



Policy Spotlight on New England

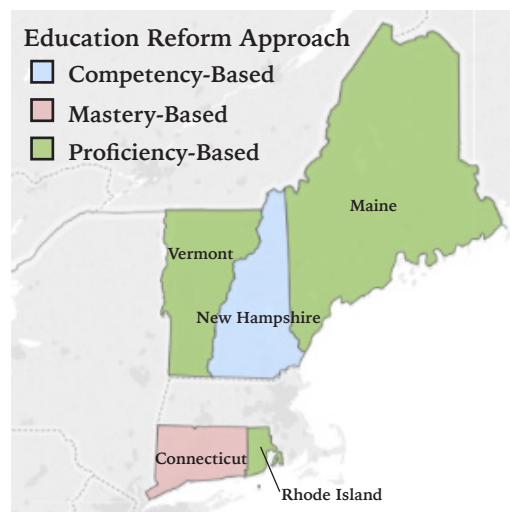
A Look at the Relationship between Policy and Practice in K-12 Education Reform: Insights for State and District Leaders

With college and career readiness driving K-12 education goals in the United States today, states are focusing more acutely on policies to ensure their students are well prepared for postsecondary and professional success. While states may adapt their education policies in pursuit of these goals, a question about implementation at the local level takes center stage: How do school districts interpret and respond to these types of policy changes?

New England, known for its history of local control over public education, is a pertinent site to examine the relationship between state policy and local implementation. With a declining school-age population, the region's knowledge-based economy relies upon the retention and attraction of well-educated graduates. In response to these strategic goals, New England states have joined national conversations about college and career readiness, trying to determine the best model for their K-12 education systems. As part of the New England Secondary School Consortium, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island and Connecticut have all passed legislation to this effect: Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont have adopted "proficiency-based education" as a vision for preparing students for college and career; New Hampshire describes its vision in terms of "competency-based learning;" and Connecticut does so with the term "mastery-based learning" (Figure 1). Despite the terminological variation, these models all strive for similar goals: to promote learning that is personalized, relevant and meaningful for each individual student, preparing them for civic and professional life in the 21st century.

While changes in state policy are a critical first-step for education reform, real change must happen in school districts. It is important to study how local districts respond to, and grapple with, these policy changes in order to better understand the implementation process. States may change policies in pursuit of these visions, but it is the change in practice at the local level that truly impacts student experience and thus plays a major role in the success of the state policies. With this in mind, the following report compares state policy with local implementation to identify areas where they align and where they diverge. To do so, the report uses New Hampshire and its drive toward a competency-based education (CBE) system as a guiding case study to illustrate important challenges to, and strategies for, statewide educational transformation.

Figure 1: New England Secondary School Consortium States' Approaches to Education Reform



Note: Massachusetts elected not to join the New England Secondary School Consortium.

Source: Created with information from Great Schools Partnership

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Why New Hampshire?

Over the past decade, New Hampshire has worked to develop a competency-based K-12 education system. During this time, the state has experienced a fascinating interplay between bold state policy changes and resolute local control over implementation. In 2005, the state passed regulations that eliminated use of the Carnegie unit (the traditional credit-hour measuring student progress in terms of time) and replaced it with a new competency system that allows students to progress based on mastery of skills and knowledge. At the same time, New Hampshire is fully committed to local control, as embodied by its state motto, “Live Free or Die.” A 2014 study authored by Julia Freeland from the Clayton Christensen Institute examined response to the state policy change at a number of schools. Freeland’s research highlighted notable variations in local implementation, and the study raised new questions about response not just within individual schools but at the district level as well. Indeed, the state policy change granted primary control over implementation to local districts, so how have districts changed their practices in turn?

Background of Competency-Based Education in New Hampshire

The concept of competency-based education first made its way into the New Hampshire education scene in the early 1990s, a time when national policy conversations started to hone in on the development of clear, high standards as the key to education reform and began to consider the relationship between education and the workplace more concretely. By the late 1990s, most states had set high academic standards for their schools that acknowledged the growing demand for challenging expectations and rigorous coursework for K-12 students.

