Transitioning to a Competency-Based System

A FOCUS SECTION FROM:

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

RAMPING UP	DESIGNING	**TRANSITIONING**	IMPROVING

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WRITTEN BY:

Chris Sturgis

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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.

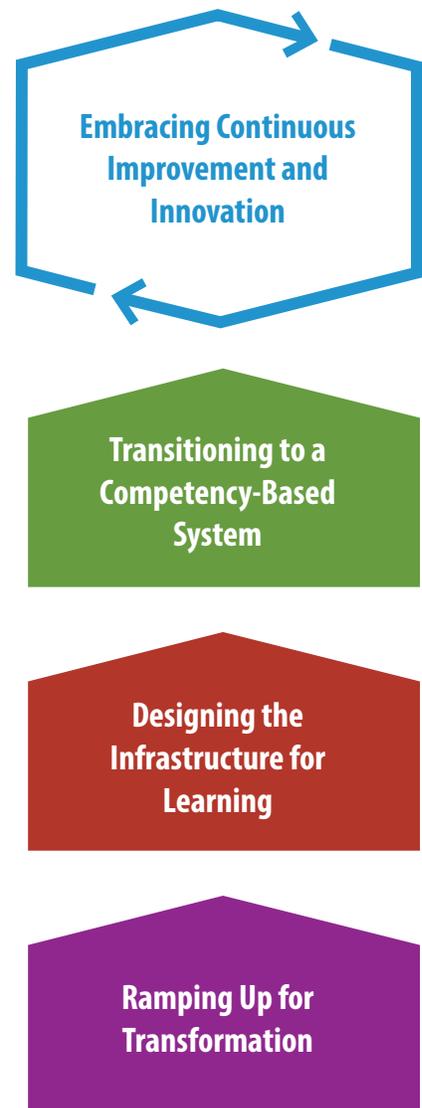# TRANSITIONING TO A COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEM

A FOCUS SECTION FROM:
Implementing Competency Education in K–12 Systems:
Insights from Local Leaders

The following is the third 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 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) 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.

This third excerpt, Transitioning to a Competency-Based System, investigates how leaders and educators are "building the ship in the water" and "constructing the plane in the air"—as they are designing the new system while also educating students within the traditional system. During this time, the student-centered culture of learning must be consistently reinforced, and educators must be reminded that they can use the standards in a non-linear fashion to construct creative and engaging learning experiences. This section also explores creating access to information for students and parents, engaging the community, and preparing for the "implementation dip" that may occur during this time.

Stages of Implementation

Embracing Continuous Improvement and Innovation

Transitioning to a Competency-Based System

Designing the Infrastructure for Learning

Ramping Up for Transformation

v. Transitioning to a Competency-Based System

The transition year(s) 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. Below are a few of the major activities that districts undertake during the transition year(s).

A. Preparing for the Leadership Lifts

The scary part of this style of teaching and managing is that to empower someone you must give away your own power. Once we had a shared purpose of what we wanted to accomplish, I gave the power to the kids. Everything went smoother, and discipline problems went away. Of course, as an administrator, it's even scarier to give up power to teachers. When I first started to develop this management style, I was afraid I might lose all my credibility and authority. Then I realized I was just changing the source of my credibility and authority. And once again, everything went smoother.

– Dr. Bob Crumley, Superintendent, Chugach School District

The leadership demands are high during the transition years—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. Moreover, as teachers begin to focus more sharply on helping students learn rather than delivering a curriculum, their own gaps in skills will become evident. Leadership will find that the shared purpose and guiding principles emphasizing learning and collaboration can become a shield to minimize the disruption caused by top-down policies that emphasize evaluations of individual teachers.

Oliver Grenham and Jeni Gotto of Adams 50 in Colorado warn that districts converting to competency education need to be ready for a "bumpy journey," as it is impossible for everything to be perfectly designed. Their advice is for educators to:

- Start from where they are and prepare to learn and improve along the way,
- Think differently and help others think differently regarding student learning,
- Seek ways to better align the system as it progresses, and
- Remember the compelling purpose and the learners, and focus on the shared goal.

