# iNACOL Issue Brief:
# State Policy & K-12 Competency-Based Education

WRITTEN BY:

Dale Frost, iNACOL

Maria Worthen, iNACOL

## Issue

The traditional, time-based K-12 education system is ill-equipped to prepare all students for success. Even with high school graduation rates at an all-time high (82%), graduates are entering college with 37% needing remediation,[1] and only 59% of college undergraduates succeed in attaining a degree.[2]

Competency-based education is a next generation learning model that focuses on all students achieving mastery, preparing them for success in college, careers and civic life. State leaders can support policy for K-12 competency-based education to help all students succeed.

## Background

To prepare all students for success in the future economy, K-12 education systems need to transform. Competency-based education systems move away from the traditional seat-time-based, one-size-fits-all model of schooling; instead, students advance upon demonstrated mastery and are empowered with the supports they need to succeed. Competency-based education models will ensure students are ready for a 21st century economy and can succeed in college, careers and civic life.

What can policymakers do to encourage a shift to K-12 competency education? No matter where a state is starting from, there are different entry points policymakers can take to enable and support competency-based systems.

This iNACOL Issue Brief provides an overview of competency-based education, and provides policy recommendations and resources for policymakers who are ready to take the next step.

1    The Nation's Report Card (2015). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Retrieved from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/.
2    Fast Facts – College Graduation. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40.

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

In 2011, one hundred innovators in the field came together where they developed a working definition of high-quality, competency-based education with the following five elements:

**1** **Students advance upon demonstrated mastery**—By advancing upon demonstrated mastery rather than on seat time, students are more engaged and motivated, and educators can direct their efforts to where students need the most help.

**2** **Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students**—With clear, transparent learning objectives, students have greater ownership over their education.

**3** **Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs**— Students receive the supports and flexibility they need, when they need them, to learn, thrive and master the competencies they will need to succeed.

**4** **Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students**—New systems of assessments give students real-time information on their progress and provide the opportunity to show evidence of higher order skills, whenever they are ready, rather than at set points in time during the school year.

**5** **Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions**— Personalized, competency-based learning models meet each student where they are to build the knowledge, skills and abilities they will need to succeed in postsecondary education, in an ever-changing workplace and in civic life.

### DEFINITIONS

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**Student-Centered Learning**
The four key principles of Student-Centered Learning:

» Learning is personalized.
» Learning is competency-based.
» Learning takes place anytime, anywhere.
» Students have agency and ownership over their learning.[3]

**Personalized Learning**
Tailoring learning for each student's strengths, needs and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest.

3    Student-Centered Learning. Jobs for the Future. Retrieved from http://www.jff.org/initiatives/students-center.

## HOW IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION DIFFERENT FROM THE TRADITIONAL K-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Competency-based education models will ensure students are ready for a 21$^{st}$ century economy and can succeed in college, careers and civic life. Competency-based learning requires several fundamental shifts in systems, structures and assumptions rooted in the traditional model of education.

These include:

**The traditional model of education is time-based.** Schools batch students by age, and move them through the same content and courses at the same pace. Competency-based education is based on learning: students must demonstrate mastery of learning, with time-bound targets.

**There is a high variability in how teachers determine proficiency in traditional settings.** Competency-based systems build educator capacity to make judgments of student mastery to the same high standards and calibrated for consistency with other teachers.

**The traditional system is organized to efficiently deliver curriculum.** Competency-based education is organized to personalize learning.

**Traditional systems depend on extrinsic motivation.** Competency education fosters intrinsic motivation by activating student agency and providing multiple pathways for learning to the same high standards.

