

Finding the Most Creative Ways to Help Students Advance At Their Own Pace

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Katrina Schwartz



In 2005, New Hampshire’s Department of Education set a [policy requiring schools to implement a competency-based system](#), but didn’t define the specific skills each school would be expected to master. State education leaders hoped that the policy would push schools towards a system in which students would not advance unless they could demonstrate proficiency in every core competency. But schools across the state have interpreted the directive in very different ways and set those competencies both broadly and narrowly.

“There wasn’t any training nor was there funding for it,” said Ryan Kaplan, Principal of [Windham High School](#) in New Hampshire.” Every school had to figure it out on their own.” Windham is in its fifth year of existence and is still working for official accreditation from the state. While it might seem easier to start an alternative teaching and assessment practice like competency-based learning in a new school, Windham educators have focused efforts elsewhere. The school has interpreted competencies broadly and has maintained a traditional grading system based on the 100 point scale, averaging scores on various assignments to get a passing grade.

PRIORITIZING INNOVATIONS

The question of student pace — the main feature of a competency-based system — has not been the most important to Windham teachers and administrators. Instead, the school staff has worked hard to integrate technology effectively into its curriculum. It’s one of the only New Hampshire public schools to have a one-to-one Apple laptop program, and is entirely wireless. Teachers are working to build up their course offerings with rigorous, rich learning experiences.

“Where we have found the ability to be innovative is in the classroom instruction and looking at designing competencies to reflect what we really want students to know and do, and how are we going to know that they can

do those things,” said Bethany Bernasconi, Dean of Science and Engineering at Windham. Faculty has interpreted competencies as broad, overarching themes where students should be proficient. In science, there are three: content, research and lab work.

“How do you do it with 30 students in a classroom. What does it look like and how does it work?”

Bernasconi is skeptical of allowing each student to move at his own pace through content, worrying that a system like that will lose its rigor. She teaches some units in a mastery-based style, but only chooses topics that lend themselves to a clear leveling-up of knowledge, like genetics.

“How can I be effective and an excellent teacher when I’m trying to teach everything at once?” Bernasconi said. She teaches from a student-driven inquiry standpoint and can’t imagine helping students moving at 12 different paces. As it is, she helps students interpret the driving question in an assignment, facilitates lab experiences, manages lab material and acts as a resource to students throughout the day. She doesn’t see all that being possible if students are all in different phases of the process.

“I think that where folks struggle with it is the infrastructure for it,” Bernasconi said. “How do you do it with 30 students in a classroom. What does it look like and how does it work?” In her genetics unit when she gives up some control over pacing, technology has been very helpful. She has a YouTube channel with video podcast lessons that students can check when they need help. But she’s skeptical of relinquishing her class to technology entirely.

“I get nervous about taking the human element completely out of it,” Bernasconi said. “A discussion in my class is really powerful. It’s interactive; the students are asking questions; they’re challenging each other’s thinking.” If students were moving at completely different paces it would be harder to leverage that community element of learning, she said.

“We’re still wrestling with what this means because we’re still designing new courses and we’re still growing,” Bernasconi said. She is clear that Windham has a lot of learning to do and that it doesn’t have everything figured out. But she’d rather focus on making classroom experiences creative and rich for each student than on pacing. And, despite the time-bound nature of classes at Windham, many of Bernasconi’s teaching methods are in line with the overall goal of a competency-based system — personalizing education for each student.

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In biology, Bernasconi has moved away from requiring all students to demonstrate their knowledge in the same way. Her students write essays, take tests, make videos, create models and generally use their creativity to show they know the information. “We have a lot of creativity and freedom to do those things,” Bernasconi said. She also encourages students to find entry points into the material that inspire them.

“To give over control of your classroom to your students, to trust them to learn and use the tools and the environment you’ve created — it’s terrifying,” Bernasconi said. “And the first time I did it I had no idea what I would get back. I was blown away by what students produced.”

COMMUNITY PUSHBACK

The innovative teaching practices that Bernasconi and her colleagues exhibit, coupled with good test scores (top five in the state) and high achieving students haven’t inspired Windham’s teachers or parents to care much about moving towards the time-flexible education system that competency-based models offer.

“You are fighting against learned behaviors,” Kaplan said. “We have learned a traditional system that we’ve been using for 100 years.” Parents and taxpayers don’t see why that system should change. In fact, they see competency-



based education as an intervention for low-performing districts, not for them.

“We have teachers doing incredibly innovative things, but using a more traditional way of assessing it,” Kaplan said. “We don’t have a system where you have to pass every competency in the course.” Students can still average out to a passing grade and advance to the next level, even with holes in their knowledge. It’s that exact scenario that competency-based learning is meant to prevent.

“In a true competency system you would need to pass everything and there would be no social promotion,” Kaplan said. “It’s where I feel we need to go. It’s happening, but slowly.” Without the support of teachers, parents and district leadership, and operating as a first-year principal, there’s not a lot Kaplan can do to push the agenda forward more quickly.

EXPERIMENTING AND RETREATING FROM COMPETENCIES

Kaplan feels better about the lack of progress Windham has made towards a more authentic competency-based system when he thinks about [Campbell High School](#). The school opened 14 years ago with the intention of being entirely competency-based, long before there were state laws requiring schools to take that route.

“In a true competency based system — and we opened with it — you did not have a letter grade,” said Dennis Perreault, a veteran social studies teacher at Campbell. “You were either advanced, proficient or NC (not demonstrating competent).” In less than a year local education officials told Campbell to get rid of that system and adopt a traditional A-F grading system.

“What was kept is if you don’t pass a competency, you don’t pass the course,” Perreault said. Similar to Windham, each department has its own set of competencies. For social studies they are fairly broad: Comprehension, analysis, evaluation, research and writing for the social sciences.

“I think we’re doing a lot of what we set out to do, but we’re just not doing it in the manner that we thought we would be doing it,” Perreault said. For example, the school has a policy that all students can retake any assessment that is part of their grade in recognition that each student learns differently. Perreault is comfortable with the middle path the community decided on because at its essence he thinks it allows for personalization.

“The essence of competency is that you individualize learning for every kid,” Perreault said. His teaching style is essentially socratic, with lots of projects and in-depth analysis demonstrated through essays. That’s the kind of performance-based assessment he’s interested in seeing. He has a hard time imagining opening assessment up to more creative, “show what you know” projects in his discipline.

“I think performance based assessment is best in the sciences,” Perreault said. “We have a lot of science and math teachers who use it because they have an end product that can be a display product.” He’s not ready to invent that wheel for social studies.

Campbell High opened with a big dream, basing the school on competencies before the community was ready to embrace it. Perreault feels it has kept the essence of that program even if the assessments and grading look fairly traditional and any competency recovery tends to happen during the summer or as an extended learning opportunity online. Ultimately, if the state had a more specific vision for how schools should implement its competency-based learning policy, it should have been more explicit with schools, Perreault said.

Bethany Bernasconi agrees. “There’s great danger in a good initiative that’s not done well,” she said.

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