



KEY FINDINGS

Five Years of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in North Dakota

When we started working in North Dakota, 89% of residents rated their K-12 public schools as “excellent” or “good,” the highest satisfaction rate in the country. With that level of confidence, it might not have seemed like there would be an appetite for change. For North Dakotans, though, there was room for improvement.

“How can we really be at our finest when 10 percent of our population isn’t reaching their full potential?” questioned Kirsten Baesler, state superintendent of the [North Dakota Department of Public Instruction](#) (NDDPI). NDDPI partnered with KnowledgeWorks in 2018 to launch the North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning (NDPCBL) initiative to create equitable outcomes for learners by transforming conventional education systems to personalized, competency-based learning. The following year, KnowledgeWorks engaged [WestEd](#) to study the initiative’s progress and outcomes.

Over the five-year effort, participating districts have seen measurable changes within their districts, schools and classrooms to center students. Pursuing such organizational shifts has impacted the daily lives of students and educators. Although implementing personalized, competency-based learning varies from site to site and is still a work in progress, we are learning what changes are reasonable to expect within a five-year horizon and what those changes mean for student achievement.

The findings we explore here have been excerpted from the full report, [The North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Initiative: Progress and Outcomes After Five Years](#) by Robin Ahigian and Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, with George Lolashvili, and represent a summary of highlights through key researcher notes.

District Journeys

The journeys of each of the districts with personalized, competency-based learning demonstrate that whole systems change, or even the implementation of an initiative, is a nonlinear process.

[The North Dakota Personalized, Competency-Based Learning Initiative: Progress and Outcomes After 5 Years](#)

Focus on shared visioning pays off

Each district in the NDPCBL initiative provided evidence of developing or working toward developing a shared vision. This was demonstrated through high percentages of responding educators expressing an understanding of the vision (79-80% year-over-year) and the plan to achieve it (81-77% year-over-year). Results persisted even as the number of respondents rose from 391 to 725 over consecutive school years.

Researcher Notes: *It was clear from being in the district – talking with educators, learners and parents and walking through classrooms – that there is a shared sense of collective efficacy created by a shared vision and mission and a commitment to equity and transparency. Educators and learners feel respected and supported, and parents feel included. Northern Cass’s personalized, competency-based learning implementation represents a true cycle of continuous improvement. All members of the community believe in their collective impact and are willing to solicit and provide feedback toward that end.*

[Full Report »](#)

Classroom practices that grow agency allow for early wins

For school districts new to personalized, competency-based learning, systems change can feel overwhelming and often too far removed from the classroom. Classroom educators need the early wins to begin “trying on” the shift in vision. Practices meant for growing agency, such as choice boards, provided educators with an on-ramp in the participating districts.

Researcher Notes: *The superintendent spoke of deliberately providing educators with more opportunities to have agency and autonomy in their instructional practice. Learning was still largely educator-centered, but the focus was on where learners were going and how they would get there on their own path. Learning targets were commonly posted in classrooms, and the focus on engagement and mastery was palpable. Learners were given the choice to determine when they would be assessed based on when they were ready. Educators spoke of the choices they had in their professional learning, including continued learning walks and instructional rounds.*

[Full Report »](#)



Fostering transparency is critical for shifting systems

As described in [Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](#), measuring progress toward growing transparency is critical for systems change. For those districts in the initiative, measuring the use of common language, shared decision-making and accountability marked a turning point for a system capable of personalized-competency-based learning.

Researcher Notes: *In the 2022–23 school year, the district’s personalized, competency-based learning vision was more visible across the schools visited by the WestEd team. Posters with the district mission, Profile of a Graduate, learner dispositions and the district’s pillars, as well as learning targets, were visible in most classrooms. School and district leadership at all levels commonly spoke about their work and progress toward the district’s goals and pillars, highlighting that goal setting for learners and educators is a key part of personalizing learning. Strong coherence in the language and alignment of the district’s efforts centered around the six pillars. While the district focused professional learning on personalized learning and its six pillars, there were choices for educators to implement personalized learning practices at their own pace and in their own way. [Full Report »](#)*

Student Outcomes

Considering each district's journey toward personalized, competency-based learning, what is the impact on students? This question needs further contextualization based on the timing of this evaluation. Through the formative analysis, we know that systems change takes time and full implementation has not yet occurred within any participating districts. This research seeks to answer what we can expect for student outcomes at year five of implementation.

Researcher Notes: *While there is great interest in understanding whether outcomes differed for learners from historically marginalized populations, the small number of learners from historically marginalized populations in two of the districts prevented this type of disaggregation of findings.*

[Full Report »](#)

Academic achievement

This study into district implementation of personalized, competency-based learning shows a small negative or no effect on academic achievement at year five. The study included an analysis of math and ELA scores across various grade levels, as well as ACT scores. As districts further their implementation in years to come, more investigation is planned.

