What is Competency Education?

Across the nation, schools, districts and entire states are reshaping their education system to ensure students reach proficiency in the skills they need for college and careers. It may be called competency-based, proficiency-based, mastery-based or performance-based education, but it speaks to one goal – to lift academic expectations while ensuring that every student reaches them.

The concept is simple: Learning is best measured by mastery rather than time spent in the classroom.

Competency education ensures students gain the academic and lifelong learning skills they need to be successful in an ever-changing world. Schools can personalize the learning experience, offering a variety of ways for students to learn and demonstrate learning. Students have more voice and choice, taking ownership of their learning. Students get the instructional support they need to succeed, even if it takes them multiple attempts over a little more time to achieve mastery. Academic rigor is sustained by measuring achievement against a common set of standards.

In competency education, students work at their academic level, understanding what they are learning and what they need to do next. Teachers provide timely assessments and extra support until students can demonstrate that they have mastered the concept. Students get the help they need, when they need it, so they can advance to a higher level of studies as soon as they are ready. This system ensures that our most underserved students are no longer left behind, and that all of our students can take their education as far as they are able.

The Five Elements of Competency Education

1. Students advance upon 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 timely, 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.
Six Ways Competency Education Improves Learning

1) Advancement Based on Proficiency, Not Time in School

Students work at their level, advancing to the next level of study based on their demonstration of skills, not age or the number of days in school. Proficiency requires students to be able to apply skills. Students can advance beyond their grade level in one subject while being on a different grade level in another subject. Struggling students get additional support. Students are no longer passed along to the next grade without the skills to succeed.

2) Transparency Empowers Students and Expands Learning

Engagement and motivation increase when students know what is expected of them and what proficiency looks like. Students study at their level, working along transparent learning progressions towards mastery of the Common Core or other college- and career-ready state standards. They own their learning, seeking ways to learn and demonstrate what they have learned that are relevant to them.

3) Assessment and Grading Designed to Help Students Learn

Students have multiple ways and multiple opportunities to demonstrate skills until they reach proficiency. Teachers use consistent methods of assessing, and grades communicate how students are progressing. Summative assessments validate that students have mastered the content and skills. As a result, teachers can certify that students are prepared when they move on to the next level.

Just listen to students and teachers to know why schools, districts and states are turning to competency education:

I feel like I had one of my best years. I got to set my own goals and watched myself grow. I’m getting excited to go to school. Now I want to come every day.
-Maya, fifth-grade student

The number one change is my students are excited about learning. They are taking control of their knowledge and they are keeping track of it. They stay on top of things because they know what is expected and what is coming up next. They ask more questions and are more willing to participate.
-Mrs. Collins, fifth-grade teacher

The teachers have a better relationship with you here. They genuinely care about your success rather than just trying to push you through so you graduate even though you don’t understand the subjects you are passing.
-Catherine, tenth-grade student
4) Timely Supports So Students Can Stay on Pace

Students’ progress is monitored in real time, benchmarked to personalized learning plans to keep them on track to college and career readiness. Teachers collaborate to pinpoint where students need help. Instructional support and tutoring is integrated into the school day so students can access them when needed.

5) Application of Lifelong Learning Skills and Academic Content

Students become prepared for college and careers by developing necessary lifelong learning skills, such as problem solving, communication, collaboration, teamwork, and persistence, that are needed to master academic knowledge. Deeper learning is emphasized through the application of knowledge. Students can soar beyond their grade level.

6) Strong Cultures of Learning and Continuous Improvement

Data about students’ progress drives the professional development of teachers and the continuous improvement of schools. Districts and schools are constantly innovating to ensure students are engaged in school, successfully mastering the curriculum, and keeping pace on their way to graduation.

Why it Matters

- About 1 million students a year leave high school without a diploma.
- 70% of higher education instructors said their students do not comprehend complex reading materials; 66% said students cannot think analytically.
- The current system allows students to progress because of age, not demonstrated ability. This is resulting in gaps – some small, some big, all damaging.
- Students, families and states bear the burden of a time-based education system. College remediation costs $2.3 billion per year.
- Our graduates do not achieve the level of academic and career skills as those of other countries. This makes them less competitive in a global economy.
How it Works

All students must demonstrate what they have learned before moving on.

