



# CBL Handbook

Intro to Competency - Based Learning






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# What is Competency-Based Learning?



Think of something you know how to do well—so well that doing it can feel almost automatic: riding a bike, reading a book, cooking your favorite meal, playing an instrument or a sport, repairing a household appliance, sewing a torn garment. How did you learn to do that thing so well? How did you stay motivated to become good at it? What did it take for this skill to become easy, even automatic, for you? If someone asked you to teach them how to do this thing, how would you teach it?

**Competency-based learning (CBL) is a system designed to ensure all students develop the skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. To achieve this goal, CBL aims to mirror how people learn, work, and succeed in the world: it prioritizes agency, encourages adaptability, and reflects the cultures and expectations our students will encounter in the future.**


According to the research organization iNACOL, CBL has **five core elements**<sup>1</sup>:

- **Students advance upon demonstrated mastery, not seat time.**
- **The essential skills we want students to develop (competencies) include explicit, measurable, transferable learning outcomes that empower those students.**
- **Assessment is a meaningful, positive learning experience for students.**
- **Students receive timely, differentiated learning support based on their individual needs.**
- **Learning experiences emphasize application and creation of knowledge, in addition to the development of essential skills and dispositions.**

A CBL environment is designed for relevance and performance, where learners absorb key knowledge and develop essential competencies through authentic practice. Every CBL school has clearly articulated competencies and learning outcomes, which educators use to make decisions about pedagogy, content, and assessments, and which students use to understand what they are working on, what they are working toward, and how they are progressing in that work. Mastery of a competency is based on successful demonstration of learning outcomes. Students in CBL environments have multiple opportunities to prove they have mastered competencies, and time spent on that work is not a factor in assessing mastery.

The power and effectiveness of CBL is evident in the work students produce and the ways they talk about that work. Student work in CBL environments is varied, interesting, and of high quality. It reflects achievement of targeted competencies and learning outcomes while capturing the student's perspective, passion, and prior knowledge. In talking about their work, students articulate how they know that work is high quality and how it contributes to their growth as learners and people. Student work and voice in CBL are the most powerful evidence of CBL's impact.

# The Three Essential Goals of Competency-Based Learning



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<sup>1</sup> Chris Sturgis and Katherine Casey. "Quality Principles for Competency-Based Education." CompetencyWorks 2018. <https://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Quality-Principles-Book.pdf>.

What is the purpose of CBL? What should we be looking for as we learn about and design for CBL? We see three essential goals.

## 1. Agency



**Research in cognitive science has taught us that students learn in a deep, lasting way when they feel ownership and a sense of success in doing complex tasks.** At CBL schools, students make important decisions as part of the learning process, meaning they have voice and choice in what, when, where, and how they learn. In a culture of student agency, students play essential, public roles in both academic and nonacademic contexts. Students routinely present high-quality work in public forums and can clearly articulate the impact of that work on their learning. Students collaborate with educators and/or advisors to design learning pathways suited to who they are and what they need to learn. Students are self-advocates who can articulate visions for their success and design plans for making their visions reality. The role of adults at a CBL school is mentorship and coaching: we guide students in developing the skills they need to drive their learning.

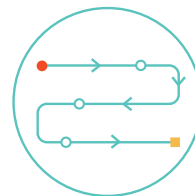
## 2. Equity



**CBL fights systemic inequities in education by meeting all students where they are.** All students are known deeply, empowered to learn, and provided the support they need to meet high expectations. CBL schools nurture a sense of belonging and positive self-concept by prioritizing psychological safety for all students and educators. Academic programs are focused on individualized learning plans, time and space for reassessment, recognition and celebration of students' unique experiences and backgrounds, and development of cultural competency

in all students and educators. CBL's focus on making school a positive experience for all leads to a culture of care with deep student support systems, disciplinary practices that focus on restorative justice, and development of diverse teams of educators.

