

# Step By Step, the Journey Towards Freedom From Grade Levels

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[Sanborn High School](#) in New Hampshire was a mediocre school with mediocre test scores. When the state passed a policy mandating that schools develop a competency-based system — advancing students based on mastery of specific skills and concepts instead of time spent in each grade — school leaders seized on the model as a way to turn the entire school around from the bottom up.

It hasn't been an easy task and the journey isn't complete, but in the past five years, Sanborn has moved away from many practices that have long defined traditional high schools, said [Brian Stack, Sanborn's principal](#).

"In some ways we were building this model with the hope it would all work out," Stack said. Sanborn is one of the few comprehensive public high schools in New Hampshire going after competency-based teaching and assessment aggressively. Most other schools in the state showing leadership in competency are charter schools whose systems don't easily map to Sanborn's existing infrastructure and staffing. "It's not like we are a new school where we can say this is going to be our model and hire accordingly," Stack said.

Despite the enormity of the task, Sanborn staff had the long game in mind. "When you really think about it, what you are trying to do is teach students skills and knowledge that they can transfer into the world later in life," said Mark Giuliani, a freshman social studies teacher at Sanborn. "When you look at it that way, competency makes all the difference in the world."

## **SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Sanborn has not reached the extreme conclusion of a mastery-based system in which students would move through different skills and concepts completely at their own pace, unbound from any age-based cohort. In that respect, Sanborn still looks fairly traditional, with freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior classes. But both Stack and Giuliucci insist that a key part of Sanborn's transition has been dividing the teaching staff into smaller learning communities working together to support individual students and being responsible as a group for meeting competencies across subject areas.

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A team of five teachers share a group of students, who stay with them for the whole year — a little like a middle school model. Teachers share information about how students are progressing through competencies and have complete control over student schedules for three to four hours each day. They distribute students to different teachers depending on where they need to strengthen their skills. It's a collaborative, creative approach and it allows teachers to share the responsibility for competencies like collaboration and critical thinking that are needed in every subject area.

"We can realign kids in ways that traditional classrooms would never do," Giuliucci said. He often doesn't have the same students from day to day. The team of freshmen social studies teachers are shuffling students around based on where they are at in meeting the competencies. That's especially important for freshmen who come in at very different levels of maturity and academic preparation, Giuliucci said.

The small learning community model has worked especially well with the freshmen class. The school has cut down the number of first year students who fail by 80 percent. Working together to identify struggling students and get them the supports they need weaves a stronger safety net.

## **TEACHING AND ASSESSING WITH COMPETENCIES**

While the competency-base system measures learning and progression very differently from traditional models based on time, classrooms at Sanborn don't look as different as one might think. A lot of instruction is project-based because teachers are no longer trying to get students to warehouse knowledge — they want them to learn how to think critically and apply knowledge. "In our classes we'll give an assessment — it might be a project or an essay — and there's no such thing as late work," Giuliucci said. "If you are competent, you are done and if you aren't we go back and get you competent."

Sounds simple, but it's actually pretty chaotic — in a good way, Giuliucci said. In a recent project Giuliucci asked his students to pick a character from the French Revolution and write a blog post obituary discussing the important events of the time and how that history affected the world today. Some kids were done quickly, others took longer or struggled to show they could connect the events of the past to the present.

"To cope with this chaos we've created flex classes for kids who need to be retaught something," Giuliucci said. "They can sign up for these classes to go back and get the re-assessment and instruction they need." This process is often called competency recovery and it happens at the moment the student demonstrates a lack of mastery, not at the end of the course when she's about to fail.

