

Competency-Based Education at Work: An In-Depth Look

Competency-based education is not a new concept, but it is one that is finally gaining traction in school districts from Alaska to New Hampshire and points in between.

The approach focuses on students mastering a specific skill or piece of knowledge. When students can demonstrate they've mastered the task at hand – when they can prove they're competent in it – they progress to the next level, concept, or content area.

Technology allows educators to assess students in real time, determine how they are progressing on a given skill, and personalize instruction to each student.

Since students advance when they're ready, they are not confined to traditional grade levels.

That means an eighth grader who breezes through her math content could move on to a ninth-grade math before the end of the semester or school year.

Instead of handing out As, Bs, or Cs, some competency-based schools use a grading scale that ranges from E for exceeding to U for unsatisfactory, with marks for limited progress and insufficient work shown.

Teachers who use the approach in their classrooms are quick to point out that empowering students to move at their own pace increases student engagement and performance.

There are measurable outcomes to support this. Below are stories from districts across the country that have garnered results from competency-based education.

Iowa

[Muscatine Community School District](#) is a medium-sized district with 11 schools and just shy of 5,550 students. Roughly 54 percent of those students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

The district began piloting a competency-based approach in early 2012 and, as of December 2013, had three cohorts of K-12 teachers in various stages of implementation. Students are assigned to those classrooms at random and take part in competency-based learning for that course, but have a traditional learning experience in their other courses.

[Nearly all Muscatine high school students who took a competency-based course earned a grade of C or higher](#) in that class during the 2012-2013 school year. In courses following a more traditional model, 61 percent earned a C or higher.

But the significance goes beyond the letter grade, according to the state's [Competency-Based Education Task Force](#).

"In a traditional grading system, students earn points in all kinds of ways that are not necessarily connected to learning the specific standards related to the course: extra credit, bonus questions, bringing in boxes of Kleenex, returning signed forms, or points on one section of a test that

counterbalance another section on a different standard,” the task force wrote in a 2013 report. “Therefore, it is not clear if the students actually learned all of the content at the level expected for that grade.”

In competency-based courses, however, students were rated on their mastery of a specific learning objective, so the grade relates directly to the content, the group noted.

Iowa lawmakers support the push toward competency-based learning. In 2012, the state passed legislation allowing students to earn credit toward high school graduation in multiple ways, rather than solely via the Carnegie unit of seat time. Several other Iowa districts, including Spirit Lake Community School, are experimenting with competency-based models, though at varying degrees of implementation.

New Hampshire

Sanborn Regional School District switched to a competency-based model in 2010 after years of poor performance on state assessments, but had a head start thanks to a state law passed in 2005 that [required all schools to report on student competency](#).

As part of the shift, the district did away with traditional letter grades. Instead of As, Bs, or Cs, students are rated on their progress toward achieving various standards using a scale that ranges from E for exceeding to U for unsatisfactory, with marks for limited progress and insufficient work shown, among other measures.

Settling on a common grading scale – one where all teachers use the same system to come up with grades – was a challenge, district leaders said. To help overcome this barrier, the district created professional learning communities to encourage teachers to work together with one shared goal: helping students achieve.

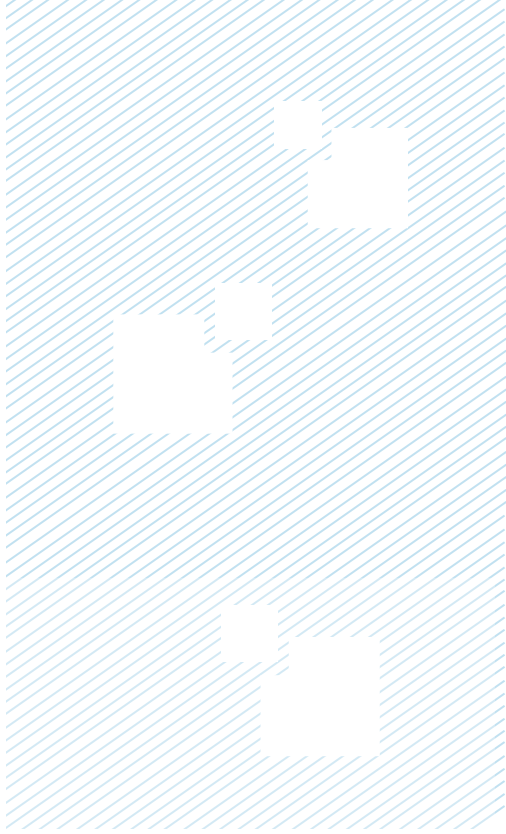
Evidence of this achievement is apparent at Sanford Regional High School, a suburban school with roughly 725 students, 14 percent of which qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch.

