POLICY, PILOTS AND THE PATH TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: *A National Landscape*

A Survey of Current State Law and Policy on Competency-Based Education in K-12 Systems

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Launched by former Governor Jeb Bush in 2008, the Foundation for Excellence in Education's (Excel*in*Ed) unique contribution is working with decision makers on developing and implementing reform policies. We are a hands-on, how-to organization that provides model legislation, rule-making expertise, implementation strategies and public outreach. Our staff has years of experience working with state and local governments, legislative bodies, in the classroom and with the media.

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EducationCounsel is a mission-based education consulting firm that combines significant experience in policy, strategy, law and advocacy to drive improvements in the U.S. education system. We develop and advance evidence-based ideas at the local, state and national levels to strengthen educational systems and promote expanded opportunities and improved outcomes for all students in order to close achievement gaps and significantly improve education outcomes for all children from early childhood through postsecondary education. It is affiliated with Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough.

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Introduction

Competency-based education is a system where students advance to higher levels of learning when they demonstrate mastery of concepts and skills regardless of time, place or pace.

A collaboration of innovative leaders and practitioners led by CompetencyWorks and iNACOL developed a working definition of competency-based education. This definition is accepted widely by the field, and is based on five design principles:

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

The shift to a competency-based system that fully embodies these five design principles provides the foundation for personalized learning. The implementation of these principles creates a framework educators can use to meet students where they are. Competency-based education differs significantly from traditional systems, where students spend a set amount of time on certain subjects and advance at predetermined intervals (course units and grade levels) regardless of whether or not the students have mastered the material. The shift to competency-based education is comprehensive and often requires fundamental changes in schedules, calendars, assessment and grading. This means state policy solutions are often needed to support this significant transition in schools and districts.

Though competency-based education is not an entirely new idea, it is the subject of new attention and excitement, particularly as states and local education agencies (LEAs) design systems for today's students. This is especially true given new efforts to personalize learning for students. **Competency-based education can provide a foundation and framework for personalized learning in K-12 systems by ensuring equity of expectations and rigor of instruction and assessment yet providing flexibility in pace and delivery**. Strong state and local policies can create the kind of environment that allows these new models to thrive.

Over the past several months, Excel*in*Ed and EducationCounsel have examined current key legal and policy foundations related to competency-based education in K-12 systems in all 50 states and D.C.[1] Exce*in*Ed and EducationCounsel have specifically aimed to understand more about the landscape of current state policy, including existing legal and regulatory foundations for competency-based education and how they may link to the practical challenges of implementation. The scope of this review has included: state policies that can actively promote competency-based education, those that remove obstacles and/or those that support local competency-based innovation.

This paper summarizes our findings and links them to Excel*in*Ed's emerging policy recommendations for states to consider.

Section 1 starts by examining what could be a strong step toward competency-based education for many states: innovation or pilot programs to support the transition to competency-based education in LEAs and schools. These pilots can provide support for innovative LEAs and schools and an opportunity to test and identify the broader policy areas that competency-based education programs may affect. (The latter point may be especially important given that the next generation of competency-based work is still emerging in state policy.)

Section 2 then explores six broader areas of statewide policy that are based on Excel*in*Ed's Competency-Based Education Fundamental Principles:

1. Provide flexibility from time-based systems in statute or rule.

2. Transition to competency-based diplomas.

3. Facilitate acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education.

4. Encourage policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning.

5. Design state assessment systems to support competency-based education.

6. Evolve accountability systems to support competency-based education environments.

States may wish to consider these areas of broader change as part of their innovation or pilot programs, looking specifically for policy and practical barriers to competency-based programs that may not emerge until the programs move from design to implementation.

States have an important moment of opportunity to pursue new competency-based programs given changes in federal law through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which grants significant new flexibility and authority to states to shape new assessment and accountability systems. This freedom presents both an opportunity to create new innovative systems and a challenge to ensure that those new systems maintain states' commitments to serving all students well. This paper specifically identifies ESSA-related opportunities throughout.

The shift to competency-based education is no small undertaking—and no state has made the shift entirely, because decisions to remove seat-time requirements and introduce pilots are only the beginning of the process. To achieve success, states, LEAs and schools will need to invest significant time, effort and resources to design and implement competency-based systems that work for educators and students. Context will affect these plans, meaning that no two states are likely to take exactly the same path.[2]

In this time of change, it can be helpful to identify the policy foundations that can incent local innovation, remove obstacles to successful implementation and build K-12 teaching and learning systems for today's—and tomorrow's—students. Excel*in*Ed and EducationCounsel hope this paper will provide states with greater clarity on the specific policy decisions and concrete first steps to support competency-based education both in the short and long term. There are already several promising examples emerging in several states, most notably in New Hampshire. Many of these states are highlighted in each section.

Indeed, our review suggests that many—even most—states already have policies in place that can enable competency-based education, especially in the area of providing flexibility from time-based systems. **This means the initial challenge for states may be less in creating dramatic, immediate new policy changes and more in creating awareness of existing opportunities and supporting innovative LEAs and schools ready to seize those opportunities.**

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Effective design and implementation of competency-based education depends on local context and significant stakeholder support. Considering this, states should work to increase understanding and dialogue among administrators, educators, parents, policymakers and other stakeholders. As this paper has described, competency-based education presents some significant differences from more traditional K-12 education models that may not be self-evident and understandable to students, parents, educators and policymakers. States can build awareness and work to gain more support for competency-based education through proactive communication and stakeholder engagement strategies. States may also be able to use existing stakeholder engagement and feedback mechanisms (e.g., advisory committees, town hall meetings and digital communications platforms).

For states initiating innovation or pilot programs that support competency-based education, they may use those local sites to spark statewide dialogue and to create a better evidence base for broader statewide policies. Including different stakeholders in these conversations is essential to help build understanding and support for competency-based education—and to think proactively about issues related to scaling and translating pilot and innovation site results to other LEA and school contexts in the state. Indeed, several new state pilot programs explicitly included a variety of communications, transparency and stakeholder engagement requirements in the authorizing statute.

These stakeholder engagement efforts may also be paired with more substantive training and technical assistance programs for administrators and educators charged with implementing systems. Key topics likely include creating and interpreting student achievement data based on competencies, making accountability determinations based on those data and linking data with instructional strategies and techniques. It is likely that these efforts will dovetail with other state and local efforts to personalize student learning in many different learning environments.

> ## Pilot Communication and Engagement Plans
>
> This paper pays special attention to state pilot and innovation programs designed to promote competency-based education, detailed in Section 1 below. Notably, several existing state pilots included a requirement that LEAs participating in pilots develop a communications and engagement plan as part of their effort. These pilot programs include:
>
> - Florida's competency-based education pilot requires participating LEAs to include in their applications a communications plan for parents and other stakeholders, including local business and community members
> - Idaho's mastery-based education "incubator sites" pilot requires participating LEAs to develop local outreach plans.
> - Utah's Competency-Based Grants program requires LEA grantees to communicate and promote their plans to parents, teachers and members of the community.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broad research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states wishing to enhance efforts to implement competency-based education through communications and stakeholder engagement efforts.

- Ensure all innovation pilot applications include a communications and outreach plan.

- Engage with parents, educators, postsecondary education institutions and policymakers to explain how they all can benefit from the state's efforts to implement competency-based education and how it links to other state education policies.

- Communicate with parents and other stakeholders (e.g., educators, postsecondary education institutions and policymakers) how meeting competencies relates to college-and-career-ready standards and expectations by the state and postsecondary institutions.

- Identify areas where educators and administrators need state-provided technical assistance and support to implement competency-based education effectively.

- Report to key state policymakers, educators and other influencers on findings and results from innovation and pilot programs related to competency-based education.

