Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in Arizona: A Case Study of Implementation in Yuma Union High School District

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Introduction

In 2019, the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) developed the Arizona Personalized Learning Network (AZPLN), a cohort of four districts that made a five-year commitment to shift to a personalized learning approach: Amphitheater Public Schools, Mesa Public Schools, Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35, and Yuma Union High School District. District leaders in the AZPLN participate in district systems building and school implementation efforts and receive customized support from CFA and KnowledgeWorks.

Research for Action (RFA), a nonprofit education research organization, partnered with KnowledgeWorks to document how personalized, competency-based learning is taking hold in two sample schools and districts in Arizona. In this case study, we will be exploring the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning in a high school in Yuma Union High School District (YUHSD). This case study was informed by qualitative sources from KnowledgeWorks and CFA, as well as classroom observations, interviews and focus groups with district and school administrators, teachers, students and parents from YUHSD. [1]

> ### Defining Personalized, Competency-Based Learning
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> KnowledgeWorks defines personalized, competency-based learning as an approach that centers each students' strengths, needs and interests and provides differentiated supports and ways to demonstrate what they know and know how to do, ensuring each learner graduates ready for what's next.

This case study will first explore the district context and history behind the adoption and implementation of personalized, competency-based learning, and systems put in place to support the work on the ground. The discussion will then shift to the school level by describing what personalized, competency-based learning looks like in a sample high school in the district, including implementation in the classroom, perspectives from teachers, students, and parents, and concluding with successes, challenges, and lessons from the field.

KnowledgeWorks has conducted extensive research on the district conditions necessary for scaling personalized, competency-based learning. The conditions along with goal setting metrics and outcomes are explained in KnowledgeWorks' Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling

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[1] KnowledgeWorks administered survey instruments to both students and staff in the district, but the n sizes were too small to include in this case study as they were not representative of the district.

[Personalized Competency-Based Learning](#). The twelve conditions are highlighted in Figure 1 and described below:

Figure 1. Conditions for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning
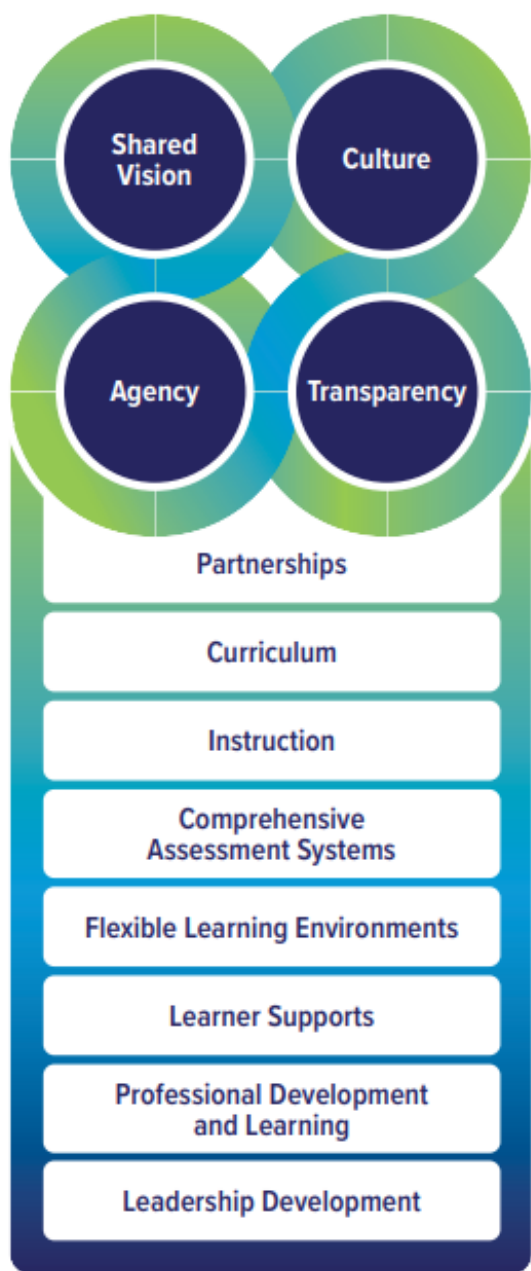
- A **shared vision** unifies the learning community's commitment toward a common purpose.
- **Culture** is a set of collective behaviors, beliefs and values that drive transformation toward the shared vision.
- **Agency** grows from a culture of trust that enables individuals to have a voice in achieving the shared vision.
- **Transparency** builds inclusivity and trust through common language, shared decision-making and accountability that are visible and accessible by all members of the learning community.
- **Partnerships** develop more inclusive and diverse opportunities for how learners pursue their learning goals and demonstrate what they learn.
- The **curriculum** drives learning and equitable outcomes.
- **Instruction** is centered around the learner experience.
- The **comprehensive assessment system** is aligned to the learning continuum to ensure equitable outcomes for all learners, cultivating learner ownership through personalization.
- Cultivating **flexible learning environments** empowers learner agency and ownership of how, when and where they learn.
- Learning is centered around the whole child with equitable access to a system of personalized **supports**, providing each child what they need to be successful, when they need it.
- The **professional development** plan, based on personalized educator needs and preferences, fosters a systemwide culture of collaboration, making continuous improvement cycles a reality in service of the learners and the shared vision.
- Through capacity building strategies and continuous improvement cycles, **leadership development** grows the collective efficacy of the learning community to cultivate shared accountability and growth in leading for equity to execute the shared vision.[2]

