

# Beyond Four Walls: How Competency-Based Learning Can Enhance Public Education



February 2021

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Texas Public Policy  
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Emily Sass, Erin Valdez, David Dunmoyer

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has highlighted something that parents, students, and educators have known for a long time: What works for some students does not work for all. One child may need more time to master multiplication than another; one may need more focused time learning to read. Despite all these individual needs, the public expects all students to reach basic competency in key subjects such as multiplication, reading, and history—and hopefully also subjects that will help them pursue the vocation of their choice, such as computer coding or welding.

Instead of being primarily funded based on student outcomes, school districts are funded based on the number of students who fill seats regularly for pre-determined segments of time. In the wake of COVID-19-related shutdowns, many students are not in physical classrooms but are instead receiving instruction virtually. Adapting to such a scenario has exposed the inherent limitations of a system predicated on instructional inputs rather than student outcomes.

The focus on “seat time,” dominant in much of American education, is a relatively new concept introduced during the Industrial Age for the purpose of easily managing pension systems and introducing factory-style efficiency to classrooms. Unfortunately, a myopic focus on inputs such as the amount of time a student is exposed to instruction forces both teachers and students into a paradigm that precludes teachers’ adaptation to individual student needs.

Competency-based (or mastery-based) education shifts the focus of education back from time spent in the classroom to learning achieved. This approach may hold special promise for career and technical education programs (CTE).

While Texas has taken initial steps to introduce greater instructional flexibility, more remains to be done. At no time has this been more obvious than in the current school year and spring of 2020, in which statewide norms had to be waived to allow districts to deliver instructional content to students regardless of time or place.

Other states have begun the process of adapting their systems of instruction and assessment to allow for greater focus on student outcomes over time-based inputs. This paper is meant to provide history, context, and recommendations to inform Texas’s ongoing discussion.

## Introduction

Texas schools are fundamentally organized based on the assumption that students of the same age should receive instruction for the same periods of time in the same subjects. School districts are funded based on the number of students who fill seats in the classroom regularly for predetermined segments of time.

## Key Points

- The recent pandemic has highlighted flaws in our education system’s focus on “seat time” as a method for organizing school funding and structure, rather than student outcomes.
- In times when students cannot always physically attend school, we need better measures of education progress and quality.
- The Texas Commission on Public School Finance paved the way for a stronger focus on student outcomes; prioritizing student competency over student presence is the next step in creating a student-centric, outcomes-focused system.
- Other states, such as New Hampshire and Idaho, have begun to incorporate competency-based education more thoroughly into their education models.
- Texas has begun encouraging competency-based instruction in subject areas such as math, but more remains to be done. Career and technical education courses of study could especially benefit from flexibility.

In the wake of COVID-19-related shutdowns, many students are not in physical classrooms but are instead receiving instruction virtually. Adapting to such a scenario has exposed the inherent limitations of a system predicated on instructional inputs rather than student outcomes.

With most students not physically in classrooms, the Texas Education Agency ([TEA, 2020, p. 2](#)) allowed for waivers to the “operational minute” requirement if schools had COVID-19 closures that could not be made up following normal procedures, which include make-up days. Operational minutes are the time between the starting school bell of the day and the final school bell ([TEA, 2018, p. 2](#)). Waiving the operational minute requirement for the spring of 2020 allowed schools to be funded as if students were continuing to attend school as usual. As school schedules resumed (on- and off-campus) for the 2020-21 school year, TEA also allowed a 1-year broadening of allowances for off-campus provision of instruction ([TEA, n.d.-a](#)).

Even before the pandemic unsettled the prior defaults of on-campus attendance and classroom-based schedules, the Texas Commission on Public School Finance acknowledged in its landmark 2018 report that the state must focus its public education finances and structure on student outcomes ([p. 16](#)). The commission’s proposed core principles addressed goals such as “every child should be able to read sufficiently by third grade,” and “every student should graduate our preK-12 system without needing remediation and should be supported in accessing a post-secondary education, a career certification, or enlistment in the military that will enable them to obtain a living-wage career beyond high school,” not perfect attendance or minimum operational minutes ([p. 16](#)). Ensuring that teachers and students can have flexibility to focus on subject mastery is vital in pursuing that vision.

## What Is Seat Time?

“Seat time” is a term used to refer to the reliance of public education on measures of student classroom presence to determine course credit and, indeed, student learning. Seat time tends to place emphasis on student attendance over student attainment. Fundamentally, seat time is used as a proxy measure of student success, focusing on the hours students are required to attend class per course rather than student achievement.

Seat time is a relatively recent innovation. Credit hours, also known as Carnegie Units, arose in response to a variety of changes that were occurring in both society and in education at the turn of the last century. The Carnegie Foundation itself issued a report ([Silva et al., 2015](#)) that explained its role in the creation of this standard. According to this report, the key reason for this innovation was Andrew

Carnegie’s interest in creating a pension system for college professors. In the early 20th century, the lines between high schools and colleges were not clear. Carnegie’s financial commitment, \$10 million, was substantial, but “... wasn’t enough to cover the faculty at every institution calling itself a college or university. So [Harvard President Charles] Eliot and his colleagues had to narrow the number of qualifying campuses” ([p. 7](#)).

In order for the pension plan to cover *only* college faculty, clear lines had to be drawn between which courses would “count” as secondary and which ones would count as collegiate level. This project was assisted by the recommendations of the National Education Association’s “Committee of Ten,” led by Charles Eliot. This committee’s report, published in 1894, laid the groundwork for standardizing school curriculum. Recommendations included the scope of curriculum in core subjects, from Latin and Greek to civics to mathematics, as well as the amount of time that should be allocated to teaching each. This report’s impact is still felt today in many respects, including the fundamental concept of 12 years’ worth of formal study constituting a complete primary and secondary education ([National Education Association, 1894](#)).

