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POLICY, PILOTS AND THE PATH TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION:

A Tale of Three States

AUTHORS:
Karla Phillips
Carri Schneider

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Competency-Based Education: Building the Foundation for Personalized Learning

There's a national conversation underway--supported by research and confirmed by employers, students and higher education--that the traditional education system is no longer matched to the demands of the modern workforce.

Many employers find not all high school graduates are fully prepared for work. Four in five employers report that recent public high school graduates have at least some gaps in preparation and report an increase in the need to require additional training and education.[1] Students feel these gaps in their own preparation. A recent survey of high school graduates revealed that many felt unprepared for both college and work and admitted they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them.[2] Institutions of higher education experience this strain through costly and time-consuming remedial courses. More than 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and nearly 20 percent of those entering four-year universities are placed in remedial classes.[3]

Too many students in the traditional, time-based system graduate without having the skills or knowledge to thrive in college or careers. Diplomas and credits based on seat time and mere passing grades signal to students and families that they are ready for what's next, but the research tells us otherwise. National education data reveals a steep gap between parent perceptions about student achievement and actual student performance data. For example, 90 percent of students surveyed believe their child is performing at or above grade level in reading, and 85 percent believe their child is on track to meet learning goals and grade level expectations.[4] However, according to National Assessment of Educational Progress 2015 data, only 34 percent of eighth graders are proficient in reading.[5]

There are several new, student-centered approaches that simultaneously address these challenges with the current system and illuminate a path forward. Because of its emphasis on demonstrations of mastery and individual learning paths to proficiency in state standards, competency-based education (CBE) offers one of the most promising approaches. A growing number of educators, leaders and state policymakers are optimistic about the potential of this policy to close learning gaps, boost college and career readiness and build the foundation for personalized learning.

This report highlights how and why state competency-based education pilot programs offer a reasonable and actionable first step for state policymakers seeking to advance this policy. In telling the stories of three states with the same goal, but travelling different paths, this report seeks to inspire other states to implement pilots as a first step. Also included are recommendations for gaining authorization for competency-based education pilots as well as communication strategies to support these efforts.

What is Competency-Based Education?

Competency-based education (known as "CBE" and also called mastery-based or proficiency-based education) is a system of instruction where students advance to higher levels of learning after they demonstrate mastery of each concept and skill regardless of time, place or pace. The pace and style will look different for different students, but the goals of mastering and understanding concepts and allowing students opportunities to "show what they know" in order to advance to more challenging material remains constant.

Our nation's traditional, time-based education system advances students based primarily on their age, regardless of their depth of understanding. By not ensuring mastery, the current system pushes students forward who are not yet ready, leaving them with gaps in critical knowledge or fundamental skills that must be remedied later. Concurrently, the traditional system often prevents students from excelling more quickly, engaging more deeply in their interests or pursuing additional academic challenges. Over time, this outdated education system repeatedly fails far too many students.
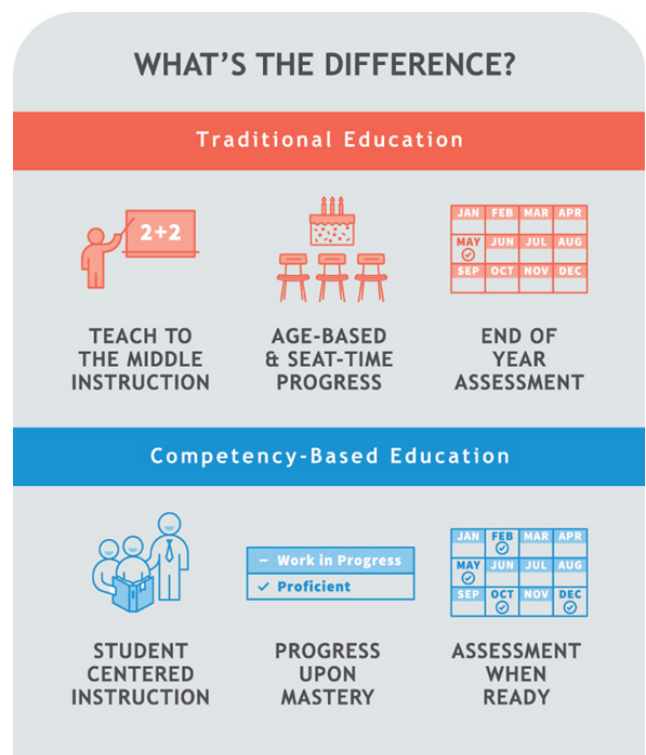
The working definition of competency-based education[6] developed by a collaboration of innovative leaders and practitioners, led by CompetencyWorks and International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) and accepted widely by the field includes these five design principles:

» Students advance upon mastery.
» Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
» Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
» Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
» Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

The shift to a competency-based system that fully embodies these design principles provides the foundation for personalized learning. The implementation of these principles creates the framework educators can use to meet students where they are. However, this shift is comprehensive and often requires fundamental changes in schedules, calendars, assessment and grading. This means that state policy solutions are often needed to support the shift to competency-based education in schools and districts.

ExcelinEd's Competency-Based Education Resource Page provides a policy overview and Frequently Asked Questions as well as links to state resources such as CBE Fundamental Principles, Policy Summary, Innovation Pilot Model Legislation and a CBE Communications Toolkit.
www.excelined.org/CBE

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Traditional Education

| TEACH TO THE MIDDLE INSTRUCTION | AGE-BASED & SEAT-TIME PROGRESS | END OF YEAR ASSESSMENT |

Competency-Based Education

| STUDENT CENTERED INSTRUCTION | PROGRESS UPON MASTERY | ASSESSMENT WHEN READY |

The Role of Policy in the Shift to Competency-Based Education

While a shift toward competency-based education can begin at the school-level, state policies can either help or hinder successful implementation. The long-term success of a shift to competency-based education requires an evaluation of current state policies to determine which enable and support competency-based education, the policies that hinder the transition and the development of new policies that may be required. Each state has a unique policy landscape and political environment, so the path towards a competency-based system will take different turns as well.

Several states are currently already on this path. iNACOL produced a detailed map[7] demonstrating both the progress in state policy supporting competency-based education but also the variety in approaches. More than forty states have made some policy progress toward shifting away from the time-based system, and there is growing momentum for competency-based education. While this represents a great deal of potential and promise, much work remains to provide the impetus for innovative leaders to step out and determine what it would take for every student to have the opportunity to learn in a personalized, competency-based system.

ExcelinEd's
Competency-Based Education: Building the Foundation for Personalized Learning Policy Summary

www.excelined.org/CBE/PolicySummary

Benefits of a Pilot Strategy

A shift to competency-based education can seem prohibitively complex at the outset. Fundamental changes in how credits and diplomas are awarded, how and when assessments are offered as well as how schools, educators and students will be held accountable may be required. Implementation requires an intentional approach that engages multiple stakeholders in developing and executing a long-term plan. It's therefore helpful to start with an approach that acknowledges the variation of state and local contexts and creates conditions where competency-based education can grow and thrive.

