

# What is Competency Education?

Across the nation, schools, districts and entire states are reshaping their education system to ensure students reach proficiency in the skills they need for college and careers. It may be called competency-based, proficiency-based, mastery-based or performance-based education, but it speaks to one goal – to lift academic expectations while ensuring that every student reaches them.

**The concept is simple: Learning is best measured by mastery rather than time spent in the classroom.**

Competency education ensures students gain the academic and lifelong learning skills they need to be successful in an ever-changing world. Schools can personalize the learning experience, offering a variety of ways for students to learn and demonstrate learning. Students have more voice and choice, taking ownership of their learning. Students get the instructional support they need to succeed, even if it takes them multiple attempts over a little more time to achieve mastery. Academic rigor is sustained by measuring achievement against a common set of standards.



Through the application of knowledge comes deeper learning

In competency education, students work at their academic level, understanding what they are learning and what they need to do next. Teachers provide timely assessments and extra support until students can demonstrate that they have mastered the concept. Students get the help they need, when they need it, so they can advance to a higher level of studies as soon as they are ready. This system ensures that our most underserved students are no longer left behind, and that all of our students can take their education as far as they are able.

## The Five Elements of Competency Education

1. Students advance upon mastery.
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.



## How Federal Policy Can Remove Barriers and Catalyze Competency Education

While states and districts lead the way in shaping competency education policy and practice, the federal government is in a unique position to catalyze competency education. Federal policy needs to be upgraded substantially in five areas to support states that are moving towards personalized, competency-based models of teaching and learning.

### 1. Re-design Accountability Framework

Federal accountability policy can be re-designed to support personalized learning with higher and deeper levels of learning as well as efforts of schools, districts and states to continuously improve. A re-designed system would include the following elements: commitment to transparency; student progress benchmarked against learning progressions rather than grade levels; multiple measures; and high-quality assessments. The accountability system should be based upon the principles of mutual accountability, culture of learning, collaboration and capacity building.



Students receive more time, support, and instruction until they succeed

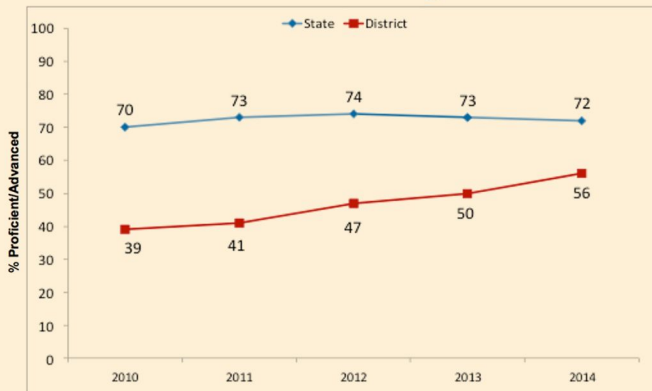
Assessment plays a critical role in learning, as well as being the linchpin of current federal and state accountability policy. The strong emphasis on assessment for the purpose of accountability has created a misalignment that has damaging, unintended consequences for schools seeking to personalize learning for students. A new concept of systems of assessments must be developed to enhance learning and teaching, with the discrete and purposeful use of data on student outcomes to inform accountability. This starts by rebalancing emphasis, placing more weight on formative assessment that helps students learn, with state assessments designed to validate learning outcomes. Flexibility is needed so assessments can be personalized to student learning, providing feedback and validation as students progress along learning progressions, not grade levels.

### 2. Re-balance the Systems of Assessments to Align with and Improve Student Learning

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### Getting Results

Adams 50 Third Grade CSAP/TCAP Reading Results for 2010–2014



Adams 50 School District in Colorado serves a diverse population with 81% of students on Free and Reduced Lunch and 45% English Language Learners. The district was considered a Priority Improvement district in 2009 with a third of their schools designated as lowest performing. Within two years of implementation of competency education, all the schools were out of turnaround status and the number of schools in the accredited status had doubled. The graduation rate continues to steadily increase, reaching 74% in 2013.