**The traditional system is built on an institutional, fixed mindset**, with direct instruction to a classroom of students, moving too fast (or too slow) for many learners. In contrast, a competency-based education system is built upon a growth mindset with a belief that all children can learn.
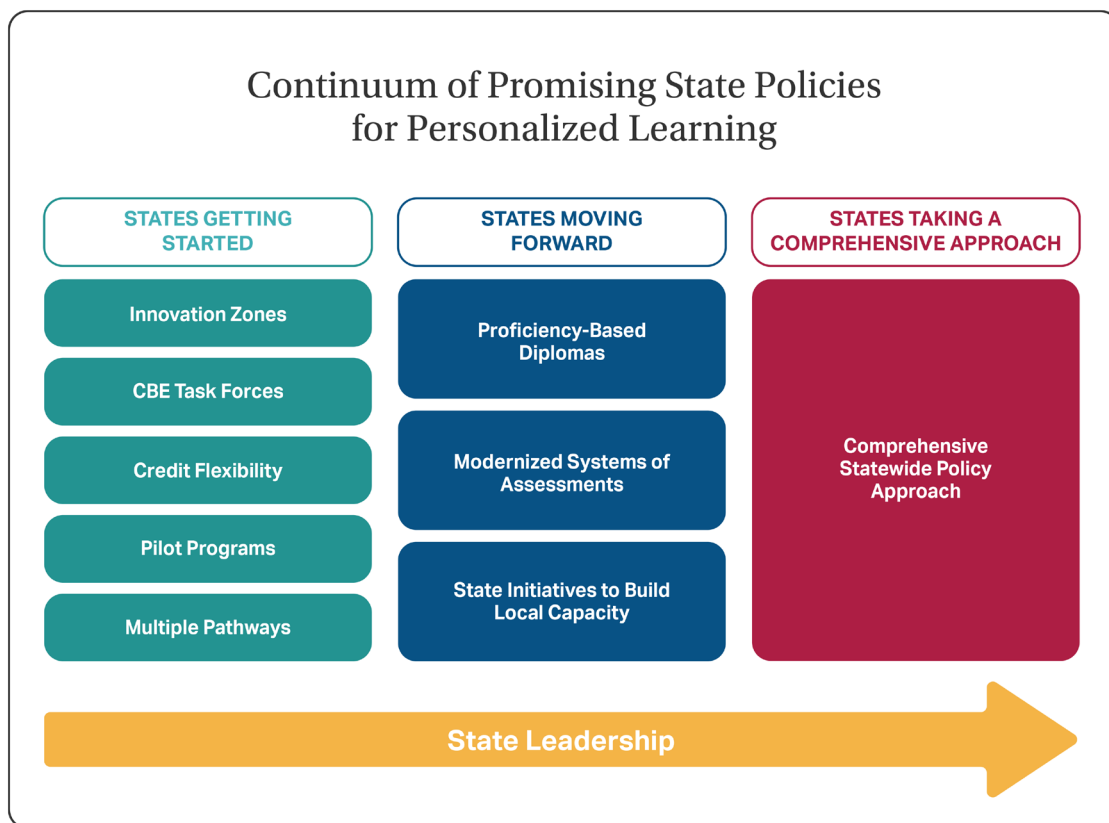
**In traditional systems, students are ranked and sorted based on variable outcomes, creating "winners" and "losers" and perpetuating patterns of inequality in society.** Competency-based education meets students where they are to ensure that each one can be successful to the same high college- and career-ready standards.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS TO BUILD COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEMS

Fully-developed, student-centered systems require significant shifts in policy and practice. They require the right balance of policies that create space for innovation and those that ensure equity with adequate supports and quality guardrails. No matter where a state is starting from, there are various entry points along a continuum for policymakers to support and build competency-based, K-12 education systems in their states.

States that do not yet have any enabling policies in place may wish to take incremental steps to create space for new learning models, while a state that already has made some progress may contemplate more comprehensive steps toward transformation. The graphic below summarizes the different entry points where policymakers can catalyze transformation of K-12 education in their state, with varying levels of state leadership:

## Continuum of Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning

| STATES GETTING STARTED | STATES MOVING FORWARD | STATES TAKING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH |
|---|---|---|
| Innovation Zones | Proficiency-Based Diplomas | Comprehensive Statewide Policy Approach |
| CBE Task Forces | Modernized Systems of Assessments | |
| Credit Flexibility | | |
| Pilot Programs | State Initiatives to Build Local Capacity | |
| Multiple Pathways | | |

**State Leadership** →

## STATES GETTING STARTED: CREATING SPACE FOR COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEMS

For states getting started, *competency-based education task forces* can help to identify policy barriers, advance the concept of competency education in the state and generate a feedback loop to state policymakers.

*Credit flexibility policies* can allow districts and schools to move away from seat time and to award credit for graduation based on demonstrated mastery.

