

What is Competency-based Education?

Competency-based education is a term that describes learning progressions based on mastery of content rather than passage of time. Competency-based learning is a system of education, often referred to as proficiency or mastery-based, in which students advance and move ahead on their lessons based on demonstration of mastery. In order for students to progress at a meaningful pace, schools and teachers provide differentiated instruction and support.

As competency education expands across the country, more people are seeking to understand what it is, how to implement it and how to revise policies to better support learning and student achievement.

During the [Competency-based Education Summit](#) hosted by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2011, participants developed the following working definition of competency:

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

In a competency-based education system, students understand learning objectives and also know what they must “know and show” to be proficient. If a student does not demonstrate adequate proficiency to advance, they must be provided with supports and interventions that help them fill the gaps in their knowledge and skills.

How Widespread is Competency-based Education?

Many states have policies in place allowing schools and districts flexibility to award credit based on demonstrating competency rather than on seat time, but these policies vary widely in their scope. Challenges remain for schools and districts attempting to implement a competency-based learning system, including funding systems that are incompatible with flexibility, data systems that are incompatible to competency-based learning, and existing policies that restrict how school districts and schools can award credit.

Policy Questions to Consider

Through a variety of approaches, state policymakers are breaking down the barriers to competency-based learning models. In some states, broad groups of stakeholders including state legislators, governors, school leaders, educators, parents and students are working together to build education systems that award credit based on students’ mastery of content and skills. A state considering enabling some form of competency-based learning may want to consider the following questions:

- **To what extent will students advance on demonstrated mastery?** Will some students or all students advance based on demonstrated mastery? If the answer is some students, will they be students in certain grade levels (e.g., only high school), students in certain subjects, or students who are struggling or advanced, or would advancement be based on individual student preference?

- **To what extent will summative assessments, used to validate determinations of mastery for advancement, be administered at the point of readiness?** At the far edge of the continuum, competency-based pathways would mean that states would assess students at the point—and at any point—that they are likely to demonstrate a mastery level of performance. This timing, however, represents a significant departure from traditional statewide annual, often end-of-year summative assessment. How far does the state envision going toward this point?
- **How will state education funding systems adjust to students moving at their own pace?** Changing how students are organized and how they move through the system may impact traditional school funding approaches. [Digital Learning Now](#) suggests that states adopt weighted, flexible, portable, and performance-based school funding systems to allow the flexibility inherent in competency-based learning.

Enacted Legislation:

- Michigan [HB 4313](#) (2017) appropriates \$500,000 for competitive grants to districts for the design and implementation of competency-based education programs to provide enhanced choice to pupils and parents for the completion of the requirements for kindergarten through a high school diploma.
- South Carolina [HB 3969](#) (2017) requires the State Department of Education, working with the Education Oversight Committee, to design and pilot district accountability models that focus on competency-based education.
- Utah [SB 34](#) (2017) establishes the Reimbursement Program for Early Graduation From Competency-Based Education, authorizing the State Board of Education to reimburse a local education agency that offers a competency-based education for a student who graduates early from the local education agency.
- Florida [HB 1365](#) (2016) establishes the Competency-based Education Pilot Program to provide an educational environment that allows students to advance to higher levels of learning upon the mastery of concepts and skills through statutory exemptions relating to student progression and the awarding of credits.
- Illinois [HB 5729](#) (2016) creates the competency-based, high school graduation requirements pilot program in which students advance once they have demonstrated mastery, and receive more time and personalized instruction to demonstrate mastery, if needed.
- Utah [SB 143](#) (2016) creates the Competency-Based Education Grants Program to improve educational outcomes in public schools by advancing student mastery of concepts and skills.
- Idaho [HB 110](#) (2015) directs the Department of Education to begin Idaho's transition to a mastery-based education system.
- Alaska [HB 278](#) (2014) allows secondary school students to earn credit for core courses by passing a mastery exam in mathematics, language arts, science, social studies, and world languages.
- Utah [SB 122](#) (2014) allows students to earn course credit towards high school graduation by testing out of the course, or demonstrating competency in course standards.
- Iowa [HF 215](#) (2013) establishes the competency-based education grant program to award grants to no more than ten school districts annually for purposes of developing, implementing, and evaluating competency-based education pilot and demonstration projects.
- Arizona [SB 1255](#) (2012) establishes competency-based educational pathways for college and career readiness that allow students in grades 7 through 12 to earn credit for a class by demonstrating competency in a subject.

- Iowa [SF 2284](#) (2012) allows school districts to award high school credit to students based on their ability to demonstrate mastery of required competencies, rather than on traditional time-based models. The law also created a task force to conduct a study of competency-based instruction, including standards, assessment models, professional development and integration with the Iowa Core curriculum. The [Final Report of the Competency-Based Education Task Force](#) was released in December 2013.
- Georgia [HB 186](#) (2011) allows students to earn course credit towards high school graduation by demonstration of subject area competency, instead of or in combination with completion of courses of classroom instruction.
- Maine [LD 949](#) (2011) requires high school students to demonstrate achievement in core learning areas to earn a standards-based diploma rather than a traditional time-based diploma.
- Ohio [SB 311](#) (2007), the Ohio Core Curriculum Act, requires school districts to allow students to earn high school credit based on demonstrated subject area competency, instead of completed hours of classroom instruction.

State Board Actions:

- [Vermont](#). In 2014, the Vermont Board of Education enacted new Education Quality Standards. Beginning with the graduating class of 2020, schools' graduation requirements must be rooted in demonstrations of student proficiency, as opposed to time spent in classrooms.
- [Oregon](#). In 2007, the State Board of Education voted to adopt new high school graduation requirements. To earn a diploma, students will need to successfully complete the credit requirements, demonstrate proficiency in the Essential Skills, and meet the personalized learning requirements. Students will also have the option to earn credit for proficiency.
- [New Hampshire](#). In 2005, the New Hampshire Board of Education began requiring high schools to assess students based on their mastery of course-level competencies, rather than time spent in class.
- [Rhode Island](#). In 2003, the Rhode Island Board of Regents passed regulations that require high school students to demonstrate achievement in standards-based content as well as applied-learning skills. Schools must offer students opportunities to complete exhibitions, portfolios, or end-of-course assessments to demonstrate mastery of required competencies.

SOURCE: National Conference of State Legislatures September 2017 at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/competency.aspx#How Widespread is Competency-based Education?>