National Center for Learning Disabilities
The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION &
Implications for Students with Learning and Attention Issues

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION (CBE) is a system of personalized learning where students master specific knowledge and skills at their own pace. Personalized learning is the tailoring of curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of individual learners. Personalized learning environments and methods can be very positive for students with learning and attention issues who make up about one in five of all students in our nation's classrooms. Specifically,
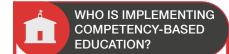
- One in 20 students in public schools are identified as having a specific learning disability, and

- Data suggest that as many as another 15% of students struggle in school due to unidentified learning and attention issues.

While personalized learning systems like CBE can be extremely beneficial for all students, policymakers, school leaders and other educators must consider the unique needs of students with learning and attention issues when designing and implementing these systems.

The Basics

Competency-Based Education is one personalized learning approach that attempts to help all students master the standards and aligned competencies to graduate. CBE is different from traditional education, which emphasizes completing courses over a set period of time (sometimes called "seat-time"). CBE is a shift from the seat-time model, as it allows students to proceed through the standards at their own pace and progress only once they demonstrate mastery of a competency.

To accomplish this, CBE recognizes that time, approach and setting are factors that impact each student differently in the learning process, and education should be tailored to each individual's needs and interests.

WHO IS IMPLEMENTING COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

By the end of 2013, a total of 26 states had taken action to implement CBE, while several more have joined task forces and coalitions to begin exploring the idea of CBE.

- **Five states** (Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Vermont) have changed their state policies and have begun an overhaul of their education system to incorporate CBE.

- **Fourteen states** (Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia) have taken a first step by implementing pilot programs, credit-flexibility policies, or policies that replace seat-time requirements.

- **Seven states** (Michigan, New Jersey, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin) have created task forces or implemented seat-time waivers for districts as a first step in exploring CBE.

Key Tenets of CBE: [1]

- Students advance upon mastery, not seat-time

- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.

- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.

- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

How CBE will Benefit Students with Learning and Attention Issues

One advantage of CBE is that it recognizes that all students have strengths and challenges and learn best at their own pace, sometimes with supports. The flexibility and individualization of CBE is also at the heart of effective instruction for students with learning and attention issues and is a core tenet of many special education laws. If implemented well, CBE provides schools a structure to individualize learning for all students. For example, CBE allows students to demonstrate mastery in many ways, such as through portfolios of work or projects, which may be more reflective of actual knowledge and demonstrate deeper understanding. A more flexible structure that readily allows for differentiation is likely to increase the inclusion of students with learning and attention issues in general education and support their

access to the general education curriculum. CBE also empowers students to play an active role in their own learning, which may help build self-advocacy skills. While helpful for all learners, developing an understanding of unique strengths and needs is critical to students with learning and attention issues, many of who may benefit from accommodations throughout their lives.

Frameworks to Enhance Access to Learning

CBE may use various frameworks to reach the end goal of ensuring that students receive personalized instruction and also stay on track. One framework that is critical to successful CBE is a **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).** MTSS provides differentiated supports, evidence-based instruction, and timely screening, monitoring, assessments, and interventions that are tailored to fit each student's needs while ensuring that competencies are met at a reasonable pace.

Another framework that can and should be used when implementing CBE is **Universal Design for Learning (UDL).** UDL ensures that students have access to all resources and content necessary to support their learning by creating instruction and materials that incorporate multiple methods of expressing ideas and engaging learners.

While CBE holds great promise for transforming the education system for all students, it is important that policy makers, school leaders, educators and parents consider the following issues essential to the provision of high-quality learning environments for students with learning and attention issues.

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[1] Patrick, S. and Sturgis, C. Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills. A CompetencyWorks Issue Brief, International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2013.

NCLD's Recommendations for Implementing High-Quality CBE Models that Support Students with Learning and Attention Issues

1. **Schools must involve parents and provide them with accurate, timely information about CBE and how their children can succeed.** Parents are a critical factor in school success. Schools must actively reach out and engage parents in developing the school's vision of CBE and understanding how best to include students with learning and attention issues. Schools must also help parents understand how to support their student's success.

