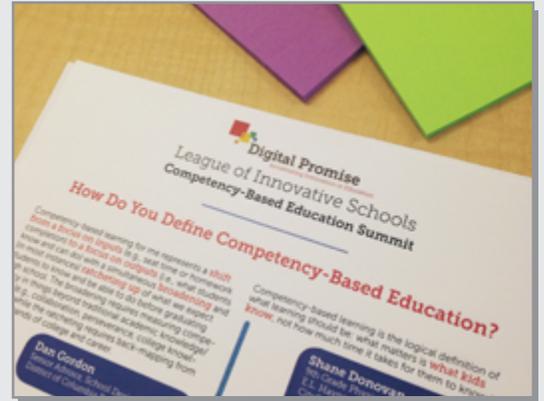


League of Innovative Schools Competency-Based Education Summit

May 20, 2014 • Washington, D.C.

On May 20th, 2014, the Digital Promise [League of Innovative Schools](#) hosted a workshop in Washington, D.C., featuring school district leaders, policy experts, and teachers working to personalize education in meaningful ways. Attendees shared their definitions of competency-based education (CBE), heard from educators applying these principles on the ground, and developed action plans to pursue CBE individually, with each other, and through Digital Promise.

This document provides a summary of the conversations, key themes, and takeaways from the League of Innovative Schools Competency-Based Education Summit.



Defining Competency-Based Education

In order to frame the summit's agenda, participants collectively defined CBE and shared first-hand experiences.

The following were the key CBE components identified:

- Student ownership of learning.
- Equitable model of education, with a focus on student growth and meeting the needs of each student.
- Personalized learning that meets students' social, emotional, and academic needs.
- Preparing students for "K-gray," equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need not just for college, but for a lifetime.
- Allowing for differentiated learning pathways.

To summarize and conclude the discussion, participants reviewed Susan Patrick and Chris Sturgis' definition of CBE from [Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills](#):

1. Students advance upon mastery.
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is a meaningful, 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.

District and School Models of Competency-Based Education

After discussing and reaching a consensus on what CBE is, district and school leaders from Maine, New Hampshire, and Washington, D.C., shared how they are working to build competency-based systems.

Regional School Unit 2, Maine Virgel Hammonds, Superintendent



All students can learn, but they don't all learn in the same way or at the same pace. So RSU 2 in Maine committed to customizing the learning processes to ensure each student got the most out of their time at school. To achieve this, Superintendent Virgel Hammonds moved RSU 2 to a competency-based curriculum, with the help of teachers, administrators, and community members.

Shifting to a competency-based model required district leaders to identify the specific skills students needed to learn. The district also had to redefine its structures, standards, and assessments to ensure expectations were clear and consistent for all students. RSU 2 built its standards around the Common Core State Standards, but structured them to meet the district's unique needs. They measure student growth by assessing the pace at which students progress through the curriculum.



Additional Information:

[Maine Department of Education RSU 2 Case Study](#)

Sanborn Regional School District, New Hampshire Brian Stack, Principal, Sanborn Regional High School Jonathan Vander Els, Principal, Memorial Elementary School



You won't find conventional letter grades on student report cards at Sanborn Regional School District in New Hampshire. 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.

Sanborn RSD 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. Still, settling on a common grading scale – one where all teachers use the same system to come up with grades – was a challenge. Creating professional learning communities helped the district ensure teachers were working together with one common goal: helping students achieve.



Additional Information:

[Our School's Pathway to Competency-Based Grading](#) by Jonathan Vander Els

Washington, D.C.

Jennie Niles, Founder and Head of School, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, D.C.
Dan Gordon, Senior Advisor, School Design, District of Columbia Public Schools, D.C.
Tanasha Dixon, 6th-8th Grade Social Studies Teacher, Wheatley Education Campus, D.C.
Shane Donovan, 9th Grade Physics Teacher, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, D.C.

DC Public Schools is working with partners at the state, district, school, and classroom level to make the shift toward CBE. The district is partnering with E.L. Haynes, a local charter school, as well as several local and national organizations, to make their goal a reality.



