Competency Education:

From Theory to Practice to Policy

As presented to Student Achievement Committee Meeting on March 3, 2015

What is Competency Education?

- Definition
- Five Elements Review
- FAQs
- The Field
  - National
  - Hawai‘i (Guest Presenters)
- System Implications
  - BOE Policy 4000 (Advisory Working Group Presentation)
  - 100-series Policy Review

Competency Education…

- Is a system of education, often referred to as proficiency or mastery-based, in which students advance and move ahead on their lessons based on demonstration of mastery.
- Relies on students demonstrating their competencies (*aligned to standards*) toward the attainment of a degree or diploma.
- Challenges a key policy issue — awarding credit based on the amount of time a student is in a seat, or seat-time, for each course, regardless of what was learned.
- Ensures learning takes place inside and outside of the school building for students to have control and flexibility over **path, place and pace.**

Adapted from International Association for K-12 Online Learning iNACOL October 2013 report

The Five Elements

1. Student Advancement: demonstrated mastery, flexible pacing (not age, not seat-time)

2. Competencies: explicit, measurable, transferable

3. Assessments: positive, multiple, student-driven, formative, summative

4. Student Supports: personalized, WE-learning environments/-leadership, (so all succeed)

5. Learning outcomes: through application for college, careers and community success. EQUAL VALUE: academic standards AND life-long learning skills and dispositions

Adapted from CompetencyWorks 2011 (see handout)

The FAQs

- Will there be letter grades and GPAs like we are all used to? (*see Nashua, New Hampshire article, April 2014*)
- Will this change or hurt the chances of our students to get into college?
- Is this the same thing as Common Core?
- Competency-based pathways may be great for students who fall behind, but won't it disadvantage high achievers?

see Achieve handout, January 2015

The Field: National

- Strengths
  - 51% of states have some level of activity
    - 1/3 of states have some level of initiative to explore or advance CE
    - Additional nine states have districts transforming
    - Hawai‘i categorized as an emerging state
  - Models beginning to maximize value by integrating personalized learning, competency-based structured and blended instruction
  - Strong interest in CE in higher education

- Concerns
  - Lack diversity (racial and expertise in serving disenfranchised students) in leading organizations
  - Mixed opinion if there is agreement about what competency education is (or is not)
  - Need to establish aligned policy infrastructure
  - Have not defined quality implementation
  - Still waiting to see consistent results

See WSJ handout, March 2014

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CompetencyWorks

The Field: Hawai‘i

University of Hawai‘i Manoa, College of Education

- Guest Presenters
  - UH "Modified" Competency-Based Course (Dr. Paul McKimmy & Jonathan Kevan)
  - Hawaiian Education Competency Pathways (Dr. Kalehua Krug)

Hawaiian Education Competency Pathways:

Historical Perspective

- Observation was at the foundation of ritual. "When the child attained the ability to....(follow, carry, dig and throw)"
  (Pūkuʻi, 1972, pg 42)
- Learning Proficiencies for Kilo Hōkū
  - Hoʻopaʻanaʻau, ʻIliʻili, Kahakaha Ipu, Kilo Hōkū, Holo i ō Tahiti
- "A lehia ka haumana i keia mahele haawina."
- "A wale waha ka haumana ma keia mahele haawina."
  Joseph Poepoe, KA NAʻI AUPUNI, September 25, 1906- Book II Number 97
- These references described the competency for proper passage into the next stages of learning.

Hawaiian Education Competency Pathways:

Contemporary Perspective

- Kaiapuni Education- Language acquisition at the core of learning through the Hawaiian language
  - HLL and the need for proper competency measures and coinciding curriculum
- American Council for the Teaching of a Foreign Language (ACTFL); International English Language Testing System (IELTS)
  - Speaking Descriptors of proficiency levels
  - Assessments that mark competence level post high school are not realistically measured by age
- An A student Kilo Hōkū vs. a D student Kilo Hōkū; Passing?
  - Learning and Competency are still linked to survival and life skills.
  - The result of skipping one stage of learning for the Hawaiian Wayfinder
  - Where would Hōkūleʻa and the Worldwide Voyage be?

System Implications

- BOE Policy 4000/General Learner Outcomes (GLOS)
  - Advisory Working Group Presentation, Ronn Nozoe and Kauʻilani Sang
  - Handouts
  - See Stanford Social Innovation Review article, February 2015

"A vision of our public school graduates through a Hawaiian lens"

Policy Implications

- **Pave the way forward**: Clarify the purpose and meaning of competency-based pathways
- **Hold the line**: Ensure that state graduation requirements, assessments and accountability systems promote determinations of competency that equate to college, careers and community readiness
- **Protect the promise**: Identify and mitigate risks to equity.

Achieve, "The Imperative for State Leadership", July 2014

Policy Review Process

- 100-Series Ends and Means Policy?
  - Committee Discussion

Handouts for Presentation - Competency Education: From Theory to Practice To Policy presentation

1. CompetencyWorks – Aligning K-12 State Policies with Competency Education (pages 12-17)
2. Nashua - Transitioning to new grading system continues in Nashua (pages 18-19)
3. Achieve - Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness (pages 20-21)
4. Stanford Social Innovation - Stanford Social Innovation Review, Rethinking how Students Succeed (pages 22-34)
5. Wall Street Journal, Shaking Up the Classroom, March 2014 (pages 35-37)

What is Competency Education?

Across the nation, schools, districts and entire states are reshaping their education system to ensure students reach proficiency in the skills they need for college and careers. It may be called competency-based, proficiency-based, mastery-based or performance-based education, but it speaks to one goal – to lift academic expectations while ensuring that every student reaches them.

The concept is simple: Learning is best measured by mastery rather than time spent in the classroom.

Competency education ensures students gain the academic and lifelong learning skills they need to be successful in an ever-changing world. Schools can personalize the learning experience, offering a variety of ways for students to learn and demonstrate learning. Students have more voice and choice, taking ownership of their learning. Students get the instructional support they need to succeed, even if it takes them multiple attempts over a little more time to achieve mastery. Academic rigor is sustained by measuring achievement against a common set of standards.

Students soar when motivated and engaged

In competency education, students work at their academic level, understanding what they are learning and what they need to do next. Teachers provide timely assessments and extra support until students can demonstrate that they have mastered the concept. Students get the help they need, when they need it, so they can advance to a higher level of studies as soon as they are ready. This system ensures that our most underserved students are no longer left behind, and that all of our students can take their education as far as they are able.

