, instructional quality, and rich tasks. This model changes the nature of conversations about teaching, as it asks educators to think about how students are experiencing their learning, the quality of the relationships between teachers and students, and what types of instructional strategies might be most effective. It is also the basis of the state’s advancement toward a calibrated system of performance-based assessments.

The reciprocity embedded in the Elmore model sets out the responsibilities of those who are learning and those who are teaching. In *Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement*, Elmore explains, “For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance.” The reciprocity of teacher and learner is applied within schools as well as to the professional development of administrators and educators participating in the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) initiative. New Hampshire doesn’t move forward without districts being involved in the co-design and identifying the conditions and supports necessary for those who are learning to succeed.

Exhibit E Instructional Core Model.

Adapted from New Hampshire Story of Transformation



Once again using a participatory process, New Hampshire redesigned its system of support to educators. Their strategy moves beyond the one-size-fit-all method of professional development to personalize for each educator with a system of support that draws upon network theory. The New Hampshire Network Platform is designed to help educators find other innovators or those facing the same challenges to exchange insights and solutions. This virtual space, developed by 2Revolutions, allows educators to learn anytime, anywhere. There are online conversations, online courses on special topic networks (such as competency-based education, project-based learning, and technology tools), as well as face-to-face workshops. Districts can use the Platform to help teachers devise their own personalized professional development.

Another form of important professional development taking place in New Hampshire is through PACE, which is described below. Educators in the PACE districts are forming strong networks as they learn about designing and assessing performance-based assessments as well as the instructional strategies that can be used to help students build and apply higher order skills.

Piloting a New System of Accountability

New Hampshire has been clearing the path for a new system of accountability that is more aligned with student learning. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education granted a waiver to New Hampshire to pilot PACE as a new model of accountability. PACE has been developed in a collaborative process with the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), the National Center for the Improvement of Education Assessment, and four districts in the first cohort (now expanding to over eight districts).

Strategically, the pilot serves as a linchpin for building the integrated system aligned with a personalized, competency-based approach. First, it seeks to align the systems of assessments more strongly with higher order skills (or what is often referred to as deeper learning). Second, it expands the idea that students should have the opportunity to apply their skills and demonstrate their learning. Third, it seeks to develop a calibrated capacity of teachers to understand proficiency for different grade levels and to be able to assess in a way that is valid and reliable. Other states have invested in performance-based assessments over the years, but none have done it in a way that creates a system that is calibrated for embedding accountability within the education system itself.

PACE also opens the door to rethinking accountability. It establishes the use of “instructionally-relevant, high-quality performance-based assessments, alongside periodic administration of Smarter Balanced and SAT assessments of state standards in math and English language arts (ELA), for the purpose of tracking and reporting the progress of students, schools, districts, and educators.” There is general concern that performance-based assessments, although instructionally more relevant than standardized testing, are nearly impossible to grade in a way that is valid and reliable. New Hampshire has taken on this challenge directly by investing deeply in capacity building so that teachers in Epping will assess student performance tasks in the same way as those in Souhegan, Concord, and Monroe.

Performance Assessment for Competency Education

The core of the NH PACE assessment system is locally-developed, locally administered performance assessments tied to grade and course competencies determined by local school districts. Additionally, in each grade and subject without a state assessment (a total of seventeen subjects and grades), there is one common complex performance task administered by all participating districts. This common assessment is NOT a state test! Rather, it is developed collaboratively among the participating districts and is used to ensure that each teacher’s evaluation of student performance is comparable to the evaluations made by other teachers. Finally, Smarter Balanced is administered in grade 3 (English language arts), 4 (math), and grade 8 for both ELA and math. The SAT is administered to all grade 11 students. In other words, “state” assessments are administered in only six grades/subjects and local assessments in seventeen.

-- MOVING FROM GOOD TO GREAT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE: PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCY EDUCATION (PACE)

Based on initial review, PACE is, in fact, building this capacity, thereby increasing the likelihood that performance-based assessments may one day be part of state accountability systems. As they build the bank of performance-based assessments and calibration capacity across additional districts, New Hampshire will also be scaling a system that one day could support 100 percent of its districts.

Going Forward

In 2015, New Hampshire released a **new vision** to guide them in moving forward. Its four core values – a competency-based system, supporting educators, local innovation, and an integrated system of learning – are strategic design principles, not a list of things to do. The vision is written to inspire leadership across the state to believe in itself and to believe that they can create an integrated system designed around ensuring that students are learning, demonstrating their learning, and making progress.



After several years of implementation of the competency-based structure, leading districts are beginning to consider the next wave of innovation and improvement – including greater personalization, greater depth of learning, and partnerships with College for America, Southern New Hampshire University’s online, competency-based program – to consider ways of creating competency-based pathways.