District leaders and principals will need to turn to the shared purpose and guiding principles to help make decisions both during the transition year and in the years to come. Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent of RSU2 in Maine, states that he is often asked about the Lindsay story (he was a high school principal in that California district) or the RSU2 story, as if there is a step-by-step process that other districts can follow. "It's not about one method," he says. "Every district and school has its own history and culture. They need to be able to tap into the assets of their communities and schools to develop the vision, guiding principles, and process that is right for them."

One thing superintendents have to ensure is that decisions are being made in the best interests of students. Adult issues or traditional ways of doing things—contracts, bus schedules, and athletics—can easily drive decision-making if superintendents, districts, and school leaders aren't vigilant. With all the complexity of how schools operate and the incredible number of small decisions that need to be made daily, Hammonds warns that leaders can get stuck being a manager rather than a leader. Leadership is needed to take a step back and ask, "How is this moving our kids along their learning progressions? How is this providing learning opportunities that are meaningful to our kids?" Hammonds emphasizes that superintendents have to consistently role model how to make decisions in the best interest of learners.

In a culture of compliance, leaders rarely talk about courage. After all, educators don't need to if they are only following directives from above. In competency education, leaders often talk about their fears and the need to overcome them (i.e., courage). Leaders will describe the courage it took to give up power within a distributed leadership model. They describe turning to a burning desire to do better for children as the force that lifted them over the fear of failure.

It also takes courage to be honest about how students are achieving. In his presentations about the transformational process that Lindsay Unified School District has undertaken, Superintendent Tom Rooney found that district leadership had to have the courage to recognize that they'd betrayed students, parents, and the community by graduating students who did not have the skills to go to college. District leaders need to nurture courage in their teacher workforce, as well, as they will be the ones who will need to have honest talks with parents, often for the first time, about where their students are in terms of academic levels rather than in terms of completing assignments or behaviors.

✔ LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- Transition time is one of substantial discovery for the adults in the system—keep the focus on the growth mindset and celebrate learning. Teachers will often need time to unlearn practices before they can integrate new ones.

  Meetings are the most important way to bring people together to discuss issues arising in implementation. Invest in building up the capacity of the organization to use effective facilitation strategies. Build a tool kit to create structures for process, input, and decisions depending on the purpose of your meeting—problem-solving, continuous improvement, or reflection.[1]

  Consider placing a poster of the shared purpose on the wall of the conference room used for school board meetings and other decision-making groups. Point to the poster at critical decision-making points to ask how the shared purpose impacts the decision being considered. The practice will eventually transfer to other members of the school community and help you remain grounded in your shared purpose.

  Meetings are also important in developing ownership for the new system. Make sure that input is acknowledged, addressed, and used. If leaders don't routinely ask for input and deliberately use it, it is easy for stakeholders to become discouraged. Each interaction is an opportunity for building trust...or not. Strategically communicate about who has offered input and how it has been used to build the new system. Share the credit.

B. Selecting a Rollout Strategy

We discovered that in our rollout of performance-based systems, that although many of our learning facilitators were having rich conversations in small collaborative groups, we were struggling with systemic application. Learning Facilitators wanted instructional strategies, exemplars, and opportunities to observe one another. In response to this, we developed an instructional design and delivery coaching team to be at the site level to support and guide the work. This involves critical data based discussions, planning, role modeling, and goal setting, as well as feedback loops.

– Lana Brown, Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction, Lindsay Unified School District

To date, 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. Adams 50 started with elementary schools, Lindsay started with the high school and has now rolled all the way back to elementary school, Pittsfield School District started with their Middle High School, and Charleston has started with a few of their elementary schools. At Sanborn Regional School District, significant elements of the effort began at the elementary and middle school levels and eventually progressed to the high school level. RSU2 asked faculty to vote whether they wanted to go forward before moving toward the transition after a year of inquiry and research. They then developed a rollout strategy to implement their learner-centered instructional strategies throughout the entire K–12 system.

In Chugach School District, district leadership clearly and publicly announced the direction, then each school developed their individual timeline. Some schools jumped in headfirst, while others phased in the new system over time, content area by content area. Along the way, each school shared successes and challenges, learning from each other, and eventually all realized they successfully achieved the same transition.