*Innovation zones* provide pioneering school districts with flexibility from state policies and requirements in order to implement personalized, competency-based learning models.

*Pilot programs* support the examination of which strategies work in practice and lead to sharing and scaling of promising practices in other localities.

Policies that allow for *multiple pathways* to college and career readiness create opportunities for students to pursue their interests and gain real-world skills and experiences. These pathways could include: expanded learning opportunities, apprenticeships, community service, internships, independent study, online courses, community arts programs, private instruction, and career and technical and college-level coursework.

## STATES MOVING FORWARD: STATE-LED STRATEGIES TO ACCELERATE SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

For states moving toward broader systems change, policymakers could establish policies on *proficiency-based diplomas*, which require students to demonstrate mastery of academic content standards before graduating. While not inherently competency-based (particularly if implemented as solely "credit by exam"), proficiency-based diplomas can encourage the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning by stipulating that graduation decisions be based on students demonstrating mastery of college- and career-ready standards, rather than on seat-time credits.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides additional space for states to redesign their systems of assessments to better support student-centered learning. Balanced, *innovative systems of assessments* can empower educators, students and other stakeholders with multiple forms of evidence and timely feedback on student growth, readiness, depth of learning and mastery of competencies. In competency-based education, assessment is a positive experience for students because it is part of the learning process. Innovative systems of assessments incorporate formative, interim and summative measures and forms of evidence of student work.

ESSA allows for states to consider *innovative assessment pilots* with a smaller number of districts to help support competency-based education. State leaders could partner with districts and schools participating in the pilot that are beginning to lead the way to competency-based learning.

ESSA also gives states the space to *rethink accountability* through multiple measures, continuous improvement and reciprocal accountability. States have the opportunity to move from top-down accountability models that base high-stakes decisions on a single indicator of grade-level proficiency, to next generation accountability models that drive toward student mastery of a more meaningful definition of student success aligned to the knowledge and skills students truly need to succeed in college, career and civic society.

As states begin to implement their ESSA plans, they may go back to the U.S. Department of Education for permission to *amend their state plans*. States can use the amendment process to continuously improve state systems of assessments and accountability to better meet the goals of equitable education systems that help all students succeed.

### COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE POLICY APPROACH: COHERENCE ACROSS SYSTEMS

Finally, states could take a comprehensive statewide policy approach with a combination of the aforementioned policies to build coherent, aligned systems built on shared goals for all students to succeed and thrive in college, career, and civic life with high-quality personalized, competency-based models and supports.

For example, Vermont has pursued a *comprehensive statewide policy approach* with proficiency-based graduation requirements, personalized learning plans, systems of assessments for learning, accountability for continuous improvement, flexible pathways and educator and school leader development initiatives. All of these components work together in a coherent manner to improve educational options and results for students.

## Summary Recommendations

» Create policies to enable innovation zones and pilot programs to support districts or schools implementing competency-based systems.

» Host a Competency-Based Education Task Force to develop recommendations specific to your state context.

» Effectively communicate to parents and communities the benefits of competency-based learning models.

## Contact Information

For more information or technical assistance, contact the iNACOL Center for Policy:

- » Susan Patrick, CEO, iNACOL and Co-Founder of *Competency*Works: spatrick@inacol.org

- » Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy, iNACOL: mworthen@inacol.org

- » Dale Frost, State Policy Director, iNACOL: dfrost@inacol.org

- » Natalie Truong, Policy Director, iNACOL: ntruong@inacol.org

## Resources to Learn More

- » iNACOL – *Fit for Purpose: Taking the Long View on Systems Change and Policy to Support Competency Education*

- » iNACOL – *Promising State Policies to Advance Personalized Learning*

- » iNACOL – *Meeting The Every Student Succeeds Act's Promise: State Policy to Support Personalized Learning*

- » KnowledgeWorks – *A State Policy Framework for Scaling Personalized Learning*

- » *Competency*Works – *Reaching the Tipping Point: Insights on Advancing Competency Education in New England*

- » National Governors Association – *Expanding Student Success: A Primer on Competency-Based Education*

- » Foundation for Excellence in Education – *Policy, Pilots and the Path to Competency-Based Education: A National Landscape*