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State Approaches to Competency-Based Education to Support College and Career Readiness for All Students

Introduction

In recent years, the United States has achieved an all-time high graduation rate of 81.4 percent and is on pace to reach a 90 percent rate by 2020. Although this increase is substantial, many students still struggle to graduate on time within the traditional school system. Racial and ethnic minority students, English language learners, and special education students all suffer from significantly lower graduation rates (DePaoli et al., 2015). States and schools are shifting their focus to ensure college and career readiness is a realistic and attainable goal for all students. This brief provides an overview of competency-based education (CBE), one model gaining prominence in K–12 education to support college and career readiness for all.

Free from the restraints of a one-size-fits-all approach, CBE provides strategies to set college and career readiness expectations for all students while creating personalized education opportunities. CBE gained attention within the education reform community nearly 20 years ago, from a seemingly unlikely place. Chugach School District in rural Alaska adopted a new model in which students demonstrated their mastery of topics at their own pace and through innovative instructional techniques. The school district developed

Related Definitions There are several key terms related to competency-based education.

- **Competencies:** The capability to apply a set of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to complete complex tasks

- **Learning Objectives:** A brief statement that conveys what students are expected to learn throughout the school year, course, lesson, or class period

- **Personalized Education:** The modification of instruction, courses, and learning environments by or for learners with the goal of meeting their different learning needs

- **Seat Time:** Refers to the use of academic credits based on the 120-hour Carnegie Unit

- **Standards-Based Education:** A system of academic reporting based on students' demonstration of the mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they advance through their education

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a series of individualized supports for students. After replacing grade levels with 10 performance levels, the district, which had sent only one student to college ever, started to realize exceptional achievement for its students. The success led to a new organization, the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition, designed to expand the success in Chugach throughout the country (Sturgis, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). More recently, states have adopted similar reforms and more states have expanded related approaches to districts or to all students in the state. These reforms are allowing schools to foster academic rigor and can help improve college and career readiness for all students.

What Is CBE?

As a new, primarily district-led initiative (Sturgis, 2015), CBE currently lacks a universally accepted definition. The many terms and phrases used to describe this concept contain common elements that, taken together, serve as a broadly accepted framework for CBE. As succinctly covered by Jobs for the Future, CBE (or *proficiency-based education*) "[refers] to educational approaches that prioritize the mastery of learning objectives regardless of how long it takes" (Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). The policies adopted by federal and state education agencies leave much room within this broad definition to create innovative approaches to education that incorporate core elements of CBE.

Core Elements of CBE

States and districts use a variety of similar terms to describe CBE, including *competency-based, proficiency-based*, *mastery*, and more. A group of states, school districts, organizations, and thought leaders on the topic have identified some shared elements. At the federal level, the term *competency-based* was first included in the Race to the Top program and was subsequently found in almost one third of state applications as a strategy for improving teacher quality (Sturgis & Patrick, 2010).

Among the many states and school districts that have adopted types of CBE, three core elements have emerged (adapted from Le, Wolf, & Steinberg, 2014):

- **Mastery.** Students demonstrate they have gained the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the subject by meeting learning objectives that can be measured through portfolios, projects, tests, assessments, or other ways.

- **Pacing.** Students advance at their own pace toward a learning objective rather than expecting all students in a classroom to master that objective in the same amount of time. The traditional seat-time requirement is not a factor in the demonstration of mastery.

- **Instruction.** Learning is individualized, and students are presented material that becomes increasingly more challenging that is appropriate to them and their level until they are able to reach mastery in that area.

The current status of CBE can best be described as a patchwork of different federal, state, and district policies. The federal accountability system currently in place is designed to measure student performance at the end of the school year. This can make it difficult for individual states and school districts to adopt elements of CBE that encourage individual students to learn at their own pace (Worthen & Pace, 2014). States are, however, able to be innovative within the current

federal policy framework. Most states have accepted the charge to set college and career readiness standards for all students through Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility. The following sections describe how states are adopting these elements of CBE as a means to support college and career readiness for all students.

STATE POLICY Examples

New Hampshire became the first state to abandon the Carnegie Unit and seat-time requirements for earning a high school diploma. Maine also recently adopted policies to allow districts to award diplomas based on mastery.

Summary of New Hampshire Policy

In 2011, New Hampshire became the first state to adopt statewide college and career readiness competency standards. The approved content-specific competencies were aligned with the Common Core State Standards. New Hampshire replaced high school Carnegie Units with course-level competencies. As of 2014, students are now awarded course credit based on demonstration of mastery of the course-level competencies. The state education agency allows individual districts to develop their own assessments of the state-approved competencies (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2011).

Summary of Maine Policy

The Proficiency-Based Diploma Program requires all students to demonstrate proficiency in meeting new competency-based standards. The Maine Department of Education assists school districts with the transition by developing standards-based system tools and providing technical assistance to districts. Districts may award credit to students based on demonstration of mastery through evidence that includes teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios of work, projects, and more. Maine will adopt this new competency-based system by 2018 (Silvernail, Stump, Duina, & Gunn, 2013).

How Are States Using CBE to Support College and Career Readiness?