## 3. Transfer



**Transfer is the ability to extend what has been learned in one context into other contexts.**<sup>2</sup> Like agency, it is an essential component of the rigor that leads to deep learning. Focusing on transfer can significantly impact the design of academic programs, courses, and assessments. Students in CBL schools regularly apply knowledge gained in academic contexts to the issues facing their communities, their lives and families, and the world. CBL schools are thinking differently about time and space in order to support transfer. They build flexibility into schedule, calendar, and physical space to allow for more diverse, complex applications of learning. They take a networked approach, engaging community partners, expert mentors, and other learning organizations to broaden and diversify students' opportunities to transfer their knowledge into new contexts. CBL schools emphasize, celebrate, and support student work that aligns with targeted competencies and represents core values.

<sup>2</sup> Council, National Research. 2000. How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

# Why Competency-Based Learning?



## Education is changing because the world is changing.

The core demand of our global society is that we adapt to, navigate, and create new networks of people and information. The values of "content" and "knowledge" are shifting constantly, and the ability to learn quickly, in a variety of contexts, with new tools, is more important than ever. **The question now asked of us is no longer "What do you know?" but "How do you learn?"**

The role of education has always been to create safe, supportive, engaging learning environments, but what should they look like? The traditional design of school as a time-based, content-driven experience is no longer a fit for the skills-based, quickly-evolving world for which we prepare students. For many students, that model has never been a fit, and it has perpetuated systemic barriers and inequities in school. Adopting CBL recognizes that building lifelong learning skills suited to a modern world in every student should be at the heart of the school experience.

### Why CBL matters to students

**CBL puts the student at the center of the learning experience.** Students in CBL environments know exactly what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how they will demonstrate mastery. They know their school will meet them where they are and help them achieve mastery. They know that their educators and other mentors will give them multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery and that assessments, rather than feeling high-stakes

or punitive, are designed to help them progress. Students often advocate for themselves and defend their ideas and learning. They have significant voice and choice in the learning process. They do high-quality work that matters to them. By absorbing essential content linked to relevant competencies, students develop the cognitive and noncognitive skills they need to continue learning and to succeed in the world beyond school. Above all, they understand the relevance of all of this work to their visions for their own success, which sparks their intrinsic motivation to do challenging work and meet high expectations.



## Why CBL matters to educators

CBL asks educators to be clear and intentional about what and why they teach so that both they and their students will know when the students have mastered targeted skills. The reason for this clarity is:

1. To empower students as active participants in the learning process who can use the same language their educators use to self-assess and advocate for themselves.
2. To establish a common understanding of quality in performance.
3. To align pedagogy to learning goals.

These shared goals drive critical pedagogical and design decisions: What kind of work might students do to meet these goals? What are the different ways to demonstrate a competency and an outcome? How might we structure a class

or a learning experience, given these goals? How might we design daily schedules, yearly calendars, staffing structures, physical spaces, and support systems to ensure every student can meet these goals? These are challenging but critical questions whose answers begin with a shared vision for learning.



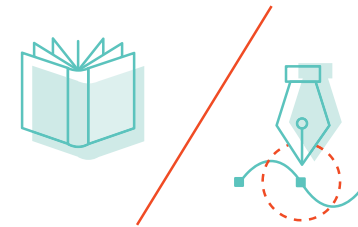
## Why CBL matters to families

CBL looks different from the school experiences of most parents and guardians. However, CBL's core value of knowing each student deeply and ensuring that student's success regardless of background or systemic barriers aligns with families' dedication to their children's success in and beyond school. Research has shown alignment among the key elements of CBL and the skills students need to succeed in college, career, and life. A responsibility of CBL schools is to communicate openly and frequently with families about how CBL supports their hopes for their children's success. **Families support CBL through deep understanding of its value, engaging with the school's work to support CBL, and/or by connecting students to learning experiences and mentors beyond school.**

# What Does Adopting Competency-Based Learning Mean for the Work of Educators?

## Adopting CBL over a traditional school model requires numerous shifts in mindset and practice.

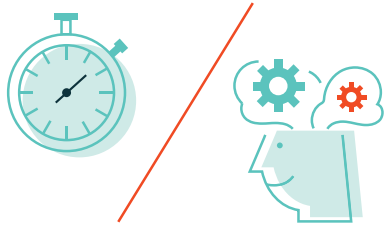
Depending on who you are and the context you work in, you may already have made some of these shifts and found some exciting, others daunting. It's helpful to discuss them openly, then strategize with colleagues how best to tackle them in more depth.



