

POLICY BRIEF

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An overview of Competency-Based Education practices & key policy considerations

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INTRODUCTION

As technological advancements drive continued changes to the workplace—and the skills expected from individual workers—the expectations of K-12 education systems are shifting to meet these needs.

Many states and school districts are considering how to best prepare students for the lives and careers they will experience outside of their educational pursuits. To shift the education system to better prepare students, some states are thinking about or currently implementing varied forms of student-centered models, including Competency-Based Education (CBE), to reform traditional ways of educating and testing students.

Competency-based education moves away from traditional Carnegie unit systems, which awards academic credit based on how much time students spend in direct contact with a classroom teacher. This transition is driven by a desire to link student advancement to mastery of content rather than seat time.¹

In Nevada, CBE's prevalence is growing—both through legislative pursuits and district buy-in. Nevada has not only enacted legislation in support of personalized learning in the past six years, but has also developed a [Network](#) within the community to generate ideas for implementing new educational approaches. [The Nevada Portrait of a Learner Project](#) further showcases a statewide effort to re-think required competencies for high school graduates.

Even with significant movement in CBE initiatives, there is lingering uncertainty about what CBE entails and how these practices could be implemented in Nevada. This policy brief aims to define what CBE is, identify challenges in implementing CBE, examine how other states are enacting CBE and its corresponding performance measures, and show potential models or best practices for Nevada.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Competency-Based Education (CBE) is a collaborative approach to education that shifts focus away from the traditional classroom model to one where students take a more active role in their education. While there is no standardized format of CBE, it generally includes the following features:

- **Customized instruction tailored to the learner:** Educators provide support that meets students' individual learning needs with the goal of advancing students to more rigorous material over time;
- **Varied pacing:** Students learn material at their own pace; and

¹ Fleming, Nora. "National Center on Time and Learning Director Talks Elt." Education Week, May 20, 2011. <https://www.edweek.org/education/national-center-on-time-and-learning-director-talks-elt/2011/05>.

- **Mastery redefined:** Students progress to more advanced levels of learning based on a demonstrated grasp of knowledge and concepts.²

Competency-Based Education in Practice

In the competency-based education environment, teachers act as facilitators, providing guidance and feedback, while students choose how, why, and with whom they want to learn. Through these learning opportunities, students collaborate with peers, receive feedback, and engage in experiences that can help them reach their potential.

With personalized, competency-based approaches, CBE proponents note that students have ownership over how, what, when, and where they learn with a focus on real-world connections. This approach uses “student voice” and consistent feedback so that each learner receives tailored and collaborative support based on their individual needs. Further, proponents of CBE, including Jobs For the Future,³ advocate for similar student-centered reforms like personalized learning,⁴ and deeper learning.⁵

Our research identified possible challenges in implementing CBE. For educators, some of these challenges include significant shifts in instruction, assessment, and grading. For students, challenges exist in ensuring their desired learning paths translate to the skills they need to thrive in life and in the workplace. Jurisdictions looking to fully implement the CBE model may consider incorporating greater flexibility into their instructional and assessment practices to accommodate these challenges.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN NEVADA

Nevada Legislation, CBE Network, and School District Participation

In 2017, the Nevada Legislature passed [Assembly Bill 110](#), which established the Nevada Competency-Based Education Network and Pilot Program (CBE Network). Assembly Bill 110 specifically defines CBE as “a system of instruction by which a pupil advances to a higher level of learning when the pupil demonstrates mastery of a concept or skill, regardless of the time, place, or pace at which the pupil progresses.” The CBE network created by AB 110, which includes certain principals, parents, and teachers, as well as representatives from two higher education institutions, is charged with improving and implementing CBE statewide. This includes:

1. Studying approaches to converting time-based requirements in classrooms into competency measures;
2. Examining tools for personalized learning and CBE;
3. Ensuring appropriate examinations are mandated by the State Board of Education; and

² RAND Corporation. “Competency-Based Education: Staying Ahead of the Curve.” Accessed April 9, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/competency-based-education.html>.