Carnegie’s board of trustees approved a plan, predicated on time-based units and informed by the Committee of Ten’s recommendations, to delineate which institutions qualified as colleges from those that would be classified as high schools ([Silva et al., 2015, p. 7](#)). Standardizing college admissions requirements helped to fuel the growth of high schools as an American institution.

According to Anthony Bryk, president of the Carnegie Foundation,

*The Carnegie Unit, also known as the credit hour, became the basic unit of measurement both for determining students’ readiness for college and their progress through an acceptable program of study. Over time, the Carnegie Unit became the building block of modern American education, serving as the foundation for everything from daily school schedules to graduation requirements, faculty workloads, and eligibility for federal financial aid. ([Silva et al., 2015, p. 3](#))*

This innovation created a convenient method for human resources departments to count educational inputs and eventually streamlined high school transcripts to make them more intelligible to colleges. A Carnegie Unit is 120 hours of contact between a student and a faculty member. In high schools, students typically earn about 6-7 credits per year, while college students earn about 15 credit hours per semester ([Silva et al., 2015, p. 8](#)).

It was not, however, designed with student learning outcomes in mind. Once again,

*The Carnegie Foundation established the Carnegie Unit over a century ago as a rough gauge [emphasis added] of student readiness for college-level academics. It sought to standardize students' exposure [emphasis added] to subject material by ensuring they received consistent amounts of instructional time. It was never intended to function as a measure of what students learned [emphasis added]. (Silva et al., 2015, p. 5)*

The report acknowledges an additional reason for the adoption of the Carnegie Unit: It was an effort to standardize higher education.

*What's more, many in education, including Carnegie's leaders, didn't see the Carnegie Unit merely as a pathway to pensions, but as a broader mechanism to improve the administrative efficiency of schools and colleges in the spirit of the 'scientific management' movement of the day [emphasis added]. (Silva et al., 2015, p. 8)*

The Carnegie Unit created a uniform system of accounting for the amount of time public school students spent exposed to prescribed instruction (Levine, 2015), thus “serving as the foundation for everything from daily school schedules to graduation requirements, faculty workloads, and eligibility for federal aid” (Silva et al., 2015, p. 3).

While the distinction between high schools and colleges was the initial rationale for adopting the Carnegie Unit in these institutions, the concept of division of the school year into time increments adding up to Carnegie Units trickled down to the primary school level as well. “With the Carnegie Unit as a basis, schools nationwide adopted a common process for schooling groups of children, sorted by age for 13 years, 180 days a year in Carnegie unit-length courses” (Levine, 2015, para. 3).

Funding schools based on the amount of time students spend in school has proven convenient for over a century. And, to be sure, there are worse methods of funding education. A purely enrollment-based system, for instance, simply pays districts for students based on the

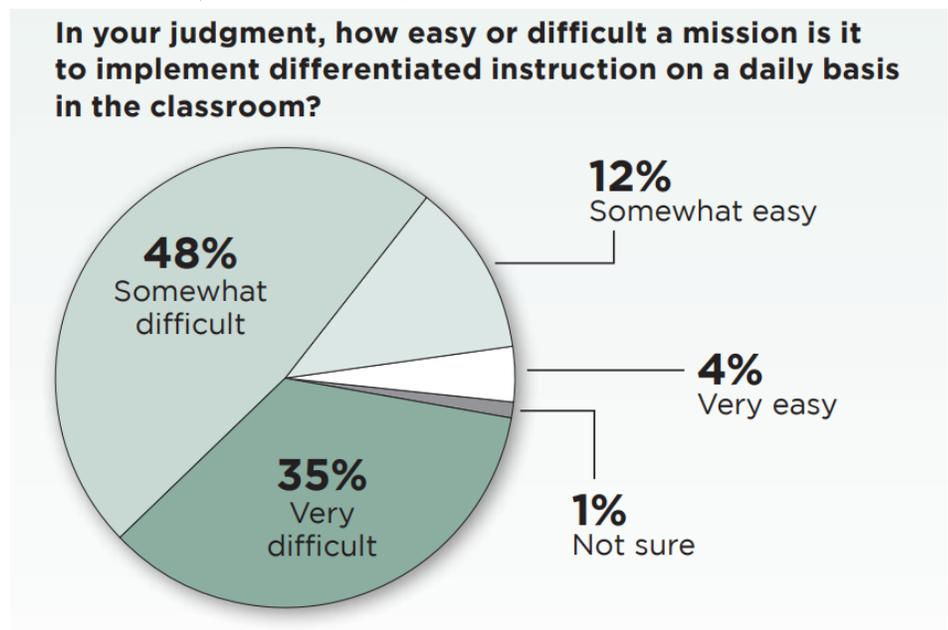
number of students enrolled, whether or not continued student engagement takes place. An attendance-based system, though flawed, is at least a better measure of consistent student engagement than whether paperwork was filled out for a student at the beginning of the semester or year. However, “while these rules may show that a school has not lost a student, they tell us nothing about the quantity or quality of instruction” (Miller & Joseph, 2020, para. 6). Seat-time funding at least measures the most basic of inputs administered to a student, but what matters most to a student's future success is not simply whether the student has been exposed to instructional material but rather whether he has mastered the material provided in those inputs.

### Effects of Seat Time on Instructional Models

Public educators regularly attempt to counter the unintended consequences of a seat-time system, but these efforts often result in frustration. Bellwether Education points out that schools that are funded based on seat time are essentially “holding time constant and allowing learning outcomes to vary” (Chuong & Mead, 2014, p. 44). Teachers and administrators recognize this constraint but find their alternatives limited. Competency-based approaches flip this so that time can be the variable while learning outcomes or proficiency are held constant.