ExcelinEd's
Competency-Based Education: Fundamental Principles

www.excelined.org/CBE/FundamentalPrinciples

Many states have authorized competency-based pilot programs or even broader innovation zones as a powerful step to kick start competency-based education. Both of these initiatives are generally characterized by applicants that commit to transition to a competency-based system or other stipulated innovations and request flexibility from the rules or regulations that hinder full implementation. This report highlights how and why state pilot programs offer a promising strategy for implementing competency-based education. ExcelinEd's work with states that have taken this path reveals both state policy benefits and local school/district benefits.

Pilot programs provide a reasonable and actionable first step for policymakers. State policymakers often assume they must first identify and eliminate each policy barrier before encouraging competency-based education. However, states do not have to have all the answers before the transition can begin. Pilots offer an entry point and a launching pad that can later inform a statewide shift, since the experience gained from the pilot program reveals the longer-term policy solutions necessary to support competency-based education and build plans for scalability. The process of developing a pilot program creates the

perfect forum for authentic policy discussions tailored for each particular state. As the iNACOL and Achieve reports describe and ExcelinEd's work confirms, state education innovation pilot programs provide a catalyst for personalized learning.[8]

Pilot programs empower and embolden innovative school and district educators and leaders. Educators across the country continue to explore competency-based education models as a path to better student outcomes. State laws and regulations based on a traditional, time-based system create real or perceived barriers that often prohibit additional schools and districts from implementing these models. Statewide pilot programs empower and incentivize innovation by providing additional support and clearing out a path freed from restrictions for those already on the path to competency-based and personalized learning and others who have not had the capacity or support to take on these challenges on their own.

There are currently four states with pilot programs specific to competency-based education - Ohio, Idaho, Utah and Florida. However, there are other states with broader innovation programs such as Colorado, Arkansas, Georgia, West Virginia, Alabama and Kentucky. Ohio and Idaho are the two states with both a state innovation program and competency-based education pilot program. The programs in these states signal growing interest in innovation programs and pilots as a starting point for implementing competency-based education.

In public testimony to support Ohio's landmark Competency Education Pilot program in March 2015, KnowledgeWorks Vice President for Policy and Advocacy Matt Williams explained that pilots "breathe greater life into [a state's] personalized learning and education innovation investments by offering new opportunities to districts, schools, and most importantly, students."[9]

Same Goals, Different Paths

ExcelinEd policy experts identified three states with the common goal of advancing competency-based education through pilot programs but took three unique paths to get there. Mirroring the flexibility in a competency-based system, in which students carve their own paths and pace, these stories that follow highlight the ways in which each state's unique needs shaped its individual path and pace toward competency-based education. The three state stories that follow feature Idaho, Utah and Florida.

Idaho's story is one of a concerted statewide, collaborative effort. In Utah, a strong advocate with a priority for education innovation saw competency-based education as a key next step for the state. Florida's district-led innovation provides a third path via a "bottom-up" adoption.

For each state, we provide some background context, key events, the state's unique approach and key takeaways. The report concludes with recommendations to inform legislative action in other states based on lessons and insights from each of these state stories.
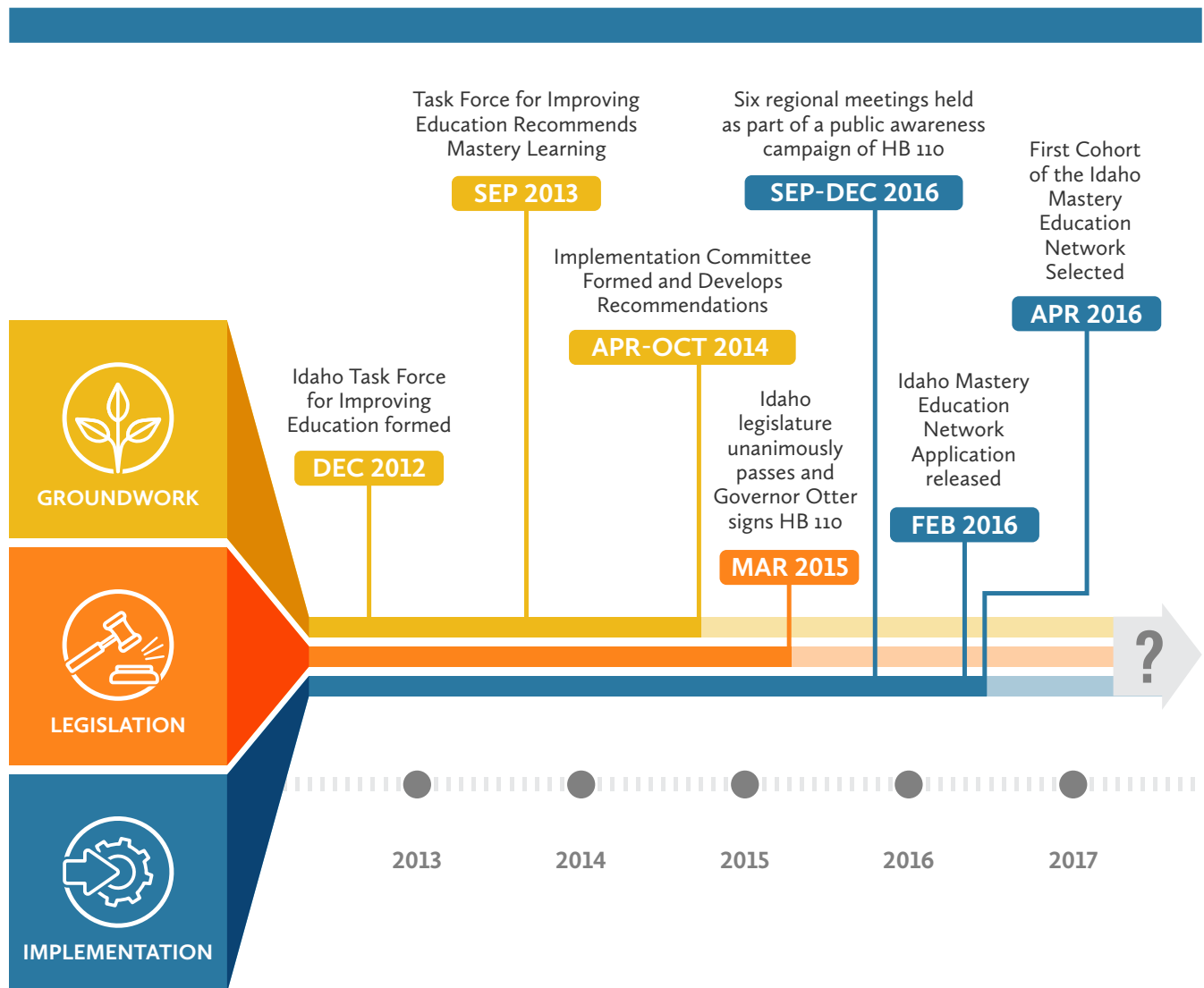
IDAHO

This is the story of implementation built on a solid foundation led by the Governor with strong support of the Legislature, State Superintendent and State Board of Education who recognize the importance of balancing state support with local decision making.

