

A child wearing a red and white striped hat, a dark green jacket, black pants, and yellow boots is walking away on a dirt path in a forest. The path is covered in dry leaves and twigs. The background shows tall evergreen trees and bare deciduous trees, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The lighting is soft and natural, coming from the side, creating a warm atmosphere.

# The Journey to Mastery

How competency-based learning creates personalized pathways to success for young learners.

By Bob Sornson



**E**very day, educators have the opportunity to shape young lives and help create our society's future. But, as a nation, we have struggled to find ways to boost learning outcomes for many of our students. Decades of school reform have, unfortunately, produced long lists of content expectation and scripted one-size-fits-all instructional programs that have not succeeded in improving national outcomes. Decades of state and national testing have produced data that sort students, schools, teachers, communities, and subgroups into winners and losers, but have not helped to improve the learning outcomes of our most vulnerable students.

There's an emerging educational trend that offers hope: competency-based learning. This approach to teaching and learning offers a fundamental systems change to the way we organize and deliver instruction. Rather than delivering grade-level content to all students in accordance with a pacing guide and a rigid curriculum, competency-based learning identifies crucial learning skills in a developmental sequence. Teachers deliver personalized instruction for these behavioral and academic outcomes. For crucial skills, students are given instruction and practice for as long as needed to develop deep understanding. Students advance and move ahead in the sequence of skills based on demonstration of mastery.

### How It Works

A competency-based learning model is based on simple principles. In it, teachers:

- Set meaningful, clear learning goals for essential learning outcomes;
- Assess student skills and instructional readiness;
- Offer instruction along a sequence of essential skills at the student's readiness level;
- Monitor progress and adjust instruction until these skills and objectives are deeply understood, giving learners the time needed to build competency; and
- Allow students to move on to more advanced learning when they are ready.

Competency is not earned with a letter grade on a one-time test. The goal in a competency-based learning system is complete understanding and the ability to apply any crucial knowledge or skill as needed in school or in life.

### Why the Time Is Right

The pressure to improve test scores has become a driving force within most schools. Our use of one-size-fits-all curricula has produced a lot of anxiety, but very few improved learning outcomes. Teachers struggle to manage behavior and build classroom culture while racing through the curriculum and keeping up with the assessment schedule. Students whose skills are a poor match for the curriculum fall into a pattern of frustration and discouragement. Without the skills to succeed, these students eventually disengage from learning and look for other ways to get attention.

In response, states such as New Hampshire and Maine have transitioned to using a competency

framework in place of traditional Carnegie Units and seat time for high school graduation requirements. Instead of accumulating credits (which may not reflect any durable skills or knowledge), these states have established a clear learning sequence to skills that matter.

Many other states have passed legislation to allow students to earn credit for required classes based on competency, or have initiated study projects to consider the transition to competency-based learning systems. Scores of universities also have moved toward competency-based learning systems.

### Competency and Early Learning

During the early childhood learning years—preschool through grade 3—competency-based learning can be used to help young students gain the learning experiences that set a positive trajectory for lifetime learning. High-quality early learning programs support social and emotional skills, which correlate with lower rates of drug use and criminal behavior, along with more stable relationships and improved earning power. Effective early learning programs support the development of academic skills that predict long-term learning success and improved work opportunities.

To support competency-based learning in preschool and primary grade classrooms, my organization, the Early Learning Foundation, has developed the Essential Skill Inventories as a competency framework. Preschool, kindergarten, and grades 1-3 have separate inventories that list behaviors and learning skills that are crucial for long-term learning success. Focusing on the whole child, the inventories track development



## REFLECT ON THIS

To introduce competency-based learning, reflect on where your school stands with learning outcomes and competence.

- How do we approach academic rigor?
- Do our teachers have clear standards for student learning?
- What is the difference between “coverage” and competency?
- Where might one-size-fits-all learning programs be falling short for students?
- How do we support students who have fallen behind?

of essential skills in oral language, sensory motor skills, behavior and self-regulation, self-care, phonologic skills, literacy, and numeracy.

