

**CompetencyWorks** ISSUE BRIEF EXCERPT

# Ramping Up for Transformation

A FOCUS SECTION FROM:

***Implementing Competency Education in  
K–12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders***

RAMPING UP

DESIGNING

TRANSITIONING

IMPROVING

Read the complete Issue Brief at [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org)

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## About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative drawing on the knowledge of its partners and advisory board. The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization with project management facilitated by MetisNet. We are deeply grateful for the leadership and support from the partner organizations American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, and the National Governors Association. Their vision and creative partnership have been instrumental in the development of CompetencyWorks.



For more information on competency education, you can visit [CompetencyWorks](#), read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.

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# RAMPING UP FOR TRANSFORMATION

A FOCUS SECTION FROM:

## ***Implementing Competency Education in K–12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders***

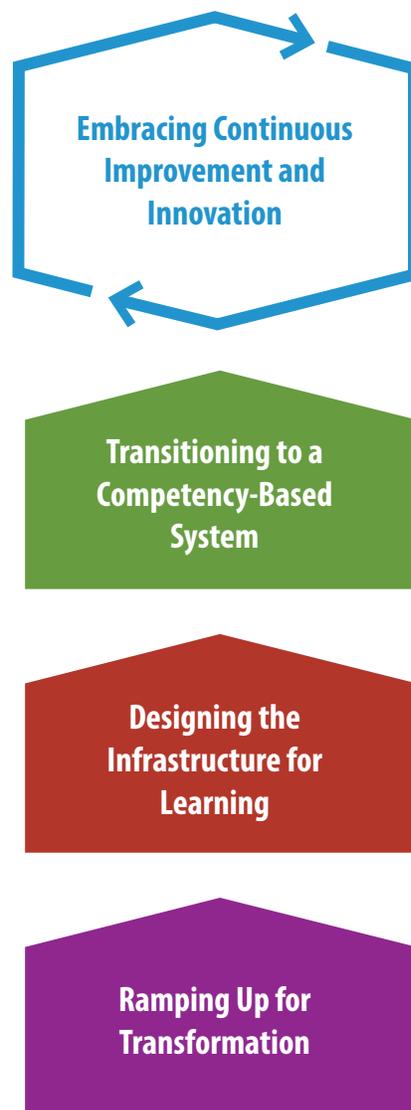
### Introduction

The following is the first excerpt from the paper *Implementing Competency Education in K–12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders*. The paper seeks to map out the terrain of the district implementation strategies being used to convert traditional systems into personalized, competency-based ones. Although states and districts use a variety of terms to discuss competency education, including proficiency-based, mastery-based, and performance-based, the goal is the same—to design the systemic infrastructure to ensure that students are getting support when they need it so that they are fully learning all the skills they will need as they advance to more challenging work. This requires schools to have the mechanisms in place to ensure consistency in how proficiency is determined and the flexibility to respond to students’ needs in a timely way. Please see [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org) for more information on competency education.

Although not a detailed guide, the hope is that the discussion offered in the paper will be helpful to districts and schools as they begin the transformational process. Four stages of implementation are proposed in this paper: 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. To make it easier for you to use this paper with your colleagues, we have produced excerpts on each of these stages. You can find the full paper and other excerpts under Resources at [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org).

In this section, Ramping Up for Transformation, several issues will be explored to enable districts and schools to prepare for the transition toward competency education. Based on the theme of sharing, this excerpt discusses investing in shared leadership, constructing a shared journey of inquiry, and creating a shared vision and shared ownership in the process.

### Stages of Implementation



## Ramping Up for Transformation

A common driving force for superintendents and principals converting to competency education is the realization that any system that advances students even if they haven't learned the skills and content is going to produce gaps in learning. Many districts describe low academic achievement or intransigent inequity as their "burning platform"—the reasons that propel them forward and create urgency for their efforts. They describe a growing understanding among educators about the need to start focusing on what is "good for kids." Once this happens, it's as if a fog lifts and educators can suddenly see beyond the assumptions and traditions of the time-based system. They can begin to imagine what a system that is designed so all students are successful in school might look like.

Districts don't suddenly throw out the old system. New structures, cultures, and practices have to be put into place while dismantling the "load-bearing walls" of the traditional time-based system. The first step is laying the groundwork for transformation. There is no set process that every district follows, as the context and depth of leadership within the district will vary; however, beyond the development of a strategic process, there are three activities that almost all districts and schools undertake to prepare for the work of re-engineering the system around learning and teaching:

- Investing in shared leadership
- A shared journey of inquiry
- Creating shared vision and shared ownership

The emphasis on sharing denotes that these approaches differ from those commonly used in traditional systems. These are collaborative approaches that generate respect and trust. They contribute to the formation of a different type of school culture—one that is student-centered rather than system-centered, empowering rather than compliance-oriented, cooperative rather than dependent on individual leadership, and motivated by learning rather than by carrots or sticks.

