

Student-Centered Learning Fact Sheet

Competency-Based Learning, often called mastery-based or proficiency-based learning, is an approach to teaching and learning that bases student advancement on mastery of skills and academic content, rather than age, seat time, or hours on task.

Key Elements:

- Students advance at their own pace once they have demonstrated mastery of key learning targets or competencies.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable learning objectives and are clearly defined and communicated to students.
- Assessment is meaningful and positive, and may involve demonstrating mastery in multiple ways to show thorough understanding of the competency.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize the competencies needed for college and career success, including applying content knowledge and critical skills, such as communication and collaboration.^{1,2,3,4}

Benefits of Competency-Based Learning

- Provides students with clear learning objectives.
- Gives students flexibility and control over their own learning and work pace.
- Allows for the advancement of students who are progressing quickly and additional support for students who are struggling to reach a specific target or achieve a certain competency.
- Increases students' intrinsic motivation and self-regulation skills.
- Ensures that students are building college and career readiness.^{5,6,7}

Learning is Competency-Based

Rhode Island's Secondary School Regulations Support Competency-Based Learning

- Rhode Island was the first state to adopt a proficiency-based diploma. The initial policy establishing a proficiency-based diploma passed in 2003 and included proficiency-based graduation requirements in six content areas, including English language arts, math, social studies, science, technology, and the arts. Performance-based assessments were included as a graduation requirement to ensure that students could apply the skills they had acquired.⁸
- Rhode Island's most recent high school graduation requirements, passed in October 2016, continue to focus on proficiency. Course requirements can be met through traditional courses or through state-approved career and technical programs, expanded learning opportunities, dual enrollment, experiential learning opportunities, and other non-traditional learning experiences that are aligned with state-adopted content-area standards. Course requirements cannot be met without demonstrating proficiency.⁹
- Rhode Island students also must demonstrate proficiency through a performance-based assessment, such as a senior project, portfolio, or exhibition. The scoring criteria for these assessments must be aligned with high-school level state-adopted content standards and applied learning standards, and/or other relevant nationally-recognized content standards.¹⁰

Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for Public Education: 2015-2020

- *Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for Public Education: 2015-2020* states that the Rhode Island Department of Education will "establish a policy and fiscal framework that enables student control over the pace, space, and content of their learning while meeting state and local requirements."¹¹
- The *Strategic Plan* also highlights as a key desired outcome "increased number of schools implementing a school-wide proficiency-based model for instruction and advancement."¹²

Competency-Based Education in New England

- In 2011, New Hampshire became the first state to adopt statewide college and career readiness competency standards. Content-specific competencies were aligned with the *Common Core State Standards*. Starting in 2014, students began receiving course credit based on demonstrated mastery of course-level competencies.¹³
- In 2018, Maine will adopt a new competency-based diploma system. Students will receive credit toward graduation after demonstrating mastery of key competencies through teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, and projects.¹⁴
- New England states support competency-based education in different ways. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have policies in place that advance statewide adoption of competency-based education. In contrast, Connecticut and Rhode Island have flexible state policies but leave decisions about adopting competency-based education up to schools and districts. Massachusetts has no formal legislation in place regarding competency-based education.¹⁵

New England Higher Education Institutions Support Competency-Based Learning

- High school students and their parents may have questions about how colleges will view competency-based transcripts and wonder if attending a school that implements competency-based learning puts a student at a disadvantage in the college admissions process.¹⁶
- In 2016, the New England Board of Higher Education and the New England Secondary School Consortium convened a meeting of admissions leaders from colleges and universities across New England to address these concerns.¹⁷
- Since then, 67 colleges and universities across New England, including all three public higher education institutions in Rhode Island, have signed onto a statement of support for proficiency-based education stating that students with proficiency-based grades and transcripts will not be disadvantaged during the admissions process.¹⁸

Recommendations

- Conduct a public awareness campaign to promote understanding of and support for competency-based education among educators, policymakers, students, and parents.
- Frame the shift to competency-based education in the context of college and career readiness.
- Review state policies to identify which existing policies support and which hinder the wider adoption of competency-based education.
- Consider authorizing and funding competency-based pilot programs in select districts or schools to foster innovation and to better identify policy barriers and eliminate them.

References

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