

How New Hampshire Transformed to a Competency-Based System

Posted May 10, 2016 in Policy by Dale Frost

For almost two decades, New Hampshire has shown how consistent, supportive state leadership can result in a system-wide transformation from traditional, one-size-fits-all education to more personalized, competency-based learning. Schools throughout the state have moved to student-centered learning environments and every high school must award credits based on demonstrations of mastery.



Policymakers in other states interested in transforming their education systems towards personalized learning can benefit from learning about and understanding New Hampshire's history.

In [New Hampshire's Story of Transformation](#), the New Hampshire Department of Education makes the following point:

One of the most important things we have done as a state is to anchor the change we seek to our values. Through this ongoing exercise, a set of values has emerged as foundational to our efforts, underpinning the work and providing us with a critical screen through which we monitor the existing efforts and evaluate new opportunities to create the system of learning New Hampshire wants and needs.

New Hampshire's educational core values, which are reflected in policy, leadership and practice, are:

- Moving to a competency-based system;
- Supporting educators;
- Local innovation is the driver of change; and
- An integrated learning system.

Early Piloting and State-Wide Conversations

New Hampshire's transition from Carnegie Units to competencies for student academic advancement occurred over almost two decades.

From 1998 to 2004, the state launched [competency-based education pilots in 27 high schools](#). Starting in 2004, the state began convening educators, leaders and community members to redefine the goals and design of the state's high school system.

The state department organized [an education summit](#) to collect data and input on several aspects of high school redesign, including personalization, rigor and relevance.

Much of the input is summarized in a [2005 report](#). The [initial policy in New Hampshire](#) provided districts with credit flexibility, but few districts took advantage of these policies to innovate at the time.

Basing Credits on Demonstrations of Mastery

In July 2005, the New Hampshire State Department adopted rule changes to [Ed 306.27](#) to [require high schools to base academic credit on demonstrations of mastery](#) rather than seat time.

The new rule allowed school boards to award credit either based on seat time or demonstrations of mastery of the required course competencies from 2005 to 2008.

For the 2008-09 school year and beyond, the state required local school boards to adopt policies for all students to earn high school credit by demonstrating mastery of required competencies for a course, as approved by certified school personnel.

The State Department's Supportive Role

Since then, the New Hampshire State Department of Education has taken on an increasingly active role in providing technical support to interested school districts.

Working with the New Hampshire Association of School Principals (NHASP) and the Concord Area Center for Educational Support (CACES), the state provided technical assistance to local school districts on how to create systems where credits are awarded on demonstrations of mastery.

New Hampshire passed a resolution, along with Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont, supporting the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC), partnering with them to support local innovations in the design and implementation of high school redesign.

Finally, the State Department created an in-depth vision document, significant communications and explanatory resources, and a course-level competencies validation rubric to improve the consistency and maintain high levels of rigor in locally-adopted competencies across the state.

Throughout this process the Department sought to respect local control. It said in one of its technical advisories:

In emphasizing the need for flexibility and autonomy for local school districts in implementing competency assessment, the state has left local districts the responsibility for developing policies relative to... high school course competencies [and]... appropriate competency assessment methods.

State-Level Competencies

Because of the emphasis on local control in the "Live Free or Die" state, New Hampshire did not pursue creating state-level competencies for voluntary use by school districts until years later.

In 2013, coordinating with educators from across the education spectrum along with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment and The Center for Collaborative Education, the Department developed state-level competencies. The state has approved competencies in mathematics, English language arts, science, art and work-study practices.

Moving Closer Towards Personalized Learning

Also in 2013, the New Hampshire Board of Education unanimously approved an update to the requirements for New Hampshire high schools (Ed 306.27), which solidified expectations for the state's high schools to provide personalized, competency-based learning environments.

These minimum standards require New Hampshire high schools to:

- Create and support extended learning opportunities outside of the physical school building and outside of the usual school day;
- Provide learning opportunities to enable students to achieve the district's graduation competencies aligned to the skills, knowledge and work-study practices required for success in college and careers; and
- Allow students to demonstrate achievement of additional competencies aligned to student interests in elective courses, career and technical education courses or extended learning opportunities.

These updated minimum standards for New Hampshire high schools made expectations explicit that students should be able to access educational opportunities customized to their individualized needs and circumstances.

Assessments For Learning

Finally, New Hampshire is pioneering the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) pilot program, a first-in-the-nation accountability strategy offering reduced levels of standardized testing together with locally-developed common performance assessments.

The PACE assessments support deeper learning and are meant to be more integrated into students' day-to-day work than current standardized tests. PACE is an example of how a state can achieve comparability, validity and reliability for an innovative assessment system with systems of multiple assessments.

Beginning in 2012, all New Hampshire school districts were invited to participate in the pilot program. It required extensive training and local commitment to managing testing locally. Currently, there are eight school districts participating in the New Hampshire PACE pilot program.

New Hampshire's transformation to a more competency-based system has helped New Hampshire schools to focus more deeply on student learning. The state is showing results and more students are actively engaged in their learning. The state's dropout rate was cut

• in half from 2.5% in 2008 to 1.26% in 2012, far below the national average dropout rate of 7%.

Interested in other promising policies for personalized learning? See our other resources and blogs in this series:

- [New Blog Series: Promising Policies for Personalized Learning](#)
- [Making Learning Personal: Eliminate Gaps and Ensure Mastery through Proficiency-Based Diplomas](#)
- [Increase Opportunity for Student Success through Multiple Pathways to Graduation](#)
- [Moving from Seat-Time to Competency-Based Credits in State Policy: Ensuring All Students Develop Mastery](#)
- [CompetencyWorks Report Cracking the Code: Synchronizing Policy and Practice for Performance-Based Learning](#)
- [CompetencyWorks Charting the Future of Competency-Based Education Policy](#)
- [Clayton Christensen Institute Case Study From Policy to Practice: How Competency-Based Education Is Evolving in New Hampshire](#)
- [New Hampshire's Story of Transformation](#)
- [Alliance for Excellent Education Report Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire's Competency-Based System](#)

