

CompetencyWorks ISSUE BRIEF

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Implementing Competency Education in K–12 Systems:

Insights from Local Leaders

WRITTEN BY:
Chris Sturgis

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IMPLEMENTING COMPETENCY EDUCATION IN K-12 SYSTEMS: INSIGHTS FROM LOCAL LEADERS

Competency education, an educator-led reform, is taking root in schools and districts across the country. In some states, state leadership has cleared the path with policies to advance competency education, while others are transitioning with little or no supporting policy. At the same time, innovative school models are popping up all over the United States, contributing to our knowledge of new ways to organize teaching and learning within a competency-based structure.

This paper seeks to pull together the district implementation strategies currently being used to convert traditional systems into personalized, competency-based ones. Findings are based on interviews and site visits conducted over the past five years as well as the knowledge shared at CompetencyWorks by leaders in the field. The districts showcased in the paper represent just a handful of all the districts converting to competency education, as there are a hundred or more that have also begun the journey to competency education.

Why Do Educators Turn to Competency Education?

The power of competency education is in its system-wide infrastructure that creates the necessary feedback loops to ensure students are learning. The traditional system produces gaps in learning because it is established around a time-based credit that guarantees a minimal exposure to content without a guarantee of learning. In combination with an A–F grading system—which can be easily corrupted as a measure of learning by providing points for behavior, allowing for measuring learning based on assignments instead of learning, and masking student progress through the averaging of grades—accountability for learning is eroded.

Once educators understand the design flaws of the traditional system, they seek a system that is designed for success. They envision a system that is able to personalize learning while ensuring that all students will benefit. Learning is the constant, while resources, learning experiences, instructional support, effort, and time may vary.

As districts, schools, and educators begin the transformation to the learner-centric competency education system, they will encounter four stages of implementation: 1) Ramping Up for Transformation, 2) Designing the Infrastructure for Learning, 3) Transitioning to a Competency-Based System, and 4) Embracing Continuous Improvement and Innovation.

Ramping Up for Transformation

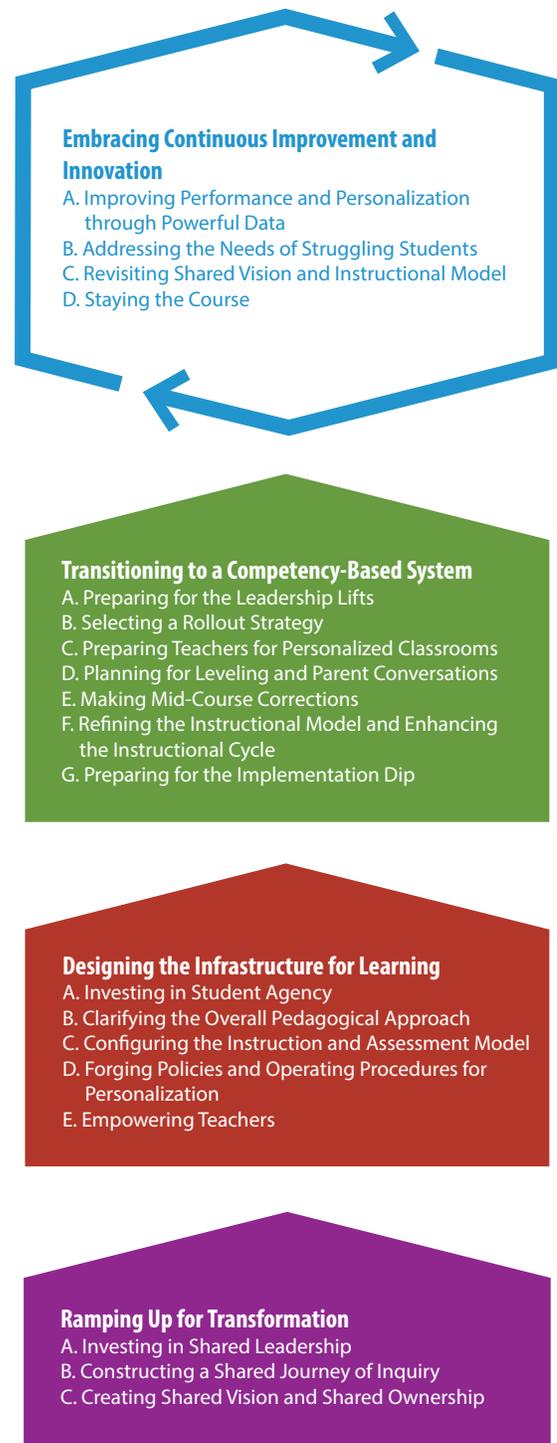
Districts preparing to implement competency education don't suddenly throw out the old system and start fresh. New structures, cultures, and practices have to be put into place while dismantling the "load-bearing walls" of the traditional time-based system, which is why the first step is laying the groundwork for transformation. The three activities required to re-engineer the system in this way include investing in shared leadership, conducting a shared journey of inquiry, and creating shared vision and shared ownership.

