

Summer Reading: What Does Competency Education Look Like?

June 30, 2015 by [Chris Sturgis](#)



Here is a list of examples of what competency education looks like in different districts and individual schools (over-age/undercredit/high school/middle and elementary/online). My dream (which requires funding that is hard to come by, as we have so many organizations now supporting competency education) is to bring these schools together with a number of experts (assessment, engagement, motivation, learning progressions, design, student agency, social emotional learning, etc.) to try to understand the commonalities and unpack the differences. There isn't any one right or better model at this point (it may still be too early to do that kind of evaluation...and again, we would need funding), so the best we can do is understand our options.

Please note: There are many more high school examples than elementary and middle school. This is partially due to the country's focus on college and career readiness and big investments by big foundations into high schools, and also because high school raises some unique issues. Finally, I'm more familiar with high schools and deeply concerned about how we educate kids who are over-age and undercredited. I will do my best to focus more on the younger years to build up our knowledge there, but I need your help in identifying great examples of elementary and middle schools that are competency-based.

Please, please, please...leave in the comments any other great examples that you know about. Competency education is expanding rapidly, and it is very likely I am missing the best examples. Or there may be descriptions of schools that are missing from this list that will be very useful to others.

Districts

[Chugach School District](#): One of the most developed districts, Chugach has figured out the ways to manage quality control and organize content and skills in ways that are meaningful to students and teachers without relying on courses. This is a seven-part series.

- [Driven by Student Empowerment: Chugach School District](#)
- [Chugach School District's Performance-Based Infrastructure](#)
- [Chugach Teachers Talk about Teaching](#)

- [Ownership, Not Buy-In: An Interview with Bob Crumley, Superintendent Chugach School District](#)
- [Chugach School District: Performance-Based Education in a One-Room School House](#)
- [Teaching through the Culture: Native Education in a Performance-Based System](#)
- [Performance-Based Home Schooling](#)

Lindsay School District: This district is shaping our understanding of competency education, as so many districts have visited them. They are on a rapid process of creating their 2.0 version with deep thinking about the competencies adults must have, lifelong learning competencies, and powerful information management systems to support pace and progress. We offer a five-part series about their process.

- [Six Trends at Lindsay Unified School District](#)
- [Preparing Students for Life...Not Just College and Careers](#)
- [An Interview with Principal Jaime Robles, Lindsay High School](#)
- [An Interview with Brett Grimm: How Lindsay Unified Serves ELL Students](#)
- [It Starts with Pedagogy: How Lindsay Unified is Integrating Blended Learning](#)

Pittsfield School District: This district began a transformation to become student-centered at the same time the state was advancing competency-based credits. The result is a strong infrastructure that supports high levels of personalization. Their four-series is listed here.

- [Redesign at Pittsfield School District](#)
- [Hand in Hand: Pittsfield Integrates Personalized Learning and Competency Education](#)
- [Pittsfield Rethinks Adult Roles](#)
- [Implementation Insights from Pittsfield School District](#)

Sanborn School District: A district that has been consistently improving its capacity for instruction and assessment for over a decade, they are now participating in the powerful efforts in New Hampshire to establish common performance assessments and a new accountability model. You can hear directly from their leadership by going reading the pieces written by [Brian Stack](#), principal at Sanborn Regional High School, and [Jonathan Vander Els](#), principal at Memorial Elementary. There is also a three-part case study series outlined below.

- [Sanborn Regional School District Flips District Reform](#)
- [Addressing Root Causes at Memorial Elementary School](#)
- [Raising the bar at Sanborn Regional High School](#)

School Models

Designed for Students with Large Gaps/Over-Age and Undercredited

Boston Day and Evening Academy: There has been a lot written about BDEA. The case study on CompetencyWorks is listed below. It is included in two reports describing competency-based schools: [Making Mastery Work](#) and Springpoint's new paper [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#). It is also the focus of Jobs for the Future's [Aligning Competencies to Rigorous Standards for Off-track Youth](#).

- [Empowering Youth to Chart their Course to Readiness](#)

Bronx Arena: This is a transfer school in New York City that is very comfortable breaking down the walls of the traditional system and re-constructing in ways that meet the needs of students.

- [Bronx Arena: Organizing Spaghetti](#)
- [Bronx Arena: Innovating Until 100% of Students Graduate](#)

Building 21: This is a brand new model developed in partnership with Philadelphia School District. Next Generation Learning Challenge highlighted Building 21 last month including a number of links to get a deeper sense of their model.

- [Competency-Based Education Approaches in K-12 Schools, Part One](#)

Schools for the Future: This new model is already [generating results](#) with a strong culture of learning, strong transparency, and extra attention to literacy (face-to-face instruction with support of adaptive software)

High Schools

Bronx International High School: Perhaps this school should be included in those that specialize with students with deep educational challenges, as their entire population is new immigrants. CompetencyWorks visited in 2014.