GROUNDWORK

LEGISLATION

IMPLEMENTATION

Task Force for Improving Education Recommends Mastery Learning

SEP 2013

Six regional meetings held as part of a public awareness campaign of HB 110

SEP-DEC 2016

First Cohort of the Idaho Mastery Education Network Selected

Implementation Committee Formed and Develops Recommendations

APR-OCT 2014

APR 2016

Idaho Task Force for Improving Education formed

DEC 2012

Idaho legislature unanimously passes and Governor Otter signs HB 110

MAR 2015

Idaho Mastery Education Network Application released

FEB 2016

?

2013   2014   2015   2016   2017

Background

Idaho's shift to mastery education (another common description, along with proficiency-based education, that is used to describe competency-based education) dates back several years to groundwork laid by Idaho Governor Butch Otter in December 2012. Based on several weeks of educator and community outreach after rejection of a November 2012 education initiative, Governor Otter tasked the State Board of Education with shepherding a statewide discussion about the future of education by forming the Idaho Task Force for Improving Education.[10]

The Task Force was driven by an overarching goal "for Idaho to have a uniform and high-performing public K-12 education system, as measured by the State Board of Education (SBOE) goal of 60 percent of people entering the workforce having some post-secondary degree or certificate." Task Force membership included the Idaho Parent Teacher Association, State Senators and Representatives, the Idaho Association of School Administrators, State Superintendent's Office, the School Boards Association, the Idaho Education Association as well as district and higher education representatives. In September 2013, the Task Force released its report and recommendations.[11] First among the twenty recommendations for improving Idaho education was the implementation of a Mastery Based System.

In order to move the recommendation from concept to operation, the State Board of Education assembled an implementation committee comprised of members of the Task Force and augmented with additional legislators and educators. Their charge was to research best practices, bring in additional expertise and gather input on what mastery education might look like in Idaho in order to develop specific implementation strategies, set a timeline and recommend a budget request.

Idaho's Story

In March 2015, based on the work of the implementation committee, the Idaho legislature unanimously passed and Governor Otter signed House Bill 110[12] which formally launched Idaho's transition to a mastery education system. The powerful bill directed the state department of education to perform three specific activities:

1. Conduct a statewide awareness campaign to promote understanding and interest in mastery education for teachers, administrators, parents, students, business leaders and policymakers.
2. Establish a committee of educators to identify roadblocks and possible solutions in implementing mastery education and develop recommendations for the incubator process.
3. Facilitate the planning and development of an incubator process and assessments of local education agencies to identify the initial cohort of up to twenty (20) local education agencies to serve as incubators in fiscal year 2017.

Inside these three components is a compelling set of processes, decisions, insights and lessons that can inform other states pilot strategy as an attainable first step toward implementing competency-based education.

> "If we can transform the current education system to one that focuses on the students and their learning needs, we can transform the future of Idaho. Mastery education can help us build a workforce that can respond to the advanced jobs of tomorrow and ensure that no students fall behind."
>
> Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

Statewide Awareness Campaign

Governor Otter's original Task Force set the expectation to establish buy-in and engage multiple stakeholders in order to successfully implement the recommendations - including the implementation of mastery education. HB 110 included a statewide public awareness campaign in acknowledgement of this.

In order to achieve the twin goals of promoting understanding of and building interest in mastery education, the Idaho Department of Education began to build and lead a communications and outreach campaign. The first step was six regional meetings from September-December 2015 to share the fundamentals of mastery education, highlight how mastery education would advance the foundational goals from the original Task Force report and describe Idaho's intention to encourage and support schools and districts to pilot mastery education through the incubator program.[13] The regional meetings also served as an opportunity to highlight progress toward mastery education already happening across the state and to invite participation in the application process.

In addition to the regional meetings, the state department also developed a mastery education resources website[14] and hired Kelly Brady, a veteran teacher and mastery education champion, as Idaho's Director of Mastery Education.

Veteran Teacher Kelly Brady is the Director of Mastery Education for the Idaho State Department of Education and a leading advocate for competency-based education. She acknowledges that communicating the benefits of competency-based education and building a compelling case for implementation with local champions is an essential first step.

Learn more from Kelly's perspective in her blogs: **Why This Experienced Teacher Believes in Mastery Education** and **How Idaho is Making Mastery Education A Reality**

http://www.excelined.org/2016/01/19/why-this-experienced-teacher-believes-in-mastery-education/

http://www.excelined.org/2016/01/25/how-idaho-is-making-mastery-education-a-reality/

Mastery Education Committee

HB 110 called for the establishment of a Mastery Education Committee. In keeping with Idaho's commitment to multiple perspectives and authentic stakeholder engagement, the committee was assembled to represent each of the six regions of the state with a combination of rural, small schools and larger districts. The committee included six teachers, seven administrators and five other representatives including a special education director, curriculum director, board member, Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA) director and research coordinator.

The stated goals of the committee were to: identify implementation roadblocks and possible solutions; develop recommendations related to the incubator program; assist in conducting a statewide awareness campaign; and help to facilitate the planning and implementation of an incubator program.

The committee met in the summer of 2015 to explore challenges, generate solutions and develop recommendations for the mastery education pilot program. The original work of this Committee informed the ongoing Statewide Awareness Campaign and Incubator Process that followed.

Incubator Process

Idaho's efforts in building and convening the committee as well as designing and launching the awareness campaign that followed are important parts of Idaho's approach to implementing mastery education and laid the groundwork for the design and development of the incubator process that successfully identified 19 local education agencies (LEAs) that now form the first cohort of incubator or pilot sites in the 2016-17 school year.

Idaho made the decision early on to proceed simultaneously with the beginning of an incubator program while also "creating a venue and process to identify state policy issues that may need to be addressed" because state leaders wanted "the policy discussion to be informed by experience and not on speculation."[15]

A key decision early on was to create and operate the participating LEAs under the umbrella of the Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN).[16] In fact, the applications clearly stated that in addition to the implementation of their own proposed plans, network sites will participate in the IMEN. The network creates a professional learning community for the participants as well as a vehicle for the state department to support the incubator sites and a forum for state policy discussion and development of applicable resources.

Activities will include, but not be limited to:

- » Participation in professional development plans and assisting in the following network activities:
- » Development of model competencies that can be scaled to statewide use.
- » Identification and/or development of assessments (formative and summative) and other tools to monitor learning.
- » Development of best practices.
- » Identification and assessment of data and metrics used to ensure compliance, progress and growth.

The work of the committee and leadership of Kelly Brady and the State Department of Education led to a process for the application and evaluation for participation in the Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN). While there are many ways states can approach pilots, Idaho's application process builds off of previous work in Ohio and can serve as the basis for other states to make adjustments and adaptations unique to their own state contexts.

In December 2015, interested Idaho schools and districts were encouraged to submit a letter of intent and take "The Mastery Education Readiness Survey"[17] to self-assess direction, motivation, leadership, student focus, curriculum, instruction, technology, comprehensive data system, risk-taking, organizational structure, ownership and communication.

In February 2016, the formal Idaho Mastery Education Network Application[18] was released. The instructions outlined requirements that echoed Idaho's commitment to collaboration and capacity-building. Idaho based its application and scoring rubric off of work done in Ohio as well as through consultation with national experts who had led or participated in similar application processes. Applications were evaluated by an independent committee of expert practitioners and national education experts who were trained by video conference on the intent of the program and requirements for scoring.