The Essential Skill Inventories are not a curriculum or a set of content standards that should be “covered.” They are a competency framework that can be used along with any quality curriculum or learning materials.

### Inside a Competency-Based Classroom

In a competency-based early childhood classroom, the teacher has a clear set of non-negotiable learning outcomes for every student. These are the outcomes for which “coverage” is not enough. Some students may already have a skill before ever coming to school, while other students may be developing at a different rate or with different opportunities for learning in the home. In a competency-based classroom, we accept the fact that students come to us with differing levels of readiness. For any of the essential skills, we promise to give kids the instruction they need, at their level of readiness, for as long as needed to develop complete and absolute proficiency.

Using a competency-based system, teachers collect baseline data as they get to know their students, and then use observational formative assessment to continually update data throughout the school year. Educators use this information to know precisely which kids need more time or instruction to develop each essential skill. By analyzing weekly data,

teachers will know which students are struggling with a skill, which students are developing normally but are not yet proficient, and those who are fully ready to move forward to more advanced learning challenges. With this information, the teacher can plan small

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groups, centers, or any type of instruction that specifically matches the needs of each student.

For instance, in kindergarten, there are four numeracy skills determined to be crucial foundational skills that must be well-learned to allow students to understand higher-level math skills. One of the four skills is: *Recognizes number groups without counting (2 to 10)*. To achieve competency in this skill requires that a student be able to look at any ordered display of items (like dots on a die or domino) and quickly name the value, without having to slow down and count the dots. This skill is often referred to as subitizing.





Proficiency for this subitizing is demonstrated by the student’s ability to quickly name any set of objects representing a number value from two to 10. They must be able to do this on three or more days, using three or more differing activities, materials, or learning contexts, consistently for at least a couple of weeks. Only then should the student be given the status of proficient for this skill. The teacher might observe a student while he or she is engaged in a small group learning activity that includes number patterns on a domino on one day, using patterns on a paper plate on a different day, and using an abacus on a third day. The teacher will observe that the student can easily manage to recognize the value of any group up to 10, with complete accuracy, even with distractions around her. In certifying that this student is competent, the teacher is using her professional judgment that the skill is well-learned to the degree that this student will never unlearn or forget how to subitize.

A few children come to kindergarten already knowing how to subitize. Others will learn it during a planned two-week math unit; other students might take months to develop this skill to proficiency. In the competency-based classroom, the teacher recognizes this developmental variance and gives students what they need, at an appropriate instructional level, for as long as needed. Because the teacher is aware of the skill level of each student in relation to any essential math skill, he or she is able to refine instructional plans weekly or daily to ensure that within the year, almost every student will achieve true competency for these essential skills, and many will progress to even more advanced levels.


### The Principal’s Role

Principals are crucial to the successful implementation of a competency-based early learning initiative. For decades, we have trained teachers to cover a lesson and then move forward in the curriculum. We’ve emphasized keeping up with the pacing guide and “covering” all the Common Core State Standards. We’ve required teachers to use standardized assessment data to prove that students had successfully learned content or skills.

The transition to competency-based learning requires instructional leadership and consistent support from principals. In monthly data meetings, principals should review:

- Which skills/domains the teachers assessed each week;
- How teachers were able to embed observational formative assessment into daily instruction;
- Which students moved from developing to proficient status;
- How proficiency/competency was noted through multiple observations using a variety of learning materials;
- Which students still need extra instructional time to achieve grade-level objectives; and
- Which students have moved ahead to above grade-level learning goals.

For most educators, using a competency model is new and challenging. When introducing competency-based learning to staff, principals would be wise to take small steps. Recommend books and articles, download and share free resources at [earlylearningfoundation.com](http://earlylearningfoundation.com), and consider tackling the subject in a book club. Find teacher leaders who can help you plan next steps and build a strong consensus for a systems change toward competency.

Continued reliance on the time-limited delivery of standard instructional objectives for all students won’t realize their learning potential. It is past time for a systems change to a personalized, competency-based learning model. We can choose to give all our students a chance to succeed in their crucial early childhood years. And we can build a model for learning that helps our teachers and our students build the connection between learning and joy. 

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