The Five Elements of Competency Education

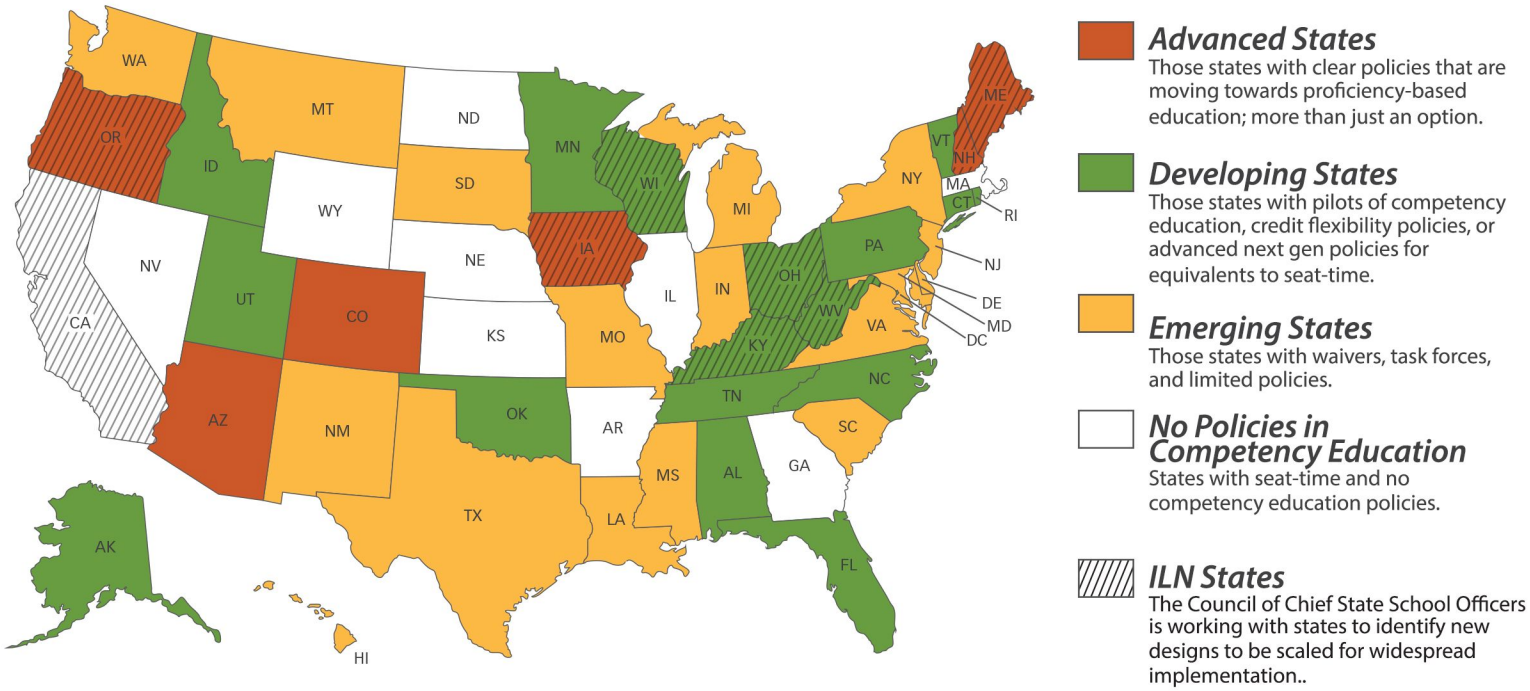
1. Students advance upon mastery.
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

A Snapshot of Competency Education State Policy Across the US

New Hampshire has embraced competency education because we know it is the only way we can fully prepare our students for an ever-changing world. Competency education allows us to take advantage of resources, in schools and the community, to personalize education so that every student is on a path to college and career readiness.
– New Hampshire Education Commissioner Virginia M. Barry

Transparency empowers students to have voice and choice

While states work to ensure all students are prepared for future success in a globally competitive society, emphasizing greater rigor and deeper application of knowledge and skills, they are confronted with the fact that the traditional time-based model of education may not be up to the task. States are now rapidly advancing competency education. Thirty-six states have already revised policies to allow for proficiency-based diplomas, waived seat-time to allow competency-based pathways, created credit flexibility, or initiated a redesign of their education system around student learning.



How States are Advancing Competency Education

Drive Policy by Student Learning Outcomes:

Focus on student learning and student learning outcomes. First and foremost, policies support the needs of students.

Guard High Academic Standards:

States are vigilant to ensure that academic expectations do not slip and result in lower achievement for groups of students. Focus is on equity with high expectations for all students.

Expand Student Options:

State policies expand, not limit, the options that students have to reach learning outcomes.

Through the application of knowledge comes deeper learning

Create Shared Vision:

Policy development is not top-down. It keeps communication open, inviting stakeholders to contribute to the vision and the steps to get there.

Offer Districts and Schools Flexibility:

States are clear about desired outcomes and provide incentives for educators to take different pathways to achieve the goal. Process rules and regulations are removed to allow and encourage innovation.

Commit to Continuos Improvement:

Policies can evolve as we learn more about the dynamics of next-generation learning, allowing ongoing improvement efforts.

Just listen to students and teachers to know why schools, districts and states are turning to competency education:

I feel like I had one of my best years. I got to set my own goals and watched myself grow. I'm getting excited to go to school. Now I want to come every day.

- Maya, fifth-grade student

The number one change is my students are excited about learning. They are taking control of their knowledge and they are keeping track of it. They stay on top of things because they know what is expected and what is coming up next. They ask more questions and are more willing to participate.

- Mrs. Collins, fifth-grade teacher

The teachers have a better relationship with you here. They genuinely care about your success rather than just trying to push you through so you graduate even though you don't understand the subjects you are passing.

- Catherine, tenth-grade student

Eight Ways to Upgrade State Policy

States investing in redesign around personalized, competency education are upgrading policies and operations in the following areas:

1) Innovation Zones

States are encouraging districts to innovate and develop new learning models by offering exemption from administrative regulations and statutory provisions in an effort to improve the learning of students.

2) Competency-based Diplomas

States are replacing credit-based graduation requirements with proficiency-based requirements. For the first time, diplomas will have consistent value. States and districts are creating new transcripts that reflect what students know and can do.

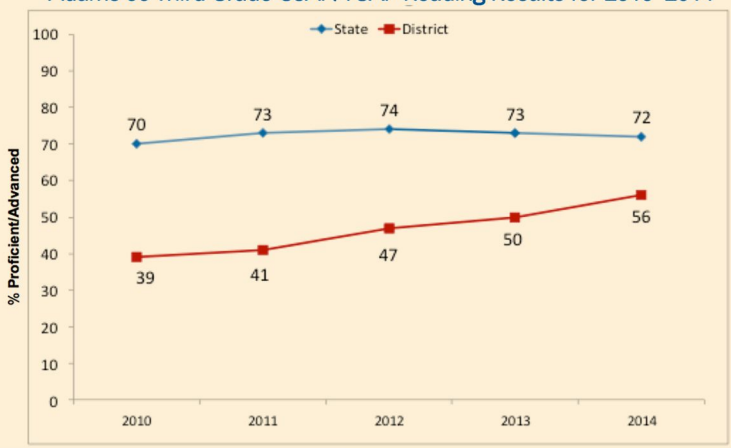
3) Supports and Advancement

Some states are requiring districts to provide additional supports to students who are not yet proficient. Others are eliminating barriers to advancement so that students can access curriculum above their grade level.