Competency-Based Education Communication Toolkits

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: STATE POLICY COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT
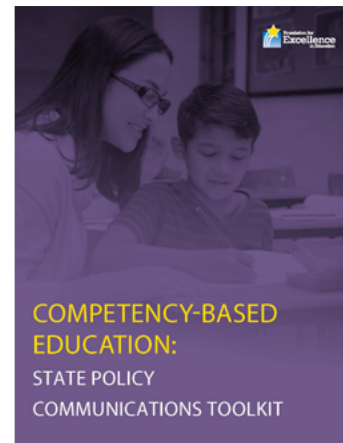
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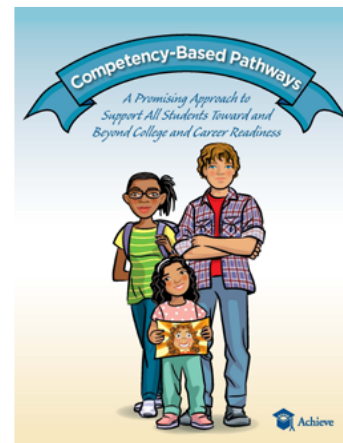
From Achieve

Recommendations for Communicating the Shift to Competency-Based Education

Research demonstrates there is much variation in both the progress and process of states transitioning to competency-based education. However, common themes and key messages have evolved. States transitioning to competency-based education tend to:

- Frame the shift to competency-based education in the context of college and career readiness.
- Emphasize the overarching goals and principles for competency-based education without letting any one particular method, such as methods leverage technology, get all the attention.
- Work purposefully with stakeholders to ensure a balance of local control and state support.
- Highlight the goal of empowering local leaders to innovate new competency-based models.
- Emphasize that competency-based education is not a new reform but a way to provide flexibility for educators to ensure that students demonstrate competency.
- Demonstrate how competency-based education is a natural extension of existing initiatives.
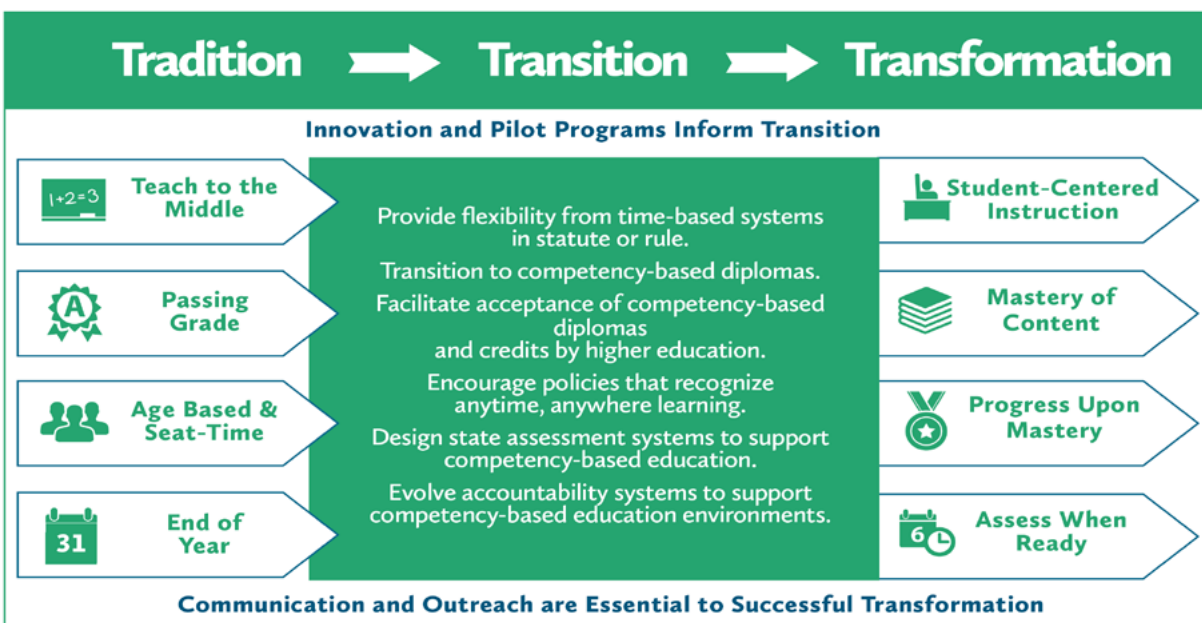
Section 1: Creating Opportunities for Innovation

Effective implementation of competency-based education demands attention to an intricate array of education policies, practices and systems at the federal, state and local levels. Some decisions can be anticipated in advance (e.g., the need for flexibility from time-based credits and requirements) while others will only become apparent during implementation (e.g., challenges logging competency-based credits into time-based databases and IT systems). Indeed, New Hampshire's state approach to competency-based education—commonly viewed as the most advanced in the country—has required more than a decade of work to reach its current maturity level.

Local contexts can have a significant effect on the purpose, use and focus of competency-based programs. Though not the only approach available to states and LEAs to pursue competency-based education, pilots and innovation zones can allow for the exploration of competency-based education in different state contexts (e.g., rural v. urban or elementary v. secondary), school sizes and roles of technology.

Early implementation of competency-based education programs does require time and effort to define competencies, create assessments to evaluate student mastery of those competencies, provide training for teachers and school leaders, and coordinate with various systems and stakeholders. However, first and foremost, schools must have student supports and interventions ready when learning gaps are identified. To reduce the burden of transition and obviate the need for new resources, LEAs can leverage existing resources and examples, align competency-based education piloting with existing training and development efforts, and/or redirect resources toward the pilot.[3]

Innovation programs and pilots provide a reasonable and actionable first step for policymakers. They also provide an important opportunity to work through challenging issues and strike an appropriate balance of state and local responsibilities. As lessons are learned and local competency-based models are refined, these pilots may allow intra-state sharing as other LEAs and schools learn about the pilots and how they might be adapted for their own unique contexts within the state.

Tradition ➡ Transition ➡ Transformation

Innovation and Pilot Programs Inform Transition

Tradition	Transition	Transformation
1+2=3 Teach to the Middle	Provide flexibility from time-based systems in statute or rule.	Student-Centered Instruction
Passing Grade	Transition to competency-based diplomas. Facilitate acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education.	Mastery of Content
Age Based & Seat-Time	Encourage policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning. Design state assessment systems to support competency-based education.	Progress Upon Mastery
End of Year	Evolve accountability systems to support competency-based education environments.	Assess When Ready

Communication and Outreach are Essential to Successful Transformation

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▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- Our review—like studies by Achieve and INACOL — suggests that states are at different levels of maturity in this area. As summarized by the map below, many states have authorized general innovation programs yet there is great variation in size and scope (and not many LEAs appear to be using these programs to promote competency-based education yet). Several states recently passed new legislation authorizing competency-based education pilot programs, so the results of implementation are likely to take some time to emerge. A handful of states have not created statewide innovation programs or competency-based pilots, but are home to leading LEAs and schools that have pursued competency-based education on their own.

The map below shows the current state of state policy related to innovation programs or competency-based education pilots. It is intended only to reflect state law and policy foundations. It does not attempt to judge states or aim to speak to the current state of implementation of the law or policy in question.

States can design programs to spark innovation in competency-based education in many different ways, depending on state priorities, contexts and needs. This review found that state approaches tend to fall in two categories: (1) specific competency-based education pilot programs and (2) general innovation programs or funds.

Competency-Based Education Pilot Programs

Competency-based education pilot programs are new and specifically focus on developing and incubating competency-based education in LEAs and schools based on state priorities and goals. These programs specify parameters for participants in detail and usually include multiple components intended to promote competency-based education in schools. Some states frame these pilots as competitive grant programs, while others have identified specific pilot sites in the authorizing legislation. A few recent examples include:

- Florida established a five-year competency-based education pilot program in March 2016. The authorizing statute identified four LEAs and one lab school that are permitted to submit an application to the state department of education. These applications are required to include a plan for: the annual goal for performance outcomes, student progression based on content mastery (that determines requirements for grade-level promotion), and the proposed allocation of resources for the pilot at the school and LEA level. The state board of education is responsible for adopting rules to administer the pilots. The state department of education is required to report to the governor, president of the senate and speaker of the house annually about activities and accomplishments in the pilot, including recommendations for statutory revisions.

- Idaho authorized the creation of an initial cohort of incubators for mastery-based education in FY2017. The state department of education led an application and assessment process to identify participating LEAs. In April 2016, 19 applicants were selected to form the first cohort of the Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN). The sites are intended to provide data and best practices for continued implementation of mastery education across the state. As part of the program, the state department of education is also required to conduct a statewide awareness campaign and create a committee of educators to identify roadblocks, possible solutions and other recommendations for mastery based learning.

