

Moving to Mastery: A National Policy Forum on Competency-Based Education

March 1, 2013

This forum, co-sponsored by CompetencyWorks and the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, highlighted important research, policy trends, and issues for advancing competency-based education. The forum showcased experts from leading state and district efforts to transform K-12 student learning using competency-based education and discussed federal policy issues and recommendations.

Many leading countries have built education systems using a competency-based education approach, rather than seat-time as we do in the U.S. Now, innovative states and school districts around the country are beginning to challenge the time-based educational system that has been in place for decades by moving to a competency-based education approach of their own. Thirty-six states now have policies providing flexibility for competency-based education.

Susan Patrick, President and CEO, International Association of K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), urged that moving to a competency-based system be our number one priority. The United States currently calculates funding for schools based on seat time, while most countries fund schools based on per pupil student mastery of key competencies and skills. Patrick offered several examples from Europe, India, and China, which are quickly implementing competency-based models that include clear learning standards, multiple pathways to meet them, and the ability to advance upon mastery. Our current accountability system is school-based, while we seek to encourage student-centered learning based instructional models. This requires rethinking accountability to be aligned with student-centered learning models, as we should be holding schools accountable to individual student progress. Thus, ESEA reauthorization provides a window of opportunity to rethink accountability in terms of student-centered learning, rather than school-centered accountability. If our federal accountability system is tied to cohorts of students based on “birthdays” in aggregate growth, and doesn’t look at measurement and individual student growth, then we lock in the rest of the system from taking a competency-based approach and can’t adequately evaluate equity and excellence of education. Patrick queried, what if we redesigned our American education system around competencies and skills and ensured all students were achieving mastery? What if we redesigned the education system around learning, rather than time? We need to build an education system that prepares every student for skills needed in today’s world, argued Patrick. Online and blended learning will allow us to truly personalize and optimize the learning experience for every student. Many states are now making strides towards competency-based learning, including the states involved in the CCSSO’s Innovation Lab network. Patrick claimed that seat time becomes the number one policy issue at the state and federal levels for this work.

Chris Sturgis, President, MetisNet, offered a working definition of competency-based education, which consists of five key components. First, in competency-based education, students advance upon mastery, and they are able to take the time to get the supports needed to be proficient. Second, competencies include explicit, measurable, and transferable learning objectives that empower students. Third, assessment is meaningful and provides a positive learning experience for students. Fourth, students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs. Finally, in competency-based education, learning outcomes emphasize the application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important

skills and dispositions. Sturgis cautioned that all these five components must be present, and that adaptive software alone does not a competency-based system make.

Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent, RSU 2 School District, Maine, discussed the complexity of implementing a true standards-based, learner-centered model that serves all youth. Hammonds argued that we need to make the leap to a new type of school that meets individual students' needs. Our kids come from a mass-customized world, noted Hammonds, but our schools are not mass-customized. The RSU 2 School District, a rural district in Central Maine, is customizing the learning process and requiring demonstration of mastery before advancement in order to meet the individual needs of its students.

In 2011, the RSU 2 School Board approved a vision to become a system with a focus on student-centered learning. The district was a consolidation of ten learning communities in five towns, each with a different curriculum. Assessments had flat-lined or declined. "We were not the world-class learning community their stakeholders had envisioned upon consolidation," said Hammonds. In 2012, the district established a strategic plan for the future of the district, with annual steps outlined. This has included a firm commitment to student-centered learning, a significant component of which is competency-based education. Hammonds identified five actions to begin the process of developing a competency-based education approach. First, identify the standards to which you will hold students accountable and align these with the Common Core. Second, articulate proficiency requirements to the State Department of Education, allowing alternate avenues for students to prove that they've reached proficiency. Third, develop a reporting process that allows students to establish accountability structures for themselves. Fourth, keep a focus on effective teaching strategies, giving kids what they need to be successful at the next level. In the District's experience, making sure students are truly prepared before moving to a new level actually accelerates the learning process because students are ready when promoted to a new level. "Measurement topics" are the RSU 2 District's standards for learning. They are the curriculum framework that guides teachers in their instruction and lesson planning and define the standards all students must achieve. Finally, eliminate policy limitations, such as requirements to group kids by age, to assess them at the same time, or to use the same assessment tools when there are a variety of ways to demonstrate mastery.

Hammonds ended with several provocative questions. If mastery of standards and being learning-centered are the goals, then:

- Why do schools group learners by age when being grouped by mastery makes more sense?
- Why must schools assess children at the same time when they should be assessing children when they are ready?
- Why must assessment tools be similar when there are a variety of ways for students to demonstrate mastery of standards?

