



Competency-Based Education: Promising Policies and Practices for the Future of K-12 Education

Capitol Hill, Senate Dirksen Building, Room SD-430
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Background

It is time to build an education system on the core principle that all students can succeed and be ready for the next step in their learning, the workforce, and life. K-12 education must transform to align with the needs of learners and the knowledge and skills they will need to fulfill their dreams. On March 22, 2019, the [American Youth Policy Forum](#) (AYPF) co-sponsored a [Capitol Hill forum](#) with [iNACOL](#), featuring national experts and state and district leaders from across the country committed to supporting competency-based education. The purpose of the forum was to provide a national overview of developments in the field of competency-based education across K-12 education and highlight ways in which education can prepare students for success in postsecondary education, work, and life. In particular, the forum helped participants understand what competency education looks like in practice, how it can advance equity, and what federal policymakers can do to ensure states and localities have the flexibility and supports needed to build high-quality, equitable systems. The panel of experts included:

- **Susan Patrick**, President and Chief Executive Director, iNACOL, Washington, D.C.
- **Maria Worthen**, Vice President for Federal & State Policy, iNACOL, Washington, D.C.
- **Virgel Hammonds**, Chief Learning Officer, KnowledgeWorks, Cincinnati, OH
- **Latoya Dixon**, Director, Office of School Transformation, South Carolina Department of Education, Columbia, SC
- **Kelly Brady**, Director, Instructional Support for Student-Centered Learning, Idaho Department of Education, Boise, ID
- **Bill Zima**, Superintendent of Regional School Unit 2, Hallowell, ME

Betsy Brand, Executive Director at AYPF, opened the forum by providing an overview of iNACOL's efforts in advancing competency-based learning models through research, development of [national quality standards](#), and advocacy at the national, state, and district/school level. Brand then introduced the panelists, and concluded her remarks by thanking everyone for joining.

Panelist Presentations

Susan Patrick, President and Chief Executive Director, iNACOL

Patrick began by emphasizing the importance of “holding all students to the highest standards with demonstrated mastery.” She described competency-based education as a movement built “from the ground up,” with educators designing new learning models based on research, and community members coming together to “ask questions we desperately need to ask.” Patrick encouraged the consideration of important questions such as:

- What does student success look like?
- How do we think about redefining success?
- What does it mean to have broader definitions of success to meet students’ needs for the future?
- What does it mean to have a valuable credential after high school that will prepare students for the future?

She went on to discuss various ways other countries are championing educational transformation across the globe, specifically New Zealand, and referenced research and resources available from the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#), and the [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#). Patrick argued the US is “a little late coming into the conversation around whether our education system is fit for purpose,” but reminded communities that now is the time to redefine success given increased flexibility with the enactment of the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\) in 2015](#). Patrick described competency-based education with the five-part definition: (1) students advance based on demonstrated mastery; (2) competencies are explicit, measureable learning objectives that empower students; (3) assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students; (4) students get timely, differentiated supports based on their individual learning needs; (5) and learning outcomes emphasize application, creation of knowledge, and skills needed for success. As leaders think about redefining mastery education to meet their needs, she stressed the importance of the language being used as many terms are often used interchangeably without being clear about differences. [Mean What You Say](#), a paper developed by iNACOL, which offers field-tested definitions and expands on the importance of language and clarity.

Reinforcing the need for a competency-based system built on a growth-mindset that every child can learn, she argued something that is missing in the current time-based system is “building educator capacity for professional judgement, in assessment literacy and to have calibration in the levels of mastery.” Research from the learning sciences was cited, stressing the need for a more holistic approach to learning. Lastly, Patrick recognized this is an exciting time to think about how systems can be transformed and highlighted the increasing number of states piloting competency-based systems in the U.S.

Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal & State Policy, iNACOL

Worthen grounded the conversation in the federal and state policy context. She began by calling attendees’ attention to [iNACOL’s 2019 Federal Policies Priorities Issue Brief](#) and [iNACOL’s Issue Brief on Developing a Modern Teacher Workforce](#). She explained how the enactment of ESSA created new flexibility for states and/or districts advancing competency-based models. Specifically, ESSA allows states and districts to “think differently about definitions of success and assessments.” For example, under ESSA, states are able to measure growth – something not reflected in the [No Child Left Behind Act \(NCLB\) of 2001](#). She acknowledged that much of the work the panelists will be discussing started long before the passage of ESSA, and also that some states have yet to begin taking advantage of the flexibility provided under ESSA. Worthen spoke briefly on the pending reauthorization of the [Higher Education Act](#) and the forthcoming opportunity to align teacher preparation with new learning models. Additionally, she highlighted the reauthorization of the [2018 Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act \(Perkins V\)](#) and how states can think about aligning pathways across K-12 and post-secondary education. The [E-rate Program](#) administered by the [Federal Communications Commission](#) (FCC) was also