### **SHIFT: From Content-Driven to Skills-Driven**

Rather than organize learning around domains of content, CBL organizes learning around the development of essential competencies. Schools do intentional research and reflection on what they want their graduates to know and be able to do, then they articulate those core competencies to all stakeholders. The schools design backwards from those competencies, identifying evidence of competency development in the form of learning outcomes. This work might reveal incompatibility between current teaching practices and CBL. Investment of time and resources in professional learning is critical at this stage, especially in understanding the relationship between content and skills in CBL. The goal is not to stop thinking about content; rather, decisions about what content to teach and how much to teach should be driven by communal focus on core competencies and learning outcomes. Every student and educator in a CBL school should understand why the content learned is relevant to the competencies and outcomes.





## SHIFT: From Time-Based to Performance-Based

Most schools operate on a time-based system using Carnegie Units: students earn credit for spending a certain amount of time in a course and advance upon accumulating the right amount of seat time. **In CBL, students advance upon demonstrating mastery: their ability to demonstrate that they have learned a skill is more important than the time it took them to learn it.** This shift requires thinking differently about how time is structured at school. CBL schools create more time for student practice and reflection. CBL educators design opportunities for reassessment and prioritize differentiation and individualized support. CBL students collaborate with educators to make learning plans that suit their needs and the learning targets. Exhibitions of learning are common summative assessments that make students the lead explainers and defenders of their learning. Rethinking time in this way is often the most challenging element of adopting CBL.



## SHIFT: From Lessons to Experiences

CBL emphasizes transdisciplinary skills that help students develop cognitive skills (automaticity, literacy, critical analysis, etc.) and noncognitive skills

(resilience, curiosity, compassion, etc.). This more holistic view of learning allows for a broader view of when, where, and how students can demonstrate their learning. Thinking in terms of “learning experiences” rather than “lessons” is a first step toward imagining immersive and varied ways students can practice applying essential content. Students in CBL environments do work both inside and outside of the classroom, they engage with both educators and mentors in their local communities, they perform both traditionally academic tasks and real-world based projects, and they develop expertise both in essential content and in lifelong learning skills.



## SHIFT: From Grading to Feedback

Implied in adopting CBL is a rejection of traditional grading practices, which tend to emphasize summative assessment and sweep various competencies and learning outcomes into a single letter or number. Rather than focusing on calculating and delivering a grade at the end of the learning process, CBL educators emphasize how best to deliver specific, actionable, formative feedback during the learning process, when students can use it. Common CBL practices such as explicit articulation of competencies and learning outcomes in a student-friendly way, use of rubrics as tools for ongoing communication and reflection on learning, and teaching students how to be excellent reflective learners, peer mentors, and givers of feedback are ways to focus on the learning process, not product. Questions of how to best synthesize and report on this learning for the purposes of transcript, college admission, employment, etc., abound in the field—one unresolved issue in CBL that various organizations are tackling (see FAQs).



## SHIFT: From Educator-Designed to Co-Designed

Traditional school environments favor the educator. **CBL environments use their defined learning goals to engage students as equals and/or leaders in the learning process.** Students with agency feel empowered to advocate for themselves and their learning. CBL offers students more voice and choice in assessments and positions students as potential co-designers of learning experiences. If we all have a deep, shared understanding of our learning targets, what's to stop us from collaborating with students on imagining the kind of work they can do to meet those targets?

**What will not shift in the move to CBL is the importance of relationships in the learning process.**

To best support students' unique paths to deeper learning, we must know those paths deeply. We know from research that a student's connection to a educator, mentor, or other adult significantly impacts that student's learning. Sparking intrinsic motivation is essential to CBL's success, and guiding students toward finding inner passion and purpose is already a critical element of school life. CBL takes what so many educators already excel at — forming meaningful relationships with students — and asks us to explicitly tie that skill to the learning process.