Efforts to focus teachers' instruction and support on individual student performance are often referred to as “differentiated instruction.” Recognizing the fact that children do not all start from the same point or progress at the same

**Figure 1**  
*Relative Difficulty of Implementing Differentiated Instruction*



Note. Figure taken from *High-Achieving Students in the Era of NCLB* by S. Farkas and A. Duffett, Fordham Institute, 2008, p. 65 (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501703.pdf>).

pace, differentiated instruction aims to tailor classroom instruction and teachers' coaching to the needs of each student, with the goal of eliminating learning gaps and ensuring every student is able to achieve subject mastery.

However, in practice, this approach operates from the assumption that successfully implementing these strategies will lead to all students in the classroom mastering the material within the same amount of time. This assumption makes providing differentiated instruction for classrooms of 18-25 students ([National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.](#)) a challenging goal for teachers. A Fordham Institute survey of teachers found that 83% of them think that implementing differentiated instruction is either somewhat difficult or very difficult. (See **Figure 1.**)

While teachers find adequately pacing classroom instruction for all students to be challenging, many students are also caught in the situation of either being behind or ahead of the pace of the course. Again, differentiated instruction has been proposed as a solution, but as **Figure 1** shows, teachers consider it difficult to provide this to students.

Blended learning has been proposed as a method for better accommodating differentiated instruction ([TEA, 2019](#)). This approach uses digital resources to help teachers keep track of what each student has learned or is struggling with. It also makes new classroom models possible, in which students review instructional material on their own and then use class time to practice concepts or get assistance—indeed, different groups of students can engage in these activities simultaneously. The very reason such a model may be successful, however, is that blended learning helps teachers maximize their limited class time or even evade its constraints by allowing students to absorb instructional material at their own pace.

### **Custody: The Hidden Value Proposition of Seat Time**

The time-and-place-based system for measuring education has persisted not because it provided a means to measure student learning outcomes, but because it provides a convenient way to measure inputs into the educational system and make it conform to the management trends of the factory era. There is another reason that seat time persists into the 21st century: It provides custodial childcare.

Buttressed and preceded by Progressive Era prohibitions on child labor, compulsory schools, which offered set schedules with custodial arrangements, provided children with a place to go during the day; the contraction of child employment translated into the expansion of education (see **Figure 2**; [Stambler, 1968, p. 208](#)). In more modern times,

the custodial aspect of schools allowed for parents—and mothers in particular—to work outside the home.

In the wake of COVID-19, the traditional school's generally unspoken value proposition of providing custodial care for children during the workday has come into sharp focus. Schools that were not offering in-person instruction have, in some cases, offered supervision of virtual education and charged parents for this service ([McClallen, 2020](#)). Some have faced legal challenges for this practice. The American Center for Law and Justice explains that “some public schools” are “telling parents that while it's not safe for their children to return to school due to the Coronavirus, they can come to the same buildings as a ‘childcare’ center... for an additional fee” ([Sekulow, 2020, para. 4](#)).

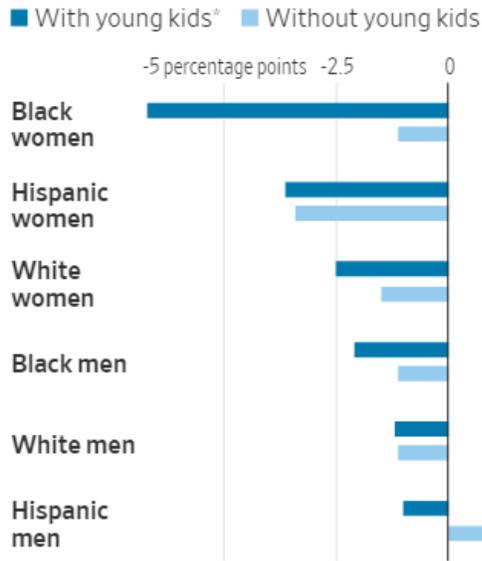
The toll that unplanned homeschooling and remote education has taken on children's educational futures ([Dorn et al., 2020](#), provides one set of estimates) will likely have generational effects that will be quantified in years to come. According to Alon et al. ([2020](#)), the COVID-19 downturn, unlike previous recessions, has led to a sharper increase in women's unemployment than men's. The authors of this research attribute this disparate impact to two factors: First, women are more likely to be in sectors that are affected by lockdowns ([p. 9](#)); second, women typically bear a larger share of a household's responsibility for child care ([pp. 9-10](#)), a duty whose scope quantitatively increased as schools closed due to COVID-19 in February 2020.

The effect on maternal labor force participation is starkly illustrated by the phenomenon of widespread and involuntary home-based learning as a result of COVID-19 school shutdowns, which have led to an overall decline of 3.4% in labor force participation by mothers from February to October 2020, with Black mothers being disproportionately affected compared with other prime age adults ([Guilford & Cambon, 2020](#)).

Providing custodial care for children during the workday is an essential economic function currently delivered primarily by schools, but this service need not be conflated with the provision of education. YMCA locations in and around Austin, for instance, responded to demands for custodial care by providing child care services for the children (up to age 12) of essential workers ([Rucker, 2020](#)). Their “child watch” workers provided in-person supervision of students engaged in virtual learning.