mentioned, as it provides libraries and schools with discounted broadband services, ultimately expanding technology access. As Congress continues its oversight over the implementation of ESSA, Worthen called attention to a provision in ESSA: the [Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority pilot](#). This pilot “allows states to pilot new, innovative systems of assessments that meet a high bar for technical quality and validity in a sub-set of districts.” However, to date, only two states have been approved to participate in this pilot, as states are facing barriers including funding, restrictive time-to-scale requirements, and limited number of slots.

Virgel Hammonds, Chief Learning Officer, KnowledgeWorks

Hammonds introduced himself as a former English teacher, principal, and superintendent and emphasized “he will always be an English teacher at heart.” He described his practitioner work as being focused on answering vital questions such as “how do we keep students accountable to deep, rich competencies that are locally identified in ways that are empowering and motivating for each child?” He described [KnowledgeWorks](#) as an organization which strives to “help learning communities do this locally and at-scale.” Hammonds explained the [strategic foresight](#), a tool developed every three years by KnowledgeWorks that explores what the future of learning could look like 20 years down the road. From this tool, experts “identify what are the policy and practice implications so that we can prepare for the future.” Hammonds’ team at KnowledgeWorks focuses on supporting communities on the practical aspect by considering questions such as:

- What does competency-based education look like at scale?
- How do we support teachers and principals?
- What does this mean for teacher preparation programs?
- What does this mean for principals and superintendents?
- What does governance look like in this structure?

When thinking about what this looks like locally, Hammonds said engaging the community, and not “solely relying on the amazing shoulders of our educators to do the work on behalf of kids,” is important. Specifically, Hammonds urges stakeholders to “engage the community in how they can become partners in learning.” Local communities are starting to ask important questions such as “what are the outcomes we believe are crucial to the success of our kids?” and “what do we aspire to accomplish as a community?” Hammonds discussed the talent-pipeline and ways to “grow our communities by growing our kids.” He explained this happens through a variety of inclusive, engaging conversations with business, non-profit, and policy leaders, which ultimately drive different partnerships in learning.

Hammonds challenged stakeholders to think about how competencies designed by educators allow students to tackle problems not only inside classrooms, but in their communities as well. In the context of equity, he acknowledged South Carolina for their intentional alignment of resources and leveraging their dollars to have a greater impact in communities. However, he admits not all students have access to quality instruction, and thus, we must work to address this issue in systemic ways. He makes a strong case for why kids are empowered when they start taking ownership of not just their learning, but of the implementation process as well. Hammonds concluded his presentation by discussing strategies to continue developing the talent-pipeline. In particular, he encouraged stakeholders to consider alignment between various different entities including teacher preparation programs, institutes of higher learning, the business sector, and the department of labor.

Latoya Dixon, Director, Office of School Transformation, South Carolina Department of Education

Dixon framed her presentation around the following question: what is it we want students to know and be able to do when they leave our school system?

For South Carolina, the answer is simple: the [Profile of the South Carolina Graduate](#). She described this profile as a “grass-roots effort” begun 2012, born out of conversations held with the state superintendent, business leaders, educators, parents, and students. South Carolina envisions that “by 2022, districts will have available assistance of personalized and digital learning that supports students in a safe learning environment.” She commended the superintendent’s commitment to this work, which ultimately led to the development of the Office of Personalized Learning. The team working in this office tackles questions around building capacity in schools to make the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate a real, obtainable goal. Dixon described the competencies outlined in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate as being “content diagnostic and not particularly items related to a content area or academic subject.” Instead, they are broad items that can be used in all schools, at all levels, by all students. With South Carolina being a very diverse state with a great deal of inequity, the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate is a tool to ensure the state clearly articulates what it envisions for every student in the education system. Lastly, Dixon shared South Carolina’s excitement with their accountability system, since for the first time ever it captures multiple measures around college and career readiness and student engagement.

Kelly Brady, Director, Instructional Support for Student-Centered Learning, Idaho Department of Education

Brady is a former teacher and vice principal and explained how legislation has supported Idaho’s journey in competency-based education. In 2013-2014, a task force was created to examine the roadblocks and opportunities to improve education in Idaho. Out of that task force, there were 20 recommendations, and the number one recommendation was mastery-based education. A year later, [HB 110](#) was introduced with three elements: (1) to put together a committee of educators to look at both roadblocks and solutions in implementing mastery-based education; (2) to organize a statewide awareness campaign to promote understanding and interest in mastery-based education; and (3) to build a network around competency-based education to examine what is needed to implement and sustain competency-based education. Brady brought attention to the intentionality of the language included in the legislation, such as using the words incubator instead of pilot and mastery instead of competency. Currently, the network consists of 19 incubators and 32 schools.