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[2] Finding Your Path A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning: https://knowledgeworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/finding-your-path-navigation-tool.pdf

This case study will ground the discussion of YUHSD's implementation of personalized, competency-based learning in these conditions, offering insights on scaling efforts. Several discussion points encompass multiple conditions which are reflected where applicable.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDY

YUHSD reflected many of the practices associated with the district conditions for personalized, competency-based learning. Based on interviews, focus groups, and observations, the conditions identified included shared vision, leadership development, professional development and learning, curriculum, instruction, comprehensive assessment systems, flexible learning environments, and learner supports.

- **Shared vision:** YUHSD has made several district-wide systems changes to support personalized, competency-based learning implementation. The adoption of standards-based grading and a portrait of a graduate—policies designed with practitioner and community input—have shaped classroom instruction to align with a common pedagogical purpose. State legislation has supported the realization of this vision by enabling more flexible instruction.
- **Leadership development:** In the initial phases, YUHSD leveraged teachers in leadership positions to drive the work forward at the district, school, and classroom levels. Teachers served on the district design team, campus design teams, and as innovators who supported their colleagues with classroom instruction. Teachers, along with administrators, continue to play an instrumental role in scaling personalized, competency-based learning practices in and across campuses.
- **Professional development and learning:** YUHSD teachers have access to several professional development opportunities, ranging from online learning platforms to group observations of personalized, competency-based learning instruction at different schools, because of partnerships with KnowledgeWorks, the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA), and Arizona Personalized Learning Network (AZPLN). YUHSD also provides teacher-led learning workshops.
- **Curriculum, instruction, and comprehensive assessment systems:** Across the case study school, teachers utilized choice boards to allow students more autonomy in how they demonstrate their learning. Students monitored their progress towards learning goals through proficiency scales and rubrics. Student performance on formative assessments guided subsequent instruction that focused on each learner's individual needs. Students, teachers, and families all reported that these pedagogical practices have increased student voice, choice, and agency.
- **Flexible learning environments and learner supports:** The case study school provided students with flexibility on where they sit in the classroom, the pace at which they move through the curriculum, and on certain days, whether they learn in person or remotely. Learner supports included small group learning where students received individualized instruction and provided mentorship to their peers, opportunities to retake assessments, and the use of technology to allow students to forge their own, individualized paths through the curriculum.

Respondent perspectives were mostly positive. Teachers at the case study school reported that their purposeful use of proficiency scales and rubrics had increased student engagement, agency, and metacognitive skills. Families stated that their children have improved advocacy skills, while students appreciated having more voice and choice in the classroom.

