COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING FAQS

For more information, see the full report “The Shift from Cohorts to Competency,” available at: http://digitallearningnow.com/policy/publications/smart-series/
Frequently Asked Questions

Listening to the critiques of competency education is important, as it helps us think through unintended consequences and increase our sensitivity to flawed implementation that is likely to produce poor results. Below are a number of questions and concerns that have been raised.

1. How can a teacher cover all the standards if some students are going to need more time? In the traditional system teachers are responsible for “covering the curriculum,” whereas in competency education they are responsible for students reaching proficiency in applying the competencies that drive the curriculum. A competency system requires a focus on priority outcomes, at least some use of supplemental and asynchronous digital instruction, and an increased level of student ownership of expectations, learning, and progress. If students’ needs are too great, the

For Students Who Are Behind

It takes courage to confront the tragedy of a child or teen navigating school more than two years behind in skills. Competency education doesn’t create this problem, but it makes it more explicit. In fact, once competency education is embraced it’s impossible to ignore problems; how are we going to help all these students catch up?

At the elementary school level, 32 states have embraced a policy to end social promotion for third graders who are not reading on grade level. This demand for proficiency is difficult for a time-based system to deal with – and asking a student to repeat a grade level of the same instruction in all subjects is not a very effective solution. The best solution, as presented in this paper, is a system that personalizes instruction and creates more time when and where it is needed.

Students entering high schools with elementary school-level skills are now placed in time-based courses, often with very little scaffolding or support. Teachers have been certified to deliver secondary-level courses, not to help fill elementary skills gaps. As a result, many students lose hope and disengage. Without the capacity to help students get back on track, schools lose hope as well, and guide students out the door prematurely.

- Competency education can help resolve the underlying tension:
- Be honest and transparent about where students are on their learning progression,
- Focus on critical skills and not “covering the curriculum” in time-based courses,
- Create day schedules and yearly calendars that double the core learning time available for struggling students, and
- Recognize schools, networks, and districts that have developed acceleration strategies.

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA), featured in a recent JFF report, is an example of a school that is taking this challenge on head-on. BDEA started by creating a process for aligning its competencies with the Common Core, taking the academic needs of their student population into account. As more schools adopt the CCSS, this will be a growing problem that can be addressed through competency-based models that enable the kind of differentiation these students need.

At Muscatine Schools in Iowa, teachers monitor students based on where they are on learning progressions – either remediation, intensive interventions, or acceleration. Early results from Iowa’s Competency-based Instruction Task Force show that following implementation of the pilot projects, 0% of students earned D’s or F’s in competency-based education classrooms, compared to 38% of all students in the 2011-12 school year. Additional data points expand the positive impact of competency-based education on students requiring remediation:

- Six percent of the students engaged in learning contracts or short-term remediation reached proficiency prior to the end of the term, and
- Four percent of the students needed intensive remediation, which required additional time beyond the term.
school leadership and teachers will need to provide adequate resources, interventions, and student support so that a single teacher is not responsible for doing everything for their students. For example, competency-based schools embed support into the school day and calendar with transition times for students who are behind pace. It’s likely we will begin to see school calendars and schedules change so that students who need extra help can continue learning throughout the year. When it comes down to it, what’s more important: students learning or covering the curriculum?

2. **Will this mean a lot more testing?** One of the fears about competency education is that it will result in a “factory model on steroids” with students trudging along lock-stepped and bubble tested every step of the way. But competency education is about making sure students learn; the key ingredient is constant and ongoing feedback to both teachers and students. This approach doesn’t mean more testing per se, but rather authentic assessments that come in all shapes and forms, such as regular demonstrations of learning-like projects, simulations, reports, and presentations. Also, with more game-based and adaptive learning, assessment is getting pushed into the background in favor of more data gathering and fewer tasks that feel like testing. Think feedback rather than grading students using tests, and you’ll start to see the power of competency education. Bob Lenz, Co-founder of Envision Schools, explains, “Once we have defined the outcomes, we must create the assessments to evaluate students’ mastery of these deeper outcomes. A simple bubble test will not suffice. Assessing deeper learning requires performance – we assess collaboration by observing collaborative work and through student reflection on their ability to collaborate. In this way, we move from assessment of student learning to assessment as student learning.”

3. **How should states approach the potential funding issues that may arise through early graduation?** Students in a competency-based system will get the time they need to become college or career ready, or be able to graduate early or use the extra time to earn college credit while in high school. Competency-based approaches offer new opportunities to recognize and reward schools that are able to help students complete their work faster or advance students to college-level work. School systems could be rewarded for any savings that might be generated with students completing early and also allowed to reinvest dollars to provide supports for students who are struggling.