Getting Results

Adams 50 School District in Colorado serves a diverse population with 81% of students on Free and Reduced Lunch and 45% English Language Learners. The district was considered a Priority Improvement district in 2009 with a third of their schools designated as lowest performing. Within two years of implementation of competency education, all the schools were out of turnaround status and the number of schools in the accredited status had doubled. The graduation rate continues to steadily increase, reaching 74% in 2013.

Adams 50 Third Grade CSAP/TCAP Reading Results for 2010–2014



4) Systems of Assessments

Leading states are beginning to address the damaging misalignment of current assessment systems that have become intertwined with accountability policy. In competency education, the systems of assessments should be designed to provide feedback and monitor how students are progressing. Formative assessments are emphasized, providing timely feedback to students so they can address areas of academic weakness and teachers can fine tune instructional support. Summative assessments play an important role as a quality assurance mechanism by validating proficiency levels. Students who are struggling with the material have opportunities to take assessments again. Success is the only option.

5) Accountability and Quality Assurance

The primary accountability metric—driven largely by requirements and state responses to the federal No Child Left Behind law—has been to use end-of-year state assessments. The system does not need to be designed this way. First, using the core philosophy of competency education that progress in learning requires access to support, states are considering continuous improvement frameworks that provide feedback and support to schools. The accountability system can provide meaningful supports that promote improvement and innovation in schools rather than branding schools as failures. Second, accountability is a quality assurance mechanism with feedback loops measuring student pacing and academic rigor that emphasizes deeper learning.

6) Expanding Learning Opportunities

Policies enable students to demonstrate learning and receive credit through community-based learning such as work experience or service learning. Policies have also ensured that online learning is competency-based and available for students to accelerate learning beyond their grade level.

7) Information management systems

Although competency education has been in development for over two decades, recent technological advances—digital learning and information systems—are causing it to flourish. Competency education generates enormous amounts of data on student learning that is best supported by an information system organized around student profiles and evidence of student work. Yet, much of today's information management infrastructure was designed around top-down accountability and compliance policies. Almost all are time-based systems that offer only weak snapshots of student progress at a point in time. As competency education continues to advance, states and districts will need to consider demand for portability of student records, meaningful student profiles, personalized learning maps, proficiency-based transcripts, portfolios of student work and evidence of learning, and new ways to measure performance in accountability systems.

8) Educator Workforce

Updated policies reflect an expansion of educator roles. Teacher preparation and professional development emphasize assessment literacy, deep understanding of the disciplines, and managing personalized classrooms.

With clear learning goals, teachers have flexibility in how they teach

Why it Matters

- About **1 million students a year leave high school** without a diploma.
- 70% of higher education instructors said **their students do not comprehend** complex reading materials; 66% said students cannot think analytically.
- The current system allows students to progress because of age, not demonstrated ability. This is resulting in **gaps – some small, some big, all damaging.**
- Students, families and states bear the burden of a time-based education system. College remediation costs **$2.3 billion per year.**
- Our graduates do not achieve the level of academic and career skills as those of other countries. This makes them **less competitive** in a global economy.

In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student's learning curve, but it is not an outcome.

– Proficiency-Based Instruction and Assessment, Oregon Education Roundtable

About Competency Works and iNACOL

CompetencyWorks provides information and knowledge-sharing about competency education through a website, a blog filled with practitioner knowledge and policy advancements, and a wiki that makes it easy to get examples of materials. CompetencyWorks provides resources for new innovators and early adopters so they can rapidly learn about lessons learned and different approaches to inform their work. CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative, led by iNACOL in partnership with American Youth Policy Forum, Jobs for the Future, MetisNet and the National Governors Association.

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 hosts the iNACOL Blended and Online Learning Symposium, the premier K-12 blended and online learning conference that provides a dedicated strand of workshops and sessions on competency education.

Stay on top of advancements in competency education at **CompetencyWorks.org** and visit iNACOL at **www.inacol.org**

For More Information on State Policy

- Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills – A State Policymakers Guide to Competency Education, available at CompetencyWorks: www.competencyworks.org
- Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness: The Imperative for State Leadership, available at Achieve: www.achieve.org
- State Strategies for Awarding Credit to Support Student Learning, available at National Governors Association: www.nga.org
- From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire, available at Christensen Institute: www.christenseninstitute.org
- Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire's Competency-Based System, available at the Alliance for Excellent Education: www.all4ed.org

Transition to new grading system continues in Nashua

By BARBARA TAORMINA
Union Leader Correspondent
Published Apr 18, 2014 at 9:55 pm (Updated Apr 18, 2014)

NASHUA — Competency-based grading at the city's high schools officially begins in September 2015, but the heavy lifting involved in developing the new report cards and assessment strategies has been taking place this year.

The new system, which is part of a broad wave of education reform throughout public education, will establish a list of clearly-defined skills and levels of knowledge students are expected to have at the end of a course. Students will receive numerical scores that reflect their abilities with different elements of each course and along the way, they will have opportunities to make up work to ensure they earn credits.

"We are setting higher standards which is what colleges want to see," said Superintendent Mark Conrad at a Board of Education workshop on the new grading system this week. "They don't want to see just high grades, they want to know there is rigor behind those grades."

Although the board was slow to embrace the new report cards which are already being used in other school districts, most members now seem convinced that the potential benefits are worth overhauling the traditional grading. "I was probably one of the most concerned members of this board," BOE Vice Chairwoman Kim Muise told a team of teachers who have been leading the district's shift to competency-based grading. But Muise said she was reassured by the extensive planning that has gone into the new report cards, and the decision to slow down the full implementation of the new system. With competency-based grading, students understand at the start of a course what expectations they need to meet. An example used at an earlier workshop listed four competencies students need to demonstrate in a World Studies course. Students need to display an understanding of tensions based on power and wealth and people's reactions, and show they understand the roots of foreign policy. Students must also be able to connect ideology, behavior and demographic changes and role of government, and demonstrate interactions with physical and technological environments.

For each of those four elements, or competencies, students will receive a score of 1 to 4, with 1 signifying a student is "in progress" and 4 reflecting the fact that a student is "proficient with distinction."

In order to earn credit for a course, students must score at least a 2, or "partially proficient" in all competencies listed for the course.

Students who are struggling with any particular required competency will have the chance to make up work with a teacher during the new E-Block, a 35-minute period built into each school day that allows time for remedial work. Students who are on target with all competencies in all courses will be able to use the E-Block for enrichment projects and activities.