- Ohio's Competency-Based Education Pilot will allow five applicants to plan and implement competency-based education programs. The Ohio Department of Education selected five sites in March 2016, each of which will receive up to $200,000 per academic year during the pilot. Ohio also allowed that participating students will be considered as traditional full-time equivalent students for purposes of state funding. Under the authorizing statute, each pilot site must satisfy all of the following requirements: (1) students must advance upon mastery; (2) competencies must include clear, measurable, transferable objectives that empower students; (3) assessments must be meaningful and a positive learning experience for students; (4) students must receive timely, differentiated support based on individual learning needs; (5) learning outcomes must emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of work-ready skills; and (6) pilots must incorporate partnerships with postsecondary institutions and members of industry. The state department of education is required to post an interim report on the pilots by January 2017 and an evaluation of implementation by December 2018, including impact on student outcomes in participating pilots and a determination of the feasibility of a new state funding model that reflects student achievement outcomes through competency-based education.

- Utah's Competency-Based Grants Program awards planning grants, implementation grants or expansion grants to LEAs to incentivize them to establish competency-based education through the use of personalized, blended or extended learning, educator professional learning or other methods. Utah appropriated $369,000 for the first year of the program, which is intended to support up to three separate planning grants. The state board adopted Rule 277-712 in June 2016. This package established the statutorily required Review Committee, procedures and requirements for awards, and performance metrics.

- These examples are all recent developments. It is worth noting that other states have piloted competency-based education programs in LEAs in the past. One of them, Oregon, made helpful findings in the review of its pilot's results. The review noted the importance of: (1) local flexibility in meeting individual student needs; (2) engaging teaching and administrative staff in new approaches to teaching and learning throughout the pilot; and (3) focusing on standards and defined performance levels to maintain consistency and appropriate rigor for awarding high school credit across pilot sites.

General Innovation Programs or Funds

The scope of general innovation programs or funds extends beyond competency-based education, allowing LEAs and/or schools to apply for flexibility in one or more areas. Usually, the areas for innovation opportunities are quite broad and are often tied to other state K-12 policy priorities, such as turning around the lowest performing schools. However, these innovation opportunities could allow for competency-based education within their broad terms—particularly given new flexibility under ESSA. Sometimes, additional state funding is available for approved LEAs and schools.

Some states have specific language in policy or regulation that identifies which specific state requirements may be lifted for approved local programs. Others have offered LEAs and schools specific guidance on how competency-based education may be pursued through these programs. Other states leave it to LEAs and schools to request flexibility based on their own assessment of policy barriers and/or to propose their own ideas for using general innovation opportunities to support competency-based education.

The map above illustrates all states with innovation programs, and below are some detailed examples:

- Colorado's Innovation Schools Act authorizes innovation zones and innovation schools. Local school boards have the authority to designate an innovation school or innovation zone based on a plan submitted by the school or schools. Among the permissible innovations include: the length of school day and year student promotion and graduation policies; and the assessment plan. Schools also must describe expected achievement gains and cost savings/efficiencies, if any. "Suggested innovations" in the Act include the following accountability measures: graduation or exit exams, end-of-course exams, student portfolio reviews, and national and international exams.

- Georgia's Innovation Fund began as a part of Georgia's Race to the Top plan and provided grants to invest in local efforts "to plan, implement and scale innovative education programs that advance student achievement" throughout the state. To continue the Innovation Fund's work, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal has appropriated state funding for the Governor's Office of Student Achievement to administer grants to organizations focused on planning, implementing or scaling programs aligned with the Innovation Fund's priority areas. Those areas include: applied learning with a focus on K-12 STEM education; birth to age eight language and literacy development; development and replication of blended learning school models; and teacher and leader development for high-need schools.

- Massachusetts's Innovation Schools initiative allows schools autonomy to implement strategies to help increase student achievement in six areas: curriculum, budget, school schedule and calendar, staffing, professional development and LEA policies. Within the "curriculum and assessment" area, the state department of education lists "graduation requirements set by the school, not by the LEA, with an emphasis on using competency-based, performance-based assessment" as a potential policy change for Innovation Schools.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broader research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states that wish to create innovation or pilot programs to enable competency-based education development in their LEAs and schools. **States should use the following recommendations to build upon existing innovation programs to more clearly support competency-based education through legislative amendment or expanded guidance documents.**

- Authorize a formal pilot or other innovation program to support the development of competency-based education in LEAs and schools.

- Identify specific goals for the pilot, including a clear definition of competency-based education, the intended purposes, contexts that the pilot is intended to inform, and the short- and long-term expectations for student and school outcomes.

- Allow participating LEAs and schools to request flexibility from state requirements that would hinder the success of their competency-based education efforts. Rather than limit those requests only to the time of initial application, allow the requests to be make throughout the pilot or innovation program process.

- Require applicants to include goals and performance targets for the innovation pilot. Areas of performance measurement should include but are not limited to:

  - Student achievement and growth as measured by the statewide assessment and other measures for non-tested grades and subjects.

  - Closing of achievement gaps using multiple measures but shall include, at a minimum, results from the statewide assessment.

  - Graduation and/or grade advancement rates (as appropriate).

  - For high schools, measurements of student progress or pace towards a four-year graduation, including but not limited to credit accumulation and retention rates.

- Identify additional areas of performance measurement to develop and implement.

- Include metrics and milestones to inform state evaluation of implementation and establish a process for pilot participants to identify additional metrics and milestones.

- Ensure that competency-based education efforts are aligned to the state's challenging academic state standards and their education goals for all students and subgroups.

- Ensure all students within a participating school are included in the pilot and that participating LEAs and schools pay appropriate attention to the needs of different subgroups in designing policies to make them as equitable as possible.

- Require applicants to demonstrate some level of support for their pilot proposals from local stakeholders (e.g., administrators, educators, school boards and parents).

- Require all applications include a communications and outreach plan from the beginning and throughout implementation to ensure all stakeholders understand proposed changes.

- Create intentional feedback loops for policymakers concerning requests for flexibility and any other policy barriers identified.

- Build in an expectation that pilot sites and/or innovation zones capture and share lessons learned with others in the state through a communications plan, state-facilitated workshops, reports to the governor and legislature, or other opportunities to collaborate.

OTHER PARTNERS

Some states have been successful at leveraging relationships with strong external partners to kick start innovation at the local level. These examples, while not spotlighted on the map above, demonstrate that state policy may not be the only means to incent and support the adoption and implementation of competency-based education programs in schools and LEAs.

South Carolina

The South Carolina Council on Competitiveness was formed by a group of business, academic and government leaders to collaborate on issues that affect the long-term economic success of the state. TransformSC is an education initiative of the Council committed to supporting schools and districts that are ready to innovate. Currently there are 51 schools from 21 districts in the TransformSC network. TransformSC has also partnered with other organizations to help state policymakers and the state department of education understand and provide what the network of schools will need for successful implementation.

Colorado

The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) is a statewide nonprofit organization whose mission is to accelerate innovation and improvement in Colorado's school by partnering with schools, districts, the Colorado Department of Education and other partners. CEI's vision is that all students in Colorado are prepared and unafraid to succeed in school, work and life, and are ready to take on the challenges of today, tomorrow and beyond.

New York

The Mastery Collaborative from New York City Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness works with more than 40 public middle and high schools across New York City. This community of mastery-based practitioners shares models, ideas and resources. A special focus for the 2016-17 school year is how competency-based, culturally-responsive education can support diverse learners toward college and career readiness.

Design Parameters for Competency–Based Education Innovation and/or Pilot Programs

Along with the necessary policy decisions, states will also have the opportunity to make several design decisions such as:

- How will the state assess applicants' strength of leadership, vision and purpose to achieve expected outcomes from the pilot?

- What is the right balance between state support and local control over the pilot or innovation program?

- What terms will be used? Although "competency-based," "proficiency-based" and "mastery-based are used interchangeably, states have made intentional choices based on state policy context.

- What is the optimal number of participating LEAs and schools? (If the program is too small, it may yield idiosyncratic results and fail to generate enough interest and support to inform broader change. If too large, it may become unwieldy and overly complicated—and too expensive for the state to support initially.) Should the group of LEAs reflect the different contexts within the state (e.g., LEA size, location or population of students served)?

- How will applicants' readiness and commitment be determined?

