

**CompetencyWorks** ISSUE BRIEF

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# The Learning Edge

## *Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment*

WRITTEN BY:

Laura Shubilla

Chris Sturgis

December 2012

# THE LEARNING EDGE: SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS IN A COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

State by state, our country is revamping our education system to ensure that each and every one of our young people is college and career ready. Over two-thirds of our states have adopted policies that enable credits to be awarded based on proficiency in a subject,<sup>1</sup> rather than credits based solely on seat-time in a classroom. To ensure high-quality competency education, a working definition was created to guide the field. This paper delves into the fourth element of the definition: *Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs*. Understanding how to structure supports is important because learning in a competency-based environment means that students and adults are often on the edge of their comfort zone and competence—the learning edge.

Our commitment to prepare all of our young people for college and careers demands that we be intentional in designing schools to effectively meet the needs of students of all races, classes, and cultures. It also demands our vigilance in challenging inequity. Our goal in writing this paper is to provide ideas and guidance so that innovators in competency education can put into place powerful systems of supports for students in order to eradicate, not replicate, the inequities and variability in quality and outcomes that exist in our current system.

## I. Support in a Competency-Based Environment

Working to achieve greater competence ensures that students, and teachers, will be at their learning edge most of the time. In a competency-based system, keeping students and teachers on their learning edge means that everyone will need support. There are two necessary ingredients for creating learning-edge supports in which students are continually progressing in building and applying skills.

### A. Growth Mindset Creates Opportunities to Learn

The need to provide support for young people in schools is not a new concept for educators. In traditional schools, support comes in the form of an intervention that is generally associated with failure or disability. Providing timely and personalized support for students who are advancing at individual paces and in different learning spaces, however, requires a shift in mindset and culture. Competency-based schools embrace a growth mindset which assumes that students and adults alike are always learning and that, with appropriate conditions and supports, can be motivated to do their very best. A growth mindset requires schools to build in time for development as part of the learning process. Students and adults with growth mindsets tend to see challenging situations as opportunities to learn things that they don't currently know, rather than potential avenues for failure.

---

*The transparency that is inherent in competency education empowers and motivates many students. Students increasingly take responsibility for understanding their own learning process, asking for help from peers and teachers when they need it, and pursuing learning that is important to them and their lives.*

---

## **B. Learning That is Grounded in Relationships and Anchored by Assessment**

Innovators point to meaningful and regular dialogue and assessment, grounded in strong relationships, when describing what is most needed to provide a timely and differentiated system of supports. Assessment that is meaningful to students is one of the core elements of competency education and can take many shapes. Competency education changes the nature of the relationship between students and teachers. Student agency in a competency-based environment comes from transparency, demystifying assessments and skill development, and transferring the power inherent in this knowledge from the adults to the students. The transparency that is inherent in competency education empowers and motivates many students. Students increasingly take responsibility for understanding their own learning process, asking for help from peers and teachers when they need it, and pursuing learning that is important to them and their lives. When they don't, teachers engage the students, their peers, parents, and community partners to better understand what is going on for students and what they need to have in place to help them move forward.

### **ii. Design Principles for a Learning-Edge System of Supports**

In dialogue with educators and experts across the country, a shared understanding of a learning-edge system of supports is starting to take shape. If a learning-edge culture is in place, a virtuous cycle of learning is created. It is not, however, as simple as saying that all learning is self-paced. There need to be structures, support, and parameters that undergird the notion of self-paced learning, especially for young people who have fallen behind.

Based on research and interviews with leaders and learners around the country, an emerging set of design principles have been compiled to guide conversations in districts and schools for implementing competency education.

#### **A WORKING DEFINITION OF COMPETENCY EDUCATION**

In 2011, innovators from across the country developed a working definition of competency education.

- 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.

**PRINCIPLE 1: *Build a Culture*** rooted in a growth mindset that supports risk taking and help seeking.

**PRINCIPLE 2: *Utilize Assessments*** that are transparent, ongoing, and provide meaningful feedback to support student learning and agency.

**PRINCIPLE 3: *Develop Embedded, Tiered, and Timely Interventions*** for just-in-time support that leads to successfully meeting or exceeding the learning targets.

**PRINCIPLE 4: *Develop Extended Opportunities to Learn*** within and beyond traditional school times and settings, including internships, online learning, project-based learning, summer classes, and more.

**PRINCIPLE 5: *Know the Whole Student*** and seek to understand their life and their learning.

**PRINCIPLE 6: *Implement a Continuous Improvement System*** that responds to keep students within or above pacing expectations.

### III. Educators on the Learning Edge

One of the most important supports that can be provided for students is support for teachers. Teachers should be encouraged to engage in their own learning in a parallel process with their students. Moving toward a competency-based system means differentiating support, not just for students, but for teachers as well. Teachers cannot be held solely responsible for the provision of any and all supports that students need, but rather should be supported during the transition to a learning-edge approach. The capacity and resources to build a learning-edge culture must be distributed among students, teachers, schools, and districts. This assumes that the roles of educators are shifting in a competency-based environment with teachers organizing their professional development around the needs of students.

A competency education environment can be extremely challenging to teachers at first. A number of interviewees suggested the need to identify the unique skill sets that teachers must master in order to support students in a competency-based environment. Instructional approaches need to be expanded and fine-tuned in response to student learning progressions. It is important that principals and district leadership organize resources to support teachers. A fundamental shift in the mindset of educators in a competency education environment is from “my students” to “our students” and from serving as the gatekeeper of knowledge to the facilitator of learning. This dynamic opens the door to collaboration among teachers and between teachers and students. Educators in competency education environments find that the willingness and ability to support students is rooted in developing a strong professional learning community in which teachers themselves have the support they need to be successful.

## iv. Summary

This paper is just a first step toward understanding the dynamics of building a learning-edge culture. As we move forward in implementing effective competency education, there are essential concepts that we will need to hold central to our work.

1. Commit to a growth mindset culture that encourages risk taking and expects that mastery will take more than one attempt. This culture should apply to students, teachers, and school administrators alike.
2. Embrace student-centered approaches that encourage students as well as educators to proactively seek support when they are stuck. Ensure that this support facilitates and supports agency and voice.
3. Be aggressive in seeking out timely interventions and multiple opportunities for students to explore and practice as they build new skills.
4. Remember that learning-edge supports need to be available for students progressing at all rates, not just for the highest- or the lowest-achieving students.
5. The learning and support of teachers is paramount to the learning and support of students. Teachers are also learners and should be engaged in a process of adult development, driven by student proficiency and their own trajectory toward mastery.

If we can consider these five elements as non-negotiable, we will be well on our way to building high-quality competency education where all students know what success is and how to attain it.



You can learn more about competency education at [CompetencyWorks.org](https://www.competencyworks.org) as well as links and materials for all the resources mentioned in the paper on the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#).

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> “[State Strategies for Awarding Credit to Support Student Learning](#),” National Governors Association.

<sup>ii</sup> Go to <http://www.brainology.us> to learn about a growth mindset curriculum created by Carol Dweck and colleagues.