2. **Schools must consider the impact of CBE on the identification and evaluation of students with learning and attention issues.** One factor that is considered when screening for a disability is rate of progress. Because CBE does not consider time as a determinative factor in mastery of content or skills, schools must modify their system to screen and assess for learning and attention issues, in alignment with the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA).

3. **Schools must set high expectations for the performance of students with learning and attention issues even though these students may progress more slowly than others in certain areas.** One hallmark of learning and attention issues is that students learn in different ways and at their own pace. If schools set low expectations or don't monitor pace of achievement, it will be easy for students with learning and attention issues to fall behind and they may never catch up. To ensure that CBE does not become a way to "track students" that struggle to demonstrate proficiency on certain competencies, high performance standards are critical to keeping students with learning and attention issues on track to mastering content and skills.

4. **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) must be in place to ensure that all students, including students with learning and attention issues, are mastering relevant competencies at a reasonable pace.** MTSS serves as a framework to provide timely interventions and supports for students struggling to master competencies. By implementing MTSS in a CBE program, students will be continually monitored and assessed, providing appropriate supports as needed to keep students progressing appropriately. Moreover, some students may never exhibit mastery of a certain competency, although they can move on and master all others. It is critical that CBE include a framework for monitoring progress and ensure students with learning and attention issues are not stuck having to demonstrate a competency they may never completely master, but for which they could make reasonable progress. In this situation, the student's IEP team, Section 504 team, or MTSS Student Support team should consider individually whether appropriate supports, accommodations or modifications are needed.

5. **Schools must be mindful of their legal duty to provide an education in the "least-restrictive environment."** Different designs of CBE may allocate teacher support in various ways; some call for placing the most efficient teachers in the biggest classroom to maximize impact, while others call for the most effective teachers to work in small groups with students who have not yet reached mastery. The school's utilization of teachers and resources must not undermine the right of a student with disabilities to the least-restrictive environment.

6. **Schools must have adequate resources and supports available for all students.** If students are all working at a different pace, supports must be available to students who are struggling with mastery. For students with disabilities, it is not enough to allow them more time to reach mastery; they have a right to additional supports and services under the law. Moreover, educators must have the time and resources to provide the interventions and supports as needed to students on various schedules.

7. **Schools must examine and take steps to prevent negative social and emotional effects on students who are reaching mastery at a slower pace than others.** There may be a negative social impact on all students, including students with learning and attention issues, who are behind their peers or are reaching mastery at a slower pace than others. It is important that schools and teachers are sensitive to these differences and ensure the school culture reinforces that all students will struggle in some areas, and taking more time on some things is simply part of the learning process.

8. **All educators must receive embedded, school-based, ongoing professional development in understanding and applying CBE.** CBE represents a change in the structure and pace of curriculum which will impact seat time. Teachers and school leaders will need support to make this change effectively. For these systems to work, parents, school leaders, teachers, and specialized instructional support personnel must receive continued instruction and individualized coaching so they can demonstrate proficiency in this new skill and knowledge base.

9. **States must adjust maximum age limits on high school enrollment to accommodate students who take extra time to obtain a diploma.** Many states currently set the maximum age of any high school student at 21 (meaning that a student cannot attend high school during the following academic year if the student will reach the age of 21 prior to September 1st of that year). States will need to adjust for the time it will take some students to achieve their high school diploma, as some students may take additional time to meet the competencies. For these students, schools must also provide intense supports and flexible opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery and to reach the competencies required for the diploma.

10. **The U.S. Department of Education must fund research of CBE models to know what is required to ensure that students with learning and attention issues will succeed.** Much of the literature on CBE focuses on the great potential that exists for students who are gifted or accelerated learners because CBE will allow them to master curriculum at an accelerated pace. Yet, none of the literature discusses how students with learning and attention issues might also benefit from CBE or whether CBE holds as much promise for these students. Therefore, funding and conducting this research is critical to ensuring that CBE benefits all students.

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