

BRIEFING MEMO

New Hampshire's Journey to Competency-Based Education

By Krista Kaput · Last updated 12 May 2017

For twenty years, New Hampshire (NH) and the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) have been on a journey to create an educational environment that supports and allows districts to improve and innovate through competency-based learning, which is when students earn credits and advance based on their ability to master a skill or standard at their own pace. Below is a comprehensive timeline of NHDOE's efforts to move the state from the traditional, industrial era education system to one that advances competency-based learning and accountability.

Phase 1: Gathering Stakeholder Input & Abolishing the “Carnegie Unit” (1997-2009)

In 1997, NH began their competency-based education journey when the NHDOE started to pilot “competency assessments” in four NH high schools. The assessments focused not only on the academic content that students knew, but also on their ability to apply and demonstrate knowledge across different settings. The pilot expanded and, by 2003, the competency assessments were administered in 27 high schools. It's important to note that these pilots did not employ competency progression.

Building on this momentum, NHDOE hosted a number of stakeholder workshops, forums, and focus groups throughout 2004 and in early 2005 in response to the growing concern that NH high schools were not preparing their students for success in the 21st century.

Summaries of the different gatherings are below:

- *Student, Teacher, and Counselor Forums*: In the spring of 2004, 143 students, mostly seniors, from 48 of 76 NH high schools participated in forums around the state.
- *Education Reform Conference*: May 17, 2004, the NHDOE and NH State Board of Education convened an Education Reform Conference. The participants advocated for a shift in high school education, where students would drive their own learning and the teacher would take on the role of a facilitator.
- *Focus Groups*: From August to October 2004, NHDOE and the NH High School Leadership Team conducted focus groups around the state, with more than 100 participants. The focus groups reinforced the idea that state leaders should help schools rethink the design of high school education to reflect the interests of the community.
- *High School Leadership Summit*: On January 25, 2005, the NH High School Leadership Team hosted a diverse group of more than 150 stakeholders. A major finding was that personalization was a promising guide for NH high school improvement efforts, but it must be clearly defined by the state and then implemented by localities.

In July 2005, using all of the input from the various gatherings, NH became the first state to abolish the “Carnegie unit” or awarding credits according to “seat time.” In its stead, NHDOE mandated that all public high schools award credit in terms of mastery of locally selected competencies.

Rather than making this change directly via statute, the NH State legislature gave NHDOE administrative authority to modify the state’s education policy through [regulation](#). The revised regulations required, among other things, that each school district create their own set of competencies and award credit based on a student’s mastery of them by the start of the 2008-09 academic year and beyond.

Despite the mandate, NHDOE had no formal mechanism to enforce the policy. Additionally, districts had complete freedom to define how competency-based education would look for their district, as well as how they would implement the program. Therefore, there was little to no consistency among the various district programs.

Phase 2: New Hampshire Lays State-Level Groundwork for a Competency-Based Accountability System (2012)

On January 31, 2012, [NH passed a resolution](#), along with Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont, supporting the [New England Secondary School Consortium](#) (NESSC). The partnership supports local innovation redesigning high schools, as well as the implementation of the design.

In spring 2012, NH Commissioner Barry and Deputy Commissioner Leather met with former Secretary Duncan to discuss a school accountability system grounded in competency-based education. In July 2012, NHDOE wrote a [concept paper](#) that described the new theory of action for the competency-based accountability system. However, upon closer examination, NHDOE and NH stakeholders found that too many of the plan’s components had not yet been fully conceptualized. Because of this, when [NHDOE applied for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\) waiver](#)¹ in September 2012, they submitted a request based on the state’s current accountability system, but added a provision that they would begin to construct a new competency-based accountability system.

In 2012 NHDOE also began a large-scale professional development initiative with teams of NH educators from the first cohort of schools that were dedicated to implementing competency education.

¹ Starting in August 2011, the the U.S. Department of Education introduced a formal process for waiving NCLB/ESEA requirements.

Phase 3: NH Designs Performance Assessment Model and NH Legislature Passes Legislation that Supports Competency-Based Education (2013)

In 2013, with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (Nellie Mae), NHDOE designed a performance assessment model of local accountability that would support the implementation of competency-based education. The model they designed built upon the July 2012 concept paper they wrote as NH was applying for the ESEA waiver, and also aligned with the tenets of [a white paper](#) completed by the Accountability 3.0 Task Force of the Innovation Lab Network of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

This model was the foundation for NH's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) proposal, which described a model of state and local accountability supported by common performance assessments that are created by the state and aligned to NH's standards-aligned, graduation competencies.

In June 2013, the NH State Legislature passed [Senate Bill 48](#), *An Act Relative to School Performance and Accountability*, which amended the statute on school performance and accountability. The legislation stressed the state's commitment to build a competency-based system where students are provided with personalized learning that provides "flexibility in the way that credit can be earned and awarded," and that allows them to "advance when they demonstrate the desired level of mastery."