Shared Leadership: Top-down management doesn't work well in competency-based environments—or, for that matter, in any large district reform. The traditional education system operates on a set of rules for the delivery of education services that has tried to standardize the inputs so students all have the same exposure to the curriculum. In top-down systems, higher levels of governance set the conditions for each lower level, leaving schools and teachers with little autonomy or opportunity to inform decision-making at higher levels.

Shared Journey of Inquiry: Transforming districts and schools starts by engaging in a period of study that includes superintendents, leadership teams, key district personnel, and principals. It is through this process of studying together, of no one having all the answers, of listening and respecting each perspective, that district and school leadership can begin to introduce a different leadership approach as well as the roots of a student-centered, problem-solving culture.

Shared Vision and Shared Ownership: Creating a shared vision and using a process that develops shared ownership for ensuring students learn is the heart and soul of competency education. It is also the heart and soul of mutual accountability between educators, students, parents, and the community. It is through this process that districts become learner-centered, not just standards-driven. Without a vision and sense of ownership that is deeply shared, districts cannot put the new instructional model into place.

Stages of Implementation



Designing the Infrastructure for Learning

After the ramping up efforts have been put into place, the next phase of implementation is essentially a re-engineering of the learning infrastructure. As compared to a focus on curriculum in the traditional system, competency-based schools are organized around an Instruction and Assessment model (I&A model). In the first few years, most districts focus on the core changes that are needed to create a transparent, coherent system that empowers students and teachers.

Before districts begin to design the infrastructure that will support their instructional model, they will take the time to consider the supports, the implications for student agency, the district's overall pedagogical approach, and how they plan to support teachers through the transition. In designing their infrastructure for learning, districts will want to take into consideration the selection of a knowledge taxonomy, the structure of the learning continuum, mechanisms to calibrate the determination of proficiency, and habits of learning.

Transitioning to a Competency-Based System

The transition year is the period of time when people use the phrases “building the ship in the water” and “constructing the plane in the air.” Educators are doing double-duty setting up the new system while also educating students within the traditional system, which makes this a time of excitement, nervousness, challenge, and frustration.

The leadership demands are high during this time, which is why it is crucial that the culture of learning is reinforced, as teachers may feel that they aren't succeeding in either the traditional system or the new one being put into place. Because there is no magic formula for how to roll out the conversion to competency education, districts consider where leadership and enthusiasm is in place, where faculty is ready for the change, and where the most urgent need is based on academic scores.

During the transition process, one of the essential steps to ensure that the district is creating a student-centered culture rather than one solely driven by standards is to prepare teachers for managing personalized classrooms. Many schools fall into a trap in the first year when they use the standards in the learning continuum in a rigid, linear fashion because they have been written that way—when, in fact, they can be used to creatively design engaging learning experiences.

Additional steps include creating access for parents and students to the digital information system, making mid-course corrections, keeping the community engaged, and preparing for the “implementation dip” that occurs after the initial flurry of change and excitement settles down.

Embracing Continuous Improvement and Innovation

There is a tremendous shift for leaders to move from compliance to continuous improvement. Compliance has an inherent element of fulfilling specific requirements, whereas continuous improvement requires a formal methodology or systematic approach to improve performance through reflecting upon data, engaging stakeholders in discussion about variation or low performance, planning for targeted improvements, and then repeating the cycle.

There are several challenges that educators must be aware of in moving forward. Currently, the information technology specifications required by competency-based districts are beyond what most vendors of student information systems or learning management systems are providing. The student information systems that support traditional time-based schools are organized by courses or classes instead of students, thus it is very difficult to generate a picture of how students are advancing across disciplines and over the years.

In addition, many districts are converting to competency education in states that have not yet begun to take the steps toward creating the vision and policies to support competency education. Even in states that have embraced competency education, leaders may need to respond to policies that have not yet been re-aligned. Thus, leaders must learn to stay true to their vision and purpose in navigating state policy.

Districts must also keep the shared vision alive by periodically revisiting it in partnership with their communities. After the first couple years of transition, districts begin to have the bandwidth to look more deeply at how they can improve in order to better address the needs of students who experience lower achievement and patterns of inequity.

Concluding Comments

The evolution to district-wide competency-based education will not be easy, yet the strategic recommendations from cutting-edge leaders shared in this paper provide a basis to develop strategies to both ease and accelerate this transition.

It is our hope that the discussion offered here will prepare you to begin the transformational process to design schools where success is the only option for students.



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