By 1997, to support its own recently developed state standards, the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) piloted a new “competency” approach to assessment, one designed to evaluate student mastery of pertinent course content and skills, measuring a student’s ability to understand and apply concepts from one context to another as opposed to strictly evaluating content mastery. Greeted with immediate support, the pilot program expanded, and the NHDOE convened educators and state leaders to develop a new vision for K-12 education in New Hampshire, one dedicated to more personalized, student-centered learning that emphasizes real-world application and relevance.

In 2005, the NHDOE translated this renewed vision into state policy. While some states require statutory change for education reform, the New Hampshire Legislature had granted the NHDOE authority to change state education policy through regulation. With this power, the NHDOE amended “Regulation Education 306: Minimum Standards for Public School Approval” (Ed 306), abolishing use of the Carnegie unit and replacing it with a competency-based system in which students acquire credit and progress through school based on demonstrated mastery of competencies, as defined by local districts. The change required New Hampshire high schools to adopt district-created competencies by the start of the 2008-09 academic year. To accommodate local control, though, the state policy included marked flexibility and few levers of enforcement. Consequently, local implementation took many shapes and progressed at varied paces around the state.

In an effort to help districts transition into the new competency-based system, the NHDOE released a report in 2007 entitled “New Hampshire’s Vision for Redesign: Moving High Schools to Learning Communities.” The report documented a wide range of practices and policies clarifying the state’s vision so that districts could better understand what it would actually look like in practice. To further support districts, the NHDOE invited New Hampshire educators to participate in the process of developing statewide college- and career-ready competencies that would be made available to districts seeking guidance with competency development. This process happened during the same time as the development of the Common Core, giving the conversation a direction to follow. In 2014, the State Board of Education approved a set of competencies to act as a model, which included the Common Core State Standards-Aligned Competencies in English Language Arts and Mathematics as well as the K-12 Model Science Competencies.

Also in 2014, the NHDOE revised Ed 306, updating its competency-based requirements for districts. Beyond defining competencies, districts were now required to build out their competency-based systems. By July 1, 2016, all districts must require high schools to align their graduation policies with their competencies and identify necessary changes in instructional practice, student assessment and co-curricular activities that will support mastery of competencies and enhance personalized learning. By July 1, 2017, districts must expand these frameworks to include their K-8 schools as well.

What is PACE?

The Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) program is a state-level accountability strategy that reduces the level of standardized testing and increases the use of common performance assessments. These assessments have been designed to support deeper learning by evaluating student ability to transfer knowledge from one context to another and apply complex skills to develop products and devise solutions to authentic problems. Still in its piloting stage, PACE has been incorporated into eight New Hampshire districts so far, and the NHDOE has developed a tiered system of support to help interested districts build capacity and transition into the PACE system.

Figure 2: School Districts Participating in the Report

PACE Districts
Epping
Pittsfield
Rochester
Seacoast Charter
Non-PACE Districts
Bedford
Berlin
Lin-Wood
Nashua

Methodology

Advised by the state's Deputy Commissioner of Education Paul Leather, NEBHE began collecting data for this report with interviews of the district leaders who most closely bridge state and local initiatives: superintendents. In particular, Leather recommended consultation with the superintendents of districts involved in the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) program. Districts participating in PACE have opted to pilot the state's new accountability system, one that includes local and common assessments designed to "support deeper learning through competency education." Launched at the start of the 2014-15 school year, PACE initially comprised four districts: Epping, Rochester, Sanborn Regional, and Souhegan. Participation expanded to four more districts during the fall of 2015 to include Concord, Monroe, Pittsfield and Seacoast Charter.

To gain a complete picture of the New Hampshire educational landscape, it was important to study a diverse range of districts in the state, including both PACE and non-PACE districts (Figure 2). Furthermore, to include a variety of district contexts, district selection considered other variables as well, including geography, school size and student demographics. For geography, districts were identified around the state that covered a range of the U.S. Census Bureau's "rural," "town," "suburban," and "city" distinctions. For school size, districts were distinguished based on enrollment figures and categorizations as listed by the NHDOE for the 2014-15 school year, from small (0-300 pupils) to medium (301-1,000 pupils) to large (1,001+ pupils). And finally, three variables addressed demographic factors: percent free and reduced price lunch, percent of students deemed proficient on the Smarter Balanced assessment (New Hampshire's state assessment of student achievement in English and math for grades 3-12), and district spending per pupil.

