



Executive Summary

It's Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency- Based Learning Summit

Written by:

Chris Sturgis, MetisNet

Susan Patrick, International Association for K-12 Online Learning

Linda Pittenger, Council of Chief State School Officers

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TOLL-FREE 888.95.NACOL (888.956.2265) DIRECT 703.752.6216
FAX 703.752.6201 EMAIL info@inacol.org WEB www.inacol.org
MAIL 1934 Old Gallows Road, Suite 350 Vienna, VA 22182-4040

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Introducing competency-based learning is an essential step to unlocking innovation in the education system. In March 2011, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) sponsored the Competency-Based Learning Summit to bring together the innovative leaders in order to expedite capacity-building to meet the growing demand for competency-based approaches.

For more information, go to www.inacol.org. The iNACOL website (www.inacol.org) offers a wiki with resources and examples about the issues raised in this paper, as well as three related papers:

- *“When Success Is the Only Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning”*
- *“Clearing the Path: Creating Innovation Space for Serving Over-Age, Under-Credited Students in Competency-Based Pathways”*
- *“Cracking the Code: Synchronizing Policy and Practice for Performance-Based Learning”*

A Note on Language

Several terms are used to describe competency-based learning, including performance-based, proficiency-based, and standards-based. Competency-based will be used in this paper because federal policy has incorporated the term in Race to the Top and other programs. However, in describing reform efforts, the terms used by the state or district will be used. The hope is that as long as a shared working definition is used to drive policy, the variations in the descriptive term will not be a barrier.

What Is Competency-Based Learning?

Competency-based and next generation learning offer a new value proposition:

By aligning all of our resources (in schools, the community, and online) around student learning to enable students to progress upon mastery, our country can increase productivity in the education system, while simultaneously raising achievement levels overall and reducing the achievement gap.

At the Competency-Based Learning Summit, participants fine-tuned a working definition of performance-based learning.

- Students advance upon mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.¹

Competency-based efforts are not a silver bullet; only high-quality implementation will produce meaningful results. All five components of the definition need to be successfully implemented to ensure equity and excellence.

Getting Started

The following are highlights of lessons learned from innovators in competency-based school designs and reforms.

Identifying Innovation Space: Building upon disruptive innovation theories, innovators and policymakers are seeking out areas of non-consumption. Participants seek to take advantage of five areas for innovation: alternative education, students at home or in a hospital, credit recovery, insufficient teacher supply or distribution problems, and students with high mobility.

Transforming the Current System from Within: At the Summit, district leaders exchanged their approaches to introducing competency-based learning. Lindsay Unified School District in California began with creating a shared vision and introduced competency-based approaches where principal leadership was hungry to innovate. New York City established an innovation zone, building on local practices in addition to bringing in outside partners.

State policy leaders shared their approaches to creating innovative space for competency-based learning. New Hampshire is leading the way by eliminating seat-time while embedding competency-based learning within the course structure. They have simultaneously increased expanded learning opportunities so that students have more options for building and applying skills. Oregon created enabling legislation and then invested in pilots in two districts. Maine is partnering with the Reinventing Schools Coalition to pilot competency-based learning in two districts.

¹ Competency-based innovators design two sets of competencies: academic and skills that students need for college and career preparation. Using different terms, innovators all include forms of applied learning competencies such as creativity, problem solving, and communication. Many include personal skills such as perseverance, cultural competency, and study skills. Those serving vulnerable students include social-emotional literacy and navigational skills that are particularly important for students from low-income communities.

Tough Issues

Throughout the Summit, a number of “tough issues” were raised, issues that did not have a simple solution or even enough understanding of the landscape to seek a resolution. A few themes were consistent throughout the conversation.

- The system must be aligned with 100 percent of the students, even those who may fall behind, fall off the track to graduation, or “stop out.”
- Students must be treated as customers, at the core of all decisions, to ensure an effective and equitable competency-based system.
- Districts and schools will need to design around the educational (both academic and lifelong learning) needs of their students.

Accountability: Putting the Customer First

Participants explored the idea that approaching students as customers created a different model for accountability than the current top-down policy. Accountability from the ground up requires growth data for individual students based on levels of competencies. Accountability systems become continuous improvement systems, rolling up student-level proficiency data to school, district, and state accountability dashboards.

Equity: Eliminating Our Tolerance for Inequality

As competency-based innovations and enabling policy conditions expand, equity must become an essential lens. To do otherwise runs the risk of reproducing the inequities of the time-based system. Several essential steps include 1) placing students on the fastest path to goals that matter; 2) ensuring consistency in academic standards for all students, using rubrics as well as online learning with assessment engines to validate proficiency levels; and 3) investing in leadership development, thus increasing diversity and expertise by building bridges with communities of color and networks serving special populations such as English language learners and special education students.