District Context, History and Systems to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

District Context and the Inception of the Work

YUHSD is a high school district with seven schools serving just over 11, 000 students in southwestern Arizona. As of the 2021-22 school year, the majority (86%) of students in the district identify as Hispanic/Latinx, with an additional 11% identifying as White; all other student subgroups total less than 1% of the population. The district dropout rate was below 3% in 2022.[3] Agriculture, tourism, and two military bases are the area's principal industries.

The district's involvement with personalized, competency-based learning began in 2019 when they committed to implementing the approach based on a shared desire to create engaging, student-centered learning experiences that prepare students for the real world. Personalized, competency-based learning was and continues to also be seen as aligned with other teaching philosophies and practices that had already been established in the district. This is particularly true for two other instructional approaches: **AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)** and the use of **educational technologies,** which together with **personalized, competency-based learning**, make up the **"three pillars"** of the district.[4] External site visits to observe personalized, competency-based learning and evidence such as video testimony showing the success of the approach further motivated leaders and staff members to adopt the model.

The district partnership with KnowledgeWorks includes the development of a state-level learning community around personalized, competency-based learning through the AZPLN; convenings on best practices around personalized, competency-based learning; and regular consultation between KnowledgeWorks and key points of contact in each district. KnowledgeWorks also helps to support district design teams that lead the work locally and provides access to customized professional development and ongoing technical assistance.

It is critical to remember that just as this work was beginning in the district during the 2019-20 school year, the nation found itself in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which required remote instruction and slowed professional development and implementation. At the same time, the pandemic supported personalized, competency-based learning in a few important ways: the pandemic helped prepare the district to further implement the approach by shifting teacher mindsets, transitioning training materials to an online platform, and incorporating student choice.

District Systems to Support Classroom Practice

While the instructional strategies included in personalized, competency-based learning take place in the classroom, district systems need to support these pedagogical shifts. The district has adopted several new systems and leveraged opportunities available through state legislation to support the

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[3] https://azreportcards.azed.gov/districts/detail/4507
[4] AVID is an approach that "helps teachers shift from delivering content to facilitating learning, resulting in an inquiry-based, student-centric classroom": https://www.avid.org/our-beliefs

implementation of personalized, competency-based learning. These policies and frameworks align with several of the conditions necessary for change.