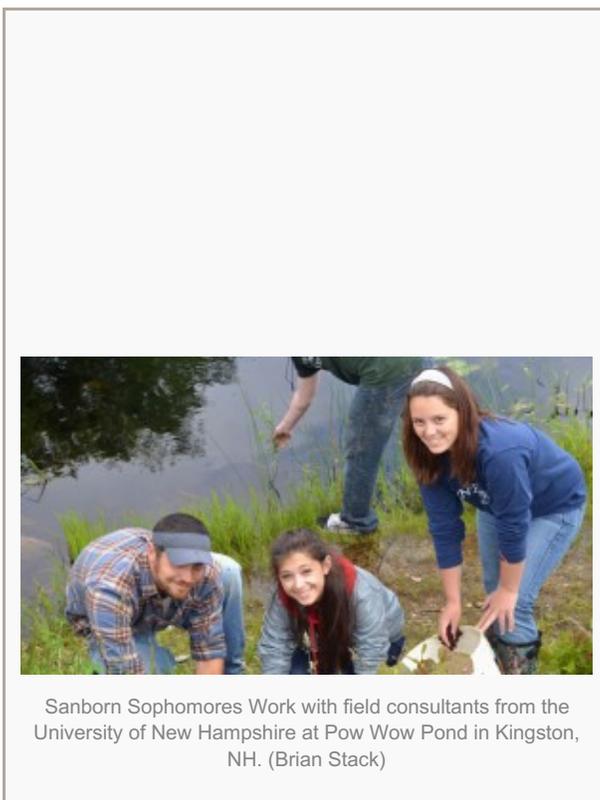
"You are creating ways for students to demonstrate their competence," Giuliucci said. The hard part is separating intertwined competencies and evaluating them individually. "It's really freeing to kids who traditionally struggle," Giuliucci said. "I'm not saying you won't learn how to write in my class, but your inability to write is not going to impact your ability to demonstrate your ability at these other competencies."

Grading based on competencies can be a headache. Teachers no longer divide a course up into assignments, quizzes and tests, assigning a percentage to each one. Instead, teachers have a drop down menu of competencies they need to teach, which they link to different assignments. Teachers are grading students on how well they perform on assessment tasks and if they've mastered all the competencies they get a letter grade and pass the course.

“I think we are going to a model where we will print two different transcripts,” Stack said. “One that is competency-based and one that is course based. Depending on what [students] go on to do next, one might be better than another.” So far, Sanborn teachers have been translating the complex competency system they have developed into a single letter grade at the end of the year. School leaders didn’t want to accidentally hurt graduating seniors’ chances at getting into college because the school’s model is so different. Changing report cards slowly has also given the community a chance to get on board with all the changes.

Stack has been in conversations with some colleges who say they’d appreciate a more granular view of what a student can do. In fact, providing the competency report card could transform college admissions. “It’s not that we are taking info away from schools, we’re giving them more information if they want it,” Stack said.

Sanborn is slowly moving away from some of the markers of a traditional school, like the 100 point scale. Stack says they were aware that if they attempted to do everything at once the change would be too great for the community to accept. Instead, they’ve been phasing in different aspects of a mastery-based system as the community seems ready for them. “This year when our kids finish classes in June, the 100 point scale is going away,” Stack said. Kids always got rubrics explaining how they did on different competencies, but teachers used to translate that into a percentage. Now students will just get the letter grade.



## COMMUNITY BUY-IN

When Sanborn school leaders decided to make the transition to a competency-based system they did so aggressively and transparently. “We’ve been very upfront about why we think this is a better model,” Stack said. They held lots of community meetings and made sure parents understood what the model would look like.

“You really have to sell the parents and sell the community on why you are doing it,” Giuliucci said. “You have to explain to them why the competency-based model is better than the system they grew up with.” Parents have expectations from schools that can be hard to reconcile with the competency-based system. Receiving honors is a good example. Sanborn used to honor the top 10 percent of its students. Now, any student who reaches a certain grade point average gets honored. That led some parents to question whether the standards had been lowered, but Stack explained some classes are just stronger than others and those students shouldn’t be penalized.

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“Every year that we’ve had this model it has become easier and easier for parents to understand it and follow it,” Stack said. He acknowledges there were questions and concerns, but says the community never pushed back strongly against the school’s move.