The district is planning a gradual implementation of competency-based grading and students will continue to receive traditional letter grades along with their competency scores. There is a conversion table to show how letter grades are determined, and those letter grades will still be used to determine GPAs and class ranks.

“Teachers are buying into this because of their commitment to see students succeed,” said David Goldsmith, head of the history department at Nashua High South.

Kelly Holmes, head of the Science Department at South, said student grades will be a more accurate reflection of their accomplishments.

“We won’t be grading kids on how well they participate in class or whether they bring in canned goods for a Thanksgiving food drive,” she said.

Some BOE members have questioned if the new system will require hiring a significant number of new teachers to help students achieve passing scores with different competencies, and BOE chairman George Farrington questioned how much the new system would added to the ever-expanding workload on teachers.

Goldsmith acknowledged that it won’t be an easy transition for teachers, but added there is a lot of support for the new system.

“And I don’t think you want the data on how hard teachers work,” he told the board. “It would be scary.”

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Comments

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- Say something new, stay on topic, keep it short.
- Links to outside URLs are discouraged, if used they should be on topic.
- Avoid comments in bad taste, write well, avoid using all capital letters
- Don't cite facts about individuals or businesses without providing a means to verify the claim
- If you see an objectionable comment please click the "Report Abuse" button and be sure to tell us why.

Note: Comments are the opinion of the respective poster and not of the publisher.

Be the first to comment.

Competency-Based Pathways: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why the need for change? This isn't how we were taught in school.

A: Everything in our world has changed since our childhood *except* for the way we educate a lot of our students. Technology has rapidly advanced, our economy has become increasingly global and the jobs of tomorrow require a much higher set of skills. Across the country, there are many efforts underway to remodel our education system to better align it with modern needs, in the same way that we would need to rewire a hundred year old farmhouse to bring it up to code. A shift to competency-based pathways is one of the most important changes under consideration.

Q: How are competency-based pathways different from more traditional approaches?

A: Competency-based pathways present learning objectives as a series of building blocks that stack upon each other. Students move through the course material focusing on one block at a time. What's different about this approach is that the student does not move on to the next block until he or she demonstrates proficiency of the block that precedes it. Instead of getting a grade that averages a student's performance across a range of topics without ensuring mastery of all (or any), under a competency-based system, a student is evaluated based on his or her ability to master individual skills or bodies of knowledge.

Q: How will competency-based pathways benefit my child?

A: Because education under a competency-based system is personalized, it is harder for students to fall through the cracks. Teachers and parents have more complete information on any areas where a student is struggling and can therefore provide the support needed. The personalization of this approach also allows students to move through the course material at their own pace. That means that students who master a particular skill or knowledge set won't get bored waiting for others to catch up, and students who take longer to learn a particular skill or knowledge set won't be pushed ahead before they are ready.

Q: Why is the competency approach the right one?

A: Competency-based pathways focus on making sure that students gain and demonstrate proficiency in critical skills, rather than moving on to new skills before they are ready. This approach focuses on the individual student, allowing him or her to advance at his or her own pace. That means that high-achieving students aren't held back and others aren't forced on before they are ready.

Q: Will there be letter grades and GPAs like we are all used to?

A: Competency-based systems do not rely on traditional letter grades to measure student progress. Instead, student performance on individual skill levels is measured on a scale based on level of mastery (from 1-4, for example). Despite the differing format, the resulting performance record gives an accurate description of the depth and breadth of learning each student has achieved. Some schools are translating their evaluation systems into GPA equivalents, while others are using different approaches to communicate overall student performance.

Q: Will this change or hurt the chances of our students to get into college? How about the most exclusive colleges?

A: No. Admissions counselors at elite colleges currently review transcripts from all 50 states and from hundreds of countries around the world. As a result, counselors have become very familiar with a wide range of student evaluations – including competency-based reports. Admissions teams work hard to understand each student's strengths. In fact, a transcript from a competency-based pathway provides these college admissions counselors greater level of detail about a student's level of preparation and what makes a particular student unique.

Q: Is this the same thing as the Common Core?

A: No. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) outline what students need to know at the end of each grade level. CCSS does not tell teachers or school districts how to get to those standards. A competency-based approach is one way to design the learning environment and curriculum to meet state, county or local standards, including and beyond the CCSS**.**

Q: Competency-based pathways may be great for students who fall behind, but won't it disadvantage high achievers?

A: No. Education systems that use competency-based pathways focus on the individual student. As a result, that means that students progress at their own pace. Those who are able to master given material more quickly advance right away instead of waiting for others to catch up – giving them a chance to move even further along than in traditional systems.

Q: Competency-based pathways are designed so that all students become proficient at the material. But not all students are the same. Some students have higher IQs, for example. Is it really possible to expect that all will graduate at the same level?

A: The goal of competency-based pathways is not to make all students the same. In fact, it recognizes that we are all individuals and all learn at different paces, mastering some material faster than others. The goal of competency-based pathways is to ensure that all students are mastering ALL of the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college or career. Some students will move through material faster than others, and some will exceed the benchmarks for proficiency.

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review
Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Rethinking How Students Succeed

A wave of noncognitive skill initiatives holds promise for making teachers more effective and students more successful.

By Lija Farnham, Gihani Fernando, Mike Perigo, & Colleen Brosman, with Paul Tough | 5 | Feb. 17, 2015

Twenty years ago, conventional wisdom held that cognitive ability displayed by mastery of core academic subjects paved the way to success in school, career, and life. Today, we know better. Success comes when cognitive skills work in tandem with so-called soft skills like self-control, persistence, social awareness, relationship development, and self-awareness. Practitioners and researchers typically frame their discussions of these characteristics around either social and emotional skills, or academic attitudes and behaviors. Each charts a separate path of inquiry and classroom practice. Yet they share a common destination: developing students whose mastery of noncognitive skills, strategies, attitudes, mindsets, and behaviors enhances their academic and life success. We call such students "effective learners."

Leaders in the broad field of noncognitive learning not only share this common goal, but they feel it with an uncommon sense of urgency. Only three-quarters of US students who start high school earn a diploma. And only 25 percent of those meet ACT college-readiness benchmarks in English, reading,

math, and science. Incorporating the dropout rate, the percentage of students who leave high school ready for college-level challenges falls to just 19 percent. [1]

In their quest to do better, educators typically focus on improving their skills at teaching core subjects, such as reading, math, and science. But research shows that students who develop social and emotional learning (SEL) skills and academic mindsets (for example, a belief that one's abilities can improve with effort) do better in school. (See "What's an Effective Learner" at the end of the article.) Yet, the potential for schools to foster more effective learners has not been developed to any significant scale—especially for the students from low-income districts who would benefit the most.