Shared Vision and Culture

District administrators, school-level staff, and community members have developed a shared vision for the work through the development of a **portrait of a graduate.** The district's mission is to make sure that "every student [is] college, career, and community prepared upon graduation." To help describe what it means for students to be college, career and community ready, YUHSD developed a portrait of a graduate through a process facilitated by the district's Director of Strategic Projects. A new position at the time, the Director's role has been to guide all areas of the personalized, competency-based learning transformation. In collaboration with the Teaching and Learning team and with input from the community, including students, six student attributes were identified: 1) Self-Aware Learner, 2) Resilient Learner, 3) Communicator, 4) Critical Thinker, 5) Collaborator, and 6) Empathetic Learner. The attributes in the YUHSD Portrait of a Graduate are displayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. YUHSD Portrait of a Graduate Attributes
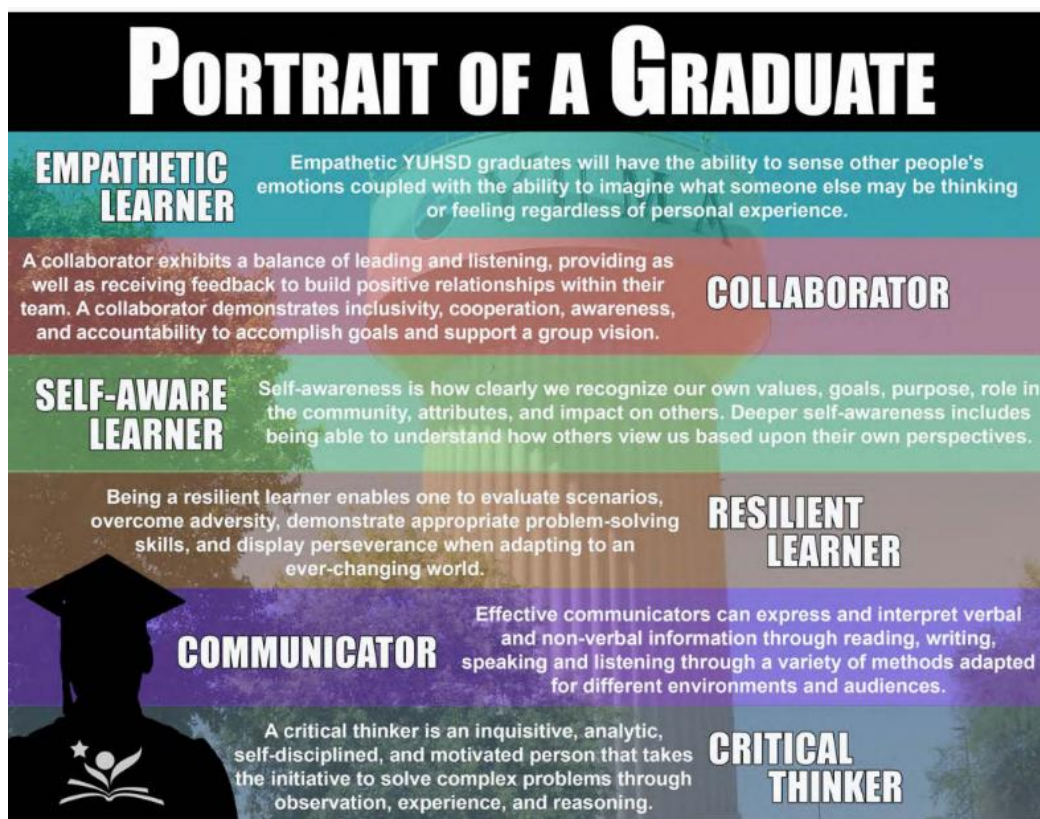
Next, with support from KnowledgeWorks, over three dozen volunteers broke into teams, one for each attribute, and started the process of defining them, identifying key competencies and creating a developmental continuum for each competency (beginning, proficient, and advanced). Each team organized the attributes into three bands: grades 9-10, grades 11-12, and postsecondary. Once the document was finalized, principals rolled it out to teachers who then explained it to the students. At the same time, community meetings were held with local organizations, business leaders, and

parent groups to share the document and enlist support. Finally in the fall of 2022, the portrait of a graduate was shared with the district's elected governing board. In order to operationalize the document, teachers now are tasked with incorporating appropriate competencies in their lesson designs, and students use the document to identify where they are in their learning and where they need to develop before graduation.

Comprehensive Assessment Systems

The district codified a **standards-based grading system** of formative assessment. In this system, students are scored on a four-point scale according to their mastery of curricular learning objectives. For each learning objective, there is a proficiency scale, or rubric, specifying what students must demonstrate to achieve a certain level of mastery and corresponding grade. The process of creating proficiency scales began with content area teachers identifying the most essential state standards and developing student learning objectives from them. District leaders then built rubrics for each of the objectives to ensure alignment across district schools. In the observed school, instruction centered around these rubrics. Students have access to them, and teachers routinely emphasize them in class.

Flexible Learning Environments and Learner Support

Arizona HB 2862 was passed by the state legislature in 2021 and allows a school district or charter school to adopt an Instructional Time Model (ITM) to meet instructional hour requirements through approaches like remote instruction, project-based learning, mastery-based learning, weekend courses, and evening courses. The district had to apply to the state for approval of their ITM plan, which has allowed for flexibility in the daily schedule, encouraging students to learn in more flexible ways, including outside of the classroom.

District Planning and Leadership Development

In the initial phases of the work, YUHSD created a district-wide design team, campus design teams, and identified teacher innovators to begin exploring and adopting the model in their classrooms. The **district design team** worked closely with KnowledgeWorks, attended district-wide convenings, participated in monthly meetings, communicated with staff and the broader school community, and supported vision setting for this work. The **campus design teams** focused on supporting school level practices and implementation. Additionally, **teacher innovators** led efforts in their classrooms and organically recruited teams.