Fulton School District, neighboring Atlanta, Georgia, is using a multi-pronged rollout. They started by transitioning their summer school sites for middle and high school students from a traditional model to a competency-based model. This year, all K–12 summer school programming will be competency-based. In addition to being a cost-effective use of resources, teachers had the opportunity to see competency-based learning up close. They've also partnered with Marzano Research Labs and are developing and implementing proficiency scales, starting with K–12 Social Studies teachers. An additional partnership with New Classrooms brings the Teach for One math model to three middle schools within the district, which is already seeing positive results in improving progress and pace of students.[i]

Districts and schools may want to have an even more discrete rollout strategy by beginning with a pilot. This can be helpful in identifying where capacity will need to be developed and anticipating issues. Jim Rickabaugh, Director of the Institute @ CESA #1, describes a piloting process used by some of the schools in their Wisconsin network. When initiating a new practice, schools use a prototyping cycle within a finite period of time. If the benefits are significant, then a planning process begins to implement the practice school-wide.[2]

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[i]   To learn more about information management systems, see Re-Engineering Information Technology: Design Considerations for Competency Education and Roadmap for Competency-based Systems: Leveraging Next Generation Technologies.

Based on the choice of rollout strategy, districts will need to think about the types and amount of support that will be needed. This may include training, coaching, and data collection to create a feedback loop to guide refinements. Students, parents, and teachers will all need to be prepared for the rollout.

LESSONS LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- Consider the capacity of the district and school leadership to continue to use shared leadership strategies during implementation. Once the rollout begins and the school moves into the transition stage, the leadership demands will only increase. Determine what types of supports will be helpful for district and school leadership during this period.

- Teachers need time to work with each other. As students build agency and teachers gain more authority and accountability, it is essential that they be treated with respect as professionals and have time to meet and plan. If a school can't find time for PLCs and common planning, then it isn't ready for the transition.

- When designing pilots, be sure to include some of the high leverage elements of competency education, including transparent learning targets, calibration among teachers, and ensuring adequate supports. Very small pilots that focus on a few discrete elements of competency education such as personalized pacing may not generate results, as teachers are using lower levels of depth of knowledge, operating in isolation without adequate peer support, or unable to meet all the needs of students for instructional support without an organizational commitment of resources.

C. Preparing Teachers for Personalized Classrooms

As the navigators of learning, our role isn't to march students to their destinations, but to provide the feedback they need to get there themselves. While we try to keep them all on the path, we know that we will have some who will want to stop to smell the flowers, those who want to go the other way because they hate always being behind the pack, and those who try to convince the group to stop because it is a conspiracy launched by the adults to control their minds. Nothing works for all students. But if we know where we need to get them, it makes it easier to guide them.

– Bill Zima, Principal, Mt. Ararat Middle School

One of the necessary steps to ensure a district is creating a student-centered culture rather than one solely driven by standards is to prepare teachers for managing personalized classrooms. Pittsfield School District provided professional coaching courses for all their teachers. Don Siviski, former Superintendent of RSU2, describes eliminating all travel and non-related professional development in order to stop doing what wasn't working and marshalling all resources to supporting teachers to prepare for the transition to proficiency-based learning. Maine districts, in partnership with the Reinventing Schools Coalition, offered training on classroom design to help teachers look at their own beliefs about learning, examine tenets of personalizing learning,

build student agency by creating classroom codes of collaboration, introduce new operating procedures, enhance formative assessment, develop and take advantage of transparency of learning targets, and plan for a competency-based instructional model that emphasizes higher order skills.[3]

Teachers can begin to use a variety of ways to manage their personalized classroom, including creating a shared purpose with their students, standard operating procedures that emphasize how students can get help (re-read the directions, ask a peer, then ask the teacher), visuals with the standards to indicate how students are progressing, posters that emphasize a culture of learning and the idea that mistakes are simply part of that process, examples of student work that are considered proficient, parking lots, and planning tools to guide students in thinking through what they will need to be successful.[4]

Many schools fall into a trap in the first years in that they teach learning continuum in a rigid, linear fashion because they have been written that way. Brian Stack, Principal at Sanborn Regional High School, explained that the very opposite should be happening. "The competencies target our learning for us and help us see how we can connect learning." For example, one team in the Sophomore Experience created a unit on epidemics. They read The Hot Zone as part of their English Language Arts, looked at the government's role in crisis for social studies, and built knowledge on viruses for science. They then tied it all together by producing and presenting an emergency response plan.