On April 22, 2016 the Idaho Department of Education announced the first group of schools[19] that will participate in the newly created Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN). The first IMEN cohort is comprised of 19 regionally diverse schools, each with unique approaches. Implementation will be carried out over a five-year period, with June 2016-August 2017 dedicated to design and planning and four academic years (17-18, 18-19, 19-20, 20-21) for implementation. The legislature appropriated $1.3 million for grants in 2016.

Key Lessons from Idaho

Idaho should serve as a model for implementing competency-based education because of its recognition and emphasis on key messaging. This is perhaps the most important takeaway from Idaho's example that other states should emulate. Idaho leaders were intentional from the very beginning about messaging. This is evidenced by the careful selection of the word "mastery" over "competency" as well as the deliberate framing of school/district "incubators" versus "pilots." Idaho leaders wanted to signal their priority of student mastery as well as their long-term commitment to LEAs in a way that the term "pilot" doesn't imply.

Above all else, Idaho has kept the conversations about the shift to mastery education focused squarely on student outcomes. States can and should learn from Idaho's example that the shift to competency-based education should be based on outcomes and not inputs like specific learning models. This is particularly important when it comes to dispelling pervasive myths about competency education such as the misbelief that competency education requires or is driven by technology.

Idaho's story reveals the importance of setting foundational goals, establishing guiding principles based on high-expectations, and then determining a collaborative strategy to get there. The story is a compelling one because it shows that states and LEAs can work together to balance local-decision making with the right amount of state support to enable school and district on-the-ground innovation. Idaho's establishment of the IMEN to inform and build capacity of the school/district incubators will ultimately impact the overall success of the individual implementation efforts of each participating incubator.

You can learn about Mastery Education in Idaho in this **presentation**, **FAQs flyer** and the **Idaho Mastery Education** website.

https://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/mastery-ed/docs/Superintendent-Presentation-2015.pdf
https://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/mastery-ed/docs/FAQs-Flyer.pdf
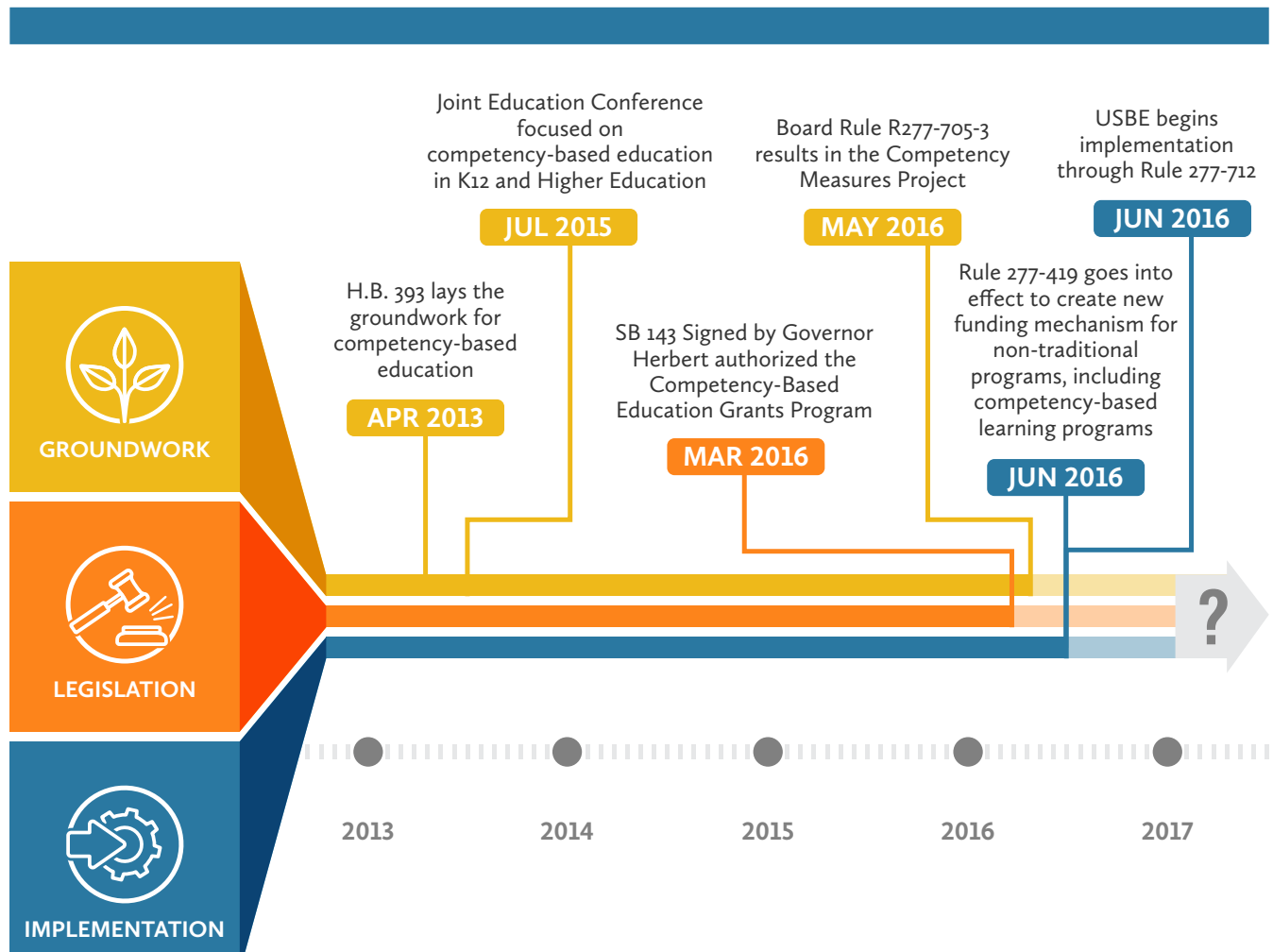*https://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/mastery-ed/*

"We know this isn't a silver bullet, and we still have a lot to learn. Already we've learned that you have to take it slow and really understand the needs of your state for a large-scale transition like this to be successful. You have to involve your communities— all stakeholders—and really listen. You can't just thrust change upon people. You have to make sure they understand how and why this change is what is best for them as individuals and as a state. You have to put yourself out there, connect with others on similar journeys and form relationships that challenge you to learn and to grow. You have to be a resource who is always willing to admit what you don't know and commit to finding and sharing the answers. You have to build interest, get people excited about the potential and empower them with ways to get involved."

Kelly Brady, Idaho Director of Mastery Education

UTAH

This is the story of a state that was able to put competency-based education pilots into place quickly thanks to a strong advocate with an innovation mindset and a state with a history of policies that created a favorable environment.

GROUNDWORK

LEGISLATION

IMPLEMENTATION

APR 2013

H.B. 393 lays the groundwork for competency-based education

JUL 2015

Joint Education Conference focused on competency-based education in K12 and Higher Education

MAR 2016

SB 143 Signed by Governor Herbert authorized the Competency-Based Education Grants Program

MAY 2016

Board Rule R277-705-3 results in the Competency Measures Project

JUN 2016

Rule 277-419 goes into effect to create new funding mechanism for non-traditional programs, including competency-based learning programs

JUN 2016

USBE begins implementation through Rule 277-712

2013   2014   2015   2016   2017

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Background

Innovative policies to support personalized learning are nothing new in the state of Utah. For years, Utah has been listed among featured states in the Digital Learning Now report card[20]--a resource that has highlighted state policy alignment to the 10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning[21] since 2012.