As the work has progressed over time, some leadership systems have remained while others have changed. The **district design team** has continued to play a central role in the work, with principals and the Teaching and Learning team meeting every other week to discuss what is going on at the campus level and receiving ongoing professional development, often led by KnowledgeWorks. However, instead of campus design teams, **school Launch teams** now work to spread personalized, competency-based learning practices at the school and classroom levels. School based teams of about a half dozen members (including the principal, instructional coach, and lead teachers) engage in professional learning to scale and spread classroom and school practices.

Professional Development and Learning

Personalized, competency-based learning is a complex instructional and systems approach that influences the roles of both teachers and students in the classroom by calling on teachers to facilitate a process through which students have agency and ownership for their own learning. For this level of instructional change to take place, educators need increased knowledge of the approach and structures to support them in the work.

As part of the supports provided by KnowledgeWorks and the CFA, teachers have access to learning modules on personalized, competency-based learning. There are also Inquiry Labs hosted through the AZPLN, which provide teachers in the YUHSD with opportunities to observe the model being implemented in other districts in the network. KnowledgeWorks has also developed a navigational tool for scaling the work.

In YUHSD, along with the resources provided by KnowledgeWorks, several strategies have been leveraged to build educator capacity, As mentioned, the **district design team** and **school Launch teams** provide opportunities to receive and share best practices on personalized, competency-based learning implementation. The district **Teaching and Learning team** hosted several convenings with expert teacher-practitioners across the district to standardize curriculum and help new teachers implement the standards-based grading system. The district has also offered teacher-led professional development sessions on the three pillars, including personalized, competency-based learning. However, much of the **professional development also takes place informally**, with teachers who have more experience and knowledge about the model sharing promising practices within their content teams and individually with their colleagues.

To develop a diverse set of coaches to support personalized, competency-based learning statewide, a cohort of **AllState Coaches** has also been developed for each AZPLN district. In Yuma, the district identified instructional coaches who engage in professional development on personalized, competency-based learning, as well as coaching strategies. They attend the school Launch team meetings and provide support to the teams. They also provide support to teachers implementing the model in the classroom.

Personalized, Competency-Based Learning on the Ground: Observations and Perspectives from a High School

To understand what implementation looks like on the ground, the research team conducted a site visit to the sample high school in the district in late October 2023, and observed classrooms and conducted focus groups with teachers, students, and parents. Before the site visit, interviews were also conducted with KnowledgeWorks, CFA staff, and district and school administrators. The following discussion outlines the findings from those data collection activities and situates them within the district conditions necessary for scaling personalized, competency-based learning.

Choice, Flexibility, and Support: Implementation in the Classroom

It takes time to implement personalized, competency-based learning due to the significant changes that it calls for, both from teachers and students. In the initial phases of implementation, district expectations were that each school would participate in the model in some capacity, but schools and educators were given flexibility in how they participated as the district fostered an organic approach to expansion. More recently, the district has worked to scale the model, while still maintaining flexibility across schools. **Teachers in the observed high school utilized several strategies to implement personalized, competency-based learning and encourage student agency, many of which align with the conditions needed for systemic change.**

Instruction and Comprehensive Assessment Systems

Common strategies in the sample high school leveraged instruction and assessment practices aligned with personalized, competency-based learning, including the following:

- **Choice boards for assignments and assessments:** Teachers, students, and family members all highlighted increased student voice, choice, and agency as outcomes of personalized, competency-based learning implementation. While teachers had various ways of accomplishing this, the most common was through choice boards. Instead of giving all students the same assignment to demonstrate their learning, teachers offered a menu of options (usually three) from which students could select based on their preferences. Typically, these assignments involved students tapping into their different learning styles and talents. For instance, in an observed class, a teacher permitted students to either create an infographic, write, or record their responses to the assignment. However, a few students expressed that most of their choices involve picking their assessments and not how they learn the content, and they generally agreed that the teachers continue to determine how instruction takes place. A few teachers also noted that they would like to move beyond choice boards and implement additional, deeper personalized, competency-based learning strategies.