New legislation was passed to:

- Continue the efforts of the statewide awareness campaign for mastery-based education;
- Remove the cap for the network (which is currently 20) to expand and welcome more districts to participate in incubators; and
- Develop a sustainability plan to ensure the network is able to move this work forward.

After a state board meeting, where the president of the Board expressed concern about the multiple definitions for competency-based education, Idaho adopted one definition to ensure clarity. Mastery education is described as “an educational system that promotes relevant learning while allowing flexibility in both time and teaching methods for student success.” Brady also spoke about the importance of ensuring an adequate representation of all types of school districts in the network. She was proud to visually demonstrate the inclusion of small, rural school districts, large school districts, charter schools, and alternative schools across the state. Brady described the [five key tenets](#) that define mastery education in Idaho and the [seven levels of support](#) that help each school or district pursue the process of adopting mastery education in a way that recognizes their unique readiness level.

She concluded by highlighting policies that have allowed Idaho to move forward with mastery education. These include the aforementioned [HB 110](#), [HB 458](#), which provides flexibility with the way credits are earned, and the credit waivers for which districts can apply. Idaho's next steps include focusing on equity, assessment, funding, teacher certification, and graduation requirements. As Idaho considers building a system that ensures students are college and career ready, state leaders are paying close attention to South Carolina and their use of the [Profile of the South Carolina Graduate](#) to achieve this goal.

Bill Zima, Superintendent of Regional School Unit 2, Maine

Zima began by providing a historical context of Maine's involvement with competency-based education, and specifically highlighted his district's ([Regional School Unit 2 – RSU2](#)) involvement with "standards-referenced grading" in 2002. Zima referred to standards-referenced grading as "being clear about what we want students to know and be able to do, and helping them get there." In 2011, the district decided to go all in with competency-based education, allowing students to move through a continuum of skills based on their level of readiness, instead of a grade-based cohort. In 2015, Maine enabled teachers and students to begin building multiple pathways, which allowed for personalized learning.

Zima provided powerful examples of how personalized learning has helped engage students in his district. In the first example, he described a student who had an interest in studying automotive technology. After hearing his interests, the leadership team took him to the technical center located off-campus. However, the student said "I don't want to do this; I want to work on diesel." To meet the student's needs, the leadership team partnered with the mechanic who services their school buses. Administrators were able to use the learning targets to communicate learning outcomes and allowed the mechanic to oversee the student's learning activities with the support of classroom teachers. In the second example, Zima described a student in a different district who had dropped out of school. A teacher from RSU2 encouraged him to transfer to her district. After the student transferred into RSU2, he became very motivated to graduate, and after attending the technical school, he became so engaged that he received an award for perfect attendance. Ultimately, he was able to graduate on time.

In regards to next steps, Zima mentioned continuing to build multiple pathways and finding additional ways to measure the development of the whole child. Zima also hopes to continue building internship experiences and grow dual enrollment courses by encouraging local universities to support students who are ready for college-level work. Lastly, he hopes states create enabling policy to continue creating innovation zones for schools, strengthen teacher/leader credentialing, and phasing out policies centered on time-based requirements.

Audience Q&A

Q: Wyoming is one of the lone states which has not developed competency-based education, but as it was mentioned, Idaho was one of the first states to start looking into competency-based education. Despite Idaho being involved in competency-based education for many years, Wyoming ranks higher in quality of public education nationally. How can we bridge the gap between Idaho and Wyoming?

Brady explained states are often criticized on how they perform on education, often being told they rank 48th or 49th nationally. However, she warned it depends on the metric that is being considered. She explained this is a systematic shift and a generational change that will not happen overnight. To support Wyoming, she encouraged connecting state leaders in Wyoming with leaders from other states that are having success with competency-based education. She provided an example of how leaders from Nevada, Utah, and South Carolina are in constant communication with leaders in Idaho.

Dixon added that a common misconception is the notion that shifting to mastery education reduces quality. In South Carolina, for example, she explained how shifting to mastery education is viewed as increasing quality and expanding equity. South Carolina has been able to clearly articulate the expectations for each student, in addition to supporting teachers and leaders.

Q: When considering these systematic shifts, how are teachers who are currently in the profession, being supported throughout these transitions, particularly with regard to teacher evaluation?

