



Competency-Based Education: Fundamental Principles

Competency-based education (CBE) is a system of instruction where students advance to higher levels of learning when they demonstrate mastery of concepts and skills regardless of time, place or pace. In a traditional system, **time** is the **constant** and **learning** is the **variable**, meaning students spend a set amount of time on certain subjects and advance at predetermined intervals (course units and grade levels) regardless of whether or not they have mastered the material.

The terms *competency*, *proficiency*, and *mastery* are often used interchangeably.



In order to fully realize the benefits of a competency-based system, states should adopt the following fundamental principles:

1. Provide flexibility from time based systems in statute or rule.
2. Transition to competency-based diplomas.
3. Design a state assessment system that supports competency-based learning.
4. Align accountability systems to competency-based learning environments.
5. Facilitate acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education.
6. Encourage policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning.
7. Communicate clearly with all stakeholders.

Each state has a unique policy landscape and the path towards a competency-based system will look different in different states. The **first step states should take is to authorize the creation of innovation districts or schools to pilot a competency-based system and identify a pathway for statewide policy adoption.** Schools that commit to transition to a competency-based system can request flexibility from rules or regulations that may hinder innovation and subject to high performance expectations in exchange for these flexibilities. The experience gained from the pilot program will help the state determine the long term policy solutions necessary to support CBE and establish plans for scalability. The pilot program must be designed to ensure that sufficient feedback mechanisms are in place to inform the decisions needed to address these fundamental principles.

1. Provide flexibility from time based systems in statute or rule.

Time based policies are embedded in different places in different states. Suggestions include:

- Eliminate policies that require a prescribed amount of minutes in a classroom for the awarding of credit, typically referred to as the Carnegie Unit.
- Provide flexibility with regard to how annual calendars and daily schedules can be constructed.

2. Transition to competency-based diplomas.

Diploma and graduation requirements vary from state to state as well as the amount of local control. Below are several suggestions to accommodate differing state policy environments:

- Amend graduation requirements to allow for and support competency-based diplomas.
- Set a date for when all diplomas must be competency-based but allow school districts and charters to create their own pathways.
- Support the design of competencies aligned to state standards for course and credit requirements for optional adoption by schools.

3. Design a state assessment system that supports competency-based learning.

States must provide an assessment system that verifies that students have mastered the college and career readiness requirements for a high school diploma and validates local determinations of proficiency. It is critical to maintain full participation of all schools and all students included pilots, in the state's assessment program. However, there are steps states can take to support a transition to CBE.

- State summative assessment schedules should allow for schools to test students when they are ready to demonstrate mastery.
- States should encourage schools to update their grading policies to ensure students have multiple opportunities to take district and school-level summative assessments.
- State assessments should incorporate performance-based tasks requiring more complex knowledge and reasoning skills.

Any district or school implementing a competency-based learning system should be required to conduct an assessment inventory to ensure assessments administered are providing educators, parents and policymakers with the information needed to ensure student success. Streamlining assessments will also maximize time and resources by eliminating duplicative or unnecessary assessments.

4. Structure accountability systems to support competency-based schools.

All schools, including those participating in pilots must maintain full participation in state accountability systems to maintain a transparent system of evaluation. However there are steps states can take to better support competency-based systems.

- Hold schools accountable for student learning outcomes with a balance of student proficiency and standards based growth.
- Contains multiple objective measures such as performance and progress on statewide assessments, graduation rates, performance on advanced coursework, and college and career readiness measures.
- Reinforce a graduation rate that reflects a four year graduation expectation while providing incentives for acceleration and credit for students needing extended time for achieving readiness.

5. Facilitate acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education.

Whether a competency-based diploma or report card will hurt a student's chance of getting into college is a concern that is frequently raised. States should be proactive to allay parental concerns as well as remove a potential disincentive for schools to transition to CBE.

- Develop a certification or other assurance that their higher education systems will recognize competency-based diplomas. The process should provide an avenue for involvement and feedback from the higher education community.

6. Encourage policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning.

Through internships, tutoring, scouting, academically focused clubs, or MOOCs, student learning isn't limited to what happens in the building during the school day. But that anytime anywhere learning is rarely recognized as part of students' official records. States must ensure that no policies prohibit these efforts and emphasize to districts and schools the importance of internal structures to enable data flow from providers. Suggestions include:

- Implement course access policies and programs. States could approve outside providers that offer additional courses aligned to state standards.
- Require districts and schools to develop policies and procedures to recognize and consider work completed by students outside of the traditional classroom environment for advancement and credit. Well-designed competencies can provide the framework to evaluate the proficiency gained through outside providers such as Boys & Girls Clubs, scouting, tutors, therapists, and after school programs.
- Allow the sharing of relevant student information with providers such as tutors and after school programs, so they can more effectively address students' needs without the need for additional assessments. Data backpacks and learner profiles are a potential mechanism for this student-level data portability that includes strong privacy controls.

7. Communicate clearly with all stakeholders.

Transitioning from a time based system to a student centered competency based system is a significant shift that requires policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents to imagine a system that they did not experience. Successful implementation must be predicated by a plan to communicate the changes to all stakeholders.

- Ensure all innovation pilot applications include a communications and outreach plan.