³ “Building a Future That Works.” Jobs for the Future (JFF), 2014. <https://www.jff.org/>.

⁴ “Early Progress: Interim Research on Personalized Learning.” Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, October 31, 2014. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED600865>.

⁵ Rothman, Robert. “Assessing Deeper Learning. Policy Brief.” Alliance for Excellent Education, June 30, 2012. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED524137>.

4. Strategizing the integration of technology to enhance CBE.

The network also focuses on professional development for educators transitioning to CBE, facilitates data sharing and support among participating schools, identifies barriers to statewide implementation, and develops evidence-based recommendations for continued CBE implementation. Finally, the network is tasked with submitting reports every other year to the Governor and Legislature to track progress and provide insights into the implementation of CBE in Nevada.

The initial cohort of the Nevada CBE Network included several schools from the Churchill, Clark, and Washoe County School Districts. Following significant interest, a second call for applications in the Spring of 2019 led to the inclusion of six additional schools from the Churchill County School District.⁶ This participation marked Churchill County School District as the first district in the State to engage in the pilot of Competency-Based Education across its entire district.

CBE Network Recommendations

[The findings and recommendations released by the CBE Network](#) in 2022 involve extensive research into strategies for converting traditional Carnegie Units of Time into competency measures, including the use of technology in instruction and professional development opportunities.⁷ Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual conferences facilitated collaboration and information sharing, particularly regarding the implementation of competency-based education and personalized learning.⁸ However, adherence to Nevada's Open Meeting Law (OML) presented a significant barrier to the network's productivity, resulting in a legislative recommendation to exempt OML requirements for the network.⁹ Additionally, there is a recognized need for a seat-time waiver to enable students to continue learning regardless of location, with a focus on utilizing data-tracking systems to monitor progress.¹⁰ These concerns were addressed, in part, through the creation of the [Blue-Ribbon Commission for a Globally Prepared Nevada](#) and the passage of [Senate Bill 215 \(2021\)](#), which expanded access to alternative calendars and distance learning.

The CBE Network's report also summarized other key observations at individual pilot schools, including the following:

- Cheyenne High School, part of Clark County School District, took two approaches to implement CBE practices: the use of small group learning cohorts and accelerated courses. The small group cohorts were established based on varied factors that could include student interest, subject, grade level, Grade Point Average (GPA), or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) scores. In these groups, students could

⁶ Nevada Department of Education. Nevada Competency-Based Education Network Comprehensive Report: 2022, 2022.

https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Division/Research/Documents/RTTL_NRS389.220_2022.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

accelerate their work, earn credit, and make progress toward graduation requirements. The school also explored the use of credit by exam but found that students lacking credits preferred computerized credit recovery options. The accelerated course offerings were marketed to students as an opportunity for students to have more time in their schedules for dual enrollment courses. Students could move at their own pace through curricula deemed essential to the given subject while cutting out additional content. Some of these classes used a third-party computer-based program with a preset curriculum, but observers found that not all students preferred this method of instruction. Instructors of another class primarily used a performance-based model with strong support from a customizable online education platform and found it more helpful than an online tool with a preset curriculum.

- Churchill County Middle School offered a project-based Blended Learning Community (BLC), open to all students, allowing them more control over the pace and time of their core courses. Despite a decline in participation due to budget constraints, students in the program showed higher proficiency in SBAC assessments compared to those not in the program. Among 6th through 8th grade regular education students, 35 percent had proficiency in English Language Arts, whereas 50 percent of BLC 6th through 8th graders demonstrated proficiency. In Math, 15 percent of regular education students were proficient compared to 27 percent of BLC students. This data was collected from 2018-2020; however, 2020-2022 data is unavailable due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Incline High School developed Competency-Based Learning units with support from a third-party vendor, which allowed students to work at their own pace, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION ACROSS THE NATION