Dixon talked about efforts in South Carolina led by the Office of Personalized Learning. Funding was specifically dedicated to supporting educators, which allowed for the development of several networks that include teacher leaders, instructional coaches, district leaders, and principals. These networks have spread throughout the whole state and include people who are committed to this work. Additionally, State Education Agencies (SEAs) have begun to look across offices to ensure they are maximizing funds and not working in isolation. South Carolina has been very intentional in finding intersections between educator evaluation and competency-based education, “allowing educators to view mastery education as a mechanism that is helping them achieve all the things that are required of them.”

Zima shared that in Maine, they are not asking teachers to retool themselves. They realized the courses teachers took to obtain their credentials were absent of assessment, and even the few teachers who had assessment courses, focused on multiple choice tests versus classroom assessment. When Maine started to change their assessments, it helped bring focus into the work, allowing teachers to realize their work is not massively different, it just requires refocusing on a different set of skills.

Hammonds stressed the importance of modeling personalization, addressing teachers’ level of readiness, and targeting professional development to meet their needs.

Q: Can you share best practices around assessment models? Additionally, colleges are still looking at seat time and Grade Point Averages (GPAs), Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and letter grades. How has competency-based education shifted college admission processes?

Patrick shared there is a national movement which started with elite private high schools and has eventually moved to public schools and districts to use a proficiency-based diploma or a mastery-based transcript. She mentioned that the [Great Schools Partnership](#) has done a lot of work with higher education and has compiled a list of individual colleges that have agreed to accept mastery-based transcripts. She explained that college admissions offices have been very supportive of this work. Patrick also mentioned the [Learning Policy Institute’s](#) (LPI) initiative titled [Reimagining College Access](#), emphasizing evidence of student work and includes a more equitable, holistic approach to demonstrated learning. Brady emphasized that any innovation is going to run into the cultural and structural barriers of the traditional system, but remains hopeful for the future.

Zima shared that his district sends out students’ “profiles,” and high school counselors rarely get questions from admission offices. If they do, it is usually for simple clarification. He also shared a personal experience while being on a college trip with his daughter to Boston University, where the Director of Admissions said “I don’t care if you have a traditional transcript or a proficiency-based transcript, I know how to figure them out,” illustrating there is a lot of understanding and support.

Hammonds brought attention to the frequency with which institutions of higher learning are asking about what it means to learn in a competency-based system. “What they are finding is that students are coming with deeper experiences that are applicable to different environments, not just learning from textbooks. Students are going to higher education institutions with higher levels of urgency and higher demands.”

Q: If students are in different levels in a classroom, what does accountability look like?

Brady acknowledged that this is a critical question, adding that in a mastery system, “we are not doing essentially what we are doing today, with a time-based system allowing large gaps along the way, where you have ninth graders performing at a third grade math level or a fourth grade reading level.” Schools are having very honest and difficult conversations around mastery and the transparency requires addressing gaps, scaffolding grade-level targets and expectations, and identifying what supports are needed. She emphasizes supports are critical to closing gaps.

Brady provided an example from Idaho, where in elementary schools, teachers teach standards, not grade level. These standards are the same for all students but time and readiness for each standard is more fluid, allowing students to come in and out of these standards as needed.

Q: What is in place for remediation/alternative assessments? What do you have in place for students who are not responding well to competency-based education?

In terms of remediation, Zima shared that his district has time built-in to blocks to go deeper throughout the day to help students. He explained, “it is not just for remediation; everyone is working on something, whatever their next level is. Our summer school is not only about recovery, but working on these standards.” He said they do not call it summer school anymore, and instead, they refer to it as “finishing school.”

Dixon described how a high school in South Carolina reimaged their schedule. They have a flexible period during which students are able to get additional support. “One of the big things that has to shift is rethinking how we organize time and resources. When we are able to do that, we are able to understand how we want to address gaps.”

Hammonds concluded by adding that the “culture of student agency is a really strong lever.” When you empower the culture of agency, students start sharing knowledge and learning from each other. He shared a powerful quote from a student attending a school with a competency-based system that further supports his point: “What I am being told in my system is that my teacher is not going to let me fail.”

Concluding remarks:

Patrick concluded the forum by thanking everyone for their time and expressed her enthusiasm for what is ahead for competency-based education. Patrick expressed being grateful for having the opportunity to talk about mastery education and reminded everyone the panelists are happy to serve as a resource. She ended the session with a quote from Victor Garcia Hoz, who authored 50 books on personalized learning, including the Treaty of Personalized Education, from the 1970s - 1990s. He defined personalization “as the learners’ journey to developing their freedom of choice.”