

Competency-Based Schools Embrace Digital Learning



A student walks past trailers set up for additional construction at Lindsay High School in Lindsay, Calif., where the rural district has put in place an ambitious competency-based education system for all grades.

—Daryl Peveto/LUCEO for Digital Directions

By [Katie Ash](#)

Tom Rooney sees competency-based education—supported by digital learning tools—as the path to building a better school district.

The superintendent of the 4,200-student Lindsay Unified School District in California, Rooney set in motion this school year a plan to move to a system in which students

progress not on the basis of their age or a set school calendar, but by demonstrating proficiency on learning objectives.

Educators in the district are aware that the transition will undoubtedly hit some bumps in the road, as do most districtwide school improvement efforts. But school leaders entered the school year feeling well prepared because the district has been gradually putting competency-based education, or CBE, in place since the 2009-10 school year.

The move to competency-based education—also known as proficiency-, standards-, and performance-based education—by Lindsay Unified and other districts will likely give them a head start in preparing for the new demands of the Common Core State Standards, experts point out, and in their ability to use technology more effectively to personalize learning.

“We have these practices that are ingrained in the traditional public education system that are not consistent with principles of learning and not consistent with how most of the rest of the world operates,” says Rooney.

“Prior to kindergarten, everyone learns to talk at a different time,” he continues. “They get potty-trained at different times, but suddenly when you get to kindergarten, you’re placed in this box, and you’re given the kindergarten curriculum because you’re five, not because you’re ready for it, or even if you already know it all. Kids learn in different ways on different time frames.”

National advocates for competency-based education echo those sentiments, pointing out economic and policy forces that are building momentum for such an approach.

“We’re in a place right now with the forces of global competitiveness, the adoption of common core, all of these new learning models, and the desire to do student-centered, personalized learning—you can’t really do that in a time-based system,” says Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. The Alexandria, Va.-based iNACOL is a fervent advocate for competency-based education.

“Common core is a game changer because it’s going to allow us to be able to share best practices and knowledge of skills across states, and it’s going to keep the innovators that are developing online content from having to reinvent the wheel in 50 states,” says Patrick.

The ability of states to collaborate will allow more districts to be able to implement pedagogies like competency-based education without having to start from scratch, she says.

Along with a number of other partners, such as the National Governors Association, MetisNet, Jobs for the Future, and the American Youth Policy Forum, iNACOL recently launched an initiative called **CompetencyWorks** that aims to promote competency-based education and provide resources for educators who are interested in learning more about the model.

The CompetencyWorks organizers hope to bring innovators together and help share their experiences with more schools and districts.

The concept is not new, but several factors have contributed to renewed interest in the structure, says Patrick.

“What’s different now is that [previously it] had to be entirely paper-based,” she says. “Now, with all of the new online and blended learning tools, teachers have a whole set of resources that can help them work with students on their learning goals. Teachers have a way to manage the personalization and allow the different pacing to happen in a very structured, goal-oriented way.”

In addition to helping teachers differentiate instruction for students, new technologies are giving rise to more powerful and detailed information systems that can help track students at the level of granularity that CBE requires, says Christine Sturgis, the founder of the Santa Fe, N.M.-based education consulting company MetisNet, one of the partners of CompetencyWorks.



Students in Garza’s English class separate into learning groups, a strategy the teacher says frees up more time for him to give individualized attention to each student and allows students progressing at similar levels to help each other.

—Daryl Peveto/LUCEO for Digital Directions

“[CBE] creates an enormous amount of data about students and teachers and teacher effectiveness,” she says. New information systems are needed to make “data-rich and informed decisions,” adds Sturgis.

Based on conversations at a competency-based-learning summit held in March 2011, **Sturgis and Patrick published a five-part working definition** of CBE. Under the definition, students advance upon mastery, competencies are broken down into explicit and measurable learning objectives, assessment is meaningful for students, students receive differentiated support based on their learning needs, and learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge.

However, re-engineering schools to a competency-based model is not a silver bullet, and creating competencies must be done thoughtfully and carefully to be successful, Sturgis explains **in a paper about designing competencies**, published by CompetencyWorks.

“If the competencies, learning objectives, and rubrics are not designed well, students may become bored by low expectations, frustrated by high-level competencies without adequate scaffolding embedded in the learning objectives, or disengaged through inconsistent feedback from flawed rubrics,” the paper says. “Although it is obvious, it cannot be overstated: Well-designed competencies are one of the essential elements for high-quality competency education.”

‘Pace Does Matter’

Empowering students and making sure they know exactly what it is they should be learning and how it can be demonstrated is a key component of CBE, its advocates say.

“Learners really understand where they’re at and where they’re going next,” says Rooney, the Lindsay Unified superintendent.

To create their learning objectives, officials of his district brought together 30 teachers and about a dozen administrators to go through the California state education standards for grades K-12 and realign the information into need-to-know learning objectives. The district also worked with the Marzano Research Laboratory, run by educator Robert J. Marzano, to help design the new curriculum.

In addition, the group created a set of assessments to go with the curriculum to evaluate how well students learned the material.

After several years of tweaking those standards and piloting them in classes, the district moved to CBE officially in 2009-10 with the incoming class of 9th graders.

Teachers, who under the new system are now called learning facilitators, scrapped the traditional grading scale and moved to a 0-4 rubric, where a 3 is the minimum passing standard and 4 indicates that a student has gone above and beyond the requirements of mastery.