Some teachers who weren’t happy with the change moved to other districts. Others weren’t comfortable with it right away, so Stack moved them to teach upper division students. The changes began with the incoming freshmen class and were slowly phased in throughout the school, so hesitant educators



had time to acclimate. “It’s been a struggle for some of our teachers, but it’s also been a release for some of them too because we took away some of those hard decisions for teachers,” Stack said.



Stack admits that not every Sanborn teacher has completely bought into the new system even five years later, but he says it’s much harder to hide teaching practices when so much teaching and preparation is done collaboratively. Stack looks at teacher gradebooks to make sure their assessments meet the set criteria. He observes classes and checks in on how well teachers work with their professional learning communities. “If you don’t buy into the philosophy of the company or corporation, don’t fake it,” Stack said. “Pick a place that matches what you believe in.”

## **ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Stack and Giuliucci both expressed the desire to move towards a more pure form of competency-based education that would allow students to progress with no consideration for age or time. They aren’t there yet, partly because the technology supports for this kind of system are slim.

“To be truly not time bound in how we organize our school, we need kids to have platforms where they can move at their own pace,” Stack said. “Part of that comes down to technology resources. It’s a lot easier to do that when kids can do some online coursework, some traditional coursework and some extended learning opportunities.” Sanborn has close to one computer for every two students, but they are school-based devices and aren’t enough to totally free up the system.

“We haven’t quite organized ourselves so that if a kid is finished in February he can move into the next course,” Stack said. In fact, there aren’t many good tech tools to support the kind of flexibility Sanborn already has. “I don’t think there is one great technology out there supporting competency education,” he said.

Sanborn needs a very flexible student information and grading system that lets all teachers access all the competencies and report them out to parents in an easily digestible way. In contrast, most gradebook software is based on the credit hour system the majority of schools still use. “There aren’t too many systems out there that are savvy enough to break down a course to say if a student is proficient in six areas then they get credit for the course,” Stack said. And his teachers are breaking course credit down into far more competencies than just six.

The other big technical stumbling block is scheduling software flexible enough to handle Sanborn’s constantly shifting priorities. Most software is based on a master schedule drawn up in the beginning of the year. But Sanborn teachers are sending students to different classes every day depending on what they need — there is no standardization. “On-the-fly scheduling is not something that’s built regularly into scheduling software,” Stack said.

It’s also more complicated for counselors to track whether a student is on track to graduate. In a traditional school it’s a question of whether the student has the credits or not. “Now you have kids who’ve completed a course, but are missing one competency so they have to do competency recovery and that’s something we have to track,” Stack said. Not to mention online courses a student has taken or extended learning opportunities like internships, which are also part of a final grade and assessment of competency.

## **ARE THE CHANGES PAYING OFF?**

Sanborn hasn’t been doing competency-based learning long enough to have firm statistics on whether students are leaving better prepared for the challenges of the world. Their AP scores are the same, although their Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) scores are up. The dropout rate is down, along with course failures, and Stack is seeing 25 percent fewer discipline referrals. “There are early indicators that things are working, but it will be really telling in the next two to three years as to how are data is changing,” Stack said.

Sanborn administrators are also in the process of surveying students and teachers to gauge their experience. “Anecdotally I think people would tell you the climate and culture of our school has changed ten fold,” Stack said.

Teachers are happier. They like the flexibility of working with a small group of peers, he said.

“It’s very freeing from my perspective to be able to teach the most logical way,” Giuliucci said. “I have not given a multiple choice, fill in the blank test in years now and I don’t miss it.” He likes giving students multiple ways to show their learning, including the freedom to create artistic works like movies or songs using the technology available to them. It’s gratifying to see students who might lose motivation keep trying. “It gives them an opportunity to feel that they struggle at this particular thing, but they can show their knowledge in some other way,” Giuliucci said.

## THE FUTURE

All the elementary and middle schools in Sanborn’s district are now competency-based, which will continue to smooth out the bumps the high school has experienced. New incoming freshmen will be used to the system, and teachers will have much more granular information about who their students are and what they already know.

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