Our research indicates that competency-based education is often met with enthusiasm, yet the translation of this concept into tangible improvements in student outcomes hinges on effective implementation, a challenge often encountered with new educational practices.¹¹ While there is consensus among proponents regarding the essential elements of CBE, its implementation varies significantly across states and districts, with policies ranging from flexible credit awards to the complete transformation of the education system into a learning-based model.¹² Some states mandate a competency-based diploma system across all districts, while others offer districts the choice to adopt elements of competency-based education without imposing specific requirements.¹³

We also observed divergence in how states implement competency-based grading policies and graduation requirements, with variations in methods of competency demonstration and subject-

¹¹ Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1976). Implementation of educational innovation. *Educational Forum*, 40(3), 344-370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131727609336469>.

¹² Steele, J. L., Lewis, M. W., Santibañez, L., Faxon-Mills, S., Rudnick, M., Stecher, B. M., & Hamilton, L. S. (2014). Competency-based education in three pilot programs: Examining implementation and outcomes.

¹³ Sturgis, C. (2014). *Progress and proficiency: Redesigning grading for competency education*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

specific credit offerings.¹⁴ This variability appears to extend to the local level, where districts exhibit differences in prioritizing proficiency assessment, personalization of learning, and the integration of technology to support competency-based approaches.¹⁵ Additionally, our research found disparities in the recognition of learning experiences outside traditional school settings and in the criteria used to determine student proficiency, highlighting the complexity and diversity of competency-based education implementation.¹⁶ To successfully implement CBE principles, policymakers and education administrators may consider establishing consistent CBE measurements and implementation practices in each school district in Nevada, and might further consider statewide consistency.

Assessments and the CBE Model

The [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) mandates statewide assessments to form the basis of state accountability systems, which may limit innovation in accountability assessments. However, states have avenues to explore assessment innovation within their own systems. They can grant districts flexibility to assess student mastery of standards or competencies rather than using traditional Carnegie units. This allows school districts to employ personalized approaches like performance assessments, portfolios, or projects to fulfill graduation requirements. At least 25 states permit graduation requirements to be met through student-centered assessment options, offering districts space to employ personalized assessment methods alongside standardized tests, thereby enhancing the measurement of student learning.¹⁷ Some states enable districts to develop varied assessment options tailored to individual student skills, interests, and career goals, which CBE proponents note fosters authentic assessment practices aligned with real-world experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Student-centered assessment for course credit permits students to progress at their own pace, which differs from fixed instructional hours dictated by Carnegie units. While implementing differentiated pacing requires school effort, competency-based education is designed to personalize support based on student needs and facilitates efficient progress to advanced coursework. This flexibility, proponents argue, promotes the application of learning in meaningful contexts, enabling students to achieve deeper mastery levels. However, for jurisdictions choosing to embrace CBE, our research finds that successful implementation CBE would benefit from states granting greater flexibility in assessment options. These state-level efforts, proponents note, would support diverse pathways to graduation and enhance student engagement and advancement.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Steele, J. L., Lewis, M. W., Santibañez, L., Faxon-Mills, S., Rudnick, M., Stecher, B. M., & Hamilton, L. S. (2014). Competency-based education in three pilot programs: Examining implementation and outcomes.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “State Policies to Support Student-Centered Learning.” KnowledgeWorks, October 6, 2023.
<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/state-policies-to-support-student-centered-learning/>.

ABOUT THE GUINN CENTER

The Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy center addressing key challenges faced by policymakers in Nevada. We are affiliated with the University of Nevada, Reno, with researchers and collaborative partnerships at NSHE institutions across the state.

Founded in 2013 by a group of Nevadans who sought to advance new policy choices based on sound research, sensible and pragmatic thinking, and bold ideas, the Center is named for the late-Governor Kenny Guinn.

Our research is financially supported through grants, contracts, and generous contributions from our donors. If you would like to support our work, visit our website at Guinncenter.org.

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