



## Getting Started with Personalized, Competency-based Learning

**Beginning in 2017, three North Dakota districts designed and implemented a personalized, competency-based learning approach.** Supported by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and KnowledgeWorks through a five-year grant from the Bush Foundation, this transformation was driven by a commitment to deeper, more flexible learning experiences and has led to measurable progress across key indicators.<sup>1</sup> This brief highlights some of the essential components educators need to know to start implementing competency-based learning with their own learners.

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1. Ahigian, R., & Lacireno-Paquet, N. (with Lolashvili, G.). (2024). *The North Dakota personalized, competency-based learning initiative: Progress and outcomes after 5 years*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resource/north-dakota-personalized-competency-based-learning-initiative/>

# What is personalized, competency-based learning?

Personalized, competency-based learning is an instructional approach that centers on each individual learner's strengths, needs and interests. Personalized, competency-based learning allows educators to provide differentiated support and allows learners to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, preparing them for future success. This differentiated support and learning could involve a focus on small-group instruction, providing students with a choice of “must-do” and “may-do” assignment options, relevant learning experiences and more.

## Essential Components of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

KnowledgeWorks has identified four essential components of personalized, competency-based learning:<sup>2</sup>

- **Transparent learning outcomes** are learning objectives that everyone has access to can understand.
- **Focus on student mastery** rather than seat time ensures that learning, rather than time, is the primary focus, allowing learners to learn at their own pace.
- Making learning **relevant** for learners helps them connect with and feel excited about the learning process. By encouraging learners to engage with a topic through a community project, their personal interests or their family, students are better able to develop a deep understanding of the subject.
- A **strategic design plan** for personalized learning ensures that both educators and learners have a voice.



In addition, KnowledgeWorks has outlined 12 enabling conditions to consider for the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning. These conditions are available in [Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning](https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/essentials-personalized-competency-based-education/).

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2. Kuhlmann, J. (2023). *The Essentials of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning*. Retrieved from KnowledgeWorks: <https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/essentials-personalized-competency-based-education/>

## What Can You Do as an Educator?

If you're interested in exploring what personalized, competency-based learning could look like in your classroom, here are some places you can start and some lessons learned from schools and districts in North Dakota.

### Learner agency

Encouraging learner agency gives students a voice in their learning and can bring collective decision-making to the classroom. Learner agency provides opportunities to increase learner engagement in both the classroom and the school, as well as increase shared accountability for learning. What might this look like in practice? Here is an example that has found great success in the three North Dakota districts:

The three North Dakota districts are finding success with choice boards, which enable students to choose how they want to learn something (such as from a book or video) and how they want to demonstrate their learning (such as through taking a test or quiz, doing a project, or giving a presentation).

One lesson that came out of the work in North Dakota is that, even when given the opportunity, learners do not automatically know how to exercise choice. In traditional models, learners have little opportunity to exercise choice and are often hesitant to make decisions or engage when suddenly given options. Learners needed support and practice to fully engage in decision-making. As educators and learners become more comfortable with student agency and choice, the ways this works in practice are limitless.

### Transparency

Transparency involves building inclusivity and trust within the learning community through the use of common language, shared decision-making and accountability. This can happen at the classroom, school and district level. For educators in the classroom, this could look like:

- Learner voice and having students' collective decision with the teacher on classroom rules and agreements for working together
- Shared understanding of learning goals through communication of learning goals and clear expectations for what constitutes consistent achievement of them
- Clear and consistent communication with students, families, staff and leadership on learning goals and expectations, as well as how decisions are made

### Culture

Culture is about the collective behaviors, beliefs and values that drive and support personalized, competency-based learning. Culture is built on relationships and shared expectations around growth mindsets, inclusivity, celebrations and continuous improvement at all levels of the system. In the classroom, this starts and is sustained through:

- Creating a sense of belonging where learners feel valued, supported and motivated through relationships and clear expectations.
- Creating a safe space for taking risks and having a growth mindset for both learners and teachers, where students can embrace challenges, try new things and if they don't succeed or achieve the standard, can try again. It's not a one-and-done for learning—it's about fostering resilience and academic and personal growth.

## Instruction

Instruction is centered around the learner experience. Learners and teachers are partners in designing and delivering personalized learning paths tailored to each student. This can take different forms, such as

- Teachers use a variety of methods and strategies, and students have some input into these choices
- Teachers and learners collaborate on the order in which they learn something, for example, tackling some math standards before others
- The pace at which students learn might be different
- Use of technology tools to support instruction, differentiated pacing and differentiated learning

## Where to Learn More

If you're interested in learning more about personalized, competency-based learning in North Dakota, read Key Findings from the [\*First Five Years of Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in North Dakota\*](#). Visit [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://KnowledgeWorks.org) to learn more about bringing personalized, competency-based learning to your district.



KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 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://KnowledgeWorks.org)

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