- [First Stop of the Magical Mastery Tour: Bronx International High School](#)

Casco Bay High School: This expeditionary learning school has been included in [Making Mastery Work](#) and [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#).

Carpe Diem: This is one of the earlier competency-based models, developed before competency education began to sweep the nation. It has integrated personalized approaches, blended learning into competency-based structure.

- [Carpe Diem: Integrating Competency-Based and Blended Learning](#)

EPIC North: A new school in NYC designed to make sure that young men of color will thrive. This is a good example of how competency education can provide an infrastructure of a highly integrated school that weaves together the principles of youth development, cultural relevance, and motivation/engagement.

- [EPIC Schools: Putting Young Men of Color in the Center of the Design](#)
- [A Deeper Dive into the EPIC North Design](#)

Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School: A case study on Parker is included in [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#). We can all learn a lot from them about strategies to enhance student agency.

Hall-Dale High School: A high school in Maine's RSU2, Hall-Dale is a good example of how a comprehensive high school can make the transition to competency education. It is included in [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#).

Highland Tech Charter School: Based in Anchorage Alaska, HTC is a small school that is seeking to put together the best of what we know about educating teens supported by a competency-based structure.

- [Highland Tech Charter School – Putting it All Together](#)
- [Advice from Highland Tech Students](#)

[Making Community Connections Charter School](#): A highly innovative 7-12 school, MC² is designed based on a deep understanding of motivation, engagement, and student agency. A strong investment in building habits of being, mind, and work are made so students build maturity and skills to be independent learners. It is included in [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#).

- [Igniting Learning at the Making Community Connections Charter School](#)
- [Gateways, Not Grades](#)

[Next Charter School](#): A case study on Next is included in [Inside Mastery Based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations](#). This is an example of a competency-based school trying to figure out how to effectively use blended learning.

[Sanborn Regional High School](#): Brian Stack has shared his learning about transitioning to a competency-based high school, including insights on leadership, grading, special education, and CTE. The Freshman Academy is worth reading about as it shows how a good high school strategy becomes great with competency education.

- [Raising the Bar at Sanborn Regional High School](#)

[Summit Public Schools](#): CompetencyWorks hasn't had a chance to visit yet. However, a lot has been written on the Summit model. [You can find a list of reports here](#).

Elementary and Middle Schools

[Adams 50](#): It's interesting, but I don't think anyone has written up a description of the elementary school model Adams 50 is using that has produced such [gains in three years](#). This is clearly a missing piece of our knowledge bank. Next person who goes to visit – please write up a description!

[Carroll Gardens School for Innovation](#): This school in NYC is a great example, an outstanding example, of how the needs of the most vulnerable students including those with disabilities are placed in the center of the design. It's clear when you visit Carroll Gardens how powerful competency-based education is for supporting students in special education.

- [Carroll Gardens School for Innovation \(MS 442\): Intentional School Design](#)

[EAA Schools](#): EAA is changing, so we don't know what to expect. However, here are descriptions of how their schools integrated personalization, blended learning, and competency education.

- [A Visit to Brenda Scott Theatre Arts Academy](#)
- [A Visit to Phoenix Multicultural Academy](#)

[Ingenium Public Schools](#): The Barack Obama Charter School in Los Angeles uses the personalized, performance-based model developed by the Reinventing Schools Coalition. It was amazing to see students on task in every classroom.

- [Ingenium Schools: A Big City Competency-Based School](#)

[Innovate Manhattan Charter School](#): This school, based on the Swedish Kunskapsskolan model, is high on my list of schools to visit. Ed Week wrote about it [here](#).

Merit Prep: I haven't visited yet, but I'm hearing great things about how Merit Prep is integrating strong F2F and online learning within a competency-based structure. NGLC has written about their grantee [here](#) and [here](#).

Memorial Elementary School: We know a lot about Memorial Elementary School thanks to Jonathan Vander Els' frequent writing on how the school transitioned to competency education and how it is leading to a strong culture of learning and improvement. I consider [his posts](#) must-reads. My favorite is about "[the wall](#)."

Mt. Ararat Middle School: Several people have written a lot about their experiences in transitioning, leading, and teaching in a competency-based school. I highly recommend reading the posts by principal [Bill Zima](#) and [Courtney Belolan](#).

Online

Virtual Learning Academy Charter School: New Hampshire's online school is taking advantage of competency education to push for greater innovation. They play a powerful role by allowing students to do competency recovery instead of credit recovery.

- [Pushing the Envelope with Student Centered Learning at VLACS](#)
- [Competency Moves Beyond Courses](#)