

POLICY, PILOTS AND THE PATH TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: *A Tale of Three States*

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Our nation’s traditional, time-based education system advances students based primarily on their age, regardless of their depth of understanding. By not ensuring mastery, the current system pushes students forward who are not yet ready, leaving them with gaps in critical knowledge or fundamental skills that must be remedied later. Concurrently, the traditional system often prevents students from excelling more quickly, engaging more deeply in their interests or pursuing additional academic challenges. Over time, this outdated education system repeatedly fails far too many students. A different approach gaining interest is competency-based education (CBE),¹ a system of instruction where students advance to higher levels of learning when they demonstrate mastery of concepts and skills regardless of time, place, or pace.

Benefits of a Pilot Strategy

While a shift toward competency-based education can begin at the school-level, state policies can either help or hinder successful implementation. As a result, a shift to competency-based education can seem prohibitively complex at the outset.

This report highlights how and why state competency-based education pilot programs provide a reasonable and actionable first step for state policymakers seeking to advance competency-based education. **Also included are recommendations for gaining authorization for competency-based pilots as well as communication strategies to support these efforts. In telling the stories of three states with the same goal, but travelling different paths, this report seeks to inspire other states to implement pilots as a first step.**

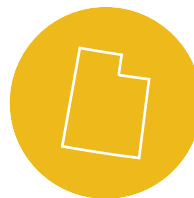
1. The terms *competency*, *proficiency* and *mastery* are often used interchangeably.

Three State Paths to CBE Pilot Programs

ExcelinEd policy experts identified three states with the common goal of advancing competency-based education through pilot programs. Mirroring the flexibility in a competency-based system, in which students carve their own paths and pace, these state stories highlight the ways in which each state’s unique needs shaped its individual path and pace toward competency-based education.



Idaho’s story is one of a concerted statewide, collaborative effort led by the Governor. In 2012, mastery education was a key recommendation of the Idaho Task Force for Improving Education. It culminated in the passage of **H0110** in 2015, formally launching Idaho’s transition to a mastery-based education system.



In Utah, a strong advocate with an education innovation priority saw competency-based education as a key next step for the state. A Joint Education Conference on CBE in 2015 resulted in the passage of **SB 143** in 2016, authorizing the Competency-Based Education Grants Program.



Florida's district-led innovation provides a third path via a "bottom-up" adoption. Two districts had already made the commitment to transition to competency-based learning (and personalized learning more broadly), but the passage of **SB 1365** in 2016 created a formal state pilot program that will ultimately create an appropriate forum to identify and mitigate state and local policy barriers.

Recommendations for Communicating the Shift to CBE

ExcelinEd recommends the development and implementation of a communications strategy before, during and after constructing a CBE pilot program. The following guidelines will improve its effectiveness:

- 1 Frame the shift to CBE in the context of college and career readiness.
- 2 Emphasize the overarching goals and principles of CBE without letting any one particular method, such as those that leverage technology, get all the attention.
- 3 Work purposefully with stakeholders to ensure a balance of local control and state support.
- 4 Highlight the goal of empowering local leaders to innovate new competency-based models.
- 5 Emphasize that competency-based education is not a new reform but a way to provide flexibility for educators to ensure that students demonstrate competency.
- 6 Demonstrate how competency-based education is a natural extension of existing initiatives.

Recommendations for CBE Pilot Policies

The stories from Idaho, Utah and Florida reveal that state policymakers can take a variety of basic steps to initiate CBE implementation. As documented in this report, solutions to all policy barriers are not required before starting a pilot program. However, ExcelinEd recommends the inclusion of the following key policies for CBE pilot programs that will better lay the foundation for continued success:

- 1 Ability to request flexibility from state requirements.
- 2 Performance metrics.
- 3 Alignment with the state's standards and goals.
- 4 Participation of all students in participating schools.
- 5 Demonstration of support from stakeholders.
- 6 A local communications and outreach plan.
- 7 Policy and implementation feedback loops.
- 8 Capture and share lessons learned.
- 9 Specific goals with short- and long-term expectations.

Conclusion

Idaho, Utah and Florida had different entry points, different methods, different champions and different timelines for their competency-based education pilots. Despite these variations, several common themes emerged across the three states. The experiences of these states confirms that there are innovative local leaders eager to make the transition to competency-based education and that a pilot program is a highly effective way to kick-start those efforts.

Future research on this topic will focus in-depth on pilot program implementation, provide further review of supportive policies and continue to document the unique solutions taking place in individual states.

See ExcelinEd's **Competency-Based Education Resource Page** for state resources such as CBE Fundamental Principles, Policy Summary, Innovation Pilot Model Legislation and a CBE Communications Toolkit.

www.excelined.org/CBE