

Reaching the Tipping Point

Insights on Advancing Competency
Education in New England

WRITTEN BY:

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Paul Leather, Deputy Commissioner, New Hampshire Department of Education. His vision, perseverance, and creativity have been instrumental in the transformation of the education system in New Hampshire and across the country. His commitment to empowering and engaging others is an inspiration to all of us working toward building a personalized, competency-based education system.

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.

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For more information on competency education, you can visit CompetencyWorks.org for case studies on states, districts, and schools, exploration of implementation issues, and issue briefs. Visit the [CompetencyWorks wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition and to learn about competency education in your state.



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One name may be listed as the author on this paper, but be assured that this is very much a collaborative product.



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I. INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The Every Student Succeeds Act: A Catalyst for Competency Education At Scale?

By: Susan Patrick, President & Chief Executive Officer, iNACOL
Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy, iNACOL

New England's competency education journey so insightfully told in Chris Sturgis' paper is also the story of how stakeholders, coming together to create a shared vision for student success, can move the needle on state – and ultimately federal – policy.

When the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in December 2015, it reflected the lessons learned and the advocacy of educators, superintendents, state leaders, and congressional representatives from New England to make room for systems that align to competency-based education. Congressional staff looked to states like New Hampshire to ensure that they could continue to implement innovative performance assessments for accountability purposes that also support learning.

The new flexibilities in ESSA did not appear out of thin air. They are the result of years of hard work by states who are getting results from competency-based education, but were unable to fully realize their vision due to the limitations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The New England states featured in the following pages are well-positioned to take advantage of ESSA's opportunities to deepen their efforts in shifting to personalized, competency-based education.

WHAT ARE ESSA'S OPPORTUNITIES FOR STATES?

ESSA, the new K-12 federal education law,¹ shifts significant power back to states, with increased flexibility to rethink accountability, redesign systems of assessments, and modernize educator development. It provides a new opportunity for states to redefine what success means for students, beyond a single test score, and to align systems around this vision. It is now possible to design a more student-centered education system in which assessment supports learning and accountability enables data-rich, continuously-improving personalized learning environments in which students advance upon mastery. In this new era, states also have the opportunity to shape the future of the teacher workforce, building the capacity to take on the new roles required in a competency-based system.

Rethinking Accountability

Under ESSA, state accountability systems will now be required to include at least four indicators, providing a historic opportunity for states to rethink the definition of student success. These indicators include:

- Grade-level proficiency;
- English language proficiency;
- Graduation rates; and
- An indicator of school quality selected by the state, which could include student and teacher engagement, school climate, and non-cognitive skills.

States may include any other indicators beyond these four in their accountability system; however, all indicators must be disaggregated by student subgroup, and the first three indicators listed above must carry the greatest weight in identifying schools for improvement. States must identify at least the bottom five percent of the lowest performing schools in the state for comprehensive improvement, and the schools with the greatest achievement gaps for targeted improvement of subgroup performance.

Opportunities to advance competency education under ESSA's accountability provisions are significant: states could align a set of indicators to their vision of student success, create data dashboards that support educators to drive continuous improvement of student learning in personalized learning environments, and engage students, families, and communities with transparent data on students' progress toward success. States could also prioritize personalized, competency-based school models for school improvement.

Redesigning Systems of Assessments

States can now design their systems of assessments to engage students and teachers with valuable information that supports learning in real time and produces summative information for accountability purposes.

ESSA, as in the past, maintains the requirement to assess students annually in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school in Reading/English Language Arts and Math, and disaggregate the results by each student subgroup. However, while NCLB relied on a single, end of year test, ESSA allows states to use multiple assessments to produce annual determinations of student success. This will provide richer, more meaningful data about where students are in their learning, and better understanding of subgroup achievement gaps.

Additionally, all states now have significant new flexibility to design systems of assessments that align with and support personalized, competency-based learning, including:

- Growth measures that track individual student progress;
- Adaptive assessments that may include items outside of students' grade levels, which would provide valuable information to pinpoint where students actually are in their learning progressions;
- Multiple assessments that are administered over the course of a year, so long as they can be combined into a single summative rating. This makes room for interim assessments that students could take when they are ready to demonstrate mastery, and multiple types of academic measures that provide a more complete picture of student learning; and,
- Performance assessments and other types of assessments that allow students to demonstrate mastery of academic standards. These types of assessments are more deeply connected to learning, providing a positive experience for students and allowing demonstration of transfer of skills and deeper knowledge.

Together, these flexibilities liberate states to fully align their systems of assessments to competency-based education.

The New England states are in different places when it comes to their approaches to assessment, but a unifying vision for competency-based learning is a strength that they all share. Starting with this as a core value will ensure that states can build next generation systems of assessments that support teaching and learning.

Innovative Accountability and Assessment Demonstration Authority

As New Hampshire's experience shows, creating high-quality innovative systems of assessments takes significant planning, stakeholder collaboration, and investments in teacher capacity to develop and score common performance tasks with fidelity. For states wishing to pilot innovative systems of assessments in a subset of districts, there is an Innovative Accountability and Assessment Demonstration Authority in ESSA that will initially allow up to seven states to participate. The pilot requires the innovative assessments to meet a high bar for technical quality and to demonstrate comparable results to the statewide assessment. States must have a plan to go to scale to all districts and ensure demographic representation statewide during the pilot phase. After five years, the Secretary of Education may grant permission to a state to permanently transition to the innovative systems of assessments.

Building the Foundation for Competency Education – Investing in Teacher and Leader Capacity

There are no “silver bullets” in education policy, and ESSA is no exception. This new federal law provides long-awaited flexibilities that make innovation for equity possible. However, the ability of innovative new systems of assessments and next generation accountability to improve learning for all students hinges on the capacity of educators to make it work.

Efforts to transform education to student-centered learning must start with teachers and local districts. ESSA opens up a window of opportunity to engage stakeholders in redefining what it means to be an effective educator with the new skills required for personalized, competency-based learning. By doing away with NCLB’s “highly qualified teacher” requirement, which based teacher quality determinations on degrees, not competency, states can begin to rethink licensure requirements, teacher preparation, and professional development around a new definition of effectiveness. Micro credentials would allow pre-service candidates and teachers to demonstrate mastery of discrete teaching competencies and to “stack” them towards licensure, certification, and deepening their practice through professional development to advance along career pathways.

Leaders and educators in the New England states hold valuable insights into the needed investments in teacher capacity and development. The lessons they have learned could benefit other states embarking on their own journey to competency education.

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES TO SCALE AND SUSTAIN COMPETENCY EDUCATION

Many of the states profiled in this paper are well positioned to leverage ESSA’s flexibilities to support student-centered learning at scale. They can build on a culture of education that values competency-based education to build next generation systems that empower students, educators, families, and communities.

Community engagement is a crucial ingredient for successful implementation and sustained results – when stakeholders feel that their perspectives are considered in the development of new systems, they will become active participants who feel invested in their success.

In *Implementing Competency Education in K–12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders*, Chris Sturgis recounts the process that education leaders in Pittsfield, New Hampshire used to engage their community:

- Start with questions, not solutions;
- Structure governance to include community and students;
- Inform design and implementation from multiple perspectives; and
- Reach out into the community.

This provides a helpful framework for each stage of the planning process states will go through to implement ESSA, starting with the question: “What does success look like for our students?” and continuing throughout implementation to sustain buy-in and create a feedback loop.

CONCLUSION

For states on a similar trajectory, New England states’ stories could provide a roadmap for developing ESSA plans that build capacity for competency-based education. However, context matters, and what works in New England may not work in other parts of the country. New England has regional characteristics, including small states with close geographic proximity, strong intra-state networks, and an intermediary, which may have led to the sharing of practices across state lines.

It is interesting to reflect on what it would take to see another regional center for competency education developing. For example, a number of western states are beginning to pass legislation to move away from seat time and support mastery-based learning. Perhaps ESSA will be the catalyst for a new wave of states to make the shift to student-centered learning.

II. Introduction

It is important to point out that our schools are not struggling due to a lack of effort. Educators in Maine and across the nation are working harder than ever... [O]ur schools are not failing, they are simply obsolete: They were built for a bygone era, and the world of the 21st century requires something new. — **EDUCATION EVOLVING**, MAINE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

This is a story about how educators are transforming schools to replace the age-old practices of allowing students to pass through the system based on seat-time with a new approach that ensures all students master essential skills and knowledge. This is a story about how policymakers in several states in New England had the courage to imagine they could do better – for their students, their communities, and their economies. Most of all, this is a story about leaders who are committed to helping every high school graduate be ready for college and careers by creating a more personalized approach to learning and a system in which learning, proficiency, pace, and progress are at its very core.

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. Teachers are frustrated by a system that expects them to teach students grade-level standards even if students are missing years of prerequisite skills. Students are frustrated by a system in which some of them are passed along with Cs and Ds, unable to engage in grade-level curriculum, while others endure the boredom of doing seat-time because they already know the content. The traditional system, with its highly variable A-F grading that obscures how students are doing in building the skills needed for college and careers, is frustrating to students and parents alike when graduates enter college only to find out they need to enroll in developmental courses.

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.

DIFFERENT TERMS, SAME VISION

Mastery-based in Connecticut

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Proficiency-based in Maine, Rhode Island,
and Vermont

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Competency-based in New Hampshire

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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 report **Competency-Based Learning: Definitions, Policies and Implementation**, the Northeast and Islands Regional Education Lab confirms that despite variation in language and policies, there are several shared elements in how districts are implementing competency education in New England. As would be expected, there is also substantial variation in how far along districts are in their implementation, their approaches, and how consistently it is being implemented within schools.

To think of this simply as a story of districts and schools responding to catalytic state policy would be misleading. Some of the earliest competency-based models were created in Boston well before any state had introduced policy. Districts in Maine created a collaborative initiative that helped to launch the transformation to personalized, proficiency-based education across the state. Even in the states with the weakest permissive policy, there are communities that have determinedly moved forward, not waiting for the state leadership to come to grips with the limitations of the traditional system. As over one third of the districts in New England are currently planning for or in the transformational process of becoming competency-based, and **sixty-seven of the region's colleges and universities (including the most elite) have committed to accepting proficiency-based transcripts**, we may be reaching the tipping point.²



In Vermont, we are focused on two big changes that are deeply connected. 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.

— MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM & TECHNOLOGY AT MONTPELIER SCHOOL DISTRICT, VERMONT

For district leadership and policymakers seeking to introduce competency education within their states, this paper seeks to take advantage of this concentration of transformational activity to draw out lessons learned and insights from the efforts of educators and policymakers in New England. The ideas presented here are based on hundreds of conversations with students, educators, policymakers, intermediaries, and funders in New England over the past five years during school visits, over the phone, by email, at meetings, and through the insights shared by CompetencyWorks' contributing authors. While the efforts in New England date back as early as 1995, our knowledge is evolving alongside schools models, district systems, and state policies. Thus, readers will find many insights to inform their efforts rather than firm advice or recommendations.

In the first section of the paper, the core concepts of competency education will be introduced. In the next section, we'll look at the question of why and how the region of New England, with some of the most high-achieving education systems, has embraced competency education. The third section seeks to glean insights from across the states. The final section provides an early analysis about the impact of state strategies toward quality and equity, scaling, and sustainability. In the appendix, readers will find a synopsis of each state strategy, complemented by short case studies of districts and schools.

III. 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.³ 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.⁴ Students are not getting what they need, and the implications ripple through their lives, their families, communities, and our economy.

RECOMMENDED READING ON UNDERSTANDING COMPETENCY EDUCATION

- **Delivering on the Promise: The Education Revolution**
- **The Past and the Promise: Today’s Competency Education Movement**, Jobs for the Future
- **Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified**, Great Schools Partnership
- **What Is Competency Education?**, iNACOL
- **Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education**, iNACOL
- **The Shift from Cohorts to Competency**, Digital Learning Now
- **Progress and Proficiency: Redesigning Grading for Competency Education**, CompetencyWorks
- **The Learning Edge: Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment**, CompetencyWorks
- **Inside Mastery-Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations**, Springpoint

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.