It is obvious that while custodial care and educational services *can* be offered by the same institution, they do not necessarily have to be. YMCA's Southwest Branch advertised pay for child watch staff, whose duties include “supervising

**Figure 2**  
*Change in Share of U.S. Population Aged 25-54 Working or Looking for Work, February to October 2020*



\*Household has at least one child under 13  
 Note: Data are seasonally adjusted.  
 Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas

Note. Figure taken from “Covid Shrinks the Labor Market, Pushing Out Women and Baby Boomers” by G. Guilford and S. Chaney Cambon, *Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2020 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-shrinks-the-labor-market-pushing-out-women-and-baby-boomers-11607022074>).

all aspects of the classroom programs and executing the daily curriculum. You will work toward providing a program to foster children’s social, physical, spiritual, and mental growth,” for a part-time role at \$9.00-\$10.50/hour (YMCA of Austin, n.d.). This provides a potential “wage floor” for the demand for those who supervise students while they participate in virtual education. For comparison, the starting salary in 2020 for new teachers (no experience) in the Austin Independent School District is \$51,000 (Austin Independent School District, n.d.), or \$40.47 per instructional hour. This does not count non-salary compensation in the form of insurance, retirement, and other benefits.

A primary value proposition of custodial care is safety. Unfortunately, institutions of education may not be the best equipped to provide that value. In at least one survey, parents cited safety as one of the top reasons they chose to send their children to charter, private, or home schools (percentages ranged from 28 to 41% depending on the school type; DiPerna et al., 2019, p. 13). Children in some urban schools are particularly vulnerable to victimization. According to a study conducted by the UT Health Science Center at Houston which surveyed students in Houston, Birmingham, and Los Angeles, 49% of 10th graders

reported sustaining a violent injury over the past year (as reported by the University of Houston’s Houston Public Media; Watkins, 2019).

But dangers posed by fellow students are not the only ones children face. By September 2017, the Texas Education Agency reported a 42% increase in the number of disciplinary investigations against teachers since SB 7 (2017) strengthened reporting requirements for public schools (Chang, 2018). HB 3 (2019) expanded reporting requirements to private schools and created a do-not-hire list (TEA, n.d.-b). According to a 2004 report by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 10% of students are estimated to experience school employee sexual misconduct during their education (Shakeshaft, 2004, p. 17).

Schools are not by default an ideal childcare solution; while childcare and instructional time are both essential to a child’s healthy development, childcare and instruction do not necessarily have to be institutionalized together in the way we currently do.

## How Does Seat Time Impact Public Education?

The Texas Education Code (TEC) addresses seat time requirements for public schools in several places.

TEC § 25.081 requires that school districts operate for 75,600 minutes each school year (the equivalent of 180 school days). This minute-based requirement, passed into law in 2015 in HB 2610, was an update to the previous requirement for a minimum number of 180 days of instruction, and was intended to provide more flexibility to districts in scheduling (Peterson, 2015). A subsequent bill, HB 2442 (passed in 2017), also removed the requirement for a 7-hour school day (TEA, 2018, p. 1). This 75,600-minute requirement is the standard case for Texas schools, with a major exception being approval from the commissioner to reduce operation time in the event of a natural disaster or outstanding calamity. School funding is then determined by the number of students who spend time in the classroom.

TEC § 25.085 requires that children between the ages of 6 and 19 (some exceptions apply) attend school “each school day for the entire period the program of instruction is provided.” Further stipulations from TEC § 25.092 require students to maintain an attendance rate of at least 90% to advance further in their education. Subsequent sections of TEC Chapter 25 provide that students who have not attended sufficient class hours, whether they are performing well academically or not, can face truancy and other disciplinary consequences, while their parents can be held criminally liable for their lack of attendance.

To understand how the funding mechanism for this seat-time model is inextricably bound to student attendance, we can turn to [TEC § 48.005](#). Specifically, funding is granted in accordance with each school's average daily attendance. Average daily attendance, or ADA, is equal to the sum of attendance for each day of the minimum number of days of instruction divided by the minimum number of days of instruction (meaning a student with perfect attendance would produce an ADA number of one).<sup>1</sup> This ADA number is integral to the formula determining how much money each school receives from the state, with lower ADA numbers resulting in less funding for schools (and vice versa). Should a district operate for fewer than the minimum number of minutes required, the commissioner of education is authorized to reduce its funding proportionately (see [TEC § 25.081 \(f\)](#)).

However, [TEC § 48.007](#) does provide one exception to the generic formula for calculating ADA. Upon approval from the commissioner, off-campus programs can be provided to students as instructional programs that may be counted for the purposes of determining ADA. This has proved particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many parents are seeking out safe and flexible educational opportunities for their children that are generally untraditional.

## Career and Technical Education

The seat-time model presupposes that the more time a student spends in a classroom, the more learning there will be. This may be the case for some students, but on a universal level, this conclusion is flawed. Texas spent \$2.6 billion on the weighted career and technical education allotment ([Foundation School Program, 2020](#)) in school year 2019-2020. The weight for CTE education is 1.35 times the basic allotment for students in 7th to 12th grades. This allocation is made not based on the individual pupil but on the counterintuitive measure called the “full-time equivalent student,” which is a sum of all the minutes students are in contact with a district staff member, as calculated by the average daily attendance. Texas funds career and technical education at over 20 times the total amount of the federal funding for secondary and postsecondary CTE through the Perkins Act, which amounted to \$111 million for FY 2019 ([Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, n.d.](#)). Despite the size of this commitment, shortages in key skilled trade occupations exist ([Meier & Orrenius, 2018](#)), limiting the growth of the Texas economy ([DiFurio, 2019](#)). Clearly, this system is not sensitive to outcomes.

A funding model that is truly focused on student success would be both competency- and outcomes-based ([Excel in](#)

[Ed, 2017, p. 13](#)). This is particularly relevant to career and technical education, which tends to be conducive to skill-based measures, but this need not be limited to traditional vocational subjects. Moreover, competency-based education can be used to develop skills from which all students may benefit from, such as public speaking, verbal and written communication, and collaboration with others. In addition, the seat-time-based funding model prevents public schools from expanding virtual, hybrid, or task-based models, which may be more appropriate for a particular student. While traditional education may be preferable for many or most learners, other students may learn differently, and the state's funding model should not reduce their opportunities or limit their potential.