- Should the program include multiple cohorts—possibly spaced over time—or just one?

- Is the program timeframe long enough to allow for thoughtful design and initial implementation—and evaluation of preliminary outcomes and lessons for others? Does it allow at least a year for participants to design their programs before moving to full implementation?

- What will the plan be for program evaluation in order to identify strengths, weaknesses and potential student outcomes in the early years of implementation? How will the state communicate results to policymakers and stakeholders?

- Is competency-based education clearly defined and specifically allowed or incentivized in state law?

Section 2: Exploring Statewide Policy Support for Competency-Based Education

Pilots and innovation programs can support more robust development of local competency-based education policies and practices; they can also identify the level of state support that will be needed for broad statewide transition. At the same time, these smaller scale efforts will uncover policies that may promote or hamper competency-based education and, therefore, provide important guidance for state policymakers.

There are several larger policy areas that states may explore during the pilot to inform statewide policy change. This section explores how states can:

- Provide flexibility from time-based systems in statute or rule;
- Transition to competency-based diplomas;
- Encourage policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning;
- Facilitate acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education;
- Design a state assessment system that supports competency-based education; and
- Evolve accountability systems to support competency-based education.

These policy areas are no small undertaking—and each state will need to chart its own unique course based on its priorities, context, capacity to support change, and level of local engagement and leadership. This section is intended to help clarify what these policy areas entail by reviewing the policy area, providing state examples, and identifying state policy opportunities that can lay a foundation for effective competency-based education. Regardless of the policy choices states make, the need for clear communication and outreach to all stakeholders is paramount.

Provide Flexibility from Time-Based Systems in Statute or Rule

Seat time has long been a foundation for determining how schools and systems award credit, advance students through grades and set graduation requirements. The common use of "Carnegie Units" originally developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as interest and need grew for more standardization of primary and secondary education programs.

Most states set baselines for credit, advancement and graduation by using seat time that LEAs and schools are expected to use. These baselines are often tied to funding and budgeting decisions as well, which can make these policies particularly resistant to change and difficult to identify. Student schedules, transcripts, teacher assignments and assessment schedules are just a few of the areas that are usually determined by thinking about time first. Thus, everything from IT systems to instructional design techniques tend to assume that students will progress according to a time-based, one-size-fits-all schedule.

But those traditional systems do not reflect how most students learn: on their own unique trajectories. Moving systems away from time-based requirements can start to free systems and educators to think less about time and more about personalizing student learning experiences.

▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

Even though most states use time-based systems, a majority already appear to have some flexibility built into their credit, advancement and/or graduation policies. In several cases, these polices have been in place for

some time. As a result, many states may already have one important legal foundation that LEAs and schools need to move toward competency-based systems.

A handful of states have established flexibility from time-based requirements throughout statewide policy. For example:

- New Hampshire has abolished the Carnegie Unit and awards credits and high school diplomas based on demonstrations of competency rather than seat time, as codified in the state's Minimum Standards for School Approval.

- Many other states have not yet changed statewide policy, but have created an option for LEAs to move away from time-based requirements, at least under certain circumstances. For example:

- Michigan allows LEAs to apply for a waiver of the minimum seat time requirements. LEAs must apply for renewal yearly.

- Oregon's credit options allow LEAs to offer credits based on demonstration of proficiency, which can include completion of classroom or equivalent work "designed to measure proficiency or mastery of identified standards (knowledge and skills) in class or out of class, where hours of instruction may vary."

- Rhode Island requires completion of courses (not credits), which are defined as "a connected series of lessons and learning experiences that: (1) establish expectations defined by recognized standards; (2) provide students with opportunity to learn and practice skills; and (3) include assessments of student knowledge and skills adequate to determine proficiency at the level of academic rigor required by relevant content standards." LEAs must offer multiple learning opportunities that support meeting proficiency and provide an appropriate schedule of instructional time to create a comprehensive program of study across grades PK-12.

- Utah's State Board of Education has defined a "non-traditional program" as one that includes distance learning, blended learning, online learning or competency-based learning. (The state board's rule, effective June 1, 2016, also acknowledges that this is only the first step toward a long-term, non-time-based funding solution.) The new policy then allows LEAs to "adopt a written policy that designates a continuing enrollment measurement to document the continuing membership or enrollment status for each student enrolled in the nontraditional program."

But, though many states have these flexible policies, it does not appear that they have been significantly used by schools and LEAs to date. Lack of awareness of flexibility, lack of knowledge on how best to use that flexibility, or administrative hurdles to obtain that flexibility may account for this. However, competency-based programs can only be effective if LEA and school leaders know about the opportunity to create them and can then translate the opportunity for flexibility into a new educational approach. One reason this paper emphasizes pilots and innovation programs is that those efforts can create a mechanism and encouragement for forward-thinking local leaders to recognize and leverage existing flexibility. Pilots and innovation programs can also uncover the reasons why opportunities for flexibility have gone unused and what support local leaders will need to capitalize on these opportunities.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broader research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states to consider in order to provide flexibility from time-based systems and support the development of competency-based education in their LEAs and schools.

- Create policies that allow for credit to be earned based on demonstrated proficiency.

- Provide flexibility with regard to how annual calendars and daily schedules can be constructed.

- Modify key school finance definitions, attendance procedures and time based allocations of funding—these may include reviewing terms such as full-time student and membership.

Transition to Competency-Based Diplomas

Amending diploma requirements to support the shift from credits to competencies can allow students to move

through requirements at a more flexible pace and to ensure proficiency. For some students, this may allow more time for dual enrollment or college credit courses (which can also save time and money needed to earn a college degree). For students who may need more time in at least some areas, a competency-based diploma can help them continue to progress through requirements based on the required skills and competencies, rather than requiring them to repeat a grade or a course. And for all students, competency-based diplomas can provide a clearer signal of the skills and content knowledge that they have gained during high school to share with postsecondary programs and employers.

Graduation requirements serve multiple purposes. They include: describing how individual students can earn their diplomas; how the state calculates graduation rates for schools and LEAs; and what the state reports for federal accountability purposes. In other words, the transition to competency-based diplomas implicates several policies and practices—not simply what final exit examinations may be required. These requirements can be a hurdle for local efforts to implement competency-based education if states or LEAs use time-based requirements.

States and LEAs should carefully consider the implications of changing diploma requirements. Policies should clearly articulate performance levels, proficiency definitions and expected pace in a way that sets appropriate expectations for all students and allows for flexibility to suit individual students' educational needs. Although students deserve flexible pacing, pace still matters. **For this reason, states should align diploma requirements with competencies rather than creating a separate competency-based diploma track**. And, particularly for states that allow for LEAs and schools to define graduation requirements, it is important that the state look for ways to calibrate local policies with state learning standards and expectations for college and career readiness. Diploma requirements are the end of a long K-12 journey—and should appropriately reflect the wide array of skills, content areas and knowledge that students gain over those years.

▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

This review of existing state law and policy suggests that only a few states have specific policies related to diplomas and competencies, though some allow that credits earned through demonstration of competency can count toward local graduation requirements (as defined by the LEA). It is worth noting that, for decades, states have allowed alternate pathways to a high school diploma through GED programs.

And, as with most policy areas, there is significant variation among states on how high school diploma requirements are defined. Some states define requirements at the state level. For example:

- Maine is transitioning to a proficiency-based diploma for all students.[4] The state has adopted a set of Guiding Principles to define cross-curricular skills for which each student must demonstrate proficiency for high school graduation under this new requirement, including clear and effective communication and creative and practical problem solving. Maine also has eight content areas for high school instruction, and students are required to demonstrate proficiency in standards in these content areas starting in 2018. Moreover, the authorizing legislation requires each school administrative unit to certify each student's content area proficiency on the student's transcript. The state department of education, in turn, is required to collect and aggregate these certifications as evidence of progress toward high school graduation goals.[5]

- Michigan recently authorized funding for a public-private partnership, led by the Michigan Center of Innovation in Education, to develop and pilot a competency-based transcript and marketplace to "provide enhanced choice to pupils and parents for the completion of requirements for a high school diploma." The transcript to be developed and piloted is to be "pupil-owned," able to satisfy college admission requirements, and able to allow students to accumulate different credentials and credits for high school graduation, postsecondary matriculation and early career success. The transcript must: include Michigan-specific academic standards for competency definitions; use industry standards for competency assessment; use industry standards for articulating and transcripting credentials and credits; and be available to

students and parents at no cost.