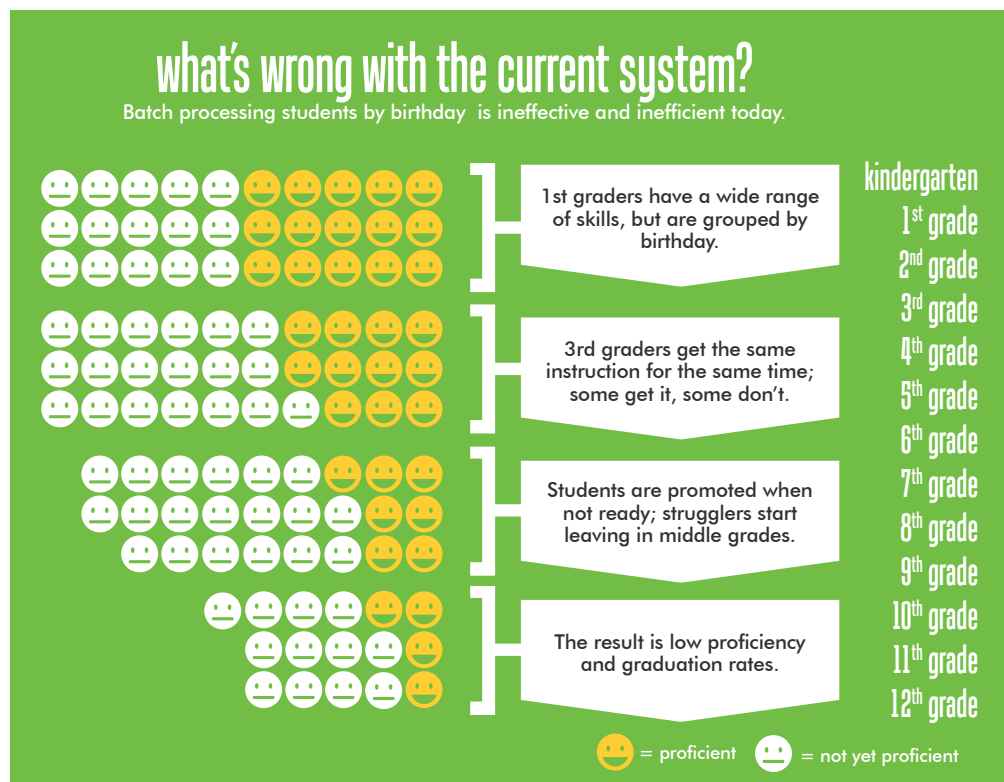
#1 THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM IS BASED ON A FIXED MINDSET. It assumes that some students are smarter than others, and there isn't much anyone can do to change that. Even with the elimination of formal tracking, most schools are organized to offer strands of classes based on performance levels of students. 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.

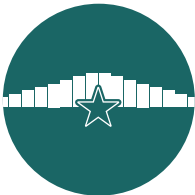


The combination of a fixed mindset and the time-based system means that districts and schools have little reason to be more responsive to students or use continuous improvement techniques to improve the educational experience – the results are considered predictable, as some students are simply going 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.



#5 THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL IS ORGANIZED FOR EFFICIENTLY DELIVERING CURRICULUM.

Almost everyone in the United States has the shared experience of walking into a classroom, sitting in desks in straight rows, becoming quiet when the bell rings, doing exactly as the teacher tells us during the class, trying to stay focused during fifty minutes of lecture, and then studying, often pure memorization, for quizzes and tests given throughout the semester. The traditional school has been designed for teachers to efficiently deliver the curriculum and assess students.

However, learning is a messy process. Students bring different skills, interests, and life experiences to the classroom. They have misconceptions, they make mistakes, and they can become frustrated or disengage. Schools need to be designed based on what we know about child development and learning. We need to redesign our education system to be focused on effectiveness, not efficiency, taking into consideration research on learning, engagement, and motivation.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF COMPETENCY EDUCATION



- Students advance upon demonstrated mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.



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.



The road to mastery-based learning is full of hiccups and pitfalls that just come from trying, learning, and revising. The most important thing is to keep the focus on solutions and to make sure that those who are going to implement, the educators, are part of the solution. We got some things wrong and learned from them. We have also gotten things right – especially staying focused on providing instruction and support that students need to reach mastery.

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

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.

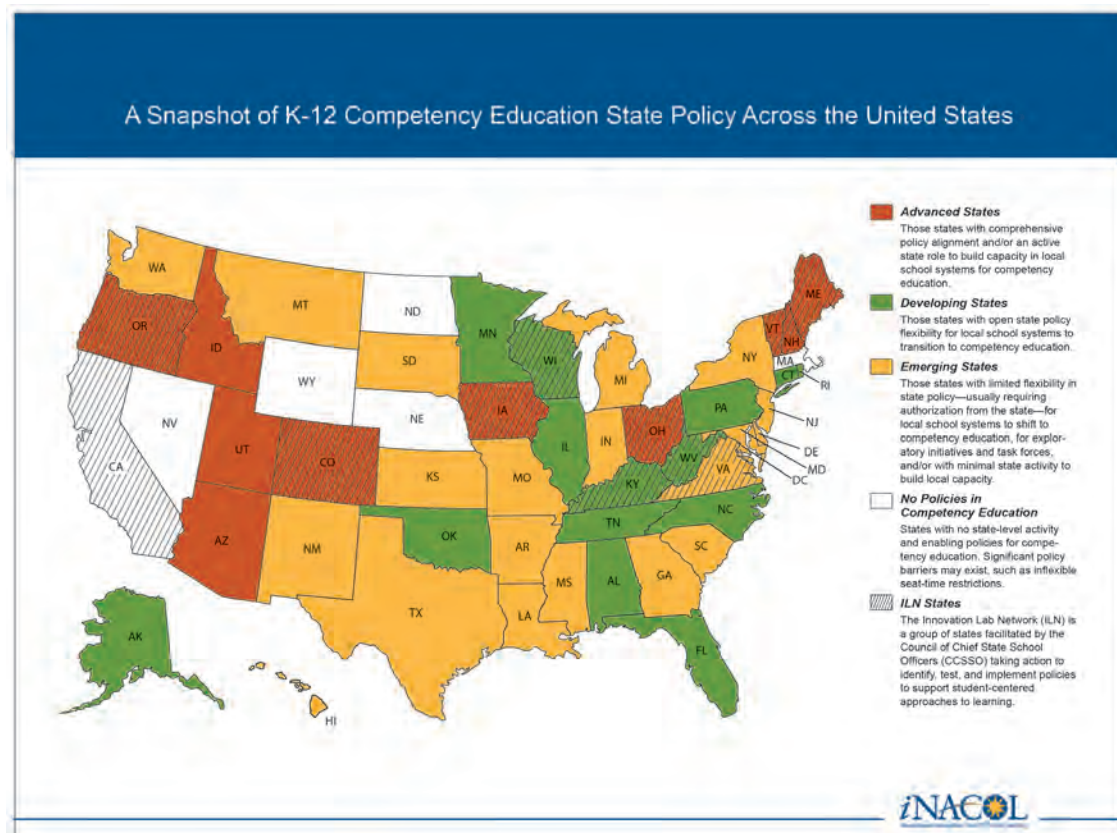


We are focused on improving the quality of instruction by building a common belief system of what is good instruction and creating the instructional culture to support collaborative dialogue. The structure of mastery-based learning allows us to focus more closely on how students are progressing, allowing 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.

Exhibit B A Snapshot of K-12 Competency Education State Policy Across the United States



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.



IV. A Look at Competency Education in New England

Competency-based districts and schools are developing in many places across the nation, even in the few states that continue to hold the time-based Carnegie unit firmly in place. However, in half of the New England states, there is a tremendous concentration of districts either in the planning or implementation stages of converting to competency education.

This section explores three questions:

1. Why are so many of the New England states embracing competency education?
2. What strategies are being used to advance competency education in the New England states?
3. Does New England have a strategic advantage that is enabling the transformation to competency education?

When referring to New England states, the discussion will be based on the efforts of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, as they have all introduced proactive strategies to allow for or expect schools to become competency-based. Of the six states, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has not invested in exploring, piloting, or expanding competency education, and thus will not be included in the following discussion. For those readers who would like to know more about each state, please turn to the detailed case studies of each of the states in the appendix.

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

We are clear that the rapidly evolving economy will not wait for our students if they are not prepared with the right mix of knowledge, skills and work study practices. – NEW HAMPSHIRE STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

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*.

How do the states themselves describe the rationales for moving to a competency-based system?

1. PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY IS NO LONGER ADEQUATE: COMMUNITIES EXPECT THAT ALL STUDENTS WILL GRADUATE PREPARED FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS.

Communities in New England understand that workforce needs are changing, with more and more jobs requiring some level of post-secondary education or training. Communities across New England have embraced the goal that all students shall be prepared for college and careers. No longer satisfied with providing students with opportunity, communities have lifted the expectations of districts and schools to actually prepare students for the next step in their educational journeys.

Concerns about under-preparedness also point to significant issues of inequity. Even though high school graduation rates are inching upwards, the concern that too many students are not receiving their diplomas is demanding new ways to keep students engaged and to support those who are over-age and under-credited.

Furthermore, of those students who do complete high school, too many are unprepared for college. For example, responding to their communities' expectations that all students become prepared for post-secondary education and training, Connecticut school district superintendents became advocates for a personalized, mastery-based system. They came to believe that it was impossible to meet the needs of all students to be fully prepared for college and careers in the traditional system: the only way to reliably provide the learning experiences and instructional supports that students need to reach proficiency is to redesign the system.

Connecticut, we've got a set of complex problems.

Just like many communities across the nation, Connecticut's public education system faces a series of complex problems – a mass of challenges that have multiple causes and cannot be solved in a set time period by using standard techniques and conventional processes. These complex problems include:

- *International and racial achievement gaps*
- *Low level of student engagement in their education and motivation for learning*
- *Limited measures of assessment and accountability*
- *Inadequate preparation for today's higher education and workforce*
- *Changing U.S. demographics*
- *Little emphasis on modern skills to meet the needs of a global economy*
- *Impact of disruptive innovations*

Obviously, solving these problems is not easy. Traditional solutions are inadequate...

The fact is, the only way to work on these problems is to redesign. The public school system must change.

“

— NEXT ED: TRANSFORMING CONNECTICUT'S EDUCATION SYSTEM, CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

2. COMMUNITIES WANT STUDENTS TO HAVE THE NECESSARY SKILLS TO BE LIFELONG LEARNERS AND TO BE ABLE TO ADAPT TO AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD.

Communities across the New England region, as across the country, are feeling the pressures of globalization and want their children to be strong lifelong learners who can adapt to changes in the economy. In addition to the foundational skills of reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, they want graduates to be skilled at problem-solving, creativity, and synthesis, as well as able to apply their skills in new contexts. Parents want their students to be competent to navigate a changing world and ready to take advantage of new opportunities.

Maine's strategic plan, **Education Evolving**, makes its case based on the changing economy and implications for the workforce:

For generations, the educators in Maine's public school system have worked tirelessly to meet the educational needs of the students in their care, and their unwavering effort has been evident. Maine's schools routinely score highly in national rankings of educational outcomes and Maine people have a long history of strong support for their local schools.

However, a new age is upon us. Where our schools once needed to prepare young people for work in a predominantly natural resource-based economy of forestry, farming and fishing, they must now prepare students for a global economy in which many of the jobs of Maine's past have become automated or moved offshore. Maine's young people need an entirely new set of skills to succeed in an information-age economy where ideas and innovation move at the speed of light. These new skills are not just related to advances in technology, they are a product of the way society and business work and think: flatter organizations that require more independent thinking and problem-solving; collaboration with people and teams across the aisle and in offices around the globe; and more advanced critical thinking, even in jobs that once were considered manual labor and did not even require a high school degree.

This new age poses a series of challenges that will require us to not simply reform our schools, but to re-imagine them; to build on the successes of the past while creating a model of schooling for this new age.

3. THE PREVIOUS REFORMS THAT FOCUSED ON ACCOUNTABILITY HAVE NARROWED THE CURRICULUM AT A TIME WHEN STUDENTS NEED A HIGHER LEVEL OF SKILLS.

Communities, educators, and policymakers have all grown frustrated by an accountability system that is seen as ineffective. True, it has brought much-needed transparency to achievement levels and gaps, but it has not led to significant improvements. There are concerns that it may have narrowed curriculum or redirected resources away from a well-rounded education that propels students toward self-directed learning and higher order skills. It has focused attention on the examination itself rather than on the learning. In search of greater achievement, it has created a rigid focus on standards that eclipses the needs of students. Our schools have become standards-driven rather than student-centered.



In short, recent efforts to improve schools through test-based accountability efforts have largely failed. The intense work undertaken to raise test scores in math and language arts has had little discernable impact on those test scores, and worse still, these efforts are driving educators from the profession and have resulted in a narrowing of school curricula at a time when the job creators of the 21st century are calling for more emphasis on creative and innovative thinking and skills.

– EDUCATION EVOLVING, MAINE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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

We can't address challenges around engagement, relevance and student responsibility for learning without taking on this issue of personalization. – REBECCA HOLCOMBE, VERMONT SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

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.

1. RESOLVING THE PARADIGM-CHANGING POLICY PARADOX

How can a state bring about a much-needed change when the only way to ensure effective implementation is for educators to want to make the change?

