

A Look at Competency-based Education in K-12 Schools

BY SUNNY DEYE

Competency-based education, also referred to as proficiency-based or mastery-based education, is a term that describes learning progressions based on mastery of content rather than passage of time. A growing number of states are encouraging or mandating the transition to competency-based learning to give teachers and schools flexibility and tools to optimize and personalize learning for students. Transitioning away from traditional classroom “seat time” toward a more flexible structure allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content. With increased flexibility in time and pace of learning, students can work at their appropriate level regardless of age or grade level.

States and districts that are experimenting with competency-based education are re-evaluating teacher preparation programs, teacher and leader professional development, and school staffing models. The goal is to provide teachers and leaders with the supports they need to optimize and personalize instruction for each student.



Competency-based Learning Defined

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s webpage on [Competency-based or Personalized Learning](#), “Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others. This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student... Depending on the strategy pursued, competency-based systems also create multiple pathways to graduation, make better use of technology, support new staffing patterns that utilize teacher skills and interests differently, take advantage of learning opportunities outside of school hours and walls, and help identify opportunities to target interventions to meet the specific learning needs of students. Each of these presents an opportunity to achieve greater efficiency and increase productivity.”

Did You Know?

- The [Carnegie Foundation](#) established the “Carnegie Unit” over a century ago as a rough gauge of student readiness for college-level academics.
- The standard Carnegie Unit is defined as 120 hours of contact time with an instructor. Most public high schools award credit based on this 120-hour standard.
- New Hampshire became the first state to abolish the Carnegie Unit in 2005.

State Action

Many states have policies in place allowing schools and districts flexibility to award credit based on demonstrating competency rather than on seat time, with the policies varying widely in their scope. An increasing number of states are starting with small-scale pilot programs, offering grants to schools and districts that are implementing competency-based models.

New Hampshire has been working toward systemwide transformation from traditional, one-size-fits-all education to more personalized, competency-based learning for more than a decade. In 2005, the state began requiring high schools to assess students based on their mastery of course-level competencies, rather than time spent in class. New Hampshire is pioneering the [Performance Assessment of Competency Education \(PACE\)](#) pilot program, a first-in-the-nation accountability system offering reduced levels of standardized testing together with locally developed common performance assessments.

A number of states—including [Florida](#), [Illinois](#), [Iowa](#), [Michigan](#), [Nevada](#), [South Carolina](#) and [Utah](#)—have appropriated money for competitive grants for districts to design and implement competency-based education programs. In addition, [Utah](#) established the Reimbursement Program for Early Graduation from Competency-Based Education, allowing schools to keep funding for a student who graduates early from a competency-based program.

Idaho has begun a systemwide transition to competency-based learning. Idaho [HB 110](#) (2015) directed the Department of Education to begin the state's transition to a mastery-based education system, resulting in 19 districts and/or schools launching [Idaho's Mastery Education Network](#). To facilitate this work, Idaho is conducting a statewide awareness campaign to promote understanding of and interest in mastery-based education for teachers, administrators, parents, students, business leaders and policymakers. The state is also establishing a committee of educators to identify roadblocks and possible solutions in implementing mastery education.

Vermont, Maine and Ohio have taken steps to move from time-based diplomas to graduation requirements that are rooted in demonstrations of student proficiency. In 2014, [Vermont](#) enacted

NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission

The [NCSL Student-Centered Learning Commission](#) is a bipartisan group of state legislators studying legislative policy options, obstacles and recommendations to help states move forward with personalized, competency-based and student-owned learning environments. The commission has held webinars on [competency-based education](#), opportunities for [personalized learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act](#), and [performance-based assessments for teaching and learning](#), all of which are available on the commission's [webpage](#). The commission met in May in New Hampshire to visit three schools in the Manchester School District that are competency-based. Read about the visit on NCSL's [blog](#).

new Education Quality Standards in which schools' graduation requirements must be based on student proficiency, as opposed to time spent in classrooms. [Maine](#) requires high school students to demonstrate achievement in core learning areas to earn a standards-based diploma rather than a traditional time-based diploma. [Ohio](#) requires school districts to allow students to earn high school credit based on demonstrated competency in a subject area rather than completed hours of classroom instruction.

Federal Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015, includes the new [Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority](#). Innovative assessments include competency-based, interim and cumulative assessments, or performance-based assessments, that combine into an annual summative determination. State education agencies can apply to exercise demonstration authority to allow local education agencies to create innovative assessments with the intent that the assessments would eventually be scaled up statewide. This provision of ESSA provides states with significant flexibility to advance personalized learning by enabling new systems of assessments that align with competency-based learning.

Additional Resources

- [CompetencyWorks, What Is Competency Education?](#)
- [Great Schools Partnership, Research Evidence for Proficiency-Based Learning](#)
- [iNACOL, Current to Future State: Issues and Action Steps for State Policy to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education, Competency-Based Learning or Personalized Learning](#)

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