At KnowledgeWorks, our approach to personalized, competency-based learning is rooted in our belief that all children can learn, should be challenged to take ownership of their learning as individuals and empowered with the academic knowledge and social-emotional skills they need for the future. It’s what good teaching and learning has always looked like.

Here are answers to frequently asked questions, which highlight questions voiced most by all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, community members and students—and we’ve paired them with responses that could spark critical conversations about what personalized, competency-based education offers your learning community.

WHY IS PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING IMPORTANT FOR TODAY’S STUDENTS?

The world has changed, and this changes what students need from their education, and by necessity, how education is delivered. Personalized learning has tremendous potential to address the country’s challenge to achieve equitable educational outcomes for all students. The approach’s emphasis on targeted supports for every student, and attention to individual interests and academic and cultural needs, underscores the importance of closing achievement gaps between students and their peers.
WHAT ROLE DOES THE TEACHER PLAY IN A PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED CLASSROOM?

Relationships drive student learning. Teachers are essential, creating unique opportunities for learning, working with students to create classroom culture, helping students discover their learning styles and working side-by-side with learners throughout the year.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PERSONALIZED LEARNING?

Technology can be a great tool for learning, but it’s not the only one. Some students may prefer project-based work or a computer program, while others prefer pencil and paper. Personalized, competency-based education provides students with the opportunity to learn how they learn best and to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways, rather than just taking a test or writing a paper.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STATE STANDARDS IN A PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

Standards guarantee every student an equal, quality education. It doesn’t matter what the standards are called or who created them. Be it Texas, Maine or Alaska, what is more important is that the state has chosen to use high-quality state-wide standards to ensure consistency in learning among all districts, no matter the tax-base or zip code, ensuring students in low-income and high-income districts are guaranteed a high-quality education.

IS PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION A WORKFORCE MODEL?

Many of today’s students will enter the workforce and fill jobs that have yet to be created. Through personalized, competency-based education, students master core academic content and demonstrate what they’re learning while also developing the social-emotional skills necessary to succeed. Skills like critical thinking, self-awareness and the ability to collaborate will help them no matter what path they choose after high school.

HOW DOES PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION EXIST WITHIN CAREER-READINESS OPPORTUNITIES?

Certifications through career and technical education (CTE) are a great example of how school districts can implement personalized, competency-based learning opportunities for career readiness. Students participating in certification programs, such as Certified Nursing Assistant programs or welding programs, are required to show competency in a number of areas before they are certified in their field. These CTE programs provide opportunities for students to connect their learning with life beyond the classroom, and they make sure learning is relevant and transferable for students in ways that directly benefit their career trajectory.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR STUDENTS TO ADVANCE UPON MASTERY?

Students move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content, not when they’ve reached a point in the school year. In a personalized, competency-based learning environment, a class pace is set by the teacher based on where each student excels and requires support. Students are aware of how what they’re working on contributes to their understanding of the learning targets, and what they need to do to show what they’ve learned and at what level of rigor. There may be some learners who work faster or a little slower, but this more student-centered approach gives the teacher greater understanding as to where each student is, and when supports are needed to advance deeper learning in ways that are empowering and motivating to each learner.
HOW WILL A TEACHER PERSONALIZE LEARNING FOR EVERY SINGLE STUDENT?

A learner-centered classroom doesn’t mean 25-30 individual lesson plans for each student. It’s about developing a student’s agency so they have a voice in their education, choices in how they learn and present that knowledge to others and engagement opportunities to access content in the best way for them. The school day includes instructional time with the teacher and opportunities to work independently, in pairs or with other students. Because their learning targets are transparent, students work with the teacher to determine what they need to accomplish to meet them and how they could show evidence of learning. Learning isn’t a mystery, and students have a greater understanding of what they need to learn and why.

KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With nearly 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with schools and communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what’s next.

Get more resources to help make personalized learning a reality at KnowledgeWorks.org.