This is what might be called the paradigm-changing policy paradox shared by the New England states and most states across our country. This tongue-twisting, profoundly complex paradox is created because of two dynamics. First, given that competency education requires a paradigm shift or a change in values and assumptions, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to implement effectively without educators embracing those values. When the policies and practices of competency education are placed upon the old values of fixed mindsets and compliant students, classrooms become overwhelmed by linearity and checklists as students tediously climb a ladder of standards. It is very difficult to mandate or require people to believe differently or do something they don't think is valuable. There has to be an opportunity to engage, reflect, and learn. Second, the states in New England (similar to most states across the country) value local control and are resistant to policies or regulations that feel like a mandate. Thus, prescriptive policies are unlikely to engage districts, schools, and educators and may even produce substantial pushback.⁹

Given that it is impossible to mandate that people accept new values and beliefs, state policy to advance competency education will not immediately translate to transformation of the entire education system, regardless of how bold, intricate, or high-leverage it is. What are state policymakers to do? How can they drive toward a new education system while not actually mandating that any school change? If competency education is more easily and effectively implemented by educators who have come to their own conclusion that it is needed, how do you engage districts and schools through state policy to want to convert?

Thus, states are challenged to find ways to engage districts in the learning 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. (By the way, this same paradox challenges districts, principals, and teachers as they seek to engage and motivate school leaders, other teachers, and students).

RECOMMENDED READING ON IMPLEMENTATION

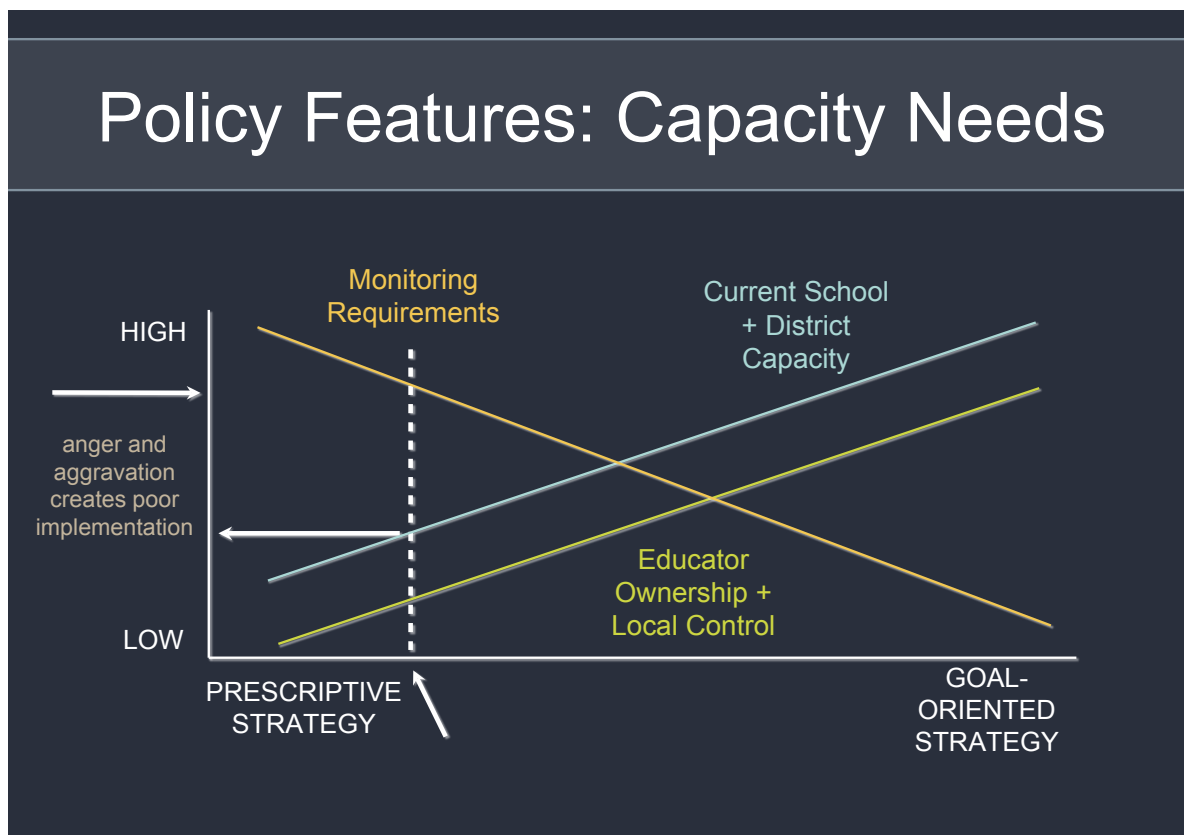
- **Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders**, CompetencyWorks
- **Looking Under The Hood Of Competency-Based Education: The Relationship Between Competency-Based Education Practices and Students' Learning Skills, Behaviors, and Dispositions**, AIR and Nellie Mae Foundation
- **From Policy to Practice: How Competency-Based Education is Evolving in New Hampshire**, Clayton Christensen Institute
- **Proficiency-based High School Diploma System in Maine: Local Implementation of State Standards-based Policy, Phase IV Policy Report**, Maine Education Policy Research Institute

2. POLICY FEATURES AND CAPACITY NEEDS

In Exhibit C, Great Schools Partnership's David Ruff offers an insightful analysis regarding the tradeoffs between prescriptive policies as compared to goal-oriented strategies that can help to resolve this paradox. If a state uses a prescriptive strategy, the top-down approach is unlikely to generate the deep commitment, shared vision, or sense of empowerment that is so necessary for the cultural foundation of competency education. Furthermore, state monitoring requirements are likely to aggravate districts and generate distrust. Thus, prescription and monitoring are unlikely to generate the transition to competency education.

In comparison, a goal-oriented strategy that outlines a powerful vision and clear outcomes depends on a complementary capacity-building effort, rather than monitoring, to accelerate high-quality implementation. Without capacity building, districts are left to reinvent the wheel themselves; some will produce dramatic innovations, while many will be burdened and frustrated by repeated trial and error. Thus, it is likely that goal-oriented strategies will struggle, and possibly fail, unless combined with a strong set of supports. Furthermore, in a goal-oriented strategy, innovation is likely to produce a variety of interpretations, approaches, and models of how to reach the goal. States will need to employ strategies to co-design new policies and construct the elements of the statewide systems to tap into the local expertise and ensure that they can accommodate the different models.

Exhibit C Policy Features and Capacity Need. Adapted from *Great Schools Partnership*



Each of the New England states has tried to navigate this paradox 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.

3. RHODE ISLAND: A CASE STUDY IN PRESCRIPTIVE POLICY

Before exploring the goal-oriented strategies, it is valuable to reflect upon Rhode Island's road to proficiency-based education. Like Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, Rhode Island established a proficiency-based diploma. However, their approach has been much more prescriptive.

Rhode Island's strategy for reaching a proficiency-based system was through a broad set of requirements for secondary schools, introduced through the Board of Education's regulations. The practices are primarily organized around: 1) multiple mechanisms for determining graduation-ready proficiency, including twenty credits and a performance-based assessment such as a portfolio or exhibition; 2) personalized educational experiences; and 3) responses to the needs of students who are below grade level or learning at a slower pace.

Given that few Rhode Island districts to date have fully embraced proficiency-based learning beyond those practices required in high school, this approach raises the question of whether proficiency-based learning can in fact be catalyzed through precise regulations. Rhode Island's high schools describe themselves as proficiency-based given the inclusion of performance-based assessments in the diploma requirements. Many have built capacity around personalizing learning plans, performance-based assessments, portfolios, and exhibitions. Yet, few districts have put into place more than the practices required by the policy, especially as it pertains to creating a K-12 proficiency-based system.

It's difficult to determine why the layers of regulations aren't adding up to more in Rhode Island. Are there too many regulations trying to drive specific models, practices, and behaviors in high schools? Do they need proof points to help education leaders understand what is possible in creating a proficiency-based K-12 system? Is it a problem of changes in leadership, partial vision, communicating a vision, or competing agendas? Is the problem a focus on secondary school practices rather than systemic change? Or is the approach too top-down, without enough school autonomy to allow for innovation and an empowered culture of learning? Certainly, the values that make competency education so powerful – growth mindset; transparency; agency, autonomy, and empowerment; and innovation and continual improvement – are unlikely to be introduced through regulations.

Or, perhaps, with this detailed policy foundation, it is simply that districts are moving at their own pace. Just like students who go a little slower to understand something deeply and then have a sharp trajectory of rapid learning, Rhode Island districts may be becoming skilled in each of the practices and are about to take off.

4. AN EXPLORATION OF GOAL-ORIENTED POLICY STRATEGIES

Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont all introduced goal-oriented policies for personalized, competency-based education with a message and vision that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that schools had to be redesigned for the sake of children, families, communities, and the economy. Powerful, yet highly conceptual visions were promoted that emphasized new skills, higher expectations, greater personalization, and a system that could more reliably help students become prepared for college and careers.

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

Maine initially provided an opportunity for districts to train with the Reinventing Schools Coalition. After the policy establishing a proficiency-based diploma and standards-based system was introduced, the Department of Education created a district self-assessment process that has informed technical assistance provided by the Department of Education and allowed districts to set flexible implementation timelines. Limited support beyond the self-assessment process has been offered through the Department of Education in recent years.

New Hampshire's strategy starts with a belief that innovation takes place at the local level, drawing upon co-design strategies to build new systems such as graduation competencies and a new accountability system. It also emphasizes that in order to help students learn, schools need new capacities and teachers must be supported in building their skills. A NH Network Platform offers personalized professional development, and the Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) initiative supports teachers to create and use performance-based assessments that will allow students to engage in richer tasks and build higher order skills.

“

The only way to create the new systems to support personalized, competency-based districts is through partnerships between the New Hampshire Department of Education and districts. Districts and schools understand the implications of decisions on teachers and students and the state brings attention to system-building. This partnership creates mutual respect and understanding for the challenge of truly designing a student centered approach to learning. Together we are creating a new system of assessments and accountability that is aligned with the needs of our students.

– ELLEN HUME-HOWARD, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, SANBORN REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Vermont's comprehensive policy of personalization, proficiency-based diplomas, and flexible pathways is complemented by a support strategy in which half of the supervisory unions have had the opportunity to participate in training provided by Great Schools Partnership. Work groups are being developed to address critical issues in creating the new system.

There are several common elements in the policy strategy, theory of change, and set of supports that are driving change in these three states at the school, district, and state levels.

#1 Theory of Change Based on New Values

In most of the New England states, competency education is advancing with a new set of values being used by principals, districts, and even state policymakers to catalyze the transformational process:

- **A growth mindset** that deeply believes that with the right conditions, educators can learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach within a personalized, competency-based system to help every student succeed.
- **A strong culture of learning and supporting communities of learners**, which eliminates the culture of “blaming and shaming.”
- **Transparency and mutual accountability** that builds trust and respect, establishes continuous improvement, and increases responsiveness.
- **Autonomy and empowering strategies** that engage others in problem-solving and co-creating new systems and practices.
- **Personalization** that responds to the unique contexts and needs of districts, schools, and educators rather than one-size-fits-all policy, technical assistance, and professional development.



Risk taking and valuing mistakes as learning opportunities are role modeled starting with the superintendent.

– TOBI CHASSIE, CO-PROJECT MANAGERS OF THE SYSTEMS CHANGE INITIATIVE, PITTSFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

These values are used to shape classrooms and the school day, upgrade district operations, and redesign statewide policies and structures. They are also driving the leadership approaches and change processes needed to transform schools.

#2 Coalition of the Willing

Working independently, courageous district leadership might have been seen as marshaling unique efforts. However, local collaboratives and regional networks such as the New England Secondary School Consortium amplified the lessons learned, created political coverage, and established avenues for communication with state leadership as well as other stakeholders such as parents and college admissions officers. Thus, the effort in New England to date has been driven through coalitions of the willing.

#3 From Compliance to Support

State leadership in these three states has begun to reduce the reliance of the state education agencies on compliance. Instead, they are seeking to provide more support to help create the conditions necessary for transformation. This is an important step in creating a statewide culture of learning and organizational agility so that districts, schools, and educators can be more responsive to students' needs. To do so requires that state education agency staff become substantially more sensitive to the context in which districts operate and their long-term strategies.



We all know the ground is shifting beneath our feet – the world is changing and our schools need to, as well. In New Hampshire, we have recognized the disconnect, and we are focusing on transforming instruction by empowering educators and students.

– NEW HAMPSHIRE STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

State education agencies are building systems of support using the values and beliefs of competency education. For example, the Maine Department of Education developed guidelines for implementation that draw from the same values and beliefs of competency education; based on each district's self-assessment, timelines were set for implementation and for informed technical assistance, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches that responded to the unique needs of districts. In New Hampshire, a platform was created to offer more personalized professional development for teachers.

There still remains the problem of what to do about those districts that simply do not want to change, do not have the capacity to change because of risk-averse leadership, lack trust within schools or between the community and district, or disagree with the proposed change to competency-based systems. It is likely that at some point states will need to begin to develop strategic incentives and disincentives to make it more and more uncomfortable for those districts to maintain the status quo.