## What Is Competency-Based Education?

Competency-based education (CBE) is a modern expression of the ancient idea that underlies apprenticeship: Advancement to the next level depends on demonstrating skills. This, in turn, allows students more flexibility to advance or linger based on their needs. While CBE varies from institution to institution, the general framework includes measurable and meaningful assessments, a learner-centered approach, and flexibility in class structure and teaching style. Ultimately, the goal is to best prepare individual students for the workforce or postsecondary education ([Southern New Hampshire University, 2017](#)).

Even as credit hours were becoming the norm in the early 20th century, alternative models arose. In 1919, at a school outside Chicago, school superintendent Carleton Washburne initiated an experiment in self-paced education, later called the “Winnetka Plan.” Under this model, students worked through common sets of booklets in order to progress to the next level. According to Le et al. (2014), “Despite its self-paced component, it is notable that Washburne did not fully disrupt the time-based structure upon which American schooling had been built. Students who had not mastered the objectives in those work units by the end of the school year still advanced to the next grade” (p. 9). This policy of advancing students regardless of mastery undermines the point of mastery or competency-based learning.

Throughout the 20th century, there were iterations on this idea, leading to the “mastery-based learning” movement that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Le et al. (2014), summarizing conclusions of a meta-analysis of 108 evaluations, note that “mastery learning not only has positive effects on achievement, but that the effects are stronger on the weaker students in a class” (p. 13). In 2008, New Hampshire, as described below, was the first state to adopt a competency-based system statewide.

<sup>1</sup> Note: TEC § 25.081(d) authorizes the commissioner to adopt rules determining the minutes of operation that are equivalent to a day.

Looking to the future, one could imagine reaching back to an era in which colleges determined their own admissions standards and in which high school curricula enabled students to demonstrate their readiness for the next challenge through tests, hands-on activities, or entrepreneurial endeavors. Badges, dual credit, micro-credentials, specialized curriculum tests, and portfolios could serve the purpose of signaling mastery of knowledge or skills and solve the problem of transparency. Learning from a variety of effective competency-based models can help policymakers move Texas education into the 21st century.

## Examples of CBE (and Texas Applications)

### *Blended Learning*

Blended learning models (see “Effects of Seat Time on Instructional Models”) often include a strong competency-based learning component. Additionally, math programs like the popular Khan Academy use a competency-based approach. Texas’s Math Innovation Zones ([TEA, n.d.-c](#)) use a similar structure.

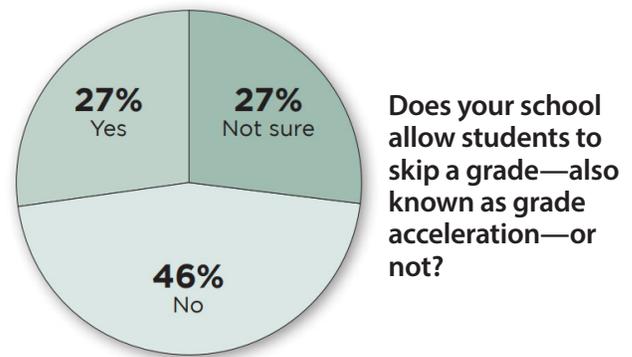
In the wake of COVID-19, CBE is garnering more attention across the country and has emerged as a natural extension of consumer demand for more customized products and services ([Deloitte, 2019, p. 2](#)). As districts rely more heavily on remote instruction and a blend of asynchronous and synchronous content, they are by necessity relying on indicators other than seat time to gauge student progress ([Barnum, 2020](#)).

### *Credit by Examination*

Credit by examination allows students to condense standard educational timelines by taking examinations to show mastery of course material. The Acceleration Institute ([n.d.-a](#)) counts 16 states as explicitly allowing acceleration (defined by the National Association for Gifted Children [[n.d.](#)] as “when students move through traditional curriculum at rates faster than typical”), Texas being one of them ([Acceleration Institute, n.d.-b](#)). Most other states either do not prevent acceleration or leave acceleration policy to local districts.

While the seat-time model largely falls short in the area of graduating students on to new materials after displaying content mastery, [TEC § 28.023](#) does stipulate that students can test out of specific classes, and even grades. District boards of trustees must approve a selection of examinations that a student may take to earn grade acceleration or credit by examination. School districts may implement examinations that thoroughly test students’ comprehension of a subject matter or grade level materials. These examinations must be administered four times a year, and students who meet the minimum required score are then able to move up a grade or receive credit on a specific course.

**Figure 3**  
Grade Acceleration



Note. Figure taken from *High-Achieving Students in the Era of NCLB* by S. Farkas and A. Duffett, Fordham Institute, 2008, p. 67 (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501703.pdf>).

However, the student must achieve credit by examination before the beginning of the school year in which such a course would be required; otherwise, the student must complete the normal course. In other words, a student cannot enroll in a course, study hard, and take the course examination early in order to move on to other material.

Unfortunately, grade acceleration may be less available in practice than in statute. Farkas and Duffett (2008) note that based on their teacher survey, “to hear teachers report it, grade acceleration—or skipping a grade—rarely occurs these days. ... That so many teachers either think their district’s policies prohibit grade acceleration or are unsure suggests that many school districts today actively discourage the practice” (p. 67).

### *Diplomas for Early College Readiness*

Among the essential components of competency-based education, the Education Commission of the States ([Jenkins, 2020](#)) includes learner agency, explaining that “students daily make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning” (p. 2). Student agency is increased when students have the chance to own their educational pace.

