



Executive Summary

Cracking the Code: Synchronizing Policy and Practice for Performance-Based Learning

Written by:

Susan Patrick, International Association for K-12 Online Learning

Chris Sturgis, MetisNet

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iNACOL
International Association for K-12 Online Learning

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

Executive Summary

State policymakers are seeking ways to catalyze breakthrough innovations that produce excellence and equity. Performance-based learning is one of the keys to cracking the current structures and practices that are built into the educational code. This paper is designed to expedite state policy development.¹ Building upon the 2011 Competency-Based Learning Summit convened by the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the following discussion explores how state policy can loosen the regulatory environment that is handcuffing the administrators and educators who are ready to move toward student-centered, competency-based models of learning.

What Is Performance-Based Learning?

The Council of Chief State School Officers included performance-based learning as one of the six attributes of next generation learning. It is a powerful concept that mutually reinforces personalized learning and anytime, everywhere innovations. However, it is not enough to simply create seat-time waivers. Performance-based learning requires a new set of practices and policies that is riveted on student learning.

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

¹ For more information about the Competency-Based Learning Summit, read “It’s Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency-Based Learning Summit,” available at www.inacol.org or www.ccsso.org.

A Note on Language

In this paper, we use the terms performance-based and competency-based interchangeably. Federal policy uses the term competency-based learning in Race to the Top and other programs. The Council of Chief State School Officers uses the term performance-based learning. Some leading states and districts refer to proficiency-based or standards-based learning. 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.

- 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.

Competency-based efforts are certainly not a simple guarantee of high achievement. Like any service industry, only high-quality implementation will produce meaningful results. To ensure equitable results, all five elements of the definition must be implemented.

Redesigning Policy for Performance-Based Learning

Just as there are multiple pathways for students to learn, there are multiple pathways for states to create room for innovation. States can start with enabling policy, such as seat-time waivers or “credit flex” policies. The most advanced states are working on comprehensive competency-based policy redesign, including:

- Require districts to offer competency-based credits so that students have competency-based options. Offer competency-based alternative schools and credit recovery.
- Provide support mechanisms. Education leaders will need opportunities to work with their colleagues or technical assistance providers to create competencies, train teachers, and establish information management systems.
- Establish quality-control mechanisms. To safeguard equity and to ensure that higher expectations for student learning are not compromised, states will want to design quality-

Next Generation Learning

CCSSO has embraced next generation learning as one of the most important roles for state leadership for comprehensively reshaping the agenda for state education agencies. In partnership with seven states, CCSSO has defined next generation learning as rooted in six critical attributes:

- Personalizing learning
- Comprehensive systems of learning supports
- World-class knowledge and skills
- Performance-based learning
- Anytime, everywhere opportunities
- Authentic student voice

control mechanisms, including rubrics and formative evaluations, and provide supporting tools and resources such as samples of student work at each proficiency level.

- Expand learning options. Competency-based efforts immediately trigger demand by students for expanded learning options in the community, after school, and in online courses.
- Align higher education with K–12 competency-based efforts. Teacher training, college admissions, and streamlining budgets to support accelerated learning are all critical elements to creating a sustainable competency-based approach.

A Policy Framework for Advancing a Performance-Based Education System

States must create space for organic development and expansion of innovations. Moving beyond the compliance-based policy model requires replacing it with a different set of design principles. Below are suggested next generation principles that provide a state policy framework.

- **Drive Policy by Student Learning Outcomes:** Focus on student learning and student learning outcomes. First and foremost, policies should be made to support the needs of students.
- **Guard High Academic Standards:** States will need to be vigilant to ensure that academic expectations do not slip, resulting in lower achievement for groups of students. Focus on equity with high expectations for all students.
- **Expand Student Options:** State policies should expand, not limit, the options that students have to reach learning outcomes.
- **Create Shared Vision:** Policy development cannot be top-down. It will be important to keep communication open, inviting stakeholders to contribute to the vision and the steps to get there.
- **Offer Districts and Schools Flexibility:** Be clear about desired outcomes and then provide incentives for educators to take different pathways to achieve the goal. Remove process rules and regulations in order to allow and encourage innovation.
- **Commit to Continuous Improvement:** Policy will need to evolve as we learn more about the dynamics of next generation learning, requiring ongoing improvement efforts.