#4 Informed by Innovation

An enormous yet exciting challenge of transitioning to a new architecture for the education system is that no one knows exactly what the new system will look like. The states using goal-oriented strategies create opportunity to be informed by practitioners and establish mechanisms to co-design policies and new processes. For example, New Hampshire has embraced co-design, involving a partnership between the state and districts, as the only way to make sure that any statewide efforts are fully informed and shaped by the insights of the practitioners. The New Hampshire Department of Education creates formal process by which to create the new system, including establishing graduation competencies, work study practices, and the PACE initiative to inform the new approach to assessment and accountability.

#5 Courageous, Creative District and School Leadership

It is unlikely that the New England states would have advanced as far as they have without extraordinary leadership at the district and school levels. Early innovators helped educators think differently about how to engage students and structure schools. However, many communities have demanded that the education

system better meet the needs of all students. School boards and district leaders have had the courage to respond to the community call for greater personalization, deeming competency education the architecture for modernizing education.

A good example of this type of leadership is found in Connecticut. A permissive policy, **Connecticut's Act for Unleashing Innovation in Connecticut Schools**, allowed for credits to be mastery-based but did not require any district to change. Yet two districts, **Windsor Locks** and Farmington, have made substantial progress toward mastery-based learning because they think it is in the best interest of their students and teachers. Most notably, Windsor Locks has seen improvements in achievement in their elementary schools. If and when Connecticut state leadership decides to take the next step toward a comprehensive policy to have all districts become competency-based, these districts and other early adopters will be positioned as invaluable partners.



We believe it is essential that local education leaders help build the new system through their innovative efforts.

– PAUL LEATHER, ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER
OF EDUCATION, NEW HAMPSHIRE

For more information on how districts are managing the transformational process, please see [Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders](#).

If there is to be a lesson learned from the goal-oriented strategies used by Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, it is that the state policy can set the direction but it is the theory of change and capacity-building strategies that are proving to be catalytic.

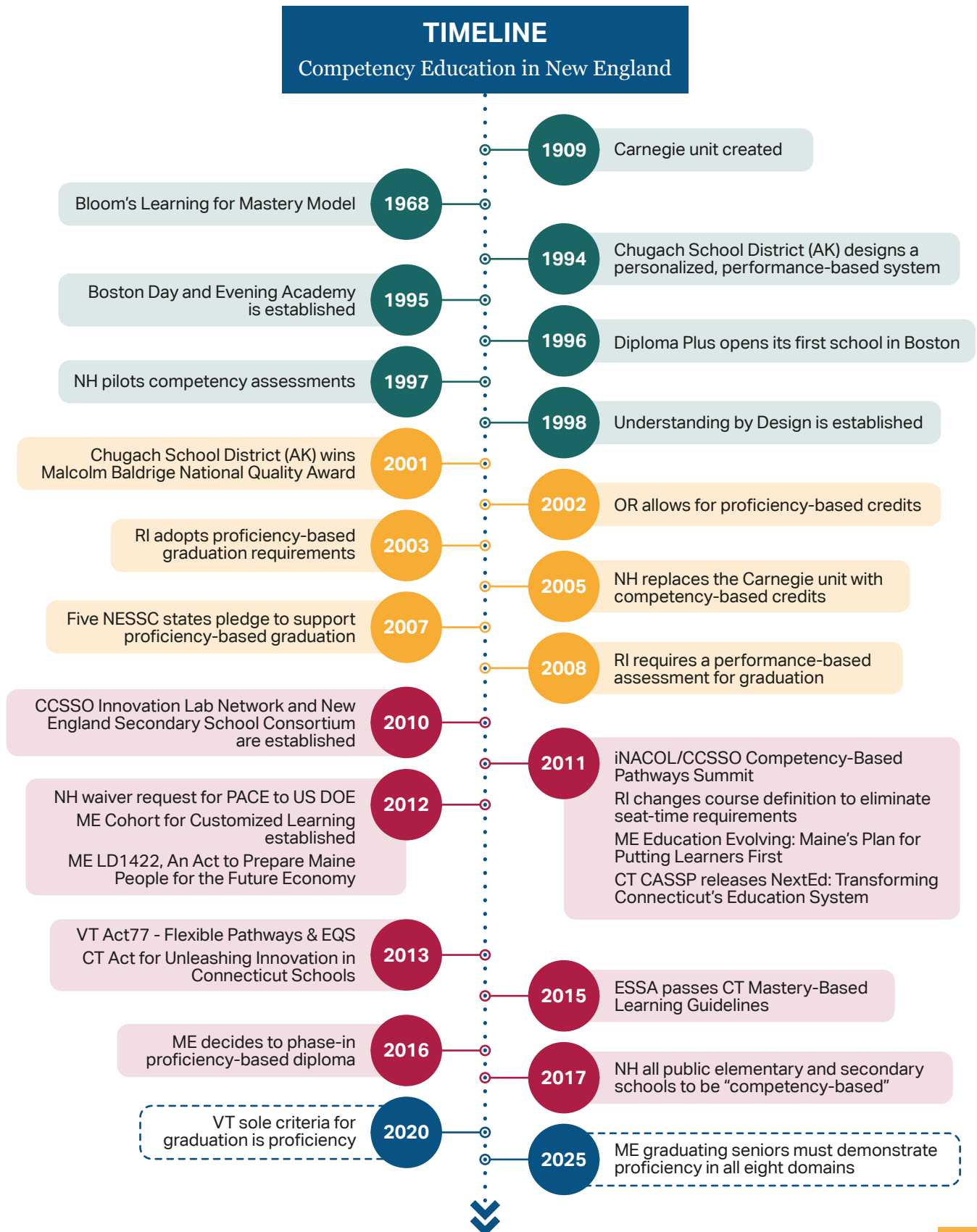
C. DOES NEW ENGLAND HAVE A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE THAT IS ENABLING THE TRANSFORMATION TO COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

Once I started teaching in a proficiency-based school, I never looked back. The traditional classroom just didn't make sense anymore, and my students felt the same way. I was able to support my students much more effectively and efficiently, and they were able to take on so much more of the responsibility for their learning. Once you and your students experience the power of proficiency-based learning, it is unfathomable to go about learning and teaching in any other way.

– COURTNEY BELOLAN, INSTRUCTIONAL COACH, RSU2, MAINE

The New England region stands out for its early innovations, bold vision, and high percentage of districts becoming competency-based. Yet, a quick glance at the timeline in Exhibit D shows that the earliest models popped up on both sides of the country – in Boston and Anchorage – around 1995. So why is it that competency education has taken hold in New England with such momentum?

Exhibit D Competency Education in New England Timeline



Let's take a look at a few of the possibilities.

1. A GOOD IDEA CREATES CONTINUITY

The New England states have not had continuity in leadership. Governors have changed, as have the Secretaries of Education and other key personnel. Complicated budget issues, volatile political dynamics, and redistricting have demanded attention. Yet competency education has continued to be a major priority. Why? Because there are enough people in influential positions who believe in it. Some have argued that because students in New England states are relatively high-achieving, there just isn't any other way to generate improvement except to create a more personalized, flexible system. Moreover, many educators will vouch for it, affirming that once you understand what competency education can do, there is no going back. With strong local control, this makes it harder for state leadership to change course because the policy is perceived as beneficial to students and educators.

2. GEOGRAPHIC SIZE

The small geographic size of New England states helps, but can't fully explain the momentum. Small states can make it easier to bring people together to build a cohesive vision and understanding of competency education. Small districts can also be an advantage in creating a dialogue within schools and with communities about why the change is important as well as managing mid-course corrections in implementation. Yet, every state big or small faces the same challenges of scaling beyond the coalition of the willing.

3. A CATALYTIC INTERMEDIARY

Great Schools Partnership (GSP) has played a vital role in advancing proficiency-based learning. It has provided technical guidance to states in their efforts to create policies, helped to develop exemplars of graduation expectations, convened admissions offices in higher education to eliminate any potential barriers of proficiency-based diplomas, and provided training and technical assistance to districts and schools. They have demonstrated enormous generosity in sharing their resources under Creative Commons licensing. As an intermediary, GSP has also developed expertise across states, thus building extraordinary capacity in understanding the choices and implications of different policy and design decisions.

4. HISTORY OF INTER- AND INTRA- STATE COLLABORATION

The New England states have a history of collaboration across states and within states. For example, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont have used the same standards and same state assessment system, the New England Common Assessment Program.¹⁰ All of the New England states, with the exception of Massachusetts, formed the **New England Secondary Schools Consortium** (NESSC) and its regional professional learning community, the **League of Innovative Schools** (LIS), which has spurred on the efforts to introduce personalized, competency-based education. In 2007, the commissioners of five states signed a **pledge to implement proficiency-based graduation, flexible**

learning pathways, and redesigned student-centered accountability systems. This common commitment has meant that the states are advancing together, with no state too far behind or too far ahead. NESSC and LIS have also generated and disseminated effective practices across the networks so that districts and schools receive support even when state resources are not available.

5. STRONG PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS

There is no doubt that philanthropy has played a catalytic role in advancing competency education in New England. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation has played a powerful role through the combination of strategic investments throughout New England to support student-centered learning and the inspirational leadership of one of the early leaders of competency education, Nicholas Donohue, the Commissioner of Education at the time that New Hampshire redefined the Carnegie unit credit and now the foundation's President. With the addition of another regional foundation, the Boston-based Barr Foundation, with a team of program officers knowledgeable in personalized learning and competency education, it is likely that these foundations will have even greater catalytic influence.

6. LEADERSHIP

Leadership matters. We know it does. There has been extraordinary leadership in the New England states at the school, district, and state levels – too many to list here. There are leaders willing to convert to competency education before the idea takes hold because they feel it's the right thing to do for students. There are leaders who have created the early models and provided opportunity for others to see it in action. There are leaders who excel in engaging others in sharing a vision and the belief that it is possible to transform the education system.

There are policy leaders working together to support each other across states. There are leaders who possess an imagination big enough to begin to put into place the new systems based on transparency, empowerment, and responsiveness that will help students succeed no matter what their backgrounds.

There are two qualities of leadership that abound in the state policymakers, districts, and schools leading the way in New England. First, they are leader-learners, always seeking to better understand, to become more effective, and to seek out the best ideas even if it means accepting that theirs might not be. Second, many district and school leaders possess the participatory leadership styles (referred to as distributed, adaptive, or transformational leadership) needed to help educators move from the traditional system to embrace the values and create the conditions for a more



Principals and district leaders have the power to make sure there is freedom to have hard conversations in safety. It starts with distributed leadership models that understand and value teacher leadership in creating a dynamic learning culture within the school.

– JONATHAN VANDER ELS, PRINCIPAL,
MEMORIAL SCHOOL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

personalized, competency-based system. Are these qualities we can only find in New England, with its history of town meetings? Doubtful. They can be found all across our nation. However, it is possible that the multiple networks and collaboratives in New England have helped to nurture and popularize these forms of leadership.

What does this all mean for other states that are geographically larger, operate in isolation, or lack catalytic intermediaries and foundations? It means they will need to figure out their own strategic advantages, develop partnerships, and, if necessary, seek to form partnerships outside their region to tap into the expertise they need. They, too, will need to create cultures of learning, engage communities in defining what they want for their children, and develop their own shared vision and values to ignite the transformation process. Other states without these same advantages are making big leaps toward competency education. For example, Colorado has developed a strong supportive approach, with districts working in cohorts to learn about and develop strategies to advance competency, while Idaho is building knowledge and networks through nineteen district pilots of competency education.

V. 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

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

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.

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.



Community engagement – not simply marketing an idea and buy-in, but authentic and respectful community engagement – is an essential ingredient for effective implementation.

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.

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 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.



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



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

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 align with competency education, a strategy



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.



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

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.¹¹ 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

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- **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

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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.

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.

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.



New Hampshire has found that working collaboratively across districts statewide is paramount in the process of building capacity and consistency.

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.¹²

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.

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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.

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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.¹³



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

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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.

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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.

VI. 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.

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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.

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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

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.

VII. 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.

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.

Appendix

State Stories



CONNECTICUT
Making Room for Innovation
Windsor Locks School District
New Haven Academy



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



MAINE
Making the Most of
High-Leverage Strategies
RSU-2
Casco Bay High School
University of Maine at Presque Isle



RHODE ISLAND
Putting Together the Pieces of
a Competency-Based System
Cumberland High School



MASSACHUSETTS
Home of the Early Innovators
Melrose School District
Boston Day and Evening Academy



VERMONT
Comprehensive Policies of
Personalization and
Proficiency-Based Learning
Montpelier School District



CONNECTICUT
Making Room for Innovation
Windsor Locks School District
New Haven Academy

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.

Connecticut Vision for Mastery-Based Learning

Ensure all students are prepared for college, career, and civic life through multiple and flexible pathways for learning, including mastery-based systems of accountability for student growth.