- **Monitoring progress through proficiency scales and rubrics:** While the district-created proficiency scales serve as the backbone for implementation, how teachers employ rubrics in the classroom also plays a large role in determining the effectiveness of the approach. In a focus group, a teacher explained that having students reflect on their learning and self-evaluate according to the proficiency scales was a huge part of personalized, competency-based learning and promoting student agency in the classroom; the teacher had students reflect on their progress towards mastering the standard after every assignment and assessment. Furthermore, she mentioned that she had students produce an individual plan for how to improve. Similarly, another teacher talked about leveraging Google Form trackers so students know the learning goals and can document their progress towards mastery. In focus groups, students also cited several examples of how teachers used proficiency scales to improve their metacognitive skills[5]. For example, a student mentioned that in one of their classes every student got a sheet from their teacher where they could

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[5] Metacognitive skills include planning, internal dialogue about learning, self-monitoring, and other study strategies.

record how they performed on their last test, their goals, and a reflection about how they could improve. Some students reported knowing exactly what they needed to do to achieve their goal and said that this was a big difference from their middle school years when they had traditional grading. For example, one student explained that in "middle school, [class assignments were]… what the teacher wanted us to do and not our type of learning… and now here in high school, it's more of the type of learning… we want to do[6]."

- **Formative assessment to guide individual instruction:** Teachers also reported leveraging formative assessments to provide students with individualized instruction tailored to their strengths and areas for improvement. The most common ways teachers did this at the sample school was through strategic grouping and mastery paths. Instruction in many classes revolved around group work in which teachers placed students strategically based on their proficiency level. By having students with similar struggles and strengths together, teachers could more efficiently address any gaps. One teacher described how the process worked in her classroom: she circulated among the student groups assisting those who needed help and allowing students to advance once particular skills had been mastered.

Flexible Learning Environments and Learner Supports

Personalized, competency-based learning also focuses on the need to allow for flexibility in the classroom to empower learners with agency and ownership of how, when, and where they learn. The model also addresses equity by providing each student with what they need to be successful. These conditions were operationalized in several ways, including the following:

- **Flexibility in how learning takes place:** The case study school provided students more flexibility in the ways that they learn through several strategies. For example, the school offered *flexible seating in classrooms* and created more open spaces for students to use in the school. There was also *flexible pacing* that allowed students to decide when they are ready for an assessment and could move on to the next unit. Further, the school offered *"flex days"* during which students could work remotely if they chose and focus on catching up in areas where they needed additional work or move ahead in areas where they had already met proficiency levels. Students also explained that in some classes, teachers allowed the students to move around the classroom and work with their peers on assignments. Finally, the district's *Flexible Pathways program* allowed students to apply their knowledge and skills to tasks of personal interest, which includes Career and Technical Education (CTE), work-based learning, and virtual/blended learning.[7] For instance, the CTE program allowed for job shadowing and provided opportunities for hands on experiences, such as building welcome signs for the Yuma area.

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[6] Yuma student focus group

[7] https://www.yumaunion.org//cms/lib/AZ02218644/Centricity/Domain/1229/SLHS%20School%20Profile%20SY23%20Final.pdf

- **Small group learning:** Teachers often grouped students together by ability level to provide customized support to students who were working at a similar pace. Some teachers also grouped students with mixed-ability levels together in the same group, so that stronger students could support others who were struggling. Students generally felt that using small groups ensured their "personal needs in a certain subject" were addressed[8]. One student discussed how teachers divided the class into four groups based on where they needed help; the teachers would then work with each group and provided individualized attention as needed.

- **Opportunities to take assessments more than once:** Students mentioned that they have several opportunities to retake assessments if they failed to meet the standards on the first attempt. They said teachers would also give them assignments or ask questions between assessment attempts to ensure they had learned the material and were ready to try again. One shared that, "What I really like is that they make sure that you studied or learned something and you're prepared for the retake by asking you questions or asking you to do an assignment showing that you understand more the topic.[9]"

- **Leveraging technology to support differentiated instruction:** Respondents mentioned several technological resources they used to help meet the individual needs of students as well. For example, the school used Canvas Mastery Paths, which allowed teachers to differentiate learning for students based on their performance on a formative assessment; once the assessment had been completed, the student could be directed to different "paths" that would help in areas where they had not yet met proficiency.[10] Teachers mentioned this tool as a strategy they used that was aligned with personalized, competency-based learning. A student focus group participant also reported using a tutoring app that provided feedback on their work, such as writing assignments; the student reported that they used the app to gather feedback on a draft of a paper and found it to be helpful.

