What Is Competency Education?

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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What Is Competency Education?

High school graduation is a turning point in a young person’s life: it is a major benchmark in the transition to adulthood. Every parent wants their child to be ready to take the next step, prepared to pursue post-secondary education and training. Yet, even with the increases in graduation rates, too many teens do not even make it to graduation day, and those who do often find themselves having to pay for remediation courses when they enter college. We’ve known that something isn’t working in the education system and have spent several decades trying different reform strategies, programs, and initiatives – none of which has produced the desired results.

A. THE FLAWS IN THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The challenge to be confronted, then, is to build a system that prepares every student for some type of post-secondary education and the high-skill careers of today and the future. To do that, we have to address the core design elements of the system we have—the age-based grade levels, the Carnegie units and seat time, the factory-style bell schedules. We have to address the basic architecture of the industrial-era model of schooling built more than a century ago. — EDUCATION EVOLVING, MAINE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Educators across the country have started to realize that it is the structure of the education system itself that is at the root of the problem. The data tells us clearly that something is not working. After decades of policy reforms and targeted improvement strategies, the on-time graduation rate has inched up to 82 percent, with states ranging from 61 percent to 91 percent. Yet, Native American, African-American, and Latino students continue to graduate at much lower rates: 70, 73 and 76 percent, respectively. Among those students who do graduate high school, nearly 25 percent of them, from all socioeconomic groups, require remedial courses in college, costing them and their families $1.5 billion a year. Students are not getting what they need, and the implications ripple through their lives, their families, communities, and our economy.
Why do our schools continue to have such difficulty preparing our students? Below are five of the primary flaws in the traditional system that competency education seeks to correct.

#1 THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM IS BASED ON A FIXED MINDSET. It assumes that some students are smarter than others, and there isn’t much anyone can do to change that. Even with the elimination of formal tracking, most schools are organized to offer strands of classes based on performance levels of students. Thus, the traditional education system focuses more on ranking and sorting students to determine who is going to be able to go on to college.

#2 THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM IS TIME-BASED. As Exhibit A shows, in the conventional education system, students advance to the next grade level after a year of schooling regardless of what they actually learn. Thus, students become burdened with accumulated gaps in skills and knowledge that make it more difficult as they climb toward graduation. Imagine trying to learn algebra if you don’t understand the concepts of numeracy and fractions. Yet, every year students take algebra over and over again without ever getting the help they need to build the elementary level skills they need to succeed to pass the course.

Exhibit A  What’s Wrong with the Traditional System?
From The Shift from Cohorts to Competency, Digital Learning Now and Getting Smart.
The combination of a fixed mindset and the time-based system means that districts and schools have little reason to be more responsive to students or use continuous improvement techniques to improve the educational experience – the results are considered predictable, as some students are simply going to do better than others.

#3 THE TRADITIONAL GRADING SYSTEMS DEPEND ON EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION. Grading practices are organized around giving points for good behavior and doing well on tests and assignments. This works well for the students who receive the highest points and the best grades; however, for the rest of the students who are missing important prerequisite skills, it is an exercise in futility. The low grades only reinforce the fixed mindset that they can’t learn, thereby undermining motivation and engagement in school.

#4 THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS HIGH VARIABILITY IN HOW TEACHERS DETERMINE PROFICIENCY. One of the primary problems with traditional grading techniques is that averages mask areas of misunderstanding: Students can receive passing grades but lack skills that will be needed later on in their coursework. The traditional system has also produced high levels of variability in what it means to be proficient.

Within schools, there is variability between teachers, who each use their own system of grading, weighting how well students did on assignments and tests and good behavior in their own unique way. Within districts and across states, some schools have much lower expectations, and students learn at much lower achievement levels than others. The high variability within the time-based system results in credits having little meaning; the high school diploma is a nearly meaningless certificate in terms of indicating what students know and are able to do, and the GPA, considered a powerful predictor for college success, is at best an indicator of the habits of work and ability to effectively navigate the school environment rather than of what students know and can do.

There has been little effort within states, districts, and schools to invest in moderation, (i.e., to ensure consistency in how students are determined to be proficient). Given that educator judgment is central to the practice of assessing mastery of student work, we cannot create an equitable system without moderation of the education system.
The systemic inconsistency and low achievement levels of low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and racial and ethnic groups all contribute to the need for greater attention to equity. The top-down accountability system introduced under No Child Left Behind exposed the inequity of the system but could do little to improve a system designed for efficiency rather than for equity. It will require a different set of values, structures, and policies to help every child be prepared for college and careers.

B. DESIGNING FOR SUCCESS WITH COMPETENCY EDUCATION

As a learner, I grew in the way a fire would if you sprayed gasoline on it.” – FROM A STUDENT’S GRADUATION PORTFOLIO, MAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS CHARTER SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

In the mid-1990s, educators on the geographic edges of the United States began to design district systems and school models in which students would “show what they know and can do” in order to advance. In response to community members’ frustration with their children’s low reading levels, the district leadership in Chugach, Alaska created a new system in which teachers organized instruction to meet students at their performance level, and in which assessments allowed students to advance upon mastery. In Boston around the same time, two different groups of innovators were creating new, competency-based school models to meet the needs of students who were over-age and under-credited.
This approach provided a new way of organizing districts and schools, designed to help students successfully master skills at every step, year after year, by ensuring they advance after they demonstrate proficiency. In 2011, one hundred innovators in competency education came together for the first time. At that meeting, participants fine-tuned a working definition of high quality competency education with five elements.

**#1 STUDENTS ADVANCE UPON DEMONSTRATED MASTERY.** When students advance upon mastery, not time, educators can direct their efforts to where students need the most help and make sure they learn the skills they will need in more advanced courses. Students are more engaged and motivated when grading helps them focus on what they need to work on and show what they know. Students may spend more time working in those areas that are more difficult for them. They may even advance beyond grade level in some domains, while taking more time in those that are more challenging.

