State and district education leaders are increasingly considering implementing competency-based pathways and systems as a way to help more students become college and career ready, as competency-based learning (CBL) gives students the flexibility to take the time they need to master material and provides differentiated, student-centered instruction and assessment across a full range of competencies. Recognizing that college and career readiness involves a host of skills beyond core academic content, CBL is being recognized as a strategy for fostering those skills. In thinking about the design of these pathways, educators should consider incorporating expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) into the pathways. ELOs take place outside of the boundaries of the school day and allow students to learn in non-school settings with diverse community providers on topics of relevance and interest to students. There is growing agreement that ELOs, afterschool, and summer programs are a promising strategy for helping youth develop the full range of skills needed to succeed in college and careers. ELOs add to the depth and breadth of learning and draw upon many adult experts to augment, enrich, reinforce, and support in-class learning, help students master academic and other competencies, and apply their knowledge. ELOs, afterschool, and summer programs should be viewed as key players in a competency education system.

There are a number of unexplored design questions as competency-based systems emerge across the country. The goal of this Discussion Group was to begin a collective discussion between individuals and stakeholders who work in K-12 education, competency-based education, and expanded learning, about the role that ELOs can play in the development and implementation of CBL. This event served as an opportunity to build connections, help participants understand CBL, and discuss the potential role of ELOs. The event included a focus on emerging practices in communities and states where schools are working with ELOs to provide students with personalized learning that allows them to learn and advance at their own pace.

Welcome, Introductions, and Participant Share Out

Executive Director Betsy Brand began the day with remarks that set the stage for this discussion. Brand discussed the shared characteristics and similar foundations of the work of CBL and ELOs. Both seek to provide individual and student-centered learning, use authentic assessments that are based on real world tasks and act as meaningful learning opportunities, and rely on strong partnerships between schools and communities. They also use similar experiential learning strategies, demonstrated by their use of internships, community service, workplace exploration, and other real world learning settings. CBL and ELOs also both focus on application of knowledge and helping students learn a diverse set of skills that promote college and career readiness.

Participants then shared their interests in this discussion, touching on many of the same themes and goals. Several participants discussed viewing the use of CBL and ELOs as an issue of equity and social justice. Participants also stressed the need for systems integration and hoped to discuss how to build

state and city systems that would support the work of CBL and ELOs. Several participants were already involved in models that use CBL and/or ELOs. States represented included Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wyoming. These individuals indicated they are interested in improving current models and learning best practices. Likewise participants from states that do not yet use competency education were hoping to obtain information to help envision new school models and methods of funding. Participants wanted to discuss the role of government and strategies to convince policymakers to support CBL. Participants discussed how CBL and ELOs might help address current issues such as reducing high school dropouts, creating alternative pathways for students to earn credit, and greater integration of technology and STEM-related skills into student learning. Participants also hoped to discuss the role of assessments in CBL, particularly performance-based assessments, and whether assessments can help ensure quality of CBL and ELO programs for all students.

Creating the Vision

Chris Sturgis, the Principal of MetisNet and co-founder of CompetencyWorks and Hillary Salmons, Executive Director of the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) set the framework for further discussion and identified underlying principles that guide their work with ELOs and CBL.

Chris Sturgis, MetisNet

Chris Sturgis discussed the parameters of a competency–based system and defined terms to encourage consistent use of language for the discussion. Sturgis described three elements that are important components of competency-based programs. The first is transparency, demonstrated by students knowing their learning targets, what proficiency looks like, and what next steps they are working toward. The second is a clear learning progression, meaning that students begin where they are currently proficient and work towards learning goals. Third, teachers are focused on teaching students and not the curriculum, with the goal of getting students to proficiency. Sturgis explained that a competency-based learning model must always begin at students' current level of mastery and then help students fill the gaps and progress. Sturgis also pointed out that just using adaptive software doesn't make a school competency-based. Strictly online courses that culminate in multiple choice exams do not allow students to understand content on a higher level and use their knowledge and skills in ways that can be applied in real life settings

Sturgis gave a definition of Competency Based Learning, with a focus on quality. The definition had five parts:

- *Students advance upon mastery*. What students should know and be able to do to be considered proficient is well-defined. Student work is appropriately challenging, based on the student level, and students advance upon mastery, not based on a passing grade or their age. Once students are proficient they can apply content more deeply or move to the next course to advance more quickly.
- *Explicit and measurable learning objectives that empower students*. Students, parents, teachers, and ELO partners should understand student learning objectives. Students can communicate

these objectives, promoting a greater sense of student agency and student voice. ELOs can provide students opportunities to work on gaps in their learning or to develop greater fluency. The use of digital badging is an emerging technique for credentialing and communicating skill development. Badges allow students to "carry" their learning objectives through an online portfolio and meet those objectives through a range of experiences, including ELOs. Sturgis said that it is important to keep in mind earning a badge does not necessarily equate to a full course credit, but rather it can be an opportunity to help students meet specific competencies that can possibly count towards partial credit or demonstrate unique skills beyond expectations of the K-12 system.

- *Assessment is meaningful and positive learning experience for students*. Teachers use formative and summative assessments to assess knowledge, skills, and abilities across multiple contexts. Assessments should engage students in their learning experience—portfolio assessments or student presentations are not only an opportunity to demonstrate learning, but also a learning experience where students can develop communication, critical thinking, and other higher order skills. This strategy is in contrast to many assessments of lower levels of depth of knowledge in which students merely recall and repeat information they have previously learned.

- *Timely and differentiated support to meet each student's specific learning needs*. This component involves providing students differentiated supports based on their needs, including having a plan for what happens when a student is not reaching proficiency or when advanced students want to pursue higher level studies. It includes building flex time for extra help into the school day and school year. It also means having a clearly articulated plan for using learning plans to inform teachers and instructional specialists so that they can provide the necessary instructional support when students need it.

- *Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions such as learning to learn*. Sturgis said that CBL includes developing a set of competencies that are far broader than strictly academic content. The goal of a competency-based learning model is for students to be familiar with and apply the material from the Common Core State Standards at higher levels than they are currently doing in traditional classrooms. Many systems use knowledge frameworks, such as Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's Depth of Knowledge, that articulate deeper levels of learning, such as evaluation, application, or creation of knowledge. ELOs can contribute to these skills and offer a range of opportunities to learn how to learn. Skills such as perseverance and learning from our mistakes can be learned in ELOs as much as the classroom.

Finally Sturgis described CBL as students learning to learn and why learning is important. Instead of being pushed through curricula without fully understanding or being able to apply material, students can learn that they can be successful when they have the time and support to develop mastery.

Hillary Salmons, Providence After School Alliance (PASA)

Hillary Salmons discussed PASA's use of CBL in their model, specifically on legitimizing afterschool and ELOs as ways to obtain credit and develop specific habits of mind, problem solving skills, and the ability to demonstrate their learning.

Salmons stressed that their goal is to be able to promote a youth development agenda and ultimately hold the program accountable for youth outcomes. In order to do that, adults across multiple contexts, including schools and ELOs, must develop and coordinate an agenda focused on the needs of the student, as opposed to the system. A CBL approach would be characterized by the use of a common language across providers, meaningful assessments and rubrics, alignment of support services across schools and community-based partners, youth empowerment strategies, and an accountability system focused on youth and adult outcomes that work toward the desired graduation profile of a student.

Salmons suggested the importance of linkages, working together, and sharing expertise in order to move forward. What is needed, she said, is more honesty and willingness from teachers to discuss what kinds of rubrics and mastery assessments can be developed. There is an opportunity for the different sectors in education to take these projects on collectively. Eliminating silos is essential to the success of this work. Salmons stated that moving forward, there should be more focus on the physical, social, and emotional development of children, and all sectors should work together toward this outcome. Salmons also pointed to the importance of technology as a tool that allows for linkages between formal and informal learning and explained that the use of digital badges has a currency with today's technologically savvy youth in a way that credits do not as badges more often reflect students' individual interests, skills, and achievements. She highlighted three important documents that have informed their work:

> The Forum for Youth Investment. (2012) *Out of School Time Policy Commentary*: *The Common Core Standards: What Do They Mean For Out of School Time?* (Devaney, E., Yohalem, N.)
> *Available at:* http://forumfyi.org/files/ost_7.31.pdf

> Nellie Mae Foundation. (2012) *Making Mastery Work: A Close Up View of Competency Education.* (Priest, N., Rudenstine, A., Weisstein, E.)
> *Available at:* http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Making-Mastery-Work-NMEF-2012-Inline.pdf

> Jobs for the Future. (2012) *Aligning Competencies to Rigorous Standards for Off Track Youth. (Wolfe, R.)*
> *Available at:* http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/AligningCompetencies_112812.pdf

State and Local Examples

Adam Greenman, Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance

> *"The Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance (RIASPA) is a statewide advocacy organization whose mission is to influence public policy to expand and support high quality afterschool programs so that Rhode Island's children and youth are inspired to learn, grow, and prepared to lead productive lives. RIASPA was founded by and is currently funded and housed by the United Way of Rhode Island and is one of thirty-eight statewide afterschool networks in the nation funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Currently RIASPA has a broad-based network of over 400*

individual members in Rhode Island. Participating organizations include direct afterschool providers, substance abuse task-forces, state agencies, community groups serving youth during the afterschool hours, school personnel, among others."

Adam Greenman discussed Rhode Island's progress in offering high school credit through ELOs through a competency-based approach. The state passed legislation allowing districts to develop plans for ELOs to provide high school credit and consequently Providence, Central Falls, and Woonsocket began to provide opportunities for students to earn credit for some of their work outside of school. These districts are implementing systems that are student-centered, not time-based, and emphasize community involvement. Greenman described a three-legged approach in which students, teachers, and community partners work together. This model has been both teacher- and community-driven and has validated the work that ELOs are doing. Previously, the work in ELOs was completely unconnected to the school day, but now students can get credit for the work they are doing out of school.

Greenman suggested ways to strengthen the connection between competency-based learning and ELOs. Greenman recommended continued focus on developing aligned systems and encouraged participants to consider what policy implications might emerge as a result of this shift. As systems shift, Greenman argued that we should think about the most effective ways to share best practices, which communities are ready for these models, and which organizations and processes are already at work. Finally he suggested we explore the role of workforce credentials and workforce readiness as part of CBL.

Hillary Salmons, PASA

"The Providence After School Alliance aims to improve and increase quality after-school opportunities for the children and youth of Providence, Rhode Island. PASA received initial funding from The Wallace Foundation and Bank of American to expand and improve afterschool opportunities for the youth of Providence by organizing a system of afterschool supports. This system will ensure access for all Providence youth to high quality afterschool programs and learning opportunities. PASA was created and formed through the collective efforts of more than 150 public and nonprofit afterschool providers in a planning process led by then-Mayor David N. Cicilline. Since its founding in 2004, PASA and the Mayor successfully built a city-wide afterschool system comprising a core AfterZone model, Quality Improvement Strategy, baseline systems, and unprecedented levels of public-private partnership. The innovative AfterZone model serves more than 1,000 youth per year through five school-centered, community "campuses" that provide a variety of programs for middle-school youth in the areas of the arts, sports, science, and life skills."

Hillary Salmons discussed the work PASA has done through The Hub program that allows high school students to receive elective credits through work done in community-based organizations working in partnership with PASA. *Educators in ELOs work closely with PASA for professional development and*

other curriculum and assessment materials. The ELO educator also partners with a teacher of record within the school to co-create a curriculum and assessment plan, which is then vetted by the central office in Providence Public Schools. Both the ELO educator and teacher of record assess students (the teacher of record is responsible for providing grades), using performance assessments such as portfolios and community-wide presentations of learning. While individual ELOs did not have the capacity to partner with schools, seek out professional development support, and develop performance assessments on their own, the partnership with PASA facilitated that work. Salmons said that a focus on student competencies and providing credit to students as a result of the work they are doing beyond the school day provided ELOs legitimacy. Salmons pointed to the use of rubrics and portfolios as one way to demonstrate and show student mastery.