### A. Investing in Shared Leadership

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*As an instructional leader, I focus my job on three goals. First, my job is to keep the compelling purpose of supporting our students alive. It's easy to slip back into doing things just because that's the way we've always done them. Second, my job is to empower our staff. They need to have the freedom to do their jobs in supporting our students. Third, I operate from a position of service and collaboration. This is very important because if I used top-down leadership, I wouldn't be able to empower staff. These three elements go hand in hand.*

*The reason that Lindsay is able to make this transformation is because of the structure of shared leadership. The process we use to arrive at decisions reduces mistakes because we make sure to gather input and address all the issues. We seldom have to cut and recut because we are measuring every step of the way.*

– Jaime Robles, Principal, Lindsay High School

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This section starts with a focus on leadership because the shift to competency-based education requires a personal commitment from superintendents and principals to develop collaborative leadership and management styles. Changing personal leadership styles means these professionals must undertake extensive study, solicit feedback for reflecting on their leadership, engage in dialogue with peers and colleagues, and even seek out coaching. Each leader will have a different journey toward developing leadership/management strategies that are effective in creating and sustaining empowering, learning organizations. In the following discussion, three aspects of leadership are discussed: the call for a distributed leadership style, the role of a culture of learning, and empowering others.

### **1. Distributing Leadership**

Superintendents and principals agree that 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 all students 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. Traditional leadership styles are often characterized by people turning to the managers above them to resolve issues or set the direction. Changes are often communicated through memo, where dialogue is limited, if not nonexistent.

The problems with this kind of compliance-oriented leadership style are three-fold. First, top-down approaches undermine any efforts to create an empowered staff who will take responsibility for ensuring students are learning. Top-down decision-making essentially undermines accountability. Second, when employees look to the next level up to answer questions and resolve issues, it undermines the culture of learning and is a lost opportunity for building problem-solving capacity within the organization. Third, no superintendent or principal can have all the knowledge or answers about how to best respond to students or address organizational issues. During periods of dramatic change, this becomes a risk, as the superintendent or principal is unlikely to be able to understand all the ramifications of every change. It requires collaborative, iterative processes to create the new operational policies and procedures needed to support a personalized, competency-based environment. Fueling a competency-based system requires the engagement and ownership of students, educators, and community members alike—an idea that will be explored in depth as the paper progresses.

In a personalized, competency-based education system, it is incumbent upon districts and schools to continuously improve at every level. Teachers support students to build the habits of learning they need to take ownership of their education. Teachers facilitate and guide learning through cycles of adaptive instruction in which students receive timely feedback. Professional learning communities offer embedded professional development so teachers are continually learning how to better support students, drawing on their colleagues' expertise when needed. Superintendents and principals play an instrumental role in managing decision-making processes, reminding their staff to turn to the guiding principles to solve problems and seek innovation. Throughout the transformation process, all these changes are continually informed by data on student progress and pace.

Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent of RSU2 in Maine, describes a common challenge in the old style of leadership. As administrators ascend the career ladder, they increasingly find themselves trapped by the expectation that they should have all the answers. The irony is that as authority and rank increase, the further administrators are from daily decision-making related to students. Hammonds points out that this kind of thinking places too much authority in one person's hands, and can also lead to the mistaken belief that one person has all the answers—when, in reality, all perspectives have critical insights into solving problems.<sup>1</sup>

A shared leadership style takes this all-knowing superintendent or principal position and transforms it to one of respect, trust, and collective intelligence. Also known as adaptive leadership, [middle-up-down management](#), distributed leadership, or servant leadership, these approaches have several common attributes: investing in empowerment, seeking input, collective ownership, and transparent decision-making processes. These forms of leadership seek to move beyond the limits of the “dance floor and the balcony,” in which hierarchical position defines perspective to create structures and approaches that build multi-dimensional understanding of problems as well as expanding possibilities.<sup>2</sup>



## LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- Invest in building the leadership capacity of the district team and school leadership very early in the process. Ensuring that management staff have a chance to reflect on their leadership styles, engage in an inquiry process, and plan for the next stage of work is empowering. It is important to align the strategy for ramping up and transitioning to the capacity of the leadership team to manage inclusive decision-making processes and distributive leadership.

### 2. Creating a Culture of Learning

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*Culture. It is not part of the game. It is the game. Does your building believe all students can learn? Do the educators have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset? Do they believe they have a say in how the school operates?*

*I have too often listened to school administrators find every reason to explain away their poor culture. They blame the Department of Education, the parents, the central office, and even the students. I too blamed the external environment until I realized that the culture of my school is the one thing I can impact directly.*

*A leader must envision the culture he or she wants. To begin, ask yourself, “What do I want an outsider or a new parent to say when describing the culture of the school?” This vision will become the postcard destination, the perfect scenario. Analyzing the gap between the current and the envisioned will define the steps that need to be taken to create and then maintain the desired culture.*

– Bill Zima, Principal, Mt. Ararat Middle School

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Educators who have started down the road to competency education often discuss the fact that competency education is a second order change. Whereas first order change focuses on altering inputs and approaches, second order change is based on a different set of underlying beliefs and relationships. The culture of learning breathes life into the values and assumptions of competency education.

