

WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING?

For more information, see the full report “The Shift from Cohorts to Competency,” available at:

<http://digitallearningnow.com/policy/publications/smart-series/>



A series of interactive papers that provides specific guidance regarding the adoption of higher standards and quality assessments focusing on the shift to personal digital learning.

THE SHIFT FROM COHORTS TO COMPETENCY



2015	Data Backpacks: Portable Records & Learner Profiles		Funding Students, Options, and Achievement	Improving Conditions and Careers: How Blended Learning Can Improve the Teaching Profession
Online Learning: Myths, Reality & Promise	Blended Learning Implementation Guide 3.0	Smart Series Guide to Edtech Procurement	Personalizing and Guiding College & Career Readiness	Using Prizes and Pull Mechanisms to Boost Learning








EXHIBIT: Confused by the Terminology

Terms such as online and blended learning, personalized, customized, and competency-based, are flooding our educational dialogue and are often used interchangeably. The ideas are related, but not the same. It's important to understand the difference. (See [Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education](#) from iNACOL for additional information.)

Competency Education

Competency Education is a system of education (often referred to as proficiency-based, mastery-based or performance-based) in which students advance upon mastery. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students. Assessment is meaningful and serves as a positive learning experience for students. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs. Learning outcomes include the application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions (Source: [CompetencyWorks](#)).

Online Learning

Online Learning is teacher-led education that takes place over the internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically, using a web-based educational delivery system that includes software to provide a structured learning environment. It may be synchronous (communication in which participants interact in real time, such as online video) or asynchronous (communication separated by time, such as email or online discussion forums). It may be accessed from multiple settings (in school and/or out of school buildings) (Source: [Keeping Pace](#)).

Blended Learning

Blended Learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through the online delivery of content and instruction, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace, and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home (Source: [Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation](#)). Compared to high-access environments, blended learning includes an intentional shift to online instructional delivery for a portion of the day in order to boost learning and operating productivity.

Personalized Learning

Personalized Learning is paced to student needs, tailored to learning preferences, and customized to the specific interests of different learners. Technology gives students opportunities to take ownership of their learning (Source: [National Education Technology Plan](#)).

Customized Learning

Customized Learning is informed by enhanced and expanded student data, which will boost motivation and achievement – keeping more students on track for college and career readiness (see [Data Backpacks: Portable Records and Learner Profiles](#)). The authors use the term customized learning to refer to a sequence of multi-modal learning experiences queued by a smart recommendation engine that is driven by a comprehensive learner profile.

All of these strategies are only competency-based if they meet the definitional requirements above.



A PRIMER ON COMPETENCY EDUCATION

SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW

Learning continuums are typically made up of standards, while competencies are similar to, but different from, standards. As Rose Colby explains, “**Competency implies much more than content and skills. By its very definition, competency requires that a student be able to transfer content and skill in a particular setting.**” In short, students in a competency-based system progress when they show what they know.⁷

Competency education always starts with knowing the student and where he or she is on the learning progression. Doing it right requires a demonstrated proficiency on a common pathway, or learning progression, toward college- and career-ready expectations, but it unlocks the power of personalization by letting every student take a unique path and pace. Students get the time they need to really understand the standards, and they have the

opportunity to demonstrate what they know on a regular basis. These periodic demonstrations of knowledge and skills inform their progress and matriculation, versus our current system that simply groups and advances students according to their age. These ongoing assessments and periodic demonstrations of student knowledge and skills create a [portable record and learner profile](#).⁶

[The Past The Promise: Today's Competency Education Movement](#) from Jobs for the Future describes an overview of the roots of the competency-based learning movement; highlights key research and the implications for competency-based learning and provides readers with several considerations for navigating the challenges and realizing the potential of the competency-based education movement.

What is Competency Education?

[CompetencyWorks](#) is an online community devoted to advancing the field, which is sponsored by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, the American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, and the National Governors Association. CompetencyWorks defines competency education as:

- Students advance upon mastery,
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students,
- Assessment is meaningful and serves as a positive learning experience for students,
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs, and
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies including the application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Competency education is rooted in core concepts and lessons learned from other reforms that have developed over the past 50 years – Bloom's instructional approaches, Essential Schools, standards-based education, and youth development, among others, are woven into a new framework. The development of competency education is decades long. Technology is unleashing it by generating demand for online and blended learning and enabling a powerful information system infrastructure. Until recently, it would have been impractical to suggest that competency education

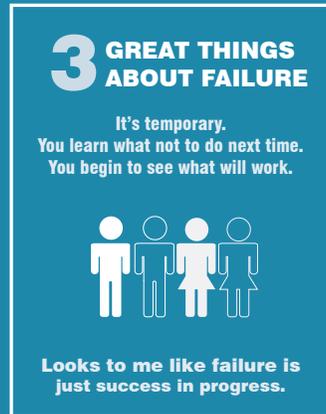
could reach every student without the personalization that technology now affords. The tools now exist to tailor instruction to individual student needs, collect and report student data down to each individual learning progression, and manage data-driven environments.