✓ LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- Many schools encounter unintended consequences during the transition from a time-based, one-size-fits-all culture to a personalized culture invested around intrinsic motivation and student agency. Teachers may find that some students fall behind when they are given too much leeway in moving along at their own pace. Other students may not submit homework because there are no longer points attached to it, or fail to study for tests because they can count on taking a re-assessment later on.

  To prevent this, educators must make sure that each class develops a strong code of collaboration or shared purpose to help shift the ownership of learning to the students. A meaningful set of habits of learning is also important so that teachers can use them to reflect with students on their behavior and the consequences. Teachers can negotiate how much independence students have based on their demonstration of the habits. When students do try to take advantage of the greater flexibility to do less, teachers can engage them on their habits and the impact they will have on their future lives in college and careers.

  Beware of how "time is a variable" can be interpreted. Emphasize that pace matters and turn to the idea of the growth mindset to put the focus on effort. The variable of time doesn't mean that students can lag behind—it is that students may need more time during the day or week to work on the concepts with the necessary instructional support. Make sure that students know they need to demonstrate proficiency before they take an assessment—thus assignments may be opportunities for practice and to demonstrate learning. Re-assessments cannot be taken until additional work is done to demonstrate their learning—thus students will have to do more work, not less, if they choose not to study for exams.

D. Planning for Leveling and Parent Conversations

First, we need to make sure the system is transparent about where students are on their learning progression and how they are progressing. And we need to have honest conversations about it without blaming the child, educator, or system. We can't hide behind any excuses. We need to have the courage to act in the best interest of our kids.

– Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent, RSU2

As described previously, schools will need to determine students' academic levels as distinct from their grade levels (often referred to as leveling). It will be important to help teachers prepare for engaging parents in the initial conversation about where students are on their learning progression. Anticipate questions such as, "Why is my child not at grade level? Why are you starting him on an academic performance level rather than on grade level? Why is my child's target for growth an academic level or two rather than their grade level?" (Listen between the lines, as what they are really asking is, "Will my child ever catch up?")

According to Copper Stoll, formerly Chief Academic Officer at Adams 50, the district dedicated a day to meet with every parent to inform them of their child's placement in ELA and math the spring before they began their K-8 competency-based system. Teachers had talking points to help create a consistent message. They personalized the conversation by providing folders that included information on the standards their child would be learning based on the student's academic placement as well as brochures that explained the personalized mastery system. This laid the groundwork so parents wouldn't be surprised if their child was placed in an academic performance level below their chronological grade level in the coming year. They continued to use a quarterly reporting system that parents were used to while introducing the standards-based progress reports. They also offered parents access to the electronic information system so they could monitor progress independently. According to Stoll, "Parents didn't express any concerns, as they knew their kids were behind and they were grateful that we were finally doing something to address it!"[5]

Ephraim Weisstein, founder of Schools for the Future, recommends expanding the conversation. The discussion with parents and students about learning, progress, and pace should be followed by conversations about the bigger picture—the development of their child, their habits of learning, and their path toward graduation and beyond.

Creating access for parents and students to the digital information system is a powerful step for reinforcing student ownership and a culture of learning. At Chugach, the initial discussions were centered on the students who performed below their "age level," and eventually moved to areas where they might already be ahead. The result was a series of productive conversations about student strengths and interests as well as areas for improvement. As Superintendent Bob Crumley put it, "Adults had the most concern about student performance placing them in levels below their perceived 'age level.' Students had less concern about this because it was information they already knew. The new system seemed like common sense to them, as they intuitively knew that all students were different and performed at varying levels across the content areas. This dynamic led to students increasing their likelihood of providing peer help and asking for peer help. Over time, the conversation changed. Rather than focusing on students who were 'behind,' the light began to shine upon where students were actually performing and what strategies and resources were going to help them advance."

✓ LESSON LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

- One of the big shifts of culture in a competency-based system is that the idea of being "fair" to students and their families is no longer about giving them a higher grade or points for good behavior. Instead, educators are honest about where students are on learning progressions and ensure they have adequate supports in place so that students are not academically behind indefinitely. Because a competency-based system is transparent and honest about where students are on the progression, it gives them the chance to build their skills—an opportunity that is denied them when we say students are getting an A, B, or C but are not actually learning the skills they need.