Although students in Lindsay Unified are still grouped into grade levels, each student is also grouped by a content level (readiness levels 1-13), so the learning facilitator knows exactly where every student falls in each subject area by content level. The district also built in more flexibility with scheduling so that students can move from one content level to the next without having to wait for the semester to end.

In addition, students receive frequent and meaningful feedback from their learning facilitators, Rooney says. In the new information system, teachers, students, and parents can check to see students' exact progress in each content area at any point in time.

But just because students now learn at their own pace does not mean that students can take multiple years to get through one content level, emphasizes Rooney. "Pace does matter," he says. "Our system is about increasing the rigor and holding everyone accountable—administrators, learners, and learning facilitators."

Students who are more than two content levels below their grade levels receive individualized learning plans to help them catch up to their peers. Those students are allowed to test out of certain parts of the curriculum that they may already know to increase their pace.

Ultimately, though, what CBE comes down to is good teaching, Rooney says. Providing good feedback, making sure that students learn what they need to know before they move on, and differentiating instruction for each student is what good teachers have always done, he says.

The Boston Day and Evening Academy, an alternative high school in the Roxbury section of Boston that serves overage, undercredited students, has been using competency-based education since it opened 17 years ago, says the director of curriculum and instruction, Alison Hramiec.

The school, which does not use a traditional grading scale or group students by grade levels, has broken down each yearlong course into 11-week classes so that students have more flexibility to move from one class to the other.

“With this population of students in particular, they leave school, they have poor attendance, different situations arise, and they may fall behind in that class,” Hramiec says. In a traditional school, she says, “when they get back to school, everyone’s far ahead, and there’s no flexibility to get those kids caught up.”

But at the Boston Day and Evening Academy, students have the flexibility to start up where they left off, she says.

Like Lindsay Unified, the Boston Day and Evening Academy has spent several years aligning the curriculum with state standards and breaking it down into need-to-know competencies.

“You start with [the standards] and from there pull out what you believe are the enduring understandings,” says Hramiec. “Those are the big learning objectives that are the ones you want students to carry with them ten years from now.”

All students must demonstrate competencies independently and multiple times to move on, she says. They are given many opportunities to practice mastery informally before the actual assessment.

Protecting Innovators

One state that has taken the lead in competency-based education is New Hampshire, which in 2005 eliminated the Carnegie unit, a seat-time-oriented way of accounting for students’

academic progress. Schools in the state were given until the 2008-09 school year to move from a time-based to a mastery-based system.

Those regulations extend to the statewide online public high school, the Exeter, N.H.-based Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, or VLACS, which has been competency-based since it opened in 2007.



Teacher Adrian Gutierrez uses Kindle Fire tablets with students in his Spanish 1 class at Lindsay High School. Principal Jaime Robles says the school used to ban cellphones and tablet computers, but now it embraces them. "This is how students communicate and learn," Robles says. "So we are using the tools that they use to keep them engaged."

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When students take and complete courses at VLACS is flexible, allowing students to move at their own pace. They can complete courses in 10 weeks or take as long as 36 weeks, says Steve Kossakoski, the chief executive officer of the school.

Students must score at least a 75 or greater on all competency-based assessments, out of a possible 100, in addition to receiving a passing average score on all the assignments (not just the ones pegged as competencies) in order to pass.

To help brick-and-mortar schools in the state meet the mastery-based requirements, VLACS has begun offering competency-recovery classes for students in regular schools who have fallen behind.

"In a traditional school, one of the things they've struggled with is what do you do with a student who hasn't met competency in a world where everything is attendance-based?" says Kossakoski. In the competency-recovery courses that VLACS offers, the courses are broken down into smaller units so students only need to go through the parts of the class that they didn't pass the first time.

Interest in the competency-recovery classes has jumped from about 200 students the first year it was offered to 1,400 students in the last school year, says Kossakoski.

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The Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers has brought together nine states, including New Hampshire, in its **Innovation Lab Network** to build new models of education that empower learners. Members of the network challenge the status quo with six design principles for transformation, one of which is performance-based learning.

“We want [states] to wrap around [innovative schools and districts] and protect them like a cocoon,” says Gene Wilhoit, the president of the CCSSO.

The Common Core State Standards have helped pave the way for innovative learning models such as CBE, says Wilhoit.

However, while innovation is happening in pockets around the country, large-scale statewide movements are rare, he says.

To push that progress along, the Innovation Lab has identified diagnostic tools that need to be developed and more effective intervention strategies for teachers.

One of the most recent states to join the CCSSO’s Innovation Lab is Iowa, which has begun to explore the idea of competency-based education. It granted districts in the state access to seat-time waivers after a forum about CBE held in December 2011.

The 500-student Collins-Maxwell Community School District, about 40 miles north of Des Moines, is one that has taken advantage of the change in policy.

“Competency-based education challenges some of the structures that we think may be there to support students, but may actually be limits,” says Jason Ellingson, the superintendent of the rural district, who also sits on the state’s task force on CBE.

Although the district has not rolled out a proficiency-based education system, it is taking steps to encourage organic growth of the model, officials say.

For instance, this school year, the district will be giving out iPads to all of its K-12 students. While elementary school students will leave the devices at school overnight, middle and high school students will be allowed to take the devices home with them.

“We feel that those tools are going to be pushing the idea of personalized learning, and we think that’s going to help the discussion around competency-based education,” says Ellingson.