Carnegie Unit: Creating Meaning for Students and Educators

When the idea of redefining the Carnegie unit is introduced in policy discussions, the issues soon begin to focus on other elements of the education system. This includes the roles and responsibilities of teaching, new types of jobs and career development, job protection, and budgeting. It is important to ensure that the new models have meaning for students and educators. New Hampshire has demonstrated that maintaining the course structure is a viable method for moving forward without having to tackle all the issues simultaneously.

Personalization: Co-Designing with Students

Participants suggested that keeping student voice central to the design and implementation of competency-based approaches is imperative. Competency-based learning is inherently personalized as students progress upon their learning trajectory in a way that is unique to them. In addition, competency-based approaches quickly hit a wall without student co-design. Deeper learning—the development and application of knowledge—requires real-world experiences or project-based learning in which students shape their learning.

Management Information Systems: Re-Engineering for Results

The competency-based innovators all started out with paper-based systems and soon developed information systems to support the abundant data generated on student learning. Standards-based systems capture proficiency levels that are validated with on-demand assessment data. Standards are tied to learning resources with the potential for customized recommendation engines for student interventions. As states and districts begin to think about scaling competency-based systems, they quickly encounter the complexity of trying to build student-centered, competency-based information management systems to be integrated with their current school-centered, top-down accountability systems.

Assessments: Where the Rubber Meets the Road

It was proposed that summative assessments should only occur after a student has mastered materials, serving as a validation mechanism for ensuring that standards were consistent across teachers, schools, and districts. Similarly, it was proposed that summative assessments should be delivered “just-in-time”—as soon as students are ready. Greater modularization would be helpful so that students could demonstrate the material they had mastered in shorter periods of time, allowing a sense of progress and portability for those with high mobility. Most of all, participants at the Summit raised concerns about whether the assessment consortia were taking into consideration the possibility of competency-based, next generation learning systems.

Shared Vision: Investing in the Process

Those state and district leaders that had substantial experience in creating competency-based systems constantly reminded us that it is imperative to engage the communities early and often. The true cost of community engagement is rarely budgeted, placing it at risk of being less than adequate. In addition, participants voiced a concern about how to communicate competency-based learning and the other elements of next generation learning to the broader community without causing confusion.

Higher Education: The Missing Partner

Representatives from New Hampshire suggested that they had made a mistake in their early stages of building a competency-based policy by not engaging higher education early in the process. Four areas that should be considered in higher-education policy included increasing access to higher-education courses for students who have advanced beyond K–12 competencies, upgrading admissions policies and practices to accept competency-based transcripts, teacher training, and competency-based post-secondary courses.

Unlocking the System

Ideas on how to advance competency-based approaches and unlock the system for greater innovation were offered at the Summit.

Alignment with the New Value Proposition

All the panelists agreed that aligning incentives with the new value proposition was critical for driving

the transformation of the education system. A new business model focused on performance outcomes was proposed to drive transformation. The school turnaround, online learning, and supplemental education service space are potential areas for performance-based or outcome-based payment.

The Power of the Customer

A customer-driven market or democratization of the market challenges top-down approaches. Instead of trying to determine what students need and organizing options to meet them, students decide for themselves in a customer-driven system.

Emerging Opportunities

The Common Core of State Standards is a mechanism for organizing and driving more innovation. Students underserved by the current system, such as young people in juvenile justice or alternative schools, offer a place to show the value of competency-based approaches. School turnaround policy is opening up a potential market given the federal funds directed toward the bottom five percent of schools. Finally, new learning models are developing in which students can access blended learning in community centers as well as schools.

The Federal Role in Unlocking the System

Although federal policy has yet to be created to promote competency-based approaches, the U.S. Department of Education has taken small steps toward integrating competency-based approaches into competitive programs, including Race to the Top and I3 competitions. Participants were repeatedly encouraged to inform Jim Shelton, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement, if they encountered specific barriers in federal policy or practices.

Conclusion

As more states build experience in competency-based policy and approaches, there is sure to be greater insight, more experience to inform the tough issues, and a stronger sense of the strategies that will move us forward. In the coming year, there are several things that need to be done consistently to accelerate the transformation of our educational system.

- Include innovative space for competency-based and next generation learning in every policy and initiative.
- Develop diverse leadership that can walk in both worlds, improving the traditional system while advancing next generation approaches.
- Ensure that traditionally underserved students are benefiting from the new models so that we do not replicate the inequity of the current system.
- Most importantly, make sure that student learning is driving all of our decisions, each and every one of them.

Keeping our eye on the prize is the key to unlocking our education system for new and wonderful possibilities in our communities and our country.