

Competency-Based Education FAQ

Q: What is competency-based education?

A: Competency-based education (CBE) is a strategy to cultivate 21st century knowledge and skills, and to personalize each student's learning experience to their academic needs and interests. Key characteristics of schools, districts, and states implementing CBE include:

- **Learning objectives are defined in terms of “competencies”**, which clearly articulate goals for standards-aligned, 21st-century skills, dispositions, and knowledge.
- Students **advance through competencies by demonstrating mastery**, rather than by their age or “seat time”.
- Students often demonstrate mastery through **performance assessments, portfolios, and other means** beyond just traditional standardized tests.
- Assessments are **embedded into the learning experience**, and provide real-time feedback to students and teachers to inform and shape learning.
- Assessments are often based on **common performance tasks or evaluation rubrics**, to help increase inter-rater reliability when used at a district- or state-wide level.
- Students get more flexibility, and exercise greater agency, in choosing **where, when, and how** they acquire and show evidence of meeting competencies.
- Students receive **additional support as needed**—personalized to their abilities, learning styles, interests, and more.

Q: What is the significance of New Hampshire and the “PACE” accountability pilot?

A: There are nine New Hampshire school districts currently participating in the PACE pilot. PACE is significant because it is the first time a statewide accountability system is using educator-designed **performance assessments in some grades and subjects *instead of the statewide standardized test*** to assess student proficiency.

- Performance assessments are complex tasks designed by educators, in collaboration with the New Hampshire Department of Education, which assess both subject matter knowledge and problem-solving abilities. As an example, one PACE high school math task is: *“Your town’s population is predicted to increase over the next 3 years. In order to meet the future needs of the town, you need to analyze, write, and present a proposal to add a water tower that will be capable of holding 40,000 cubic feet of water.”*
- Students are given traditional state standardized tests only once in elementary, middle, and high school. For all other years and subjects, student proficiency within the statewide accountability system is **determined using performance assessments**.
- Some of the performance assessments are designed by educators locally. Others are drawn from a statewide “task bank” of performance assessments. The use of a mixture

of both local and state performance assessments **allows for statistical comparability**. For example, in one [summer workshop](#) where educators rated 400 pieces of student work on performance assessments, there were only three conflicts in proficiency scores.

Q: Where else in the country is competency-based education being implemented?

A: Several other states are experimenting with CBE, including but not limited to:

- Several other New England states, namely **Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, and Rhode Island** have convened coalitions of innovators and implemented competency-friendly policies such as proficiency diplomas and competency assessments. See item #1 in the additional reading list at the end of this document for more information on these efforts.
- **Illinois** passed legislation in 2016 that created a competency-based pilot. ISBE decided to restrict the pilot to only high schools. Currently, there are ten districts, including Chicago Public Schools, signed up to participate in the pilot, which will start in 2018-19.
- **Michigan** passed legislation in 2010 that provides a seat time waiver to districts that want to offer pupils access to online learning options and the opportunity to continue working on a high school diploma without actually attending a school facility.

Q: What are some of the benefits to the competency-based approach?

A: Growing bodies of research suggest there are multiple benefits to students in CBE. For example, a [2012 study](#) by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation found that many students find CBE to be more motivating and engaging than the traditional education models. Additionally, students cited that the ability to progress at their own pace was especially important.

Additionally, a [2016 report](#) by Imaginarium found that students were better able to understand and articulate what they were learning and why, and also felt greater responsibility for managing their projects. This contributed to higher self-awareness, engagement, and motivation. The report also found that teachers felt more empowered and were growing more professionally.

Q: Where can I learn more about competency-based education?

A: Several good resources include:

1. [Reaching the Tipping Point in New England](#). Competency Works. 2016.
2. [Competency-Based Learning: Definitions, Policies, and Implementation](#). REL Northeast & Islands. 2015.
3. [Our Story of Transformation](#). New Hampshire Department of Education. 2014.
4. [Assessment to Support Competency-Based Pathways](#). Achieve and the Center for Assessment.
5. [Making Mastery Work](#). Nellie Mae Education Foundation. 2012.
6. [Measuring Mastery: Best Practices for Assessment in Competency Education](#). American Enterprise Institute. 2012.