While several strategies included in the personalized, competency-based learning approach were being leveraged in some classrooms, **implementation continued to occur piecemeal across campus and had not been fully operationalized.** The presence of multiple, competing initiatives such as AVID has been an obstacle both for initial teacher uptake of personalized, competency-based learning and deeper implementation among faculty who have made it central to their classroom practice. While the work is still in progress, many of the strategies that respondents discussed were also described as **creating more equitable instruction for students** by meeting their individual needs**.**

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[8] Yuma student focus group
[9] Yuma student focus group
[10] https://www.nova.edu/lec/This-Week-in-the-LEC/newsletter/images/2018/mastery-paths.pdf

Student Agency through Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in the Classroom: Sketches from Different Subject Areas at the High School

While implementation of the personalized, competency-based learning model was similar across subjects at the case study site, teachers in the observed classrooms leveraged personalized, competency-based learning strategies in their individual classrooms differently to facilitate student agency.

Career and Technical Education (CTE): Students spent the class period preparing for Skills USA, a national competition where they will test their skills against industry standards for entry-level positions in different trades through authentic demonstrations. Students worked on various activities on the Skills USA website depending on their learning interests and preferences. In addition to Skills USA, students had the option to read notes from an OSHA lesson or work on Cornell Notes from another assignment. The different assignments reflected the individualization strategies of personalized, competency-based learning.

Social Studies: Students learned about the Sudeten crisis prior to World War II, and the teacher assigned a choice board to evaluate their knowledge of the historical event. They could either create an infographic, a news story, or a video about the event. The tasks accounted for differences in skill levels among students and allowed them to either work individually or with a partner, as their preferences and learning style dictated.

English: Students worked on a self-paced descriptive essay. They had step-by-step instructions on their learning management system, Canvas, and worked through a series of activities that would culminate in a finished draft for peer review. The activities had several checkpoints, signified by green, yellow, and red traffic lights. When students reached a red light, they were to visit the teacher's desk for individualized support. Students could also select from one of four prompts or create their own.

Math: The teacher instructed students to take notes of learnings from an online module and then create a graphic organizer to synthesize their knowledge. The teacher then placed students in one of three different strategic groups (levels 1, 2, or 3) based on their scores on a formative assessment they had taken previously. Students completed any two activities of the four possible from a choice board. The teachers circulated throughout the classroom providing individualized support when necessary. Students at the highest level of mastery (level 3) could decide whether or not to push themselves to advance beyond the standards for their grade (level 4).

Perspectives on Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

Personalized, competency-based learning has been implemented for several years in AZPLN districts. However, it is still early in the process to measure the impact of the model due to 1) the deceleration of implementation due to COVID-19 and 2) the moderate level of implementation resulting, at least in part, from the organic nature of implementation in these early stages of the work. Respondent perceptions of the model's effectiveness, therefore, help measure its influence.

The roles of teachers and students have changed since the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning. For one practitioner, the game changer has been the shift from teacher to student ownership of learning. *Students* can now explain what they are working on, where they are in the process of meeting the standards, and what support they need to succeed.

Teachers and staff have become more reflective in their instructional practices, exploring what has and what has not worked in supporting students.

Personalized, competency-based learning has helped to foster stronger relationships between teachers and students. One teacher mentioned that students feel more comfortable being honest with teachers about their opinions as a result of personalized, competency-based learning. Another teacher mentioned that the model places less pressure on the student because students are given challenges based on their skill level and what they need; they are not asked to complete assignments that are too difficult. Yet another teacher shared that there is more trust between students and teachers because of increased transparency in how students are assessed through the standards-based grading system; the same teacher has also been using the flipped classroom approach, which allows for more time to build relationships with students through discussions during class time.