## 3. Create Space for Innovation

Federal policy can open up innovation space in several ways, such as including competency education in innovation grants, removing time-based constraints from regulation, and investing in evaluation, research and development. Innovation in competency-based learning models are needed that take greater advantage of digital learning, develop stronger metrics to guide learning, and expand human capital development for the changing roles of educators. Federal grants for innovation should emphasize approaches that have the potential to dramatically advance student learning through personalized, competency-based approaches, rather than requiring prior evidence from traditional, time-based models.

## 4. Invest in Competency-based Information Technology

A compliance-based federal accountability system has created a legacy of compliance-based state and local data systems. Student-centered data systems should collect, report, and provide transparent information on where every student is along a learning trajectory, based on demonstrated high levels of competency, so educators can customize learning experiences to ensure that every student masters standards and aligned competencies. Data should provide useful information for improving teaching and learning, as well as for accountability and quality purposes. Federal policy can catalyze this shift through grants that support technology platforms, costly upgrades to state and district data systems and incentivize system designs that support competency-based models.

## 5. Build Robust Supports and Interventions

Current policies regarding annual classification of underperforming schools and time-based delivery of supports and interventions make it challenging to ensure that current students benefit from reforms. The federal government should support states and districts as they develop and implement a proactive system of supports and interventions that tracks students' progress in real-time to assure that their personalized learning pathways are preparing them for college and careers. Federal policies can catalyze a shift to competency education by supporting states in building robust systems of supports and interventions to drive more timely (and more competency-based) school improvement efforts, as well as to ensure students get the help they need, when they need it.



### Why it Matters

- About 1 million students a year leave high school without a diploma.
- 70% of higher education instructors said their students do not comprehend complex reading materials; 66% said students cannot think analytically.
- The current system allows students to progress because of age, not demonstrated ability. This is resulting in gaps – some small, some big, all damaging.
- Students, families and states bear the burden of a time-based education system. College remediation costs \$2.3 billion per year.
- Our graduates do not achieve the level of academic and career skills as those of other countries. This makes them less competitive in a global economy.

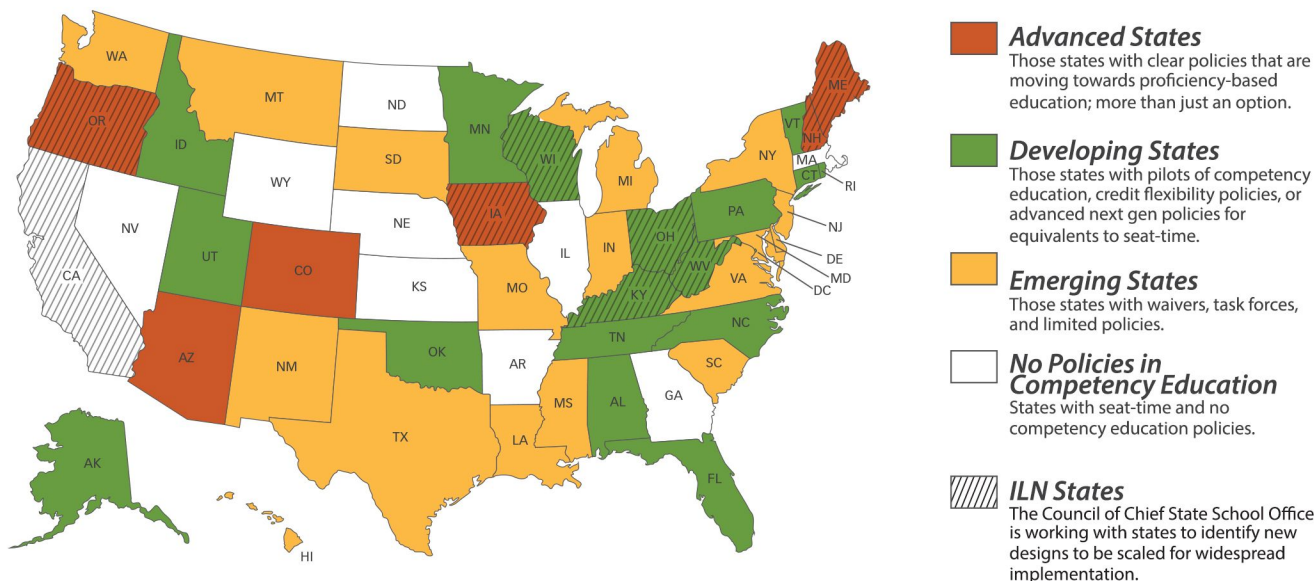


# A Snapshot of Competency Education State Policy Across the US

New Hampshire has embraced competency education because we know it is the only way we can fully prepare our students for an ever-changing world. Competency education allows us to take advantage of resources, in schools and the community, to personalize education so that every student is on a path to college and career readiness.