E. Making Mid-Course Corrections

We need to have honest conversations about when a process or approach isn't working. Adjust it now if you know it's not working. It can be difficult because everyone is working so hard, and they might have spent months trying to develop a new process. But if it isn't working, they need to deal with it, not wait until the end of the school year. We have to be courageous to confront activities that aren't moving kids in their learning. We can't be afraid to confront the truth. If a process isn't working, either refine it or scrap it.

– Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent, RSU2

Bob Crumley explained that in the early years of the transition at Chugach School District, he felt like he was "pulling weeds." As the team implemented the new instructional models, they kept stumbling over practices and operational issues that were rooted in the traditional, time-based system. For example, students were learning through extra-curricular activities, but CSD wasn't including that performance data within their system. They turned extra-curricular activities into co-curricular activities by building in processes, students, and stakeholders until they began to see that learning occurs anywhere and at any time. Expanding the walls of the classroom to include athletics, student government, field trips, the arts, and career development created opportunities for students to pursue high interest learning opportunities.

Both Brian Stack, Principal at Sanborn Regional High school, and Jonathan Vander Els, Principal at Memorial Elementary, have described having to refine their grading and scoring systems after the first year of implementation. Stack pointed out, "As a leader, what stood out for me as an example of resolute leadership was when my fellow administrators and I had the courage to recognize that a decision we made was not working, and we were able to make a change mid-year. It would have been very easy to use that mistake as an excuse to go back to our old system, but we managed to stay true to our vision for competency education and find a way to overcome the hurdles and roadblocks that were put before us."

Keeping the community engaged throughout implementation is critical. As Pittsfield School District began implementation, they alerted their Community Advisory Council (now called the Good to Great Team) as they hit implementation issues to engage them in problem solving around mid-course corrections. Rick Schreiber of the Reinventing Schools Coalition cautions, "Often a district will establish a strong shared vision but fails to implement regular communication with stakeholders to seek out further input. In the beginning, stakeholders

are building trust, and there is excitement about the upcoming changes. The second and third years are critical for leaders to continue the shared vision process to address the social, emotional, and logistical issues that arise from second order change."[6]

Principals will find that as teachers stretch themselves to meet the needs of students, there will be significant demands to increase the responsiveness and flexibility of the school to provide resources. If schools didn't organize a flextime for instructional support, they will want to do so immediately. There will also be demands for more modular calendars so that frequent regrouping can happen to help students who need additional support advance to where their academic and grade levels are closely aligned (i.e., staying on track).

Memorial Elementary School found that their competency-based approach "fit flawlessly into our tiered-response model." Still, creating a schedule wasn't easy. Team leaders worked together to devise a schedule that provided time for intervention and extension, the LEAP block, for every grade level. There were varying points of views and considerations about how to do this, and they ultimately designed a schedule that took into account the developmental needs of students. The result is that every student can get extra help on whatever is most challenging to them every day. Similarly, Pittsfield School District had to go through several iterations before landing on a fairly traditional schedule four days of the week, with Wednesdays having a late start and shorter classes to create time for teachers to meet and pursue professional development, to have a block of time to support students academically and in leadership development, and to offer the high interest, project-based learning in Studios.

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- Practices that need to be discarded or refined are often related to the master schedule; assessment, grading, and reporting; honor roll and valedictorians; competency recovery; athletic eligibility; and transcripts and college and career planning. Some of the mid-course corrections will be easy to facilitate, while others will have much more complexity, challenge deeply held belief systems, and may even feel counter-intuitive.

- Culture change is slow and needs constant reinforcement. Fidelity of implementation will be dependent on the ability of district and school leadership to tap into the motivational drivers of educators and engage with skeptics to overcome their resistance. Leadership attention is needed to fully integrate new practices.

F. Refining the Instructional Model and Enhancing the Instructional Cycle

Is it just enough for us to say that in education we are standards-based? Does that result in students who are competent? Not necessarily so. We do need to have students learning what they should know and be able to do within a discipline. However, competency really speaks to a depth of knowledge that is beyond knowledge of content and skills. Competency requires that students acquire, make meaning of, and also transfer their content and skills.

– Rose Colby, Consultant on Competency Education

The instructional infrastructure and its focused attention on student learning, the instructional cycle, and teacher skill-building will be a work in progress for several years. The first year, teachers will offer a flurry of ideas about problems, refinements, and innovations. It is important to create a strategy for managing the revision process. Summit Public Schools has a lean start-up model that quickly tests out ideas to see if they are valuable before implementing them school-wide.[7] Many districts engage educators in dialogue to determine which items are critical to change and which can be addressed later on, which helps to prevent the new system from imploding under the weight of its own potential.