Sanborn High saw a significant drop in discipline issues after the state moved to a competency-based system in 2005. The number of freshmen reported for discipline issues [fell from 433 during the 2007-2008 school year to just 84 in 2011-2012](#). Course failures among the freshman class dropped from 53 students to just two students during the same time frame, according to a January 2013 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Colorado

Low test scores and declining school enrollment prompted Adams County School District 50, located in the outskirts of Denver, to change things up in 2008.

Adams 50 [was on academic watch](#), with most schools [designated as “turnaround” or “priority improvement” schools](#) by the state – the two lowest categories. It also ranked in the 28th percentile nationally in reading, with 90 percent of the district’s roughly 10,500 students reading below grade level.



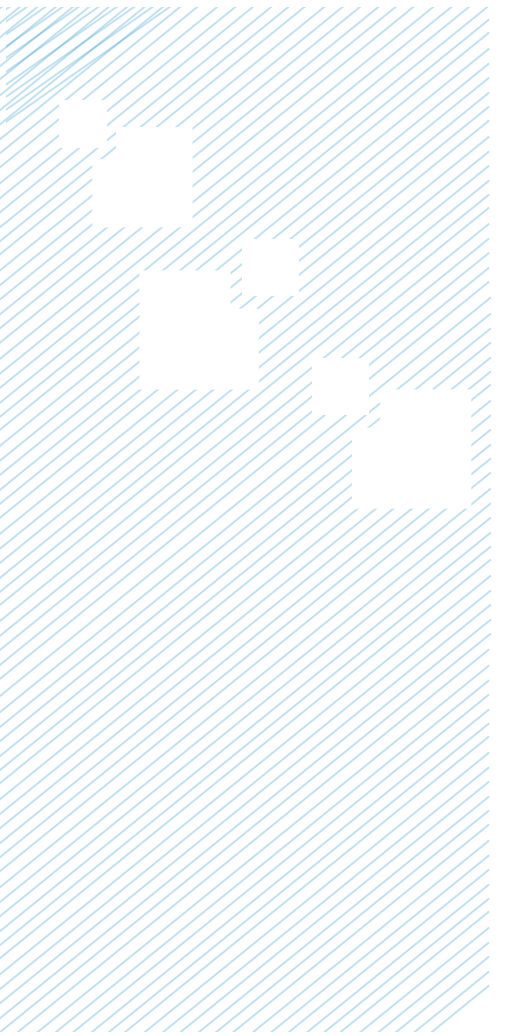
To spark improvement, Adams 50 settled on a competency-based model that did away with traditional grade levels and credit hours. Students were grouped by proficiency in a given topic, rather than age, and received personalized lessons, which they could move through at their own pace.

The shift started at the elementary school level during the 2008-2009 school year, with high schools phased in starting in 2010-2011. During that time [Adams 50 rose to the 71st percentile nationally in reading](#) and many schools made gains on Colorado state assessments.

Adams 50's transition to a competency-based system hasn't been without its challenges, though. The district tweaked its new academic standards several times to meet new state requirements and is still [working out class rank and grade point averages](#) in its high schools, the Denver Post reported.

Then there are state testing requirements, which "force Adams 50 to group students by grade, even though those students may not have been working on the particular academic areas that the tests cover," the paper reported in 2012.

Alaska



[Chugach School District](#) is a tiny district that spans 22,000 miles of mostly remote isolated communities in south central Alaska. The district employs roughly 30 teachers and staff members and enrolls roughly 275 students.

More than 200 of those students attend via [FOCUS Homeschool](#), which only employs four teachers. These so-called advisory teachers travel by "boat, plane, and snowshoes to visit ... families and provide them with support, materials, assessments, and encouragement," according to the school's website.

Chugach moved to an entirely competency-based system in 1994. At the time, 90 percent of students did not read at grade level and [1 in 26 graduated from college](#).

The district developed new standards covering 10 content areas – math, technology, reading, social sciences, writing, personal/social/health development, career development, cultural awareness, service learning, and science – as well as new assessments.

Students are assessed on their ability to "use technology to observe, analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions," and "explain the principles and ideals upon which government in the US is based," the [school's website explains](#).

The move to competency-based standards made a significant impact on the lives of students. More than 70 percent took a college entrance exam in 2000, up from zero percent, and student achievement on the California Achievement test jumped from the bottom quartile to the 72 percentile in just five years.