



Building Competency-Based Pathways:
Success and Challenges from Leaders in the Field
A Forum

April 11, 2011

Background

Competency-based approaches to education enable students to progress in their learning based upon mastery of clearly identified content and competencies, rather than based upon time on task or grade level. Innovative systems and programs that are competency-based are built around student-centered learning opportunities that enable students to know what is expected of them at each stage of their learning. The term “competency-based” has been used in federal programs but other phrases for these learning approaches are used in different states, including “proficiency-based,” “standards-based” and “performance-based.” The criteria by which student learning is measured in such learning pathways are clearly articulated and competencies are assessed in multiple ways. Competency-based pathways to high school graduation are showing promise in both district-wide reform as well as in alternative education settings.

This forum presented a comprehensive overview of what competency-based learning can include, as well as the policy considerations for enabling such learning approaches. Two examples of competency-based learning in practice were highlighted—as a model for school district reform and as an alternative schools model in a nationwide network of schools.

Chris Sturgis, President of MetisNet, gave an overview of competency-based education to frame the forum’s discussion. MetisNet is a consulting firm specializing in supporting foundations in strategy development, coaching, and rapid research in the areas of high school reform, dropout recovery, youth issues, and community engagement.

Sturgis emphasized that there is a fundamental difference between the current time-based system used in education and a competency-based system. Competency-based learning is a structural change that dovetails with the idea of next generation learning—anytime, anywhere learning. However, the two are distinct; for example, competency-based learning can occur in a classroom during traditional school day hours. Ultimately, competency-based learning is student-centered and student-driven.

It is important to have a common, working definition for competency-based learning, which is a term used in the U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation Fund programs. Following are the critical design principles of competency-based learning:

1. *Students advance upon mastery.* Students progress to more advanced work and earn credits upon demonstration of learning by applying specific skills and content; pace is still important but there is responsiveness to students' needs.
2. *Explicit and measurable learning objectives empower students.* Courses are organized into measurable learning objectives that are shared with students; rigorous, expanded learning opportunities connect academics with the real world; and students take responsibility for their learning.
3. *Assessment is a meaningful and positive learning experience for students.* Traditional approaches to assessment and accountability of learning are shifted to be *for* learning. Formative assessments are aligned with learning objectives and students receive immediate feedback from assessments to encourage them to return to difficult concepts and skills until mastery is achieved. Students do not wait for months to test concepts they mastered earlier in the year.

Sturgis shared several lessons learned from a scan of the field about the readiness to expand the use of competency-based education, including:

- There are pockets of innovation; innovative states include New Hampshire, Oregon, Ohio, and Alabama, and early innovators include Diploma Plus, Chugach School District in Alaska, Lindsay Unified School District in California, Florida Virtual School, Re-inventing Schools Coalition, Equity and Achievement for Standards-based Learning Institute, and Youth Connection Charter School in Chicago
- Technology can empower competency-based learning by providing tools to measure data on student progress
- There is a rapidly growing demand due to the availability of online learning, budget deficits, the graduation crisis, and school turnaround efforts
- States are in a position to lead this effort due to limited federal barriers
- Teachers flourish and rediscover the joy of learning and teaching
- Competency-based learning promotes a culture of continuous improvement

Sturgis noted the importance of competency-based learning for students who have dropped out. Competency-based learning helps create a culture of success for students who previously haven't been served by the education system, and assists students in being responsible for their own education. This approach acknowledges that some students don't have time for the seat time requirements of traditional programs and need accelerated learning, or that others don't require an entire course but just have gaps in skills that must be filled in. Ultimately, it provides continuity for students who are mobile, have religious or work responsibilities, become pregnant, or have other breaks in learning.

At a recent summit on competency-based learning, several points emerged as highlights. First, there are expanded learning opportunities all around that can help students build competencies, including online and 24/7, afterschool, and in work or volunteer experiences that can help students have rapid learning experiences through college. Second, accountability must be from the ground-up, be based on student progress, and ultimately serve students and teachers first. Summative assessments are used once students have had the opportunity to master skills. Third, language needs to shift for expanded roles; for instance, from "teacher" to "educator" and from "school" to "learning environment." Fourth, critical partnerships need to be forged, particularly to promote higher education institutions in accepting credits from competency-based programs. The reauthorization of the Elementary

and Secondary Education Act can promote such partnerships. Ultimately, innovations in policy and practice need to be synchronized.

