

DEEPER COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Making Equitable,
Student-Centered,
Sustainable Shifts



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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Deeper Competency-Based Learning*, by Karin Hess, Rose Colby, and Daniel Joseph. The introduction explains what CBE looks like in schools.

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Introduction



For a number of years, I have been saying that implementing CBE should be easier for the next wave of educators—that those of us who did the earlier work constructed pathways that others could ultimately follow. However, this has proven more difficult in practice than I predicted, as many of the early works on this topic only served to bring readers into the forest and lose them among the trees as the path petered out in the gloom. . . . Schools must attend to the larger elements of making big change in our public schools—addressing why this transformation is so important—if public education is to survive well into this century.

—Paul Leather, Director, Interstate Learning Community
National Center for Innovation in Education

For over ten years, **competency-based education (CBE)** has emerged not only as an innovation in education but as a true transformation of the traditional approaches to how we “do” school. Those tried and true trappings of the industrial model of traditional teaching and learning are no longer viewed as “modern” education as we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. As a nation, we have simply outgrown the one-size-fits-all instructional and assessment practices of the past. Today, schools are embracing new models of teaching and learning that personalize a child’s education, require evidence of **proficiency**, and lead to graduation from high school with future readiness for the workplace and further education. These new models of competency-based education seek to provide the learning opportunities for each child to be successful both in academics and personal development.

This pioneering work in school transformation has been advanced through collaborations among educators at the classroom, school, district, and national levels with a shared vision for more learner-centered schools. The successes

of the schools we might call early adopters have informed and guided other schools in how to move their own schools forward with CBE. Because schools are transforming a one-size-fits-all model to something that must meet their unique needs, many different workable models are emerging organically. This makes the work of describing how to design new systems for teaching and learning difficult. CBE implementation can look very different from one school to the next. This is why we have included a variety of school-based scenarios to illustrate that point. In our experience, the most successful of schools may have different entry points into CBE, but they all stay true to their WHY. Having a clear purpose and vision for transforming schools becomes the cornerstone and focus of the decisions schools must make in forging their journey.

We call the CBE implementation process a journey simply because it will take a long time to get there—time to “unlearn” or strip away strongly held beliefs about the existing structures of teaching and learning and even the purpose for schooling in America today. As we watch the sunsetting of the No Child Left Behind era of high-stakes testing introduced in 2002 (Klein, 2015), we are moving toward more authentic ways of measuring student growth and learning over time. Educators ready to embrace the core beliefs of competency-based education, built on principles of equity for each student, are poised to begin an exploration that will transform their schools.

In 2012, nearly half of all states were designated as having no policies to support competency-based education. Now, according to an Aurora Institute report (Truong, 2019), the United States has reached a tipping point in recognizing the potential of competency-based education to transform K–12 education and providing policy to support these changes. As of December 2019, forty-nine states (with Wyoming being the exception) have some form of supportive policy or flexibility to allow competency-based learning.

State policies vary from state to state, with some states requiring that local school districts apply for waivers or credit flexibility in how credit is earned at the high school level for graduation.

The Aurora Institute (formerly iNACOL) categorizes and regularly updates the status of state CBE policies as *Advanced*, *Developing*, or *Emerging* to signify whether the state has permissive, enabling, or comprehensive state policy to advance competency-based education.

For example, *Advanced* means that the state has comprehensive policy alignment or has established an active state role to build educator capacity in local school systems for competency-based education. Seventeen states are now at the advanced stages of CBE implementation. One of these states is New Hampshire, which now uses a CBE model as part of its federal accountability system, using performance-based assessment, competency-based grading and reporting, and the state accountability assessment test once every three years.

The work of transforming to competency-based education is complex, requiring major shifts away from the conventional organizational structures of schools and away from many less effective teaching and learning structures toward student-centered classrooms. Our book explores these shifts in detail by sharing practical strategies, tools, and resources for sustainable implementation—moving your school from traditional teacher-directed learning to student-driven competency-based education.