– **MASTERY-BASED LEARNING GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION**, CONNECTICUT
 DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In 2009, a group of **Connecticut Association of Public Schools Superintendents** (CAPSS) members realized that the traditional system was not designed to offer the level of personalization necessary to reach this goal, so they began studying the issues and creating the vision for personalized, mastery-based learning. They brought in experts, read articles, and began to outline their vision. In 2011, CAPSS issued its first report, **NextEd: Transforming Connecticut's Education System** (2011), followed by **A Look to the Future: Personalized Learning in Connecticut** (2015), which was published in partnership with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), and, most recently, with a series of recommendations in the 2016 **NextEd: Next Steps**.

These publications were a major impetus in creating the policy environment for the legislature to pass the 2013 **Connecticut's Act for Unleashing Innovation in Connecticut Schools**. The legislation enabled mastery-based learning by giving districts the opportunity to use credits based on the demonstration of mastery.

In 2015, with support from Great Schools Partnership (GSP) and the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESCO), the Connecticut Department of Education (CDOE) issued **Mastery-Based Learning Guidelines for Implementation**. The guidelines are organized in three sections – community engagement, policy, and practice – with suggested steps in each. The section on equity identifies several important issues and suggests mitigating steps.

Although budgetary issues in CT have drawn attention away from transformational work, the state continues to build capacity by taking advantage of national networks, having joined the **ACHIEVE Competency-Based Pathways State Partnership** in 2014 and the National Governors Association Competency-Based Education Network in 2016. It appears that the next big policy step will be to reconsider graduation requirements. At the beginning of 2016, a task force established by the legislature offered recommendations for strengthening attention to skills, improved alignment of requirements with standards and assessments, and considered a system that would lead to more students graduating fully proficient in college- and career-ready skills.

CAPSS knows that proof of concept is needed for mastery-based learning to expand within the state. Much of this is being accomplished thanks to a partnership with GSP and its networks, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium and the League of Innovative Schools. Together, they support educators with summer institutes and workshops during the school year. Leadership teams from approximately thirty secondary schools in the Mastery-Based Learning Institute have been trained so far, with additional supports for the actual implementation process.

Although mastery-based learning is gaining attention, CAPSS knows the importance of continuing to engage community leaders across the state, including unions, which need to be engaged and have their interests addressed early on. In 2015, they launched an effort to engage student voice in the discussion through a **contest for students to prepare short videos** about how schools should be changed to improve their learning. In the coming year, the effort to build public will involves working with twenty-three districts on Reimagining High School Education.

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Our instructional shift was from teacher-centered delivery of curriculum to personalized, student-centered, active learning. Student-centered doesn't mean that teachers aren't managing and teaching. There are many times that teachers will be in front of the classroom and many times that direct instruction will be the best way to help students. Our teachers are focused more on the different types of instructional strategies they might use to help students learn. What we seek is for our students to value learning and be active in their learning in the classroom.

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

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN CONNECTICUT

WINDSOR LOCKS SCHOOL DISTRICT

After clarifying and strengthening their pedagogical philosophy, Windsor Locks School District, outside of Hartford, realized they needed a way to focus more closely on how students were progressing and how to build a structure that would create more opportunity for students to apply their learning. Thus, they began the

transition to mastery-based learning to enable continuous improvement and increase the effectiveness of their instructional supports and robust learning experiences. After a two-year extensive community engagement process that included over 400 stakeholders, Windsor Locks set a deadline to have their fifth graders graduate with a mastery-based diploma in 2020.

The first step was to clarify the pedagogical philosophy. The district began the process of shifting from a teacher-centered delivery of curriculum to personalized, student-centered, active learning. Efforts included engaging teachers in developing a common instructional vocabulary and reflecting on their philosophies of what made the best instructional approaches. For example, the district has embraced a four-step learning cycle of Design, Apply, Document, and Defend. The district also focused attention on improving the capacity of teachers to provide effective formative assessments. With 40 percent of students considered Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), Windsor Locks also empowered teachers to meet students who are missing prerequisite skills to reach grade level content where they are.

Sixteen teachers, whose classrooms now serve as peer learning labs, were trained in the practices of Assessment in Daily Instruction offered by **EL Education** to build up student-directed learning practices. Windsor Locks Middle School has incorporated many of these practices, including student-engaged assessment, checking for understanding strategies, and helping students lead their learning by “owning” their learning targets.

The board-approved College, Career, and Life-Ready program has shaped graduation expectations based on five domains: responsible citizen, informed thinker, self-directed learner and collaborative worker, creative and practical problem-solver, and clear and effective communicator. These domains have also required the district to consider how instruction and assessment are aligned with deeper levels of knowledge. The district began to pay more attention to performance tasks and performance-based assessments to ensure students have opportunities to apply learning.

WINDSOR LOCKS’ VISION: THE SYSTEM THAT WILL GROW OUR GRADUATES

Our education system/structures will be flexible and adaptable to fit what students and teachers need to fulfill our mission.

All students’ learning will be personalized – and these individual plans will be tailored to meet student academic, social/emotional and career-interest needs.

All teachers will use their well-developed instructional skills to engage students at the highest levels to master and exceed both cross-curricular and content-based standards.

All students will be leaders of their own learning as they Design, Apply, Document and Defend their learning in active and visible ways.

All students will ALWAYS know where they stand in terms of meeting district-wide standards.

Parents and community members will be strong partners in this work in a variety of ways.

As the educators throughout the system began to use a common language and a similar set of instructional strategies, WLPS realized they needed an aligned teacher evaluation system. After determining that the Danielson and Marzano models wouldn't work for them, as they represented a different pedagogical philosophy, they decided they needed to create a rubric complete with their own instructional language. Building upon John Hattie's **Visible Learning**, they created a framework and tool that would consider what students were doing as part of their learning as well as the quality of learning and teaching.

Calibration is taken very seriously at Windsor Locks – and it's calibrating around the teacher and support rubric used in the evaluations, not just on the alignment around proficiency. Teachers have collaborative time once per week using early departures, and also do visible learning walks within their own schools.

**WINDSOR LOCKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS
COLLEGE, CAREER AND LIFE-READY**

Responsible citizen

Informed thinker

Self-directed learner and collaborative worker

Creative and practical problem-solver

Clear and effective communicator

Revisiting How Learning is Communicated

WLPS began the discussion about grading by looking at the problems with the traditional A-F system, including its averages, zeroes, and variability. Realizing how much these traditional grading practices impeded learning, they began to ask what it would mean to exclude these harmful practices and what the alternative might be. They started by transitioning K-5 to mastery-based grading and are entering the fourth year of implementation in the middle school. The Windsor Locks School Board recently adopted new high school mastery-based grading and graduation policies.

Discussions with staff started to identify many of the unproductive implications of the A-F grading scale. One of the biggest concerns was the grade inflation and deflation that occurs in the traditional system. They could see it clearly in AP classes where students might have a 95 but not do equally well on the actual test. Recognizing that traditional grades are made up of information about academics and behaviors, WLPS separated them by creating *habits of scholarship*, including completes homework, participates in class discussion, conducts self in appropriate manner, and maximizes time on task.

Windsor Locks used local media to help engage the broader community in the discussion on the shift to mastery-based learning and grading. They took out a four-part newspaper insert on What is a Grade? (**Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4**). They also prepared for conversations with parents and the community by hiring a director of community engagement. They have learned that community engagement—especially around grading – is an ongoing process that, when possible, is best done individually or in small groups. Parents understand the new grading practices when they realize their students will get the support they need to be successful.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Starting with Pedagogy**.*

NEW HAVEN ACADEMY

Launched in 2003, **New Haven Academy** (NHA) is a 9-12 magnet school serving 300 students from New Haven and thirty surrounding towns, of which 70 percent are FRL. NHA began as a project-based school using inquiry-based learning, portfolios, and exhibitions before it introduced mastery-based grading in 2013.



One of the biggest benefits of mastery-based learning is the transparency and intentionality.

NHA values critical thinking – their goal is to “teach students to analyze information and ideas in depth, to consider multiple perspectives, and to become informed decision-makers.” Their pedagogical philosophy is that students need to be involved with inquiry-based learning, engaged in solving problems, able to reflect on their learning, and able to demonstrate their learning through performance assessments. Social action is a theme throughout the school, with students earning ten hours of community service every year and completing a social action project in twelfth grade.

NHA helps build critical thinking skills through six Habits of Mind:

- Ask questions
- Find evidence
- Make connections
- Recognize perspectives
- Consider alternatives
- Explain relevance

They also have three areas of Responsibility – completing homework, participating in class activities, and meeting assessment deadlines – that capture the habits of work that students need to be successful.

The move to mastery-based grading began in 2009-2010 as NHA started to contemplate how to have more **authentic education**. Traditional grading was getting in the way because it wasn’t consistent with their values, pedagogy, or how they wanted to engage and motivate students.

In 2012, they put together a team of teachers, all of whom had been with the school for over six years, to begin to think through some proposals. They looked at several models before creating a grading policy. NHA’s core beliefs that were used in shaping the grading policy include:

- Students must master critical thinking, academic skills, and essential knowledge in each academic discipline.
- Students need time to practice and learn from mistakes.
- Students should have multiple opportunities to show what they know and can do.
- Strong work habits and community involvement are critical for success in college, career, and citizenship.
- Learning cannot be averaged.

In creating their new grading system, they separated academics from responsibilities, removed Ds and Fs as an option, and introduced practice (formative) assessments and core assessments. Core assessment are designed to prepare students for the kinds of work and thinking required in college and the workplace. Students must successfully earn a number of credits in each discipline by creating a portfolio of Core Assessments that demonstrate their ability to do the essential work of that discipline. Although not part of the grading, practice work and practice assessments are used to inform instruction to help students progress.

New Haven Academy has found that one of the biggest benefits of mastery-based learning is the transparency and intentionality. Teachers began to engage in deeper conversations about what they are teaching, why they are teaching it, and what they want students to know and be able to do. Departments began to understand alignment as a natural and iterative process to improve teaching and learning. The next stage of capacity building is likely to be on unit development so that students will have more flexibility in how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Pedagogy Comes First**.*



MAINE
Making the Most of
High-Leverage Strategies
RSU-2
Casco Bay High School
University of Maine at Presque Isle

Maine's journey to a proficiency-based diploma can best be described as a bottom-up and top-down process. In 2007 and 2008, districts in Maine began the journey to personalized, proficiency-based systems. First, the Department of Education began to partner with the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC) to provide training to districts on how to engage communities in creating shared vision, help teachers learn how to create the culture and practices for personalized learning, and convert to proficiency-based systems. The DOE then provided limited funding to those districts interested in creating more personalized learning experiences to continue ideas outlined by the RISC. When this funding was discontinued, vested districts created a professional community of learners, the **Maine Cohort for Customized Learning**.

Maine Definition of Proficiency-Based Education

Any system of academic instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting that is based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.

With extensive district collaboration, the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning became a catalyst for personalized, proficiency-based learning in Maine. The MCCL districts played a powerful role as proof points when the Department of Education organized a statewide listening tour, followed thereafter by legislative tours that launched state-level conversations and informed the strategic plan **Education Evolving**. The result was the passage of **LD1422, An Act To Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy** by the state legislature in 2012.

LD1422 requires a *standards-based education system* that enables multiple pathways for pursuing and demonstrating learning, leading up to a *proficiency-based diploma*. It also requires the Department of Education to provide specific types of support and technical assistance to districts.

The standards-based system is organized around the Maine Learning Results, established in 1997 and upgraded in 2011. Maine's proficiency-based diploma policy requires students to be proficient in eight content areas – Career & Education Development, English Language Arts, Health Education & Physical Education, Mathematics, Science & Technology, Social Studies, Visual & Performing Arts, and World Languages – as well as the five cross-disciplinary Guiding Principles.

MANAGING THE TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Maine has demonstrated the principles of a proficiency-based system in creating flexible pacing of implementation and adjustments in timelines to fully introduce the proficiency-based diploma. The original legislative deadline for implementation was 2017. In 2014, the Department introduced the district self-assessment process that allowed districts to request implementation timelines based on the progress in implementation, with new deadlines stretching to 2020. In 2016, the **legislature revised the policy** in response to concerns about helping all students achieve proficiency in all eight domains, instead choosing to phase in the graduation requirements. The graduation requirements will increase, starting with four domains for the 2021 graduating class, adding in student choice of additional domains for the next three years, and then requirements of all eight domains for the graduating class of 2025.

SUPPORT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The support from the Maine Department of Education has changed over time partially in response to funding availability and partially because of the political context. There have been several high-leverage strategies that have had a strong impact. One of these strategies was the early decision to support a small group of districts that were a “coalition of the willing.” They were provided with professional development from the Reinventing Schools Coalition, which laid the groundwork for a strong understanding of the culture and practices needed for a proficiency-based system that enables students to become more self-directed and teachers to personalize instruction. Another strategy was that the district self-assessment process required all districts, even those that were the most hesitant to move forward, to engage in reflecting upon what they had in place and how they might move forward to create a standards-based system and proficiency-based diploma. Lastly, in collaboration with Great Schools Partnership, the Department’s strategy to provide exemplars and samples provided supports to districts while still respecting local decision-making in creating a standards-based system.

