

From State Commitment to District Implementation:

Approaches and Strategies for Personalized, Competency-Based Learning – Executive Summary of State Level 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 provided support at the state level for local implementation of personalized, competency-based learning in a number of states, including Arizona, Nevada, North Dakota, and South Carolina. Each of the four states working with KnowledgeWorks has a commitment to personalized, competency-based learning transformation statewide, with the goal of scaling the work beyond initial cohorts of districts.

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. While the [full report](#) discusses findings at the state and district levels, this executive summary focuses on state support for personalized, competency-based learning. The executive summary on district implementation can be found [here](#).

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.

Creating State Level Conditions that Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning: A Roadmap

Systemic adoption of personalized, competency-based learning at the local level requires support at the state level to remove barriers and assist implementation. State policymakers and education advocates need to leverage their individual state contexts and opportunities for policy change in order to gather support for the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning. Further, states need to determine their leadership model for the effort, necessary partnerships to support the effort, the order of local implementation (i.e., start at the district or school level), and their scale-up strategies.

We present a roadmap (see Table 1) of the various approaches to fostering the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning across the four study states. The roadmap describes how personalized, competency-based learning has been encouraged by the four states included in the study. By identifying these approaches in the study states, other states can work to recognize opportunities to adopt personalized, competency-based learning, the decisions they will need to consider, and the options leveraged in other states. The [full report](#) includes a broader description of the roadmap and the work taking place in each of the study states.

Table 1. A roadmap of the various approaches to fostering the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning

Decision Point 1. What are the potential catalysts for the advancement of personalized, competency-based learning?	
 CATALYST	<p>States identified catalysts that encouraged or accelerated the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning: 1) the adoption of related state legislation and regulation, 2) changing instructional needs in the wake of COVID-19, and 3) the development and adoption of state graduation pathways. Policymakers and advocates need to consider how to leverage catalysts to gather support for personalized, competency-based learning.</p>
Decision Point 2. How can personalized, competency-based learning advance the larger state vision for education?	
 STATE VISION	<p>Personalized, competency-based learning can be a vehicle to achieve a state's larger education goals. Study states identified: 1) helping each student succeed, 2) facilitating educational flexibility and innovation, and 3) supporting state goals for high school graduates as larger state visions supported by this effort. It is critical to identify the state's visions and how personalized, competency-based learning supports them.</p>
Decision Point 3. What state policy mechanisms can be used to create the conditions needed to support personalized, competency-based learning?	
 POLICY MECHANISMS	<p>States need to develop the policy conditions that allow for the adoption of personalized, competency-based learning at the local level. States used several vehicles to advance policy to support the effort: 1) state legislation, 2) commissions and task forces, 3) accountability and instructional frameworks, and 4) pilot testing.</p>
Decision Point 4: What type of state leadership model will be used to support the adoption and scaling of personalized, competency-based learning?	
 STATE LEADERSHIP	<p>Each of the states developed leadership models for the effort with specific organizations designated to lead decision-making. These organizations included: 1) a state-based nonprofit organization, 2) multiple offices within the state department of education, 3) a coalition of state stakeholders, and 4) a designated office within the state department of education.</p>
Decision Point 5. What are the potential partner organizations that could provide ongoing professional development and technical assistance for the work?	
 PARTNERS	<p>Personalized, competency-based learning requires ongoing professional development and technical assistance. Along with providing their own services, KnowledgeWorks facilitated the development of additional types of partnerships to provide these supports: 1) structured networks of cohort districts, 2) regional education service centers, 3) technical assistance providers, and 4) state partnerships.</p>
Decision Point 7. What scaling strategies will best fit the state political and cultural context?	
 SCALE-UP	<p>Each of the four states considered their local political and cultural contexts in designing strategies for scaling the work beyond the first cohort of districts; strategies included: 1) organic expansion for wider adoption, 2) peer-to-peer network of educators, 3) initial cohort demonstration sites, and 4) multiple entry points and supports into personalized, competency-based learning.</p>

State Supports for Local Implementation: A Cross-State Analysis

To understand each state's strategies to support personalized, competency-based learning at the district and school levels, RFA developed four state-specific logic models (Appendix A in [full report](#)). The components of the logic model include: 1) resources to adopt, implement, and support personalized, competency-based learning; 2) implementation activities; 3) and short-term results and long-term impact. Each of these components are discussed below:

