

# Every State Now Lets Schools Measure Students' Success Based on Mastery, Not Seat Time

By Libby Stanford — May 31, 2023

Wyoming students may soon see the end of their school system as they know it.

In April, the state's board of education, education department, flagship public university, and governor agreed to start a pilot project through which a handful of districts this fall will begin abandoning the traditional model of letter grades and course credits in favor of promoting—and graduating—students once they've demonstrated mastery of the required subjects.

The switch to a system called competency-based learning gives those districts a chance to try out evaluating students based on their mastery of subjects rather than whether they've put in a set amount of seat time in the classroom.

With the pilot project, Wyoming has become the final state to allow competency-based learning in some form, marking a historic point in a growing, albeit slow, movement in favor of a model that emphasizes students' achievement rather than the set 13-year academic schedule. That movement—long championed by many high-profile education leaders—has seen a handful of states embrace competency-based education faster than others and uneven progress within those states.

In Wyoming, it's part of a three-pronged effort to move the state toward what State Superintendent of Public Instruction Megan Degenfelder calls “student-centered learning,” which is heavier on personalized and project-based learning that emphasize the development of problem-solving skills and letting students test-drive different career pathways.

The state superintendent, who was elected last November, has a private-sector background in the coal, oil, and gas industries. That experience showed her that many students weren't prepared for life outside of the classroom, she said.

And after talking to people during her campaign for superintendent, “it became more and more clear that the people of Wyoming wanted something different in their education system with this greater focus on job preparation and competency of skills,” Degenfelder said. “To me, we really get there when we provide greater choice and individualized learning opportunities for all students, and we simply can't afford to continue with this really one-size-fits-all model in education.”

Advocates say the competency-based model—which has also been called proficiency- and mastery-based education—is more personalized, gives students room to grow in their learning, and ensures that graduates are prepared for the challenges and opportunities they’ll encounter in the adult world.

But it’s a transition that requires a wholesale shift in school culture, school structures, and teacher pedagogy, according to the Aurora Institute, a think tank that studies competency-based learning, and many states still have room to grow in developing policies that allow for competency education.

Despite the slow growth, however, the past decade has been pivotal, according to the think tank. In 2012, 22 states lacked any policy addressing competency-based learning. About a decade later, they have all made at least some move to adopt the model.

By the Aurora Institute’s definition, competency-based education allows students to make key decisions about their own learning and progress at their own pace; is tailored to individual students’ needs and learning styles; relies on assessments that are meaningful and deliver timely, actionable results; and is based on common and clear expectations.

The model allows for more personalization, flexible time, equitable instruction, and group work skills, said Susan Patrick, the Aurora Institute’s president and CEO.

“It really is equity-driven,” she said. “If you are ensuring that every student gets to mastery, you’re addressing these gaps that are taking place and the holes in learning that are deeply impacting students, especially our most underserved and our most vulnerable students.”

## A change 100 years in the making

In 1906, the Carnegie Foundation, an education policy and research center, developed the Carnegie unit, the system that measures how much time students must spend in class to complete a course. It was exclusively based on seat time, and the foundation determined that 14 units would translate into four years of high school education.

Last year, however, the foundation announced an initiative that seeks to replace the unit with a more modern measure of student achievement, which could include mastery of subjects.

“Seat time is universally used as a definition for how you earn a Carnegie unit or a credit in high school because it’s easy,” Patrick said. “A hundred years later, we’re finally going to get the Carnegie Foundation to support that shift, too.”

A handful of states—including Alabama, New Hampshire, and Ohio—were ahead of the trend and adopted policies that allow for competency-based learning in the 2000s. Those policies varied, however.

In 2005, New Hampshire started a full redesign of its education system to shift from seat time to a competency-based model. All districts in the state now operate under the competency model, with grading determined by students’ mastery of content.

Alabama’s policy, adopted in 2009, allows students to demonstrate mastery of state content standards without specified instructional time to receive credit.

