EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills

A State Policymakers Guide to Competency Education

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Our goal is to build a system that is built around kids.

– Stephen Bowen, Commissioner, Maine Department of Education

While states meet the challenge of implementing the Common Core State Standards, emphasizing greater rigor and deeper application, they are confronted with the fact that the time-based system may not be up to the task. States are now rapidly advancing an alternative: competency education. Thirty-six states have already opened the door by creating proficiency-based gateways, waiving seat-time, establishing credit flexibility, or redesigning their education system around student learning.

State leadership and policy are the linchpin to competency education. Certainly, federal policy can help or hinder, especially around the high-leverage accountability and assessment policies. Districts and schools can implement competency education once seat-time constraints have been removed, but it is unlikely that they can grow and sustain fully developed systems that let our children soar to new levels of achievement under the burden of the time-based, agricultural schedules and rigid, age-based structures. It is firmly in the hands of state leadership to redesign policies for a student-centered system, rather than a time-based system.

States are taking different routes toward competency-based systems. Leading states are redesigning their education systems with a laser focus on helping students reach proficiency. Others are taking advantage of *areas of nonconsumption* such as increasing access to courses through online learning or serving over-age, under-credited students. Other entry points into competency education include *credit flexibility and waivers*, opening up innovation zones, or establishing proficiency-based *gateways*. The context of these entry points will shape their overall strategies, policy agenda, and the realignment of their policy infrastructures.

Changing their focus from compliance to systems transformation, state education leaders are redefining their roles in designing next generation learning. Every aspect of state policy becomes a lever for change: assuming the duty of removing barriers to competency education, creating conditions for district and school innovation, designing thoughtful assessment regimes to ensure quality across schools, and creating flexibility to support student learning.

For more information on competency education, you can visit CompetencyWorks, read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the Competency-Based Pathways wiki for an in-depth look at the working definition.

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i. Setting the Direction

Competency-based education truly has the power to transform our school system. We must fuel this innovative spirit.

– Jason Glass, Director, Iowa Department of Education

State leaders are positioned like no others to offer and/or facilitate a common vision. In setting the direction, state leaders use a variety of techniques including:

Multiple rationale for competency education: State leadership has capacity to address the need for redesigning the education system from many perspectives including equity, college and career readiness, graduation crisis, customization, and economic development.

Public discourse and critical conversations: Competency education involves deep, "second order" change.[1] This requires adaptive leadership approaches that include asking powerful questions, listening, co-creating, and negotiating.

Innovation and implementation: Once the direction has been set, one of the first decisions state leadership will have to make is the strategy for change, the theory of action—how to bring about competency education. Everyone agrees that a top-down compliance model simply won't work. Below are mechanisms that states are putting into place as part of their innovation infrastructure.

- **Creating a Road Map:** Competency education calls for systemic change—realigning all the elements of the education system around student learning. It can't happen all at once, so a road map is called for to provide guidance. This state policy approach is predicated on the assumption that the driving force for change, the capacity for innovation, is generated at the grass-roots level.

- **Pilots, Proof Points, and Building Knowledge:** In order to move forward, states need to be able to point to schools that are effectively using competency-based approaches to benefit students. Depending on the overall strategy, states may think about these as pilots, proof points, or an ongoing research and development process.

- **Systems of Supports for Educators:** States are creating peer-to-peer learning to support practitioners in response to where they are in their own learning process. States are providing technical assistance, professional development, and leadership development through just-in-time mechanisms including networks, communities of practice, and online platforms.

II. Aligning the Policy Infrastructure

What do we know about learning? Learning only takes place when students are engaged. We learn by connecting concepts and building expertise over time. If we do not learn a concept, new learning cannot be built on it.

—Paul Leather, Deputy Commissioner, New Hampshire Department of Education[2]

States that start by waiving seat-time find experimentation is weighed down by the reporting, rules, and policies of the traditional system. Creating a competency education system requires more than waivers or removing time-based practices. It calls for an alignment of policies around student learning.

There are a multitude of design choices to make in realigning the system. States may make different design choices at the state level or determine that certain decisions are better made at district or school levels. The most important consideration for states is to select high-leverage policies for ensuring quality models that benefit our traditionally underserved students. When aligning and centering policies around learners, not time, one theme will continue to arise: the capacity to provide students adequate time and interventions to advance based on mastery. It is the most dramatic departure from our current system of "Swiss cheese learning,"[3] which allows students—even the top performers—to move ahead with gaps.