- **Common Resources to Support the Local Adoption and Implementation of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning:** *State policymakers and agencies* helped pass legislation aligned with personalized, competency-based learning in all four states. *State-based and external organizations* also supported the efforts in various ways across states, offering professional development and technical assistance to assist implementation. Lastly, *district leaders* determined overall strategies for adoption and implementation while *educators* used their time and expertise to bring personalized, competency-based learning into their classrooms.
- **Implementation Activities:** Based on KnowledgeWorks' *Four Strategies for System Design*, the research team identified the following common activities to support local implementation:
 - **Building capacity:** Hosting convenings; offering ongoing monitoring and coaching; cross-cohort collaboration; technical assistance; and professional development tools.
 - **Cultivating systems change:** State opportunity analysis; advocacy for state policy aligned to personalized, competency-based learning; coordination of personalized, competency-based learning supports within the state department of education; and scaling personalized, competency-based learning.
 - **Empowering student learning:** Supporting the development of student agency.
 - **Ensuring quality:** Leveraging independent evaluation partners and developing action planning metrics.
- **Short-Term Results and Long-Term Impact:** Common responses across states regarding goals for the work included the following:
 - **Short-Term Results:** Increased educator knowledge about and capacity to implement personalized, competency-based learning; adoption of state and district policies aligned with personalized, competency-based learning; implementation of personalized, competency-based learning into classroom instruction; completion and/or integration of the Portrait of a Graduate in the district; increased student agency; development of metrics to measure the impact of personalized, competency-based learning; and development and dissemination of lessons learned.
 - **Long-Term Impact:** Scaling personalized, competency-based learning to more districts; development of evidence on the impact of personalized, competency-based learning on student outcomes; elimination of student achievement gaps; and increased student readiness for college and career after high school.

Equity Considerations Across Study States

RFA explored equity considerations across study states through document review, policy scans, and interviews with state policymakers and practitioners. Instead of evaluating state approaches to incorporating equity into their personalized, competency-based learning efforts, RFA asked respondents to share their own definitions and considerations around equity; the common themes that emerged included the following:

- State-level respondents often found it difficult to provide operational definitions of equity, but expressed an explicit commitment to equity within the personalized, competency-based learning effort.
- Key factors related to equity were identified across the study states, including the socio-economic status of students, special education services received (including gifted services), student race and ethnicity, access to resources within the school and broader community, and school academic performance.
- State policymakers involved in personalized, competency-based learning emphasized the importance of the effort as a way to address issues of equity, with equity primarily discussed as a way to meet the needs of each individual student.
- Personalized, competency-based learning was often viewed as a strategy or tool to reach or improve equitable outcomes for students.

Recommendations for State Leaders

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

- **Establish a clear and shared vision and goals for personalized, competency-based learning from the outset.** It is critical to establish strategic and measurable goals across a coalition of partners at the outset of any effort so that there is clear vision for the work.
- **Leverage catalysts to advance personalized, competency-based learning in the state.** It is important to recognize and leverage opportunities to build support for the work and create the conditions needed to adopt and sustain it.
- **Advocate for personalized, competency-based learning as a vehicle to achieve the state's larger vision for education.** Advocates can identify the state's larger vision(s) for education and frame personalized, competency-based learning as a vehicle to meet that vision(s).
- **Develop state policy that supports the adoption and scale-up of the work and orient district leaders on how to leverage these policies in their local context.** Policymakers have supported the work through legislation, frameworks and commissions/task forces that created the policy landscapes in which personalized, competency-based learning could be adopted and implemented; district leaders will need help to understand how to take advantage of these policies to adopt and implement personalized, competency-based learning in their local context.
- **Build a broad coalition at the state level to provide input in the effort and support the work.** In order to build, scale, and sustain support for the effort, policymakers, advocates, service providers and practitioners from across the state will need to be involved.

- **Leverage both internal and external partners to provide ongoing professional development and technical assistance for the work.** Due to the complexity and whole-school nature of personalized, competency-based learning, it is a demanding instructional shift that requires ongoing professional development and technical assistance.
- **Provide technical assistance to districts on how to focus on both district systems building and school level implementation.** Initially study states focused on district system building or school level implementation; more recently, districts have been focusing on both simultaneously, as both are critical to successful implementation, and can inform one another.
- **Identify indicators to measure implementation and impact.** In order to track the level of implementation and determine whether an initiative is ready to measure impact, clear and measurable indicators need to be defined.
- **Consider the state political and cultural context in determining scaling strategies.** Each of the study states have a culture in which local control is a dominant dynamic; as a result, the decision whether to adopt personalized, competency-based learning was a local decision; other states will need to consider similar dynamics to determine which scaling strategies fit best.
- **Develop a clear definition for equity as it relates to personalized competency-based learning.** It is critical for states to identify those populations for whom opportunities and outcomes have been inequitable and determine how personalized, competency-based learning can work toward addressing those inequities.

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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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