The same year, Ohio adopted a similar policy, which requires every school district to develop a policy on credit flexibility, which includes a plan to demonstrate mastery of a subject through tests, projects, demonstrations, or a combination of several measures, according to the Ohio Department of Education.

The Aurora Institute categorizes state policies based on the level of policy flexibility.

Seventeen states—including Alabama, New Hampshire, and Ohio—have “advanced,” comprehensive policies or “an active state role to build capacity in local school systems for competency education.”

Sixteen states, now including Wyoming, are labeled as “developing,” meaning they have policies that allow for flexibility at the district level to transition to competency education.

And 17 states are labeled as “emerging,” meaning they have limited flexibility in state policy for states to shift to competency education.

## A process that is easier said than done

Over the past decade, the Vermont Department of Education has been working to make competency-based education a mainstay in the state’s schools.

In 2013, the state adopted Act 77, which created the Flexible Pathways Initiative that aimed to encourage and support districts in adopting personalized learning plans for students, expanding work-based learning opportunities, and allowing for competency-based learning. It led to updated state standards in 2014, which included a requirement that graduation standards shift so that by 2020 students would complete high school once they demonstrate proficiency in the required subjects rather than put in the requisite seat time.

Every district in the state is working toward achieving that standard, but some have been quicker to adopt competency-based models than others, said Pat Fitzsimmons, proficiency-based learning team manager at Vermont's education department. That's because the shift requires a fundamental change in how districts approach education.

"The thing about proficiency-based learning is that it's not a technical change, it's an adaptive change," Fitzsimmons said. "It really takes a while for educators to change their practice."

A shift to true competency-based learning requires new professional development for teachers, a commitment to implementation from school leaders, and flexibility in admissions standards at colleges and universities.

That's not an easy task for school districts let alone statewide systems, but it can be done, said David Ruff, executive director of the Great Schools Partnership, a Portland, Maine-based nonprofit that helps districts across the Northeast make the transition to competency-based learning.

"Personalized learning for each kid is a bigger lift, there's no doubt," Ruff said. "If we expect a teacher to stay in control of learning for every kid, that's almost impossible to do. We have to shift to teachers thinking of themselves as partners with students and families around learning and that way, it's doable."

The transition also requires strong communication with parents and families, who might not be familiar with the competency model, Ruff said.

"Adults all went through a system that largely looked at averaging grades, and we're used to that," he said. "So this is a change to the system that has to happen for adults, too."

Degenfelder said Wyoming's partnership with the University of Wyoming and Gov. Mark Gordon's office will make it easier to address the challenges that come with the transition to the new system.

“When we’re considering any shift that is this monumental, that really shakes up the foundation of our education system, we have to have all policymakers on board to move forward,” Degenfelder said.

## Preparing students to thrive after graduation

The ultimate goal of competency-based learning is to set students up for success past graduation, when they’ll have to make their own decisions about how to learn.

“When I went to school, I was a hoop jumper,” Fitzsimmons, from Vermont’s education department, said. “If you told me what I needed to do to get an A, I could do that. It wasn’t until I got to college that some professor said, ‘you need to decide ... the parameters in terms of the assignment.’ I was in sheer panic because everybody always told me what they wanted. Now it was for me to make that decision. I don’t want that to happen for students.”

If done well, competency-based learning can help expand opportunities for all students, better prepare them for the working world, and help students who are behind to catch up academically, Patrick said. But if done poorly, experts warn that it could lead to confusion and watered-down academic standards.

Degenfelder has hopes that the new model will be a game changer for Wyoming students.

The state released its applications for districts interested in participating in the pilot program earlier in May, with the goal of having selected districts begin work on the shift to competency-based learning in the summer so that students will learn under the new model in the fall.

Depending on how the pilot program goes, the state will look at scaling up the model so it’s in place in all 343 schools in the state, Degenfelder said.

“It shouldn’t just be about ticking the box and getting a high school diploma anymore,” she said. “It should be about, how do we best meet the individual learning styles of these students and make sure that when they walk out the door they have a plan, they have a pathway, and they feel confident in their education?”