Competency-based Education

Pascack Valley Regional High School District - Rethinking Academic Calendars

How does your organization define competency-based education?

Using subject-area standards as the criteria to which student's skills and knowledge are evaluated and feedback given.

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Overview

We recently completed a comprehensive survey of students, parents, and faculty on areas relating to our assessment policies. There was a very high rate of return and the data will be used to adjust district practices in assessment and professional development for next school year. We have also been visiting various high schools that employ and do not employ, competency-based education. Furthermore, we have or will visit eight different universities this year that a bulk of our students apply for to see how students are assessed in post-secondary education.

Beliefs

We want to help our students become more independent and more involved in their education. Our hope is that students will better understand their growth if they can identify the skills that they are using and reflect on their progress rather than only defining their success by a letter grade.

Rationale

Our district has always been interested in innovative ways to enhance students' learning. We thought a more flexible assessment schedule might be a pathway to do that but we wanted to proceed in a thoughtful, well-researched manner. In 2015, we visited several districts who were innovating in this area (e.g. we went to Hunterdon Central to discuss eliminating marking periods), and several Pennsylvania districts. Teachers felt we should explore this concept further. Conceptually, it made sense to try something new.

Outcomes

Of the dozen or so teachers who are trying levels of flexible assessment, all report that interactions with students are less stressful because the students know that they can perform assignments over and over again until they reach mastery. Those teachers spend more time considering feedback than they have in the past.

Surprises

Something we did not anticipate was how diverse some of the instructional strategies our teachers are using have become.

Trade-offs

Simplicity! Shifting components of the system to CBE can be a complex process that could rock the apple cart, but ships were not built to sit in the harbor! Like all types of change, doing it right takes hard work and planning.

Considerations

How will teachers/students/parents/colleges view changes to assessment and competency-based grading if they become a district-wide initiative?

Artifacts

One of our teachers explains a system for organizing assessment around key skills and allowing for multiple attempts at mastery: "I grouped the standards into 3 basic categories: reading, writing, and critical thinking. I split critical thinking into making meaning and problem solving. My gradebook is organized around the 20 skills. Students are allowed to perform assignments over and over again to reach mastery. These skills are assessed on various assignments during the semesters. Some skills have been assessed more frequently than others. For instance, I have assessed considering diction and syntax the most frequently because I have required that all submitted assignments are grammatically perfect."