In total, eight superintendents from districts around the state and across these characteristics participated in hour-long interviews for this study. Districts represented include Bedford, Berlin, Epping, Lin-Wood, Nashua, Pittsfield, Rochester, and Seacoast Charter. Furthermore, Leather at the NHDOE, Rose Colby (a consultant for the NHDOE), and David Ruff at the Great Schools Partnership participated in interviews as well, sharing insight into the educational reforms from the state's perspective.

What major obstacles have districts faced?

While the superintendents interviewed agree the state has clearly defined and communicated its expectations about the switch to a competency-based education system, the local implementation process—turning policy into practice—has varied. When asked about their interpretation of the policy, most responded in the same way, explaining how districts must now grant course credit based on demonstration of competency rather than simply number of hours spent in the classroom. Many of them expressed appreciation for the move, agreeing with its core values and mission: to make learning more relevant, authentic and student-centered. However, since districts have had control over the development and implementation of their own sets of competencies, there have been notable differences in approach and progress. While some have already established K-12 competencies and aligned courses around them, others have yet to hold district-wide conversations about transformation, as they contend with other, more pressing district priorities. All in all, the data collected from participating superintendents reaffirm the notion that, within New Hampshire, there is great variation with regards to implementation and practice of competency-based education across—and even within—districts. The variation can be explained by obstacles facing districts, which fall into two primary categories: capacity and perception.

Capacity

Personnel

Unless sufficient supports are in place to facilitate competency-based education reform, the workload required to make the shift can be overwhelming for teachers, principals and superintendents, especially when it is just one of numerous district priorities that range from budgetary concerns to student behavioral and mental health. Some districts have the size and resources to support more administrative staff and curriculum-specific positions, while others simply do not. Without a director of curriculum to lead the implementation of a competency-based system, school leaders—principals and superintendents—take the weight of the responsibility. The need for personnel—those who have time and expertise to carry out this work—becomes a major obstacle.

Within the classroom, teachers face the challenge of differentiation. In a competency-based system, teachers must have a keen awareness of the strengths and weaknesses for each individual student in order to evaluate their progress toward a competency and identify the best instructional approach. The varying speeds by which students move through the curriculum exacerbate this challenge. Even in small classes, differentiated instruction is difficult. Superintendents recognize this classroom management issue, and some teachers have requested more aides to help them track student progress and target instruction appropriately. Given the current classroom structure, more personnel would lessen the workload for teachers and ensure meaningful differentiation for students, but the cost to do so prevents many districts from providing these supports.

Expertise

Competency-based learning entails dramatic changes to traditional practice, and many district leaders feel uncertain whether they have sufficient expertise to make the transition, particularly in the near future. First, teachers must design new formative and summative assessments, the former of which is used to determine areas for targeted instruction and additional support, if needed, while the latter evaluates whether a student has mastered the competencies. Most superintendents participating in the study agree with the theory and values underlying this new approach to assessment. However, creating these assessments requires an expertise of competency-based learning that many teachers currently lack.

Second, many superintendents have heard concerns from teachers about the ambiguity of instruction in this environment. How can teachers manage the pacing of students in their classrooms? What happens when a few students do not pass a summative assessment and must revisit the material and redo the formative assessments while their classmates move ahead? Furthermore, what do you do for a 7th grader who has 4th grade reading skills and 8th grade math skills? Do you teach students at the grade-level they are at? Or do you teach them at the grade-level they are “supposed” to be at? Without concrete answers to these questions, some superintendents question whether the implementation of a truly competency-based system is feasible at this point in time.

Professional development could help develop teacher expertise in instruction, assessment and learning in a competency-based environment. However, to coordinate professional development, districts must often hire expert consultants to enter their schools and share knowledge and guidance that will help teachers learn how to implement this new pedagogical approach. Even with state-operated professional development programs, school districts must pay teachers to attend these workshops—costs that quickly become major obstacles, especially in low-resourced districts or those with hundreds of teachers. Professional development for teachers in a major urban district with upwards of 950 teachers, for example, is a monumental task, and there is no current framework that enables a district of this size to train so many teachers. Furthermore, in addition to the financial costs to districts, professional development at this scale requires teachers to miss significant time in their classrooms. One superintendent noted that, last year, some teachers spent 12 to 15 days out of the classroom to attend workshops on assessment design—a valuable experience to develop expertise for their teaching, but at the cost of time working with their students directly.

