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Competency-based instruction in Concord schools means new grades on reports cards

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Parents of Rundlett Middle School students will see a different sort of report card come home at the end of the quarter.

Like many districts across New Hampshire, and, increasingly, the country, Concord's schools are switching to a competency-based system of instruction that focuses more on proficiency than averages.

Broadly, the idea behind a competency-based education is that students should get credit for what they demonstrate they know – not by the time they sit in class. To do that, subjects are broken down into learning goals – competencies – which students must master.

For example, in math class, students must demonstrate they know how to divide fractions before they move on to the next unit. They are allowed to retake tests if they don't get fractions down the first time, and they also can't move on until they've mastered fractions.

These changes mean new ways of teaching – and new report cards. Because competency-based learning demands that students master individual units of instruction, the thinking goes that you can't give students a single grade for an entire class. Instead, report cards should reflect which individual competencies students have mastered, or not.

As Donna Palley, assistant superintendent for the Concord school district, explains it: "If you went to the doctor and the doctor said that we're going to take your weight, your blood pressure, your temperature, and average them out together for your 'health score' that wouldn't really be that useful for you."

Competency in Concord

Concord's elementary schools switched to a new system of grading last year. A third-grade report card doesn't offer a single grade in Language Arts. Instead, it tells parents whether or not the child "knows and applies rules of phonics to decode grade-level words," and "reads accurately and fluently to support comprehension."

Rundlett is making the switch this year. And Concord High currently uses a hybrid model, where grading is competency-based and then translated to a traditional 100-point class score for parents and colleges.

Palley said the goal is to eventually transition fully to a competency-based model. But the district is moving gradually, in order to get parents used to the idea – especially in high school, where the stakes are much higher.

"It takes awhile for a community to move there. Because it's a big change," Palley said. "Grading systems have had their traditions for a long, long time."

A system in action

Brian Stack is the principal at Sanborn Regional High School in Kingston, where the district began to switch over seven years ago and is now fully competency-based. He's an evangelist for competency education – he even co-authored a book on it, *Breaking With Tradition: The Shift to Competency-Based Learning in PLCs at Work*, that came out last week.

But he concedes the transition is difficult, and not without pushback – especially from parents.

“We always have a subset of parents that don't fundamentally agree with the approach,” he said.

Some would worry, he said, about their children being guinea pigs in a new system, while others would justifiably point out that a particular teacher wasn't implementing the model consistently.

But many parents who pushed back were those whose children – historically high achievers – said they were suddenly struggling in the new model, according to Stack.

“We have a lot of kids who learned how to play the game,” Stack said. “They found a way to be really successful in school without really mastering the skills.”

Competency-based grading, according to Stack, is ultimately better for accountability. Because there's no averaging out how you did in one unit with how you did in another, and no completion grades or extra credit, there's simply no papering over what you don't know.

In his experience, Stack said it's students who have been really successful in traditional models who sometimes flail in the beginning. Kids in the middle do about the same. And kids who have traditionally done badly often see noticeable gains, he said, because teachers are better able to identify where they're struggling.

Other things have changed at Sanborn because of the switch. Stack contrasts competency with traditional models of learning as “measuring kids to a standard” instead of “measuring kids against each other.” And for that reason, the school has de-emphasized ranking students as much as possible. It still does, but only for the purpose of giving rankings to scholarship organizations. And while a valedictorian is still named, that’s not automatically the student who speaks at graduation – that’s whoever submits the best essay, as judged by a panel of teachers.

“To a much lesser degree, admissions officers ask for (rankings), although in most cases it’s not a heavy part of their weight because they’ve started to recognize that a lot of schools don’t like to rank kids any more,” he said.

Admissions

A lot of parents worry about how colleges will receive the new model, and if it could hurt their children’s chances of gaining admission. But administrators say that as competency-based grading has gained ground, colleges have adapted.

Robert McGann, the director of admissions at the University of New Hampshire, said his office routinely sees competency-based transcripts from both in- and out-of-state applicants.

“The context of it is we see transcripts from around the country and around the world. And there’s countless variations on transcripts,” he said.

Whether competency-based or otherwise, it’s important that schools provide admissions offices with the tools necessary to understand their records. And by and large, they do, McGann said. Competency-based transcripts are “not a pro or con in the admissions process,” he said.

“When I talk to my colleagues at different institutions, they uniformly tend to be very supportive of the concept behind it – the idea being that high schools are not going to be moving kids along until they’ve demonstrated a mastery of the topic at hand,” Stack said.

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