Attendance and graduation rates

Implementing districts have experienced a small positive effect on attendance. With the increased focus on chronic absenteeism post-pandemic, research into potential supports have become more sought after. Although the effect size is small, it may prove helpful as we begin to consider how increased agency may impact engagement levels and, subsequently, attendance. At this time, graduation rates have seen no change resulting from this initiative.

Researcher Notes: *Fourth and fifth graders in participating districts, as well as learners in ninth through 12th grade, have attendance rates that are one percentage point higher than non-participating schools in North Dakota. That equates to nearly two days of school. For sixth through eighth graders, the percentage point difference is two, which equates to nearly four days of school. [Full Report »](#)*



Choice readiness

As a result of this initiative, can we expect heightened levels of student readiness for what's next? An analysis of the available Choice Ready indicator data in North Dakota suggests that 12th graders in personalized, competency-based learning districts in the 2022-23 school year are similarly, or more so, prepared as students in nonparticipating districts. In the 2022-2023 school year, districts with a personalized, competency-based learning approach are nine percentage points more likely to have students ready for the military, along with a year-over-year 14 percentage point increase in the workforce readiness indicator. Students across the state saw increases in each readiness area year-over-year and similar readiness rates in workforce and post-secondary readiness.

Post-secondary enrollment

Enrollment in postsecondary education is a frequent and often relied upon indicator of success upon high school graduation.

An analysis of post-secondary enrollment shows an increase in rates for students from participating personalized, competency-based learning districts compared to the baseline, as well as a quick recovery from the pandemic compared to nonparticipating districts. In 2022, enrollment rates for learners within districts who had adopted personalized, competency-based learning began to rise, eventually higher than the baseline. School districts that did not participate in the initiative have seen a decline in enrollment rates in 2022.

Lessons Learned to Support a Successful Implementation

Research from the NDPCBL initiative has implications for future personalized, competency-based learning work in North Dakota, as well as other states and school districts. We've learned lessons about readiness, leadership, culture, professional learning and onboarding.

Context makes a difference

District readiness is a critical aspect of personalized, competency-based learning implementation. The degree to which schools and districts were ready to pursue personalized, competency-based learning impacted the rate and quality of implementation. The districts varied in their understanding of personalized, competency-based learning and what it took to launch the work, which affected pace and progress.

Leadership sets the stage

Leadership affects conditions identified as necessary for a successful implementation of personalized, competency-based learning, including culture, transparency and agency. Strong leadership sets the stage for these conditions to emerge and grow toward operationalization. Lack of strong leadership can threaten personalized, competency-based learning implementation.

District, school and classroom leaders helped create the momentum for Northern Cass School District 97 to succeed. Britt Breiland, a seventh and eighth grade English teacher describes her district as “relentless” in their pursuit of doing what’s best for learners. [Read More »](#)

Culture is essential—and nuanced

Each district has its own culture, and the leadership needs to understand the culture and how to navigate it to support implementation, including strengthening culture if necessary. Smaller districts talked about a “family culture,” where the school is the heart of the community. In those same places, it was often difficult for new staff to learn the culture, particularly the practice of personalized, competency-based learning. To engage in changing practice, people must first feel that they belong and are part of it.

Personalized professional development fosters a system-wide culture of collaboration in service of learners and the district’s shared vision. As early as 2020, surveys in North Dakota showed 70% of educators reported that they get to choose their own professional development engagements within their schools. [Read More »](#)

Professional learning and onboarding to personalized, competency-based learning are critical

Since the 2020–2021 school year, districts have discussed the importance of onboarding new staff to personalized, competency-based learning. An onboarding framework and toolkit will be essential to sustaining personalized, competency-based learning beyond the life of the grant.

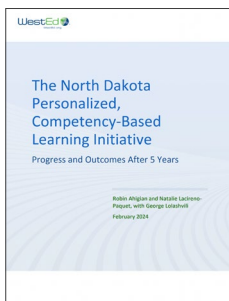
When WestEd visited schools in March 2023, educators spoke of a need for formalized, structured onboarding processes for new educators to help ensure continuity of work underway. [Read More »](#)

Personalized, competency-based learning implementation takes time

It takes commitment, dedicated leadership and supportive colleagues who are philosophically aligned to get this off the ground and maintain momentum and commitment in the face of challenges and changing leadership.

KnowledgeWorks started working with North Dakota on education transformation in 2018, but the state has been pushing for innovation since 2013 “when it introduced a structured statewide system for continuous improvement and accountability.” [Read More »](#)

Baesler has been leading in North Dakota for nearly a decade and [shares this advice for other education leaders](#): “Put students first in everything you do. Keep the main thing the main thing.”



The full report summarizes the implementation outcomes for the participating districts and the cohort of participants based on WestEd’s evaluation of the initiative. It also provides an analysis of the impact of district participation in the initiative on learner outcomes and shares implications for future personalized, competency-based learning work in North Dakota and beyond.

[Read the full report from WestEd »](#)

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what’s next. For 25 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. [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://www.knowledgeworks.org)