



DIGITAL LEARNING NOW!

THE SHIFT FROM COHORTS TO COMPETENCY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Getting a driver's license requires passing a test and a driving demonstration – a competency-based system utilizing multiple forms of assessment. Professional certifications for doctors, accountants, and lawyers rely on test-based demonstrations of competence.

Promotion policies that require students to read before moving to fourth grade are an attempt to ensure that students are ready to succeed; such policies are an early effort to make the old cohort system more competency based.

Credit recovery courses and academies are competency based. Some rely exclusively on low-level end-of-course multiple-choice quizzes, which are an example of instructional models in which students move at their own pace and progress by demonstrating competence.

We can all think of examples – from professional licensure to video games – in which we must “show what we know” to demonstrate achievement. Why, then, should the education system be any different? Moving to a competency-based system is the logical evolution from the outdated factory model to one that can personalize learning and serve

the needs of each individual student. For the future doctor entering medical school or the future pilot logging flight hours, a system based on competency also has the best potential to improve college and career readiness. Yet today's current system holds back students who could be excelling and moves students on who aren't ready.

[CompetencyWorks](#) defines competency education as a system of education, often referred to as proficiency or mastery based, in which students advance upon mastery. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students. Assessment is meaningful and serves as a positive learning experience for students. Students receive timely, differentiated support tailored to their individual learning needs. Learning outcomes include the application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

This paper explores how competency education has the potential to connect learning to students' passions and interests, drawing them toward higher-order thinking and, therefore, deeper learning. And while technology is not a necessary component of competency education per se, advances in

educational technology have made it possible to bring competency education to scale through an ever-expanding set of tools that can personalize and customize learning. The authors contend that without leveraging technology and discovering new ways to use time and resources differently, we will fail to achieve the goals of college- and career-ready standards like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Shifting to competency education is an important step in this process.

After reviewing the basic tenets of competency education, the authors discuss the ways in which the shift from cohorts to competency can improve student achievement and school performance. The most frequently asked questions related to competency-based learning are also answered. The paper provides an in-depth exploration of the issues related to the overall shift to competency education for education leaders and decision makers. Specifically, the authors describe 10 new capabilities of a competency-based system and 10 design choices to inform the necessary changes. The paper ends with a discussion of state policies that support competency education.