Sanborn Regional School District in New Hampshire aspires for the district to operate as a professional learning community by emphasizing three pillars: collaboration, competency, and culture and climate. One of the early shifts Superintendent Brian Blake undertook was to take a hard look at the multitude of initiatives that

were underway. “One of the big steps we took in moving from first order to second order change was to whittle down the ninety-plus programs and initiatives to a few that were highly aligned with our new direction. Now we only focus on efforts that are absolutely aligned with our goal for the district to be a true professional learning community. We believe if it is worth doing, it is worth doing system-wide as part of our competency-based operations and practices.”<sup>3</sup>

Although the language may vary, competency-based districts and schools tend to emphasize similar characteristics. For example, the culture of Mt. Ararat Middle School in Maine can be broken down into four main components: learner centered, clear expectations, continuous feedback, and valuing relationships. All four components relate to both students and the adults in the school. Bill Zima, Principal at Mt. Ararat Middle School, states that one of the key functions of principals is to be vigilant in nurturing the school culture. “School culture is created through what the leader creates and what the leader allows.” He recounts that he had to develop his personal leadership by building a leadership team, implementing effective action planning, skillfully facilitating meetings, and nurturing a strong culture of learning. He paid particular attention to group norms, rituals, and protocols for meetings so that everyone could share ownership for nurturing the school culture.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Empowering Others

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*When we started down the road to transformation, we had to deconstruct the systems that were in place. We redesigned with the goal of student ownership, involving them along the way. If students are going to be empowered, so must the workforce be empowered.*

*The only way to manage an empowered workforce with empowered students is through a middle-up-down management approach that constantly seeks input and opportunities to distribute leadership. Superintendents who separate leadership and management do so at their own peril.*

– Dr. Bob Crumley, Superintendent, Chugach School District

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The transparency of the competency-based infrastructure for learning—with explicit habits of learning, measurable learning objectives, rubrics, and calibrated understanding of proficiency—empowers students and teachers alike. Students have more agency in the learning process and teachers are more responsive because they know exactly how students are progressing in mastering learning objectives. Thus, the transparency that is required to make competency education work also requires empowered teachers and a high degree of school autonomy.

District and school leadership in competency-based systems are vigilant about nurturing empowerment. It begins by turning to research on motivating, engaging, and empowering adults. Bob Crumley, Superintendent at Chugach School District in Alaska, developed a leadership-management style based on three elements that motivate employees: being challenged, working within a social context, and having autonomy. “These three ingredients are the foundational building blocks I used with students in my classroom, and I also use them now with my staff. It is absolutely critical that this approach is used consistently. You need to make sure your teachers are empowered if you expect them to support empowered students. I always return to these three elements when we are starting a new initiative or addressing issues raised through continuous improvement.”<sup>5</sup>

Creating a safe environment for employees to take risks is a key component of this process. Strong professional learning communities are essential for empowering teachers, and building respect and trust among teachers is important if they are to take risks in learning how to operate in a personalized, competency-based environment. However, creating a safe environment for learning begins with district and school leadership. Tobi Chassie, a project manager of the transformational process at Pittsfield School District in New Hampshire, emphasized, “Risk taking and valuing mistakes as learning opportunities are role modeled starting with the superintendent.”<sup>6</sup>

Virgel Hammonds also considers creating an empowering culture as one of the essential tasks of his job. To this end, he makes it a point to hire principals with similar values and an approach that is cohesive with the current system. By looking for qualities like active learning, a collaborative work ethic, and humility in incorporating the thoughts and ideas of others, he has been able to create a team with a commitment to distributed leadership. He also looks for candidates who are committed to serving both children and the community in which they live, as well those who are able to lead and empower through empathy. Through this approach, it’s not just the students who will be pushed to reach their full potential, but the entire staff, as well.



## LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- An important step in empowering the teaching workforce is to make sure they have the resources they need. This includes strong professional learning communities, time to plan and meet, and feedback on their teaching skills as well as their participation in developing a strong school culture and organization. This may seem obvious, but many schools try to move forward without having these elements in place, only to find that they are important ingredients.

## B. Constructing a Shared Journey of Inquiry

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*I didn't know how important it was in the beginning, but we are now at the point where staff understand that students must have a growth mindset to take on ownership and for continuous learning to occur. The research on brain science and how the brain changes as you learn is fascinating to both students and teachers. In fact, learning about brain science and the growth mindset has been the catalyst for change for some teachers. It's now institutionalized in our work.*

– Debbie Treece, Director of Special Education, Chugach School District

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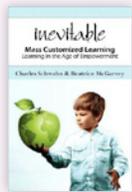
Transforming districts and schools starts by engaging in a period of study. The superintendent may engage the school board in a series of readings, discussions, retreats, and site visits. A leadership team involving key district personnel and principals will look more deeply at the issues to examine how other districts have proceeded and to reflect on options for designing a process for moving forward. Superintendents also begin to have initial conversations with stakeholders in the community to lay the groundwork for understanding why we need a more personalized system, the problems with the traditional system, and the benefits of redesigning to ensure students are learning. Principals will later engage educators in inquiry teams in a similar process and also begin to review research about how students learn, brain science, motivation theory, and grading practices.

