EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Maximizing Competency Education and Blended Learning:

Insights from Experts

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MAXIMIZING COMPETENCY EDUCATION AND BLENDED LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM EXPERTS

In May 2014, CompetencyWorks brought together twenty-three technical assistance providers to examine their catalytic role in implementing next generation learning models, share each other's knowledge and expertise about blended learning and competency education, and discuss next steps to move the field forward with a focus on equity and quality. The objective of the convening was to help level set the understanding of competency education and its design elements, as well as to build knowledge about using blended learning modalities within competency-based environments.

This paper attempts to draw together the wide-ranging conversations from the convening to provide background knowledge for educators to understand what it will take to transform from traditional systems to personalized, competency-based structures that take full advantage of blended learning. We consider the discussion offered here a first step in the very steep learning curve required to fully maximize competency-based structures and blended learning modalities.

Why Do We Need to Transform Our System of Education?

Every district that begins the process of transformation must identify the multiple reasons that call for educators, students, and parents to become comfortable with new structures for learning. The world has changed immensely since the traditional school system was developed. All students need to graduate from high school and be prepared for some level of post-secondary education if they are going to access family-wage jobs. We must challenge inequity in its many forms—across income levels, racial and ethnic groups, by gender, and among students with special educational or language needs. We are driven to increase what our children need to know and be able to do so that they (and our nation) can compete in a global economy.

We have learned that the traditional education system itself creates hurdles for students and schools. It's no longer viable to rely on one-size-fits-all curriculum or move students on in age-based cohorts regardless of if they need more time or have the prerequisite skills for the next grade. Our nation's path to greater personalization is also catalyzed by advances in new technological opportunities and research on learning and motivation.

You can learn more about competency education at CompetencyWorks.org, as well as find links and materials for all the resources mentioned in this paper on the CompetencyWorks wiki.

What Is the Best Way to Approach the Transformation to Personalization?

One thing shared by districts and schools approaching personalization by converting to blended learning or competency-based structures is their need to manage change and innovation. Although the specific tasks ahead of them may differ—blended learning requires much more knowledge and decision-making around technology, online learning, and digital content; while competency education focuses on deconstructing the traditional system and creating a new structure of learning—both are long-term change strategies that support personalized learning.

The capacity of districts to manage change is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—element for successful implementation. Districts will need to engage the community, decentralize operations to enhance school autonomy and provide supports, reshape district roles, and create an overall transition strategy.

What Are the Differences and Commonalities between Personalized Learning, Competency Education, and Blended Learning?

Experts noted that education leaders and policymakers have a tendency to use words and terms such as personalization, deeper learning, next generation learning, blended learning, and mastery interchangeably, which creates confusion. They reinforced the need for clarifying terms upfront with the expectation that understanding of the concepts will grow with experience.

Personalized Learning: In general, personalized learning means to tailor learning to students' strengths, needs, interests, and experiences—a goal we cannot reach by delivering one-size-fits-all instruction. Although the hope is that personalized learning will reduce the achievement gap by providing students with greater responsiveness to their needs, it also raises the concern that personalized pathways could result in different expectations.

Competency Education: Competency education (also referred to as *proficiency-based, mastery-based,* or *performance-based*) is a structural reform that helps schools move from the traditional time-based system. In traditional systems, huge gaps are created along students' learning trajectories because students are generally passed on to the next grade even if they aren't proficient. A shift to competency means the system is designed to ensure students are learning, and they must demonstrate that learning before advancing to the next level. Frequently, competency education is described as simply flexibility in pacing or awarding credit, but this does not capture

Building a Personalized System Enabled by Competency Education, Personalized Learning, and Blended Learning
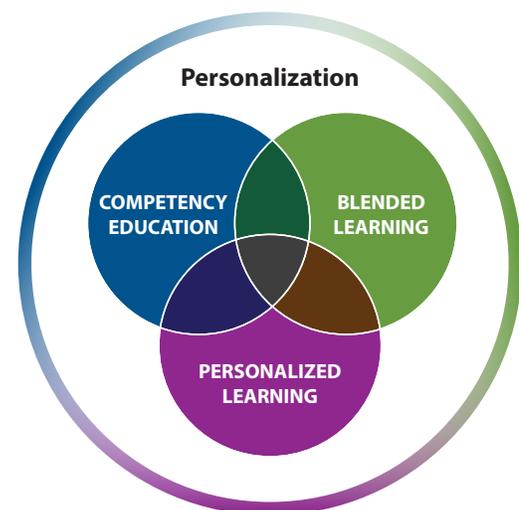
the depth of the transformation of our education system from a time-based system to a learning-based system. The primary equity concern related to competency education is that the focus will only be on flexibility in pacing without providing adequate instructional support and coaching.