# What Might a Competency-Based School Look Like?



A CBL school articulates its shared purpose and values in the form a community-wide Graduate Profile and/or core competencies. For instance, here are **GOA's six core competencies**, which are the skills we want all students to practice, no matter which course they take.



**1**  
Collaborate with people who don't share your location.



**2**  
Communicate and empathize with people who have perspectives different from your own.



**3**  
Curate and create content relevant to real-world issues.



**4**  
Reflect on and take responsibility for your learning and that of others.



**5**  
Organize your time and tasks to learn independently.



**6**  
Leverage digital tools to support and show your learning.

# Leading Competency-Based Learning at Your School



**These core competencies serve two functions:**

1. To communicate clearly what we want students to know and be able to do as part of any GOA experience (Graduate Profiles can serve the same purpose).
2. To serve as models for educators to articulate additional competencies relevant to their work with students.



## All educators are leaders of people, regardless of their roles.

As with any significant change, adopting CBL needs people who will step forward to communicate and model new ideas, new approaches, and new questions raised by this mode of learning. To lead CBL at school, we believe leaders need to focus on four areas:



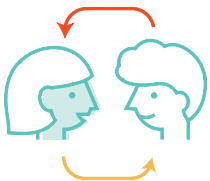
### 1. Vision

Have a clear, aspirational rationale for taking on this work. Have a vivid, context-specific idea of how your school will be better as a result of this change.



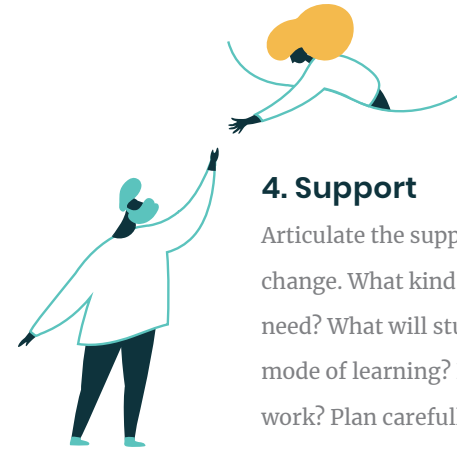
### 2. Research

Know the most relevant research not just on CBL, but on learning (see “Further Reading” at the end of this handbook). Translate what you learn from research into concrete strategies, practices, and ideas that work for your community.



### 3. Communication

Talk openly about your vision with students, families, and colleagues. Emphasize the work’s relevance to each stakeholder. Share your work-in-progress in open forums. Acknowledge that change can be challenging by sharing and reflecting on your own process.




### 4. Support

Articulate the support people need to join you in making this change. What kind of professional learning will educators need? What will students need to become accustomed to this mode of learning? How might we educate families about this work? Plan carefully and generously for the time required to do this important support work.

Whether you work primarily in the classroom or as an administrator, be sure to explore the “Strategize” section of the Activities Guide. These are ways to explore how CBL will fit in your community.

# Four Myths about Competency-Based Learning



## **Myth 1: CBL is self-paced learning.**

CBL is personalized to the individual student, but that does not mean students learn alone and rarely collaborate. Think of time as a precious resource: CBL asks schools to use their articulated competencies and learning outcomes to ensure time is allocated in a way that supports mastery. Rather than always asking students to move in cohorts (by class, by grade level, by academic performance), CBL schools identify clear blocks in their calendars and weekly schedules for students to pursue individual learning targets and passions. Time for meaningful one-to-one interactions with adult guides and mentors is also routine. However, students are also collaborating in learning experiences, sharing and giving feedback on each other's work, and participating in class activities we would recognize in any school (discussion, lecture, group work).

**CBL does not ask schools to simply flip from cohort-based use of time to fully self-paced time: it asks CBL schools to design a more diverse schedule that better suits deeper learning.**

## **Myth 2: Content doesn't matter in CBL.**

Focusing on skills does not mean forgetting about content. Deeper learning requires fluency in relevant content and asks students to develop expertise in content areas as a way to demonstrate important competencies such as research, critical thinking, and literacy. The difference between CBL and more traditional, content-driven education models is that choices about which and how much content are driven by articulated competencies and learning outcomes. If content cannot be aligned with targeted competencies, it cannot be part of the learning experience.