APPLYING THE RESEARCH OF JOHN HATTIE TO CBE IMPLEMENTATION

In 2009, Professor John Hattie published *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. This groundbreaking book synthesized the findings from 800 meta-analyses of 50,000 research studies involving more than 150 million students, and it built a story about the power of teachers and of feedback, thus constructing a model of learning and understanding by pointing out what works best in improving student-learning outcomes.

Since then, Hattie has continued to collect and aggregate meta-analyses to the Visible Learning database. His latest dataset synthesizes more than 1,600 meta-analyses of more than 95,000 studies involving more than 300 million students. This is the world's largest evidence base into what works best in schools to improve learning. *Visible Learning's 250+ Influences on Student Achievement* (Corwin, 2019) rank orders these factors from the ones having the greatest **effect size**—or impact on learning—to the least (meaning those with a negative impact, such as retention). For example, Hattie positions **collective efficacy** at the top of the list of factors that influence student achievement, finding it much more powerful and predictive of student achievement than the effects of a student's socioeconomic status, prior achievement, home environment, or parental involvement. When teachers believe that, together, they and their colleagues can impact student achievement, they share a sense of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy refers to “the judgments of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students” (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004, p. 4).

As we have developed tools and strategies for long-term implementation of CBE, we've seen many correlations between Visible Learning's top-tier influencers and schools doing this work. In addition to developing and strengthening collective teacher efficacy (effect size = 1.39), we believe that well-implemented CBE systems also support the following:


- Teachers' engagement with cognitive task analysis (effect size = 1.29)
- Greater teacher clarity when setting expectations for learning and designing learning activities (effect size = 0.75)

- Developing students’ ability to engage with tasks requiring that they transfer their learning (effect size = 0.86)
- Student use of self-reflection (effect size = 0.75)
- Strategy monitoring (effect size = 0.58)
- Metacognitive strategies (effect size = 0.55)
- Classrooms that personalize and deepen learning through timely, self-regulatory feedback (effect size = 0.66)

Therefore, throughout the book, we have referenced these influencers from Hattie’s work as they relate to the changes that schools will engage in as they implement CBE and transform their schools (See Figure 0.1 on page 5).