Many issues are likely to emerge at this time: how to improve consistency on assessing student work, how to lift up both assessment and instruction to higher levels of learning, how to better support students who have difficulties with subject matter, how to provide more opportunities for students to personalize their learning experiences, and more. It is likely that the misalignment between the desired depth of knowledge, assessment, and instruction will emerge as a healthy tension as educators recognize that it is an obstacle to ensuring students are attaining higher levels of learning. Based on the feedback from educators, principals can co-design a strategy to strengthen assessment literacy, deepening their knowledge of teaching disciplines through the work on learning trajectories (now referred to as learning progressions), and building performance assessment capacity. It's not all going to happen in the first year.

In the third year of implementation, Memorial Elementary School began to focus on strengthening their instructional capacity in math. They turned to the Ongoing Assessment Project (OGAP) that is based on research on learning progressions and cultivates the use of formative assessment in the instructional cycle. Teachers worked together on learning progressions to more deeply understand the reasoning behind major concepts, such as multiplicative reasoning, and expanded their instructional strategies to help students learn. For example, students were expected to explain their reasoning and unpack how they were solving problems so teachers could have more data on where to provide formative feedback. Teachers began to build up item banks that provided substantial information on how students approach math problems. They also developed additional assessments of major concepts to ensure students understand the fundamentals they will need for later courses.

Chugach made three significant enhancements to their instructional framework. First, they focused on "inter-rater reliability" or calibrating assessment of performance-based assessments. Dedicated time for staff development and the opportunity to score the same student work led to discussions about the assessment tools and processes. Over time, this expanded to include refinement of the tools, instructional alignment, and more meaningful feedback for students and parents. Second, they introduced process standards in all content areas to better prepare students to be lifelong learners. Beginning with the scientific method and later including others such as writing processes, math problem-solving processes, and conflict resolution, staff worked together to build their skills at teaching processes. Eventually the process standards were embedded into the performance-based assessment structure. Older students now use the process standards in developing their individual learning plans. Third, the teacher evaluation system at Chugach was upgraded to reflect the same values and principles. Today, all staff are involved in a year-round Performance Evaluation Process (PEP) that is part of the pay for performance system. Teacher scores are averaged across the district so that Performance Pay is equal for all teachers. This has led to teachers who are scoring higher to be more likely to reach out to assist those who are new to the profession and those in need of assistance. All of this is done in a collaborative spirit where teachers understand that they are all in this together, and ultimately for the good of the students.

G. Preparing for the Implementation Dip

There is likely to be an implementation dip during transition years. After the initial work is done, confusion tends to rise and achievement scores may go down. The question is, how fast can districts get beyond the dip and embrace the new practices?

Pittsfield invested heavily in preparation and engaging the community, and then implemented the redesign in one year. It was a challenging year of "ripping off the Band-Aid." But when they came back in September of the next school year, they were all going in the same direction and were ready to begin refining and enhancing their student-centered approach. Building in a late start Wednesday for teachers to meet made the implementation year manageable.

Chugach solidified the school board and district leadership commitment to a long-term strategy and created an intentional communication strategy that reinforced the idea that the system transformation will take several years. They also used data to intensify the sense of urgency by reminding people of the poor results in the traditional system as well as celebrating small steps of progress. Most importantly, they kept their community engaged so members could continue to deepen their understanding and celebrate alongside the students who were beginning to thrive and enjoy coming to school.

LESSONS LEARNED AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- Remember to use the shared purpose and guiding principles when doubts arise during difficult times in the first years of implementation. There may be times when it feels best to create hybrid models that maintain parts of the traditional system. Test those ideas out with your guiding principles to ensure they won't undermine the commitment to learning and supporting all students to reach proficiency.

- Districts converting to competency education know they need to invest in organizational learning in order to fully integrate the new infrastructure. Learning means mistakes are going to happen. Just as competency-based schools need to create a safe place for students to make mistakes, those districts converting to competency education need to create safe environments for educators. This means district leadership will need to engage state leadership with the institutional power to create room for innovation. Invite policy leaders to site visits with you to more developed competency-based schools. Encourage them to read Necessary for Success about how other states are creating innovation space. Most importantly, recognize their leadership when they take risks themselves to change the top-down compliance culture of state-level organizations.