The district started with "CBE light," pushing students to take ownership of their learning and encouraging them to continue revising projects and assignments until they fully grasp the lesson or skill. Teachers in some schools have already shifted their courses to focus on competencies and say the move has changed the discourse in their classrooms and allows them to have more meaningful interactions with students. DCPS and E.L. Haynes are working to develop a CBE framework that can be scaled across all schools in the district.

League of Innovative Schools Competency-Based Education Areas of Interest

League superintendents in attendance reflected on the CBE models from Maine, New Hampshire, and Washington, D.C., and identified the following elements of CBE that they wanted to explore further together:

- Digital resources that support CBE and technical best practices
- Ensuring that CBE is equitable and serves all students; identifying state policies that support equity in CBE
- Change management for implementation of CBE
- CBE design in high school
- Research on efficacy of CBE; evidence that CBE is effective and an improvement over the traditional model of education
- Selling the need for CBE to district stakeholders; engaging the community around CBE
- Differentiation of CBE within content areas
- Assessing readiness to implement CBE; determining where to begin and the order of operations



The League's Competency-Based Education Priorities and Action Plans

Participants selected the following three areas of interest to explore and advance through action plans:

- External Communications of Competency-Based Education
- From Ideas to Action: Getting Started with Competency-Based Education
- Competency-Based Education in High School

! The Challenge:

Many educators, students, parents, and policymakers are unaware of the nuances, impact, and potential of a competency-based approach to education. Additionally, there are few comprehensive and accessible resources to help educators learn about these principles.

? The Essential Question:

How might we create external communications resources and a body of evidence that informs the public and supports school leaders around CBE?

⚡ Action Plan:

Curate meaningful stories, research, and resources about CBE and make them available through an online resource. Potential audiences for this resource include: parents, students, teachers, administrators, policymakers, businesses, higher education, and the news media.

1. Scan the environment

- What materials are already available?
 - Research
 - Case studies
 - Professional development materials
 - CompetencyWorks.org
- Which organizations are influential in this area?

2. Find compelling stories related to efforts in CBE

- Look within the League of Innovative Schools to find useful examples of competency-based learning in action
 - How are districts doing it?
 - How are teachers adapting to competency-based approaches?
 - What do students think?
- Identify the best schools for site visits related to CBE
 - Good examples:
 - Sanborn Regional School District, NH
 - Regional School Unit 2, ME
- Collect artifacts used for CBE
 - School schedules, report cards, evaluation rubrics, etc.

3. Define “competency-based education”

- Ask stakeholders for their view of CBE
- Create materials that explain CBE

4. Make resources available to those who need it

- Assemble and package these materials in one place
- Promote to schools seeking information and stories that help them navigate CBE
- Allow people to contribute their own stories and resources



! The Challenge: District leaders are learning more about CBE and are considering moving their schools in that direction, but they're not sure how to do it.

? The Essential Question: What are the essential elements of a strategy a district leader could use for getting started with CBE?

⚡ Action Plan: The following is a sketch of a strategy for transitioning to CBE. While each school district might answer the questions below in their own way, these elements are likely to be essential for any CBE strategy. Evaluation and continuous improvement must be embedded across all district strategies and plans.

1. Establishing a vision

A shift to CBE would likely mean a lot of changes, which means discomfort for district stakeholders. Leaders should be able to answer: What is the aspiration? Why is it important to move in this direction? How do we know it will be worth the effort? Learning from existing CBE models would support this visioning process.

2. Conducting readiness and needs assessments

Most importantly, how prepared are our teachers to structure student learning in this new way, and what support will they need to be successful? [KnowledgeWorks' CBE framework](#) could be adapted to serve as a needs assessment instrument to be used with teachers.

3. Engaging key district stakeholders

Who are the people within the district who need to be part of the strategy team? Who else needs to be informed and involved along the way?

4. Engaging the community

What is the broader strategy for communicating the vision and earning buy-in among parents, community members, and others with interests in and influence over what happens in the school district?