Utah has been on the path to competency-based education for a number of years.

It was one of the first states to adopt a policy that requires student academic information to be housed in a common, electronic record that will provide a holistic view of a student's progress and achievement. The state has completed the system where all data is housed and is accessible to all Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Parents and educators can access these reports via the LEA student information systems. This portable record will allow students to create more meaningful personalized learning paths and will equip teachers and parents with the resources to track a student's progress within a single course or among multiple courses and grades. Utah's 2013 Student Achievement Backpack (UT SB 82)[22] is featured as an example[23] of data backpack policies in the 2014 report card.

Additional examples of innovative education policies include 2015's SB 222[24] that requires the State Board of Education and Utah Education and Telehealth Network (UETN) to develop a digital teaching and learning program proposal and provide technical support to LEAs. Due to the work performed as a result of SB 222, Utah passed HB 277[25] in 2016 to create the Digital Teaching and Learning Grant program.

Utah's Story

The Evolution of CBE Policies

In 2013, HB 393,[26] known collectively as the "Competency-Based Education Amendments" amended provisions related to CBE. Specifically, the bill required that the State Board of Education make recommendations for a CBE funding formula before the 2014 General Session and stipulated allowance of a school district or charter school to "establish competency-based education programs and assessments that would result in course credit if the student demonstrates competency in the subject." HB 393 also allowed LEAs to waive or adapt traditional attendance requirements; adjust class sizes to maximize the value of course instructors or course mentors; enroll students from any geographic location within the state; and provide proctored online competency-based assessments. Additionally, Utah expanded eligibility standards and funding for the Statewide Online Education Program to allow private and homeschool students to earn high school graduation credit alongside other secondary students through the completion of publicly funded online courses conducted with all protections characteristic of the Utah public education system.

> "We have made great progress in transitioning to next generation models of education in Utah. Our new pilot program empowers innovative educators to implement locally-driven approaches to competency-based education that is student-centered and tailored to individual learning needs. By leaving a one-size-fits-all approach to education behind, we are hopeful our students will thrive with these new opportunities and pathways to success."
>
> Utah Senator Howard Stephenson

The funding report[27] created in response to the charge in HB 393 was released on Nov 6, 2014. The report advised on dollar amounts but more importantly, it recommended that funding online courses/schools and competency-based funding policies should be consolidated.

Effective May 1, 2016, Board Rule R277-705-3 required an LEA governing board to "establish a policy, in an open meeting, explaining the process and standards for acceptance and reciprocity of credits earned by a student in accordance with state law." The Competency Measures Project[28] was created in response to the rule. Districts in collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) Teaching and Learning Section are currently developing competency measures to deploy in a consistent manner statewide to meet the credit awarding requirements of state law and Board rule.

The State Board of Education also passed Rule 277-419,[29] effective June 1, 2016. Acknowledging that it is only the first step toward a long-term, non-time-based funding solution, the rule defines a "non-traditional program" as one that includes distance learning, blended learning, online learning and competency-based learning. The new policy then allows LEAs to "adopt a written policy that designates a continuing enrollment measurement to document the continuing membership or enrollment status for each student enrolled in the nontraditional program." The complexity of school finance and attendance policies will most likely warrant further study and adjustment but Utah deserves praise for taking a bold step and acknowledging that the connection between traditional seat-time funding and attendance policies run counter to new next generation education models.

The Utah CBE Grants Program

With the strong foundation for personalized learning policy in place, competency-based education pilots were the logical next step toward implementation in Utah. Senator Howard Stephenson, an innovation-minded legislator known for his personal and professional commitment to improving Utah education in service of students and their families, was a key driver in the development of the CBE pilot program.

Thanks to long-standing relationships with education experts across the country, Senator Stephenson was able to quickly assemble a group of key stakeholders in September 2015 for a Joint Education Conference[30] focused on competency-based education in K-12 and Higher Education. The meeting included House and Senate Education Committees; members of the State Board of Education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Higher Education, Board of Regents; and local leaders. At the meeting, ExcelinEd's Karla Phillips and Getting Smart's Tom Vander Ark provided an overview of the national CBE landscape[31] and shared five potential next steps for Utah:

» Flexibility from time-based systems.
» Facilitation of higher education acceptance.
» Transition to proficiency-based diplomas.
» Encouragement of anytime-anywhere learning.
» Creation of innovation districts and schools.

Senator Stephenson adapted principles of model legislation to meet Utah's needs and by winter 2016, the key pieces were in place and SB 143 was introduced. With the help of Representative Kim Coleman in the House, SB 143 passed through the legislature.

On March 29, 2016, Utah Governor Gary Herbert signed SB 143[32] into law, which established the Competency-Based Education Grants Program. Under this law, the State Board of Education may award up to three planning grants for schools that apply to pilot a competency-based education program where students advance to higher levels of learning when mastery is demonstrated regardless of time, place or pace.

The grant program incentivizes a LEA to establish competency-based education through the use of:

- » Personalized learning.
- » Blended learning.
- » Extended learning.
- » Educator professional learning in competency-based education.
- » Any other method that emphasizes the core principles.[33]

SB 143 establishes planning, implementation and expansion grants, and appropriated $369,000 for the first year for up to three planning grants. Applications for the grants must include a plan for school-wide implementation of the program, demonstrate local governing board support and include communication plans for teachers, parents and community members. Applicants may include requests for a waiver of a Board rule that inhibits or hinders implementation as well as recommended statutory changes. The State Board may in turn make a recommendation to the Legislature. The bill also stipulates that higher education institutions must cooperate with the LEA "to recognize and accept on equal footing" the diploma of graduates from pilot high schools as traditional high school diploma recipients.

The USBE began implementation in June 2016 with the passage of Rule 277-712.[34] This package established the Review Committee authorized in SB 143 to establish metrics to determine the quality of grant applications, review applications and make selection recommendations to the Superintendent and the Board. The advisory committee will have ten members comprised of experts in blended learning, STEM education, assessment, as well as current and former teachers, and administrators. The Deputy Superintendent of Instructional Services or designee will also serve as a non-voting member.

The rules also established pre-grant approval requirements, procedures and requirements for awards, and stipulated that LEAs shall include outcome-based measurements as part of their application and that must include at least one measurement of student growth and proficiency. The metrics may also include parent and student satisfaction with the LEA's competency-based program, cost savings, graduation rate and the number of credits earned by students through the competency-based program.