A pilot program does exist to allow a Texas research university to partner with up to 10 school districts to develop a set of competencies that would allow a student to demonstrate early readiness for college and earn a distinguished level of achievement (see TEC §28.0253).

In addition, a limited number of bracketed districts are also allowed to pilot a 3-year high school diploma program (see TEC § 28.0255). In addition to developing accelerated graduation plans for students, the districts must coordinate with

postsecondary institutions to help graduates move on to the next stage. This pilot expires in 2023.

Idaho provides students who graduate early a scholarship of 35% of a year's student funding; this funding accumulates for every year a student graduates early, up to \$1,800 per year ([Idaho State Department of Education, 2020](#)). This scholarship is for the expected expenditure for high school that the student is forgoing by graduating early. These funds, which must be used for tuition at Idaho public colleges or universities, are then added to the individual student's Advanced Opportunities account, which is discussed in more detail below.

The Texas Legislature could follow this model using existing funds, perhaps by allowing districts to create local individual scholarships using proceeds from the college, career, and military readiness outcomes bonuses or allowing students to access existing CTE allocations. Such a program might help students launch their postsecondary journey before leaving high school, and still save taxpayer funds to the state over the typical 4-year graduation timeline.

### CBE in Other States

Other states have created or are in the process of creating more competency-focused systems of education. The Aurora Institute has conveniently mapped each state's status

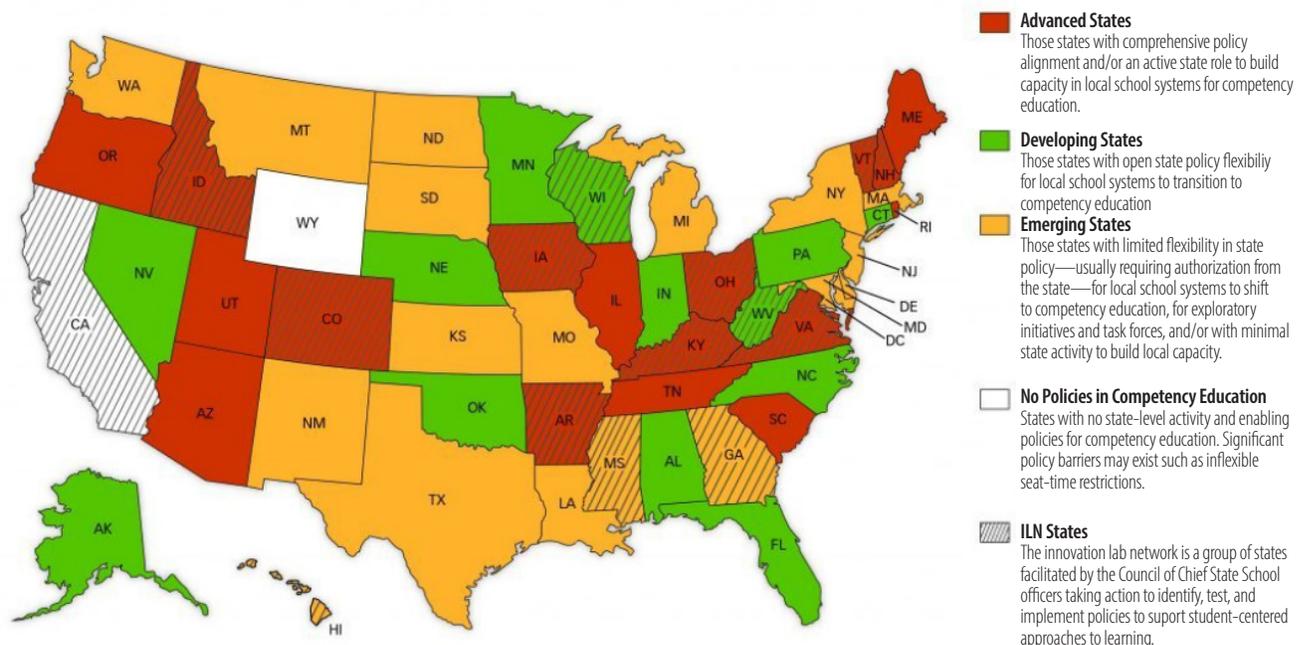
based on several indicators ([Frost, 2018](#)). Texas is designated as an "Emerging State," holding that status since the map's creation in 2012. (See [Figure 4](#).)

Two states listed as "Advanced States" are New Hampshire and Idaho. Several of their program highlights are listed below.

#### *New Hampshire-PACE and VLACS*

Considered a national leader in competency-based education, New Hampshire allows districts to award student credit based on student mastery of competencies and has developed a set of competencies that can be used in place of time-based credits. New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) has recalibrated the state's assessment system to include "a combination of local, common and state level assessments" ([New Hampshire Department of Education, n.d., para. 1](#)). These assessments incorporate locally developed assessments of local competencies aligned with state standards, collaboratively developed "common tasks" administered by all participating institutions, and a total of 7 state assessments strategically administered throughout a student's educational journey ([New Hampshire Department of Education, 2020](#)).

**Figure 4**  
Competency Education State Policy Across the United States



Note. Figure taken from "CompetencyWorks Releases Updated Competency Education State Policy Map" by D. Frost, *Education Domain Blog*, Aurora Institute, June 21, 2018 (<https://aurora-institute.org/blog/competencyworks-releases-updated-competency-education-state-policy-map-for-the-unit-ed-states/>).

