

Student-Centered Learning Spotlight

Learning is Competency-Based: Spotlight on Cumberland High School

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}

Cumberland High School by the Numbers

1,310

students in grades 9-12

23%

low-income

96%

of students graduate in 4 years

Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016-2017 school year and Class of 2016.

A Principal's Perspective: Leadership Matters

- Alan Tenreiro, who was named National Principal of the Year in 2016, served as Principal of Cumberland High School from 2012 to 2017. During his tenure at Cumberland High School, Tenreiro made student-centered learning, and particularly proficiency-based learning, a priority. According to Tenreiro, "Principals are the center of policy, practice, and public will." In order to galvanize the school community to move toward a proficiency-based system, "leadership matters."
- Tenreiro emphasizes, "A proficiency-based system is just as hard to maintain as it is to create. It requires constant cultivation, conversation, and checking for consistency with procedures."
- Cumberland High School uses accountability tools to ensure that teachers are adopting proficiency-based learning and grading in their classrooms. Teachers participate in Iwalk Classroom Observations to collect data on best practices, and some teachers have Lighthouse Classrooms that serve as model learning spaces. Tenreiro believes that these types of strategies encourage accountability outside of the teacher evaluation system.

Focus on Grading and Reporting

According to Tenreiro, a key step in transitioning to a proficiency-based system is focusing on grading and reporting. "Until you make that change where adults have to report out in a new way you don't get the watershed moment in people's brains," he reflects.

Some examples of how Cumberland High School shifted its grading and reporting include:

- All courses are aligned to rigorous measurement standards for graduation. (There are four to six measurement standards for each content area.)
- Students have multiple ways to meet standards and multiple opportunities for revision if they make valid and genuine attempts.
- Teachers use consistent and common scoring guides and school-wide rubrics.
- Grading is based on formative and summative assessments, and teachers make judgments based on how well the students perform authentic skills.
- Students receive feedback on their Learner Qualities, including attitude and mindset, quality producer, respectful citizen, self-directed learner, and collaborative work.

It Takes the Entire School Community

In Tenreiro's experience, it takes the entire school community to make the shift to competency-based learning.

- **School Committees** need to adopt proficiency-based graduation requirements and take advantage of state policies that permit competency-based learning.
- **Teachers** need to play a leadership role in school-wide professional development and be given the autonomy to create learning experiences that enable students to meet learning standards.
- **Students** need to learn how to take charge of their own learning.
- **Parents** need to be educated about proficiency-based education so they can serve as advocates and supporters.

A Teacher's Perspective: Professional Development is Key

Melissa Kusinitz is an English Content Leader and Writing Center Director at Cumberland High School. She describes the process of becoming a proficiency-based school as "amazing" and "intense." She feels that since competency-based learning was introduced morale has improved, and teachers are working to target students who feel disconnected and trying to offer as many options and opportunities as possible.

In order to get everyone on board with new teaching strategies, the school provides extensive professional development opportunities.

- The principal provides resources and links to articles about personalized and proficiency-based learning.
- Teachers discuss strategies during Common Planning time and have an online page that links to professional development resources.
- Professional development opportunities also are offered outside of school and have included Fuse RI, a writing conference at the University of Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Learning Champions project, a collaborative effort of the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Great Schools Partnership.

Acknowledgements

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References

¹ The Nellie Mae Education Foundation. (n.d.). *Learning is competency-based*. Retrieved October 26, 2016, from www.nmefoundation.org

² Haynes, E. et al. (2016). *Looking under the hood of competency-based education: The relationship between competency-based education practices and students' learning skills, behaviors, and dispositions*. Quincy, MA: Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

³ Phillips K. & Schneider, C. (2016). *Policy, pilots and the path to competency-based education: A tale of three states*. Tallahassee, FL: Foundation for Excellence in Education.

⁴ Sturgis, C. (2016). *Reaching the tipping point: Insights on advancing competency education in New England*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

A Student's Perspective: What Success Looks Like

Eleventh grader Hannah Ballou was one of the students involved in the creation and establishment of Cumberland High School's Writing Center, a writing resource center that is staffed by student volunteer tutors. She describes this experience as a "transformative process" and the course that teacher, Melissa Kusinitz, developed around the creation of the Writing Center as "the most useful and interesting course I have taken in my high school career."

- In this writing course, students learned about metacognition, multiple learning styles, and how to create an effective tutoring session. They visited the Rhode Island College Writing Center, watched videos, read articles about pedagogical theory, and practiced their own teaching skills.
- In Kusinitz's writing course, students received rubrics at the beginning of the class that demonstrated what success would look like. All course tasks were aligned to the Cumberland High School Measurement Standards. Ballou says that the use of rubrics in classes like this one allow her to break down large assignments into manageable goals. She appreciates how rubrics allow her to review one standard at a time and make sure she is working toward these goals.

Next Steps

- Tenreiro recognizes that Cumberland High School is early on its journey to becoming a competency-based school. Since the school started out as a traditional high school with credit and time-based learning, change takes time. "You have to move a system productively, you can't disturb it so much that you hit a wall," Tenreiro reflects.
- Tenreiro, who recently assumed a new role as President of Mount Saint Charles Academy, hopes that Cumberland High School will continue to make progress in becoming a competency-based school that offers rigorous, authentic learning experiences focused on achieving competencies that are not bound by traditional constructs, such as seat time and class periods.



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