



Spaulding High School – Rochester, NH

Description

Serving 1,600 students in Rochester, New Hampshire, this high school is a leader in competency-based education. Starting in 2005, Spaulding began the process of transforming their use of the State’s traditional Carnegie-unit driven educational system into a fully integrated competency-based learning model. Now in its second year of full implementation, Spaulding successfully uses competencies to guide and assess student learning in all courses.

Design Levers

Curriculum & Content

Spaulding’s competency-based curriculum is personalized per academic department. “Most courses have an average of five competencies, while some have more and others less (see examples of Spaulding’s course competencies in information resources below). They are the essentials of a course of study that the students work to master,” says Principal Rob Seaward. From the beginning of the school year, teachers are explicit about the competencies, and continue to refer to them during instruction and assessment, ensuring students have a clear understanding of what’s expected.

“In some courses, like foreign language, the competencies are often reviewed in a spiral fashion throughout the duration of a course. In other content areas, such as science, students may focus on specific, defined competencies for shorter periods of time, and then move on to others,” says Erica Stofanak, curriculum instruction & assessment coach with Rochester School District.

Evidence of Learning

“At Spaulding...grading has many purposes: providing feedback to students, parents, and teachers, documenting progress and guiding instructional decisions. In a competency-based system, grades are a reflection of what a student knows and is able to do,” says Seaward. Spaulding redesigned its entire grading system to reflect competency-based learning. Now, students receive the following grades throughout and at the end of a course: A (Advanced); B (Beyond Competent); C (Competent); NYC (Not Yet Competent); or IWS (Insufficient Work Submitted), which refers to cases when a student does not submit enough work to measure competency.

These grades are devised from a combination of formative and summative assessments to evaluate how students are progressing through their learning. Spaulding also developed what it calls “professionalism competencies,” which used to be lumped into all courses, but now are addressed in a stand-alone manner. These professionalism competencies include leadership, independence, motivation, respect, and other soft skills essential to learning and student success.

Impact and Evidence of Effectiveness

- **Drop in course remediation.** In the past two years since the competency-based model has been fully implemented, Spaulding has seen a seven percent drop in students who have to remediate competencies in courses, as well as increased student engagement and personalization across all subjects. Why? “Grading by competency enables students and teachers to be able to identify exactly where student mastery is lacking. As a result, we are able to focus time, energy, and resources on exactly that,” explains Stofanak. In a traditional model assessment was reported back as a percentage, which didn’t let educators zero in on the areas that needed improvement.
- **Improving student experience.** “The water is no longer murky,” for students, explains Stofanak. “In a traditional model the definition of success was created by each individual teacher—they were able to attach a certain percentage on each category that they deemed critical (quizzes, participation, homework completion, tests, posters, etc.). Now that we have the commonness of the competency documents, every teacher has a common way of communicating *what* is expected of *all* students. Moreover, this focus places the spotlight on student learning as it relates to each specific content area.”
- **Boost in instructional differentiation.** “We could not have predicted the high levels of differentiation that are emerging as a result of our work,” says Stofanak. “The more our teachers differentiate and enable students to take more ownership for their learning, the more our energy and time is focused on teaching and learning and the less it’s focused on classroom management. As a result, more students are engaged more of the time.”



- **Community approval.** “Parents appreciate the explicitness of our model,” says Stofanak. “They also appreciate its fairness, in terms of how it’s created a more level playing field.”

How Did They Do It?

Collaboration’s Role in Change Management

“Change is always hard, but it’s a process that includes engaging all of the stakeholders,” says Principal Rob Seaward.

Moving to a competency-based system is an enormous undertaking, since it fundamentally redesigns the whole school. With that in mind, the administration of the Rochester School District was very purposeful in the rollout of the new plan. The discussions began in 2005 after staff members visited a high school in Rhode Island to observe how they were working with competencies. After the trip, the administration started the conversation with the faculty during monthly staff meetings. In 2007 the faculty and administration went through the advantages and disadvantages of a competency-based system; and then in 2008 and 2009 started building the competencies within each department. In 2010, after careful consideration, collaboration and confidence in an aligned mission among the entire staff, the school rolled out the competencies, department models, and new grading systems.

Points to Consider

- Teachers were given ample opportunity to meet and look at all the components of a course, and decide together what the enduring knowledge and competencies needed to be.
- District and school leaders focused on shaping conversations so collaborative time was spent moving Spaulding forward rather than backwards.
- Throughout the evolution, school leadership had to understand where stakeholders could be flexible and where they needed to assert “non-negotiables.”

Effective Communication with Families and Students

Communicating the new competency-based system to families and parents was one of the initial struggles Spaulding’s staff had to work through. To overcome the hurdle, they instituted a comprehensive website that offered frequently asked questions on all components of the



competency model (including grading, assessments, rubrics, enrichment opportunities, why the school decided to move towards this change and more). The site also offered video presentations from parent and community meetings, mission statements, competency curriculum guides, newspaper articles covering the community's perspective, and other artifacts from the system.

Beyond using virtual communication, Spaulding educators and leaders held weekly parent forums at various start times to ensure all families were able to attend and voice questions and concerns. The school also held student grade-level forums during homeroom to discuss the changes and hear feedback. The competency-based team also visited the middle school to meet with the eighth graders and present the system and how the experience will differ from their current learning experiences. The competency-based school team made themselves available to answer any questions by email, phone, or in-person meetings.

Families' Top Concerns: How the new grading system would affect the school's highest achieving students, especially in terms of GPA and college acceptance.

Spaulding's solutions: The school maintained a GPA and class ranking system – specifically, a number value is attached to the competency-based grades. The school's guidance counselors and other staff members also met with New Hampshire colleges to explain Spaulding's transition to a competency model and ensure that this change would not effect a student's admission to a university. Spaulding also updated its profile of the school to include the new competency model.

Spaulding Resources

Spaulding's Competency-based Learning Guide for families: http://www.rochesterschools.com/SAU/district/ParentGuide_Pamphlet13-06-11.pdf.

Spaulding Reading List

Off the Clock: Moving Education From Time to Competency by Rose Colby

Sources:

Spaulding High School Website