A question was asked about what federal policy barriers exist to competency-based learning, particularly about the federal qualifications for “highly qualified teachers.” Sturgis responded that teacher quality itself isn’t a barrier to competency-based learning, however the need to meet the “highly qualified teacher” provision under the No Child Left Behind Act may limit the ability to offer anytime, anywhere learning. When creating or changing policy, Sturgis urged improvements to the current system, which is based on a factory model, by looking toward next generation learning, and emphasized that policies should promote and not hamper next generation learning.

Tom Rooney, Assistant Superintendent of the Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) in California, shared the story of how his district developed a performance-based system for learners that has redefined many of the traditional structures of schooling and developed a future-focused, learner-centered educational environment.

LUSD is located in Central San Joaquin Valley, California—the heart of the state’s farmland and a key to supplying food to America. Most residents speak Spanish at home, and for many learners, it isn’t necessary to know English to get by locally. Very few residents have college degrees, with the average education level of the overall community at the fifth grade level. There is a high unemployment rate and a high level of poverty.

LUSD was prompted to move to a competency-based system after seeing staff and students work hard to meet the state standards and achieve movement on Adequate Yearly Progress targets, only to see a flat line in performance shortly after. Examples abounded of high school graduates who couldn’t read at a sixth grade level. Rooney, other school leaders, and parents felt that students were awarded high school diplomas that really did not signify they were adequately prepared for adult life after high school.

Rooney and others worked with district and community stakeholders regarding their expectations and vision for what they wanted Lindsay graduates to look like—including expectations for curriculum, instruction, academic competencies, and social behaviors. There was a desire to develop a system that would give “learners,” rather than “students,” more time and more strategic help enabling them to progress faster in the required learning. LUSD worked with the community to build a strategic design for the district that would prepare learners to be life-long learners and productive, future-focused global citizens. The district developed guiding principles—beliefs and truths—about learning and set a bold vision for assessment, curriculum, instruction, technology, leadership, stakeholders, and personnel.

LUSD identified units of study, aligned curriculum with competencies based on state standards, and developed new assessments aligned with these competencies. LUSD is in the process of aligning its curriculum with the Common Core Standards as they are available. The performance-based system now includes measurement topics and scoring scales (a one through four scale), an assessment system, ability to track learning, grading and scoring guides, and formative feedback opportunities.

Rooney believes that the competency-based learning system is fair to all students because it is honest about where students are and lets them achieve at their highest level. Rooney said, “The current, traditional education system lies to a bunch of our students. It is dishonest to the highest-achievers who do homework and ace tests, because it doesn’t let them truly achieve their fullest academic and social potential. Competency-based learning is not just for the low-achieving child.” After last year’s inaugural year for high school students, data show that the highest performing group was freshmen students, the group for which proficiency-based learning had been fully implemented. The district is now expanding the system to all K-12 students.

Like Sturgis, Rooney noted that federal policy doesn’t necessarily block competency-based learning, but it doesn’t exactly promote it either. For instance, while the No Child Left Behind Act created a focus on testing and measurement, there is now an opportunity to make assessments more performance-based. If policy and test questions are geared toward problem solving and doing projects, this will drive behavior in the classroom.

Akili Moses Israel, Executive Director of Diploma Plus™, described the nationwide reach of Diploma Plus’s work to create small schools and programs that offer supports to decrease disparities for students who have dropped out or been pushed out of school.

Diploma Plus is a nonprofit with a network of 27 schools and programs in 10 states, and growing. Located mostly in urban areas with high concentrations of poverty and minority groups, Diploma Plus was created in 1996 by teachers in the Boston area in response to an alarming number of students dropping out—mainly students of color. Diploma Plus provides rigorous, relevant, and student-centered alternative education for students, many of whom don’t have anywhere else to turn for education support. Students who enter the program should have at least a sixth grade reading level to access the curriculum. Participating students are promised to graduate prepared for both college and careers, have opportunities to accelerate their education, have academic connections to the real world, and have supportive relationships with caring adults.

