

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: March 17, 2015

Published in Print: March 18, 2015, as **What's Good for New Hampshire**

Competency-Based Education Is Working

By **Ronald A. Wolk**

The rollout of the Common Core State Standards has been bumpy, to say the least. Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia rejected the common core from the outset. Oklahoma and Indiana have withdrawn from it, and at least another half-dozen states are under political pressure to do so. If a majority of students fail the new tests this spring—as many predict—an angry public backlash could delay or derail not only the new standards, but also the decades-long effort to improve the nation's public schools.

With the recent election of new governors, legislators, and state schools chiefs, and the 2016 presidential race already underway, the debate is likely to heat up. Despite the opposition, the common core is likely to survive simply because the longtime advocates of standards-based accountability are too determined and too powerful to retreat at this point. Whether it will succeed is another matter.

So the crucial question is how to make sure that the common core achieves its main goal of improving student learning. New Hampshire may well be the state that has the best chance of doing that. It has established a competency-based education system, or CBE, which translates the new standards into actual skills. Students will take the Smarter Balanced test—one of the two main common-core assessments—but the results will be for gathering helpful data only. They will not count toward student promotion or graduation.

In the book he co-authored, ***Off the Clock: Moving Education From Time to Competency*** (Corwin 2012), Frederick J. Bramante, a former chair of the New Hampshire state school board, a former science teacher, and a well-known businessman, describes how the little Granite State came to be a model for the nation. In 2005, he called his first board meeting to discuss the state's minimum-standards regulations. When the question of the school calendar came up, Mr. Bramante asked whether 180 days and 5.5 hours were "magic numbers."

After a brief discussion, the board decided to define a school year by simply multiplying 5.5 by 180. This translated into 990 hours of

**“Establishing a
competency-based**

instruction, which the board members decided could "be defined any way a school determined it be structured."

Then, Mr. Bramante asked an even tougher question: Why, as stewards of the public school system, were they giving credit to students for the successful completion of gym class, but not for their participation on the gymnastics team? The board approved the idea, but was silent when Mr. Bramante suggested credit for participating in a community-sponsored gymnastics team.

education system is a better option for states than abandoning the common core or modifying the existing standards and assessments."

"What do we care more about?" Mr. Bramante asked. "That the school is the firsthand deliverer of the learning experience, or ... that our students learn the desired lessons and skills, regardless of the source of the learning?" He continued his Socratic dialogue: Should a student get music credit for playing in the school band? What if the student plays in the local symphony?

"What if the student played in a rock band?" Mr. Bramante asked. After a minute of awkward silence, one board member spoke up: "I'll tell you how I could buy into this. The student goes to the music teacher and says, 'I want to get my music credit playing in a rock band.' The teacher responds, 'OK, let's put a plan together to make this happen.'" In this ideal scenario, the board member explained, the student would grasp the connection between the rock-band experience and the state's music standards. The board agreed that with the teacher's support, the student would understand the seriousness of the undertaking, the required teacher oversight, the expected results, and the process of assessment.

Mr. Bramante acknowledged that the same approach could be taken with "every single subject."

Ultimately, this conversation led to the elimination of the century-old credit-hour measurement—the Carnegie unit—and the move away from seat time to competency mastery. "In that one meeting," Mr. Bramante wrote in his book, "we concluded that we didn't care where, when, or how students learned, only that we hold them to high standards before blessing them for credit."

New Hampshire's revised standards exchanged the Carnegie unit for the demonstrated mastery of course-level competencies. The state also specified that students should receive a rigorous, personalized education, which would pave the way for educators and community leaders to develop new high school delivery models.

Iowa and Ohio have also established competency-based education systems (with Mr. Bramante's help), and the movement is gaining momentum nationally. The Council of Chief State School Officers, perhaps recognizing that CBE offers the best chance for the success of the common core, has developed a **road map to encourage and guide states**.

Establishing a CBE system is a better option for states than abandoning the common core or modifying the existing standards and assessments. That would be a step backward. It is also preferable to implementing the common-core standards and having to lower the grading scale so that most students reach "proficiency" on the new assessments. That would be like running in place.

But competency-based education is not a silver bullet. It will take courage, wisdom, patience, and a lot of work to make it successful.

States will have to address tough issues, like the inherent contradictions in aligning mastery of competencies to the common standards for a diverse group of student learners and using high-

risk standardized tests to assess learning. To succeed at the grassroots level, states will have to make a concerted effort to help and support schools as they move from a system of seat time to mastery. School districts will have to ramp up professional development for principals and teachers.

A visit to a random sample of New Hampshire's public schools quickly reveals that the promise of CBE has yet to be fulfilled. Many principals and teachers are still struggling to understand and incorporate the idea of mastery learning. The culture of the traditional school is deeply embedded and stubbornly resistant to big changes. And most students have yet to realize the extraordinary opportunities available to them in a system that recognizes such learning flexibility.

And yet, CBE is having a positive effect on a growing number of New Hampshire schools. More and more students are earning credit for supervised internships and community projects. A **2013 study by the Alliance for Excellent Education** of two New Hampshire high schools found significant declines in the dropout rate, school failures, and disciplinary problems, and increases in student engagement and learning. Students said their work was more challenging and their interactions with teachers more rewarding.

And New Hampshire now **ranks third in the nation** on the 13 indicators that make up *Education Week's* Chance-for-Success Index, which captures lifelong learning opportunities, from early childhood through K-12 to higher education and work.

Despite an unprecedented effort since the early 1980s, there has been little progress in improving schools and closing the achievement gap. In 2015, some 50 million students remain trapped in a system designed for 1915. The people who make and carry out policies governing public education owe it to students, teachers, and parents to answer Fred Bramante's question: Is it more important to hold on to an outmoded learning method than to offer new pathways for how, when, and where students learn?

Ronald A. Wolk is the founder and former editor of Education Week and the chair emeritus of the board of its nonprofit publisher, Editorial Projects in Education. He is also the former chairman of Big Picture Learning, a nonprofit organization in Providence, R.I., that creates innovative schools, and the author of Wasting Minds: Why Our Education System Is Failing and What We Can Do About It (ASCD, 2011). The views expressed in this Commentary are his own.