We are at a moment in time when that could change. The quest for scaling up noncognitive learning has inspired researchers and educators to embark on a range of initiatives. Thirty-seven leaders of several of the more prominent organizations leading this work, including the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Character Lab, the Consortium on Chicago School Research, and New Teacher Center recently gathered at Bridgespan in Boston for a daylong convening to discuss the current and future direction of their work, and look for ways to work more closely together.[2]

These field leaders work against an educational backdrop in which the stakes have never been higher. Forty-two states are moving forward with implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which require students to master more challenging math and language arts/literacy content. At the same time, a number of states have embarked on improving teacher effectiveness—often measured by student learning gains.

If the pressure to improve student outcomes has never been greater, the prospects for funders to help scale noncognitive competencies across school districts—in school and after school—have never been brighter. Four such promising initiatives have zeroed in on the barriers to progress and advanced two priorities to overcome them: integrating SEL and the development of academic mindsets into teaching practice, and acknowledging that before educators can help students develop as effective learners they need support to change their own beliefs and mindsets.

New Efforts to Expand Noncognitive Development

Pioneering efforts by members of the convening to expand noncognitive development fall into four broad categories: collaborations between researchers and teachers; professional development for teachers; systemic reforms in school districts; and complementary efforts between in-school and after-school or expanded-learning time.[3] Some initiatives are primarily in service of developing students' social and

emotional competence, while others aim to build academic mindsets and behaviors such as the belief that failure can lead to improved learning. For educators, the lines between these two parallel strands of exploration often blur as they focus on the desired result—more successful students.

Collaborations between researchers and teachers | One promising path to scale up effective learning targets students' attitudes and beliefs regarding school and learning. A growing number of researchers and teachers are collaborating to identify exactly what can help students develop an "academic mindset," characterized by the persistence needed to participate in class, complete homework, and study. Many evidence-based SEL programs were developed through a similar collaborative approach. Such collaborations are a way for researchers to break free of university-based settings, where most academic mindset research has been conducted. Researchers have found that school teachers are eager to contribute their knowledge to advance innovation in the field, enabling them to become a source for the best (and perhaps most scalable) ideas grounded in the work they do every day. These classroom-based research initiatives often include multiple cycles of testing and feedback with an emphasis on rapid learning and improvement. The 8th/9th Teacher Network (8/9TN) and Character Lab, cofounded by MacArthur Genius award winner Angela Duckworth, Dave Levin, cofounder of the KIPP Charter Public Schools, and Dominic Randolph, headmaster of Riverdale Country School, provide examples of this approach.

The 8/9TN initiative in Chicago represents a partnership between researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) and 35 eighth- and ninth-grade teachers across seven Chicago public schools. The 8/9TN project grew out of CCSR's work on noncognitive skill development and increasing recognition that teachers need actionable strategies to develop students' academic mindsets. To that end, teachers work together, with input and support from researchers, to identify and develop practices that may be suitable for other schools to adopt.

Character Lab strives to develop evidence-based teaching tools and practices that can be easily and effectively integrated into the school day—a key to scaling up. For example, a mental strategy to boost students' successful pursuit of goals helped fifth graders in a low-income New York City middle school move up half a standard deviation on their academic performance in one semester. Character Lab aims to help teachers weave this kind of exercise more systematically into their lesson plans and daily interactions with students.

Professional development for teachers | A second promising effort aims to upgrade the training programs teachers routinely enroll in. Many school districts partner with professional development providers to deliver in-service teacher training. Some of these providers serve multiple districts across many states and reach thousands of teachers each year. Given their reach, these providers can play an important role in helping to embed the development of noncognitive skills into the daily practice of thousands more teachers. By incorporating noncognitive competencies into their training programs, providers set a higher standard for other professional development organizations to follow.

The New Teacher Center (NTC), for example, considers SEL and academic mindsets as integral to its training programs. The center provides coaching and professional development, in person and online, to first-year teachers in more than two dozen school districts across the country. This year some 7,000 NTC mentor teachers will work with more than 26,000 new teachers who instruct an estimated 1.6 million students. NTC's Mentor Academy, for example, has integrated SEL development with its guides for implementing the Common Core. "Teachers need to have these competencies front and center the minute they come into teaching," says NTC CEO Ellen Moir. To complement its training and mentorship programs, NTC is building an online site with a set of tools and resources, including observation guides and assessment rubrics, focused on SEL and academic behaviors.

Systemic reforms in school districts | A third effort focuses on helping school districts integrate noncognitive competencies into district-level policies and practices, extending to every classroom. The Collaborating Districts Initiative, launched by CASEL in 2011, involves eight school districts striving to move beyond the programmatic and often modular focus of most SEL efforts. Rather than teach SEL as a separate classroom exercise once a week, for example, the initiative seeks to embed SEL into teachers' daily work with students. That means adopting SEL learning standards and assessments, designing professional development programs for teachers, and integrating SEL with existing district initiatives—such as the Common Core. CASEL hopes the collaborating districts initiative will provide successful models that other school districts will follow. Two of the districts involved—Austin, Texas, and Nashville, Tenn.—illustrate somewhat different routes to achieving the same goals.

In Austin, SEL Director Sherrie Raven has led the school district's initiative with a three-pronged strategy: teaching SEL to elementary school students using the evidence-based Second Step program;[4] embedding SEL in curriculum at all grade levels; and integrating SEL throughout the school day from the classroom to the cafeteria.

Austin hired 14 coaches to work with teachers on incorporating SEL into their daily activities. "The most critical thing for success has been the involvement of SEL coaches," says Raven. "These coaches keep

SEL at the forefront for principals and teachers, and they are building administrators' and teachers' capacity to sustain SEL implementation efforts over time." Among their many activities in schools, coaches reinforce a common language for SEL competencies, work with principals to determine how to integrate SEL into school culture, and partner with teachers individually and in groups to identify what works and how to better support SEL throughout the school day.

In Nashville, the school system chose not to hire SEL coaches, says Kyla Krengel, the district's SEL director. Rather, the district tapped its academic and instructional specialists to provide SEL support for teachers and administrators. The district is also working to embed SEL into existing programs and initiatives, including its project-based learning initiative in which students explore real-world problems and do a significant amount of individual exploration as well as group work. Project-based learning efforts began in high schools and will be rolled out in Nashville's elementary and middle schools as well. Nashville's academic specialists also help to integrate SEL support with the training teachers receive for implementing the Common Core. The district plans to review its teacher evaluation framework, seeking to identify links between teacher effectiveness and their SEL competencies.

Complementary efforts between in-school and after-school or expanded-learning time | The fourth effort involves after-school and expanded-learning time initiatives. Several of these programs already build noncognitive development into interactions with students. There are increasing examples of programs that work more closely with the schools where they are housed to ensure that students experience the same support for skill and behavior development during school as they experience after school.