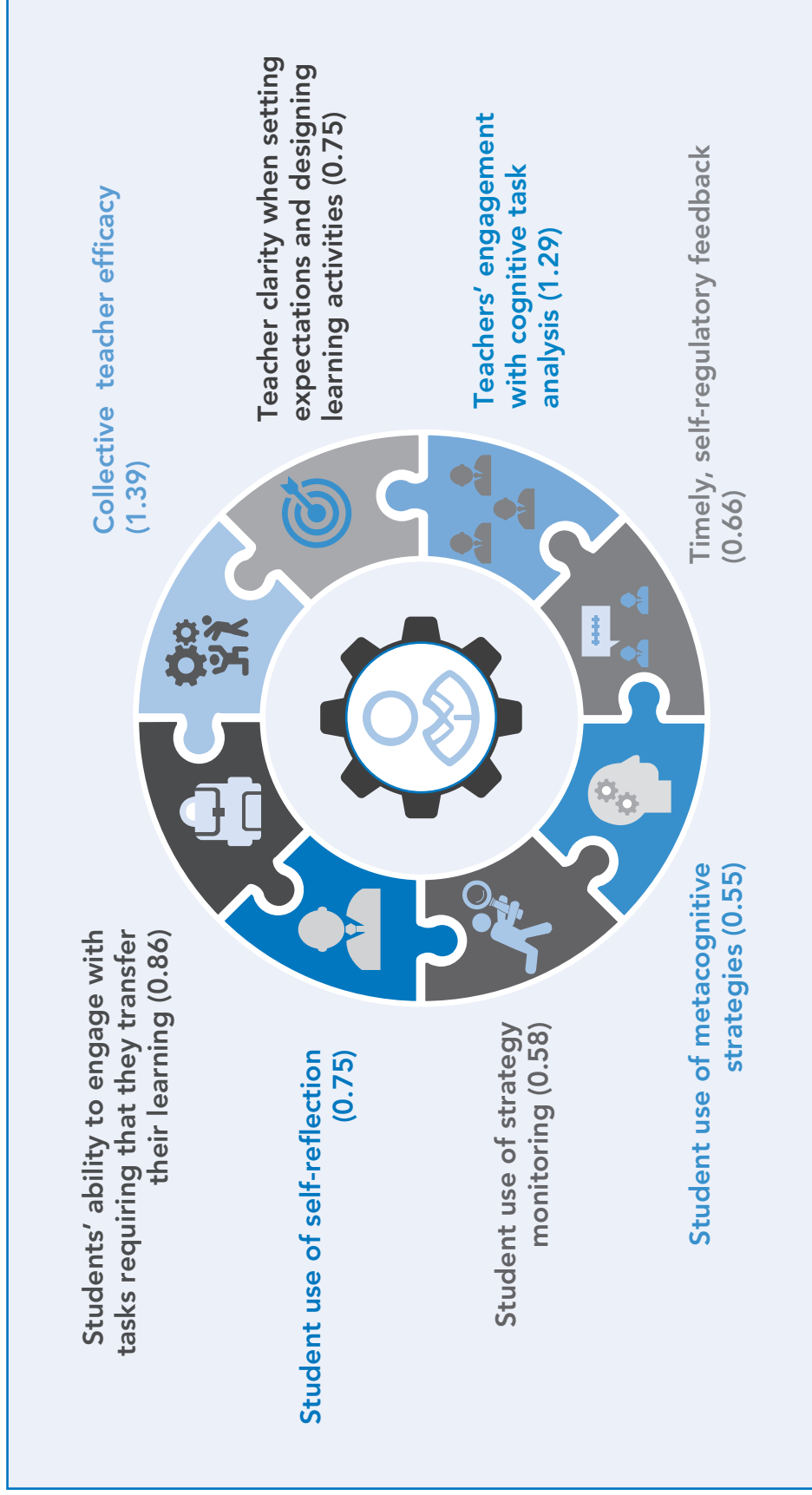
TAKING TIME TO STOP AND REFLECT

We’ve written this book to promote CBE as a learner-centered system. So throughout the book’s text, we have included thought bubble icons with reflection questions. We invite readers to use these as opportunities to pause, make personal connections, and to capture ideas and insights. CBE teams may want to share reflections with their colleagues as they develop and implement their evolving CBE systems.

 **STOP AND REFLECT**

What is one question you have about CBE that you’d like this book to answer for you . . . and why?

FIGURE 0.1 Connecting CBE Implementation With Visible Learning Influencers



CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

Chapter 1: The WHAT, the WHY, and the HOW of CBE

Chapter 1 is a primer for those beginning to explore CBE and who want to understand the quality design principles and the kinds of shifts schools must consider if they choose to embark on the journey.

- WHAT is competency-based education, and will it qualitatively change what we do now?
- WHY would a school want to adopt a competency-based model? Do *we* have a convincing WHY?
- HOW do we get started? HOW do we design, implement, and sustain this transformation? HOW will we know it's working?

An examination of the traditional education framework provides the launching point for deep systemic transformation to CBE based on fundamental principles of equity. This transformation requires the consideration of three kinds of shifts from traditional education to CBE. In this chapter, we share scenarios from schools who chose different entry points into the work based on their WHY. We introduce a CBE Readiness Tool for you to use and reflect on with colleagues as you consider your current status in the development of your own CBE system. We also begin the story of one school's CBE journey and visit with them several times in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Making Organizational Shifts

In Chapter 2, we discuss the first of the three fundamental shifts in implementing CBE—organizational shifts. When a K–12 school district uses a community-based approach to develop the vision of their graduates, it is incumbent on that K–12 school district to refashion its organization to deliver on this new promise with the community. Four key dimensions in organizational shifts impact HOW school leaders support the new shared vision for teaching and learning. These organizational shifts are in the areas of policies, leadership, professional culture, and professional learning. To support learner-centered, competency-based education, schools must build a collaborative organizational culture that is mutually supportive among educators. This must be supported by state and local policies grounded in the principles of equity, with special consideration for assessment policies and practices. In order to support student learning in this new environment, it is necessary to support new learning for professionals through high-quality collaborative work as part of the school day.