Key Lessons from Utah

A key part of Utah's story is the collaborative and "always learning" approach of the legislators that drove the creation and passage of SB 143. Senator Stephenson, a regular attendee and participant at national education conferences and events, has built relationships with a cadre of education experts that are "at the ready" when Utah legislators want to learn more about ways they can enable and empower local districts and schools to personalize learning.
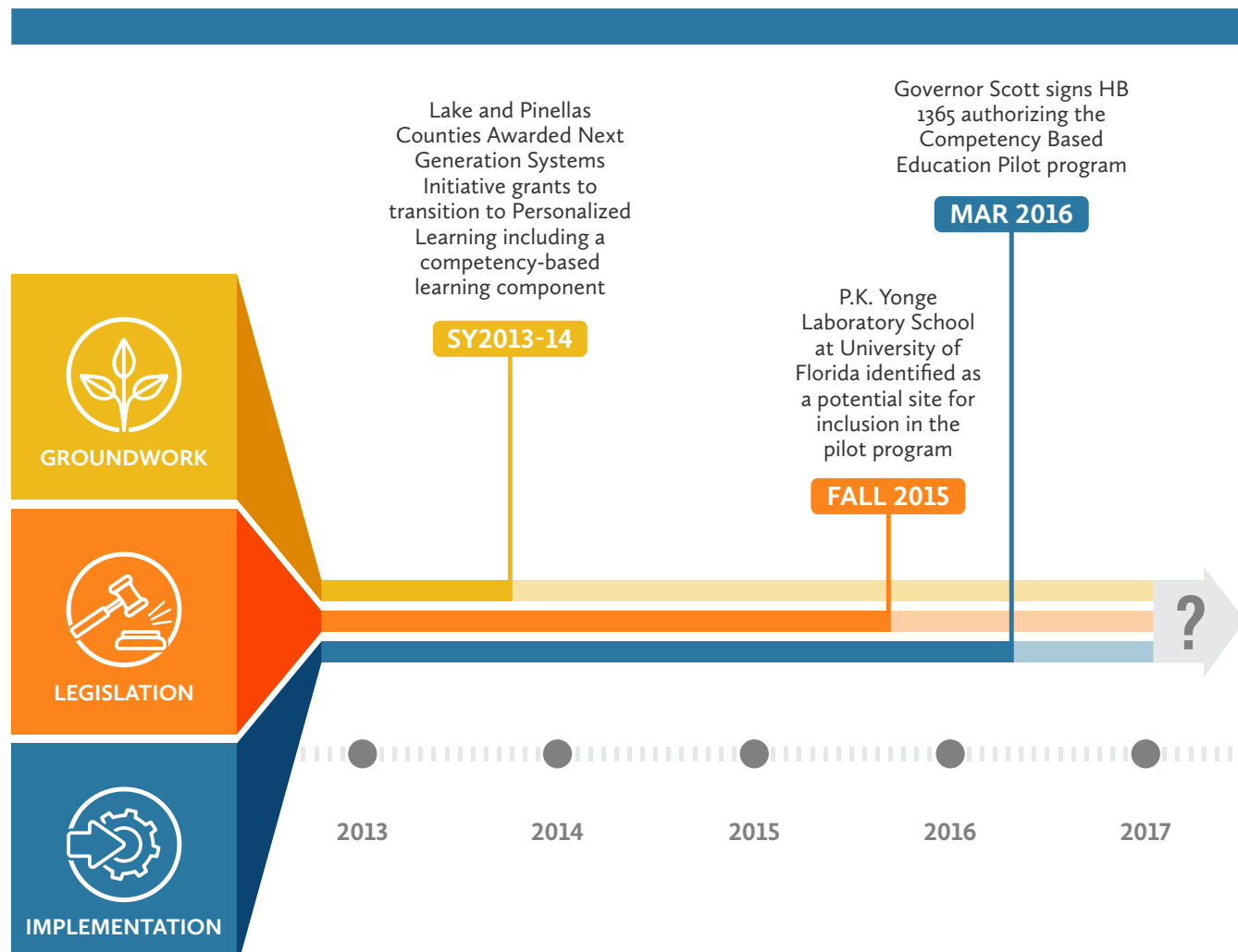
Utah's story shows that states can build upon their own existing state education policies and implement pilots as a logical and powerful step toward statewide implementation of personalized learning. Likewise, Utah's story is similar to many other states in that many critical pieces were already in place, yet a pilot program may still be necessary to catalyze interest and provide a clear pathway for innovative leaders to begin the transition to competency-based learning. It's important to note that like Idaho, Utah's CBE pilot legislation does not dictate a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, it empowers educators to design and implement their own locally-driven approaches.

Utah is also a great example because the approach to pilots is both coherent and comprehensive--beginning with the diversity in participants at the conference to the acknowledgement of the necessity for alignment between K-12 and Higher Education systems with diplomas and credits.

FLORIDA

This is the story of how two school districts' bold efforts to center learning around the student catalyzed the passage of legislation to create competency-based education pilot programs. Their actions resulted in formalized support to identify the policy barriers as well as open the door for other districts to transition to competency-based education.

GROUNDWORK

LEGISLATION

IMPLEMENTATION

Lake and Pinellas Counties Awarded Next Generation Systems Initiative grants to transition to Personalized Learning including a competency-based learning component

SY2013-14

Governor Scott signs HB 1365 authorizing the Competency Based Education Pilot program

MAR 2016

P.K. Yonge Laboratory School at University of Florida identified as a potential site for inclusion in the pilot program

FALL 2015

2013   2014   2015   2016   2017

?

Background

Florida is the third largest K-12 state in terms of students served; however because most districts are county-wide, there are only 67 school districts total. This configuration allows for district-level innovations to impact thousands of learners and allows forward thinking district leaders to collaborate more easily with like-minded peers.

Florida has a long history of innovation and has set a foundation for competency-based education. One of the ways the state has begun to address time-based policies has been through the recognition and promotion of acceleration options[35] and early high school graduation.[36] Florida also has a comprehensive framework for providing financial incentives to districts to promote these acceleration options. Specifically, districts are rewarded for students who graduate early,[37] pass state-developed end-of-course assessments and earn high school credit without being required to enroll in the corresponding courses[38] and for students who earn passing scores in designated accelerated courses, such as International Baccalaureate, Advanced International Certificate of Education, Advanced Placement and courses that lead to an Industry Certification.[39]

Florida also recognized early on the importance of providing new and innovative ways for students to access learning and has been a forerunner in the area of online learning, establishing the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) in 1997. Through the combination of FLVS and school districts' virtual programs, there are almost 10,000 online courses available to Florida's students. The previous CEO of FLVS clearly articulated the opportunities[40] that FLVS presented in next generation learning. "The foundation of the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) learning experience is "any path, any pace, any time, any place." At FLVS, the clock does not dictate curriculum, the presentation of information, or the methods by which a student moves through the learning process. Instead, the focus is on mastery learning, quality over quantity, and the creation of individualized paths."

Competency-based education is beginning with a solid foundation of existing flexibility. The Legislature has long recognized the need to cultivate local innovation and already authorizes the State Board of Education (SBOE) to permit the Commissioner of Education, upon the request of a district school board, to waive administrative rules related to district school instruction and school operations, with some exceptions.[41]

Also noteworthy is that Utah and Florida were the only two states to earn an "A" rating on the most recent Digital Learning Now Report Card.[42]

> "This is the future of education, my friends. This is where we're going."[49]
>
> Florida Senator Jeff Brandes

Florida's Story

Florida's implementation of competency-based education pilots has not followed the traditional path, and the approach has been intentionally different. Instead of a statewide call for districts to pilot CBE, districts that had expressed interest or had even begun implementation were offered support. The driving force of this strategy was to leverage the leadership and authentic experiences of local districts to identify policy barriers and successfully pave the way for other districts.