WINGS for Kids, for example, is an after-school program teaching kids how to behave well, make good decisions, and build healthy relationships. Students participate for three hours each day throughout the school year. The staff typically spends the first hour providing direct SEL instruction, and then reinforces these lessons with teachable moments over the next two hours as students complete their homework and engage in enrichment activities.[5] WINGS also works to bridge the gap between students' in-school and after-school experiences. Program directors collaborate with school administrators and teachers to ensure that students in school are exposed to the same SEL concepts encountered in WINGS. The WINGS staff and teachers also assess students' SEL competencies with a series of behavior rating scales. This allows the WINGS staff and school's teachers to develop joint plans for providing additional supports as needed to students who may be struggling with specific concepts.

An increasing number of schools are also using expanded-learning time as a venue for developing effective learning behaviors. Through its ExpandED Schools initiative, The AfterSchool Corporation

(TASC) has developed a survey to help teachers and expanded-learning time educators measure students' academic "habits of mind." TASC then collaborates with instructional teams at schools to create action plans to help students become effective learners. Citizen Schools is another leading expanded-learning organization that provides low-income middle school students with hands-on, after-school apprenticeships focusing on social and emotional skill development. The apprenticeships emphasize 21st century skills, such as communication, collaboration, data analysis, advanced literacy.

What's Preventing Greater Scale?

While nascent, these four initiatives show promise for charting multiple ways educators—and entire school districts—can help students develop noncognitive skills, attitudes, and mindsets. However, those involved in advancing the noncognitive field realize that their efforts touch only a small number of students. Four barriers impede scaling up to a larger number of students.

District agenda overload | Administrators and teachers are weary from coping with multiple competing priorities, initiatives, and programs. Few districts have escaped deep budget cuts in recent years, eliminating teaching positions and long-standing programs. Many schools face high teacher and leadership turnover. Superintendents and school boards often fail to involve teachers in decisions that affect classroom practice. In this context, any new effort to develop students' noncognitive capabilities may come across as just another district initiative when there's simply no room to squeeze in another well-meaning program.

Lack of consistently positive school environments | Students need to experience consistent support throughout the school day to develop the SEL skills and academic behaviors that characterize effective learning. It takes a supportive environment for these skills and behaviors to translate to actual learning outcomes. Conversely, classrooms with negative environments "stifle perseverance and undermine academic behaviors, which results in poor academic performance," concludes a Consortium on Chicago School Research report.[6] Creating the right classroom environment starts at the top with district and school leaders who make noncognitive factors a system-wide priority. And it extends to every adult who is interacting with students throughout the school day. Such consistency is hard to find in any school, much less an entire school district.

Lack of adequate preparation for educators | Educators need to understand and be able to model the attitudes and behaviors they endeavor to instill in their students. Unfortunately, most haven't been trained to put noncognitive factors at the forefront of their work, and supportive professional development opportunities are scarce. At the top of the list of behaviors educators need to model are a growth mindset

—believing that their own and their students' abilities are not fixed but can be developed through dedication and hard work—and a sense of *self-efficacy*—believing in their own and their students' ability to complete tasks and reach goals. These are building blocks for student success because they reflect a fundamental belief that effort produces results.[7] Educators also need building blocks to develop trusting relationships with their students, including learning how to show empathy and respect. This implies significant changes for teaching training and coaching, which today largely focuses on pedagogy and classroom management.

Inadequate measurement | Assessment remains a huge challenge for the field, as evidenced by the questions yet unanswered. How exactly do you measure development of noncognitive factors? How do those measures change with students' age? Are some interventions more effective than others? Participants at the convening viewed this lack of clarity around measurement as a serious obstacle to field advancement, both in terms of progressing research to develop practical classroom practices and of attracting funders to support continued research. "This community needs to have a set of metrics that show SEL and other noncognitive skills are foundational to student success," says Moir. "We're never going to get into funders' portfolios unless we build a common language to measure success."

Priorities for Moving Forward

Moir's plea for a "common" way forward resonates with our findings. Commonality, in fact, has emerged as a unifying theme in a field where groups have worked in isolation. Once steeped in their own specialized pursuits, SEL advocates, academic mindset advocates, after-school and professional development practitioners, and reform-minded funders have begun to forge a unified voice around two goals critical to pushing aside barriers to the field's advancement and much greater scale: reorienting the field from replicating programs to integrating noncognitive development into teaching practice; and acknowledging that educators need support to develop their own noncognitive skills.

By focusing on these two goals, noncognitive field leaders hope to go farther faster, making what they learn available for application on a far greater scale. Agreement on priorities like these also will help draw attention and build momentum for the pioneering efforts already underway. Integrating noncognitive factors into teaching practice and teacher preparation are common elements of all the initiatives led by participants in the convening.

Shift from replication of programs to integration of practices into daily interactions with students | Over the past two decades, dozens of SEL instructional programs have been developed for all ages. They aim to help students learn skills such as conflict resolution, decision making, self-control, teamwork, and

relationship building. Many of these programs are taught as an add-on, with a designated time slot one or more days a week. Going forward, advocates want to see SEL and academic behaviors become integral to the student experience, and they want to achieve this shift on a scale that reaches millions of students.

School districts hold the key, especially the large, urban districts that educate the vast majority of students. They provide a platform for effective learning to become an integrated part of students' daily interactions. But first, districts need to figure out how to systemically build and embed the capacity and supports to do this well. As is the case with CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, this could mean integrating SEL into the district's budget, professional development, organizational structure, communications, school supports, and central office functions and priorities.

In addition, districts have to make change management a priority to help teachers and administrators navigate the often unfamiliar terrain associated with supporting students to become effective learners. Austin and Nashville have learned a lot about what district-wide change management efforts entail. They see the importance of having dedicated district capacity to lead the charge and build buy-in among teachers. In both districts, coaches work to steer the needed change in the right direction. And as the 8/9TN initiative discovered in Chicago, building educators' understanding of SEL and noncognitive development can be a prerequisite to gaining their engagement and ownership over development of their students as effective learners.

Professional development providers also have an important role to play by helping teachers learn the skills needed to help students become effective learners. Many of these providers, like NTC, work with thousands of teachers across multiple states. Similarly, expanded-learning time initiatives (Citizen Schools, ExpandED Schools) and after-school programs that work with schools (WINGS) are eager to align their ongoing SEL and noncognitive efforts with the work of teachers during the regular school day.

Help educators change their own beliefs and mindsets| Ongoing initiatives in the field have brought into sharper focus the need to devote much more attention to educators' beliefs and mindsets, and the development of their own noncognitive competencies. It's not just that educators feel unfamiliar with noncognitive skills and unprepared to teach them. In many cases, they also need to change long-held beliefs in their own and their students' capacity to learn—such as embracing the power of a growth mindset and self-efficacy. The need to focus attention and support on educators came as a surprise, but it's an insight central to advancement of the field. Students can't develop as effective learners unless their teachers understand, model, and believe in the skills and behaviors they seek to teach.