District and school leadership will drive the study groups and conversation with a set of questions such as the ones below:

- Why do we exist as a school? What is our purpose?
- What do successful people have that we want our graduates to know and be able to do?
- How will our children support the future growth of our communities, state, and country?
- What are the values that will govern how we interact with each other?
- What are the principles by which we will make decisions?

## RECOMMENDED READING

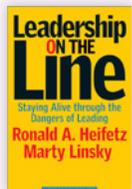
Districts and schools often use common readings as a way of beginning to build a new set of assumptions and reference points upon which to ground the new district culture. Tom Rooney recommends [Inevitable, Mass Customized Learning](#) by Bea McGarvey and Charles Schwahn as one of the most important books to help educators build a shared vision. Other books often used by districts include:



**[Inevitable, Mass Customized Learning](#)** by Charles Schwahn and Beatrice McGarvey



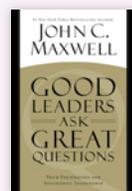
**[Total Leaders](#)** by Charles Schwahn and William Spady



**[Leadership on the Line](#)** by Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky



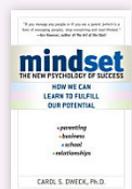
**[Building a New Structure for School Leadership](#)** by Richard F. Elmore



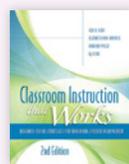
**[Good Leaders ask Great Questions](#)** by John Maxwell



**[Delivering on the Promise](#)** by Richard A. DeLorenzo, Wendy J. Battino, Rick M. Schreiber, and Barbara B. Gaddy Carrio



**[Mindset](#)** by Carol Dweck



**[Classroom Instruction that Works](#)** by Robert Marzano<sup>7</sup>

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.

Time will of course be a constraint, and the timeline for moving to the next stage of work will be dependent on the ability of the inquiry process to advance to the point where people are ready to begin shaping a shared purpose. Throughout this process, a sense of urgency develops as the traditional system becomes intolerable and a sense of “moral purpose” develops to transform the system to be student-centered. Virgel Hammonds describes how his district felt a great deal of urgency to get the system, structures, and processes right. “We have zero time to waste. We need to be relentless in that we need to figure things out. As a superintendent, I also need to be clear about when we need to slow things down in order to figure out complex problems. My job is to keep the pressure on without forcing staff to feel that they need to come up with a short-term fix.”



## LESSONS LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- As people have rich conversations around issues such as what they want students to know and be able to do upon graduation, the benefits of personalizing learning, and the principles of putting students first, they will also begin to understand many of their past struggles in a different way. These issues may include how previous decision-making has taken adult concerns into consideration more than student concerns, how a compliance culture undermines a sense of ownership and empowerment, and how current practices and structures undermine learning of educators and students. This can open the door to a wide range of emotions and finger-pointing. This moment is a key leadership opportunity to reinforce a school culture that accepts mistakes as part of the process of learning, begins to build collaborative problem-solving skills, and instills a sense of empowerment and accountability for going forward.
- District and school leadership will want to assess the degree of respect and trust that is in place. It is difficult to begin the actual transition if there is inadequate trust. Invest in building strong professional learning communities, seek out coaches to help build the leadership skills to manage more inclusive processes, and seek feedback from staff. Most importantly, take the time to listen.



**Assessment is part of the learning cycle that creates a positive learning experience for students.**

## C. Creating Shared Vision and Shared Ownership

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*Creating a personalized, performance-based system starts with engaging the community in an authentic way. Our entire transformation started with the communities and school board challenging us—they wanted to know why their children were not reading at grade level. We were not effective in helping our children to learn the basics or preparing them for success in their lives, and we had to find a way to overcome that.*

*Twenty years later, we are thankful for how our community guided us in the right direction by asking difficult-to-answer common sense questions. Their description of what they wanted for their children helped us to understand we needed to approach students holistically. We needed to be able to prepare students for being successful in their lives—whether that was to live in remote areas, live in urban areas, go to college, work in a business, or create their own methods of supporting themselves.*

*I think the biggest mistake that districts moving toward performance-based systems make is that they skip the community engagement piece. To community members, it quickly becomes “your system” and not “our system.” Too many districts glance through that step, and it always comes back and bites them. When we transform our schools to a personalized system, we have to start with being community-based.*

– Dr. Bob Crumley, Superintendent, Chugach School District

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Creating a shared vision and using a process that develops shared ownership for ensuring that 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. Community members, parents, students, and educators all come to terms with the fact that the traditional system was designed to sort students, and the goal now is to design a system to ensure students successfully learn. Standards are important to establish where we want students to go (i.e., what we want students to know and be able to do), but the important thing is focusing on what it will take to get students there. Without a vision and sense of ownership that is deeply shared, districts cannot put the new instructional model (described in the next section, *Designing the Infrastructure for Learning*) into place. Without the shared purpose, the result is likely to be a standards-based system, at best—and it is only by creating shared vision that the learning-centered spirit develops to inspire students, educators, leadership, and community members to collaborate, seek to build their capacity, search for new innovations, and discover new opportunities. Debbie Treece, Director of Special Education at Chugach School District, emphasized this point with, “The shared purpose and shared values help us to have a common way of talking about issues and solving problems.”