High Expectations for All Children

The absolutely essential role of state leadership is to establish a clear vision for the end goal of K-12—college and career readiness—the standards that will get our students there, and the level of proficiency we expect along the way. Implicit in competency education is a holistic approach to children's development that goes well beyond a narrow focus on academic skills, to emphasize knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

College, Career, and Civic Readiness: Competency education forces the conversation about college and career readiness to become explicit about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we expect students to have and to be able to apply in the real world. For example, under this system, it is not sufficient to require four years of math; we must specify the math skills that we expect students to develop and use.

New Hampshire and Maine started with a clear vision of readiness for college and career success for all children, supported by an overarching policy of proficiency-based diplomas.

Development of High-Quality Competencies and Knowledge Frameworks: Well-designed, standards-based competencies and their complementary rubrics are at the heart of competency education. If we can't define what we want students to know and be able to do, how will we ever help them to get there? With states having set core academic standards, at this point, most states see the underlying knowledge frameworks, competencies, and rubrics as a local decision. New Hampshire, a state that has been on the journey toward competency education for over seven years, has arrived at the point where it makes more sense for the state to facilitate a process of developing statewide competencies in mathematics and English language arts.

Development of the Education Workforce

States have been working for years to improve the effectiveness of the teaching workforce, including teacher recruitment, preparation, and evaluation. However, there are a number of issues emerging around competency education that are requiring states to rethink their efforts to ensure alignment with competency education.

Changing Roles of Educators: State leaders realize that competency education opens up the doors to new school designs, ways to deploy staff, and signals shifting roles for teachers and learners. States are updating language in teacher-related policies to emphasize the new roles and new skills that are needed.

Retraining and Professional Development: Competency education emphasizes elements of teaching that are different from the traditional methods such as assessment literacy and adaptive instruction. Furthermore, classroom management is very different in a personalized, competency-based setting. States are investing heavily in creating a system of supports for educators so that they can upgrade their skills in response to what their students need to progress.

Teacher Effectiveness: In competency education, the traditional system gives way to a richer and more dynamic process where learning becomes personalized and students are no longer treated as a group. Students are organized in new ways, and attributing value to individual teachers becomes more difficult since students may receive instruction and support from a number of educators, as well as through blended learning. Thus, teacher effectiveness systems need to reflect the collaborative approach, providing schools with information to support continuous improvement and educators with meaningful feedback and supports.

Student Progress and Graduation

Competency education explicitly recognizes that students are different—with different sets of skills, different levels of maturity and identity, and different aptitudes, interests, and family supports. One of the fundamental changes in competency education is the way students progress through the education system.

Grading and Transcript Policies: There are two important aspects of competency education that challenge time-based practices and policies. First, it assumes that schools will never give up on kids. Second, it values dispositions and behaviors, yet assesses them separately from academics. Oregon's State Board of Education has integrated these dynamics into their revised policy on Student Achievement Grading and Reporting, which provides students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of academic content standards and includes the expectations that districts will respond to students who have not met or have exceeded the academic content standards with access to additional services and other public school or alternative educational options.

Competency-Based Graduation Requirements: Earning a competency-based diploma is a major linchpin in the shift to giving our students the opportunity to expand choices in how they learn, when they learn, and where they learn. Arizona's Move On When Ready policy allows students to earn a competency-based Grand Canyon Diploma, regardless of their age or grade. Maine's legislature has passed legislation requiring that a diploma from a secondary school be based on student demonstration of proficiency by 2018. New Hampshire's education leaders are in early discussions about what a competency-based diploma—based on a competency framework, rather than course credits—might look like.

Extended Graduation Rates: In competency education, time is a variable, including the time it takes to graduate from high school. In the process of agreeing upon methodology to monitor the graduation rate, the federal government established the use of extended graduation rates.[4] Yet less than half of our states are using the extended graduation rate as an incentive for districts and schools to continue serving those students who need more time to graduate.

Alignment with Higher Education: Engaging higher education leadership is essential to a successful shift to competency-based education. More seamless pathways to post-secondary education will be created as higher education institutions integrate competency-based practices in providing dual enrollment and alignment of admissions processes.

Embedded and Extended Learning Opportunities[5]

Competency education will only be successful if students are able to access adequate interventions and time for them to become proficient. One of the most important and most difficult things for schools to do is create greater flexibility of time and place for learning. Beyond the seat-time policy, there are many other time-based policies that dictate to schools when and how they operate, including schedule and calendar.