Salmons suggested recruiting young business leaders and mentors to provide out-of-school credit opportunities for students. One example given of this was having young lawyers read and comment on students' arguments as a means of mentoring them on their portfolios. She also discussed the many groups and organizations that are led by young people that are in high schools or want to be working in high schools. The portfolios can be used as a communication vehicle for the community. An important piece of this is using teachers as a bridge. Teachers would be paired with each community organization as an advisor. This pairing would allow teachers and school faculty to understand the merit of the work being done outside the classroom.

Lynn Stanley, New Hampshire Afterschool Network

Lynn Stanley described the CBL system in New Hampshire in which implementation looks very different across school districts as New Hampshire is a local control state and districts have a great deal of freedom to determine their educational offerings. Education decisions are made through district town halls and through grass roots processes. This has major implications for CBL, as moving to a competency-based system requires that local stakeholders be in support of the initiative to develop political will to implement or sustain any change.

Stanley went on to discuss how the afterschool network supports ELOs in New Hampshire. New Hampshire has removed the Carnegie Unit and mandated the use of proficiency-based diplomas, which has opened up the opportunity for ELOs to help students attain credit and caused many districts and schools to change their policy to allow for ELOs. She also stated that ELOs are an avenue for creating the important link between schools and communities because these programs oftentimes already have long-standing relationships in the community.

Stanley then shared some lessons learned from using ELOs. First, that each school is going to use them differently but that there should be guidelines about what they look like. Second, that funding from ELOs comes from different funding streams and not just one consistent source, making sustainability an issue. Third, ELOs are especially helpful for students who have a harder time earning credit or who have barriers to graduating on time. Participating in ELOs can allow students to catch up to their peers and participate in activities that are of interest to them. Finally, students are able to develop a personal relationship with a caring and supportive adult in ELOs.

Carolyn Hudman, Kentucky Out of School Alliance

> *"Kentucky Out-of-School Alliance is a collaborative effort that brings together a powerful and influential group of adults -- including educators, legislators, policy makers, and child-care providers -- who care about the well-being of Kentucky's young people. As members of the Kentucky Out-of-School Alliance, they share a common vision and are working diligently to create a sustainable structure of statewide, regional, and local partnerships, particularly school-community partnerships, focused on supporting statewide policy development for afterschool; support the development and growth of statewide policies that will secure the resources that are needed to sustain new and existing afterschool programs; and support state-wide systems to ensure programs are of high quality."*

Carolyn Hudman provided an overview of the state's work on CBL at the state level. State leaders have worked together to develop a taskforce and recommendations for moving to a competency-based system. The Kentucky Department of Education prepared a [CBE report](#) following a summit in 2012 to help inform policymakers and education leaders in the state on major implications and develop a framework for a competency-based system. Kentucky has had support from various partners, such as the National Governors Association and the Council for Chief State School Officers to develop communities of practice and learning experiences focused on CBL. As a result of their work, Kentucky has written legislation that offered district waivers to develop "Districts of Innovation." Using language from this legislation and through their 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding, the Out-of-School Alliance has developed five pilot programs in Kentucky over the next three years to help build programmatic support and embed ELOs into the school day through competency-based pathways. The Alliance has been working with the Kentucky State Department of Education to build evaluation tools to measure program effectiveness.

Progress has been made through state level convenings and discussions. There have also been barriers to this approach taking hold in districts across the state, which Kentucky is working to eliminate. Hudman stated that assessment and accountability systems were seen as major obstacles in state level discussions. State leaders struggled to decide what assessments would be appropriate for measuring competencies and how the state could incorporate those assessments into a large scale accountability system. Furthermore, while having conversations at the state level led to the development of a CBL framework and pilot programs, schools and districts are still working to understand and incorporate ELOs into their work through competency-based pathways. Hudman argued that Kentucky is working towards the development of additional guidance materials so that schools and districts have a better understanding of the shifts they can implement on the ground to support this work.

Discussion of Key Issues

After hearing from specific state and local examples, participants took time to reflect on some of the critical issues that surfaced. Recognizing the overwhelming number of issues at hand, participants narrowed the discussion to three topics that were of most interest to the group for further discussion in small groups: equity, professional development, and assessment and accountability.

