Competency-Based Learning Puts Students at the Center. It's Perfect for Now.

By Donna M. Neary   Sep 1, 2020

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Twenty-year-old Asmaa is an example of how constant change and upheaval were hallmarks of the previous school year. A student of mine in an accelerated program for new arrivals to the U.S., in just over 10 months, she became a wife, mother and a high school graduate. Then COVID-19 catapulted education into crisis mode, forcing her and all students and teachers into at-home learning situations across the world.

Access to computers and Wi-Fi at home was woefully inadequate. Districts distributed devices and internet providers allowed free connections. But even with that assistance, families reported lack of adequate resources; my student Ismail's family was issued only one device for seven siblings to share. Older students employed as essential workers, at grocery stores and warehouse distribution centers, lost significant learning time. Mandated school closures and movement to remote learning —or Non-traditional Instruction as it is termed here in Kentucky—was quickly revealing the stark inequities for learners across the country and in our district.

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Asmaa, Ismail and their peers in public education were caught in the perfect storm of school closures and an unplanned and awkward move to online learning. The transition to nontraditional instruction required educators to consider not only students' access to technology and instructional materials, but of adequate food and necessities often provided by schools.

Just as school terms were ending in the U.S., protests erupted across the country around police violence against Black people and people of color in reaction to the murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ky. The protests collided with the pandemic to magnify the inequities of public education like nothing else in recent times. The disparity of learning during the pandemic and the recognition of the ongoing systemic racism in our schools laid bare the problems with public education. Students and public education stakeholders across the country began asking what must be done, finally, to confront and correct the issues of equity in public education.

One solution my district is beginning to explore is a competency-based learning system, and I am on a team of teachers and administrators working for the change. For various reasons, school districts have been slow to shift from the traditional seat-time systems of education to a more modern model that heralds personal learning. The CompetencyWorks initiative of the Aurora Institute (formerly iNACOL) is a leader in this area, advocating to replace what they view as outdated structures and pedagogies. Their definition of competency-based education is based on empowering students with agency, providing relevant and timely assessments and feedback and providing personalized learning with varied pacing. It is a model where students "progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time," and it asks schools to develop strategies for ensuring equity for all students almost as a precondition.

I fully support the model and know it works after piloting a competency based learning program for the past few years. Students often came into my program from all over the

world with limited English language skills in their late teens, which makes them at risk for aging out of earning a traditional high school diploma. Yet my students' successes indicate that the conditions that often make school difficult for marginalized students —such as required minutes per course, attendance requirements, traditional testing— are neutralized or at least equalized in a competency-based system. Learning begins from a position of strength by capitalizing on existing knowledge. And what students already know is wildly personal and specific to their life experiences. In one instance, an immigrant-origin student stepped in as the foreman overseeing the construction of an earthen oven at an urban farm where we were learning. He didn't learn that from me.

During the past three years, our team navigated schedules, course credits and standards as an outlier program in a traditional system. The successes of students in the program were the result of the work we had done around equity, developing a strong classroom culture and providing evidence of student mastery. Instead of letting a curriculum or standardized test dictate learning, teachers incorporated student choice when deciding how much time and space (within a managed framework) to commit to individual standards, content and skills development. This meant students' learning was personal, and hopefully meaningful and sustained.

Students embraced the agency provided and developed as self-activated and self-governing individuals. Moving the students to the center of their learning, instead of the teacher, increased participation, engagement, completion of assignments and built a dynamic, inquiry-based classroom culture. We found that focusing on learning as the constant and time as the variable accelerated student learning by providing time and space to focus and drill down into content and concepts across the curriculum. Curriculum maps were influenced by the students, not the calendar, and served their needs as learners.

This year continues to bring change and throw curves, as the district relocated our competency-based program to our newcomer school, where English learners are first placed in our district before transferring to other schools after a few semesters. I opted to remain at my school—where our enrollment of English learners, immigrants and

refugees continues to hover at one-fourth of the total enrollment—to teach students in 9-12 grade social studies. And I am making lemonade of lemons by taking full advantage of the current reality of Non Traditional Instruction to capitalize on the fluidity of virtual teaching time to focus on student mastery of content and skills in social studies.

Seeking effective and accessible ways to accelerate learning for students is of vital importance as the world confronts a pandemic that is negatively impacting student learning, and the likelihood of other pandemics or events that may impact the length of the school year. Critically, providing systems of learning that value each learner, support and promote their development and operate as anti-racist are non-negotiable.

As I've learned, it is past-time for the removal of arbitrary time-constraints, such as Carnegie minutes, as the driving factor in learning. Instead, shifting the focus to *what*students are learning, rather than for how long, will free teachers and students to operate in dynamic real and virtual learning spaces. My teaching experience and students' successes clearly illustrate that the traditional system is fraught with obstacles for marginalized students. Non Traditional Instruction is showing that districts all over the world are capable of quickly devising new strategies. When will stakeholders in education demand a long-term solution to the inequities and anomalies of traditional education systems? Now seems like the right time.

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