5. Addressing system and structure issues

Desire to transition to CBE is not sufficient. Just as teachers need to be ready, so do systems and structures that serve as the backbone of school districts. How will grading and data systems need to change? How will relationships and communication with higher education institutions need to be adjusted? How will schools rearrange the way time and space are organized to support CBE? Which state policies need to be examined and potentially changed, if any?

6. Choosing an implementation approach

Each district will have characteristics and interests that influence the appropriate implementation approach. Does it make sense to implement CBE in the entire district right away, or to take a gradual approach? Start with certain schools? Start with certain grade levels across schools? Elementary grades might be a natural place to start because it allows more time for the district to work through issues specific to the high school-higher education transition.

- ! The Challenge:** High school is the last chance teachers have to help prepare students for college and the workforce, but high schools are faced with unique challenges when trying to move toward competency-based education. Students have been in a traditional school setting for longer, so they may be resistant to change and have the potential to be further behind. High schools also have additional accountability measures, including graduation rates.
- ? The Essential Question:** How do you create a plan for advancing CBE in high schools, given the complexities of high school design, student age, and accountability?
- ⚡ Action Plan:** The group settled on the following action plan, which includes both short-term and long-term goals:

1. Research key frameworks
 - [Designing the Future of Learning: Unthink School to Rethink Learning](#), 2Revolutions
 - [CompetencyWorks.org](#)
2. Identify organizations that are supporting CBE high school design and implementation
 - Support organizations/intermediaries: Springpoint, Next Generation Learning Challenges, etc.
 - Foundations: Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates, Carnegie Corporation of New York, etc.
 - Education policy groups
 - Business groups
3. Support District of Columbia Public Schools in defining the characteristics of CBE to build a model everyone can use
4. Identify barriers for CBE at the high school level and develop strategies to overcome them
 - Focus on the equity imperative
 - Higher education requirements and college admissions
5. Review competencies being used by successful CBE high schools and determine how likely/unlikely it is to have a shared list of competencies
6. Compare student work to norm what mastery looks like across LEAs and schools
 - How do other LEAs and schools define competencies?
 - Evidence of student work in CBE environments
7. Connect with civil rights organizations about CBE to build an important bridge connecting education reform efforts and civil rights efforts
8. Assess the stance of national policy organizations towards CBE and highlight supportive organizations
9. Engage high school principals from League districts in this body of work



Conclusion and Next Steps



The Competency-Based Education Summit generated energy, innovative ideas, and concrete action plans for advancing CBE in League districts.

The action plans for the three areas of interest will require different types of support and engagement. Digital Promise will follow up on the action plans and specifically will take on the following activities.

External Communications of Competency-Based Education

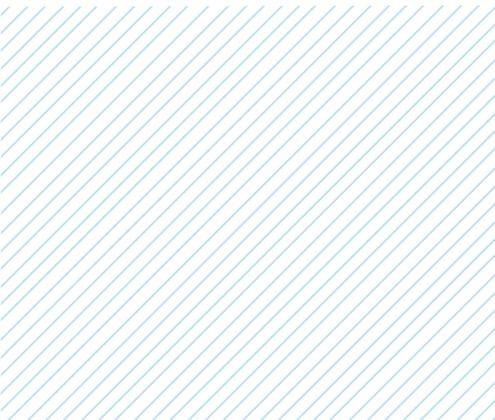
Digital Promise will partner with educators and other organizations to help inform the public discussion about CBE and help the field understand the potential and the challenges of such an approach.

From Ideas to Action: Getting Started with Competency-Based Education

Digital Promise will further develop the action plan for getting started with CBE and share this framework with League districts. League districts that use this framework can provide feedback on and context for each step of the plan.

Competency-Based Education in High School

To support the action plan for designing CBE in high schools, Digital Promise will facilitate a landscape analysis of organizations providing design and implementation support as well as policy and advocacy support and will work to build partnerships with these organizations.



To support League districts more generally in understanding and advancing CBE, Digital Promise will compile research, resources, and CBE best practices. Digital Promise will also work to organize site visits to CBE schools for League members. We look forward to building on the action plans that were generated at the summit and supporting League districts through this challenging, but critical transition.