Aligning skills and content usually results in rethinking curriculum, offering students more choice, and integrating a variety of pedagogies into teaching (project-based learning, experiential learning, responsive curriculum, etc.). **Most importantly, when it comes to curating content at a time when the amount of content in the world can feel overwhelming, CBL asks schools to thoughtfully answer the question, “Why?” Why do we expect students to absorb all the same content?** Why do we ask students to learn math (and which elements of math are the most important to learn)? Why do we ask students to read literature (and which authors are the most important for students to know)? Why do we ask students to study history (and must they study certain periods/events)?

### Myth 3: CBL is less rigorous than traditional education.

CBL asks schools to think of rigor in terms of authentic challenge and complexity of tasks, focusing on higher order skills (see Bloom’s Taxonomy) rather than focusing on students absorbing a wide breadth of content. Creating more complex, more challenging learning experiences for students to navigate will necessarily result in sacrificing content coverage for more thorough investigations of certain content. Words like “intensity,” “immersion,” and “deep engagement” are often associated with rigorous CBL experiences. CBL educators often think of learning experiences in terms of case studies, research projects, experiential education, and performance-based assessments, while survey courses and textbook-driven curricula are less often a part of CBL.

### Myth 4: CBL is a restrictive mode of learning.

For some, CBL’s emphasis on pre-articulated competencies, learning outcomes, and rubrics might seem restrictive, limiting student creativity and educator autonomy. CBL’s emphasis on skills rather than content, however, can inspire more varied, interesting work from both students and educators. Competencies and learning outcomes offer clear parameters but leave room for educators and students to interpret what work might be done to meet those targets. In addition, use of rubric formats that de-emphasize points, such as the single-point rubric below, shows students opportunities to exceed learning outcomes. There is a floor, but no ceiling. **How might the below single-point rubric invite diverse, interesting work from students and educators?**

Competency: Communicate and empathize with people who have perspectives different from your own.		
Concerns <i>Areas that need work</i>	Learning Outcomes	Advanced <i>Areas exceeding expectations</i>
	<p>I can communicate in a way that reflects an understanding of the needs and perspectives of my audience.</p> <p>I can articulate my own perspectives and identify the influences on them.</p> <p>I can communicate how cultural, historical, and local factors have an impact on situations, events, issues, or phenomena.</p> <p>I can consider how access to knowledge, technology, and resources influence human interactions and understandings of a situation, event, issue, or phenomenon.</p> <p>I can use communication, analysis, and reflection to show I understand the perspectives of other people and groups and am able to distinguish those perspectives from my own.</p>	

# What Does Competency-Based Learning Look Like? A Day in the Life of Two Students



While there is no one way students go about CBL, here are the stories of a day in the CBL life of two fictional students at “CBL High School,” “Max” and “Avery.” Max and Avery go to the same school, but their days look quite different.

Max	Avery
<b>8 AM</b>	
<p>Max goes to his internship. He is in the midst of “community work.” Every student must spend 6-8 weeks every year embedded in a local business, nonprofit organization, government agency, etc. pursuing an inquiry-based question. Max and two peers are working with a counselor at another local school researching social-emotional learning and its role in academic achievement in middle school students.</p>	<p>Avery meets with her advisor at school. Students meet with their advisors almost daily to articulate learning goals, monitor progress, and reflect on learning. Avery updates her advisor on where she is in pursuit of certain competencies. Foremost on her mind today is a project in biology class: her class is studying a polluted pond in town and preparing an analysis of the water and a proposal for cleanup. Her teacher has created a number of assessments around the scientific method, data collection, and chemical analysis students must master to demonstrate competency. Avery, however, has not yet mastered these assessments, so she and her advisor agree she will use time today and tomorrow to re-attempt and advance.</p>
<b>10 AM</b>	
<p>During a break in his day, Max puts the finishing touches on his team’s presentation for an exhibition of learning later in the day. His advisor has already reviewed the presentation and given him feedback. A group of parents, educators, and community partners will be in the audience – many of them assessing the exhibition – watching community work-study students provide an update on their learning.</p>	<p>Avery is in biology class. The class spent the previous week visiting and taking samples from the pond, and they are now using class time for analysis. During this work, Avery meets 1-1 with the teacher and says she would like to re-attempt the assessments she discussed with her advisor. The teacher suggests Avery revisit relevant content posted in the class’ online learning space and schedule a conference for supplemental help.</p>