Community-Based Learning: Many states have policies that a student can receive credit through community-based learning such as work experience or service learning. However, few states or districts have the competencies in place to ensure that students are actually learning at the high standards on the route to college and career readiness. At the time that New Hampshire moved forward on competency-based credits, they also established a policy on extended learning. With transparent competencies in hand, students can take full advantage of these learning opportunities.

Online and Blended Learning: Online learning has become a driving force behind competency education. Online learning has the potential to create student-centered, personalized pathways for students that are mastery-based. Competency education policies are needed to realize the potential of new learning models. However, many states that have gone boldly down the path of online and blended learning have done so without the systemic alignment to competency education.

Systems of Assessments

The fourteen states in the Proficiency-Based Learning Task Force of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) identified ways a competency-based assessment system might be designed that can drive toward both higher achievement and equity.[6] State summative assessment regimes need to offer three features: validation of proficiency levels, meaningful feedback loops, and supports and multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency for students who are not deemed proficient.

With the understanding that the Common Core State Standards assessments being developed by SBAC and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career are necessary but not sufficient in helping to define and assess the pathway to college and career readiness, states are making progress in putting the pieces together for a balanced system of assessments. New Hampshire is designing a comprehensive and balanced set of assessments including the capacity to evaluate the development of higher-order skills that include problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Emerging Issues

There are four emerging and highly related issues that will take substantial creativity and determination to fully align with competency education: accountability, productivity metrics, information management systems, and school financing. Caution must be taken not to prematurely address these issues before we understand the implications of competency education in meeting the needs of traditionally underserved students.

III. Creating a Culture of Competency in State Education Agencies

What does a culture of continuous improvement look like compared to a culture of compliance? Chief state school officers bear the largest responsibility for the transformation of the SEA organization and culture. Regardless of the level of detail being discussed, from strategy to review of timelines, every interaction is an opportunity to create a learning culture. Yet, commissioners and state superintendents have a limited time span due to the political nature of their jobs. Thus, deputies within the SEA play a critical role with their in depth understanding of the organization, policy, and practice, while also positioned to sustain the initiative. Chief state school officers and their deputies are transforming their organizations in the following ways:

- Reorganizing to become a service agency rather than one driven by regulation and compliance.
- Developing capacity of the SEA to design new systems and to lead transformative change through partnerships with organizations that can mentor and co-create.
- Seeking the leadership to embrace and inculcate the culture of innovation and improvement from the ground up.
- Restructuring the SEA organization to encourage collaboration and cross-departmental innovation.

IV. Closing Comments

The work of the state is not over once competency education policy is adopted. State leaders emphasize that the challenges of implementation need to draw the same level of attention as policy issues. By far the hardest work of transforming competency education takes place in classrooms, schools, and districts.

The greatest challenge facing all of the SEAs that are guiding our country's transformation to competency education and a personalized model of learning is in supporting districts and schools in implementation. There is nothing more important than effective implementation to lifting up the education system and generating equity in student achievement. There are no ready-made road maps. The demand on local education leaders is extraordinary as they engage practitioners and communities in making the necessary design choices. There are many opportunities for missteps and delays; however, there are equally as many opportunities for creativity, leadership, and a shared joy of learning.

We don't know what competency education will look like in ten years, especially with the rapid advancements in digital learning. What we do know is that the dialog needs to go both ways to redesign systems toward transformation and to create conditions necessary for student success. If we are to align the systems for student-centered learning, state policymakers must listen to the practitioners who are designing the systems we need and must be strong advocates for necessary changes in state and federal policy as well.

Endnotes

[1] Robert J. Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian A. McNulty, *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results* (Aurora, CO: ASCD, 2005).

[2] Presentation of "New Hampshire—The New Ways We Are Thinking about Learning" at the NH Innovation Lab Network Partnership for Next Generation Learning meeting, October 27, 2011. Web. February 2013. http://www.education.nh.gov/innovations/nxgl/.

[3] Salman Khan introduces the phrase "Swiss cheese learning" in his book *The One World Schoolhouse* as a metaphor for the gaps in learning that develop for both high-achieving and struggling students.

[4] "Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged; Final Rule" 34 CFR 200.19(b). www2.ed.gov.

[5] For more on this topic, see "The Learning Edge: Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment," CompetencyWorks.

[6] Final report of the Proficiency-Based Learning Task Force, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, October 11, 2012. Available at the Competency-Based Wiki.