– New Hampshire Education Commissioner Virginia M. Barry

While states work to ensure all students are prepared for future success in a globally competitive society, emphasizing greater rigor and deeper application of knowledge and skills, they are confronted with the fact that the traditional time-based model of education may not be up to the task. States are now rapidly advancing competency education. Thirty-six states have already revised policies to allow for proficiency-based diplomas, waived seat-time to allow competency-based pathways, created credit flexibility, or initiated a redesign of their education system around student learning.



## Just listen to students and teachers to know why schools, districts and states are turning to competency education:

I feel like I had one of my best years. I got to set my own goals and watched myself grow. I'm getting excited to go to school. Now I want to come every day.

- Maya, fifth-grade student

The number one change is my students are excited about learning. They are taking control of their knowledge and they are keeping track of it. They stay on top of things because they know what is expected and what is coming up next. They ask more questions and are more willing to participate.

- Mrs. Collins, fifth-grade teacher

The teachers have a better relationship with you here. They genuinely care about your success rather than just trying to push you through so you graduate even though you don't understand the subjects you are passing.

- Catherine, tenth-grade student

# What States Are Doing to Advance Competency Education

## Competency-based Diplomas

Arizona, Colorado, Maine and New Hampshire are creating competency-based diplomas.

## Expanding Learning Opportunities

In New Hampshire, students can demonstrate learning and receive credit through community-based learning, such as work experience or service learning.

## Supports and Advancement

Oregon requires districts to provide additional supports to students that are not yet proficient. Iowa has established policies that eighth-grade students can advance to ninth-grade curriculum.

## Systems of Assessments

In Ohio and New York, efforts are under way to create common performance tasks. New Hampshire is creating a comprehensive and balanced set of assessments that emphasize performance and flexibility.

## Accountability and Quality Assurance

Kentucky and New Hampshire are working to re-design their accountability systems to emphasize multiple measures of student learning and postsecondary readiness and meaningful supports that promote improvement and innovation.

## Innovation Zones

Colorado, Connecticut and Kentucky are encouraging districts to improve the learning of students through innovation by providing exemption from administrative regulations and statutory provisions.



With clear learning goals, teachers have flexibility in how they teach



*In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student's learning curve, but it is not an outcome.*

– Proficiency-Based Instruction and Assessment, Oregon Education Roundtable

## About Competency Works and iNACOL

CompetencyWorks provides information and knowledge-sharing about competency education through a website, a blog filled with practitioner knowledge and policy advancements, and a wiki that makes it easy to get examples of materials.

CompetencyWorks provides resources for new innovators and early adopters so they can rapidly learn about lessons learned and different approaches to inform their work. CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative, led by iNACOL in partnership with American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, MetisNet and the National Governors Association.

The mission of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to ensure all students have access to a world-class education and quality blended and online learning opportunities that prepare them for a lifetime of success. iNACOL hosts the iNACOL Blended and Online Learning Symposium, the premier K-12 blended and online learning conference that provides a dedicated strand of workshops and sessions on competency education.

Stay on top of advancements in competency education at [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org) and visit iNACOL at [www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org)

### For More Information on Federal Policy:

- A K-12 Federal Policy Framework for Competency Education: Building Capacity for Systems Change, available at CompetencyWorks: [www.competencyworks.org](http://www.competencyworks.org)
- Competency Education Policy Briefs, available at KnowledgeWorks: [www.knowledgeworks.org](http://www.knowledgeworks.org)
- Accountability for college and career readiness: Developing a new paradigm, available at Education Policy Analysis Archives: [epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1724/1334](http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1724/1334)