Blended Learning: High-quality blended learning combines the best of face-to-face instruction with the best of what we know about how to provide learning online. Technology is expanding rapidly, and schools are able to select among a number of emerging technologies, applications, tools, software, and devices that can be applied to enhancing learning experiences. Blended learning has the potential for improving instructional delivery to underserved students by allowing flexibility in pace and place and allowing teachers to direct their time toward helping students who are struggling or need more guidance. However, students may not have access to technology at home and in the school, and the curriculum may be too narrowly developed without opportunity for choice or deeper learning.

How Do Districts Integrate Competency-Based Structures, Personalized Learning, and Blended Learning?

The concepts of personalized learning, competency education, and blended learning are not synonymous. However, personalized learning and competency education are highly intertwined. Competency education offers an infrastructure that enables personalization without losing the commitment to equity. Some innovators consider that competency education is foundational to personalized learning in that competency-based learning progressions enable high degrees of personalization and deeper learning for each student. Furthermore, personalized learning benefits from transparent competency-based progressions to engage and motivate students. When these ideas are integrated, we have clear and constant benchmarks of success for all students based on the Common Core and other state standards. We also have the opportunity to offer different ways each student can become competent on these benchmarks.

With so many different approaches and ideas emerging in the field, it is of huge importance to look to schools and districts that have already begun to put the pieces together for advice. The paper provides three short profiles on Pittsfield School District in New Hampshire, Chugach School District in Alaska, and the Education Achievement Authority in Michigan.

How Can Competency-Based Districts Maximize Learning through Blended Approaches?

Blended learning can help address five common issues that competency-based schools face: 1) Boosting skills of students with significant gaps; 2) Providing on-demand learning and assessments so students can continue learning even when the teacher is working with other students; 3) Offering advanced students an opportunity to move to the next level of study when they are ready; 4) Increasing engagement by providing choice to students in how they learn; and 5) Creating more opportunity for teachers to work with students around deeper learning and individualized support.

The report explores which models may be more suited for competency-based schools and highlights considerations about digital content.

How Can Blended Districts Integrate a Competency-Based Structure?

Districts that have introduced blended learning share the common philosophy with competency-based schools that students learn differently, requiring schools to personalize the learning experiences. However, they've started with a different entry point by focusing on how technology can improve the delivery of instruction. The trend of blended schools converting to a competency-based structure is just beginning. We know very little from firsthand knowledge at this point. Thus, the paper offers key considerations, including revisiting the mission and vision, investing in building capacity for distributed leadership, nurturing a culture of learning, establishing mechanisms to calibrate proficiency, developing student agency, and designing for students who are not yet proficient by providing responsive systems of support.

What Are the Recommendations for Moving Forward?

The participants at the convening suggested five opportunities for foundations and policymakers who want to help improve the conditions for the transformation to personalization: improving the human capital pipeline, comprehensive resources, supportive policy, data infrastructure and technology ecosystem, and community engagement and public will.

Concluding Remarks

Transforming a district or school or creating a new school is hard work. It requires extraordinary leadership throughout the layers of the education system, as everyone must commit to deconstructing the old system with all its complexities while simultaneously building up new structures and language. It takes anywhere from five to ten years to thoroughly implement new practices and policies and eliminate the old. It also takes time to fully integrate each piece of the personalization puzzle.

Technical assistance providers play a catalytic role in the ability of any new idea to take root and spread. This convening of technical assistance providers from the fields of blended learning and competency education was an important first step in integrating the knowledge bases toward personalization. Not only did it enable us to find commonalities and strengths, but it also helped to identify gaps where further work needs to be done, including: 1) a better understanding of how to empower students and provide autonomy to teachers and schools; 2) further integration of project-based learning and performance assessments to ensure that students in the new learning models have access to the highest levels of learning; and 3) fully integrating what we know about educating our most underserved students—such as English language learners, students with disabilities, African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans—into the very core of school design and instruction. To do anything else is to leave them marginalized and undermine the entire movement for personalized learning.