Evolution of A Pilot Program

In 2013-2014, two Florida school districts, Pinellas and Lake Counties, received Next Generation Systems Initiative Grant[43] (NGSI) from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to implement personalized learning through 2022. For both districts, personalized learning provided an opportunity to fundamentally design their educational systems with the goal of accelerating all students' progress toward college and career readiness.[44] Furthermore, both districts had also committed to competency-based progressions as included in the definition of personalized learning provided by the Gates Foundation.

In the late summer and fall of 2015, ExcelinEd contacted the staff in Lake and Pinellas County to learn more about their local personalized learning initiatives. It was quickly discovered that one of the goals of the NGSI grants was to identify and mitigate state and local policy barriers. Although they had already begun implementation, it was determined that a formal state pilot program would create an appropriate forum for policy discussion as well create a supportive environment for other districts and begin to create a state vision for personalized learning and competency-based education.

During the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016, ExcelinEd coordinated periodic conference calls with these districts along with their technical assistance provider, Great Schools Partnership. On-site visits to these districts also facilitated understanding of each district's unique approach to implementation. Like all NGSI recipients, Lake and Pinellas Counties also participated in several professional learning opportunities by which they could work with and learn from one another, as well as national experts in supportive models such as blended learning and competency-based education.

ExcelinEd also initiated communication with staff from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) to provide information on the activities related to competency-based education and share resources, including those from Idaho and Utah.

Proposed legislation was drafted by the Foundation for Florida's Future, the state-based education advocacy organization, that focused on these two districts and included the submission of an application to the FLDOE. The application's content was designed to be similar to that of their respective NGSI grants. The proposed language expanded on the SBOE's existing authority to allow the Commissioner of Education to grant waivers to existing administrative rules. The draft bill also required that the school districts identify what rules needed to be waived by the Commissioner to successfully implement CBE.

During the fall of 2015, one of Florida's K-12 university laboratory schools, P.K. Yonge Laboratory School at the University of Florida,[45] was identified as a potential site for inclusion in the pilot program. The school was already implementing many components of personalized learning as part of their mission is to "implement, test and analyze educational innovations and disseminate best practices in teaching and learning in the state of Florida and around the nation."

The bills to implement this pilot program were filed and presented in their respective subcommittees during the 2016 Legislative Session.[46] Representatives from Lake and Pinellas school districts testified in support of this legislation.

During the legislative process, the bills were amended to include two additional school districts, Palm Beach and Seminole Counties, as pilot sites. The request to add Palm Beach originated from the school district's leadership, who are uniquely qualified to implement personalized learning. Both the superintendent and deputy superintendent have experience with implementing personalized learning. The request to add Seminole also originated from the district. Seminole County is an optimal site for implementing personalized learning as it has a reputation for embracing initiatives with proven results to ensure the continued success of their students.

A Competency-Based Education Pilot Program

On March 25, 2016, Florida Governor Rick Scott signed HB 1365[47] (companion bill SB 1714[48]) creating the Competency-Based Education Pilot Program to be administered for a period of five years in five districts, serving more than 400,000 students in more than 450 schools beginning in the 2016-2017 school year.

The bill authorizes the Florida State Board of Education to give the Commissioner of Education authority to grant waivers to rules related to student progression and awarding of credits in accordance with the stated purpose of the pilot program to "provide an educational environment that allows students to advance to higher levels of learning upon the mastery of concepts and skills through statutory exemptions relating to student progression and the awarding of credits."

The bill requires the school districts to submit applications to the FLDOE that include annual goals and performance outcomes; a communication plan; plan for student progression; plan for technology and digital and blended learning; allocation of resources and identification of state rules to be waived. Additionally, FLDOE is required to compile student and staff schedules before and after implementation of the pilot and submit an annual report to the Legislature.

Key Lessons from Florida

The two biggest takeaways from Florida's story are collaboration and communication.

The "on the ground" innovation that was happening in local districts grew into the formal pilot program thanks to collaboration among district and state leaders and the state-based education advocacy organization. Foundation for Florida's Future helped to coordinate communication between district leaders and legislators to shape the policy language as well as the related communication efforts.

Cognizant of the opportunity to address misconceptions about CBE, everyone from the pilot districts to bill sponsors articulated the same key messages about the goals for and benefits of the pilot program. For example, they emphasized the focus on student outcomes and achievement and explained how the pilot program was an extension of previous initiatives.

Another key lesson from Florida is the policy's deliberate emphasis on the pilots as a way to inform the identification of current policies that hinder progress toward personalized learning in local schools and districts. Pilot participants are responsible for helping to identify current policy barriers so legislators can explore policy options to mitigate these barriers.

You can learn about Florida's journey with resources such as Great Schools Partnership, Pinellas County Schools, and Lake County Schools.

http://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/cbl_florida/
http://pcsb.schoolwires.net/Domain/7106
http://pl.lake.k12.fl.us/

Recommendations

As the three state examples confirm, there are multiple paths to developing a competency-based pilot program. Idaho, Utah and Florida had different entry points, different methods, different champions and different timelines. While there is much variation in these states, there are some common themes that have developed across pilot programs. These emerging insights inform a set of recommendations for communicating the shift to competency-based education, passing pilot legislation and looking ahead to implementation. These recommendations are intended to inform and inspire policymakers who wish to develop competency-based education pilot programs in their own states.

ExcelinEd's **Competency-Based Education: State Policy Communications Toolkit**

www.excelined.org/CBE/CommsToolkit

Recommendations for Communicating the Shift to Competency-Based Education

Like any change effort, it is essential to successfully communicate the reasons for the change to the people who will be most impacted. In education, this means communicating to a diverse set of stakeholders from local teachers and leaders, to students and families as well as policymakers, influencers and the public at large.

ExcelinEd recommends the development and implementation of an intentional communications strategy before, during and after constructing a competency-based education pilot program. Our work has also revealed that schools and districts may lack the internal capacity to successfully manage a communications effort, so states can and should create resources that local schools/districts can customize to meet their own needs.

"The beauty of a mastery-based education system is that it is rooted in local control and is truly from the ground up. Local communities, schools, and districts will determine through this effort what is best to meet the needs of their students."[50]

Idaho State Superintendent Sherri Ybarra

Some of the greatest lessons learned from these three states were in the evolution of the key messages used to communicate the shift to competency-based education.

1. Frame the shift to competency-based education in the context of college- and career-readiness.

2. Emphasize the overarching goals and principles for competency-based education without letting any one particular method, such as those that leverage technology, get all the attention.

3. Work purposefully with stakeholders to ensure a balance of local control and state support.

4. Highlight the goal of empowering local leaders to innovate new competency-based models.

5. Emphasize that competency-based education is not a new reform but a way to provide flexibility for educators to ensure that students demonstrate competency.