Additionally, in 2013, NHDOE began coordinating with educators from across the state, along with the National Center for the Improvement Educational Assessment and the Center for Collaborative Education, so they could develop the state-level competencies in mathematics, science, art, ELA, and work-study practices.

Phase 4: NH Establishes their PACE Pilot and Submits Waiver to USDE (2014)

In the spring of 2014, with continued support from Nellie Mae and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, NHDOE established a PACE pilot of four implementing districts and four planning districts. These districts were dedicated to fully developing and implementing an accountability system for the 2014-15 academic year that would also satisfy the federal regulations.

The PACE Pilot was not only innovative, but NHDOE also saw it as a necessary step to advance educational equity for the state's students. In their ESEA waiver proposal to USDE, NHDOE wrote, "the state argues that the current system is likely an impediment for moving from good to great." In same proposal, NHDOE expressed their intent to move to an accountability model where localities have more agency to design their own systems.

The Center for Collaborative Education and the National Center for the Improvement of



Educational Assessment assisted with ensuring that there was a valid and reliable system of common performance assessments that aligned with the grade span summative Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) assessments.

On November 21, 2014, [NHDOE submitted their proposal](#) for the competency-based accountability PACE pilot program to USDE. The proposal requested that the USDE allow NHDOE to waive the number of annual state-level achievement testing for four NH school districts and that they instead be allowed to base accountability determinations on a combination of common local assessments and state-level assessments. Specifically, students would be assessed using the Smarter Balanced Assessments in grades 3 and 8, for ELA and in grades 4 and 8 for mathematics. The SAT is administered to all students in grade 11. In the other years, students would be assessed by local and common performance-based assessments.

In order for a district to participate in the pilot during the 2014-15 academic year, the district had to have already adopted the State graduation competencies, as well as developed a high-quality set of K-12 course and grade competencies that mapped to NH's graduation competencies. Additionally, districts had to be willing to participate in a peer and expert review process that involved submitting their performance-based assessments for evaluation.

Districts participating in the PACE pilot were also required to report the number and percentage of students at each grade level that were meeting both the locally defined and state approved definitions of proficiency and competency.

Phase 5: NH Receives USDE Waiver for PACE System (2015-2016)

In March 2015, [NHDOE was awarded permission](#) from the US Department of Education (USDE) for a two-year PACE pilot. The pilot was not a statewide waiver and, therefore, did not change the requirements for the other NH districts.

The pilot was the first of its kind in the nation, allowing districts to reduce the level of standardized testing in favor of more locally managed competency assessments that are more integrated into students' day-to-day work. The four districts that initially participated were Sanborn Regional, Rochester, Epping, and Souhegan.

In the first year of the pilot, the districts administered the Smarter Balanced statewide assessment once in elementary school, once in middle school, and once in high school, thereby decreasing the number of years of assessment from seven to three. (Under NCLB and ESSA, students are required to take Math and Reading assessments in grades 3-8 and once in high school.) In the years when students are not taking statewide assessments, the PACE districts administer local "performance assessments," a central feature of the PACE accountability

system, that were developed by the districts themselves and approved at the state level.

PACE also provides closer monitoring of each individual student because, rather than waiting for the results from a standardized test, the teachers administer their own assessments and get the results much quicker so that they can improve their practice and help more students.

On October 6, 2016, the [USDE granted NH](#) a one-year extension for their competency-based assessment pilot and also allowed them to expand to nine districts across the state. USDE was so impressed with PACE that the “Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority,” section in ESSA is modeled after the NH PACE initiative, and extends the opportunity for up to seven states.

Phase 6: NH Builds on PACE by Beginning to Question “Grades” (2015-Present)

The New Hampshire Learning Initiative won a grant in 2015 from [Next Generation Learning Challenges](#) for their [NG2: Personalized Inclusive Education Pathways](#), which aims to improve New Hampshire’s personalized learning while also dismantling the concept of “grades”, which they see as a long-standing barrier to personalized learning. The grant is for 24 months and started in March 2016.

The team has identified two forms of “grades” that schools use and that act as impediments:

- Grades as ratings of students knowledge or skills (A, B, C, etc.) that often don’t truly reflect students’ understanding or skills
- Grades as methods for grouping students mostly by age (i.e. 1st, 2nd, 3rd grade, etc.) that often poorly align to their true needs as learners.

For this project, seven elementary schools in New Hampshire are piloting methods for combining competency-based learning and performance assessments in multi-age settings. Those elementary schools are Memorial, Parker Varney, DJ. Bakie, Ashland, Pittsfield, and Maple Street Magnet School.

The seven schools only started piloting the program this year, 2016-17, but one of the schools, Pittsfield Elementary, has already garnered national attention. A November 2016 [EdWeek](#) article highlighted the innovative model within the school. Rather than use letter grades (A-F) as the main indicator of student learning, students are moving at their own, flexible pace and they move on when they demonstrate proficiency.