- Vermont requires LEAs to have proficiency-based graduation requirements based on state standards, starting with the graduating class of 2020. Schools may use credits to demonstrate a student has met graduation requirements; if they do, credits must not be based on time and must specify the proficiencies demonstrated to attain a credit.

Other states only define state-level parameters for locally-designed diploma requirements. For example:

- Arizona began allowing schools to opt into offering the performance-based Grand Canyon Diploma in 2012-13. Students may elect to earn the diploma at the end of grade 10, or during or at the end of grade 11 or 12.

- Colorado LEAs must develop their own high school graduation requirements—in consultation with community stakeholders—that meet the graduation baselines set by the state department of education. LEAs may select from a menu of options provided by the state board of education to create a list of options that students must choose from in order to graduate (beginning in 2017-18). Among the menu options, LEAs may require a capstone project (often including a portfolio of a student's work) or a collaboratively-developed, standards-based performance assessment (currently in development). Once an LEA has determined which high school graduation options it will offer, it is required to communicate the revisions and menu of college- and career-ready demonstrations to community members, students and families.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broader research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states to consider for transition to and use of diplomas based on competencies.

- Amend state graduation requirements to allow for and support diplomas earned through mastery of competencies and ensure that neither standards nor expectations are weakened.

- Support the design of competencies aligned to state standards for course and credit requirements for optional adoption by LEAs and schools.

- Set a date for when all diplomas must be competency-based but allow school districts and charters to create their own pathways.

- Reinforce a graduation rate that reflects a four-year graduation expectation while recognizing extended-year graduation rates for students needing extended time to demonstrate competency.

Paving the Way for College Admissions

Lindsay Unified in California is an example of an innovative district with a robust competency-based education system. The school has created special GPA conversion charts so that state institutions of higher education can understand Lindsay students' results for admission and scholarship decisions.

States have particular influence over their public colleges and universities and can encourage better understanding and acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits through the state's convening, communication and oversight powers. Fully developed competences—and their application through K-12 competency-based diploma and credit programs—may also help bridge the gap between K-12 learning standards and postsecondary expectations.

Facilitate Acceptance of Competency-Based Diplomas and Credits by Higher Education

Acceptance of competency-based credentials by higher education can be both a practical and perceived hurdle given the need for college admissions officers to understand the rigor behind competency-based education programs (and comparison with traditional diploma and credit award). Parents and students may be reluctant to participate in competency-based education programs if they worry that credits and diplomas based on competencies could hinder the admissions process. There may also be subtle yet corollary policies, such as acceptance into specific programs or scholarships based on class rank and/or GPA.

▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

Today, there are very few examples of states explicitly linking K-12 competency-based education policies to higher education admission and credit award processes. For example:

- Illinois authorized a competency-based education pilot which specifies expectations for relevant high school mathematics courses. "College-level mathematics courses" delivered to high school students at state community colleges must be portable across the state so that all other community colleges in the state provide the same completion recognition for students. And high school seniors enrolled in "transitional mathematics instruction" intended to prepare them for college-level work may receive instruction in a competency-based learning system that includes transitional mathematics competencies.

- Utah included a requirement that the institutes of higher education shall recognize and accept a diploma earned in a competency-based program in the enabling legislation for the Competency Based Pilot Grants.

- The New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC) is a collaboration of five states (Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont) that promotes 21st-century skills and college readiness by encouraging proficiency-based graduation and personalized learning pathways. The consortium is a strong supporter of competency-based education in K-12. The group has worked to secure a statement of support from 68 public and private institutions of higher education which "states—unequivocally—that students with proficiency-based grades and transcripts will not be disadvantaged in any way" in the admissions process.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broader research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states wishing to facilitate acceptance of K-12 competency-based courses and credits by higher education.

- Develop a certification or other assurance that their higher education systems will recognize competency-based diplomas. The process should provide an avenue for involvement and feedback from the higher education community.

- Consider creating a clear pathway between high school competencies and progression to college-level competencies or course work.

- Involve higher education in the development of competency-based education policies and practices, including defining state competencies, norming proficiency levels required for high school graduation and creating feedback loops on students' readiness for college-level work (including providing exemplars of college-level student work to inform the goal for K-12 progression to college and career readiness).

- Identify other corollary programs and policies—such as state merit scholarships—that are still based on class rank and/or GPA.

> ### Comparing K-12 and Higher Education Competency-Based Education
>
> Colleges and universities may be more receptive to K-12 students with competency-based credentials given the parallel move in higher education toward more competency-based education programs. Recent studies have shown that nearly 50 postsecondary institutions in 23 states offer competency-based education programs and nearly 600 more are actively considering or creating them. The U.S. Department of Education has supported these developments in part by expanding its "experimental sites" program that allows postsecondary competency-based education programs using direct assessment models to be eligible for federal financial aid programs.[6]

Some higher education competency-based models often incorporate prior learning experience as college credit, especially through online learning. Many also focus on a specific population of students (adult learners and other "non-traditional" postsecondary students) and on lowering both the costs of delivery and the costs to students. However, higher education competency-based programs share the common goal of providing flexibility and personalization and a <u>very similar definition</u> of competency-based education.

Encourage Policies that Recognize Anytime, Anywhere Learning

"Anytime, anywhere learning" has been <u>defined</u> as when "students have equitable options to learn outside of the typical school schedule and away from the campus. Whether that means studying online, completing an internship over the summer or taking advantage of some other out-of-school opportunity, they can receive credit for the knowledge and skills they master."

Anytime, anywhere learning can happen in many forms, and is a critical lever for competency-based education. It is the recognition that maximization of time, place and pace is necessary in order to have all students demonstrate mastery of key concepts and skills before advancing to the next level of learning.

A strong competency-based system has well-defined learning objectives and clear, calibrated definitions of proficiency. With this foundation, states and LEAs can open up new anytime, anywhere learning opportunities by using these common objectives and proficiency definitions. These new opportunities include:

1. Capturing learning that is already happening in and out of school;

2. Maximizing the extended learning opportunities currently available to students; and

3. Creating new learning opportunities beyond current options.

State policies can recognize the value of such learning experiences in official student records or provide incentives for schools and LEAs to offer more opportunities. Moreover, states can support extended learning opportunities (ELOs) and create funding, data policies and quality control processes as well as address other potential policy issues such as identifying teachers of record.

▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

States are pursuing anytime, anywhere learning policies in a variety of ways, as described and illustrated in the examples below.

Course Access

<u>Course Access</u> is a state-level policy that provides public school students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers. The policy is unique because it: relies on state approval and quality assurance processes for providers; allows funding to follow the student; and can include online, blended and in-person learning opportunities from different providers such as other LEAs, colleges and universities, career and technical education providers, and other third party providers. Course Access can be a way to introduce new courses and delivery methods for students—and emphasize the importance of personalized learning. Many Course Access programs allow students to move at their own pace within a particular window, flexibility that mirrors competency-based education efforts.

Course Access is especially important given longstanding gaps in access to certain courses. The <u>U.S. Department of Education</u>, for example, found that only half of high schools nationally offer calculus and 63 percent offer physics; a quarter of high schools with the highest percentage of black and Latino students do not offer Algebra II and a third do not offer chemistry.

Louisiana's Course Access program—known locally as the <u>Supplemental Course Academy</u>—is considered the most developed nationally. Hundreds of online and face-to-face courses are offered by providers that have gone through a rigorous state review and approval process. State funding follows the student to their Course Access courses, but they remain enrolled in their home school. Several Louisiana LEAs have used the program to fill curricular or teaching gaps effectively and efficiently. The system uses a flexible funding model that employs tuition amounts set by the state department of education based on the nature of the course and necessary course materials.

Non-Classroom Based Credit Options

Non-classroom based credit options can allow students to learn in new environments to enhance and complement their school-based learning. These policies can also strengthen efforts to personalize learning and tailor opportunities to individual student interests and needs.