Paul Leather, Deputy Commissioner, New Hampshire Department of Education said that New Hampshire has been working on competency-based education for 15 years. The state believes that all students must be college- and career-ready and that therefore the system must advance students as they demonstrate mastery of content, skills, and dispositions, a process requiring a comprehensive system of educator and school supports. Leather argued for a "new goal-line" for public education in the U.S. He noted that we are expecting a much greater depth of knowledge on the part of students today than we have of past generations. In addition, the ability to take learning and apply it in different settings is very important to success in life. Therefore, we need to go where students have a deep understanding and can apply knowledge in new areas.

Competency-based education can help make the education experience more three-dimensional in order to properly prepare students.

New Hampshire has constructed an “ecosystem” of educators and schools reside within networks of innovation, connected through “talent clouds” of national and international experts. Leather concluded with policy recommendations for any regulation or legislation moving forward, urging policy makers to build a system that: supports personalization and moving on when ready; includes a 1:1 computing model for students; provides systems of support for students; strengthens broadband and network infrastructure; includes deep professional development, which is crucial to the success of a competency-based model; aligns systems of accountability; builds data systems that support mass customization; and which helps all states to get there, not just a few. Since 2005, New Hampshire's students have been expected to demonstrate mastery upon exit from high school.

Panelists made national policy recommendations, including:

1. Approach policy decisions for education with the student at the center.
2. Redesign the accountability system framework so that students advance upon mastery, with summative assessments to validate proficiency.
3. Assure world-class quality through an assessments framework that includes metrics on individual student growth, balanced systems of assessments, investment in performance-based assessments, and the creation of multiple measures at multiple points in time.
4. Create innovation space by removing time-based constraints in federal policy, supporting pilots, evaluation, and research and development.
5. Rethink human capital and offer support systems, professional development and pre-service education to prepare teachers for 21st century student-centered models.
6. Improve technology and broadband infrastructure to support competency-based education and ensure readiness for online assessments in 2014.
7. Offer flexibility around time, and strengthen attention to over-age and under-credited students.

See CompetencyWorks.org for a link to a wiki with information on competency-based education, including updated information about states.

Question and Answer Period

What role have businesses been playing in this work? How are the skills needed to be successful identified?

New Hampshire has been involved in community-based learning with businesses for a long time. Students who show tremendous promise often leave the state for college and do not come back. This is an opportunity for businesses to connect with students and form relationships that go on over time.

Why is it taking the U.S. so long to move in the direction of using competency-based education?

We actually think there is a very rapid rate of change right now. Three years ago, only New Hampshire and Oregon had advanced competency-based policies. Now, many more states are moving in this direction, with more than half of states setting competency-based education policies. We also now have increased capacity to collect data that makes it possible for students, teachers, and parents to see how they are doing in real-time.

How can we help connect informal learning systems with competency-based learning systems at the school level?

You must be transparent about what your standards are. Then students can tackle these standards in a variety of ways-- in after-school programs, internships, through completing a merit badge for scouts, completing a community service project, or through other outside organizations. Competency-based education creates transparency around what the learning expectations are. Then everyone can own them.

How do we address the social and developmental aspects of education if we promote based on competency?

We must consider social progression of our children as well; it is not just about academics. We do not want that span of academics to grow greater than three levels. RSU 2 is discussing not separating kids from their peers by more than three age levels.

We are seeing a much more intentional focus on maturation in a number of competency-based high schools. This is an ongoing discussion.

How does competency-based education interact with IDEA?

The idea behind competency-based education is to personalize learning for ALL students. Students with disabilities can be much more effectively served in competency-based education.

For example, Kentucky has implemented individual learning plans (ILPs) for all students.

Where are districts developing competency-based data systems?

Today's data systems and all of the investments in the last five to ten years have been focused on getting the systems to be compliant with NCLB. Those systems do not take into account student competency over time. We know learning is not linear, but data systems we have today are linear. No state has the complete data system that would fully provide student profiles and recommendations for future content and on-going assessment data (historical) to serve students where they need to be served.

The Innovation Lab Network is currently trying out promising platforms. We are also establishing common metrics above and beyond NCLB.

What are the policy implications for having all children start kindergarten at age five?

RSU 2 has a lot of eager families that want to get a head start. Many private daycares and preschools are asking to see what the kindergarten standards look like so they can prepare them for the rigors of the expectations.

Competency-based education assumes differentiation. We are designing a system that says all kids are different, and it is the role of schools to figure out how to respond to them.

We must design our schools knowing there are kids who will enter gaps and take "breaks" along the way.