## 12 PM

Max has worked with his mentor, the school counselor, to schedule a focus group with middle school students during lunch. His teammates are leading similar groups throughout this research project. Based on his research into social-emotional learning, he has generated a list of questions for the students. He asks them about their stress level, how welcome they feel at school, and how they talk about school with their families. Their insights will be part of his final research.

As soon as her humanities class is over, Avery uses her school's library to go online and revisit the essential content for biology. For at least one hour of every school day, students design their learning time: educators are available for academic support, support staff are available to monitor reassessments, and the library is open for research and study like the kind Avery is doing. After reviewing the content and taking a few practice quizzes, Avery still isn't feeling confident, so she makes an appointment with her teacher for the next day for support.

## 2 PM

Since Max isn't at school every day, he must report on his progress to his advisor and his mentor (the school counselor). He has decided to do this via a blog. He writes a short post that summarizes the focus group and his other work and includes reflections about what new insights or questions he has. He publishes his post and emails his advisor with a reminder to check the blog.

Avery has a video call with her Arabic teacher. A core competency at her school is to learn to communicate in new and different contexts, and Avery has received approval from her advisor to take an online Arabic course as a way to pursue that competency. While her peers are doing community work or are in class, Avery dedicates time every day to this course, sharing with her advisor evidence of her progress, including examples of her work and feedback from the online instructor.

## 4 PM

Max and his teammates arrive at school for the exhibition of learning. He meets briefly with his advisor for final preparations. His presentation includes the competencies his team is pursuing, evidence of their mastered outcomes, and reflections on what they have learned and still need to do for the rest of their community work. Audience members have been given copies of relevant rubrics and asked to provide feedback. Max will do one more exhibition after this one, when his community work ends.

Avery arrives to watch the exhibition of learning. All students not engaged in community work attend these exhibitions to help them create and prepare for their own community work. Avery has already completed an internship at a local bakery where she learned about managing a small business. As soon as she demonstrates competency in biology, humanities, and Arabic, she will be eligible to propose new community work.

## Questions for discussion of these students' days:

- What is appealing to you about the way Max and Avery spend their days? How might their days appear similar/different from the typical day for students at your school?
- What do you imagine the school culture of "CBL High School" to be like? What guiding goals and/or values seem to drive its design?
- What systems or structures do you imagine would need to be in place for both Max and Avery to have successful experiences at this school?



# Competency-Based Learning Glossary



## Competency

An essential skill students need to succeed in the world beyond school. Competencies are research-based and mission-aligned. They are observable skills articulated in student-friendly language. In CBL, core competencies drive decisions about which learning outcomes we want students to master, what kinds of learning experiences and assessments define the student experience, and the systems and structures that define the school environment.

### Example from GOA

**“Curate and create content relevant to real-world issues.”**

## Deeper Learning

The Hewlett Foundation defines deeper learning as thinking critically, solving complex problems, mastering academic content, collaborating and communicating effectively, learning how to learn, and developing academic mindsets.

## Exhibition of Learning

A common form of summative assessment in CBL. An exhibition of learning is a student-driven presentation of work. While exhibitions can take many forms — a defense of a portfolio, an analog or digital publication, a multimedia presentation, a whole-school event — they share a few key traits. First, the students have an audience larger than the educator. Second, the student, in consultation with a educator/advisor, makes the decisions about what work to curate and how to present it. Third, metacognitive reflection — articulating the impact of the work on learning — is an essential element.

## Graduate Profile

What are the skills and traits we want our students to possess when they walk across the stage at graduation? Graduate profiles are distilled from a school's mission and research as a way to organize the entire school community around shared learning goals. They focus on transdisciplinary, relevant skills and/or learning domains. While profiles can take many forms, they share a few core traits: they are visual, memorable (concise, clear, and accessible to all stakeholders) and aspirational.