- **New Hampshire** "supports and encourages" LEAs to create Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs), defined as "the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited, to: apprenticeships, community service, independent study, online courses, internships, performing groups and private instruction." Under state law, local school boards are required to adopt and implement written ELO policies if they choose to offer them. Almost all New Hampshire school districts now employ ELO Coordinators. For its state competition for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, New Hampshire included special consideration of the ELO opportunities in the program design section.

- **Vermont's** Flexible Pathways Initiative allows students to design personalized pathways to graduation that, in addition to school-based courses, can include virtual learning opportunities, community work-based learning opportunities and dual enrollment programs with state institutions of higher education. Notably, the state did not pre-define these pathways, but encourages LEAs, schools and students to create individualized pathways suited to the unique interests and needs of each student. Both students with disabilities and students who formerly would have sought a graduation-equivalent diploma have been specifically provided for in the Initiative.

Virtual Schools

State virtual schools can provide flexible courses that align with competency-based education goals. For example:

- Florida Virtual School, established in 1997, is focused on "any path, any pace, any time, any place" learning. Credits are awarded in these online classes based on individual student progression, rather than time-based requirements.

- New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) provides full- and part-time online learning opportunities for middle and high school students. Students work at their own pace in all courses.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Based on existing state examples and broader research and engagement, the following policy decisions are recommended for states that wish to enhance competency-based education efforts by encouraging policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning.

- Implement Course Access policies and programs. States could approve outside providers that offer courses aligned to state standards and encourage the development of competency-based courses.

- Leverage state virtual schools to develop competency-based courses with flexible pacing.

- Require LEAs and schools to develop policies and procedures to recognize and consider work completed by students outside of the traditional classroom environment for advancement and credit. Well-designed competencies can provide the framework to evaluate the potential proficiency gained through outside providers such as employers who host internships, community organizations that provide after-school educational programming (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, scouting), supplemental education tutors and therapists who provide educational programs for students with special learning needs).

- Where appropriate based on federal and state law,[7] allow the sharing of relevant student information with providers such as tutors and after school programs, so they can more effectively address students' needs without additional assessments. Data backpacks (official transcripts that would follow all students through every grade and school transition) and learner profiles (tools that would build on the data backpacks and can be customized based on student needs, platform data requirements and family decisions) are a potential mechanism for this student-level data portability that includes strong privacy controls.[8]

> ### Data Backpacks in Utah
>
> Utah's 2013 Student Achievement Backpack (UT SB 82) is featured as an example of data backpack policies in the 2014 report card. Utah was one of the first states to adopt a policy that requires student academic information to be housed in a common, electronic record that will provide a holistic view of a student's progress and achievement. The state has completed the system where all data is housed, and the data is accessible to all LEAs. Parents and educators can access these reports via the LEA student information systems. This portable record will allow students to create more meaningful personalized learning paths and will equip teachers and parents with the resources to track a student's progress within a single course or among multiple courses and grades.

Design State Assessment Systems to Support Competency-Based Education

A vision for the future of statewide assessments

In the future, ExcelinEd hopes that all 50 states will have systems of next-generation assessments built around student-centered learning. Ideally, these systems will be adaptive, available to students whenever they are ready and will provide multiple, real-time measures of student progress toward mastery. These assessments will, hopefully, also be designed to better support new forms of teaching and learning, such as competency-based education and personalized learning.

This is ExcelinEd's vision for the future, but the journey will be incremental and take time. As already demonstrated by other states that have begun the work, such as New Hampshire, this change requires substantial technical and financial investment. In large part, this is because many of the strategies required for this vision remain untested or haven't been taken to scale statewide. Even then, ESSA requires that these new forms of assessment will need to demonstrate they can produce valid, reliable and comparable results. States piloting new assessments should also be cautious to not increase the classroom time devoted to testing or unduly interfere with local decisions about curriculum.

- All states do have an opportunity, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the flexibilities that it offers, to begin building the foundation for a next generation system of assessments.

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Although most states are not yet ready to adopt a completely new vision of testing, all states can incorporate the following best practices and begin the transition to assessment systems that support competency-based education. Two key hallmarks of a competency-based system are flexibility and transparency. ExcelinEd strongly recommends the following policies to help states ensure that these qualities are built into their state assessment systems and maximize instructional time.

- Procure their summative assessments to allow for the piloting of flexible administration for students to demonstrate mastery when they are ready—this may mean allowing districts or schools to administer the state summative assessment once per quarter or on demand once students have completed the content.

- Utilize online assessments to enable the acceleration of both delivery and scoring of assessments as well as the use of innovative item-types to measure higher order skills that paper and pencil tests may not be able to assess.

- Develop strategies to streamline state and district assessment systems (e.g., taking an inventory or audit of existing assessments) to eliminate duplicative, low-quality or unnecessary tests.

- Provide technical assistance to LEAs for the development or procurement of interim or benchmark assessments.

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The Every Student Succeeds Act

The Every Student Succeeds Act maintains the federal requirement that every state administers a statewide system of assessments that must be used in part for annual school accountability determinations. These assessments must be valid, reliable and aligned to the state's challenging academic standards. At a minimum, state assessment systems must annually assess at least 95 percent of all students and each subgroup statewide in the following grade levels and subjects:

- Reading/English language arts and math assessments for grades 3-8 and once in grades 9-12;
- Science assessments given at least once in each grade span from grades 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12; and
- Annual assessments of English language proficiency for English learners (newly required to be used as an indicator for school accountability purposes).

The state's system of assessments can include out-of-grade-level items to capture a better picture of student knowledge. However, ESSA still requires state assessments to "provide coherent and timely information" about student attainment of the standards with grade-level proficiency determinations by content area.

There are three new exceptions to the broad requirement that all students take the same assessment: (1) flexibility is available for states to permit districts to administer locally-selected, nationally-recognized high school assessments; (2) a waiver exempting advanced students from taking the grade 8 math test if they take a high school-level math assessment (i.e. Algebra 1 end-of-course test); and (3) broader flexibility is available for the states that receive demonstration authority to pilot an innovative assessment and use it for accountability and reporting purposes in select schools and/or LEAs before scaling statewide.

Additionally, as under prior versions of the federal law, a state may choose to use alternative assessments to assess up to 1 percent of students statewide with the most significant cognitive disabilities. There is no cap on individual districts and the state may apply for a waiver of the one percent cap.

The final state plan regulations require each state to provide an assurance that it will meet these ESSA requirements and those outlined in the final ESSA assessment regulations.[9]

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- Ensure teachers and parents receive useful, clear, concise and timely results from all statewide assessments.

States may also consider the following options to support competency-based education and maximize the flexibility afforded under ESSA. (While many of these opportunities were present under earlier laws, they are now more explicitly allowed. All options should be coupled with considerations of cost, overall assessment time and the need to build capacity at the state and local level for successful implementation.)

- States could design a state assessment system that includes multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge and reasoning skills that may include portfolios, projects or extended performance tasks.

- States could transition to computer-based adaptive testing that includes out-of-grade-level items while still reporting grade-level proficiency.

- States could independently evaluate the alignment of nationally recognized college entrance tests (e.g., SAT or ACT) to state standards in high school and determine if they meet all requirements of the federal law, including accessibility for all students.

- States could explore the administration of a set of interim tests that can be rolled up into a single annual result for each student. States should determine the cost effectiveness of this approach and whether it would reduce duplicative testing and potentially decrease overall student assessment time.

- States could determine if the state's vision for a state assessment system will warrant application for the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority.

Current State Policy Examples

Though no state has addressed all outstanding questions related to competency-based education and assessment systems, the following state examples include elements of what the future of assessment could include:

- Florida end-of-course (EOC) assessments, aligned to the Florida Standards (FS) or the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS), are administered for biology, U.S. History, Civics, Algebra 1, Algebra 2 and Geometry. Students may take the EOC assessments at five points throughout the year, which include multiple retake testing opportunities. The assessments are computer-based, though paper-based or other versions are available for students with disabilities who need accommodations. Students who do not complete the assessment by the end of the assessment time are permitted to continue working until the end of the school day.

- **New Hampshire's** Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) began under the state's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver. A small number of LEAs are voluntarily piloting the system,[11] which includes reduced standardized testing together with locally developed common performance assessments designed to support deeper learning and to be more integrated into students' day-to-day work than current standardized tests. The inspiration for ESSA's Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority, PACE includes:

ESSA: Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority

The Every Student Succeeds Act created the new **Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority** pilot.[10] Under this umbrella, states can begin to test drive next generation assessment systems in a subset of districts in lieu of the statewide assessment. The flexibility afforded to states with approved applications allows for a deliberate and phased in rollout.