> ### Respondent perspectives were mostly positive
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> Teachers at the case study school reported that their purposeful use of proficiency scales and rubrics had increased student engagement, agency, and metacognitive skills. Families stated that their children have improved advocacy skills, while students appreciated having more voice and choice in the classroom.

Student and family focus group participants lacked an awareness of personalized, competency-based learning as an instructional approach, but described aspects of the model as part of the learning experience. For example, one parent reported that their child was *advocating for themselves* more than they had previously, while another explained that their child had *more choices in the ways that they learn*. While not familiar with the term *standards-based grading*, a parent described that their child receives numeric proficiency scores instead of grades. Students also described a number of elements of personalized, competency-based learning that they appreciated, such as *increased flexibility to move through lessons at their own pace*, more *collaboration with other students* in class, opportunities to make *choices in how they demonstrate their learning*, and that they had a *better understanding of what they needed to do to improve academically* because of the proficiency scales.

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons for the Field

Interview and focus group respondents identified some of the successes, as well as several challenges, that the school and district has experienced through the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning.

Successes

A number of successes have already been discussed, many of which focus on increased student agency and ownership of their learning. **Teachers also reported that increased student engagement has been a byproduct of developing student agency.** One teacher explained that their students are excited that they have different assessment options (for instance, they do not always have to draft an essay in English). Another teacher described how students pitch ideas about how to demonstrate their knowledge if they do not like the menu of teacher-created options.

However, a math teacher acknowledged that it can be more challenging to provide students with a menu of different options for demonstrating knowledge in math than in other subjects. A teacher also shared that they have been intentionally gathering student feedback about their activities.

Challenges

Interview and focus group participants identified several challenges to implementing personalized, competency-based learning in the school, including what was described as initial "growing pains." At first, students and their families complained about the shifts in instruction and assessment, but over time it spread organically. More specifically, the challenges mentioned included the following:

- **Perceptions that AVID is a higher priority:** AVID was adopted by the district prior to personalized, competency-based learning and while they are aligned, AVID is often seen as a higher priority. Members of the district Teaching and Learning team have worked to highlight the alignment of these two instructional approaches, helping faculty to understand that personalized, competency-based learning is not "reinventing the wheel." Nevertheless, because AVID predates personalized, competency-based learning, the models are similar, and teachers had already become familiar with it, AVID has become an obstacle at times to teachers focusing on the new approach to instruction.

- **Scaling the model to more teachers and classrooms:** While this new instructional approach has grown over time, it has been a challenge to get more of the core subject-area teachers (i.e., English, math, science and social studies) on board. The growth of personalized, competency-based learning has been allowed to take place organically, which can facilitate stronger buy-in from the teachers who adopt the model but can slow the rate of scaling across a school.

- **Providing faculty with additional time and support:** Implementation of the model takes additional time and requires opportunities for ongoing training and collaboration, which several teachers reported as limited. Teachers expressed that they were already stretched by their traditional responsibilities, and that implementing personalized, competency-based learning strategies (e.g., generating and reviewing multiple versions of assignments and assessments) required additional time. Implementation of this approach also requires ongoing training beyond simply strategies to increase student agency, as well as opportunities for collaboration across faculty within the same academic department, which can be difficult before the effort has been scaled to a larger proportion of teachers.

- **Addressing the needs of special education students and English language learners:** While personalized, competency-based learning focuses on meeting the needs of each student, some faculty expressed concerns that strategies they had learned apply primarily to traditional students as opposed to special education students and English language learners, especially in inclusion classrooms. Respondents reported the need for additional technical assistance in how to tailor personalized, competency-based learning strategies to meet the needs of these students.

Overall, personalized, competency-based learning aligns with the other two pillars in the district, which has both supported its growth and created challenges for faculty in understanding the additional value-add of the model. While some have reportedly criticized implementation as slow, the district wants to make sure they "do it right," which takes time and ongoing support.

About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit education research organization. We seek to use research to improve equity, opportunity, and outcomes for students and families. Our work is designed to strengthen early education, public schools, and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public; and enrich civic and community dialogue. For more information, please visit our website at www.researchforaction.org.

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