Few states are adopting CBE on a statewide basis. Instead, many states and districts are incorporating aspects of CBE. In total, 35 states allow a student to earn credits toward a high school diploma through some aspects of CBE. In some cases, the district can require schools to include CBE as part of the graduation requirements. Mostly, states allow districts to create innovative models that incorporate mastery, pacing, and/or instructional changes—core elements of CBE. States have created proficiency-based diplomas, allow credits to be converted to recognize mastery of skills, and grant waivers to districts to release students from seat-time requirements (Sturgis, 2015). The following examples highlight common ways CBE can be incorporated into the educational options available in a state.

Examples of Mastery and Alternative Instruction in the States

Exceptions to Seat-Time and Course Credit Waivers. For decades, the Carnegie Unit has been the prevailing method to assess secondary educational attainment. In recent years, however, a shift has occurred. A majority of 29 states now allow districts to award credit based on mastery

with or without seat-time requirements. A much smaller group of four states allow districts to apply for waivers releasing the district from requirements to award course credits based on seat time. CBE is one of several options available to districts to create alternative educational models in these states (Le et al., 2014).

One of the ways states are incorporating mastery into their policies is by amending high school graduation requirements. Iowa allows districts and schools to establish competency-based pathways and provides guidelines for learning competencies outside the traditional school setting and beyond seat time. To achieve this, Iowa recognizes learning outside of school; awards credit for advanced learning; and provides rapid, personalized support for students who fall too far behind (Iowa Department of Education, 2015).

Oregon allows districts and charter schools to grant credit to students demonstrating defined levels of proficiency or mastery of standards through a variety of options, including:

1. Successfully completing a supervised independent study, career-related learning experience, or project-based learning

2. Successfully passing an exam designed to measure proficiency or mastery of identified standards

3. Providing a collection of work or other assessment evidence that demonstrates proficiency or mastery of identified standards

4. Providing documentation of prior learning activities or experiences that demonstrates proficiency or mastery of identified standards (Oregon Department of Education, 2011)

Alternative Instructional Approaches. CBE also allows for personalized education within a standards-based framework, reconciling two movements that have traditionally been at odds (Le et al., 2014). The movement toward CBE shares the spirit of standards-based accountability by focusing on mastery for all students. The main difference is the option to adopt a highly individualized approach. The concept, in very broad terms, is a shift from all students proving their understanding at specific times throughout the year to students demonstrating proficiency at their own time. This individualized approach allows states and districts to adopt alternative instructional delivery approaches.

Combining mastery and personalization allows CBE to align with both college and career readiness and high standards for all students within a framework of individual student needs and attention. Approaches to alternative instruction include online and blended learning, dual credit, and credit recovery, among others.

Michigan passed a seat-time waiver in 2010 so that districts can offer online learning to students without the need to attend the physical school building (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

In 2011, Florida passed legislation that required districts to implement virtual instruction options, which allows blended learning courses in the classroom and requires students to take at least one online class to graduate (Florida Senate, 2011).

In Georgia, dual enrollment is available to all students meeting local and state dual enrollment credit requirements that are enrolled in an eligible high school (Georgia Department of Education, 2013).

What Is the State Role in CBE?

State education agencies can take an active role in supporting the development of CBE. Some states, most notably Maine and New Hampshire, have set ambitious goals for their students and the public K–12 education system. Other states are identifying approaches taken by leading schools and districts and are finding ways to support them on a larger scale. A variety of policies, programs, and pilots can expand the adaption of CBE among individual schools and districts or across the whole state. The following recommendations are examples other states have taken along this path.

Write Policies and Guidance That Support CBE

- **Raise the bar on college and career readiness expectations for all students by ensuring academic rigor in core classes.** Anticipated reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act provide opportunities to include new or revised standards in statewide education plans. State education agencies can use these opportunities to include detailed plans for the adoption of assessments measuring individual student mastery that meet existing college and career readiness standards. States and districts have taken a variety of approaches to measuring mastery of competencies, including formative, interim, and summative assessments; portfolios of work; demonstration of prior learning; and capstone projects; among others. By providing guidance to districts and schools that are considering CBE, the state can encourage the adoption of this model for education.

- **Allow seat-time waivers for districts to award credit for courses toward a high school diploma.** Allowing individual districts the flexibility to experiment with proven models, such as CBE, will allow other schools and districts throughout the state to consider adoption of the core elements of CBE. One approach taken by many states is the seat-time waiver for individual districts, which can be useful for many purposes, such as providing online credit recovery, in addition to CBE.

Expand Assessment of Mastery

- **Review assessments available to districts and schools, or write guidance on options that can be quickly adopted.** One of the quickest ways schools and districts can begin to adopt CBE is through identifying assessments of student mastery already approved for use in the state. The state education agency can make it easier for individual schools and districts to select appropriate assessments by surveying their use throughout the state and then distributing the results. The list should contain assessments that have been approved by the state education agency through written guidance or through individual requests from schools or districts.

Explore Different CBE Models

- **Form an exploratory task force.** If your state or region has not considered CBE, consider forming a task force, led by the state education agency, to review various models; analyze current state policies like those identified in this brief; and deliver a set of recommendations regarding whether or how to adopt CBE across the state.

- **Start a pilot program at districts or individual schools.** One approach to learn more about CBE is to find districts or schools willing to serve as early adopters of the model. These "living laboratories" can be a test bed and platform for legislators, other districts, and national organizations to see CBE in action. Consider piloting or expanding national models similar to or that incorporate elements of CBE, such as Early College High School, that have been adopted in many states.

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