New Hampshire’s state virtual school, Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS), incorporates competencies into its entire structure. Students can choose to enroll in individual courses or enroll full time. For its more than 12,000 students (about 400 of whom are full-time), VLACS offers several different ways to fulfill competencies in their learning journeys. The first “journey” is “Courses.” Students may start at any point during the year, select their own pace, and earn badges along the way. This allows learning opportunities outside the classroom (such as an industry certification) to be incorporated into their journey. The second journey is called “Projects,” which serves to introduce students to their desired career field and help them complete competencies through mock experiences (the Digital Learning Collaborative offers the example of an English student acting as an editor for the marketing department of a real estate company). The third journey is called “Experiences,” and this portion is almost entirely student-designed. Students approach teachers with a proposal for a particular skill they wish to acquire outside of the classroom, which can include work-based opportunities such as job interviews, internships, and shadowing. The more competencies VLACS students achieve, the more education funding VLACS receives on a low-stakes proportional model that prioritizes student achievement ([Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020, p. 21](#); [VLACS, n.d.](#)).

Student reports indicate that this program has given them agency to maintain their academic progress while also developing career or extracurricular pursuits ([Berdik, 2016](#)). This virtual model also seems to have achieved exceptional student outcomes.

According to *U.S. News and World Report (2020a)* analyses, drawn from state-administered assessment data, 92% of VLACS students were proficient or above in reading, and 67% were proficient or above in math. Both scores highly outperformed the New Hampshire state average.

**Idaho-Advanced Opportunities**

Idaho’s Advanced Opportunities program has given students and their families the ability to direct a fund (\$4,125), starting in 7th grade, that can be used for approved dual credit, industry credentials, and, starting in 2020-21, workforce development and apprenticeship programs. This student-centered approach is agnostic about the pathway that students choose and

equally supports their post-graduation success. As a result of this program, overload and AP exams soared (see **Figure 5**). According to the architect of Advanced Opportunities, Senator Thayne, the dramatic growth of this program is all about student agency. “When you talk to students and parents about money, it becomes more concrete. The kids feel like it’s their money. It’s not a state program that they have to access. It’s theirs. That’s a huge psychological difference” ([Eden, 2020, p. 8](#)).

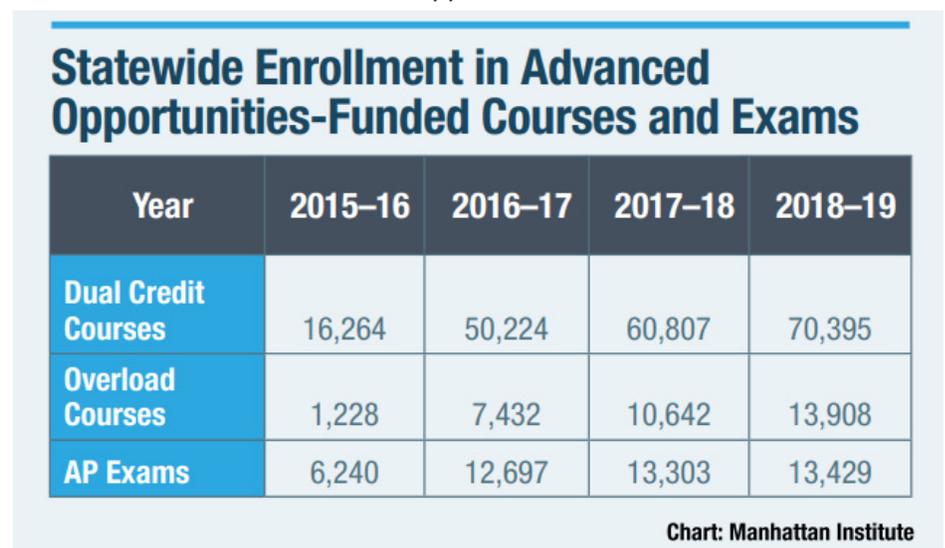
Students are able to graduate early, take college courses, and otherwise advance their futures in less time because they can move at their own pace. The key is giving students agency in terms of their pathways.

**Benefits of CBE**

One of the most widely cited benefits of a CBE system is the flexibility it provides students. Students can work faster and leverage prior or outside experience to achieve mastery in topics expeditiously, rather than work at an unnecessarily slower pace. This, in turn, allows students to move through materials at a quicker pace and begin mastering other competencies and course work.

The CBE model also provides benefits for students with competing obligations to school, be it work or family. Through the use of online delivery of instruction, staff “coaches” who check in on individual students, and the hand-tailored course content to meet individual student needs, each student is offered a degree of autonomy in classes that mitigate barriers to entry present in a seat-time model. This framework fulfills the vision of differentiated

**Figure 5**  
Statewide Enrollment in Advanced Opportunities-Funded Courses and Exams



Note. Figure taken from *Advanced Opportunities: How Idaho is Reshaping High Schools by Empowering Students* by M. Eden, Manhattan Institute, 2020, p. 8 ([https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/how-idaho-reshaping-high-schools\\_ME.pdf](https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/how-idaho-reshaping-high-schools_ME.pdf)).

instruction by creating an educational model that removes the constant of time and instead places greater emphasis on the individual needs of students, taking into account each pupil's situation and overall disposition when investing in the creation of knowledge.

## Equity and CBE

While there are some concerns regarding implementation of CBE, most—if not all—can be allayed when necessary precautions are taken. For example, one concern is that diverse or historically marginalized students will not receive the needed attention required to ensure they do not fall behind in content mastery. There may also be a fear that in transitioning to CBE, students of different races will be inappropriately placed in learning categories.

These concerns are not new to education and indeed have historically been issues associated with a seat-time model of learning, as students of all races, socioeconomic statuses, and learning differences who struggle to master material within the allotted times must perforce be shuffled along to the next subject—regardless of mastery, student desire, or even teacher concerns. Despite decades of attempts to close them, learning gaps persist ([Dorn et al., 2020](#); [Hanushek et al., 2019](#)).