Technology

Competency-based education also requires significant change to technology. In a system where assessment is so central, it is unsurprising that data collection is yet another priority demanding district attention. Digital gradebooks currently linked to the traditional model—documenting attendance, participation, behavior, test scores, etc.—must transform to align with each district’s set of competencies. Now, to differentiate instruction, new technology must allow teachers to document student progress on formative assessments, highlight areas of improvement for each student and record student performance on summative assessments. Without the proper software and technical support, many teachers find themselves handling much more paperwork, adding to their workload. Many districts have enlisted the services of technical assistance providers to redesign their assessment and grading technologies, but superintendents said these services are expensive, and it is difficult to find the best qualified and most cost-effective vendor.

Perception

Beyond capacity, perceptions of competency-based education pose a challenge for districts, helping to further explain variation in implementation. Experience informs beliefs and attitudes, and most students, teachers and parents have experienced only the traditional model of education: the “banking model,” where rote memorization and recitation characterize classroom experience, and grades are reported “out of 100” or with a letter. The notion of changing assessments into competency-based ones, where questions like “What percent did I get correct?” and “Did I get an A?” lose meaning, induces anxiety for many. Most teachers have never learned nor taught in a competency-based system before; their preparation, training and experience have been almost entirely within traditional learning environments. Parents, too, lack experience with and understanding of a competency-based system. And students are experiencing the switch firsthand. To address these concerns, many districts have transitioned slowly and gradually, reporting grades in both formats at first and shifting entirely to competency reporting over time.

The biggest challenge for districts, as reported by the eight superintendents, is to garner support from the entire community—students, parents, and teachers—by illustrating the value of the reform and encouraging community members to actively participate in the change process.

Granted, reservations remain among proponents of competency-based reform. Without the technology, expertise and personnel to implement the change, many teachers and district leaders alike question whether developing a competency-based system is feasible. The training and technology needed to support teachers through the transition feels overwhelming to some school leaders, particularly in the face of other initiatives requiring their attention and resources. And while performance assessments—presenting students with real-world tasks over a long period of time—are considered the most authentic way to evaluate student competency, some superintendents question their reliability and validity and are uncertain whether an accountability system based on performance assessments is the best approach. Many believe performance assessments are powerful tools to improve instruction and engage students, but they fear attaching high stakes to them for both students and teachers might undo the intended purpose. The emphasis on assessment more generally has pushed some teachers to the brink, as they spend hour upon hour grading student work and filling out paperwork in the pursuit of meaningful learning for students but without supports to make it feel feasible. One superintendent, in fact, reported instances of teachers coming to her office in tears, feeling overwhelmed by the demands of grading.

For more than 10 years, New Hampshire has been transitioning toward competency-based education. Clearly, change takes time. However, this presents a key challenge in an outcomes-driven world. School leaders and community members who feel skeptical about the feasibility of competency-based education wonder whether current reform efforts will fade away over time, as the potential positive outcomes of competency-based education may take longer to materialize than political will and leadership are willing and able to give.

What lessons can we learn from New Hampshire?

Clear Expectations from the State

Superintendents emphasized their appreciation of the clear and consistent communication they have received from the NHDOE with regard to the new state policies. Since the beginning, Paul Leather has been a figurehead of the competency-based education movement in New Hampshire, leading efforts to communicate with districts and addressing any points of confusion head-on. Looking at the relationship between state policy and local implementation, clear communication is critical from the outset. Any uncertainties or misinterpretations create barriers between the state’s intention and district outcomes.

District Involvement in Statewide Discussions

It is important for state policy conversations between state and local leaders to be inclusive and open, as implementation at the district level hinges on whether school leaders: 1) share the values that underlie the new education vision; and 2) understand the vision and the expectations fully. In New Hampshire, there are monthly meetings between state and local education leaders. Superintendents meet consistently with peers on statewide committees, and the commissioner hosts periodic meetings with school leaders to talk about the latest research and upcoming considerations at the state level. While these meetings do not all focus solely on competency-based education, they establish time for collaboration and feedback.

