



# Ways tracking can and should be replaced by personalized, competency-based learning

Below we lay out a series of 13 comparisons to demonstrate how tracking can and should be replaced with personalized, competency-based learning. We consider this a starter list since there is likely a host of other comparisons and features worth surfacing – we hope you’ll reach out if you think of refinements and additions.

## LOGIC

### TRACKING

Ability is innate, immutable, limits success.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Mastery is incremental, achievable, unlimited.

## STANDARD MODE OF OPERATION

### TRACKING

Use biased standardized tests and teacher recommendations to group and segregate students by perceived ability and behavioral compliance, then implement “**one size fits all**” pedagogies to try to reach and teach the bulk of learners in that track.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Each student receives **customized supports** to remain engaged and challenged while mastering standards and aligned competencies. Personalized student supports allow for all students to be pushed to their potential, regardless of their current level of proficiency.

## RESEARCH BASIS

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### TRACKING

Eugenics, [The Bell Curve](#), racism, classism, fixed notions of “intelligence,” segregation, apartheid, White supremacy.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Agency, motivation, engagement, belonging, growth mindsets, self-determination theory, self-efficacy, expectancy-value theory, self-regulation, culturally-sustaining pedagogy, anti-oppressive pedagogy, border pedagogy, critical race theory, LatCrit, DisCrit, subtractive schooling, deeper learning, zone of proximal development, social learning theory.

## MINDSET

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### TRACKING

**Fixed. Struggle is bad.** It is evidence of insufficient ability, intelligence, commitment or preparedness for success. Struggle demonstrates what a student cannot do. If students struggle in an activity or content area, they may not be cut out for success in that domain. If students need to slow down or re-learn something, that demonstrates they are incapable of learning the material at the pace others may be learning it. Such students will be unlikely to catch up so they should be separated.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

**Growth. Struggle is good.** Struggle is evidence of the edge of the learner’s current competency. Struggle is encouraged not pathologized, and failure is understood to be part of the learning process. Improvement is assured with effort, help, resources, access and time. If a student needs to slow down or re-learn something, that’s normal and expected; it only demonstrates a need to differentiate the learning activity or temporarily change the pace. Students can catch up and take multiple paths toward mastery.

## INTENTION

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### TRACKING

**Secure unearned advantage** for over-resourced students and families. Rank and sort children and youth to provide justification for arbitrary and discriminatory social hierarchies. Provide ample supply of cheap unskilled labor and thereby maximize profits for the elite. Convince individuals that their socioeconomic position is an inevitable and natural consequence of their biology. Present schools as meritocracies.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

**Establish meaningful and equitable opportunities to excel** so all students are prepared to flourish in post-secondary college and career. Inspire mastery of content, commitment to lifelong learning, knowledge of how to learn and proficiency in 21st century skills. Democratize access to opportunity to stabilize schools, communities, the economy and our nation, and reduce status differences that drive social discord. Give all kids a chance at a bright future.

## PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

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### TRACKING

Assessment is for ranking and sorting. To prove which students merit “advanced” or “gifted” labels and which will be given an assortment of low-expectancy **classifications** (“low,” “struggling,” “college prep,” “honors,” etc.).

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Assessment is for learning. To capture what students can do now, and plan for what they will do next to **keep growing** in their competencies.

## PATHWAYS

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### TRACKING

**Ruts** to constrained if not pre-determined and foreclosed post-secondary college and career options.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

**Personalized and open opportunities** to explore interests, demonstrate growth and achieve forms of measurable mastery that are valued in post-secondary college and career settings.

## PACING

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### TRACKING

Keep up with the teacher's or school's arbitrary milestones or fall behind and either receive lowered grades, lose course credit or get diverted to lower tracks.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Learners advance within the learning continua after demonstrating competency in ways that are meaningful, relevant and purposeful to each learner (examples of learning continua [here](#) and [here](#)). When utilizing learning continua, learning is the constant and time becomes the variable.

## ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES

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### TRACKING

Only allocated for "gifted" learners.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

For all students, whenever they need them.

## ACCELERATION OPPORTUNITIES

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### TRACKING

Acceleration and enrichment for the 'gifted' few. Remediation and isolation for the rest.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Acceleration and enrichment for all. Extra scaffolds, resources and instruction whenever needed.

## WHAT GRADES SHOW

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### TRACKING

Grades are **threats**. They are designed to scare students into completing work. They mostly measure student behaviors, students' socioeconomic circumstances or their position within racial / gender / (dis)abled / linguistic hierarchies.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Grades may be nonexistent, but if present reflect **the level of mastery a student has achieved** in a given domain of inquiry.

## ETHIC

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### TRACKING

You either have it or you don't. **Sink or swim**. Compete against others to be "the best."

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Everyone challenged, everyone supported, every day. Everyone working at the edges of their current and always expanding abilities. **We lift as we rise**. We collaborate with others to do our best and help others to do the same.

## MEASURES

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### TRACKING

Wide **variability and bias** in standardized assessments used to determine “ability,” plus ample evidence of racial/gender/class/linguistic/cultural bias in teacher recommendations used to determine placement. Parents with abundant social and cultural capital are more able to “game the system” to secure their child’s advantage which perpetuates the “rich get richer” outcomes intrinsic to tracking regimes. Little to no agreement of what constitutes an ‘A’ or a ‘B’ or a ‘C’ or ‘failing’ even among teachers who work in the same grade or department.

### PERSONALIZED, COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Transparent and often teacher/student/family co-produced assessments of mastery aligned with curriculum standards set by the state, some of which have established **levels of validity and reliability that permit scaling**.

We believe that each learner must have access to the tools, supports and experiences needed to graduate ready for what’s next. Tracking is anathema to this goal. Personalized, competency-based learning, however, establishes engaging educational experiences that are customized to each learner’s strengths, needs, interests and funds of knowledge. In a personalized, competency-based learning environment, students have voice in and ownership over how, what, when and where they learn and connections to community and real-world experiences are a priority.

**In a personalized, competency-based learning environment, students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing that does not result in tracking or other forms of ability grouping.** Each of these core elements of personalized, competency-based education – engaging experiences, a focus on the learner’s individual needs and assets, student agency and autonomy, connections to real-world experiences and preparation and de-tracking – have a substantial body of research and evidence supporting their efficacy in closing opportunity gaps and producing more equitable outcomes. And because personalized, competency-based learning can be used to dismantle and replace the racist origins of and current harms produced by tracking, it functions as a scalable, student-centered, anti-racist remedy. Let’s do this!

Get more resources to help make personalized learning a reality at [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://KnowledgeWorks.org).



KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what’s next. For more than 20 years, we’ve been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we’re creating the future of learning, together.