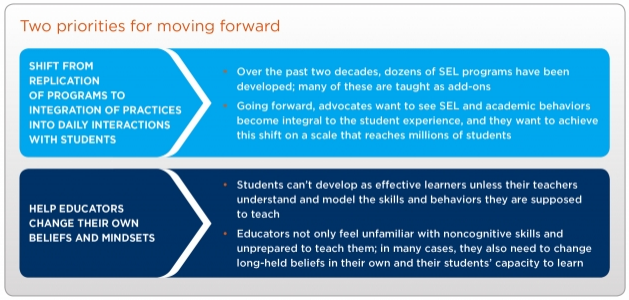
This was an early lesson for researchers and teachers involved with the 8/9TN initiative in Chicago.

Researchers quickly saw that many participating teachers did not believe they could impact students' noncognitive development or that students could change in the ways described, which shifted the initiatives' early focus to helping teachers develop needed behaviors and competencies. "We have spent a lot of time helping teachers to own the idea that they are a powerful force in students' lives, and in the few hours they have with students each day, they can do a lot. We have been able to change a lot of people's minds," says Ann Szekely, director of the 8/9TN initiative. Teachers viewed this knowledge and changes to their behavior as the gateway to helping students develop as effective learners. "Much of our work in this last year has been as much or more around teacher mindsets and teacher self-efficacy, without which it will be impossible for teachers to effectively support noncognitive development in their kids," says Camille Farrington, a research associate at the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research.

The investment in teachers pays dividends in the classroom. A growing body of research indicates that schools and classrooms are more important in shaping students' desired academic behaviors than the personal qualities they bring with them to school.[8] Without the requisite mindsets, beliefs, and self-knowledge, teachers are less likely to create the kind of supportive classrooms that foster effective learning. Creating the right environment starts with grounding teachers more firmly in their own noncognitive skills, traits, strategies, and attitudes. Such training presents a growth opportunity for university teacher training programs and professional development providers.

Make no mistake. Behavioral change is hard to learn and even harder to sustain. But the efforts under way to help teachers learn and model new noncognitive skills and behaviors are essential for the field to grow. What's learned from today's efforts will point the way to further research and development on strategies that position educators to help their students develop as effective learners—strengthening their own effectiveness as educators along the way.

Off to a Good Start



By clarifying goals and priorities for moving forward, the field is sure to accelerate research and learning. But advancing the field will take more than bold new approaches. Field leaders also recognize the need for greater emphasis on clear standards and measures of noncognitive factors—for teachers and students—that lead to greater student success, not only to calibrate learning today, but also to anchor the next wave of research around "what works." It's a point made by a recent Consortium on

Chicago School Research report: "While some very interesting and promising work has emerged recently, the state of research evidence, and the development of practice models still lag far behind the high level of interest."[9]

Field leaders also highlight the need for a coordinated learning agenda and more collaboration across different areas of research and exploration. Much remains to be learned about how best to help educators develop the self-knowledge they need to help their students become effective learners, and how to change educators' daily interactions with students to incorporate new approaches. And it's not clear which skills and behaviors—of the many being studied—make the most difference in improving student academic performance.

Ongoing efforts in the field represent a good start to answering these questions. With a clear fix on priorities and more coordination among field leaders, education funders increasingly may find noncognitive development an attractive arena for investment with the potential for significant impact—local, state, and national.

The accumulating body of knowledge gives rise to a growing sense of optimism that we can do better, much better, in preparing students for success in school and beyond. And those who stand to benefit the most are the students in low-income schools for whom success remains more dream than reality.

What's an Effective Learner?

It's a relatively new concept borne of recent research establishing the critical importance of noncognitive skills and behaviors to student success in school and beyond. While we use the word "noncognitive," we recognize that the field does not yet have a common language for this set of competencies. Therefore, we focus on the outcome—effective learning—and define "effective learners" as students who develop a set of qualities that includes self-control, persistence, social awareness, relationship skills, curiosity, resilience, and self-confidence. Research shows that such skills are the defining factors that set high school and college graduates apart from those who drop out at either level. The research that has introduced the importance of these qualities into mainstream conversation falls into two distinct but overlapping arenas: social and emotional learning (SEL), and academic attitudes and behaviors.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the leading proponent of SEL. Its mission is to make SEL an integral part of education from kindergarten through high school. CASEL has identified five interrelated social and emotional competencies that define SEL:

- Self-awareness | The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior.
- Self-management | The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations.
- Social awareness | The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
- Relationship skills | The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.
- Responsible decision making | The ability to make decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

A range of studies confirm that well-designed and well-executed SEL programs help students develop a greater attachment to school, diminish risky behavior, and improve academic performance. The most cited study is a 2011 analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs involving over 270,000 K–12 students. It found that many SEL programs significantly improved students' social and emotional skills, and academic performance improved by 11 percentile points among students in 33 programs that measured impact on achievement.[1]

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) is a leading proponent of enhancing students' academic attitudes and behaviors to boost performance. In 2012, CCSR published an influential paper that described five factors that significantly influence student academic performance as well as success in life: academic behaviors (going to class, doing homework), academic perseverance (grit, tenacity, self-discipline), academic mindsets (e.g., believing that abilities are not fixed but develop through hard work), learning strategies (study skills, self-regulated learning), and social skills (interpersonal skills, empathy, cooperation).

CCSR concluded that "building students' academic mindsets and teaching them appropriate learning strategies are the best ways to improve academic behaviors and perseverance, which leads to better grades."[2] Over the last decade, researchers such as Angela Duckworth and Carol Dweck have identified discrete interventions that, when applied in a lab setting, can result in changes in students' academic mindsets or attitudes. What the literature review highlighted, however, is the gap between what we know about the importance of these factors and how little we know about how teachers and other adults can help students develop them.

Across the two arenas highlighted above, there is common cause: to help many more students grow as effective learners. While the roots of these movements differ, we see potential for greater integration over time as many more educators seek to support their students in all the ways it takes to grow their hearts and minds.