The progress New Hampshire has made in building a supportive and aligned system doesn't mean that every district is fully implementing a competency-based model. Local control is taken very seriously, as is the case in many of the New England states. Thus districts have substantial leeway in how they interpret what it means to be competency-based rather than time-based. Some are implementing the bare bones of competency-based credits without taking advantage of personalized approaches. Others are beginning to engage in redesign: rethinking their systems of assessments to ensure there is opportunity to demonstrate performance of competencies; designing more personalized approaches with more flexibility for students in terms of choice, voice, and pace; reconfiguring policies and practices so teachers can meet students where they are and students can advance upon mastery; building capacity regarding work-study practices based upon the Center for Innovation in Education's **developmental framework for essential skills and dispositions**; and developing schedules and mechanisms to provide just-in-time support. There is no doubt that educators across the state are thinking more deeply about what they want students to learn, the assessments that will allow them to know if students are learning, and the instructional strategies that are needed to help students continue to learn.

There is also a growing discussion in New Hampshire about what it really means to meet students where they are. They want students to truly advance upon mastery rather than have teachers cover grade level standards regardless of students' skills. In New Hampshire, this often focuses on students with special education, those with high mobility, or those who may have endured trauma in their lives.

Competency-based education in New Hampshire, with its focus on ensuring mastery, is challenging educators and policymakers alike to think more deeply about the educational experiences of students and the processes that help them to learn. These are the conversations needed to increase equity.

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

PARKER-VARNEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

With a high percentage of students from low-income families and those challenged by high mobility, the team at Parker-Varney Elementary in Manchester is creating a competency-based system to meet students at their performance levels. They are using learning progressions so that even if students are organized into grade levels, they are teaching students at their performance levels within the learning progressions.

Three years ago, Parker-Varney was entirely program-driven. They depended heavily on curriculum programs to drive instruction. However, they found that when



By focusing more on helping students make progress rather than pacing guides, teachers have greater flexibility. If they are at a breakthrough moment, teachers can take advantage of that teachable moment and not move on to math time.

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

teachers are dependent on specific curriculum products, they are also constrained by those very products because there is no flexibility to meet the needs of students who are at a level different than their grade level. The Parker-Varney team also believed that there was too much focus on assessment and not enough on instruction. Knowing that they needed to engage students more effectively through active learning, they began to incorporate more project-based learning with the support of 2 Revolutions.

Parker-Varney has taken four steps toward becoming competency-based. First, they introduced more project-based learning to create engaging learning experiences. Teachers were empowered by seeing that they can change the dynamics of the school and student behavior by changing instructional strategies. Second, Parker-Varney joined Tier 2 of the **PACE initiative**, building a statewide system of calibrated, performance-based assessments. Third, they introduced the concept of competencies as a way of instilling greater rigor. Instructionally, they also built the capacity of teachers to use research-based learning progressions. Finally, they created a system of **competency-based progressions** to personalize professional development for teachers.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Keepers of the Bar**.*

PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT

Starting in 2008 with a community-wide dialogue including staff, Pittsfield School District created a shared vision for a student-centered redesign. In creating the vision, they concluded that three elements were critical: encouraging students to discover and pursue their passions; addressing gaps in students' skills; and creating ambitious yet achievable plans to guide students in the next phase of their lives. The next step was to turn these into five guiding principles:

- Learning is personalized
- Teaching is focused on coaching and facilitating
- Learning reaches beyond the school walls
- Progress is measured by mastery, not by age or the number of classroom hours
- Time is a flexible resource

Once they began implementation, the number of students being accepted to college jumped from 20 percent to 80 percent.

An early step was writing competencies. Pittsfield sees them as a mechanism for communicating what is expected for students to learn and how they will be



Rather than asking students to sit quietly and absorb everything they're told, we're asking them to be actively involved in researching, experimenting, and talking about what's important to them in the context of both traditional school subjects and subjects that interest them.

– JOHN FREEMAN, SUPERINTENDENT,
PITTSFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NEW
HAMPSHIRE

assessed. This transparency gives students greater control by opening up options for how they learn and demonstrate mastery. They also find that transparency is important to teachers, and have thus increased the intentionality and provided a structure for deeper conversations about instruction, assessment, and meeting needs of students. They consider the weekly planning time created by a late start to be essential for making competency-based education a viable approach.

Pittsfield has also taken advantage of the competency-based structure to create additional opportunities for students to learn, including learning studios, expanded learning opportunities, and VLACS's online courses and competency recovery.

Pittsfield has worked to create a sustainable model, including reorganizing to create a flatter, more distributed leadership structure and revising job descriptions to reflect the new roles of educators. Currently, they are seeking to tackle the challenge of better meeting the needs of students who enter school with challenges such as learning disabilities, gaps in skills, or chaotic lives in which they have experienced trauma.

Members of the Pittsfield community continue to be authentic partners, not passive observers satisfied with updates. In order to keep this process going, PSD has created formal structures, including a Community Advisory Council (called the Good to Great Team) to create the long-term plan, establish a logic model, and guide the evaluation of programs and initiatives. Students are seen as partners, making up the majority of members of the Good to Great Team and participating in other governance committees. Their participation in a task force on school discipline led directly to the district embracing restorative justice. Other strategies to empower students include student conferences and expanded learning opportunities that offer authentic community engagement in support of students.

Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study on [Pittsfield School District](#).

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