The main difference in competency education from the traditional time-based system is the focus on students learning to specific competencies; the amount of time and types of resources vary as needed. Accommodations can be made for students who enter courses with differentiated skills by adjusting to their needs and interests. A more holistic approach to development is often associated with competency education, or as Stanford University's Carol Dweck would say, a growth mindset.

The rapid expansion and increasing interest in competency education is being driven by a confluence of forces. More rigorous college- and career-ready standards, such as the CCSS, will generate shifts in instruction as teachers cover fewer topics but in a deeper fashion. Competency systems can help with this transition by adjusting and adding time and resources as necessary. Improvements in personalized learning and information systems have made it easier to pinpoint student needs and vary instructional approaches and interventions. The growth in online learning has created new options for many students and has demonstrated the opportunities and benefits of self-pacing when covering coursework. But it has also become clear that most students thrive in a mixed modality environment that is both personalized to their needs and supported by different ways of providing instruction, content, resources, interventions, and extra assistance.

EXHIBIT: Trevor and Tyler: A Competency Tale

Trevor, 8 and Tyler, 10 moved to Lake Park in late September. Having moved frequently, both boys were nervous about being placed in a new classroom, but had come to expect much of the same wherever they landed. School was often boring and uninteresting. But as they walked into the school office with their parents, they could tell right away that something was different. On the wall was a huge poster that read:



Mrs. Garza greeted them and explained that over the next two days the boys would be in orientation with three other new students who were enrolling that week. The boys were surprised. Orientation was fun. They talked a lot with Mrs. Garza about their other schools. She had them write and draw pictures about what they liked to do. They got to pick out books they thought were interesting and then read and talk about them with Mrs. Garza. They spent some time on the computer, on something called [MAPS](#).⁸ On Wednesday Mrs. Garza met with their parents. Meeting individually, she showed the boys and their parents on the computer what she called the learning map with levels. She explained that there were 13 levels that the boys would progress through, just like a video game, to get ready for college.



Trevor's map showed that in math he was on level three, but in reading and writing he was mostly on level one. Mrs. Garza explained that Trevor knew how to do a lot of things on level one like asking and answering questions about details in books and retelling stories. He could also read at level one. To get to level two he needed to work on two things: listening

carefully to stories to identify who is telling the story, and comparing and contrasting the adventures and experiences of characters in stories. She said she would like to make a plan to get Trevor to level three over the next year, but it would mean that he would need to practice reading every day during X-block, a special time for students to work on their school work every day. She also said that his new teacher, Mr. Cheng, would help him and he could also practice his reading and comprehension skills on the computer every day. She asked Trevor, "You told me you didn't like reading very much. What if we found some books about dragons and monsters, since you like to draw pictures of them so much?"



Tyler's map was very different. He saw that a lot more of his map was colored in. Mrs. Garza explained that they hoped most students his age would be at level six. In English Language Arts he was almost all filled in, except that he needed more practice in revising his writing. His vocabulary was at level seven, but he needed more practice in using vocabulary

from different domains. She told Tyler and his parents that since he loved to read, he could keep moving forward to higher levels. But he would need to spend a lot more time writing, not just reading. In math, Tyler was ready to start level six, but based on the MAPS assessment he seemed to have a few gaps at levels three, four, and five. She asked that for the next few weeks he spend X-block working with his math teacher, Mrs. Sen, and practicing on the computer.

Two months later at the next parent conference, Trevor and Tyler showed their parents evidence of their learning. Trevor showed examples of work from level two in which he compared and contrasted the most important points in two texts on the same topic. Tyler proudly reported he had filled in his math gaps, and that because he could work on the online curriculum during X-block he was now working at level seven. Mrs. Sen explained that Tyler really enjoyed the experience of progressing rapidly. They had decided to see if he would like the experience of exploring other ways to apply his learning. So instead of moving on to level eight later this year, she wanted to work with him on advanced work in level seven, which included creating a video explaining probability.

The boys' parents had never seen their kids so excited about school. Looking back on all their different experiences in several states, they were amazed at how quickly the new teachers got to know their sons and how smooth the transition was compared to other moves. They had always worried that the multiple moves would negatively impact their sons' futures, but finally felt confident that they had made the right choice (and one that would last) here in Lake Park.