For many districts, shared ownership can also change the nature of the relationships between the community and schools. Andrea Korbe, a Chugach School District board member and parent, told a story of how her community of Whittier has become so engaged in their students and schools that community members seek

out significant opportunities for students to enrich their education, including a waitress initiating a partnership with NASA when she learned her customer was an astronaut. They feel ownership around their schools and understand the many roles they can play.

## 1. Engaging the Community

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*We took direction from the community about the kind of graduates they wanted and the type of school they wanted. As we began the high school redesign process, we never backed off from engaging our community. Our community is in the driver's seat.*

– John Freeman, Superintendent, Pittsfield School District

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In order to establish a community engagement process, districts will need to invest in structuring and facilitating ongoing conversations. The community in Pittsfield, New Hampshire demands to be an active partner—not just in the initial conversations, but in a sustained way. Thus, Pittsfield School District offers a case study of a multi-pronged approach to community engagement that provides formal structures for ongoing conversations and continued learning and is prepared to engage around challenging issues when they arise.

**Start with Questions, Not Solutions:** Pittsfield recommends that districts and schools that are beginning the community engagement steps avoid declarative statements like, “We are going to become competency-based!” By starting the conversation with the solution instead of an honest discussion, schools undermine any chance for authentic dialogue. In addition, buy-in strategies do not solicit the invaluable input and ideas from the community.

Instead, the focus should be on what communities and parents want for their children upon graduation... and then the role of the school in fully preparing them for that goal. This is where the conversation begins about what it means to personalize the learning experience to ensure students reach proficiency on all the important skills they will need to be successful in the next stage of their learning. Is it misleading to have an idea where the conversation might end up? Not at all—because it is likely that your community will introduce ideas that expand beyond your own understanding and vision for a personalized, competency-based education system. For example, Tobi Chassie emphasizes that it was invaluable to have community members participate in the process, as they raised issues that educators might have skipped over. “We had not included anything to address unmotivated learners. It was a community member who pointed that out, raising the question about what was in place to support that set of students.”

**Structure Governance to Include Community and Students:** At Pittsfield, a thirty-five-member Community Advisory Council was created with six sub-teams, which contributed to an overall logic model that was turned into a roadmap for implementation. The teams explored personalization that emphasized student-centered learning, an understanding of the learning process as a combination of habits of mind that supported inquiry-based learning, the goal of building the twenty-first century skills that would prepare students for college and career readiness, and an expectation that students would demonstrate their learning through authentic assessment.

The Council (renamed the Good to Great Team) continues to meet once a month as a full group and once a month in sub-teams that include talent management, community engagement, parent engagement, and student engagement. As Chassie explained, “Community engagement is the key to sustainability. If the district and school leaders fell off the face of the earth, the community would keep it going. They are creating the public demand.”

**Inform Design and Implementation from Multiple Perspectives:** Pittsfield developed several approaches to engage the community and gather knowledge from different perspectives. They knew it was important to identify as many issues as early as possible and make sure they had been taken into account. To this end, they created a Competency Education Implementation Task Force of three students, five parents, three community members, and eight faculty members to ensure that all perspectives and concerns were addressed. The task force visited neighboring schools to learn more about the transition and to help identify potential implementation issues that might arise.

## WHY ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY?

District leaders offer many reasons for engaging the community early on in the process of converting to competency education.

- **Nurturing Consensus and Leadership:** Communities need to be given time to understand the new structure and why it is important. The greater the number of people in the community who are knowledgeable about the process, the more they can help others to understand.
- **Contributing Valuable Perspectives:** Members of the community will bring ideas to the table that educators might not necessarily include. They will bring their values and perspectives to create a richer conversation.
- **Re-Aligning Roles:** Engaging community members will shake up the bureaucratic dynamics that have come to shape how educators often interact with families and community members.
- **Re-Building Respect and Trust:** Community engagement can help to overcome mistrust and build the mutual respect that is needed to create a culture of learning. In most districts, there are segments of the community that have either had bad experiences in school or have historically been underserved and disrespected by school systems. Districts must create a space for people to talk about what they want for their children, have honest conversations about the current academic achievement levels and graduation rates, and share their fears.
- **Sustaining Change:** Community engagement is an essential ingredient for staying the course when unanticipated consequences of implementation arise and when district leadership changes.
- **Unlearning Old Routines and Practices:** Districts and schools will receive feedback on what has not been working in their previous community engagement strategies and can begin to co-design new strategies with the community.

There is an additional reason that community engagement is needed in the process of converting to competency education: to build respectful relationships with students. In order to foster strong relationships, school personnel need to have a sense of the culture and experiences that shape their students’ lives. In competency education, valuing the insight and perspectives of the community has to come first. In fact, the most successful district conversions to date begin the process with strong community involvement.

