

# Does the future of schooling look like Candy Land?

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MANCHESTER, N.H. — At first glance, the binders incorporating a whole year of learning at the Parker-Varney elementary school in Manchester look a little like Candy Land, the beloved game of chance where players navigate a colorful route past delicious landmarks to arrive at a Candy Castle.

The pathway for kindergarten math displayed on the cover of one binder, for example, begins on a lower left square featuring a giant “20” and the statement, “I can count to 20.” It ends on the upper right with a drawing of a child sporting a humongous smile: “I can fluently add and subtract to 5!” In between are 14 squares representing other essential learning standards.

Last year, like many schools, Parker-Varney navigated months of remote learning, in which standardized tests were disrupted and absences soared. Unlike many, however, Parker-Varney had no need to guess what its students had missed. Teachers used those colorful pathways in a competency-based system to track what each student had learned — and hadn't learned — in real time.

*Binders holding student work display the pathway for kindergarten math, which somewhat resembles the Candy Land board game. Credit: Nancy Walser for The Hechinger Report*

By the last day of school in June, roughly 70 percent of students had mastered 75 percent or more of the math and literacy standards for their grade level, according to the school principal, Kelly Espinola. This fall, students will take up the pathways again, picking up wherever they left off.

As educators reflect on the disruptions of the past two academic years, they're increasingly gravitating toward the kind of personalized, “move on when you're ready” learning being practiced at Parker-Varney.

Once considered a boutique form of education overly reliant on technology, [competency-based education](#) is increasingly seen as a way to solve a host of

problems with traditional schooling, problems that became more apparent when learning went virtual. Traditional school metrics — based on attendance (“seat time”) and meeting a minimal standard in order to move to the next grade — often lead to arbitrary grading practices, uninspiring lessons and a lack of flexibility to support students socially and emotionally, critics say. They argue that challenging students to demonstrate competency on critical concepts only after they are prepared is a better and more motivating way to measure learning, and allows educators to address gaps before they grow over time.

It’s a view that’s catching on.

*“Pre-pandemic, we saw a lot more interest in one-off pilot programs. The pandemic really changed the policy conversation to more systemic shifts.”*

*Lillian Pace, vice president of policy and advocacy, KnowledgeWorks*

The pandemic unleashed “tremendous interest” in revisiting assessments, said Jean-Claude Brizard, president and chief executive officer of Digital Promise, a nonprofit organization that promotes innovation in education. In particular, the [suspension of mandated state testing](#) in K-12 schools in 2020 “accelerated the conversation” about alternative assessments that would help educators personalize learning and focus on students’ long-term success rather than year-to-year progress, as measured by current end-of-year tests.

“There is real appetite for something more whole-child, more comprehensive, more longitudinal, that really informs [teacher] practice,” he said, adding, “Competency-based assessment does a much better job, frankly, of really informing practice.”

And Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the 13,000-member American Association of School Administrators, said he had seen “absolutely a significant increase in interest in competency-based personalized learning that has been driven by the pandemic.”

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Advocates of competency-based education say they believe public opinion is also shifting their way. They point to [a recent national poll](#) showing that 74 percent of voters think the lack of personalized learning in schools is “a problem.”

It’s hard to be sure how voters understand that term, and there’s been little evidence to show that personalized learning improves student learning, in part because of how varied the methods are.

Competency-based education usually goes hand in hand with personalized instruction to ensure that students meet their learning objectives.

*At the Parker-Varney elementary school in Manchester, N.H., students practice core skills together and independently, using competency-based education methods. Credit: Daniel Joseph*

At KnowledgeWorks, a nonprofit organization that works with district leaders, policymakers and others interested in moving to personalized and competency-based education, inquiries from state and district leaders have increased, according to Lillian Pace, vice president of policy and advocacy.

“Pre-pandemic, we saw a lot more interest in one-off pilot programs,” said Pace. “The pandemic really changed the policy conversation to more systemic shifts.”

State leaders from Utah to Michigan to North Carolina are getting more involved in figuring out how to support the expansion of personalized, competency-based learning, she said, although it’s too early to decipher how much of the stimulus money flowing to school districts will go toward these efforts.

Factors driving the uptick in interest include a desire for greater transparency about “where students are” in their understanding of important concepts and for finding ways to engage students in accelerating their learning, said Pace.

*“CBE could be the hardest undertaking that any district or school could attempt to do.”*

*Shawn Rubin, interim executive director of the Highlander Institute*

Such was the case in Manchester, with Parker-Varney’s pioneering use of competency methods being the exception.

Home to the state’s largest school district, with nearly 60 percent of students considered economically disadvantaged, Manchester has consistently performed well below average on state achievement tests. And within a month after COVID sent students home, district leaders realized they couldn’t get a handle on the scope of learning loss that students might be experiencing in its 22 schools.