## Learning Outcome

Evidence of development of a competency. Learning outcomes are more granular, specific actions students can take to demonstrate progress toward mastery of a competency. Educators and students use learning outcomes to build rubrics and assess student work. Often phrased as “I can...” statements, learning outcomes can be transdisciplinary or discipline-specific, depending on the context. A learning outcome essentially reflects an application-based target, not a compliance-related task; it articulates clearly what a student should be able to do as a result of completing the assigned work.<sup>3</sup>

### Example from GOA

**“I can pose an original and researchable question on a local, regional, and/or global issue.”**

## Reassessment

CBL supports a culture of reassessment, meaning students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate competency, often in a variety of ways. Reassessment is not the same as retake. The idea is not to allow students to redo an assessment ad infinitum; rather, it is to acknowledge that students learn and build competency at different rates, so relevant learning outcomes should be reassessed regularly (possibly over the course of several different assessments), and the time it takes a student to master the learning outcomes should not hinder the student's ability to advance.

<sup>3</sup> Berger, Ron, Leah Rugen, Libby Woodfin, and EL Education. 2014. *Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons.


## Rubric

In CBL, rubrics should be designed in student-friendly ways that emphasize the learning to be accomplished rather than the points to be earned. CBL rubrics are used for ongoing communication and reflection on progress toward learning outcomes; they are formative, not summative. Learning outcomes form the basis of CBL rubrics. GOA recommends a single-point rubric as a format well-suited to CBL, though effective rubrics take many different forms.

## Transdisciplinary

Transcending discipline. Unlike “interdisciplinary,” which focuses on mixing or blending disciplines, transdisciplinary refers to ideas, actions or topics that exist beyond purely academic areas. Referring to competencies or other CBL-related terms as “transdisciplinary” emphasizes the need to tie academic content and work to skills that apply to other domains.

# Competency-Based Learning FAQ's



## Q: What are other terms people use for CBL?

**Answer:** In an attempt to capture what this potentially transformative shift in education might look like, a number of terms have arisen in addition to “competency-based learning.” Specifically, “proficiency-based learning,” “mastery-based learning,” and “personalized learning” are often used in tandem with or instead of competency-based learning to explain a system that prioritizes skills-based education. All of these terms refer to a system that tailors learning to the individual and uses demonstration of mastery as the metric for advancement.

## Q: How long does it take to fully adopt CBL?

**Answer:** Unless you are creating a new school based on CBL or are a very small, nimble organization, you should adopt CBL as a long-term, multi-year systemic change — a marathon, not a sprint. Schools often take a year or more to articulate learning goals in the form of a Graduate Profile and/or core competencies. Aligning learning outcomes to competencies and organizing them according to age-appropriate targets and content areas is a similarly complex effort requiring ongoing collaborative work among educators. Once all of these targets have been articulated, designing high-quality learning experiences and deploying them with students should be done thoughtfully to ensure proper time and space for the experiences. Throughout this process, educators and students should give and collect feedback on the competencies, outcomes, and experiences for ongoing iteration.

This work is deeply valuable as professional learning and in building a community of shared values. Beyond simply preparing for a new system, schools who adopt CBL clarify how their values and ideas translate into clear learning goals for students.

## Q: How do I keep track of student progress if all of my students are demonstrating competency and advancing at different times?



**Answer:** It is more difficult to monitor the learning of many students when their learning is individualized and customized. This is part of the reason the industrial model of time-based, content-driven education has endured: it

is highly standardized, thus highly efficient. For CBL to be valid and effective, however, we must develop habits and routines that support clear, consistent tracking of competency development. There is no one way to do this, but there are some core principles:

### **Your students are your collaborators in this work.**

Coach them on how to curate evidence of learning, how to explain its relevance to competencies and outcomes, and how to keep work organized so review can be consistent and efficient.