RECOMMENDED READING: UNDERSTANDING MAINE’S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The guide **Understanding Maine’s Guiding Principles** introduces a research-based framework to help students advance through four levels – beginner, advanced beginner, strategic learner, and emerging expert – in the five guiding principles:

- A Clear and Effective Communicator. Understands the attributes and techniques that positively impact constructing and conveying meaning for a variety of purposes and through a variety of modes.
- A Self-Directed and Lifelong Learner. Understands the importance of embracing and nurturing a growth mindset.
- A Creative and Practical Problem Solver. Is skilled at selecting and applying a process of problem-solving to deepen understanding and determine whether redefining the goal is a better way of addressing a problem situation and continuing to consider other alternative solutions until one resonates as the best one.
- A Responsible and Involved Citizen. Understands the interdependence within and across systems and brings to each situation the appropriate actions.
- An Integrative and Informed Thinker. Is skilled at using complex reasoning processes to make meaning.

The Maine Department of Education has provided a series of supports, including:

- **Professional Development Opportunities:** In the early stages of implementation, the Department provided professional development opportunities for district teams that wanted to create a personalized, proficiency-based system.
- **Resources:** Early in implementation, the Department created the **Center for Best Practices** that housed **videos** to allow viewers to hear directly from educators and students about proficiency-based learning, **case studies**, and resources from those districts that were making steady progress in implementation. Over time, the Department created a section on their website called **Getting to Proficiency** that includes statutory requirements, policy exemplars, and **frequently asked questions**.
- **Transition Funds:** LD1422 requires the Department of Education to provide funds to support the cost of the transition to a proficiency-based diploma. Since 2013, each school administrative unit has received funding based on a formula of 1/9th of 1 percent of that SAU's total cost of education. This element of the legislation has directed millions of dollars to districts to support the transition.
- **Exemplars:** In collaboration with the Great Schools Partnership and MCCL, the Department of Education developed **exemplar graduation standards and aligned performance indicators**, which Maine schools can use or adopt when creating their own system of local learning standards and proficiency-based graduation requirements. The exemplar standards are aligned with the **Maine Learning Results**, which encompass the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics, and the Next Generation Science Standards in science and technology.
- **District Self-Assessment:** In the spirit of proficiency-based learning, the Department provided flexibility in implementation based on the submission of **district self-assessment** of their progress in implementing the standards-based system. The self-assessment tools submitted by each district were also made public on the Maine DOE website, creating opportunities for districts to look at how others were moving forward. In addition, the Maine DOE offered a sample **implementation plan for proficiency-based learning**.
- **Networks:** Maine's success in implementing proficiency-based learning statewide has been due in large part to the comfort of districts in working collaboratively with networks, both topical and geographic. In addition to the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning, twenty-five secondary schools belong to the League of Innovative Schools, sponsored by the New England Secondary Schools Consortium. Districts are also taking advantage of eight regional collaboratives. For example, the **Northern Maine Education Collaborative** (NMEC) was created to support seventeen rural districts in creating a proficiency-based system. These networks have been helpful in sharing costs of professional development and purchasing, sharing best practices, and leadership development.



Maine's district self-assessment process required all districts, even those that were the most hesitant to move forward, to engage in reflecting upon what they had in place and how they might move forward.

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN MAINE

Maine's educators have taken on the challenge to figure out how to help all of their students become proficient. Everywhere you go in Maine, there are districts and schools discussing issues such as learning, how to help students reach proficiency, strategies to support teachers, and how to re-align instruction and assessment around higher order skills. There are also important and sometimes painful conversations about how to help students with learning disabilities or substantial gaps in skills get on track to a diploma within four years and how to create more responsiveness in younger grades so more students enter higher school with or close to grade level skills.

RSU2

The RSU2 school board has demonstrated the type of leadership and courage needed for districts to stay the course through the bumps in the road that always emerge in implementation. They have hired three superintendents over the past six years, all of whom believe deeply in the promise of proficiency-based learning, adaptive leadership styles that engage others in problem-solving, and the need to seek ways to continually improve the system.

RSU2 was originally trained in proficiency-based learning by the Reinventing Schools Coalition with a standards-based structure based on measurement topics and learning targets. They have also worked on improving instruction by drawing from the Art and Science of Instruction by Marzano and deeper personalized approaches with training by Bea McGarvey.

They have now introduced a new wave of innovation, as they realized students need more opportunities and instructional support to apply their learning. They are working at the secondary school level to reorganize the schedule so students continue to build foundational skills while also having more opportunity for engaging applied learning opportunities.

There are also efforts underway to explore how to better meet the needs of students who are missing prerequisite skills. RSU2 found that even though they were four years into implementation, some teachers were still being driven by covering the grade level standards. There are now deeper conversations taking place about how to respond to students instructionally and systemically in order to build their foundational skills in ways that will lead to their eventually getting to grade level.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Building a High Quality Proficiency-Based District.***

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION IN MAINE

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The Maine legislature asked the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to investigate **the implementation of proficiency-based learning**. To date, the following studies have been completed:

- **Proficiency-based High School Diploma System in Maine: Local Implementation of State Standards-based Policy, Phase IV Policy Report**, Erika Stump, Bernadette Doykos & Catherine Fallona. (2016)
- **Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System: Early Experiences in Maine**, Erika K. Stump & David L. Silvernail. (2014)
- **Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System in Maine: Phase II - District Level Analysis**, David L. Silvernail, Erika K. Stump, Anita Stewart McCafferty & Kathryn M. Hawes. (2014)
- **Preliminary Implementation of Maine's Proficiency-Based Diploma Program**, David L. Silvernail, Erika K. Stump, Angela Atkinson Duina & Lori Moran Gunn. (2013)

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CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL

Casco Bay High School in Portland has become a national example of how a proficiency-based structure can be integrated with a robust pedagogy that emphasizes communities of learners, real-world inquiry-based curriculum, and authentic student work that emphasizes higher order skills. (Casco Bay is an **EL Education** school, previously referred to as Expeditionary Learning.) At one New York City school, an assistant principal explained that “when we grow up, we hope to be like Casco Bay.”



We want the grading system to reward students for doing their personal best even if they aren’t at grade level. Our system reflects their progress and their habits of work.

– DEREK PIERCE, PRINCIPAL, CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

The learning community is a huge part of the student experience at Casco Bay. Students are placed in grade-based Crews, which are groups of around fifteen students (and one teacher) who act as a sort of “family.” These Crews do whatever it takes to support one another through the educational process, including building agency and real world skills, working together to navigate the tricky waters of college admissions, and even walking together to receive their diplomas.

Casco Bay emphasizes student agency and helping students to build the habits of work they need to be successful in school and the workplace. Their proficiency-based structure is organized around transparent learning targets – long-term, short-term, daily, and habits of work – each with their own rubrics and exemplars. As long as students “get a 3 on the big 3” (homework, attendance, and meeting deadlines), they can have flexibility in pacing and opportunity for reassessments.

Casco has developed a strong **standards-based grading system**. This system ensures that students get regular feedback, build upon their habits of work, and have opportunities to excel. The scoring system is used for both learning and habits of work with 2=approaches, 3=meets, and 3.25-4=exceeds. As one teacher explained, “A 1 means you didn’t turn in, 2 means you need to revise, 3 is you’ve reached proficiency, and above that, you are stretching yourself to excel.”



You can say “graduate by proficiency.” You can say whatever you want about “every kids has to.” Until you establish a relationship with a child, nothing is going to happen.

– LESLIE APPLEBAUM, TEACHER, CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Learning as Exploration** and Springpoint School’s **Inside Mastery-Based High Schools**.*

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT PRESQUE ISLE

Proficiency-based education is also taking root in some institutions of higher education in Maine. The University of Maine at Presque Isle sees proficiency-based learning as an opportunity for first-time college goers. It can

more effectively address any skills gaps students enter with, ensure students can apply skills, and possibly reduce debt ratio by enabling faster routes to completion. Unlike many of the other competency-based programs in higher education that are primarily online courses, UMPI is organizing their approach throughout the campus.

At UMPI, there are twenty-three essential learning outcomes within the five categories of: effective written and oral communication; critical and creative thinking; quantitative and scientific reasoning; information literacy; and global consciousness and intercultural awareness. Each essential learning outcome is graded with its own rubric.

In their transition to proficiency-based learning, UMPI relies on three questions to guide them:

- How do you design pedagogy to ensure students are becoming proficient?
- How do you link to student support services for students who need extra help?
- What tools are needed for faculty to know how students are doing?

Twenty faculty members received professional development in research-based instructional strategies during the first year of implementation with the goal of providing more voice and choice to faculty and organizing student experiences around specific learning targets. UMPI is also strengthening their internship program so that students can build and apply their essential learning skills in the real world.

As the districts in the Northern Maine Education Collaborative build their proficiency-based systems, there is potential for a partnership with UMPI to create the first proficiency-based K-16 pipeline in the country.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Moving at the Speed of Light**.*

MAINE'S CORE PRIORITIES

In 2012, the Commissioner of Education released Education Evolving, a strategic plan with five core priorities.

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

1. Rigorous standards and aligned curricula
2. Learner-centered instructional practices
3. Assessment systems that provide timely, accurate data on achievement and growth
4. Information systems that track learner growth over time

Great Teachers and Leaders

1. Common standards for teacher and leader effectiveness
2. Initial preparation and professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data-driven
3. Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders
4. Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

1. Advancement based on demonstration of mastery
2. Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning
3. Expanded learning options
4. "Anytime, anywhere" learning

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

1. Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs
2. Coordinated health and wellness programs
3. A commitment to community and family engagement
4. Career and workforce partnerships

Coordinated and Effective State Support

1. Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood
2. Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine's schools
3. Comprehensive integration of technology
4. A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system



MASSACHUSETTS

Home of the Early Innovators
Melrose School District
Boston Day and Evening Academy

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the only state in New England that has not taken proactive steps toward introducing or advancing competency education statewide despite there being no significant policy obstacles beyond the end-of-year grade level accountability exams. Massachusetts has deployed a state exit examination as its high-leverage strategy to improve student achievement and ensure proficiency. Currently, students must score at a passing level on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System in English, math, and science.

We were evolving, with a greater range of learning opportunities for students. The question was how could we further institutionalize so that we offered a cohesive and consistent set of educational experiences that also allowed for personalized learning experiences? We think competency-based education is the answer.

— CYNDY TAYMORE, SUPERINTENDENT,
MELROSE PUBLIC SCHOOL, MASSACHUSETTS

As in other states, however, individual schools and districts often move ahead of the state leadership in building new approaches and working collaboratively around challenging issues. Massachusetts is home to two of the early models of competency-based education: Diploma Plus and Boston Day and Evening Academy. There are also a number of other schools across the state using rich, personalized learning strategies to engage students in their learning. For example, in Chelsea High School, a number of practices such as performance-based assessments and inquiry-based learning have deepened the learning opportunities. Plymouth high schools are creating more personalized approaches, including authentic assessments and involving students in leadership and decision-making.

Nine districts are participating in the newly formed Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment. The governing board is comprised of the superintendents and teacher union presidents from each member district, with staffing provided by the [Center for Collaborative Education](#). The goal of the MCIEA is to “re-conceptualize assessment rather than tinker to refine a testing model that has limited value in furthering public education.”

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN MASSACHUSETTS

MELROSE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Now in a period of investigation, Melrose Public Schools has not yet made a decision to go forth toward converting to a competency-based system. Yet, it offers insights into why districts in Massachusetts might want to become competency-based even if the state is not calling for modernization of the education system.

Many districts come to competency-based education because of demographic changes that are bringing more low-income families into their communities and because of their realization that they need a better way to respond to greater diversity. Melrose is experiencing the opposite trend – it has been increasingly becoming more affluent, and parents are becoming more demanding that the schools provide high levels of rigor and additional opportunities for their children. Melrose is considering competency-based education as a strategy that can benefit the traditionally high-achieving student while ensuring traditionally lower achieving students will thrive.

The competency-based structure allows for richer personalization, increased flexibility, and more opportunities for students, while also providing a consistent understanding of proficiency. In addition, Melrose sees competency-based education as a way to better align learning with deeper levels of knowledge.

Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study [Going Deeper with Competency-Based Education](#).

BOSTON DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is designed to meet students where they are – in terms of academic skills, credits, social and emotional readiness, and vision for their path after graduation. The **school is designed for students with a wide range of education and life experiences**, most of whom have not experienced success at their previous school or schools, as well as those who are enrolling after having disengaged from school altogether. One hundred percent of the students at BDEA are low income, and many are also teen parents and/or have experience with homelessness. Over 50 percent of students self-identify at intake as having mental health concerns, and over 90 percent carry one or more risk factors for trauma.

