

Four Elements of Success for Competency Based Learning*

Defining and adopting competencies aligned with standards:

Proficiency or competency statements must be unambiguous and specific, making explicit what students must do to demonstrate learning. Proficiencies should demand an appropriate level of challenge for students, focus on higher-level thinking (e.g., evaluation, strategic thinking), and define the content and skills that are essential across subject areas. It is important that schools create definitions and a set of criteria for mastery to ensure that mastery is not reduced to simple recall of discrete facts and to avoid ineffective teaching practices that limit when students can advance. Clearly communicating information about the proficiencies allows students, teachers, community members, and other external audiences, such as higher education agencies, to engage and understand the quality and range of proficiencies needed.

Developing assessments to measure progress toward mastery.

Summative assessments are needed that measure whether students have successfully acquired the knowledge and skills defined in the proficiencies or competencies. Decisions need to be made about how students demonstrate their knowledge and skills and the standards by which students are determined to be proficient or competent. For example, summative assessments must be complex and valid tasks on which students demonstrate high-level ability rather than passing scores on invalid, simplistic assessments. Formative assessments are just as critical, providing ongoing feedback to teachers and students on progress toward mastery and identifying gaps in knowledge and skills to complete summative assessments successfully. As with proficiencies, the assessment system must be transparent to students, teachers, parents, and outside stakeholders.

Creating structures that support competency-based learning.

Competency-based learning necessitates that students work at their own pace, which requires flexible pacing guides, schedules, and school calendars so students have the time they need to master the content. This type of learning requires restructuring the school day, school year, class structure, and other elements of the traditional schooling model. Other needed supports highlighted include tools for tracking student progress; grading policies; guidebooks and manuals for faculty, students, and families; and graduation requirements.

Providing support for students and teachers.

Students, especially students whose progress is slower, need support making decisions about their learning and how best to navigate their way toward graduation. Providing professional development and collaborative time for teachers is essential to the success of competency-based learning initiatives.

*[Source](#)