Responsiveness from the State Education Agency

The superintendents interviewed applaud the responsiveness of the NHDOE. In particular, they commend the efforts of Paul Leather and Rose Colby, who continue to engage with districts to learn about their struggles and challenges and identify strategies they can employ to overcome them. The NHDOE ensures any questions or concerns about implementation receive the attention they deserve, working to bring in the necessary expertise and technical support to help districts through the process. With limited resources, however, perhaps the biggest challenge of all is the limited capacity of NHDOE to facilitate the state policy changes, hampering its ability to respond with the resources and support that districts truly need. Given this reality, it has been important for the NHDOE to secure close relationships with districts, but the ability to respond and give the necessary support continues to be a challenge for the NHDOE.

Inter- and Intra-District Collaboration

Because some districts developed competencies and integrated them into their schools early on while others have taken a slower approach, there has been room for inter-district collaboration. Some early adopters have shared their competency definitions, resources and strategies with other districts interested in pushing forward with their own transformations. Sanborn Regional, for example, has hosted multi-day summer workshops for school leaders and teachers from around the state to learn about its transition into an aligned competency-based education system. Also, the NHDOE has hosted professional development workshops bringing together educators statewide; sessions focused on assessments, for example, have enabled educators to learn about and develop performance assessments together, with the intent that they return to their districts with common understandings and practices. The movement toward competency-based education has encouraged collaboration within districts and schools as well. First assigned with the task of developing and implementing competencies, high schools have been able to share their experiences with elementary and middle schools in their districts, serving as advisors and sharing templates that will help districts transition their K-8 schools into competency-based learning as well.

Community Involvement

The transition into a competency-based system has helped foster more discussions between districts and their communities, as school leaders must work to elicit support from local community members. One superintendent, for example, invited parents and community members to share their thoughts about the district's mission statement at a town meeting, since he felt the mission statement needed to be revised to coincide with the shift toward competency-based learning while also gaining community support. In these types of conversations, district leaders begin the process of changing community perceptions of competency-based learning, aligning school goals with those of the broader community.

Innovation

Many districts have discovered innovative ways to redesign their structures and change their practices. In response to capacity challenges, for example, one small rural district decided to restructure its administration, eliminating the two principal positions and replacing them with a Director of Instruction and a Director of Operations. Doing so has allowed the administrative team to handle instructional issues and target teacher support, while still addressing the daily operational work needed to keep the district up-and-running. Another district has revised its daily schedule so teachers have more time to plan lessons, reexamine competencies and develop assessments—a change that has also given teachers more time to work directly with students in class and increased co-teaching opportunities.

As with any form of state policy, superintendents ask for the state to continue to recognize and appreciate the demands they face and the responsibilities they must fulfill every day. Transitioning a state from one education approach to another is a daunting task—admirable and valuable, but highly difficult. As is common practice, any new state mandate must coincide with an appropriate increase in support for implementation. Without abundant resources, the state must critically examine its current supply of resources—financial and human—and evaluate the various levers it has to facilitate change alongside school districts, so that the education professionals enacting change on the ground (the teachers, principals, and superintendents) feel supported and capable of doing so. New Hampshire should also consider better aligning its standards for teacher and principal preparation programs with the new policies and broader vision of competency-based education. Many of the challenges facing districts can be attributed to the lack of preparation and experience with competency-based education among educators. If prospective teachers and school leaders are trained more explicitly in the competency-based approach, they will be better equipped to manage and implement competency-based practices. The recent reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) may also provide an opportunity for the state to use federal funds for professional development of current teachers and principals. Indeed, the new

law, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), gives states greater control over their education systems—primarily in terms of assessment and accountability—so there may be new avenues for states to acquire resources to facilitate education reform efforts.

New Hampshire has made significant strides in its transition into competency-based education. Yet, challenges remain that inhibit local implementation and cause notable variation from one district to the next. With continued collaboration and innovation, and hopefully expanded sources of financial and technical support, districts and the state will continue to push forward, striving to improve student experience and promote student achievement by reforming the education system. Certainly, there is a lot of hard but exciting work ahead. As New England states pursue their own education reform efforts, they often look to each other to better understand obstacles facing local implementation among school districts and strategies they should use to overcome them. New Hampshire can play a significant role in contributing to this understanding.

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About the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)

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