HOW DOES COMPETENCY EDUCATION IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE?

For more information, see the full report “The Shift from Cohorts to Competency,” available at:
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It's important to remember that competency education is a structure, a framework. What schools do with this framework makes a big difference for student achievement. If you apply less rigorous standards, you will get less achievement. If you don’t use meaningful assessments to provide feedback, students won’t be able to learn from their mistakes. If you don’t pay attention to the cost effectiveness of interventions, you may find yourself with operations that aren’t producing learning gains for all students.

Meet Students Where They Are:
Competency education always starts where the students are. The first step is always to understand what skills students have developed, where there are gaps or weaknesses, and where they are excelling. Schools may group or regroup to organize teaching resources to help students move forward. They may use online and blended learning to respond to wide levels of differentiation. Schools then monitor and track student progress along a pre-developed curricular learning progression such as the CCSS. Students are never simply passed along to the next teacher or given a grade D that symbolizes that they didn’t learn what they needed to learn.

Progress Upon Mastery:
Competency education requires (and allows) students to progress upon mastery, which has three important implications:

• Investing in Proficiency: Schools continue to invest in students – by offering extra time, interventions, and alternative methods of learning – until they have reached proficiency and are ready to move on to the next learning target. It’s that simple: all students progress and reach proficiency before moving on. For our underserved students who have borne the burden of our factory model, this promises to produce enormous learning gains as they get the help they need, when they need it. This doesn’t mean that all learning is linear or within one domain. Schools can organize their curriculums based on interdisciplinary or clustered learning targets, with the understanding that students will need to become proficient in them. Some schools distinguish between learning targets that are the backbone of future competencies within a domain and those that students need to be familiar with (but not necessarily proficient in) to advance.

• Accelerating Learning: Competency education creates the opportunity for accelerated learning for students with large gaps in their education, or those who are over-aged and under-credited, as well as for high-flying students who have strong interests within domains. It creates

Choice and the Drive for Excellence

What happens when students reach proficiency on a learning target? Many competency schools refer to it as a “3” (or if they still use letters it may be tracked as “B”). The “4” varies across schools to indicate exceeding expectations, additional application, creation of knowledge for the student, or some type of extra credit. In competency education, new choices for students and teachers develop as students reach that “3.” They can go on to get a “4,” they can move on to the next learning target, or they might return to a learning target to focus on turning it from a 3 to a 4. They could go work on a learning target in another class that they are finding difficult. Or they might work on something they really enjoy like art, music, work on extra-curricular activities, or reading an interesting book. Students may also participate in job shadows and community service. We can assume that students and families with a deep understanding of the competitive nature of college will focus on getting all 4’s as quickly as they can. But in fact, that may not always be the best path for student development. There are many students with deep interests outside the school realm, or those who have intellectual curiosity driving their school experience, who may benefit from using the time in school for their own interests.
In addition to districts that are converting to competency education, new models are developing all over the country that are highly personalized, competency-based models drawing on blended learning to expand educational experiences for students. **Boston Day and Evening Academy** is an alternative public charter high school located in Roxbury, BDEA is open 10 hours a day in order to serve any Boston Public School student who is overage for high school, who has had trouble with attendance issues, has been held back in 8th grade, who feels they are not getting the attention in class that they need to succeed, or who has dropped out but is eager to come back to school to earn their diploma. The model is highly personalized so that students can work on exactly the skills they need to graduate and prepare for college. **Bronx Arena** in New York City serves over-age and under-credited students. In order to bring more intensive learning experiences to students, a new staffing model was created that includes generalist teachers, the primary person to help students get to graduation; content specialist teachers to design courses, provide support when students need help and credential learning; and, advocates counselors, provided by a local community organization to address social-emotional issues. **Building 21** in Philadelphia seeks to empower all learners to connect with their passions and build agency to impact their world. Students have personalized pathways and are able to co-design classes around their interest. Competencies are organized around six content areas with rubrics and performance tasks to ensure students can transfer skills. Opportunities for students to stay focused on the core competencies of a course, advancing as quickly as they can, which means they may be learning at 1.25, 1.50 or even 2 times the expected “teacher pace.” We can currently see this primarily in highly self-paced, competency-based schools such as Boston Day and Evening Academy or Florida Virtual School. However, even in core district operations such as **Hall-Dale Middle School**, a school in Maine’s Cohort for Customized Learning, there are examples of students moving ahead of the teacher pace in an age-based cohort. At **Muscatine School District** in Iowa, research found that 3% of students in a competency-based environment accelerated beyond the teacher pace.