Diploma Plus uses a performance-based system that has four key components:

1. *Rigorous curriculum.* The Diploma Plus program uses a rigorous curriculum that is competency-based and aligned with standards. Israel said, “The standards are the *what*, while the competencies are the *how*.” Schools use their own state’s standards, and will include alignment to the Common Core Standards as well. As a result, students meet state standards that represent the core of what students should know, understand, and be able to do, and also meet Diploma Competencies like showing observable and measurable disciplinary habits of mind. Similar to LUSD, the Diploma Plus curriculum uses a scale of zero to five to gauge evidence of demonstrating Diploma Plus Competencies.
2. *Effective institutional practices.* Diploma Plus gives students ongoing opportunities to demonstrate what they know—the program is evidenced based. Students connect to the Diploma Plus Competencies and prioritized standards as outlined in the curriculum, and apply the Competencies to state standards. Diploma Plus uses a blended learning approach that includes: access to materials anytime, anywhere; learning in the classroom and/or online; the ability to catch up on work past or move forward after mastery. Diploma Plus uses its Learning Management System, Diploma

- Plus.net or DP.net, with an online content management tool, competency-based grading system, e-portfolios, and social network style communication feature for students, teachers, and Diploma Plus staff.
3. *Authentic assessment.* Students authentically demonstrate competency through examples such as publishing an op-ed in the newspaper and having local government use student-produced work. Although behavior is included as a factor in evaluation, students are graded on attainment of specific competencies without punitive factors such as behavior measured into their academic grade.
 4. *Promotion and graduation structure.* Diploma Plus is the opposite of social promotion because in its schools, at every level, students need to demonstrate progress. Students progress from Foundation Level (below 9th grade skills), to Presentation Level (9th to 11th grade skills), to Plus Level (11th – 12th grade skills) by presenting portfolios, doing classroom activities, and undergoing authentic assessments.

Israel shared core lessons learned from Diploma Plus's work. She noted that districts need to have systemic plans in place for alternative education, policies and practices should allow time for students' development pace versus artificial timeframes based on Carnegie units; technology systems need to support learning; and students need multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. She stressed that it is vital to have staff that are committed to alternative education, and have a strong intake process for students.

Conclusion

Competency-based learning is an alternative approach to education that fundamentally changes the way that students learn. At its core, learning moves away from being time- and location-based to being "anytime, anywhere" learning in an effort to best serve young people, including those who are at risk of or have already left the traditional education for a variety of reasons. Having a common understanding of what it takes to implement competency-based approaches is vital in order for policy to not only promote this method, but to remove barriers that may exist to implementation. Two examples, Lindsay Unified School District and Diploma Plus, offer insights about how competency-based learning can happen in practice—in a variety of school settings.

Highlights of Question and Answer

Andrea Browning, Senior Program Associate at AYPF and moderator of the discussion, asked speakers to talk further about how federal policy leaders can support the growth of competency-based learning. Sturgis suggested using the words "competency-based" in legislation wherever possible; using competency-based education as a means of systemic innovation; developing competencies for use in traditional schools or next generation learning; and rethinking the reliance of policies on time-based measurements, such as grade point average, since these are just one point in time and don't show progress since that time. Rooney added that policies should honor the understanding that people learn in different ways and different time frames—something he noted is honored from birth to kindergarten and beyond high school into college, yet is not accepted in the K-12 system. Rooney also said that innovation needs to be promoted and encouraged, and that research-based programs and innovation don't go hand in hand. Finally, Israel said that schools should be rewarded, not penalized, for educating students who are returning to the system.

A question was asked about addressing the concerns of teachers and leaders when seeking to adopt the competency-based approach. Rooney said it is important to engage stakeholders from the start. This will be a huge shift for teachers, since they take on role of facilitator of learning, rather than the grand imparter of knowledge. Initially in LUSD, teachers misunderstood the system and did not provide enough direct, explicit instruction. The district implemented professional development to show how to facilitate that learning. Sturgis added that competency-based learning requires a shift in what the skills are that teachers need—it is about assessing the situation when students are stuck, giving them tools to get unstuck in different ways, and using assessments identify progress. There is a need to increase the sophistication around assessment and multiple learning tasks.

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Someone asked for examples of schools receiving funding based on improved student achievement, rather than on attendance. Rooney was not aware of any, but would like to see this area examined because he believes that the model of using seat time is not benefiting public education. Sturgis shared some examples of strong competency-based schools, though they still don't actually get at payment for student achievement. She added that there will come a point when students are learning much from resources outside of the school, and this will need to be accounted for.