BDEA is highly personalized. It offers strong relationships with teachers, instruction designed to meet students where they are in terms of skills and knowledge, flexible pacing, choices of schedule that meets their needs, and options to pursue topics that are of high interest in the two-week project-based Symposium each year. A student's BDEA experience starts with a four-day orientation that includes diagnostic assessments, analysis of transcripts, and active efforts to understand what has happened and is happening in students' lives. Relationship building starts at orientation.

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If the school community or teacher is both consistent and transparent with their expectations, it will not take long for students to see the connection between practice and competence. Students become more confident as learners and see the value of persistence and hard work. Ultimately, they become engaged in the process as they understand that they are in charge of their learning.

– ALISON HRAMIEC, HEAD OF SCHOOL,
BOSTON DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY,
MASSACHUSETTS

All students take Seminar in their first semester at BDEA. It is an eleven-week trimester to get students focused on where they are going and what they want to accomplish in school. Students are introduced to the competency model and the core elements of the school, including experiential learning, Habits of Mind, Symposium, Habits of Success, and the Capstone Project. They develop an individual learning plan with their advisor based on the assessments that begin in Orientation and carry through Seminar, and reflect on learning and how they think about themselves as learners. A key component of Seminar is allowing students to regain their academic confidence by providing them an opportunity to demonstrate benchmarks early. Students build the personal skills needed to succeed in school and discover their interests. Teachers have the opportunity to understand how to best engage and motivate the students.

The rest of the BDEA schedule is based on additional eleven-week modules that allow for proper placement based on skills, enabling students to work at their own pace and move forward through their Roadmap to graduation, when they demonstrate mastery of competencies attached to a particular module of learning. BDEA uses benchmarks to organize learning and monitor progress, each with their own rubric. Students earn benchmarks to mark their progress rather than traditional grades. BDEA knows that pace matters. They have weekly check-ins about student progress. They pull together a team from academic review committees, advisors, student support groups, and reading and math specialists as needed or if there are signals that a student needs help regarding attendance or progress. If there are problems, they begin to redirect resources and engage the family and the student.

Other districts are paying attention to Boston Day and Evening Academy. Every summer, educators from around the country participate in a **training institute** to learn how to establish the model in their districts.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Reading the Pulse of Students**.*



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.



The extended learning opportunities 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.

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

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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**.*



RHODE ISLAND

Putting Together the Pieces of a Competency-Based System

Cumberland High School

Rhode Island was the first state to establish a proficiency-based diploma. The **initial policy** establishing a Diploma System, passed in 2003 by the Board of Education, set up proficiency-based graduation requirements in six content areas: math, English language arts, social studies, science, technology, and the arts. In addition, performance-based assessments were included as a graduation requirement to ensure students could apply their skills at higher levels as part of the state graduation requirements. The state now offers four types of performance assessments – comprehensive course assessments, exhibitions, graduation portfolios, or the Certificate of Mastery awarded by the RI Skills Commission – of which districts must select two for their graduation requirements.

THE DIPLOMA SYSTEM

Under the **Diploma System**, students earned a diploma based on meeting three sets of requirements: the successful completion of a minimum of twenty courses covering the six content areas and two performance-based assessments. Students were required to demonstrate proficiency in the standards in each course, with districts determining the level of proficiency for graduation. A system of enhanced diplomas was introduced in 2011 with a Commissioner's Seal on their diploma for demonstration of bi-literacy.

Since the establishment of the Diploma System, the **Board of Education has added secondary school requirements** of practices they consider essential for creating an aligned system. These practices include:

- **Individualized learning plans** starting no later than sixth grade.
- **Multiple opportunities and measures** for students to demonstrate proficiency.
- **Appropriate supports** for students to meet objectives.

Rhode Island aspires to provide an educational system in which every student is enrolled in rigorous learning environments that meet their individual needs and through which students progress based upon their demonstrated mastery of essential, aligned, and agreed-upon rigorous academic and 21st century skills. Starting in early childhood, students have access to personalized learning experiences that are experiential, blended, flexible, and differentiated; as a result of these experiences, students will be able to control the pace, place, and content of their learning experience while meeting state and local requirements.

– 2020 VISION FOR EDUCATION: RHODE ISLAND'S STRATEGIC PLAN FOR PK-12 & ADULT EDUCATION 2015-2020.

- **A progress plan** that outlines the type and duration of academic support to be provided to students when they do not meet grade-level proficiency on the state assessments exams.
- **Literacy and numeracy interventions** for any student performing one or more levels below grade level.
- **Multiple pathways** for students to meet the high school graduation requirements, including career and technical programs, expanded learning opportunities, dual enrollment, and online learning.
- **Structures to offer personalized learning** built into each middle and high school, with middle school also offering student advisories.

Rhode Island has several initiatives to support implementation, some driven by districts and others based on state-district partnerships. For example, eighteen schools participating in the League of Innovative Schools are learning more about how to create a proficiency-based system, with some moving toward proficiency-based grading. RIDE has launched the **Scaling Up PBG Network** in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education to establish a network of secondary schools to develop a set of common performance assessments and establish high-quality assessment practices. There are also substantial efforts underway to introduce personalized learning, blended learning strategies, and career pathways into the Rhode Island schools.

NEXT STEPS

The Board of Education approved a new **strategic plan in 2015** based on an exemplary process of community engagement. The plan includes a vision for a RI graduate to be *well prepared for postsecondary education, work, and life. He or she can think critically and collaboratively and can act as a creative, self-motivated, culturally competent learner and citizen.* The values driving the vision are equity, support, diversity (culture and different bases of knowledge), autonomy, preparedness, personalization, and safety. Within the personalized learning priority, the first outcome is *to increase number of schools implementing a school-wide proficiency-based model for instruction and advancement.*

WHAT IS A COURSE?

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In order to eliminate any barriers caused by seat-time requirements, the 2011 Board of Education modified the definition of a course to be a connected series of lessons and learning experiences that:

1. Establish expectations defined by recognized standards,
2. Provide students with opportunities to learn and practice skills, and
3. Include assessments of student knowledge and skills adequate to determine proficiency at the level of academic rigor required by relevant content standards.

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PRIORITIES

The six priority areas focus and organize Rhode Island's strategic plan for public education over the next five years.

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- 1 Teacher and Leader Support
 - 2 Early Childhood Education
 - 3 Personalized Learning Statewide
 - 4 Globally Competent Graduates
 - 5 Informed Instructional Decision Making
 - 6 Student-Centered Resource Investment

The Board of Education continues to refine the Diploma System with new regulations expected to be issued in the fall of 2016. In the proposed regulations, graduation requirements will be: 1) demonstrating proficiency in twenty courses and 2) completion of one performance-based diploma assessment that includes both applied learning skills and core content proficiency. Students are required to present their portfolio or exhibition to a review panel that will use a state-approved rubric.

WILL STATE POLICY LEAD TO TRANSFORMATION?

The challenge before Rhode Island is for districts to use the set of practices required by the state as the building blocks for creating proficiency-based systems. At this time, although many districts will describe themselves as having proficiency-based diplomas, few have been identified as embracing the values or responsiveness that would be expected in a proficiency-based system. Providence has started down the path toward proficiency-based learning by creating new high schools as part of the **Opportunity by Design** initiative launched by the Carnegie Corporation and **Springpoint**. However, for a proficiency-based system to fully develop, it will require districts to engage in a much fuller transformation process.

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN RHODE ISLAND

CUMBERLAND HIGH SCHOOL

Cumberland High School had many of the pieces of a competency-based system in place, including personalized learning plans and performance assessments. However, it wasn't until they introduced standards-based grading that they generated the level of transparency needed to create consistency across the school and autonomy for teachers.

CHS has created a hybrid proficiency-based grading system that is based on student performance levels while still converting into a numerical grade. The performance level rubric is designed to create consistent scoring across all staff members, relying on moderate, strong, and distinguished command of the standard. Students receive feedback on how they can improve their performance. CHS has also eliminated zeros and the D and F. A **video on their grading policy** describes how the rubric scores are then turned into the numerical scores used to determine A, B, or C.

CHS academic expectations are organized around measurement standards. Students are assessed against them. There are about four to six measurement standards for each year, and teachers use common scoring guides. An example of a measurement standard might be demonstrating the use of *evidence-based* claims in a social studies course. Within the academic departments, teachers have worked to create learning progressions around sub-standards – what are the things students need to know and be able to do in order to meet the measurement standard?

Cumberland has developed performance-based assessments aligned with the measurement standards. Students are expected to do two to three within each marking period. The school has also created a validation process to ensure that the performance-based assessments maintain a high level of rigor. A learning

information system (LIS) tracks every measurement standard and every performance-based assessment. This allows for transparency and, with it, greater consistency and accountability on how teachers are assessing student work.

Cumberland High School uses Learner Qualities (LQ) that are considered foundational to academic achievement: attitude and mindset, quality producer, respectful citizen, self-directed learner, and collaborative work. The LQs are only assessed formatively, with students given the chance to demonstrate them in all of their courses. The student information system is organized so that students can see how they are doing on academic progress as well as the LQs. Students are scored as met or not met on LQs, and you can't be on the honor roll without having met all of them.



Cumberland High School had many of the pieces of a competency-based system in place, including personalized learning plans and performance assessments. However, it wasn't until they introduced standards-based grading that they generated the level of transparency needed to create consistency across the school and autonomy for teachers.

The school district has recently begun a process to support eighth and ninth grade teachers to talk together about what students are expected to do when they enter high school. They've created a common assessment for the end of eighth grade to help middle school teachers and students strive to meet that level of proficiency. The common assessment also provides ninth grade teachers with an understanding of exactly where each student needs to continue their learning as they make the transition into high school.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study on **Cumberland High School**.*



VERMONT

Comprehensive Policies of
Personalization and
Proficiency-Based Learning
Montpelier School District

Vermont understands that personalization and proficiency-based education go hand-in-hand. In order to allow greater flexibility, schools need processes in place that create greater accountability for students to reach proficiency and make progress.

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**, which went into effect the next year, while the state legislature passed **Act 77** to expand flexible pathways.

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

The combined power of these two policies has created a clear message that the state is taking a new direction. However, local control is respected in Vermont (as in most of the other states). Thus, supervisory unions have substantial leeway in how they organize a personalized, proficiency-based system. The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) is providing substantial support in the form of training and sample resources, with the understanding that the supervisory unions will develop systems that reflect their communities and build upon their strengths.

Vermont hopes to help supervisory unions and schools reach a deep understanding that can help them launch implementation efforts through a **seminar series** organized by the **Great Schools Partnership**. The series includes sessions on proficiency-based learning, personalization, flexible pathways, student work and norming, grading and reporting, community engagement, assessing transferable skills, student voice, instruction, and graduation. To date, more than half of the state's supervisory unions have participated in the training.

Instructional practices shall promote personalization for each student, and enable each student to successfully engage in the curriculum and meet the graduation requirements... Schools must provide students the opportunity to experience learning through flexible and multiple pathways, including but not limited to career and technical education, virtual learning, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment and early college... Students must be allowed to demonstrate proficiency by presenting multiple types of evidence, including but not limited to teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects.

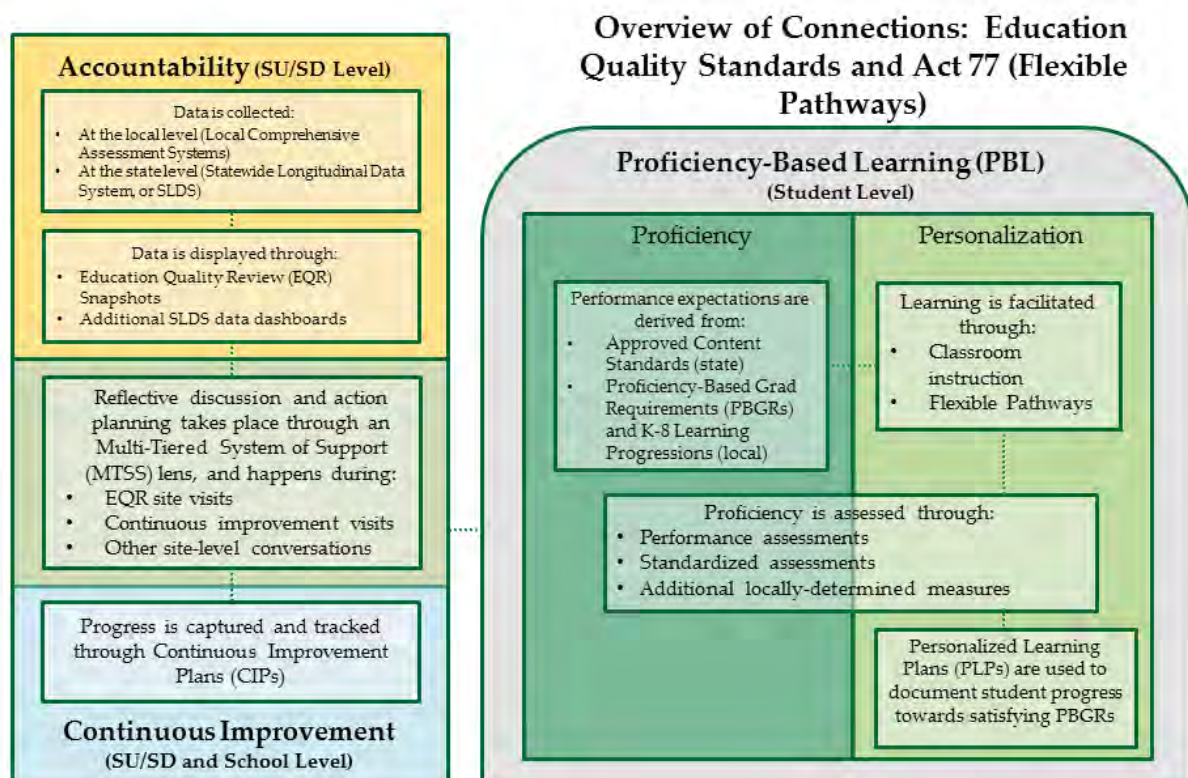
– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY
STANDARDS

Supervisory unions receive \$22,000 for teams of five-to-seven people who participate for two days per month over the course of the school year. The strategy is that at least one member will be trained as a facilitator to support implementation and to train others. The next step is for teams to create implementation plans. In addition, the AOE has created a number of tools to support supervisory unions and schools as they think through the questions they will need to answer for implementing each of the policy elements.