4. **Does competency require little steps and avoiding big challenges?** Some critics are concerned that competency-based learning assumes that linear one-step-at-a-time learning is always best. That’s not the case at competency-based networks including Big Picture, Edvisions, or Expeditionary Learning. Many schools create interdisciplinary opportunities for students to develop and apply skills. At Hybrid High, students have greater flexibility and access to staff with extended school hours. It’s important to remember that students who are struggling or have experienced years of academic failure find small units empowering. They experience success and build confidence that they can be a
“good” student. Making Mastery Work said, “Many students find competency education more motivating and engaging than traditional approaches. The chance to progress at one’s own pace is particularly important to struggling students.”

5. Is competency education the same as standards-based education? Similar to standards-based learning, competency education focuses on outputs rather than inputs. The big difference is competency education understands that trying to get students to the same outcome with the same instruction, within the same amount of time, is impossible. We’ve tried to do outcomes-based and standards-based learning in our current time-based system, but without systemic changes, students are still shackled to their cohort and do not have the ability to take more or less time as needed. Not only do we want to get students to become proficient on the same set of standards, we want to lift the ceiling off the K-12 system and let students soar. Digital tools also let us respond to students at both ends of the spectrum to make sure they are getting the help they need when they need it.

Competency-based learning frameworks should be seen as a way to help all students master the expectations outlined in college- and career-ready standards such as the CCSS.

6. Do the CCSS and a competency-based system impose order and progression at the expense of meaningful, exciting learning? It depends on how the CCSS is implemented. If you implement it in a rigid, boring way that’s what you will get. Competency education actually provides opportunities for teachers to personalize instruction. Students should have some choices when it comes to how they show what they know. It is possible to build achievement recognition systems that creatively combine big challenges with progressions through standards. The authors have observed in competency-based environments a high level of transparency about learning targets, students working at their own pace and building evidence of their learning, teachers organizing themselves to enable students to get what they need, and a high level of collaboration. Next-generation platforms will make it easier to mix big and small challenges and manage competency-based progress and matriculation. Making Mastery Work acknowledged, “The biggest logistical challenge to creating competency-based initiatives is the lack of high-quality data and technological tools to assess and monitor student progress that are tailored to each initiative’s specific approach.”

7. Could competency education lower expectations? One concern is that personalized learning may lead to personalized expectations that could be lower than what is expected of standards, graduation requirements, or what is needed to succeed in college or career. That’s a well-intentioned concern, but it should be impossible as long as there is a commitment to rigorous standards and a valid and reliable assessment system. A competency-tracking system that follows students will allow teachers to personalize instruction from day one and will set high expectations for all students. There are some important elements to pay attention to in competency education to make sure it works for all students. First, pacing matters. Self-paced does not mean any pace. Schools and teachers need to offer timely, differentiated support when a student is showing signs of...
slipping behind. Second, students enter a school and classroom with different skills. If it is a relatively narrow differentiation, the goal should be to accelerate their learning to get them caught up with the other children. Once behind shouldn’t mean always behind. The toughest challenge we will face exposing the current practice of letting students with significant skill gaps flounder in courses, giving them C’s and D’s and passing them onto the next course. In competency education, this practice is eliminated. The result is that competency educators are struggling with how to respond to students with elementary-level skills who are unable to become proficient in high school courses within a semester or even two. This isn’t a by-product of competency education. It’s the solution to America’s crisis in achievement.

8. Will competency education decrease the achievement gap? Competency education is designed to close the preparation gap with significant increases in the proportion of students that will complete high school and be better prepared for college and careers. Improving proficiency for our low-income and minority students is a critical step for our country, given the tremendous demographic shift we are undergoing. Once the ceiling is taken off the K-12 system and students are allowed to accelerate their learning, it is likely that higher-performing students will do even better. So in the short term, as we come to understand the types of rich learning experiences that are needed to support traditionally underserved students, all students will do better, but the achievement gap may not be dramatically reduced by shifting to competency-based learning alone.

In addition, since competency-based systems focus attention on students struggling with concepts, extra supports or interventions can be assigned to help students catch up.