Equity:

One participant argued that ELOs are fundamentally inequitable. Currently, students and families who have access to resources and time often have access to a range of engaging learning experiences beyond the school day. Disadvantaged households largely do not have access to such opportunities; while a number of federal funding streams exist and are occasionally made available for disadvantaged populations, the majority of low-income families miss out. By incorporating ELOs into competency-based systems, we can bring to light these inequities and ensure that all students have access to high quality engaging learning experiences.

Alternatively, another participant expressed concern over the long term implications of supporting a more decentralized system that moves away from large scale accountability systems in favor of a more personalized system that places more responsibility on the K-12 and ELO educators. By relinquishing that control, there is the possibility that students' experiences could vary dramatically based on the quality of instructors and amount of available resources.

Professional Development:

As competency-based education systems are being built across the country within K-12 systems, policymakers and practitioners are recognizing the tremendous amount of capacity building that must be put in place to educate teachers and instructional teams, administrators, state leadership, and the general public. As participants considered also incorporating expanded learning opportunities into these systems, they acknowledged the significant barriers to providing the necessary support to effectively implement competency-based learning in opportunities beyond the school day.

Most CBOs or afterschool systems do not have access to the resources to offer ongoing professional development on the topic. While the ELO community has taken great lengths to embed professional development and quality improvement systems in their work, financial capital make sustaining these efforts a constant struggle. Competency-based learning requires intensive training on curriculum and assessment and ELOs will not likely have the funding to support sustained work. They will need incentives to participate. Furthermore, human capital can be an issue as many ELO staff work part time, have less training, and are more transient than K-12 teachers. These issues make it difficult to ensure that ELOs are up to date on the most current competency-based practices.

One potential solution to the lack of resources within the ELO community is a focus on close collaboration between schools, districts, and community-based organizations. Through these partnerships, educators can access joint professional development opportunities in which community-based educators are learning alongside K-12 teachers. Afterschool intermediaries at the state and district level are potential vehicles to help drive continued collaboration between ELOs and schools. They often have developed many of the partnerships needed to spur this work and can tap into those networks to solicit community buy-in; they also have professional development modules in place to support ELOs and schools in such a transition.

In addition to leveraging professional development support, this approach also requires close collaboration between K-12 teachers and CBOs to develop co-created curricula. In Providence, the teacher of record works with the community-based educator to develop a curriculum and assessment plan and that plan is then approved by the school district central office. Assessment decisions are also often under the purview of the teacher of record. All systems represented at the meeting required that a teacher of record provide a final grade. This close collaboration can be a challenge for many ELOs as oftentimes CBOs and schools are not co-located, ELOs are rarely offered any incentive to participate in this collaboration, and K-12 staff often are not supportive of these efforts. K-12 teachers are constrained by teacher evaluation systems and standardized student assessments that do not align with competency-based learning.

Despite significant challenges, there are opportunities for ELOs to participate in these systems. First, many of the underlying principles in competency-based learning align closely with those of the afterschool/expanded learning world. Both recognize the value of experiential learning and a personalized approach to student learning. In order to successfully engage students beyond the school hours, high quality ELOs have already been able to personalize learning, based on student needs and interests, through unique and engaging learning experiences. As competency-based systems look to embed these experiences in their work, CBOs already engaging students can showcase their work as an entry point into such opportunities. Both also emphasize the importance of a wide range of skills needed to be successful in college, careers, and in life. As a college and career readiness agenda—one in which skills such as critical thinking, application, and communication are acknowledged—is promoted across the country, the ELO community is ideally positioned to tout their work over several decades in supporting those skills.

Furthermore, a switch to competency-based learning in K-12 systems demands a complete overhaul of schools, districts, and state departments of education. The entire system has been anchored around time for more than a century. This has implications for curriculum and instruction, assessment and accountability systems, educator pipelines and evaluation systems, technical assistance and professional development systems, and funding structures. Altering these systems to align with a competency-based approach is a daunting task and will require gradual change. In contrast, the ELO community has far fewer restrictions to innovate and that flexibility can be seen as an asset. ELOs have more freedom to develop proof points, given that they are not tied to onerous accountability systems and bureaucratic structures.