Other efforts that are supporting schools in developing personalized, proficiency-based systems include New England Secondary School Consortium's **League of Innovative Schools**, the **Vermont Professional Learning Network**, and **Partnership for Change**, which is providing support to Winooski and Burlington.

VERMONT'S POLICY FRAMEWORK

Vermont approaches personalized learning broadly with attention to instruction, personalized learning plans, and flexible pathways. The proficiency-based system is primarily embedded within the introduction of a proficiency-based diploma, with additional policy elements in the comprehensive system of assessments and tiered supports.



PROFICIENCY-BASED DIPLOMA

Starting with the class of 2020, the EQS creates a proficiency-based diploma that expects students to become proficient in Visual & Performing Arts, Global Citizenship, Health Education, English Language Arts & Literacy, Mathematics, Physical Education, and Science as well as the Transferable Skills of Clear and Effective Communication, Self-Direction, Creative and Practical Problem Solving, Responsible and Involved Citizenship, and Informed and Integrative Thinking.

In its efforts to support supervisory unions without insisting on one approach, the AOE has provided sample **proficiency-based graduation requirements** in the content areas as well as examples of performance indicators for each of the transferable skills. Not only may school boards set their own graduation requirements, including transferable skills, but the AOE suggests that they should. Recognizing that the number of standards creates a high degree of granularity, the AOE states, “it is unrealistic to expect that graduation requirements will include them all. Therefore, it will be necessary for local policy to identify the key standards that will serve as the basis for graduation decisions.”

Vermont clearly states in the EQS that students are expected to demonstrate proficiency against the standards and not based on a prescribed number of years (math is an exception). The EQS states that while the previous regulation “allowed for the use of Carnegie units to determine graduation decisions, EQS requires that progression and graduation decisions be based on the demonstration of proficiency.” While making clear that proficiency is “the sole means for determining progress and graduation,” the EQS allows schools an option regarding whether to continue to use credits: *Schools may or may not use credits for the purposes of demonstrating that a student has met the graduation requirements. When used, credits must specify the proficiencies demonstrated in order to attain a credit and shall not be based on time spent in learning. Further, students may receive credit for learning that takes place outside of the school, the school day, or the classroom. Any credits earned must occur under the supervision of an appropriately licensed educator.*

A powerful policy change in the EQS is that the responsibility for curriculum is moved from being a school responsibility to the supervisory union. The intent is to create better alignment and consistency across schools. This is an important change in terms of implementing competency education, as it will improve curricular alignment so that students can advance beyond grade level.



“Proficiency-based learning” and “proficiency-based graduation” refer to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.

– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY
STANDARDS

Personalizing Instructional Practice

Vermont's policy regarding personalized instruction is simple. Instruction should be research-based and it should be effective in helping students meet the graduation requirements. The state is also emphasizing the importance of the tiered system of support in ensuring students are successful.

Personalized Learning Plans

Act 77 sets the expectation that all seventh through twelfth grade students will have **personalized learning plans** (PLP) that include any additional supports students require to be successful in school. Vermont sees the PLP as an important step in engaging students in owning and reflecting upon their education as well as creating a formal mechanism to engage parents or legal guardians on an annual basis. Vermont also wants the PLP to be a catalytic tool for creating more experiential learning opportunities based on students' interests and aspirations.



Personal Learning Plans are the mechanism designed to engage students, parents, and educators in a partnership to design a student's unique flexible pathway to graduation. The intention is to put students at the center of the construction of their own learning experience, which evidence indicates will result in greater relevance and engagement, and therefore better outcomes.

– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY
STANDARDS

To support supervisory unions in developing the PLP capacity, Vermont created a work group to provide guidance, a self-assessment tool for supervisory unions and schools, a conceptual framework, critical elements, and a sample template of a PLP. They also issued guidance on the relationship between individualized education programs (IEPs), personalized learning plans (PLPs), and proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGR).

On the understanding that proficiency-based learning isn't just about flexible use of time, but also about the delivery of flexible instructional support, Vermont requires supervisory unions to offer a system of support to be specified in the PLP in the EQS.

Flexible Pathways

Act 77, Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion was designed with three purposes in mind: 1) to encourage and support school supervisory unions to provide high-quality educational experiences; 2) to promote post-secondary readiness; and 3) to increase school completion and pursuit of post-secondary learning. Specifically, it creates opportunities for students to: *demonstrate learning through flexible and multiple pathways, including but not limited to career and technical education, virtual learning, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment and early college.* Pathways must be aligned with standards and supervised by appropriately licensed educators.

A flexible pathway is defined as “any combination of high-quality academic and experiential components leading to secondary school completion and post-secondary readiness, which may include assessments that allow the student to apply his or her knowledge and skills to tasks that are of interest to that student.” Although the legislation includes a list of different types of programming – dual enrollment, early college, virtual learning, and work-based learning – it is designed to enable students to create unique pathways. Understanding that some students leave school without completing their diploma for a variety of reasons, they have also included High School Completion Programs and adult diploma programs as part of the flexible pathways. To further support anytime/anywhere learning, Vermont awarded a grant to the Expanded Learning Coalition, a collaborative effort of supervisory unions and schools to increase the use of expanded learning opportunities within flexible pathways.

Comprehensive System of Assessments

The regulations in the EQS took a more direct approach in requiring supervisory unions to have a comprehensive system of assessments. It starts with the expectation that students should be able to demonstrate proficiency through multiple types of evidence. It articulates seven qualities of the system of assessments:

1. assesses the standards approved by the State Board of Education;
2. employs a balance of assessment types, including but not limited to, teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects;
3. includes both formative and summative assessments;
4. enables decisions to be made about student progression and graduation, including measuring proficiency-based learning;
5. informs the development of Personalized Learning Plans and student support;
6. provides data that informs decisions regarding instruction, professional learning, and educational resources and curriculum; and
7. reflects strategies and goals outlined in the supervisory union’s Continuous Improvement Plan.

In addition, Vermont requires that the performance criteria be transparent to students, parents, and educators.

Ensuring Quality through the Qualitative Review

There are many strategies for states to determine quality of the schools, with end-of-year state accountability exams serving as only one of them. Vermont policy contains a broader perspective of quality than simply the performance of student achievement. The EQS requires AOE to conduct regular qualitative reviews. The AOE is building this capacity by having conducted eight reviews of supervisory units this year with a goal of twenty reviews in the coming year. The focus is now on the supervisory union level as compared to the school level based on the strategic goal of building more coherence and consistency through the supervisory union, as well as the practical reason that the supervisory units tend to be small.

Currently, Vermont does not intend to use the reviews within their accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Instead, they hope that the qualitative reviews will become meaningful opportunities for technical assistance. Given that the reviews will include peers from other supervisory unions, this will also help to strengthen networks, disseminate effective practices, and contribute to future system-building.

Going Forward

Vermont is in the midst of a dramatic change of their education system, with four workgroups being developed at AOE to help guide the process of alignment: 1) Proficiency-Based Learning; 2) Personalization & Flexible Pathways; 3) Multi-Tiered System of Support Team; and 4) the Education Quality Review/School Effectiveness. With their strong history of community engagement, and with school budgets passed by citizens at town meetings, the sense of reciprocal accountability is very strong. The AEO is also collaborating with Great Schools Partnership, educators from around the state, and generating student feedback to create the Vermont Transferable Skills Assessment Supports (VTSAS) including transferable skill-specific sample tasks, task models, scoring criteria, and student work samples.

Most supervisory unions are small, as are the classroom sizes, making it easier to engage communities and educators in moving through the powerful change in values and mindset. Many schools have the pieces of a personalized, proficiency-based system in place with full implementation expected to start in the coming year in leading supervisory unions. Thus, CompetencyWorks will be making visits in 2017 after schools have had a full year of implementation.

A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN VERMONT

MONTPELIER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Montpelier School District has been using personalized learning plans since the late 1990s, and now link to graduation proficiencies. With the comprehensive policies of the state to advance personalized learning, flexible pathways and proficiency-based learning, Montpelier is thinking more deeply about how to use the plans to engage and motivate students. One of the first steps is to operationalize the seven **transferable skills** – reading, writing, communication, problem-solving, habits of learning, citizenship, and creativity – so that educators can effectively **assess and provide effective feedback** on key skills across the curriculum and over time. Another critical element is the reflection and goal setting provided by exhibitions of learning.



The state created a set of policies that are all around the same work. The common theme is building student agency. We want our students to know themselves as learners, to have the skills to be successful learners, and to have opportunities to build the transferable skills all along their path from kindergarten to graduation.

– MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF
CURRICULUM & TECHNOLOGY,
MONTPELIER SCHOOL DISTRICT,
VERMONT

Montpelier High School (MHS) uses the Understanding by Design (UBD) framework (Wiggins & McTighe) to start with the end in mind, namely college- and career-readiness demonstrated by proficiency in transferable skills supported by rigorous content-area knowledge. Teachers identify one transferable skill to focus on for each unit as an enduring understanding. For example, a science unit might emphasize organization and evidence in writing in biology class. Drawing upon the learning objectives developed by teachers, the district will then begin to build the framework for the entire district. The goal is to create a **common set of language for educators to discuss improvements in instruction and assessment** as they increase their intentionality of what students should know and be able to do.

One tool MHS is finding helpful in managing implementation are key documents that can engage a broad set of stakeholders in understanding and helping create the new system. The following documents can be powerful leverage points for engagement:

- Description of the graduation requirements
- Program of studies or the list of courses with the specific standards that students will be expected to demonstrate within each course.
- Proficiency-based report cards
- Transcript changes
- School profiles that include description of pedagogy, what they want for students to learn and be able to do, extended learning opportunities, and data to describe performance in a personalized, proficiency-based structure

Throughout the year, Montpelier has invited the community into the conversation in a four-part series titled The Future of School. In so doing, families and stakeholders had the opportunity to be both early learners of the changes, as well as design partners.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study on **Montpelier School District**.*

Endnotes

1. ESSA reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was last reauthorized in 2001 under NCLB.
2. See the New England Secondary School Consortium Collegiate Statements of Support, <http://newenglandssc.org/resources/collegiate-support/>
3. The Education Week Research Center, "U.S. Graduation Rate Breaks Another Record," *Education Week*, June 2, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/06/02/us-graduation-rate-breaks-another-record.html?intc=EW-DC16-TOC>.
4. Mary Nguyen Barry and Michael Dannenberg, "Out of Pocket: The High Cost of Inadequate High Schools and High School Student Achievement on College Affordability," *Education Reform Now*, March 2016, https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/EdReformNow%20O-P%20Embargoed%20Final.pdf.
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.
6. Sturgis, C., "Chugach School District: A Personalized, Performance-Based System," *International Association for K–12 Online Learning*, March 2016, http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CW_ChugachSchoolDistrict_APersonalizedPerformanceBasedSystem.pdf.
7. "The Role of Learning Progressions in Competency-Based Pathways," Achieve, July 2015, <http://www.achieve.org/learningprogressionsinCBP>.
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**.
9. The challenge of statewide policy in states with high levels of local control is described in **From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire** by Julia Freeland, Clayton Christensen Institute.
10. New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont established NECAP in 2005 to provide reading, writing, mathematics, and science assessments. Maine joined in 2009. With the introduction of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, the participating states are now only collaborating around the science assessments.
11. 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.
12. "New Hampshire Performance Assessment of Competency Education: Progress Report to the United States Department of Education," October 30, 2015.
13. See **Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching**, Council of Chief State School Officers and Jobs for the Future, 2015.



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