**#2 EXPLICIT AND TRANSPARENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES EMPOWER STUDENTS AND IMPROVE INSTRUCTION.** By making the learning objectives transparent, students have greater ownership over their education and much more opportunity for choice in how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning. Students receive grades that help them understand how they are progressing toward the learning objectives. Teachers become more collaborative with increased intentionality of what they want students to know and be able to do. Working together, they improve instruction, assessment literacy, and build deeper understanding of learning progressions.7

**#3 STUDENTS RECEIVE TIMELY AND DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT.** Every student struggles at one point or another. To keep engagement high and quickly address misconceptions before they become rooted in a student’s understanding, competency-based schools provide flex time during the day for students to receive additional instructional support. When students don’t complete a course, they focus on the specific skills they need to develop rather than retake the entire course.

**#4 ALIGNED ASSESSMENTS ARE ROOTED IN THE CYCLE OF LEARNING.** The system emphasizes formative assessments so that teachers understand where students have misconceptions, and students receive the feedback they need to improve. To ensure students are building higher order skills and are able to apply what they learn, schools increase the use of performance-based assessments. In the more advanced models, students take summative assessments whenever they are ready rather than at set points in time.
#5 STUDENTS DEVELOP AND APPLY A BROAD SET OF SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS. Success in college and careers takes much more than comprehension of the core academic subjects. Students need to become self-directed, lifelong learners with critical thinking and problem-solving skills to address challenges and take advantage of opportunities. They will also need the critical skills of communication, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness to help them work in ever-changing, diverse workplaces. In order for students to develop these skills, they need to be actively learning with opportunities to apply their skills in new contexts.

Equally important to the five elements are three conditions that are needed for effective implementation of competency education.

#6 NURTURE A GROWTH MINDSET AND A CULTURE OF LEARNING. Schools converting to competency education seek to create the conditions that will help all students to develop a growth mindset, learn, and progress. It always starts with organizing schools to nurture relationships and strong communities of learners. Knowing that every student comes to school with different skills and background knowledge, teachers meet students where they are in their skill-building, and schools provide timely support so every student progresses. Providing effective formative assessment, flexible pacing, and timely supports are all important. To ensure that remnants of the traditional system’s focus on ranking and sorting are not lowering expectations, schools will need to challenge biases and identify attribution errors.8


**#7 BUILD INTRINSIC MOTIVATION SO STUDENTS ALWAYS PUT THEIR BEST EFFORTS FORWARD.** Informed by research on engagement and motivation, competency education builds intrinsic motivation and a deeper sense of agency. The transparent learning objectives enable much greater personalization, as students can pursue learning objectives within the contexts of their passions as well as have more flexibility in where and when they learn. Greater flexibility means schools can more easily integrate the practices of cultural responsiveness. Students receive grades that help them understand how they are progressing toward the learning objectives. The habits of work are assessed separately, and students are coached to build the skills they need to be lifelong learners.

**#8 EMBED ACCOUNTABILITY INTO SCHOOL AND DISTRICT OPERATIONS.** States, districts, and schools are putting the mechanisms into place and creating processes that provide much higher levels of consistency. Grading becomes a district-wide policy. Teachers work together to clarify what students should know and be able to do at every performance level and calibrate how they determine proficiency. Greater organizational agility allows schools to respond to students’ needs. Thus, accountability practices are embedded into the district and school operation itself rather than only as a once-a-year summative exam.

*We are focused on improving the quality of instruction by building a common belief system of what is good instruction and creating the instructional culture to support collaborative dialogue. The structure of mastery-based learning allows us to focus more closely on how students are progressing, allowing us to use instructional models that will work for students and provide more opportunity for them to be active learners.*

— SUSAN BELL, SUPERINTENDENT, WINDSOR LOCKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CONNECTICUT

As Exhibit B indicates, competency education is advancing across the country. Even in many of the states with little or no interest in exploring competency education, there are educators pursuing a better way to organize education so that students receive the instructional support they need.
C. AT THE HEART OF COMPETENCY EDUCATION IS EQUITY

Transparency creates consistency while also creating autonomy for teachers. These are the elements that are going to create more equity for students. – ALAN TENREIRO, PRINCIPAL, CUMBERLAND HIGH SCHOOL, RHODE ISLAND

At the heart of competency education is equity. A transparent system means that the needs of students are clear and teachers can more easily address them. The transparency of the system is transformative, with both students and teachers more empowered to make decisions based on student educational needs and interests.

Transparency of the learning objectives, rubrics to guide demonstration of mastery, and exemplars of what it means to be proficient are also key ingredients in students building the agency they need to become lifelong learners. When combined with the other ingredients – intrinsic motivation, habits of work, and the metacognitive skills needed to reflect upon their own learning – transparency of the learning objectives shifts the power dynamics of the classroom, with students provided much greater independence. When students own their education, and when education has meaning and the process makes sense, students can begin to co-construct personalized pathways.
Rather than expecting compliance from students, competency-based schools seek to ensure students feel safe, respected, valued and empowered. There is greater opportunity for cultural responsiveness. And most importantly, the expectation that students will demonstrate mastery and that teachers will hold greater consistency in determining proficiency means that students are no longer just passed on without the skills they need to be successful.
Endnotes

1. ESSA reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was last reauthorized in 2001 under NCLB.
5. The paper The Past and the Promise: Today’s Competency Education Movement, published by Jobs for the Future, provides an overview of the history and research base of competency education.
8. For more information on this subject, please see our CompetencyWorks post, 6 Ways to Eliminate Attribution Error on the Path to Equity in Competency-Based Systems.