The U.S. Department of Education can approve applications for up to seven states for this pilot. Applications may include consortia of states for the first three years of the pilot, with additional states allowed to join later.

In their applications, states may propose assessment systems that include competency-based assessments or performance-based assessments (among other possible models) that results in an annual summative proficiency determination for a student. The innovative assessments would need to meet the same peer review requirements for alignment, rigor, reliability, validity and comparability and are meant to be scaled statewide over several years.

The following resources can help states determine if their vision for a new statewide assessment system can be realized within the new parameters of ESSA or if they would need an application for demonstration authority. Both resources are guides for states interested in maximizing flexibility or pilot programs. And both resources identify the state policies, resources and stakeholder engagement that will be required.

- **Knowledge Works**, in partnership with the Center for Assessment, has developed a series of State Readiness Conditions and a Visioning Toolkit for New Assessments.

- **The Council of Chief State Schools Officers** developed a Critical Area Outline posing a series of thought-provoking questions and decision trees for states to determine what flexibility is available.

- Common performance tasks that have high technical quality;

- Locally designed performance tasks with guidelines for ensuring high technical quality, regional scoring sessions and local LEA peer review audits to ensure sound accountability systems and high inter-rater reliability;

- A web-based bank of local and common performance tasks; and

- A regional support network for LEAs and schools.

• LEAs participating in PACE assess students using:

- **Statewide assessments**: Smarter Balanced is administered to grade 3 for English language arts, grade 4 for math, and grade 8 for English language arts and math. The SAT is administered to all 11th-grade students.

- **Common tasks**: For all non-tested grades and subjects, all participating LEAs administer one common complex performance task that has been developed collaboratively among participating districts and the state and used to ensure comparability of teacher performance.

- **Locally-developed performance assessments**: The "core" of the PACE assessment system, these locally-developed and locally-administered assessments are tied to grade and course competencies. These performance assessments can be used both for local grading and state accountability purposes.

PACE builds on New Hampshire's foundations of competency-based education, including the development of state model college-and-career-ready competencies that describe the knowledge, skills and work study practices that all students are expected to master for high school graduation. All districts, regardless of the assessment system in use, must demonstrate the alignment of their systems with these standards and model competencies.

New Hampshire's approach to comparability in the pilot relies on Smarter Balance's Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs) for the appropriate grade level and subject area. These ALDs served as the basis for identifying performance levels on the Smarter Balanced assessments. Those same narrative ALDs are used by PACE-participating districts to determine competency in relevant grades and subjects. To assist with reliability and accuracy, New Hampshire also provided several opportunities to develop LEA capacity and improve scoring validity and reliability through professional development institutes and regional calibration and validation sessions.

Utah's Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence (SAGE), first administered in 2014, has dozens of summative testing dates available in the spring and dozens of interim assessment dates available in the fall and winter. The assessment system also includes formative teacher tools and instructional supports that provide resources for educators for daily instruction. The computer-based SAGE assessments are also computer adaptive.

Virginia has been administering online tests for over a decade and is transitioning many of its statewide assessments to computer adaptive testing, with most students taking computer adaptive mathematics tests in grades 3, 6, 7 and 8 in 2015-16. Many tests also allow students to indicate their responses in ways other than multiple choice answers. This program is being expanded in 2016-17, with grades 3-8 mathematics and grades 3-5 reading computer-adaptive tests. Also, in 2014, Virginia reduced the number of statewide mandatory assessments from 34 to 29 and has been "studying further steps to reduce the burden of testing while maintaining accountability."

Evolve Accountability Systems to Support Competency-Based Education

In the wake of ESSA, states are tasked with bringing their accountability systems into compliance with the new law. Just as new systems of teaching and learning will necessitate new statewide assessments, new measures of student success may emerge. Indeed, this is one of the goals of the state competency-based education pilot programs. One of the inherent goals of new assessments is to provide more rapid, nuanced and student-

centered data. Correspondingly, accountability indicators should align with these systems and reflect the change in focus. However, it is imperative that any new indicators strengthen states' ability to hold schools and districts accountable for the success of every single student.

Competency-based education presents an opportunity to create new ways of demonstrating student progress and outcomes. The process of creating competencies for different subject areas and the means to assess them will, in time, prompt the evolution of accountability systems. One reason that this paper has emphasized pilots and innovation programs is because they allow states to support the development of competency-based models that can lead to authentic, long term state solutions.

This process will also be incremental and take time, but states can begin to transition to more flexible yet robust state accountability systems.

▶ CURRENT STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

Understanding that all states are in the midst of constructing new assessment and accountability plans, the following examples demonstrate how some states have already incorporated indicators that support competency-based education.

- **Arizona** has placed an equal emphasis on student achievement and growth in the state's school accountability system since the adoption of A-F letter grades in 2010. Arizona also adopted a college-and-career-readiness index in 2013 as part of ESEA Flexibility. The postsecondary indicators are being incorporated in the new ESSA plan but the graduation portion remains in place. The emphasis is placed on the four-year rate but schools can still credit for students who graduate in five, six and seven years.

- **Florida's** accountability system grades schools on an A-F scale using up to 11 components. These include:

    - Percent of students proficient in ELA, Math, Science, Social Studies;

    - Percent of kids making growth towards proficient and advance achievement in ELA and Math and percent of the lowest performing kids making growth towards proficient and advance achievement in ELA and Math.

    - Middle school acceleration (the percentage of eligible students who passed a high school level end-of-course assessment or industry certification);

    - High school acceleration (the percentage of graduates from the graduation rate cohort who earned a score on an acceleration examination (Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced International Certificate of Education), a grade in a dual enrollment course that qualified for college credit, or an industry certification).

- **Mississippi** also uses A-F letter grades with a statutory requirement to include both student achievement and student growth. High schools can also earn points through acceleration and college readiness measured by participation and performance on ACT, AP, IB and dual credit programs.

- **New Hampshire** is shifting its accountability model to focus more on improvement "with significantly greater levels of local design and agency to facilitate transformational change in performance." As a first step toward this system, New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) accountability option provides LEAs with an alternative route of demonstrating measurable progress in student outcomes in the New Hampshire competencies, the Work-Study Practices and other measures. In its first year, PACE LEAs are required to report on English Language Arts, mathematics, science and the Work-Study Practices. Social studies, the arts and other content areas will become a part of the PACE system as new competencies are developed.

The PACE pilot changes how student proficiency and competency are determined through a new suite of assessment tools. At the outset of their participation in the pilot, participating LEAs must create an accountability plan that describes their local accountability goals. Throughout the pilot, their progress will be documented and evaluated in the state accountability system. In other words, these proficiency and competency determinations are used in the summative school ratings. Participating LEAs must report the number and percentage of students at each grade level who are meeting both locally-defined and state-and-peer approved definitions of proficiency and competency. These LEAs must also anchor their annual determinations of proficiency in the Smarter Balanced Achievement Level Descriptors.

Student growth for PACE districts will be reported through locally determined and peer approved approaches for documenting student progress towards graduation competencies. Student learning objectives (SLO) that are required for New Hampshire's educator evaluation system are also used for documenting and reporting student progress. New Hampshire and participating LEAs produced achievement/status reports at the end of the first pilot year, but are not producing growth results until two years of data are available. Also, New Hampshire is monitoring the results for different subgroups of students, including through a mandatory peer review process for participating LEAs to evaluate aggregate and student group performance results during the first three years of implementation.

- Many states have undertaken efforts to create modern, user-friendly report card designs that take advantage of the latest trends in data visualization. State examples can be found at:

    - Show Me The Data from the Data Quality Campaign

    - State Exemplars of School Accountability Report Cards from the Education Commission of the States

▶ STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

States should consider the following policies to support competency-based education, maximize the flexibility more clearly delineated under ESSA, and empower parents with more information about their school and student:

- Hold schools accountable for student learning outcomes with a balance of student proficiency and growth toward a standard that ensures students are adequately prepared.

- Calculate student progress towards grade-level and advanced achievement.