- **Removing the Ceiling on Achievement**: There are only a handful of examples where we can see the implications of how competency education can remove the constraining ceiling on achievement. At competency-based online schools such as Florida Virtual School, FLVS (where legislation enabled the school to be competency-based) and Virtual Learning Academy (operating within New Hampshire, where high school credits are competency-based) we can begin to see the practices of open entry/open exit that allow students to advance more quickly than the Carnegie unit allocates for completing the course. At competency-based elementary schools, it is easy to imagine that blended learning will allow some students to advance well beyond their age-based expectation when they have family-based knowledge, interest, or aptitude in a specific domain. Thus, we are likely to see students begin to take some middle school courses in elementary school, high school courses in middle school, and college courses early in their high school careers.

**Student Motivation and Engagement**: Competency education requires transparency about the competencies, learning targets, rubrics, and student progress. This transparency is the special ingredient that allows students to own their own learning, which can be transformed into higher levels of motivation and engagement. Personalization provides greater opportunities for student voice and choice. Of course not all students will be motivated and engaged all the time. However, the expectations for many of the dispositions needed to be successful in school are also transparent, and can facilitate dialogue with students to help them mature.

**Unique Pathways**: The combination of competency-based and blended learning environments makes it possible to customize every student’s learning experience. Blended learning allows students to vary their rate, time, location, and path. Instead of being widgets on the conveyor belt, not knowing why they are there or what it all means, students become the co-designers of their education.

**Educational Continuity**: Across the country, low-income families transfer in and out of schools in search of safety, high performance schools, housing, and jobs. As families break apart under these pressures, some students become homeless, are placed in child welfare, or end up in juvenile justice systems. This high mobility
in low-income communities impacts students and challenges schools. If portability is built into the competency education system, students will be able to carry their own learning history and progression. With online learning, they may even be able to continue learning while their lives are in upheaval.

Cost Effectiveness: Competency education may eventually generate overall cost savings. (Remember, the time-based system does not even consider cost effectiveness. It's all about inputs). The first step is to improve cost effectiveness with a deeper understanding of the resources it takes to provide adequate intervention and opportunities to help low-income students and other underserved students become college/career ready. There should certainly be cost savings for state budgets and families if more students can tuck a few college courses under their belt by the time they leave K-12. Districts and schools benefit if students can focus on competency recovery, like at New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School.

If states and districts work to streamline the K-12 and higher education systems so that 6th grade students can do 8th grade-level courses, 8th graders can do 10th grade, and 10th graders have access to any college-level courses, we should be able to generate some savings and help families reduce the cost of higher education. Cost effectiveness will also increase with these changes, especially if they give schools more scheduling flexibility to provide more time for students to become proficient, rather than using clumsy and expensive interventions like summer school and retention.

Unleashing Innovation: One of the major contributions of competency education is the role it can play in unleashing greater benefits from other innovations. First, allowing students to progress upon mastery means we can finally take advantage of online and blended learning. Students can accelerate the rate of their learning to catch up with (or move beyond) teacher pace. Students can advance in some disciplines and not in others. Students doing upper-level courses will become a norm. Second, competency education, with its clear learning progressions and rubrics, allows us to make sense of the explosion of digital tools and mobile learning applications. With better data, we will be able to measure which learning experiences work best for students with a particular profile. The viral adoption of learning apps has already made the system more dynamic and responsive. We are only at the beginning of understanding what online and blended learning can enable, as it is constrained by the traditional time-based system.

As we build up more content and common tagging language that allows us to quickly find appropriate options for students, personalization and choice will expand, which will reinforce student motivation and engagement. In the next section we will look at this in greater detail.