



LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR COMPETENCY EDUCATION:

A Policy Guide for the Next Generation Educator Workforce

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About KnowledgeWorks KnowledgeWorks.

KnowledgeWorks is a social enterprise focused on ensuring that every student experiences meaningful personalized learning that allows him or her to thrive in college, career and civic life. By offering a portfolio of innovative education approaches and advancing aligned policies, KnowledgeWorks seeks to activate and develop the capacity of communities and educators to build and sustain vibrant learning ecosystems that allow each student to thrive. Our portfolio includes EDWorks and StriveTogether. www.knowledgeworks.org

About iNACOL



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 is a non-profit organization focused on research; developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access; developing quality standards for emerging learning models using online, blended, and competency-based education; and supporting the ongoing professional development of classroom, school, district and state leaders for new learning models. www.inacol.org.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing numbers of states and districts are embracing competency education, focusing on student mastery of critical competencies instead of seat-time requirements that communicate little about the quality of learning. This approach provides students with highly personalized learning pathways to ensure mastery of the academic knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in college and careers. While competency education continues to spread to schools across the country, the current system is not structured to provide educators with the preparation and training required to excel in these new environments. Our nation's educator preparation and development systems must keep pace, aligning to create a profession that benefits from the same level of personalization that defines competency-based schools.

What is Competency Education?

With an increasing number of communities interested in competency education, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) brought together educators, instructional leaders, and education advocates in 2011 to develop the following working definition for competency education.

- Students advance upon mastery, not seat time.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions. (Patrick & Sturgis, 2013)

This approach ensures every student graduates with the knowledge and skills he or she needs to be successful. This is in contrast to traditional systems which advance students based on seat time, often resulting in significant gaps in learning. Districts and schools interested in adopting competency-based models must work to integrate all five elements of this definition into their practice. This holistic approach is critical to high quality implementation.

Building a Competency-Based Workforce

A highly trained and engaged educator workforce will be the single most important driver of a successful competency education system. As states and districts consider this approach, they must plan to engage and adequately prepare their workforce. Educators will take on new roles as they work individually and collectively to design customized pathways to graduation for every student. Many will require new skills to adapt instruction for students with varying levels of competency and interests. This will require significant changes to pre-service preparation, certification, professional development, and evaluation programs to ensure educators have the support and resources to make this transition. Federal and state policymakers can play a critical role in this transformation, working to align policies and programs that would make it possible to build an education workforce with the expertise to ensure all students master competencies aligned to standards by graduation.

What New Skills Will Educators Need?

1. Provide timely, differentiated support to students based on individual learning needs, moving each student along an individual learning trajectory at a sufficient pace to achieve college and career readiness in time for graduation.
2. Align instruction to the explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives.
3. Use formative assessments to regularly assess student progress and readiness to demonstrate mastery on a summative assessment.
4. Develop and implement performance-based formative and summative assessments with high validity and reliability.
5. Use data on individual student learning in a timely, ongoing manner to inform instruction and support student progress to mastery.
6. Support student development of lifelong learning skills and social and emotional competencies.
7. Design and manage personalized instruction, using technology, including blended or online learning, to expand learning opportunities so students can progress to mastery along individual trajectories.

A transformation of the education workforce will require a new vision for how we train and prepare our teachers and leaders aligned to student-centered learning. The nation's current system divides "teacher and leader" programs into four siloed categories: pre-service preparation, certification, professional development, and evaluation. Instead of four isolated processes, a competency-based system would provide a seamless continuum in which aspiring educators build and master instructional competencies, and upon entering the profession, access customized professional development and evaluation opportunities to ensure continuous improvement of their careers. The graphic below contrasts the ways the traditional system and a competency-based system build and sustain an effective educator workforce.

THE SHIFT TO A NEXT GENERATION EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

TRADITIONAL

(Siloed)

PRE-SERVICE PREPARATION

Teaching and leadership degrees are awarded based on the number of credit hours completed.