In the following discussion, the role of state leadership is explored through four different angles. The policy framework is designed to provide insights into the leadership and organizational capacity required by state education agencies to manage next generation reform strategies.

Synchronizing Policy and Practice

States have five critical roles in creating meaningful innovation space that will further advance policy changes: create innovation space, provide catalytic support and knowledge transfer, protect high standards, invest in communication and community engagement, and offer adaptive leadership.

Integrating Next Generation Learning with Efforts to Improve Current System

State policy leaders will be challenged to bring the very different reform approaches—growth models of accountability from the student-level up, improved teaching, and transforming low-performing schools with a strong vision of next generation learning—together into a comprehensive approach.

Collaborative State Leadership

The emerging policy issues require substantial analysis, creativity, and engagement of multiple stakeholders to develop viable alternatives to our traditional system. Although states can do it alone, by working collaboratively they can expedite the process, reduce the costs of poorly formed policies, and guard against being caught by surprise in unintended consequences. In addition, states that work together can create more cohesiveness in the policy environment, thereby allowing competency-based innovators to expand their ideas more easily.

Emerging State Policy Issues

As states and performance-based innovators move forward, they quickly encounter the underlying assumptions defining the dynamics of the traditional education system. The following discussion lifts up a number of emerging state policy issues. How well and how quickly we tackle these issues will determine how rapidly the benefits of next generation learning are unleashed.

EMERGING ISSUE #1: Redefine the Carnegie Unit into Competencies

The Common Core State Standards is opening new possibilities for competency-based models. States can play a critical role in helping districts and schools develop high-quality competencies and learning objectives.

EMERGING ISSUE #2: Personalized Learning

State policymakers can facilitate conversations to redesign policy around personalized learning, including expanding access to online and blended learning, taking advantage of expanded learning opportunities, modularizing courses, rethinking school and district information systems around personalized learning plans for all students, and establishing guidelines for portability for highly mobile students.

EMERGING ISSUE #3: Student-Centered Accountability and Assessment Models

Most states have designed accountability systems that involve grade-based and time-based testing windows. This poses a serious problem for competency-based learning models in which summative assessments should be triggered based on student mastery to validate their knowledge soon after they have mastered new competencies. Moving forward, states need to redesign accountability for student progress that supports teaching and learning on demand, with modularized assessments to validate proficiency throughout the year.

EMERGING ISSUE #4: Learning Empowered by Technology

Most state data systems are designed around compliance models for No Child Left Behind. The result is that district data systems have been designed in the same silos as compliance policies for reporting, rather than informing instruction. Students in a competency-based learning system should have access to meaningful data to see their progress in learning. In practical terms, at a minimum, this means an integration of student information systems, learning management systems, and analytics in a standards-based architecture supporting personalized learning plans. States will need to facilitate discussions on how to cost-effectively shape the necessary information systems.

EMERGING ISSUE #5: Supporting Educators in the Transition to a Competency-Based System

States will need to invest in efforts that engage the teaching workforce in exploring the possibilities in a competency-based model and participating in the decision to move forward. In addition, transitioning to a competency-based system raises several issues that will require states to revise state policies on standards for teacher expectations, the definition of highly qualified teacher, and job classifications to provide more flexibility for schools.

EMERGING ISSUE #6: Financing a Competency-Based System

Performance-based funding creates incentives for schools to respond and intervene quickly to students if they begin to disengage or become stuck academically. It also creates incentives to provide high-quality curriculum and the best learning opportunities to increase the rate at which students are learning. Some states may ultimately want to create incentives for schools and students within competency-based models to accrue the greater benefits of the innovation.

Conclusion

State leadership is increasing its mission to transform what is possible for education systems. Competency-based learning is essential to cracking the code, unleashing next generation learning, and positioning the United States to out-innovate global competitors. State policies that set high expectations for students and unleash creativity in designing personalized learning will dramatically accelerate student outcomes at rates never before thought possible. It is state leadership that will be in the position to be the conductors of this transformation—synchronizing the innovations and policies into a vibrant education system where all of our children experience the joys of learning.