

# Using Competency-Based Learning to Respond to COVID-19 Learning Loss



## Framing the Issue

Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, 49 states and the District of Columbia had some form of support for competency-based education in which students receive credit by demonstrating proficiency rather than having to complete seat time. These supports included the development and alignment of state policies, convening of state task forces and study groups, development of next-generation assessment and accountability systems, creation of innovation zones, and targeted resource development and technical assistance.

The transition to virtual and hybrid learning posed by COVID-19 forced states and districts to begin rethinking seat time requirements, instructional minutes, and the length of the school day and considering instructional models with greater flexibility. Competency-based education can provide this flexibility, supporting individualized instruction that can more effectively address the needs of students, especially those students who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 learning loss.



## Key Contact

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## Key Takeaways

- Well-developed competency-based learning systems provide each student with an individual learning plan and monitor progress frequently to maximize flexibility for addressing gaps in learning. In these schools, success is about students demonstrating mastery with evidence, not accumulating time-based credit.
- Awarding credits on time rather than on competency fundamentally perpetuates inequities in our public education system. Prior to COVID-19, a high percentage of students graduating from high schools were already unprepared for college-level work, as demonstrated by the percentage of students in community colleges who were required to complete remedial courses in reading and mathematics. In the aftermath of COVID-19, continued time-based learning will only exacerbate existing gaps between students from affluent families and students from low-income families and students of color.
- Flexibility for course credit is one starting point for states in establishing an initial foundation for competency-based education. States that provide a framework for this flexibility set up the preconditions for districts to build capacity to support competency-based pathways.
- States can establish innovation zones to enable districts and schools to develop policies that support competency-based education. State education agencies can also conduct audits across multiple divisions to address potential barriers for transitioning from time-based to competency-based policies.
- The rationale for competency-based education is backed by research on high-performing international education systems conducted by the National Center on Education and the Economy, which concluded that “when it comes to student performance, more important than the amount of time students spend in class is how that time is spent” (NCEE, 2018, <https://ncee.org/2018/02/statistic-of-the-month-how-much-time-do-students-spend-in-school/>).



## Exemplars

**Ohio's approach to credit flexibility** (<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-Education-Options/Credit-Flexibility-Plan>) requires every district to have its own policy on credit flexibility and empowers students to develop targeted plans that are aligned with district policies and procedures and are developed in collaboration with educators and parents.

**The Oregon Department of Education's proficiency-based resources** (<https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/OregonDiploma/PLR/Pages/Proficiency-Grading.aspx>) describe the evolution of state policy for proficiency-based education and provide supports for teachers and districts on teaching and learning to proficiency, theory, and best practices on parent communications, report cards, grading, and systems implementation.

New Hampshire's **Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE)** (<https://www.education.nh.gov/who-we-are/division-of-learner-support/bureau-of-instructional-support/performance-assessment-for-competency-education>) system supports competency-based learning through a combination of local, common, and state-level assessments that are aligned with PACE Common Tasks for each grade and subject.



## From the Field

- “It’s about using the learning sciences—research on how kids learn best—to design, respond and empower our youth and support them. Time is a resource, not a constraint.” – Susan Patrick



## Resources

- Evans, C., Worthen, M., & Marion, S. (2020). *How systems of assessments aligned with competency-based education can support equity*. Vienna, VA: Aurora Institute. Retrieved from <https://aurora-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/how-systems-of-assessment-aligned-with-competency-based-education-can-support-equity-jan-2020-web.pdf>
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- Patrick, S., & Chambers, A. (2020). *Education policy issues for the COVID-19 era: Policy actions and responses to leverage the moment for future readiness*. Vienna, VA: Aurora Institute. Retrieved from <https://aurora-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/education-policy-issues-for-the-COVID-19-era-policy-actions-and-responses-to-leverage-the-moment-for-future-readiness.pdf>
- Patrick, S., Truong, N., & Chambers, A. (2020). *Future-focused state policy actions to transform K–12 education*. Vienna, VA: Aurora Institute. Retrieved from <https://aurora-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/future-focused-state-policy-actions-to-transform-k12-education-2020-web.pdf>

<https://www.air.org/resource/air-s-covid-19-response-and-resources>



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