“It became evident right in April, when we were looking to see ‘What are the competencies, what are the standards that the students missed?’ And we were unable to identify them,” said Amy Allen, assistant superintendent for teaching, learning and leading. They could identify what the teachers had assigned but not what students had learned, she said.

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To help, district leaders turned to Daniel Joseph, a veteran educator and national consultant who has led the design of Parker-Varney’s competency system, and asked him to adapt it for the rest of the district’s K-12 schools. So far, they’ve committed \$400,000 in federal stimulus funds to the multiyear effort.

Beginning in 2018, Parker-Varney teachers met weekly with Joseph to construct the new system. Together, they decided which math and literacy standards to prioritize. For each standard, they created “kid-friendly” performance scales with a series of four learning goals or steps for making progress toward proficiency.

Scales in hand, students confer weekly with their teachers to demonstrate their emerging knowledge in a process called “leveling up.” Teachers record their progress on the scales — ranging from 1 to 4 — in a database that provides a color-coded snapshot of where each student is along the pathways.

*Daniel Joseph, a veteran educator and national consultant, worked with Parker-Varney staff members to design the school's personalized, competency-based system, beginning in 2018. Credit: Nancy Walser for The Hechinger Report*

Reaching Level 3, or proficiency, on a standard is cause for celebration. Students choose from a menu of rewards, including a call home from the principal, an “I Kissed My Brain at Parker-Varney” sticker or — popular among fourth graders — a pajama party.

If a student is not yet at Level 3 — “yet” is an important word in this school — there is time during the rest of the week to work alone, in groups or with the teacher on “just-right” activities designed to get them there, activities drawn from the district curriculum and other resources.

Sometimes there are tears, admits Joseph. “It’s okay to experience failure,” he said. “We say, ‘Oh, you were soooo close,’ then ask, ‘What’s your goal? What’s your strategy?’ We need to teach resilience.”

“The vehicle that drives this is student engagement, not ‘Learn or I’ll hurt you,’ ” he added.

Elissa DeLacey, who has taught at the school for six years, said: “The kids volunteer to assess. They say, ‘I’m ready to level up; I want to level up!’ ”

Rather than compete, students cheer one another on, staffers say.

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Competency-based education requires such dramatic shifts in the way schools typically operate, however, that even advocates see huge challenges to widespread adoption. Carving out time during the day for teachers to collaborate on new practices, working with parents to understand them and sustaining the momentum over the years it takes to implement them rank among the top challenges.

“CBE could be the hardest undertaking that any district or school could attempt to do,” said Shawn Rubin, interim executive director of the Highlander Institute, which has specialized in training educators to implement blended and personalized learning since 2011.

Rubin thinks the pandemic has increased interest, “but overall the work of CBE is still too difficult and the resources/supports still leave too much onus on overworked [administrators] and teachers,” he wrote in an email.

*“Yet” is an important word at the Parker-Varney school, as students work toward various proficiency levels, mastering each before moving on. Credit: Nancy Walser for The Hechinger Report*

Joseph concedes that the work is hard, but his mantra to teachers is to work “smarter, not harder.”

Teachers are motivated to make a change, he said, when they see students taking the initiative to set their own learning goals and see the progress being made weekly.

A morning spent in Jill Tiner’s kindergarten classroom at Parker-Varney just before the school year ended offered a glimpse into the skills required.

First, Tiner led the students, masked and sitting in socially distanced rows, in a series of whole-group activities including an introductory lesson on the “magic e” — which, when added at the end of a word, “tells the vowel in front to say its name, and not its sound.”

*A student demonstrates what he has learned, in a weekly “level-up” conference. Principal Kelly Espinola says parents aren’t told, “Your child isn’t on grade level,” but rather, for example, “He’s one standard behind, but very close. He’s having a hard time telling time, but is great with skip counting.” Credit: Daniel Joseph*

Then she divided the class into small groups for practice. Sprawled on the floor, students matched “magic e” words to pictures, identified opposites and found words that rhyme. Tiner pivoted between keeping the groups on task and helping others at her desk, one on one. With her laptop open to the literacy dashboard for her class, she quizzed one student on letter sounds, then another on letter recognition.

For the most part, teachers have rallied around the new system, although some chose to retire rather than make the switch, according to Espinola, the principal. Behavioral incidents, unlike in some years past, have been “nil.” Parents are more engaged as well, she said.

The pathways are sent home each trimester, and teachers make a note of which standard they are currently introducing, and where the student is on the pathway.

“We don’t say, ‘Your child isn’t on grade level.’ What does that mean?” Espinola explained, saying the aim is to give parents more specifics. “We can say, ‘He’s one standard behind, but very close. He’s having a hard time telling time, but is great with skip counting.’ ”

The response? “They want to help,” said Espinola. “They ask, ‘What kind of activities can we do to support you?’ ”

*This story about [competency-based learning](#) was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for our [higher education newsletter](#).*

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