STATE CREDENTIALS

Teachers can obtain state credentials to teach specific subject and grade-level positions often based on mastery of aligned subject matter tests.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development programs require teachers and leaders to participate in one-time development activities that are often one-size-fits-all and time-based.

EDUCATOR EVALUATION

Educator evaluation systems determine individual teacher and leader performance based on annual, time-based measures. Information on performance informs district human capital decisions such as compensation and tenure.

COMPETENCY

(A Seamless Continuum)

PRE-SERVICE PREPARATION

Teaching and leadership degrees are awarded after candidates build a portfolio of multiple forms of evidence that demonstrate mastery of rigorous academic and clinical competencies aligned to practice expectations.

EDUCATOR EVALUATION

The primary purpose of educator evaluation systems is to improve practice and functionalize educator supports through real-time feedback on individual and collaborative educator performance. This seamlessly aligns with customized professional development opportunities to ensure educators continuously improve their practice.

STATE CREDENTIALS

Educators can obtain state credentials that reflect changing teaching roles, are aligned to learning progressions, and may enable educators to teach integrated or multiple subject areas. Credentials are obtained only upon demonstrated mastery of clinical teaching competencies and are directly aligned to pre-service programs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development programs are highly personalized, ongoing, and job embedded. They address the individual needs of educators and are aligned to a set of rigorous, practice-aligned competencies that help educators advance along individualized career pathways. These programs build on pre-service and credentialing expectations.



Policy Landscape

The two federal laws governing the preparation, development, and evaluation of the nation's education workforce – the Higher Education Act (HEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – expired in 2013 and 2006 respectively. Despite ongoing conversations to reauthorize both statutes, Congress has yet to reach agreement on a new vision for education reform. Most policy proposals would tweak the traditional system, rather than challenge its underlying assumptions. Policymakers should pay attention to emerging innovations in K-12 learning, such as competency education, and adopt a new policy framework that will prepare educators to succeed in these environments. The nation cannot scale these highly personalized new models of learning without a workforce that is prepared to provide the quality and rigor critically necessary for a system in transition. This transition must begin with educators so they have the personalized supports necessary to build and implement rigorous competency-based instructional models, administer appropriate, real-time performance assessments, and provide all students with customized supports to ensure they are challenged and on track to graduation.

About this Paper

This paper provides a vision and set of policy recommendations to help federal, state, and local leaders develop the workforce necessary to support teaching and learning in a competency-based K-12 education system. Part One, Pre-service and Credentialing for K-12 Competency-Based Learning Environments, provides policymakers with a framework and set of actions to build educator competency, focusing on the alignment of pre-service preparation and credentialing programs with K-12 competency-based learning environments. Part Two, Continuous Improvement of Instruction: Professional Development and Evaluation, reveals strategies for integrating and strengthening professional development and evaluation systems to ensure educators have the personalized and ongoing support needed to excel in competency-based environments. Both sections also include an analysis of current policy barriers and a case study of an early adopter that has taken bold steps to integrate competency-based principles into the preparation and continuous improvement of the educator workforce. We hope this paper advances the national dialogue about education reform, inspiring policymakers to implement a new vision for teaching and leading that elevates the rigor and performance of our education system. We also hope that this conversation refocuses the national dialogue in favor of policies that support teachers and leaders so they are empowered to focus on what matters most for student learning.

A Note about Terminology

The term 'educator' used throughout this paper refers to teachers, leaders, and other instructional staff. As educator roles change and career pathways evolve, it will become increasingly important to ensure that all instructional professionals in the K-12 system have the skills and supports to excel in their profession.

Part One

PRE-SERVICE AND CREDENTIALING FOR K-12 COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Transformation of the education workforce must begin with development of educator standards and competencies that align to a state's academic standards and competencies, and which reflect the skills and professional responsibilities educators will need as they transition to competency-based instruction. States should engage a wide range of stakeholders in this conversation, including representatives from pre-service preparation programs and state educational agencies, as well as educators from the K-12 system.

