



## 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.

	Time-Based Education	Competency/ Mastery-Based Learning
ADVANCEMENT	Age and grade levels	Mastery
COMPETENCIES	Variable	Explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives
ASSESSMENT	May feel punitive for students	Meaningful and a positive experience
FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT	After-the-fact	Timely, ongoing support and feedback
LEARNING OUTCOMES	Little or no ability to advance based on mastery of standards	Emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge

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](#).<sup>1</sup>

**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.

RI.3.1		Unit 2 S...ion 8	Unit 2 S...ion 10
Students	MOST RECENT	U4 EX:4 P:3 PG:2	U4 EX:4 P:3 PG:2
Student 1	PROFICIENT	3	3
Student 2	BEGINNING	1	1
Student 3	PROFICIENT	2	3
Student 4	PROFICIENT	1	3
Student 5	PROFICIENT	1	3
Student 6	PROFICIENT	3	3
Student 7	PROFICIENT	3	3
Student 8	PROGRESSING	3	2
Student 9	PROFICIENT	2	3
Student 10	PROFICIENT	2	3

*MasteryConnect student progress tracker, from Las Americas ASPIRA Academy*

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.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> CompetencyWorks. (2016). What is Competency Education? Retrieved from [https://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CompetencyWorks\\_ReachingTheTippingPoint\\_WhatIsCompetencyEducation.pdf](https://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CompetencyWorks_ReachingTheTippingPoint_WhatIsCompetencyEducation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CompetencyWorks. (2016). Update on Main’s Proficiency-based Diploma Policy. Retrieved from: <https://www.competencyworks.org/policy/update-on-maines-proficiency-based-diploma-policy/>

<sup>3</sup> CompetencyWorks. (2016). Updated: Competency-based Education Across America. Retrieved from: [https://www.competencyworks.org/resources/competency-based-education-across-america/?x=0&y=0&\\_sf\\_s=map+of+schools+implementing+](https://www.competencyworks.org/resources/competency-based-education-across-america/?x=0&y=0&_sf_s=map+of+schools+implementing+)

### 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](#).<sup>4</sup>

### How are competency-based transcripts different from traditional transcripts?

CBL transcripts often differ significantly from traditional transcripts. [Click here](#) to see examples.<sup>5</sup>

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 schools' teaching and learning philosophies) that traditional transcripts might not capture. For example:

MATHEMATICS MEASUREMENT TOPICS	
Algebra: Expressions, Equations and Inequalities	4.0
Applications of Graphs	4.0
Conic Sections	3.5
Derivatives	3.5
Exponential and Logarithmic Functions	4.0
Functions, Graphs, Limits	3.5
Geometry: Coordinate Systems	4.0
Inference	3.5
Integrals	3.5
Sequences and Series	4.0

3.75

ELA MEASUREMENT TOPICS	
Language Acquisition: Use of Language	3.5
Language Conventions: Sentence Structure	3.5
Reading: Informational: Craft and Structure: Author's Purpose	3.0
Reading: Literature: Craft and Structure: Plot	3.0
Reading: Literature: Craft and Structure: Point of View	3.5
Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: Characters	3.0
Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: Theme	3.5
Writing: Research: Research Process	3.0
Writing: Types and Purpose: Informative/Explanatory	3.5
Writing: Types and Purpose: Narratives	3.5
Writing: Types and Purpose: Opinion/Argument	4.0

3.36

Sample competency-based transcript from [KnowledgeWorks](#)

<sup>4</sup> Stack, B. (2016). Separating the Facts from the Myths in the Competency-based High School Transcript. CompetencyWorks. Retrieved from: <https://www.competencyworks.org/understanding-competency-education/separating-the-facts-from-the-myths-in-the-competency-based-high-school-transcript/>

<sup>5</sup> KnowledgeWorks. (2018). High school Sample Competency-based Transcript.

	Traditional Transcript	Competency-based Transcript
Academic Indicators	GPA  Class Rank	Some include GPA and class rank
	A-F Grade on each subject  Advancement based on knowledge of separate academic disciplines	Academic abilities displayed through individual concept and subject mastery  Competency shown through interdisciplinary achievement  Details school's learning standards (curriculum and grading context)
Indicators related to behavior, communication, and other social and emotional skills	Some include effort or behavior grades.  Some include attendance	Habits of work (attendance and participation)  Details on student's communication and problem-solving skills  Student behaviors and attitudes (e.g. a love of learning; intellectual curiosity)

### 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](#) has catalogued public statements from 75 New England colleges and universities supporting CBL.<sup>6</sup>

[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.<sup>7</sup> In other words, as long as the transcript is transparent and coherent, there should be no issue evaluating its content for admission.

<sup>6</sup> New England Secondary School Consortium. (2016). College Admissions. Retrieved from: <https://www.newenglandssc.org/resources/college-admissions/>

<sup>7</sup> CompetencyWorks. (2017). Much Ado About Mastery-based Transcripts: What Schools Need to Know and What They Can Do. Retrieved from: [https://www.competencyworks.org/resources/much-ado-about-mastery-based-transcripts-what-schools-need-to-know-and-what-they-can-do/?x=0&y=0&\\_sf\\_s=transcripts](https://www.competencyworks.org/resources/much-ado-about-mastery-based-transcripts-what-schools-need-to-know-and-what-they-can-do/?x=0&y=0&_sf_s=transcripts)

### **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.](#)