

# Competency-Based Education Explained

*“You cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which they will begin to flourish.”*

—Sir Ken Robinson

## THE CASE FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

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Talk to parents of two or more children, and they will tell you: their offspring are as different from each other as night from day in temperament, in interests, in abilities, and in the ways they learn best. It therefore stands to reason that students in any classroom will exhibit a broad range of differences. Yet traditional public school education is designed to teach students in a given class as if they are all the same, following a prescribed pace and schedule.

The better the students’ mental and emotional health, the more stable their family, and the more resources at their disposal, the better they are able to adapt to the established system and succeed within it. Students lower in this spectrum lack sufficient resources to adapt well. Other roadblocks may include unaddressed deficiencies, such as low reading or writing ability, or the overwhelming circumstances of unstable lives. The too-common result: failing grades. Yet simply repeating a course or a grade level without addressing the underlying issues is counterproductive. Just ask Julissa, 22, a former high-school dropout (now a successful student at the Salem Community Charter School) who received a failing grade in her sophomore science class. Then, she recalls, “in my junior year I had the same science class with the same teacher, and I failed that, too. I stayed in that same science class for the rest of the time I was there.”

Julissa didn’t fail the science class; the science class failed her.

## ANOTHER PATH

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Competency-based education (CBE) opens a different path to success. In CBE, as with traditional approaches, students study math, science, history, English, and so on. The difference is that the subject matter is a vehicle by which students demonstrate mastery of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to be an effective lifelong learner and a productive member of society. Teaching takes a holistic approach as it merges subject-matter content with social and emotional awareness, academic skills and awareness, employment, and advocacy for self and community. Three attributes characterize CBE: personalization, process, and pace.

## PERSONALIZATION

**Priorities, Academic and Other.** Competency-based education takes a modular approach to learning, making it possible to isolate a student’s particular needs and set priorities for addressing them. For a severely at-risk student the immediate priority is stabilization, since only with a certain degree of stability can other learning priorities come into focus. CBE enables teachers and students not only to isolate emotional/social skills and other life competencies from academic skills, but also to identify and address deficiencies in reading, writing, and computation. CBE attends to non-cognitive skills as well: organizing and managing time, task planning and sequencing, working collaboratively, adjusting speaking style to the situation, and taking initiative. De-tangling competencies from each other helps to eliminate the “double jeopardy” of underperforming in one area because of a gap in another. To earn a high school diploma from Salem Community Charter School (SCCS) requires 25 competencies: 10 based on Massachusetts state requirements (including MCAS) and 15 chosen by the student with advisory help.

**Needs.** Competency-based education also adapts to each student's learning needs—including schedules and styles—not the other way around. For each competency, CBE starts wherever a student is and measures progress along a continuum that leads to a stated goal. After reaching that goal, a student will continue to refine that competency, but formal instruction will home in on the remaining competencies that need attention. The notion of being held back a grade level—and having to repeat everything in that grade—thus becomes irrelevant.

**Challenge by Choice.** CBE's flexibility allows students to make meaningful choices that tap into and reinvigorate their innate curiosity and creativity, boosting motivation as they complete each competency. It also enables teachers to give each student just the right amount of stretch at just the right time. It's important, says Jessica Yurwitz, principal of SCCS, "to start students at the comfortable range, where they can feel successful—some of them for the first time in their lives—then move towards a comfortable challenge."

**Assessment.** The teacher and student can choose from a whole universe of options of assessment based on the student's goals, needs, strengths, and creativity. Teachers set clear expectations for what they want students to be able to do. Then students and teachers work together to figure out how best to demonstrate that: exams, projects, portfolios, presentations, exhibitions, and other creative ways.

## PROCESS

Competency-based education is fluid and ongoing. Teaching and learning take place between teachers and students (bi-directional) and among students. Sessions involve large or small groups, one-on-one interaction, and self-study. Learning experiences take many forms in and out of the classroom, including simulations, field trips, adventures, work experiences, and community service. Assessment is ongoing, continuous, and variable.