- Use multiple valid and reliable indicators such as performance on advanced coursework like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment and college-and-career pathway successes such as industry recognized credentials.

- Reinforce a graduation rate that reflects a four-year graduation expectation while recognizing extended-year graduation rates for students needing extended time to demonstrate competency.

- Include competency-based education in school improvement strategies.

- Define metrics and milestones to inform state evaluation of innovation or pilot programs, and establish a process for pilot participants to identify additional metrics and milestones.

- Use school report cards to inform students, parents, teachers and the public on all indicators included in the state accountability system and other informative non-academic indicators such as attendance, climate surveys, teacher and parent satisfaction surveys, teacher quality, etc.

Spotlight on Student Growth

As schools transition from a traditional system where time is the constant and learning the variable to a competency-based approach where learning becomes the constant and time the variable, a strong accountability system must recognize the value of flexible pacing and capture measures of individual student growth. While the ultimate goal is that all students will be performing on grade level, the reality is that many are not. Focusing on both proficiency and growth in state accountability systems provides a truer, fairer picture of how a school is doing.

Growth ensures schools earn credit for making progress with students who may have entered their school below grade level and have not yet achieved grade level performance, and it also puts pressure on schools who have high performing students to keep them high performing.

There are two widely used methods for calculating student growth—"criterion-based" and "norm-referenced." Adopting a criterion-based method is essential to ensure each individual student is making progress.

In a criterion-based system, students are measured on their individual progress towards meeting pre-determined expectations. The strongest expectations set the amount of growth a student must make each year at a level that moves him or her towards achieving proficiency, or if already proficient, to advanced achievement. This growth expectation determines whether the student has demonstrated progress towards the mastery of a certain set of skills.

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Spotlight on Student Growth *continued*

Norm-referenced growth models, by contrast, compare students to the performance of other students across the state—not how well an individual student progressed towards meeting a predetermined standard. In this method, there will always be winners and losers—students that make growth relative to others and students that do not make growth relative to others— regardless of how well or poorly the students are performing.

In other words, even if student performance improves substantially across the state, there will be a set of students that are determined to not be making growth, because another set of students did just a little better.

Criterion-based growth to proficiency models are the fairest, because they measure what matters—whether each student is learning enough each year to become proficient—not how well a student did compared to their peers, using an ever-changing scale.

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KNOW YOUR SCHOOL

Spotlight on School Report Cards

ESSA requires states and districts to publish annual report cards that provide policymakers, parents and other stakeholders with important information about the performance of their schools. These report cards must include:

- Performance data from the state accountability system, disaggregated by subgroups of students;
- Professional qualifications of educators;
- Per-pupil spending;
- Disaggregated results for assessments, graduation and participation;
- National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data; and
- Civil rights data including attendance, course and program offerings, and suspensions/expulsions.

States may also elect to include a multitude of additional data points, including survey responses, teacher effectiveness and class size.

These school report cards are a key part of state accountability systems because they provide contextual information to empower parents and inform school improvement strategies. Access and usability of school report cards is critical.

ESSA also presents an opportunity for states to reimagine their state's school report card. To help support states, Excel*in*Ed's Know Your School Project is creating an exemplar online school report cards with an engaging interface. This project uses data from the state of Florida to help parents and community members put their local schools' data into context—empowering them with usable information.

The tool was built through an open source development process and the code is being made publicly available following the launch. Access to the design and front-end code gives states a head start toward having their own public reporting tool that reflects their priorities and school data.

Learn more at KnowYourSchoolProject.org.

Interest in competency-based and personalized learning models continues to increase. Educators are seeking innovative ways to meet students where they are and ensure they are truly college and career ready. Simultaneously, the tension between the new transformational, flexible, student-centered systems and our traditional, standardized policies is becoming more apparent. The research contained in this report clearly demonstrates that the process of redesigning education—from assessment, accountability, credit, diploma to graduation policies—will be unique to each state's context, be incremental and take time.

This finding reinforced our belief that pilot programs can provide a mechanism to do just that—and more. States can use innovation and pilot programs to harness existing flexibility while they transition to the broader systemic changes necessary for the implementation and sustainability of competency-based education. The experiences of pilot participants will craft the unique policy pathway for each state.

Education leaders and policymakers commonly believe the first step toward competency-based education is a sweeping overhaul of state law or policy, but this review suggests that does not always have to be the case. Many states, if not most, already have policies in place, (e.g., waivers) that can help schools begin the transition to competency-based education. However, the primary challenge for states is to create awareness of existing opportunities and support the innovative LEAs and schools ready to seize them. Again, pilot programs provide this opportunity.

During this scan of the states, we also discovered more innovation programs and competency-based pilot programs than initially expected. This suggests that many states may be on the pathway to competency-based systems should their respective pilots deliver the anticipated results. It also raises the possibility that states with pilots could share lessons learned and help build national understanding of what it takes to develop effective competency-based education systems.

At the same time, pilots will need time, attention and perseverance from a variety of stakeholders to truly succeed. The policy areas described in this paper—flexibility from time-based systems; transition to competency-based diplomas; acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education; polices to encourage anytime, anywhere learning; and supportive assessment and accountability systems—are not intended to be a menu of options but a comprehensive set of changes that will allow competency-based education to take root and flourish. By authorizing pilot programs, states can provide the mechanism to explore these areas before ushering in statewide change.

The fact that so few schools maximize the current flexibility provided by states brings into question whether existing policies are truly understood or represent perceived barriers or disincentives to innovate. Perceived or not, they can be stumbling blocks for innovative leaders, and states can and should confront these challenges proactively through pilot programs and broader communications efforts.

The good news is that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an important opening for states to rethink their systems of teaching and learning. Competency-based education can serve as a foundation and unifying concept as assessment, accountability and school support systems are reconsidered and redesigned to meet the demands of today's students and economy.

We hope to contribute to this effort by continuing our examination and promotion of leading state and local policies related to competency-based education. Further research opportunities for competency-based education advocates should:

- Investigate why LEAs and schools have not yet taken advantage of existing flexibility to pursue competency-based education.

- Explore why LEAs have decided or been invited to participate in a state pilot program.

- Determine what conditions and policies innovation and pilot programs should incorporate to create a greater chance of success.

Innovation for innovation's sake is not a worthy goal. But the changes accompanying competency-based education programs and policies offer an exciting possibility that should be the end-goal for every state, school and classroom: creating an education system that maximizes every student's potential for learning and prepares all students for success.

Endnotes

[1] The terms "competency," "proficiency" and "mastery" are often used interchangeably. Excel*in*Ed uses "competency-based education" for simplicity and intends it as an inclusive term throughout the paper. When describing specific state policies, however, Excel*in*Ed uses the terminology unique to that particular program.

[2] For one example, visit The Roadmap for Competency-Based Systems.

[3] For examples see Implementing Competency Education in K12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders

[4] A recent bill specified that the state must provide grants to schools to assist with the transition to proficiency-based diplomas. For each year that a school does not receive said grant, full implementation will be delayed. http://legislature.maine.gov/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=SP0660&item=1&snum=127

[5] A preliminary evaluation report on early implementation of Maine's new competency-based diploma system is available here: https://usm.maine.edu/sites/default/files/cepare/SBE%20Report.pdf.

[6] U.S. Dep't of Educ., Expansion of the Competency-Based Education Experiment Under the Experimental Sites Initiative, 80 Fed. Reg. 72052 (Nov. 18, 2015), http://www.ifap.ed.gov/fregisters/FR111815.html.

[7] For guidance on FERPA and its application, see http://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/stoplight-student-data-use/

[8] Both data backpacks and learner profiles are discussed in more detail here: http://digitallearningnow.com/site/uploads/2012/10/Data-Backpacks-FINAL.pdf.

[9] http://www.excelined.org/principles-2015-reauthorization-elementary-secondary-education-act/

[10] This discussion was adapted from EducationCounsel, Summary Analysis of the Every Student Succeeds Act (Dec. 2015), available at http://educationcounsel.com/?publication=summary-analysis-every-student-succeeds-act.

[11] School LEAs piloting PACE are Epping, Rochester, Sanborn Regional and Souhegan. Additional LEAs participating in 2015-2016 are Concord, Monroe, Pittsfield and Seacoast Charter.

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