Assessment and Accountability:

Carolyn Hudman, Kentucky Out of School Alliance, stated that despite initial success in pursuing CBL in 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the conversation came to a standstill as stakeholders deliberated the role of assessment and accountability. Measures of accountability have been put in place to promote equity and ensure that schools can provide a certain level of quality. Current accountability systems often present roadblocks or barriers for ELOs, as the focus of accountability does not necessarily allow for this area of learning. Important questions to consider include: What experiences do we allow and what credit can those experiences provide? Do we pursue a more

decentralized system in which schools and districts decide what counts as a quality learning experience? Can we continue to centralize accountability systems and find some way to embed ELOs in that system through performance assessments?

A central question that was raised during the meeting was what knowledge or skills can ELOs be responsible for developing in a competency-based system. Current approaches have offered credit for primary elective courses and not basic academics. Students have been able to participate in activities beyond the school day, such as STEM, to learn valuable skills that have given them elective credit and develop skills in other areas. However, with well-designed ELOs, there is the possibility of learning skills in English Language Arts and Math for potential credit in core subjects. Whether we can develop the systems to allow ELOs to help students meet core academic competencies as well is still up for debate.

K-12 and ELOs are also still grappling with how to document student progress in a competency-based system. Chris Sturgis, MetisNet, articulated the role of technology in facilitating systems in which students can "carry" their competencies with them at all time using digital tools. In essence, if students understand the competencies they must meet, they can work towards meeting those competencies in any setting, regardless of whether it is in school our outside of school. The challenge is how do we assess student's progress against those competencies and who is responsible for doing that assessment. We must think more about what types of roles ELOs can have in assessing students.

One possible avenue for incorporating ELOs into CBL is through the use of performance-based assessments. ELOs can help students document the work they do in their programs and use that documentation to support progress on specific competencies. Given that ELOs often have stronger ties to the community than schools, they can incorporate content experts from the community into student work and presentations. In order for students to earn credit for the ELO experience in Providence, they must conduct a culminating presentation in which industry experts, parents, and others participate and judge. There is, however, a concern over the validity and reliability of incorporating performance-based assessments into accountability systems, but one participant did believe that it is possible for us to "bend" on our approach to accountability away from the world of the psychometrician. Many schools and some states have embedded performance-based assessments into K-12 schools, and more states are beginning to consider following suit.

Participants also underscored the importance of aligning various policies when considering implications of assessment. In a competency-based system, what role do standardized assessments play and how are they built into school structures? Currently educator evaluation systems take into account student progress against standardized tests. In many states, graduation requirements mandate passing scores on exit exams in order to graduate high school. As we consider the inclusion of ELOs in these systems, we must think about whether learning in ELOs is aligned with current assessments and in the case that they are not, what the implications are for teachers and students.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

At the conclusion of the day-long conversation, several questions and themes emerged from the discussion of ELOs and CBL, which can help organize our thinking moving forward:

***First, what is our end goal and what are the long term implications of moving in this direction*?** There are far-reaching consequences, both intended and unintended, of promoting a competency-based system and incorporating expanded learning opportunities.

Second, who should we engage in this conversation and how should they be engaged? Such a shift requires changes in policy and practice and involves a range of stakeholders. Given that this field is relatively new and there is a great deal of work to be done motivating, educating, and learning from those stakeholders, we must be thoughtful in engaging stakeholders in ongoing conversations.

Finally, what is the policy framework to support the expansion of using ELOs for CBL? What are the entry points within existing policies that allow for ELOs to support CBL? While we were able to begin the conversation, there are countless design questions that programs and systems must begin to address. How do we build capacity amongst K-12, ELO programs, and others involved and how do we provide a policy and funding framework to progress these systems?

There are still more questions than answers in the areas of ELOs and CBE. The American Youth Policy Forum used this event as an opportunity to learn about developments in the field and to survey organizations' knowledge of and interest in the topic. AYPF plans to continue studying this work and learning from others in the hope that as a field, we can articulate a compelling vision for pathways that value the role of ELOs in competency-based systems.