Frequently Asked Questions
Competency-based Learning and Competency-based Transcripts

The Rodel Teacher Council Competency-based Learning Advocacy Team developed these FAQs based on a year of research, including discussions with Delaware-based colleges and universities and best practices from other states.

What is competency-based learning? Why do we need to change our current system?
Competency-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students to take control of their educational experience to reach their full potential.

Our current education system is leaving some students behind because it does not prioritize mastering a skill before advancing onto the next one. When students advance from one grade level to the next based on their age, rather than on what they have learned, they are often unprepared for new academic content and/or experience gaps in their learning. More specifically, data tell us that in the current system, low-income students, English learners, students with disabilities, and students of color often face some of the most substantial skill gaps. Our current grading structure can mask student needs, rather than identifying where support—or acceleration—is needed.

Competency-based learning (CBL) offers a better way to convey what students know and can do academically since it provides educators, students, and families a clearer picture of academic progress, and where a student might need extra help. CBL can help mitigate and even prevent gaps in learning from developing in the first place.

In a CBL model, students advance onto new course material only once they’ve demonstrate proficiency in a given subject matter. Rather than receiving an average grade covering a range of topics within a subject area, students get evaluated throughout the school year in order to showcase their mastery.
This evaluation of learning happens through engaging, ongoing feedback from educators. CBL builds transparency into the grading process and ensures students are getting personalized supports based on their needs. Learn more about competency-based education here.¹

**Which districts or schools are currently making this shift (in Delaware and beyond)?**

In Delaware, several elementary and middle schools are exploring CBL. For example, Colonial School District and First State Montessori Academy are both implementing CBL in kindergarten through second grade, and kindergarten through eighth grade, respectively. Colonial School District will be expanding to third, fourth, and fifth grade over the next several years. Las Americas ASPIRA Academy uses competency-based learning to track student growth in reading (see right photo). Using competency-based learning, students only progress to a new unit once they are proficient in their current one.

Appoquinimink School District and Caesar Rodney School District have also explored competency-based learning models. In addition, several schools and districts, including Brandywine School District, are implementing standards-based grading, a similar model to CBL.

Nationally, many school districts and even entire states have begun implementing CBL. For example, in Maine a student’s high school transcript is required to show not just completion of course, but also proficiency within that course.²

According to CompetencyWorks, over 30 states (including Delaware) have a policy for CBL in local schools and/or districts.³ Delaware’s policy allows local school boards to decide if schools can award credit based on mastery to support pilots of competency-based learning.

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How would CBL change grading and reporting?

Today, most students receive letter grades based on assessments covering a wide range of topics and skills within a subject. At the end of the school year, students are handed an A-F grade for the entire subject, with little transparency on what topics the student excelled at, and ones they need work on.

Using the CBL model, students learn a specific topic within a subject area and have to show mastery over that topic before moving on to the next. Reporting student progress shifts away from averaging everything covered in class into a letter grade and toward ongoing, meaningful assessments that show student progress and growth in specific skill areas. It provides students a chance to re-learn and re-assess material in real-time until they demonstrate mastery.

Reporting looks like the photo to the right, where students, parents, and educators can see exactly what a student knows and can do within a subject. In this sample, students are graded on a scale of 1.0 to 4.0 on each of the various topics within math, in addition to an overall score for how they did in the course. This allows students and parents to monitor their progress alongside teachers. Ultimately, students are less likely to develop skill and/or knowledge gaps.

For some myth-busters of grading and reporting using the CBL model, check out this Competency Works article.⁴

How are competency-based transcripts different from traditional transcripts?

CBL transcripts often differ significantly from traditional transcripts. Click here to see examples.⁵

A CBL transcript often serves as a student portfolio, with information on academics, extracurricular activities, work experience, and the school’s specific learning standards. This information showcases aspects of students’ academic experiences (and a school’s teaching and learning philosophies) that traditional transcripts might not capture. For example:

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Traditional Transcript | Competency-based Transcript
---|---
**GPA** | Some include GPA and class rank
**Class Rank** | Academic abilities displayed through individual concept and subject mastery
**A-F Grade on each subject** | Competency shown through interdisciplinary achievement
**Advancement based on knowledge of separate academic disciplines** | Details school's learning standards (curriculum and grading context)

### Academic Indicators

### Indicators related to behavior, communication, and other social and emotional skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Transcript</th>
<th>Competency-based Transcript</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some include effort or behavior grades.</td>
<td>Habits of work (attendance and participation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some include attendance</td>
<td>Details on student's communication and problem-solving skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student behaviors and attitudes (e.g. a love of learning; intellectual curiosity)</td>
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**Will a competency-based transcript hurt a student's ability to apply to college?**

All of Delaware's higher education institutions have announced that applicants with competency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in their admissions processes. Other colleges and universities nationwide have made similar announcements; for example, the [New England Secondary School Consortium](https://www.newenglandssc.org/resources/college-admissions/) has catalogued public statements from 75 New England colleges and universities supporting CBL.  

Most colleges receive a variety of transcripts from a multitude of students and schools, including traditional high school students, home-schooled students, transfer students, international students, and other non-traditional students. In other words, as long as the transcript is transparent and coherent, there should be no issue evaluating its content for admission.

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How would this effect class rank and GPA for high school students?

Schools can still report measures such as class rank and GPA for students, both of which are widely requested by college admissions. In addition to these measures, CBL transcripts offer a more meaningful look at what students know and can do as well as their interests.

In the shift to competency-based learning, what is the role of Delaware’s...

- **Higher Education Institutions**: Publicly signal to K-12 districts that students with a competency-based transcript will be considered with equal merit as traditional transcripts, and the students will not be disadvantaged in gaining admission. Students, parents, and educators should know when a Delaware college or university receives a CBL transcript, they take the time to review and understand it.

- **Schools and Districts**: Train and coach teachers on implementation of competency-based learning. Communicate with parents and students about the shift so they are prepared and included. Connect existing standards and curriculum to CBL systems and practices. Invest in technology and other resources to support the shift. Modify high school transcript and grading systems to emphasize academic mastery, and collaborate with college admissions officers, business leaders, and other stakeholders to ensure the transcript is a helpful tool in determining college and/or career readiness.

- **State Department of Education and State Board of Education**: Continue to support additional opportunities for CBL implementation. This could include technical assistance, updating grading and reporting systems, communications, and graduation requirements. Provide innovation funds and flexibility to support schools and districts with start-up costs while they make the transition to CBL.

- **Educators**: Help develop school-level approaches to CBL by developing awareness of what it is and what it could mean for teachers and students. Request opportunities for training and toolkits for implementing CBL.

- **Parents**: Talk to teachers and school leaders about the benefits of CBL and get involved in spearheading its implementation.

For more information and resources, [click here](#).