### **Leverage portfolio-based models.**

Rather than thinking in terms of gradebooks, where numbers or letters are the primary content, think in terms of portfolios, where artifacts of student work can be tagged, labeled, and/or aligned with competencies and outcomes. Assume you will always need to provide evidence to support your assessment, so make sure notations are tied to student work.

### **Leverage technology.**

Tools such as digital portfolios, project management and workflow organizers, collaborative documents and spreadsheets, learning management systems, and standards-based gradebooks can all be used to organize learning.

### **Redesign schedules, but do not eliminate them.**

This may seem counterintuitive, but adopting CBL does not mean self-paced learning (see “Myths”). Rather, it means that personalization drives the design of schedules. Using class time for hands-on practice and coaching instead of mostly for lecture, moving content online to allow students more flexibility in how and when they absorb it, designating time each week for students to advance or reassess, and using gatherings of educators to collaboratively review student work and plan for new experiences are all ways to rethink the use of time to support more flexible learning pathways.

## Q: What systems and structures would have to change at my school to support CBL?

**Answer:** This varies by school, but rethinking the use of time and space is an excellent place to start.

### **Introduce flexibility into your academic calendar to encourage deeper learning.**

CBL schools offer significant amounts of time for students to focus on inquiry-based and/or community-based projects: they pursue one or two pieces of deep work rather than juggle five or six courses at once. We have seen schools that place students outside of the building two or three days a week; that dedicate one or two months of the school year to independent projects; and that use an “intensive” model in which students pursue a single topic over the course of a few weeks.

### **Introduce flexibility into your daily schedule.**

Create more flexible periods of the day when students have the freedom to make choices about what they need to learn, when educators and/or support staff are available for individual coaching, and when students can pursue supplemental

learning, either to revisit assessments or to move ahead. Make time for adults and students to form strong relationships (this often takes the form of a robust advisory program). A focus on agency, equity, and transfer means that a daily schedule should: (1) emphasize students moving more freely and more intentionally than the traditionally regimented movement from class to class; (2) recognize that different students will require different paces and modes of instruction to learn; and (3) recognize that students need more time to complete more cognitively complex tasks.

### Think beyond the classroom.

Rethinking space does not necessarily mean expensive investment in construction projects, but often means breaking down structural silos in your school. For example, offer more opportunities for students to learn outside the building via internships, community partnerships, or expert mentorships. Open communal spaces or shared classrooms for learning experiences led by educators with a variety of expertise to begin to move away from individual educators working in their own classrooms in a content-specific context.

### Q: What is the relationship between CBL and grades?



**Answer:** CBL is grade-resistant. Its focus on fairly representing a diverse set of skills (cognitive and noncognitive) makes assigning a single letter or number to performance almost impossible. Reporting learning in CBL is more often focused on narratives by educators and students, exhibitions of student work, student reflection, and standards-based assessment. That said, many of CBL's elements can be (and have been) used in a more traditional grades-based system.

- Begin with an audit of existing grading practices and policies, analyzing what and how much you grade.
- Grade less. Allow formative assessment and daily activities such as homework to be feedback-heavy but gradeless work.
- Focus on grading learning outcomes rather than compliance and behavior-related tasks (completion, timeliness, attitude, etc.).
- Familiarize yourself with the work of researchers like Thomas Guskey and Joe Feldman (see "Further Reading") to begin shifting away from a 0-100 point grading scale.

### Q: What about transcripts and college admission?



**Answer:** The traditional high-school transcript is a barrier to CBL, as it is designed to report learning in the form of Carnegie Units and grades. CBL schools have created custom transcripts, secured waivers from states and districts to report in a CBL format, and developed advocacy practices for their students with college admissions offices. Such organizations as the Mastery Transcript Consortium are in the midst of work to create a platform that will allow many schools to report learning in a competency-based format. However, the changing of reporting mechanisms such as the transcript is a change to be made toward the end of a transition to CBL: embedding competencies, learning outcomes, and their affiliated assessments into the learning process is more important than, and should happen before, making significant changes to the product you use to report that learning.

## Further Reading



The body of research on CBL is growing rapidly. We recommend starting your deeper study of CBL with this list. We also recommend exploring the research these authors cite in their work.



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