THREE WAYS DISTRICTS STUMBLE IN IMPLEMENTATION[8]

In interviews, district and school leadership have shared the ways they learned from their mistakes when they stumbled or the ways their neighboring districts have encountered troubles.

A. Are Your Shared Values and Shared Purpose Alive?

If districts and schools do not have a clear, shared purpose or do not consistently use their shared values in daily decision-making, it is difficult to develop or maintain the desired culture. To ensure that shared values are embedded within the fabric of the schools, create a shared purpose for the entire district, with schools developing a variation for themselves and with each teacher developing a "code of cooperation" with their students to ensure ownership of the commitment to learning.

At RSU2, complex problems are addressed using the school's set of guiding principles such as, "Students learn in different ways and in different timeframes" and "mistakes are inherent in the learning process." For example, by using the guiding principles at public discussions on the budget, RSU2 has been able to resolve issues and reinforce the shared purpose of the school system.

B. How Distributed is Your Leadership?

When processes are inadequately inclusive or shared leadership is in name only, schools will quickly revert to turning to higher levels of governance, the district, or school leadership to make decisions. This can also open the door to mistrust if people are invited to participate in processes only to find that top management makes decisions through separate processes. Educators need to understand the decision-making processes, their role in it, and when they will have opportunity to have input. District and school leadership will need to take the responsibility to design, get feedback, and then implement decision-making processes with integrity.

There are several ways districts can invest in distributed leadership to ensure it is sustainable. First, create organizational structures that ensure participation, be clear about responsibilities, and encourage membership. Second, leadership needs to ensure that processes are clear and that there is someone to check that they are implemented with integrity. Third, the focus should remain on the shared purpose. Distributed leadership can create difficulties when individuals take ownership but are more enthusiastic about their own ideas or only consider their team rather than the whole. District and school leadership may need to make interventions to help people see how ideas might work for them but not for everyone else.

C. How Strong is the Ownership?

Districts have often relied on marketing or buy-in methods to introduce new initiatives. However, community members or educators may accept the initiative without ever having a sense of ownership and can begin to blame the district when implementation doesn't run smoothly. Superintendents who have converted to competency education suggest engaging community members and students in developing and periodically revising the shared purpose so that new community members have a chance to have ownership. Internally, you may wish to develop processes that take into consideration motivational theory and clear decision-making processes so that staff understand the scope of their autonomy. Consider making the process of creating shared values and a code of cooperation a non-negotiable for educators. Perhaps, as Pittsfield School District has done, students can become part of policymaking processes. Embed reflection by all stakeholders to think about their contribution and ownership into operations.

Endnotes

[1] Zima, Bill. *Lens 3: Meeting Facilitation*, CompetencyWorks (August 1, 2013). Retrieved from http://www.competencyworks.org/reflections/lens-3-meeting-facilitation/.

[2] Interview with Jim Rickabaugh, Director of the Institute @ CESA #1, November 6, 2014.

[3] See *The Long Conversation (RSU 2 – Kennebec Intra-District Schools)* and other case studies on implementation of proficiency-based learning in Maine at the Maine Department of Education Center for Best Practices, http://maine.gov/doe/cbp/case-studies/rsu2.html.

[4] Courtney Belolan, an instructional coach at Mt. Ararat Middle School in Maine, has written extensively at CompetencyWorks on how to personalize classrooms in a proficiency-based environment, http://www.competencyworks.org/author/courtney-belolan/.

[5] *Preparing for Conversations with Parents*, CompetencyWorks (September 29, 2014). Retrieved from: http://www.competencyworks.org/analysis/preparing-for-conversations-with-parents/.

[6] From an email exchange with Rick Schreiber, Reinventing Schools Coalition, March 16, 2015.

[7] Gomes, Patricia. *The 'Lean Startup' Model Goes to School*, edSurge (March 26, 2013). Retrieved from: https://www.edsurge.com/n/2013-03-26-the-lean-startup-model-goes-to-school.

[8] *Juggling Frogs*, CompetencyWorks (May 10, 2012). Retrieved from: http://www.competencyworks.org/uncategorized/juggling-frogs/.

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