Old paradigms of school schedules and time management within the day will be tested in support of these new learner-centered, competency-based teaching and learning methodologies. We will share the work of several different schools and districts in their work to develop and communicate their local vision of their graduates.

Chapter 3: Making Shifts in Teaching and Learning Structures

Chapter 3 introduces a variety of tools to enhance teacher collaboration in building new instructional and assessment approaches as schools “upgrade” their existing teaching—learning from the standards-based era or traditional curriculum approaches. In CBE, it is necessary to begin with developing high-quality, rigorous competencies that align with the profile of the graduate and then consider how to map competencies across a K–12 learning continuum leading to graduation. In addition to mapping academic expectations, incorporating the development and assessment of personal success skills embedded in performance assessment tasks is also critical. The focus of this chapter is on designing high-quality assessments that guide instructional decision-making while eliciting valid and reliable evidence and measures of student learning against academic and personal competencies. Specific strategies and tools (Appendix A and Appendix B) guide your work in designing rigorous K–12 competencies; creating performance scales to support assessment development, instructional planning, and progress monitoring; and developing and validating competency-based performance assessments.

Because of these instructional and assessment shifts, there is also a need for transparent communication with stakeholders about the expectations embodied in the competencies and student evidence that will demonstrate mastery. We offer several approaches to consider as part of the shift from traditional grading to evidence-based grading and reporting.

Chapter 4: Making the Shift to Student-Centered Classrooms

In Chapter 4, we move to the classroom to set out the parameters for making probably the most challenging CBE shift—from teacher-centered to more **student-centered learning** environments. The key elements of this shift will be in designing, implementing, and sustaining targeted core instruction that is personalized for students—essentially meeting each student where he or she is on the learning pathway—and then, moving them forward, shifting from the traditional teacher pacing of instruction to the student pacing of their learning. We also clarify what is meant by “**personalization**” and how it differs from

individualization when planning instruction. Classroom shifts bring a greater need to incorporate personalized supports that include student goal setting; metacognition and reflection skills, especially of personal success skills; and peer and self-assessment strategies.

RESOURCES FOR DESIGNING, IMPLEMENTING, AND SUSTAINING YOUR CBE JOURNEY

Multiple pathways are needed across the K–12 continuum in order to design a CB system that meets students where they are and moves them to being future-ready for challenges they’ll face in higher education and the workforce. To help your teams get started, a number of downloadable tools drawn from our own work (and discussed in each chapter) are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B to guide decisions and activities along the way. Appendix C provides suggested readings and web-based resources school teams can use to plan, design, implement, and reflect upon each incremental stage of their journey.

Finally, on our cover and throughout the book you’ll see visuals of gears. The concept of a high-functioning system is that the parts work in harmony, like the interlocking gears of a well-oiled machine—working together to accomplish a task larger than any one part is designed to do alone.

We see the transformation to CBE as a new system requiring all levels—at the organizational level (leadership and management), the teacher level (instruction and assessment practices), and especially at the classroom level—to work in harmony. Making significant changes at one level of an educational system cannot be done without affecting the other levels in some way—slowing the systems change down or speeding it up. In our work, we find that if the gears at one level have not shifted in ways that support the other levels, systemic change is next to impossible to accomplish. Figuring out which gears will move your system forward will set you on a solid path.

We have seen many versions of competency-based learning goals. Some look like the skills checklists of the 1980s; others are more focused on deeper learning. Will your school choose to prepare students for the more rigorous path?

Our goal in sharing these practical tools and strategies is to support educators working together with the larger school community to find your WHY, and thus your WAY—the shifts needed to transform schools and have a greater impact on *deeper* student learning. This is collective efficacy at its very best!

FIGURE 0.2 Core Components of Competency-Based Education for Deeper Learning

