



Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness

Communications Toolkit

Competency-Based Pathways: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why the need for change? This isn't how we were taught in school.

A: Everything in our world has changed since our childhood *except* for the way we educate a lot of our students. Technology has rapidly advanced, our economy has become increasingly global and the jobs of tomorrow require a much higher set of skills. Across the country, there are many efforts underway to remodel our education system to better align it with modern needs, in the same way that we would need to rewire a hundred year old farmhouse to bring it up to code. A shift to competency-based pathways is one of the most important changes under consideration.

Q: How are competency-based pathways different from more traditional approaches?

A: Competency-based pathways present learning objectives as a series of building blocks that stack upon each other. Students move through the course material focusing on one block at a time. What's different about this approach is that the student does not move on to the next block until he or she demonstrates proficiency of the block that precedes it. Instead of getting a grade that averages a student's performance across a range of topics without ensuring mastery of all (or any), under a competency-based system, a student is evaluated based on his or her ability to master individual skills or bodies of knowledge.

Q: How will competency-based pathways benefit my child?

A: Because education under a competency-based system is personalized, it is harder for students to fall through the cracks. Teachers and parents have more complete information on any areas where a student is struggling and can therefore provide the support needed. The personalization of this approach also allows students to move through the course material at their own pace. That means that students who master a particular skill or knowledge set won't get bored waiting for others to catch up, and students who take longer to learn a particular skill or knowledge set won't be pushed ahead before they are ready.

Q: Why is the competency approach the right one?

A: Competency-based pathways focus on making sure that students gain and demonstrate proficiency in critical skills, rather than moving on to new skills before they are ready. This approach focuses on the individual student, allowing him or her to advance at his or her own pace. That means that high-achieving students aren't held back and others aren't forced on before they are ready.

Q: Will there be letter grades and GPAs like we are all used to?

A: Competency-based systems do not rely on traditional letter grades to measure student progress. Instead, student performance on individual skill levels is measured on a scale based on level of mastery (from 1-4, for example). Despite the differing format, the resulting performance record gives an accurate description of the depth and breadth of learning each student has achieved. Some schools are translating their evaluation systems into GPA equivalents, while others are using different approaches to communicate overall student performance.

Q: Will this change or hurt the chances of our students to get into college? How about the most exclusive colleges?

A: No. Admissions counselors at elite colleges currently review transcripts from all 50 states and from hundreds of countries around the world. As a result, counselors have become very familiar with a wide range of student evaluations – including competency-based reports. Admissions teams work hard to understand each student’s strengths. In fact, a transcript from a competency-based pathway provides these college admissions counselors greater level of detail about a student’s level of preparation and what makes a particular student unique.

Q: Is this the same thing as the Common Core?

A: No. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) outline what students need to know at the end of each grade level. CCSS does not tell teachers or school districts how to get to those standards. A competency-based approach is one way to design the learning environment and curriculum to meet state, county or local standards, including and beyond the CCSS.

Q: Competency-based pathways may be great for students who fall behind, but won’t it disadvantage high achievers?

A: No. Education systems that use competency-based pathways focus on the individual student. As a result, that means that students progress at their own pace. Those who are able to master given material more quickly advance right away instead of waiting for others to catch up – giving them a chance to move even further along than in traditional systems.

Q: Competency-based pathways are designed so that all students become proficient at the material. But not all students are the same. Some students have higher IQs, for example. Is it really possible to expect that all will graduate at the same level?

A: The goal of competency-based pathways is not to make all students the same. In fact, it recognizes that we are all individuals and all learn at different paces, mastering some material faster than others. The goal of competency-based pathways is to ensure that all students are mastering ALL of the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college or career. Some students will move through material faster than others, and some will exceed the benchmarks for proficiency.