Pittsfield has also built the capacity to include student involvement in governance throughout the district. By turning to the Center for Secondary School Redesign, the adults in Pittsfield learned to engage with students on committees and task forces. One important step was to clarify the scope of the committees and the responsibility of members. Students continue to have a strong sense of ownership in the school and their education, and policies are more student-centered than they might have been otherwise.

**Go into the Community:** Pittsfield used a multi-pronged approach to engage the broader community as they moved into the transition stage. First, they worked with [NH Listens](#) to organize forums facilitated by community members. Then, in partnership with [Pittsfield Youth Workshop](#) and other local organizations, they held a pig roast in a downtown park to attract community members unlikely to come to the school. Computers were set up so teachers could show what competencies and reports cards would look like. They also invested in making sure students fully understood the new system and why it was important to make the transition. Lois Stevens, Director of Student Services and the Chair of the Competency Implementation Team, explained, “Students carry the burden of what is happening in the school. We wanted to make sure they understood it and could explain it from their firsthand experience.”

At Pittsfield, the strategic focus is on student-centered learning, with the competency-based infrastructure operating as the backbone of the secondary school. The district has strengthened its strategic communication capacity to engage the community around student-centered learning and interacting with students. It is also in constant conversation with the community. Meetings are set up before reports are released and as new ideas are being developed. Superintendent John Freeman is constantly presenting to the Select Board, Rotary Clubs, churches, and other community organizations. Students are a part of the communication strategy, participating in presentations and helping to explain student-centered learning.

The communications demands will be heavy in the early stages of putting a competency-based structure into place. Thus, it is helpful to put the organizational structures and processes in place so that ongoing dialogue continues. Strategic communication should constantly reinforce the shared purpose and highlight why it is important to upgrade the design of the education system to better meet student needs.

In engaging with the initial phase of shaping a shared purpose—as well as the subsequent work to create an instructional structure and implement it—there will be a constant stream of questions. Districts will need to be prepared for some of these issues to be raised in the local media. Some may be easy to answer, but many will require creating mini-conversations that help people understand why the district is trying to change the education system they know so well. Instead of trying to answer each question separately, ask your own question that will open a conversation or prepare a story that will resonate.

Increasingly, there are resources available to help education leaders prepare a strong message. [Achieve](#) has created a [communication tool kit](#) that can help prepare for these kinds of conversations. Frameworks Institute offers a toolkit called [Telling Stories Out of School: Reframing the Education Conversation through a Core Story Approach](#), which places the focus on our need to prepare our children for the future. Great Schools Partnership offers several resources, including [Ten Principles of Proficiency-Based Learning](#). However, learning from peers will always be the most helpful in learning how to respond to the variety of questions that pop up. Brian Stack, Principal at Sanborn Regional High School, shared his answers to [common questions](#), including, “Can you explain how competency-based grading practices will help prepare my child for college?” and “Is it true that deadlines don’t matter in a competency education system?” Identify students, parents, teachers, and community members who are effective in communicating personalization and competency education, and ask them to help address questions as they arise.

To date, the districts that have begun the transition to a competency-based system contain fewer than 50,000 students. Larger districts will need to invest more in community engagement strategies and think through roll-out strategies that will build trust with the different sectors of their community. No matter the size of the district, leadership will need to demonstrate that community engagement is a priority and ensure that processes, structures, and timelines are built so that community members can be involved, not just informed.



## LESSONS LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- Districts that want to engage their community change how they organize meetings. They stop having meetings only at the district office or school buildings and find places where community members feel comfortable, including work sites, faith-based institutions, and community centers. They stop having meetings only in the evenings and schedule a variety of different times, including the weekend. They offer daycare, food, and materials in the language of their community members. Most importantly, they structure the agenda so that dialogue is a priority.
- Expect that students who perceive they are succeeding in the traditional system (and their parents) to have a lot of questions about competency education. Be prepared to talk about how students aren't competing against their peers but against students all around the world, and how the GPA can mislead students into thinking they have learned everything they need to know. Emphasize how expectations of learning have increased so students need to apply skills and content—not just recall them—and that applying skills often takes more effort on the part of students who are used to succeeding under the rules of the traditional system. Engage higher education admissions officers in conversations so parents know that competency education won't hurt their child's chances of getting into college.

### **2. Creating the Shared Purpose**

Creating a shared purpose requires districts to develop their capacity for facilitated conversations (i.e., the ability to listen deeply to each other while driving for an agreed-upon vision, statement, or solution). Districts have used a simple set of questions that generate robust conversations. For example, Lindsay Unified School District in California invested in deep community engagement to launch their transformative process, beginning with the questions:

- Why do we exist?
- What are the values that will govern how we interact with each other?
- What are the principles by which we will make decisions?
- What is our vision for the future?
- What is the description of our graduates?

The result is a mission of “Empowering and Motivating for Today and Tomorrow,” a set of core values and guiding principles that drive their instructional model. (See Exhibit 1.)