CBE's process affirms the connections between content and practical purpose. As students engage in learning, they understand specifically how that learning will help them in work, in future studies, and in life. And assessment evaluates mastery of information, concepts, and ideas in the context of how well students can apply that knowledge in a meaningful way.

The process also rigorously challenges—and empowers—students to take responsibility for their own learning. Out of this comes an atmosphere of motivation and success. "You see it, you feel it, you breathe it," says a teacher at SCCS. He sees it in "someone who has spent years and years of not being successful in school working hard from 8:15 in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon. That they're here, putting their brain to work, and pushing themselves—that's success."

## PACE

Those who have dropped out of high school often live adult lives: most have work or family obligations, and some are parents. The modular nature of competency-based education facilitates students' ability to progress at a pace that best fits their lives. And no matter when a student fulfills the criteria for a competency—even in the first week of a term—it is marked "complete," allowing the student to focus on other priorities.

## THE PAYOFF

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Programs like that at SCCS are thus demonstrating that competency-based education can succeed at turning around students defeated by years of struggling in traditional school settings. Through CBE, demoralized students can discover that, under the right circumstances, they do, in fact, learn. And the more robust their self-confidence, the greater their learning capacity: a self-fulfilling prophecy in the best sense.

And when success leads to a high-school diploma, the payoff is immeasurable. “That little piece of paper saying just one thing—graduated—can change the whole perspective of how somebody looks at me, before they even see me,” says Tachi, 20, who dropped out of a traditional school in her senior year. Looking forward to graduation day, she says, “And the moment that I graduate—oh my God—that will make me feel so good. When I get my diploma, I’m going to hold it up and say, ‘Look what I got. Maybe it took me a little longer, but I got there!’”

## **ALTERNATIVE—OR NEW STANDARD?**

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In one of his many TED Talks on Education, Sir Ken Robinson, acclaimed English author, speaker, and international advisor on education, makes a strong case for flipping the idea of “alternative” on its head and making it the standard. To those who would dispute this as untenable, he responds that the current standard is even more untenable with respect to preparing our youth for the future:

*“We have to go from what is essentially an industrial model of education, a manufacturing model, which is based on linearity and conformity and batching people. We have to move to a model that is based more on principles of agriculture. We have to recognize that human flourishing is not a mechanical process; it’s an organic process. And you cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which they will begin to flourish.”*

## Traditional and Competency-Based Models At a Glance

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	TRADITIONAL EDUCATION	COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION
<b>Pedagogy</b>	Notional: Primary focus is on the transfer of information, concepts, and ideas from teachers to students, or among students.	Functional/notional: Information, concepts, and ideas are the vehicles for building competencies needed to be an effective lifelong learner and a productive member of society.
<b>Subject areas</b>	Mathematics, sciences, history/social studies, English, foreign languages.	Mathematics, sciences, history/social studies, English, foreign languages, emotional/social skills, other life competencies.
<b>Adaptation</b>	Students must adapt to school, departmental, and class policies with regard to content, approach, schedule, and pace.	Learning is personalized and self-paced, adapting to the student's priorities, learning needs, learning style, and personal circumstances.
<b>Assessment modes</b>	School-based: standard approaches chosen by teachers or departments to measure knowledge of subject areas. Massachusetts-based: MCAS	School-based: approaches determined by teachers, with students' input, to demonstrate competency in skill areas. Massachusetts-based: MCAS
<b>Performance criteria</b>	Determined by teachers and administrators: quiz and test grades, assignments, class participation, attentiveness/attitude.	Determined by teachers and students according to the student's needs, goals, interests, strengths, and personal circumstances.
<b>Grading</b>	Standard A - F letter system that starts at a perfect 100-point score and downgrades from there.	Qualitative assessment that starts where a student is and measures progress forward from there.
<b>Completion</b>	Final grades and pass/fail decisions at the end of the term or school year.	Evaluation is ongoing; competencies marked "complete" as soon as the student fulfills the criteria.