6. Demonstrate how competency-based education is a natural extension of existing initiatives.

Recommendations for Competency-Based Education Pilot Policies

The stories from Idaho, Utah and Florida reveal that state policymakers can take a variety of basic steps to initiate implementation of competency-based education. Remember, pilots serve as a way to identify a state's unique policy roadmap. This report demonstrates that starting a pilot program does not require solutions to all policies. However, ExcelinEd recommends key policies for pilot programs that will better lay the foundation for continued success:

ExcelinEd's **Competency-Based Education: Competency-Based Innovation Pilots Model Legislation**

www.excelined.org/ModelLegislation

1. Allow for participating LEAs and schools to request flexibility from state requirements necessary for the success of their competency-based education efforts throughout the pilot or innovation program process, rather than limiting those requests only to the time of initial application.

2. Determine the appropriate metrics and milestones to inform evaluation of implementation and/or establish a process for pilot participants to identify additional metrics and milestones.

3. Ensure that competency-based education efforts are aligned to the state's challenging academic state standards and their education goals for all students and subgroups.

4. Ensure that all students within a participating school are included in the pilot and that participating LEAs and schools pay appropriate attention to the needs of different subgroups in designing policies to make them as equitable as possible.

5. Require applicants to demonstrate some level of support for their pilot proposals from local stakeholders (e.g., administrators, educators, school boards, parents).

6. Require all applications include a communications and outreach plan.

7. Create intentional feedback loops for policymakers concerning requests for flexibility and any other policy barriers identified.

8. Build in an expectation that pilot sites and/or innovation zones capture and share lessons learned with others in the state through a communications plan, state-facilitated workshops, report to the governor and legislature, or other opportunities to collaborate.

9. Identify specific goals for the pilot, including a clear definition of competency-based education, the intended purposes, contexts that the pilot is intended to inform and the short- and long-term expectations for student and school outcomes. State leaders should resist the temptation to reinvent the wheel. States can start by learning from similar policies and programs in other states. Leaders should also build off of previous state policies and states/local initiatives rather than discussing competency-based education as an entirely new concept to a state.

DESIGN PARAMETERS FOR COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION INNOVATION AND/OR PILOT PROGRAMS

Along with the necessary policy decisions, states will also have the opportunity to make several design decisions such as:

- What is the right balance between state support and local control over the pilot or innovation program?

- What terms will be used? Although "competency-based", "proficiency-based", and "mastery-based are used interchangeably, states have made intentional choices based on state policy context.

- What is the optimal number of participating LEAs and schools? (If the program is too small, it may yield idiosyncratic results and fail to generate enough interest and support to inform broader change. If too large, it may become unwieldy and overly complicated – and too expensive for the state to support initially.)

- How will applicants' readiness and commitment be determined?

- Should the program include multiple cohorts (perhaps spaced over time) or just one?

- Is the program timeframe long enough to allow for thoughtful design and initial implementation – and evaluation of preliminary outcomes and lessons for others? Does it allow at least a year for participants to design their programs before moving to full implementation?

- What will the plan be for program evaluation in order to identify strengths, weaknesses and potential student outcomes in the early years of implementation? How will the state communicate results to policymakers and stakeholders?

- Is competency-based education clearly defined and specifically allowed or incentivized?

State leaders should resist the temptation to reinvent the wheel. States can start by learning from similar policies and programs in other states. Leaders should also build off of previous state policies and states/local initiatives rather than discussing competency-based education as an entirely new concept to a state.

Policymakers can generate interest in competency-based education by highlighting student and teacher examples in the state and others. Find current innovators, and help them tell their stories as a part of the communications effort previously recommended. State leaders should cultivate relationships to identify state and local champions--from individuals to organizations.

Finally, the state should repeatedly ask what it can do to support and enable local implementation of competency-based education. Successful state pilot programs recognize unique local school/district contexts and create flexibility. States are also likely to get more participation when avoiding top-down mandates and instead, look for ways to incentivize participation.

Recommendations for Implementation

The intent of sharing these three state stories is to help other states understand how pilot strategies are a logical, actionable first step toward implementation of competency-based education. While our main goal was to highlight the path to drafting and passing the pilot legislation in each of our three featured states, there are a few important considerations about the actual implementation of the pilots that are worth noting in the context of policy discussions since they require those developing the pilot policy to be proactive.

The core goal of a pilot program is to free schools and districts to implement competency-based education policies within current state policy environments in a way that can inform the identification and elimination of existing barriers that may prevent competency-based education implementation at scale. For this reason, it's essential to build feedback mechanisms into the pilot program so there are multiple opportunities for collecting, gathering and sharing key lessons from diverse perspectives. These feedback opportunities are particularly powerful when they are combined with capacity-building, professional learning opportunities within and among the pilot participants. In keeping with the emphasis on communications throughout this report, states should also intend to capture and share key lessons from the school and district pilot sites to inform ongoing communications and outreach efforts.

Several other organizations have provided resources to support the shift to competency-based education. For additional perspectives from these organizations, check out the links below:

Innovation Zones: Creating Policy Flexibility for Personalized Learning from iNACOL
http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/iNACOL-InnovationZonesIssue-Brief.pdf

Utah and Florida signed bills to support competency-based learning pilots, but now the real work begins from the Christensen Institute
http://www.christenseninstitute.org/utah-and-florida-sign-bills-to-support-competency-based-learning-pilots-but-now-the-real-work-begins/

Building Consensus and Momentum: A Policy and Political Landscape for K-12 Competency Education from KnowledgeWorks
http://www.knowledgeworks.org/sites/default/files/policy-political-landscape-k12-competency-education.PDF

Creating Innovation Zones to Advance the Promise of Competency-Based Pathways from Achieve
http://www.achieve.org/publications/creating-innovation-zones-advance-promise-competency-based-pathways

Conclusion

Advocates of competency-based education have long theorized how much interest there would be at the local level as well as the support that would be needed and the policies that may impede their efforts. The great news is that now we will have applications to review and pilot schools to visit across the country that will either validate our conversations or better yet deepen our understanding.

The experiences of the three states confirms that there are innovative local leaders eager to make the transition to competency-based education and that a pilot program is a highly effective way to can kick start those efforts. Future research on this topic will focus in-depth on pilot program implementation, provide further review of supportive policies and continue to document the unique solutions taking place in individual states.

The stories of Idaho, Utah and Florida clearly demonstrate how different states authorized competency-based pilots despite unique policy and political environments. Although each state started in different places with different champions, in the end, there were common lessons that we will all learn from. **ExcelinEd stands ready to partner with more states and will help determine the proper pathway for each one.**

For more information, please visit the ExcelinEd Competency-Based Education resource page.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

It is clear that policies can either hinder or better support competency-based education and build a foundation for personalized learning, but we also know that the solutions are unique to each state. Pilot programs provide an optimal beginning, allowing schools to begin planning and design while simultaneously addressing barriers as they arise. There may be others but our work confirms that the following policies will eventually need to be evaluated.

Flexibility from time based systems in statute or rule.

Transition to competency-based diplomas.

A state assessment system that supports competency-based learning.

An accountability system aligned to competency-based learning.

Acceptance of competency-based diplomas and credits by higher education.

Policies that recognize anytime, anywhere learning.

Communication and outreach with all stakeholders.

Endnotes

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