## Exhibit 1: Lindsay Unified School District Core Values



LINDSAY UNIFIED  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

### Our Core Values:

*Guide our behavior; govern how we will work together  
as we carry out the mission and vision.*

**INTEGRITY** – The embodiment of honesty, fairness, trustworthiness, honor, and consistent adherence to high-level moral principles

**COMMITMENT** – People’s willingness to devote their full energies and talents to the successful completion of undertakings

**EXCELLENCE** – A desire for, and pursuit of, the highest quality in any undertaking, process, product, or result

**RISK-TAKING** – Taking initiative, innovating, breaking the mold, and speaking out in sincere attempts to support core values

**TEAMWORK** – Working collaboratively and cooperatively toward achieving a common recognized end

**ACCOUNTABILITY** – Taking responsibility for the content and process of decisions made, actions taken, and the resulting outcomes

**IMPROVEMENT** – A commitment to continuously enhance the quality of personal and organizational results, performances, and processes

**OPENNESS** – A willingness and desire to receive, consider, and act ethically on information and possibilities of all kinds

**ALIGNMENT** – The purposeful, direct matching of decisions, resources, and organizational structures with the organization’s vision

**COURAGE** – The willingness of individuals and organizations to risk themselves despite the likelihood of negative consequences or fear

In developing a shared purpose, Chugach School District had to engage communities from three different areas as well as a statewide homeschool community based all across Alaska. The resulting mission statement emphasizes student agency, mutual accountability, and cultural respect.

Bob Crumley recounts using the following process in meetings to initiate the Chugach shared purpose.

1. Turn to a neighbor and tell each other your district’s shared purpose. Now, by a show of hands, how many were able to articulate our shared purpose? (In the beginning, there were few hands.)
2. If, as leaders, teachers, and parents (depending on the group), we aren’t able to articulate our shared purpose, how are we going to work together to clearly articulate expectations and provide a roadmap for our students to achieve success?

3. Ask students to think of a successful person (local, national, or international). Then begin a discussion on the following questions: What traits does that person have that helped them become successful? Which of those traits should we teach and assess to set all of our graduates up for success?
4. Use the input to form the backbone for developing a draft shared purpose as well as informing student performance standards at a later stage.

Currently, Chugach School District operates according to the following shared purpose:

*The Chugach School District is committed to developing and supporting a partnership with students, parents, community and business which equally shares the responsibility of empowering students to meet the needs of the ever changing world in which they live. Students shall possess the academic and personal characteristics necessary to reach their full potential. Students will contribute to their community in a manner that displays respect for human dignity and validates the history and culture of all ethnic groups.*

That shared purpose of “empowering student ownership of learning and success” is supported by eight values (or elements) of performance-based learning, valuing stakeholders, resiliency, agility, shared leadership and responsibility, open and honest communication, continuous improvement and innovation, and trust and teamwork.



Creating the shared purpose is important; however, the real value comes in making sure it is used consistently. District and school leaders who have developed shared purposes, shared values, and guiding beliefs use them frequently to make decisions big and small during the transition years. According to Jamie Robles, Principal of Lindsay High School, “My job as a principal is to make sure our decision-making processes are managed effectively. At times I may need to step in to remind the team of our compelling purpose—our learners. When we have a shared goal, it makes decisions a lot easier. Collaboration is also a lot easier.”<sup>8</sup> As Bill Zima put it, “A process of facilitated conversations amongst all stakeholders led to the establishment of a philosophical lens through which all decisions pass.”

In order to engage the full organization in working toward a shared purpose, leaders need to be skilled in tapping into what drives adults. Bill Bryan, Center for Secondary School Redesign and a coach to educational leaders, explains that most adults are driven by task accomplishment, influence, or relationship needs. Educators are also often driven by intellectual curiosity and altruism. In order for leaders to engage administrative staff and teachers to direct their energy toward creating a new personalized, competency-based system and move outside of their comfort zones, they will need to understand the motivational drivers. Furthermore, they will

need to develop a deep understanding of what underlying resistance is and employ the appropriate influence skills to help people overcome it. Thus, changing practices—introducing new ones and letting go of the old—is a leadership function, not management.<sup>9</sup>

Equally important to engaging community members is to make sure educators are also fully engaged. Inquiry teams are important for educators to take the time to understand personalization, why it is important, how the traditional system is undermining their efforts, the implications for moving to a personalized, competency-based system, and how they can assess the way the school operates with a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Some districts do not move forward until a large majority of educators in a school indicate they are ready. A case study on RSU2's Hall-Dale describes in detail the process the district took in considering a proficiency-based system, including a vote in the second year of the process in which the educators decided to move forward.<sup>10</sup>



## LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- Ask a consultant to interview people in the organization (students, parents, teachers, principals, administrative staff) to help determine how consistently the new ideas are taking hold and identify patterns where there may be resistance, doubt, or confusion. This will provide invaluable insights into where superintendents and principals need to direct their leadership, engage others more deeply, support others in building their leadership skills, and reinforce the new culture of learning.