Rightly executed, however, CBE holds the promise to increase the personalization of learning, with the goal of ensuring fewer students fall behind. Students are able to advance where they excel and to linger where they need more time. Indeed, Sturgis and Casey ([2018](#)) contend that competency-based education can be a powerful force in creating an educational system in which every student has an equal chance to succeed ([p. 1](#)).

Springdale School District in Springdale, Arkansas, labeled a “District of Innovation” by the state, has demonstrated the power of a properly executed CBE program that focuses on individual student needs. “The school district has a majority-minority student enrollment, including 31 percent Caucasian students, 47 percent English Language Learners, 46 languages spoken, and 63 percent free and reduced lunch eligibility” ([Rickabaugh, 2017, para. 3](#)). As a result, traditional seat-time methods would not serve the diverse needs of their student body. Instead, by organizing the curriculum around competency, the district has put students first and given teachers the resources to provide students with the individualized attention they need. Also involved are encouraging self-motivation among students, cultivating a love of learning, and inspiring students to take healthy risks.

Another concern is that, given the emphasis CBE places on student autonomy in completing coursework, this program only works for self-motivated, highly driven students.

While there certainly is a degree of self-discipline necessary for students to excel in this format of schooling (as is the case in any other format), properly modeled CBE schools provide students with academic and nonacademic support that in turn motivates them and holds them accountable to coursework deadlines. This comes in the form of student and staff support, with the ultimate goal of creating an environment that encourages individual students to push themselves at a challenging yet achievable rate. CBE also provides an alternative to repeating full courses for students who fall behind in their education, as can often occur in a seat-time system, preventing students from failing to move on to the next grade ([Haynes et al., 2016](#)). And in the case of dropout prevention, CBE can increase the likelihood of graduation, allow students to master skills at their own pace, and provide students with the opportunity to take responsibility for their own education ([Sturgis et al., 2010, p. 3](#)).

Even beyond outcomes-based arguments for CBE is the simple truth that it gives students back some agency in their educational journey. As seen in Idaho's Advanced Opportunities program, putting students in a position to make important decisions about their pathways leads them to approach their education with more purpose.

## New Frontiers

Allowing learning to take place outside the classroom, including in work-based learning settings such as approved apprenticeship programs, may require adjustments in our system of assessment. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the latest authorization of federal funding for education (excluding one-time stimulus funds), included a pilot program to allow states more flexibility in the design of their student assessments ([U.S. Department of Education, 2020](#)). Up to seven states or a consortia of states may participate in the pilot; to date, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Georgia, and North Carolina are participating, and as discussed above, New Hampshire's pilot is explicitly competency-based.

Last session, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3906 ([2019](#)), which creates optional interim assessments that can be administered during the year, an opening for portfolio writing assessments, and technical and educator advisory committees to advise the commissioner of education and TEA regarding assessment development. The opportunity provided by ESSA and initial steps laid out by HB 3906 may provide a framework and examples for Texas to create a path forward.

## Recommendations

Outlined below are an array of methods that Texas could employ to increase a focus on student outcomes through competency-based education. These are not exhaustive; it is

hoped, however, that they will provide a starting point for discussion as Texas policymakers determine how best to provide flexible paths to Texas districts, teachers, and students. These are all envisioned as operating within existing education funding; should additional funding for a certain goal be desirable, those funds should be reappropriated from another existing source.

- Build on lessons learned and programs created during the COVID-19 pandemic to increase the flexibility of minimum attendance laws for districts.
- Create a pilot program allowing districts and charters to opt in to an alternative funding model based on student progress in exchange for even greater flexibility in attendance and minutes, such as counting attendance on a weekly basis or including student engagement on weekend days. Such district plans could include work-based learning experiences, the opportunity to test out of classes, student portfolios of work, and more.
- Build out a robust virtual course network so that districts have a wider array of offerings for accelerated students testing out of classes or students who prefer a virtual or hybrid model. This could especially aid district offerings to students in rural areas, where specialized instruction may be more difficult to provide. (See the Foundation's *Virtual Education in Texas* for a discussion of virtual education and further recommendations for improvement: [Sass & Griesinger, 2020](#).)
- Use the already-established provisions of HB 3906 as a springboard to explore competency-based testing structures.
- Consider whether Texas should apply for ESSA's innovative testing pilot program in an upcoming application round.
- Allow districts to partner with childcare institutions and other community organizations to coordinate the simultaneous delivery of childcare and instruction, allowing greater social distancing and student and teacher safety.
- Consider continuing and expanding the 3-year high school diploma pilot to other interested districts, perhaps creating a scholarship/outcomes bonus model for students and districts.
- Allow practica for career and technical education courses of study to be assessed based on employer feedback and portfolios.
- Amend the college, career, and military readiness bonus to include the option for school districts to demonstrate career readiness based on actual post-graduation outcomes, such as employment above the regional median wage 6 to 12 months after graduation. This would better align local CTE offerings with the economic opportunities in a particular region. Currently, the only options to demonstrate career readiness for the purposes of the bonus are by earning an approved industry-based certification and scoring above the college readiness threshold of the Texas Success Initiative Assessment.
- Make the CTE allotment student-centered by varying the career and technical education weighted allotment based on how many competencies students complete with a program of study rather than solely based on contact hours.
- Give students starting in 7th grade control over some portion of the career and technical education allotment (1.35 x base funding) to devote toward dual credit in TEA-approved programs of study, apprenticeship programs, and industry-based certifications testing and training. ★

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### **About Texas Public Policy Foundation**

The Texas Public Policy Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan research institute. The Foundation promotes and defends liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas and the nation by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreach.

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