States should align pre-service preparation programs with these standards and aligned competencies to ensure candidates enter the system with the skills to help students succeed. These programs should adopt competency-based models, ensuring education professionals gain instructional competencies based on mastery, not seat time. Federal and state governments should also realign K-12 and higher education policies so pre-service programs can respond to the demands of next generation learning models.

States will also need to revisit credentialing policies to ensure they align with the new instructional competencies. As states consider changes to their education systems, they should provide districts with flexibility to recruit educators for new roles. Current policy barriers such as seat-time requirements for educator preparation programs, restrictions on reciprocity of teacher credentials, or position classifications based on grade and content, may create unnecessary roadblocks for districts transitioning to competency-based instruction. States should align credentialing policies to reflect the changing demands of competency-based models. Federal policies should encourage and reward states that have taken these steps to increase flexibility and innovation at the classroom level.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

A next generation education system will align pre-service and credentialing programs to ensure educators can succeed in competency-based learning environments through the following:

- Pre-service programs and credentialing requirements should align to instructional competencies that will ensure educators have the knowledge and skills to help all students excel in a competency-based system.
- Accreditation of teacher preparation programs should be aligned to instructional competencies which educator candidates earn based on mastery, not seat time.
- Educator preparation programs should provide candidates with multiple pathways to completion, which ensure mastery of the full-range of instructional competencies.
- Educator candidates should have the opportunity to follow multiple pathways to attaining competency-based credentials and licensure.

These initial steps will help states and districts establish a strong foundation for the transition to competency education. Quality implementation will depend on the nation's ability to establish a workforce with the instructional competencies necessary to ensure students graduate with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and careers.

What are the Policy Barriers?

The disconnect between K-12 and higher education policies complicates alignment of pre-service and K-12 programs. Administrative siloes make it challenging to incent higher education systems to align with needs and cooperate with the K-12 system on educator preparation. While the federal government can use grants to systemically influence the actions of K-12 school districts, higher education is largely financed through a consumer-driven system of student grants, loans, and tuition. States and state agencies oversee and direct higher education. Independent entities in states typically oversee credentialing and pre-service training.

There is little information regarding the extent to which pre-service preparation programs prepare educators for competency-based environments. Pre-service programs provide stakeholders with little to no information regarding their graduates' readiness to teach in a competency-based system. There are few incentives in federal or state policy to report these indicators.¹ Consequently, most educator preparation programs continue to prepare teachers for traditional classroom environments.

A shortage exists of leadership preparation programs that prepare principals to be competency-based instructional leaders who are focused on each student's growth and achievement. Leadership development must evolve to include the knowledge, skills, and competencies to understand how new learning models that are student centered and competency-based work, communicate, and lead innovation. A competency-based system will demand instructional leaders who are trained to lead innovative new models, empower educators, and provide the supports and interventions necessary for every student to master competencies. Leaders must be able to lead in a variety of personalized learning environments - including blended and online learning, and alternate pathways - and to use data to serve the needs of every student, including students with disabilities and English language learners.

Educator certification and licensure requirements make it difficult to build a competency-based workforce. Educator credentialing requirements currently align to traditional roles and skills that do not reflect the reality of a dynamic competency-based learning system. Many states also have burdensome reciprocity policies that make it difficult for out-of-state teachers to gain approval from another state to deliver online instruction. States will need to work together with institutions of higher education, teacher preparation programs, and the K-12 system to align credentialing with the demands of a competency-based system.

¹For example: The requirements for states in Title II of the Higher Education Act is to monitor and report on the quality of teacher preparation programs, including information on state certification and licensure policies as well as passage rates on state certification or licensure assessments.



POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR PRE-SERVICE AND CREDENTIALING



What Are The Current Opportunities for States?