9. Where do we start? The most important thing is to make sure your team embraces a “growth mindset.” Competency education won’t work if you think some students are smart and others are not. The next thing to do is get your feet wet – standards-based grading is a good way to engage educators in reflecting on the traditional system and getting used to operating with greater transparency with students on what they need to do in order to succeed. Blended learning will also open the door to what it means for students to have adequate time to succeed and explore multi-age groupings, pacing, and personalization. Expanding district capacity to serve over-age and under-credited students is a great opportunity to implement a competency-based school or Flex Academy such as Boston Day and Evening Academy, Diploma Plus, or Advance Path. Or create innovation space through piloting that starts to challenge the agricultural calendar. Policymakers waive seat-time requirements and other outdated regulations that interfere with competency-based models. See how more opportunities for students to get the time and help they need can be embedded into the school calendar with daily time for students to get help during the school day, trimesters with flex-blocks on either side, intersessions, and next-generation learning. Consider joining a network such as the Reinventing Schools Coalition in order to learn from your peers and stay on the cutting edge.
EXHIBIT: Unleashing the Possible: Competency Education and Next-Generation Learning

The gains seen in Chugach, Adams 50, and Lindsay have been done primarily without the advantage of digital learning. Competency-based school networks are often high-access environments with basic production tools but weak information management and content delivery tools. This section explores how digital learning can be powerfully applied within a competency-based framework to increase personalization and the rate of learning. As you read this, imagine what will be possible when an array of digital tools is available in a personalized competency education environment. The sky is the limit.

**KNOWLEDGE MAPS**

Making clear what students need to know (and be able to do) in linked progressions, allowing students to take ownership of their progression. Resources such as Khan Academy allow students to see the map and make choices about their next steps. MasteryConnect helps teachers manage formative assessments and stay on top of how students are advancing through state standards. Making clear what students need to know (and be able to do) in linked progressions, allowing students to take ownership of their progression. Resources such as Khan Academy allow students to see the map and make choices about their next steps. MasteryConnect helps teachers manage formative assessments and stay on top of how students are advancing through state standards. OpenEd ties formative assessments to instruction by recommending individualized resources from their large OER bank that can either be assigned by teachers or pursued directly by students.

**ADAPTIVE INSTRUCTION**

Adaptive assessment with linked instructional units makes it possible to identify learning levels and deliver tailored units of instruction. Products such as DreamBox, i-Ready, Compass Learning, and Read180 can all be used as primary or supplemental instruction to provide students with rapid feedback, self-pacing, and focused attention on their learning.

**MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT**

Assessment that provides useful information to students and teachers is a necessary ingredient of competency education. If students don’t receive timely feedback on their progress on learning to apply a concept, their learning is slowed or even halted. Show Evidence is an emerging performance-based assessment system used by some of the schools in the International Studies Schools Network as well as a group of networks sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation.

**COMPETENCY-TRACKING SYSTEMS**

Competency education generates large amounts of data about student learning. A standards-aligned gradebook that can be customized around a specific progression and/or gateway in competency systems helps students, teachers, and parents focus on where students are and where they are going. These gradebooks are often dynamic, visually displaying progress as students show evidence of their learning. Edvisions schools use Project Foundry to track competency within project-based environments. Adams 50, Lindsay Unified, and many districts in Maine’s Cohort for Customized Learning depend on Educate. Teachers in over 25,000 schools use MasteryConnect to track competencies.
In summary, competency systems will make clear what students need to learn and be able to do (maps), options for learning what they need to learn (playlists, projects, and self blends), and how they will show what they know (badges). Next-generation platforms will integrate many of the above features to make customized competency-based pathways for every student manageable.

Competency education opens the door to new ways of recognizing progress, including informal learning opportunities. Competency educators separate academic competencies from habits or lifelong learning competencies such as collaboration, professionalism, and cultural awareness. Specific achievements may be represented by badges or other data visualization strategies. Most badge systems will have linked assessment systems. Simple systems use end-of-unit quizzes. Khan Academy has badges linked to practice items that track progress through knowledge maps. More robust systems will require multiple forms of assessments, artifacts captured in portfolios, and periodic public demonstrations of learning. Asia Society’s International Studies School Network is developing a Globally Competent Youth Badge System that will give high school students the opportunity to earn badges based on the four domains of global competence.

A growing number of sources provide grade-level resources and enable manual playlists such as PowerMyLearning, GooruLearning, and CK12. New Classrooms provides customized playlists in middle-grade math based on prior performance. Learner profiles and smart recommendation engines will improve the ability to customize playlists over the next few years.

Creating opportunities for students to delve into standards through project-based learning takes time. New tools such as Project Foundry and the Buck Institute are making it easier to construct standards-aligned projects. Echo, the project-based learning management system at New Tech Network, is an early example of how schools will manage student progress. Teachers can even personalize the standards within similar projects so students can build the skill they need based on their learning map.

A robust competency education system will have students advancing beyond traditional grade levels. Furthermore, students wanting to accelerate their rate of learning will be in search of open entrance/open exit courses. Providers like Florida Virtual and New Hampshire’s Virtual Learning Academy offer rolling enrollment into competency-based courses. Alternatives for over-aged and under-credited students, like AdvancePath and SIATech, draw on blended learning to allow students to make individual and accelerated progress toward graduation.