Notes

[1] The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2014, ACT, http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr14/index.html; Foundation for Excellence in Education, http://excelined.org/2013/06/07/the-81-percent-why-high-academic-standards-matter/#sthash.rLqYX9cm.dpuf
[2] The Bridgespan Group organized the October 1–2 gathering in partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and Character Lab.
[3] Expanded-learning (ELT) time adds hours to the school day to increase the amount of time students spend engaged in high quality learning experiences. Unlike traditional after-school programs, under the ELT model, all students in a given school are required to attend the longer day and/or year, and the additional time becomes an integral component of the school's educational practices and objectives. Source: http://edglossary.org/expanded-learning-time/
. [4] http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step.aspx
[5] School-level studies from Yale University and University of Virginia show that students enrolled in two or more years of WINGS demonstrate significantly higher math and reading scores, grades, and school attendance.
[6] Camille A. Farrington, et al., Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners, University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (June 2012): 9
[7] Ibid., 30
[8] Farrington, Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners, 74
[9] Farrington, Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners, 74

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[1] Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, Allison B. Dymnicki, Rebecca D. Taylor, and Kriston B. Schellinger, "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Meta-Interventions," Child Development, vol. 82, no. 1, 2011: 405–432
[2] Camille A. Farrington, et al., Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance, University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, June 2012: 37

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U.S. NEWS

Shaking Up the Classroom

Some Schools Scrap Age-Based Grade Levels, Focusing on Mastery of Material

By STEPHANIE BANCHERO CONNECT

March 10, 2014 7:12 p.m. ET

Grace Hernandez with kindergartners at Jefferson Elementary in Lindsay, Calif. Pupils in one room are taught at different levels, at their own pace. *Matt Black for The Wall Street Journal*

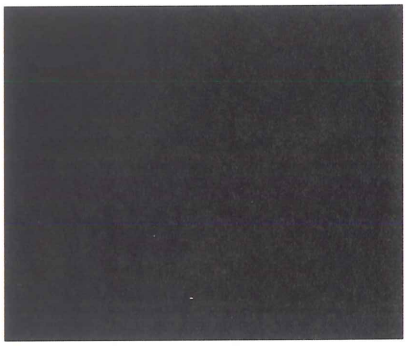
LINDSAY, Calif.—There are no seventh-graders in the Lindsay Unified School District.

Instead, in the "Content Level 7" room at Washington Elementary, 10 students, ages 11 to 14, gather around teacher Nelly Lopez for help in writing essays. Eight sit at computers, plowing through a lesson on sentence structure, while a dozen advanced students work on assignments in pairs.

The 4,100-pupil district at the base of the Sierra Nevada range is part of an experiment shaking up classrooms across the country. Called competency-based learning, it is based on the idea that students learn at their own pace and should earn credits and advance after they master the material—not just because they have spent a year in a certain class.

Salvador Centeno said he used to get bored at school and would secretly read Harry Potter novels during math. The 12-year-old, who would be in seventh grade in a traditional school, pulled out his school-issued laptop and opened a spreadsheet showing he is doing ninth-grade math. "Now, I can't slack off," he said with a smile.

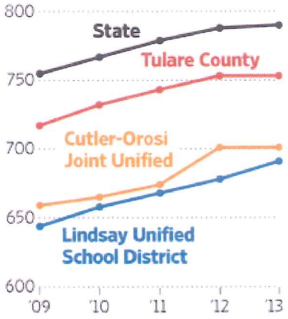
U.S. K-12 education has been undergoing a revolution as states try new ways to boost graduation rates and better prepare students for college or work. Louisiana gives credit for classes offered by local businesses. Rhode Island allows students to earn "digital



badges" outside the classroom for creating business plans. Students in Florida and Oregon take massively open online courses, or MOOCs, for high-school credit.

Making Progress

Lindsay is making faster gains than the state, county and a comparable district on the California Academic Performance Index, though its results are still lower.



Sources: California Department of Education; Lindsay Unified School District
The Wall Street Journal

Competency-based learning goes further, jettisoning the century-old idea that students move ahead based on age and classroom time. In the past few years, Iowa, Connecticut, Maine and Utah changed laws to let districts define what a credit means, bringing the number to 29 states.

The Obama administration gave grants to districts to experiment with the model; the Lindsay district here received $10 million from the administration's Race to the Top funding.

In Lindsay, which sits among lush citrus orchards, many students come from poor families who pick or sort fruit. About 95% of the pupils are Latino, and 100% qualify for free lunch.

Lindsay's move is showing some success. The district has seen its pass rates on state exams rise since competency-based teaching began in 2009. In reading, 34% of students passed the exams last year, up from 25% in 2009. Pass rates for math rose to 32% from 28%, while those for science jumped to 41% from 27%.

The district still scores below California averages on all the exams, but is improving faster than the statewide average on most of them. Lindsay's score in the state Academic Performance Index, based on tests, jumped to 691 last year from 644 in 2009. The 47-point gain compares with an average 35-point rise statewide.

Meanwhile, suspension rates dropped by 41% and high-school students claiming gang membership fell by half to about 4%, district officials said.

WSJ Radio

Stephanie Banchero and WSJ's Mathew Passy discuss competency-based learning

00:00 | 07:08

But competency-based systems have critics. Ann Marie Banfield of the conservative group Cornerstone Action said she has taken calls from New Hampshire parents and teachers who complain the system, which the state mandated in 2005, is too focused on work skills, such as collaboration, and not enough on academic excellence. Others worry the setup focuses too heavily on testing and could allow some students who need prodding to move too sluggishly.

"There is appeal to moving students through the curriculum as they are ready," said Daria Hall, director of K-12 policy at Education Trust, an advocacy group that focuses on closing the achievement gap. "But the risky downside is that it could translate into lower expectations in terms of how fast low-income and minority students are expected to progress."

The Lindsay district's leaders—unhappy with academic performance—seized on the idea that students should prove they know course material. The district replaced the old curriculum that laid out low-level academic goals with one that details more complex achievement targets. Officials rewrote lesson plans, devised a new grading scale and retrained teachers to tailor lessons for students at various levels.

On a recent day in Dora Villalobos's kindergarten classroom, rambunctious youngsters plowed through flashcards—with a 5-year-old as the leader—working on number recognition. Nearby, more advanced students did addition problems on tablet computers, while Ms. Villalobos glided through the room offering individual help.

Teachers say the transition was tough and, district leaders say, some educators left. "This was not a tweak of the old system," said Superintendent Tom Rooney. "We

Bottom, Five Years Ago

2 Shaquille O'Neal: The Self-Professed Tech Geek

3 Holder of Stolen Passport Seeking Asylum

4 Appreciating the Throat-Burning Chinese Liquor

5 Cell Races: How Fast Is Your Slime Mold?

dismantled the parts of the old system that didn't work and replaced them with an entirely new system."

Now, teachers must track every student during biweekly data sessions and move them in and out of groups or classrooms based on progress. Students must pass exams to prove they have met learning targets. Students who fail the tests repeatedly aren't moved ahead under "social promotion" but must master the material.

Amalia Lopez, who heads the English Department at Lindsay High School, said she comes to every class with five lesson plans—each for a different level of student aptitude. "I sleep very little and drink a lot of coffee," she said.

Write to Stephanie Banchero at stephanie.banchero@wsj.com