Before students can pass a course, move on to the next grade level, or graduate, they must demonstrate that they have learned what they were expected to learn. If students fail to meet learning expectations, they are given more support and instruction from teachers, more time to learn and practice, and more opportunities to demonstrate progress.

Teachers are very clear about what students need to learn.

In every class, students know precisely what teachers expect—no guesswork required. The learning expectations for the course are clearly described and communicated, and students will know precisely where they stand throughout the course—for example, a student will know that she has achieved three of six expected learning standards, but that she needs to work harder to achieve the last three before she can pass the course. Importantly, her parents will also know precisely what she’s learned and what she may be struggling to learn.

Common, consistent methods are used to evaluate student learning.

In many schools, different learning expectations are applied from course to course, and different methods and criteria are used to evaluate what students have learned. Consequently, one Algebra I course in a school may be very challenging, for example, while another Algebra I course may be comparatively easy—and a B earned in the “difficult” course might actually represent stronger learning achievement than an A in the “easy” course. Proficiency-based learning applies the same standards to all students, while teachers use consistent methods of evaluating and reporting on student learning—everyone knows precisely what grades stands for and what each student has learned. As a result, grades mean the same thing from course to course, and schools can certify that students are prepared when they move on.

While learning expectations are fixed, teachers and students have more flexibility.

Even though learning expectations and evaluation methods are common and consistent, teachers can be given more flexibility in how they teach and students can be given more choice in how they learn. For example, teachers don’t need to use the same textbooks, assignments, and tests—as long as their students learn what they need to learn, teachers can develop new and more creative ways to teach. Similarly, students can be given an assignment—research an American president, for example—but they can choose which president to study or how they want to show what they’ve learned (one student may write an essay, while others may create a short documentary using archival photos or an audio podcast in the style of a presidential address). As long as students meet the course expectations—demonstrate a strong understanding of the election system, the executive branch of the federal government, and the role of the American president—teachers can teach and students can learn in the ways that work best for them.

Getting Results

Adams 50 School District in Colorado serves a diverse population with 81% of students on Free and Reduced Lunch and 45% English Language Learners. The district was considered a Priority Improvement district in 2009 with a third of their schools designated as lowest performing. Within two years of implementation of competency education, all the schools were out of turnaround status and the number of schools in the accredited status had doubled. The graduation rate continues to steadily increase, reaching 74% in 2013.

Snapshot of State Policy

While states work to ensure all students are prepared for future success in a globally competitive society, emphasizing greater rigor and deeper application of knowledge and skills, they are confronted with the fact that the traditional time-based model of education may not be up to the task. States are now rapidly advancing competency education. Thirty-six states have already revised policies to allow for proficiency-based diplomas, waived seat-time to allow competency-based pathways, created credit flexibility, or initiated a redesign of their education system around student learning.
In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student’s learning curve, but it is not an outcome.

– Proficiency-Based Instruction and Assessment, Oregon Education Roundtable

About Competency Works and iNACOL

CompetencyWorks provides information and knowledge-sharing about competency education through a website, a blog filled with practitioner knowledge and policy advancements, and a wiki that makes it easy to get examples of materials. CompetencyWorks provides resources for new innovators and early adopters so they can rapidly learn about lessons learned and different approaches to inform their work. CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative, led by iNACOL in partnership with American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, MetisNet and the National Governors Association.

The mission of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to ensure all students have access to a world-class education and quality blended and online learning opportunities that prepare them for a lifetime of success. iNACOL hosts the iNACOL Blended and Online Learning Symposium, the premier K-12 blended and online learning conference that provides a dedicated strand of workshops and sessions on competency education.

Stay on top of advancements in competency education at CompetencyWorks.org and visit iNACOL at www.inacol.org

For More Information On Competency Education

- Cracking the Code: Synchronizing Policy and Practice for Performance-Based Learning, available at CompetencyWorks: www.competencyworks.org

- The Learning Edge: Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment, available at CompetencyWorks: www.competencyworks.org

- From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire, available at Christensen Institute: www.christenseninstitute.org


- The Shift From Cohorts to Competency, available at Digital Learning Now: www.digitallearningnow.com

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