- Develop space for innovation through waiver policies and pilots to incentivize practices that prepare educators and leaders to excel in competency-based environments.
- Change teacher and leadership preparation program accreditation requirements to recognize programs that are competency—not seat time—based.
- Encourage teacher and leader preparation programs to collaborate with K-12 systems to define instructional competencies and align preparation around mastery of those competencies. Instructional competencies should include an emphasis on data-driven instruction and serving students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Change teacher and leader preparation program accreditation requirements to ensure programs are competency—not seat time—based.
- Support educator preparation programs that provide training and residency opportunities for candidates interested in leading or teaching across diverse learning environments, including online courses, community-based settings (e.g., internships, apprenticeships), and credit recovery programs for over-age under-credited students. Multiple pathways ensure the availability of high quality personalized learning trajectories.
- Revisit their teacher credentialing policies to reflect the emergence of new teacher roles in competency environments. States can also provide a process for interim certification and licensure waivers to districts to ensure better alignment with competency-based approaches to instruction.



What Federal Policies Could Enable Change?

- Establish a Presidential commission to develop recommendations for the alignment of federal higher education and K-12 policies focused on educator preparation and development.
- Provide competitive federal grant incentives for teacher and leader preparation programs to align curricula and completion requirements with expectations of a competency education system, including data-driven instruction and serving students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Modernize reporting requirements for educator preparation programs to enable and emphasize readiness to teach in competency-based environments including measures that demonstrate mastery of instructional competencies, moving away from seat time.
- Encourage (through funding and regulation) the creation and expansion of student-centric leadership programs that prepare instructional leaders to teach in competency-based environments.
- Provide competitive federal grant incentives for states to modernize their certification and licensure policies to support demand for competency-based instruction.

Early Adopter Case Study:

Competency-Based Pre-Service Preparation at Western Governors University Teachers College

At Western Governors University (WGU)—a non-profit university where students take all courses online—pre-service teacher preparation is entirely competency-based. WGU's Teachers College is different from traditional institutions of teacher preparation because the curriculum and clinical experience are entirely competency-based.

Students earn credit towards their degree (which leads to a teaching or principalship credential) based on demonstrated competency rather than seat time. In order to earn a teaching credential, students are observed teaching in the classroom a minimum of five times. Every student is evaluated using a detailed observation rubric that clearly defines the teaching competencies and what they must demonstrate to ensure mastery.

Only students who master all clinical competencies in every observation can attain licensure through WGU. They must also demonstrate competency on all course assessments, which assess for groups of competencies, at a B grade or better.

In addition to being competency-based in itself, the WGU curriculum prepares teachers and leaders for a variety of learning environments—from traditional classroom settings, to blended, competency-based learning models—providing educator candidates with skills to personalize instruction and identify supports for each student. According to Phil Schmidt, Dean of the WGU Teachers College, "We don't present competency-based pedagogy as something separate—it's simply what they experience. In the clinical setting, what is most normal to them is to create a piece of curriculum which contains a series of competencies that are aligned to the critical standards."

In 2014, WGU Teachers College was the top ranked school for secondary school teacher preparation in the Teacher Prep Review published by the National Council on Teacher Quality with US News & World Report. This distinction shows that competency-based approaches—for both pre-service educators and the K-12 students they will teach—are not only increasing in popularity but have the potential to transform teaching and learning.

Questions for Further Discussion

- How could Federal and state governments encourage educator preparation programs, in collaboration with K-12 systems, to define and align programs around instructional competencies to ensure educators have the skills needed to customize instruction for every student, including students with disabilities and English language learners?
- How could Federal policies on higher education and K-12 better align to support the creation of a competency-based educator workforce?
- How could Federal and state policies encourage more educators and instructional leaders to pursue competency-based pathways?
- What types of flexibility are necessary in state credentialing policies to account for evolving educator roles? How can the federal government encourage states to adopt these flexibilities?
- Which initiatives from the field can policymakers look to as a platform to advance alignment of pre-service and credentialing to competency education in K-12?



