

# From State Commitment to District Implementation:

## Approaches and Strategies for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning – Executive Summary of District Implementation Findings

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### Introduction

Personalized, competency-based learning efforts often take place in a single classroom or school, but not systematically across districts, let alone states. To address this dynamic and increase the scale of personalized, competency-based learning, KnowledgeWorks has engaged in state level implementation support of personalized, competency-based learning in a number of states, including Arizona, Nevada, North Dakota, and South Carolina, as well as a cohort of districts in three of the four states, with the goal of scaling the work beyond each state's initial cohort of districts.

#### Defining Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

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.

Research for Action (RFA), a nonprofit education research organization, partnered with KnowledgeWorks to document and analyze how personalized, competency-based learning is taking hold in these states and the initial cohorts of school districts implementing the work in Arizona, North Dakota, and South Carolina. While the [full report](#) discusses findings at the state and district levels, the summary that follows highlights key findings on district level implementation including lessons learned and recommendations for the field. The executive summary of state level findings can be found [here](#).

### Analysis of Implementation at the District Level

Based on a sample of representatives from two districts within three study states, the research team explored various components of personalized, competency-based learning implementation. Highlights from the analysis include:

- **Motivations** for district adoption of personalized, competency-based learning included previous engagement or interests in work aligned to the initiative, connections between individual philosophies and personalized, competency-based learning, recognizing personalized, competency-based learning as a strategy to help students achieve the state graduation standards and/or prepare them for the world after high school, and observing personalized, competency-based learning practices through external site visits.
- District **expectations** for implementation varied as the effort itself was designed around the needs of each district, school, and educator. In nearly all study districts, teachers were expected to participate in personalized, competency-based learning, but were given flexibility in how and to what degree they implemented the components of the approach. Implementation also varied across elementary, middle, and high school levels, based on several factors such as the scaling

strategies employed. Half of the study districts reported a continuing need to help teachers better understand what personalized, competency-based learning involves.

- District **systems change** in support of personalized, competency-based learning included identifying priority standards and learning progressions to better track student's progress against the standards, revising teacher evaluation systems to align with personalized, competency-based learning, and adopting standards-based grading.
- **Capacity building strategies** consisted of sharing convening learnings with other educators who were not in attendance, providing opportunities for internal and external observations, recruiting an initial set of teacher leaders to implement personalized, competency-learning in their classrooms and support their peers, offering problems of practice and study sessions for educators and leaders, developing human and material resources for ongoing support like hiring an instructional coach, and leveraging existing meeting structures to deliver professional development. District **design teams** were the most common leadership model across districts, but the composition and role of the design teams varied and changed over time. School leadership at large has been a key component of on-site capacity building for educators.
- **Classroom implementation** varied across districts, schools, and educators but there are several components of teaching and learning aligned with personalized, competency-based learning that were commonly reported. Many schools and educators focused on increasing student agency, often through the use of choice boards and empowering students to set their learning goals and monitor progress.
- Districts are in the process of determining their short- and long-term **goals** for personalized, competency-based learning. Districts are focusing on measuring levels of implementation and utilizing two common methods to monitor the progress and quality of personalized, competency-based learning implementation: educator surveys and classroom observations.
- The majority of district respondents involved in personalized, competency-based learning emphasized that the effort could help to address issues of **equity** by helping to meet the needs of each individual student.

### Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

The interaction between the pandemic and personalized, competency-based learning efforts also changed education in the study districts in several common ways:

1. There was broad consensus that personalized, competency-based learning helped implementing schools and districts adapt quickly during the pandemic.
2. The pandemic sparked interest in personalized, competency-based learning due to the student-centered approach in addressing learning needs and environments created by the pandemic.
3. The pandemic slowed implementation, professional development, and scaling.

## Lessons for the Field on Implementation at the District Level

Several common successes and lessons learned were identified across study districts:

1. Districts reported increased student engagement, greater student agency, and student ownership of their own learning as **common successes** experienced with personalized, competency-based learning.
2. Districts identified several **effective resources** for implementing personalized, competency-based learning, including classroom observations and reflections, ongoing technical support and instructional coaching, and concentrated time to focus on personalized, competency-based learning.
3. Districts also identified additional **resources needed for implementation**, specifically: 1) additional time, both on a daily basis and in the long term, to learn more about personalized, competency-based learning and prepare to teach using this approach and 2) more concrete resources to use in their classrooms.
4. The personalized approach to adopting and implementing personalized, competency-based learning in study districts led to **variation in the process of orientating educators** at different levels within districts and a **lack of consistency in the level of knowledge across classroom teachers**.

## Recommendations for District Leaders

Based on the district level data collection and analysis, we provide the following recommendations:

- **Set clear goals for the work.** District respondents identified the lack of a shared set of short-term results and long-term impact for the effort, as well as indicators to measure progress, as challenges in moving the work forward. District design teams should develop their goals for the work at the outset and revisit those goals regularly to determine their progress.
- **Include educators at all levels in the district design teams.** In some cases, district design teams initially did not include all levels of district stakeholders, such as administrators, support staff, principals, and teachers; this created a disconnect between schools and educators not included in the process and hindered implementation and scale-up in those schools.
- **Develop district policy and practice that supports the work and removes barriers.** Study districts recognized the need to build systems in which personalized, competency-based learning could be implemented. District systems change in areas such as teacher evaluation is essential to ensure alignment between local policy and classroom instruction.
- **Allow time for teacher orientation and implementation.** Personalized, competency-based learning is an ambitious approach to education that changes the roles of both teachers and students in the classroom. That level of implementation requires time for teachers to prepare for instruction weekly and over the long term through ongoing professional development.
- **Provide opportunities for classroom observations and reflections.** Observations, whether in the district or outside, were consistently identified as an effective way to build teacher capacity. Allowing for peer reflection afterwards is also essential to help teachers process what they saw and clarify what they learned and can take back to their own classroom.



- **Offer both human and material resources to provide ongoing support.** Teachers will not have all the capacity they need to implement personalized, competency-based learning after a single professional development session; this approach requires ongoing technical assistance. Some districts utilized instructional coaches to provide customized, district-based supports that were considered effective. Providing lesson plans and templates for instructional strategies that can be modified to fit individual classrooms were also identified as valuable resources.
  - **Determine a strategy for dissemination of information that fits existing district structures.** Educators at all levels need to have a clear understanding of what personalized, competency-based learning involves and how to implement it in the classroom. In some cases, information was housed primarily at the district level and was not shared with school administrators and teachers. Districts should identify existing resources (e.g., curriculum coordinators) and structures (e.g., professional learning communities) through which professional development and ongoing support can be shared across educators at all levels.
  - **Define equity and how personalized, competency-based learning will support equitable student outcomes.** The majority of district respondents emphasized that the effort could address issues of equity by helping to meet the needs of each individual student. While focusing on the needs of every individual student speaks to equity, student outcomes vary by student subgroup and reflect inequitable opportunities for traditionally underrepresented student populations. To that end, districts should consider identifying student achievement gaps and focus their efforts on equity by addressing the needs of student subgroups experiencing those gaps.
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KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities, and leaders across the country to imagine, build, and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.

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