## SEEKING ASSISTANCE

Just as students need support to learn and teachers need mentoring, coaching, and training to build their skills, so too do district and school leaders require help in moving through the process of converting to a competency-based structure. We asked the districts highlighted in this paper to share which organizations were most helpful to them in their journey towards personalized, competency education. Below are their organizational recommendations, followed by specific resources in parentheses that may be useful.

- [Center for Collaborative Education, Quality Performance Assessment \(OPA Guide\)](#)
- [Center for Secondary School Redesign \(What Top-Performing Leaders Think About\)](#)
- [Great Schools Partnership \(Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified\)](#)
- [Marzano Research \(Proficiency Scale Bank\)](#)
- [QED Foundation \(Transformational Change Model\)](#)
- [Reinventing Schools Coalition \(Individual Mastery Pathway and Organizational Change Pathway\)](#)
- [2Revolutions \(Roadmap for Competency-Based Systems\)](#)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All references to Virgel Hammonds are based on an interview that was published as [Virgel Hammonds' Six Insights into Leadership](#), CompetencyWorks (October 8, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The reference to understanding leadership through the metaphor of dance floor and balcony was suggested in an email exchange with Don Siviski, previously the superintendent of RSU2 and the Maine Department of Education's Superintendent of Instruction, currently at the Center for Secondary School Redesign. The metaphor was developed in *Leadership on the Line* by Heifitz and Linsky.

<sup>3</sup> All references to Sanborn Regional School District, Sanborn Regional High School, Memorial Elementary School, and the leadership team of Brian Blake, Ellen-Hume Howard, Brian Stack, and Jonathan Vander Els are based on site visit in February 2014 and their publications of their insights on CompetencyWorks. Please see [Sanborn Regional School District Flips District Reform](#) for the summary of the site visit. You can also find resources explaining the Sanborn Regional School District on the [CompetencyWorks wiki](#).

<sup>4</sup> Please visit [Bill Zima's contributing author posts](#) on CompetencyWorks to find the entire series on leadership and leading a proficiency-based school on which his insights in this paper are based.

<sup>5</sup> All references to Bob Crumley, Debbie Treece, Andrea Korbe, Jed Palmer, and Doug Penn are based on interviews conducted on October 8-22, 2014 during a Chugach School District site visit. Read the entire site visit overview starting with [Driven by Student Empowerment: Chugach School District](#), CompetencyWorks (January 6, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> All references to John Freeman, Tobi Chassie, Susan Bradley, Danielle Harvey, and Lois Stevens are based on an interview conducted on January 31, 2014 during a site visit to Pittsfield School District. Access the full site visit overview starting with [Redesign at Pittsfield School District](#), CompetencyWorks (February 21, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Other suggestions for reading that can help build the new vision, catalyze a deeper understanding of leadership, and develop new capacity include: *Our Iceberg is Melting* by John Kotter; *Blended* by Michael Horn and Heather Staker; *Good to Great* by Jim Collins; *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel Pink; *The Human Side of School Change* by Robert Evans; *Visible Learning* by John Hattie; *Management of Organizational Behavior* by Paul Hersey, Kenneth Blanchard, and Dewey Johnson; *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind* by Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick; *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time* by Jeff Sutherland; and *Learning for All* by Lawrence Lezotte.

<sup>8</sup> All references to Tom Rooney, Jaime Robles, Lana Brown, and Rebecca Midles are based on the October 2, 2014 Lindsay Unified School District site visit. Read about this site visit at [Six Trends at Lindsay Unified School District](#), CompetencyWorks (March 2, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with William Bryan, Center for Secondary School Redesign, March 10, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *The Long Conversation*, or, "It's hard, but worth it. Did I mention that it's hard?", Maine Department of Education. Retrieved from: <http://maine.gov/doe/cbp/case-studies/rsu2-case-study.html>.

## Other Issue Briefs Available at CompetencyWorks

- Maximizing Competency Education and Blended Learning: Insights from Experts by Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis, March 2015
- A K–12 Federal Policy Framework for Competency Education: Building Capacity for Systems Change by Maria Worthen and Lillian Pace, February 2014
- Progress and Proficiency: Redesigning Grading for Competency Education by Chris Sturgis, January 2014
- Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills – A State Policymakers Guide to Competency Education by Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis, February 2013
- Re-Engineering Information Technology: Design Considerations for Competency Education by Liz Glowka, February 2013
- The Learning Edge: Supporting Student Success in a Competency-Based Learning Environment by Laura Shubilla and Chris Sturgis, December 2012
- The Art and Science of Designing Competencies by Chris Sturgis, August 2012
- It's Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency-Based Summit by Chris Sturgis, Susan Patrick and Linda Pittenger, July 2011
- Cracking the Code: Synchronizing Policy and Practice for Performance-Based Learning by Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis, July 2011
- Clearing the Path: Creating Innovation Space for Serving Over-age, Under-credited Students in Competency-Based Pathways by Chris Sturgis, Bob Rath, Ephraim Weisstein and Susan Patrick, December 2010
- When Success is the Only Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning by Chris Sturgis and Susan Patrick, November 2010



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