Part Two

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF INSTRUCTION: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Federal and state governments should work together to craft policies that provide new and veteran educators with ongoing support to improve their practice. These policies should evolve from one-size-fits all professional development programs and annual evaluation practices to an emphasis on the continuous improvement of instruction. Educators deserve the same level of personalized and high-quality support as students receive in a competency-based system.

This transformation should begin with a significant overhaul of state professional development systems to be ongoing, job-embedded, and continuously evaluated and enhanced through data, supports and interventions. Educators should have their own learning pathways focused on deeper mastery of instructional competencies and professional responsibilities.

Educator evaluation should support a system that thrives on continuous improvement of instruction and collaboration with multiple measures and forms of evidence. Many states have begun to reform their evaluation systems as a result of federal incentive programs and regulations that require greater emphasis on teacher and principal effectiveness measured in part by student learning gains. While some of these changes show promise, many are still grounded in a time-based rather than a student-centered approach.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Policies at the federal and state level will support an integrated system of competency-based professional development and evaluation that enables continuous improvement of teaching and learning. This system would:

- Align to instructional competencies and professional responsibilities.
- Provide formative and summative feedback to customize career paths.
- Measure deeper mastery of instructional competencies and professional responsibilities, and align supports so that educators can improve instruction in real time.
- Incorporate multiple sources of evidence on summative evaluations including progression toward deeper mastery of instructional competencies and their impact, as a whole, on student learning.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of instructional strategies for student learning trajectories.
- Permit educators to demonstrate mastery of instructional competencies at different times and in different ways, with rigor.
- Provide information regarding the return on investment of instructional strategies so stakeholders can invest in cost-effective strategies that maximize student learning.
- Encourage educator collaboration through professional learning communities.

States should design evaluation systems that place far greater emphasis on educator growth and mastery of instructional competencies. These systems should include a robust formative component so educators receive information in real time regarding their instructional impact and have the opportunity to engage in customized professional development opportunities to build their expertise. These systems must also reflect the collaborative environments of competency-based classrooms by incorporating educator effectiveness policies that measure their impact, as a whole, on student learning.

A cohesive professional development and evaluation system will help states and districts establish a mature educator workforce to sustain the transition to competency education. Federal and state policymakers would do well to engage and seek the buy-in of educators in the development of these systems to ensure they meet educator needs.

What are the Policy Barriers?

State professional development policies are tied to seat time, not mastery. Most states require a certain number of continuing education hours to maintain a teaching certificate and do not focus on deeper mastery of instructional competencies.

State professional development systems are not customized, data driven, or aligned to evaluation system. Although federal and state governments spend significant resources on professional development activities, most of these activities are not designed to maximize continuous improvement of instruction. They rarely provide individualized support and they rarely provide real time feedback on performance so educators can make adjustments throughout the school year to maximize student learning gains.

Federal teacher effectiveness requirements may discourage educator collaboration. The Race to the Top program established new requirements for teacher evaluation systems that tie teacher effectiveness in part to student growth on state assessments. This calculation requires districts and schools to establish a teacher of record for each student and subject in order to attribute data on student learning gains. In competency-based settings, teams of educators work collaboratively to help students advance through personalized learning pathways; a siloed approach to teacher evaluation requiring one teacher of record per subject or student is incompatible with competency education.

Federal incentive programs and regulations tie teacher and principal evaluation systems to summative, end of year assessments. By tying teacher and principal evaluation systems to student performance on annual tests, federal initiatives like Race to the Top and the ESEA flexibility waivers provide states and districts with little flexibility to implement a competency-based system that emphasizes mastery of standards and aligned competencies over seat time. Competency-based evaluation systems would emphasize multiple measures and portfolios of evidence tied to practice. They would also examine continuous improvement of educator and student performance throughout the year instead of relying on an annual evaluation that does not provide real-time feedback to inform practice.

POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATOR EVALUATION




What Are The Current Opportunities for States?

- Take advantage of the flexibility in ESEA Title II to design professional development opportunities that support a continuous improvement model, using multiple forms of evidence to ensure educators have the support they need to select appropriate pedagogy, curricula, supports, and interventions. Professional development programs should be job-embedded and ongoing, rather than classroom-based.
- Work with districts to identify teacher and principal evaluation measures that reflect educator mastery in competency-based models. States and districts should integrate these measures into evaluation systems and align with professional development (and pre-service) programs to ensure immediate feedback and support.
- Ensure that their professional development system is robust, relevant and built around personalized professional learning pathways focused on deeper mastery of instructional competencies and professional responsibilities.



What Federal Policies Could Enable Change?

- Incent states and districts to repurpose their ESEA Title II funds to design a professional development system that aligns to statewide instructional competencies and provides educators with real time feedback to ensure continuous improvement of instruction to serve the needs of all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Establish a pilot program that enables states and/or districts to develop educator and principal evaluation systems aligned to competency-based systems that emphasize collaborative strategies to improve student performance, growth, and pace. These systems would provide educators with formative and summative feedback on the impact of instructional strategies so educators can make the necessary adjustments in real time to ensure all students are on pace to graduation.
- Reform the Federal Teacher and Leader Incentive Program to encourage programs that identify classroom-based and non-classroom based professional competencies for teachers and principals, track progress toward mastery of those competencies, and encourage collaboration on instructional practice to ensure all students are on pace to graduation.
- Provide incentives for states and districts to align longitudinal data systems with competency-based models to help stakeholders better evaluate the impact of instruction on student learning pace and gains.



Early Adopter Case Study: New Hampshire's Approach to Teacher Evaluation

In June 2013, the U.S. Department of Education approved New Hampshire's proposal for waiver flexibility under the No Child Left Behind Act. The proposal includes a framework for a new teacher evaluation system that balances individual teacher effectiveness with educator collaboration to support the state and local educational agencies' transition to a competency-based system.

New Hampshire's teacher evaluation system will base twenty percent of a Title I educator's evaluation score on evidence from student growth. This calculation will include Student Learning Objectives for all educators as well as Student Growth Percentiles for educators in tested subjects and grades. The state system will permit districts to calculate student growth as either an individual measure or a "shared attribution" measure depending on the district's defined theory of improvement. The waiver proposal includes the following example to explain shared attribution: "If the school's theory of improvement indicates that teachers collaborate and share students back and forth in grade level teams, then it makes sense to share attribution for student learning among all members of that team."

The inclusion of shared attribution reflects New Hampshire's belief that sharing results among teachers promotes collaboration and ultimately improves student achievement. As New Hampshire's waiver application states, "trying to disentangle the contributions of individual educators to student learning is almost impossible and perhaps nonsensical."

Questions for Further Discussion

- How could states redesign teacher and leader professional development programs to support competency education?
- What types of supports would states and districts need to develop evaluation systems that support high quality instruction in a competency-based model while driving deeper mastery of instructional competencies and educator collaboration?
- What metrics and priorities should the federal government incorporate across programs with professional development and evaluation components to support high-quality competency-based instruction?
- How can states incorporate changing teaching roles into professional development and evaluation systems to support competency education?

Conclusion

High quality and effective educators are the most important factor in the success of students. The success and sustainability of education reforms requires educator buy-in and capacity.

In the shift towards competency education in K-12 schools, changes to accountability, assessment, data, research, and funding systems will create many of the conditions necessary for lasting improvements. However, policymakers at the federal and state levels must ensure that integrated systems of support—from pre-service through credentialing, professional development, and evaluation—are in place to engage and adequately prepare the educator workforce. Our educators deserve personalized pathways to support and effectively lead the transformation of the K-12 system to competency education.