



**Competency-Based Policies and Pathways:  
Lessons from Colorado and Illinois**



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## INTRODUCTION

Leaders and educators in a select number of states have begun to recognize that the traditional educational system — in which students move ahead, year after year, as long as they attain minimal proficiency on basic academic standards — can perpetuate learning gaps for students that grow over time. There is increasing understanding of how the traditional system can prevent students, particularly students of color, low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, from ever meeting the level of preparation they need for college and career.

To address these gaps and inequities, some states have turned toward a competency-based pathways (CBP) approach to advance true college and career readiness for their students. These states are using CBP to address persistent inequities caused by students progressing through a course of study without mastering essential knowledge and skills, lift the ceiling for students who want to progress at a faster pace, and provide flexibility and opportunity to accelerate learning. In these states, leaders are learning how to maintain a commitment to rigor and college and career readiness while simultaneously creating innovative CBP policies and practices to better prepare their K–12 students for college and career. In a CBP system, each student proceeds through a curriculum at a pace that is right for him or her, rather than waiting for peers to catch up or needing to move on without having fully mastered the material. Teachers are able to tailor their support to meet students where they are, instead of teaching one way or at one pace for all students. A CBP approach has great potential to improve educational achievement and college and career readiness for all students.

Achieve has long been interested in exploring the potential of competency-based systems to make learning more relevant, personalized and student-centered while at the same time promoting a high level of rigor and preparing all students for success after high school. Over the last several years, Achieve has made substantial contributions to the field's understanding of CBP and how it can support students'

college and career readiness.<sup>1</sup> Building on that knowledge base, in 2016, with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York, Achieve engaged with stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois to leverage growing interest and emerging progress on CBP in those states. Achieve personnel reviewed publicly available documents, conducted a series of 32 virtual interviews with stakeholders and practitioners, and held conference calls with key stakeholders in each state. Information from the document reviews and interviews was used to develop recommendation memos for each state's leaders to inform their continued implementation of CBP.

Through the state engagement and development of recommendations, Achieve has identified early lessons learned in Colorado and Illinois that will be of interest to other states exploring CBP. While the entry point for Achieve's engagement on CBP issues in Colorado and Illinois is at the state level, it is important to note that the locus of change is at the school and district levels. State leaders and organizations can leverage state policy to *create supportive environments* for CBP, while schools and districts actually *implement the systems and practices* and manage the change required by a CBP approach.

This paper discusses considerations and recommendations identified from the work in Colorado and Illinois. The purpose is to highlight strategies and actions that will enable CBP and college- and career-ready expectations to occur simultaneously with a particular focus on CBP-enabled graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability systems.

## CBP LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Efforts in Colorado and Illinois illustrate two different approaches to enabling CBP. Stakeholders in Colorado have taken a field-driven and ground-up approach to CBP. Stakeholders in Illinois have taken a state policy and legislative approach to encouraging the growth of CBP in schools and districts. (See Appendix A for more details on Colorado's and Illinois' CBP-supportive actions.)

## State Context

In Colorado, schools and districts have taken the lead in developing and piloting elements of CBP and are backed by a supportive staff at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), where leaders have helped build a robust community of practice around CBP. Colorado's CBP community of practice also has the support and involvement of the education philanthropy community, including the Colorado Education Initiative (CEI). Colorado districts, in particular Adams 50 and Thompson, have piloted and iterated many CBP elements. The state's CBP community of practice has launched multiple cohorts of districts interested in learning about CBP. CDE, CEI, and the Great Schools Partnership have collaborated to provide learning resources and technical assistance to districts pursuing competency-based education. Recently, CDE convened a cross-sectional leadership team of district, foundation, and nonprofit advocacy staff to launch the development of a statewide strategic plan for CBP based on the learnings and experiences of the community of practice.

Contrast Colorado stakeholders' experience with the one in Illinois, where momentum for CBP-supportive practices was built via the state's P–20 Council and the state legislature. Passed in May 2015, House Resolution (HR) 477 called for the establishment of advisory committees addressing five areas that had been identified by the P–20 Council as key to the promotion of successful student transitions from high school into postsecondary education and careers. One of these areas was piloting competency-based high school graduation requirements. HR 477 tasked the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Board of Higher Education, and Illinois Student Assistance Commission with forming an advisory committee of state policy and district leaders and submitting recommendations to the State Assembly on a competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot by Feb. 1, 2016. These recommendations were then used to write legislation, House Bill (HB) 5729, which was passed by both houses of the General Assembly in May 2016.

These two approaches, while different, have revealed some key issues to think about and some possible action steps for stakeholders in other states considering moving forward with CBP. These issues and potential actions are organized into the following domains:

- CBP Learning Community, Vision, and Planning;
- Assessment;
- Accountability;

- Educator Engagement and Capacity Building;
- Career and Technical Education (CTE) Integration; and
- Higher Education Engagement.

This paper divides each of these domains into:

1. issues for stakeholders to think about — **considerations**; and
2. specific actions for stakeholders to take — **recommendations**.

## CBP Learning Community, Vision, and Planning Considerations

State leaders seeking to advance CBP can be served by identifying ways to infuse a learning agenda throughout any planning and implementation effort, ensuring that as districts or schools advance CBP, the state has the information and relationships to adjust state strategy and support. This learning mindset is important to not only help the state adjust what it does to ensure success but also help get the right balance in the state-district relationship so districts see the state as a true thought and action partner that is serious about innovation and continuous improvement.

One of the most critical steps in advancing CBP is to work with a broad set of state and local stakeholders to reach a shared understanding of *why* advancing CBP is important to the state's goals for students and *how* it fits in with broader reform efforts. One common barrier to advancing CBP at the local level is a perception that it is "just one more thing" to do on top of everything else. State leaders need to be able to demonstrate to local educators and education leaders that CBP can be a strategy to help them meet the goals outlined across the reform agenda. In fact, multiple district stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois indicated that they would like more reassurance from state leaders about the direction the state is headed with CBP and more clarity about the longer-term goals, objectives, and roles of stakeholders. Transitioning from a traditional system to a CBP system calls on states and districts to deploy solid change management processes built upon a strong rationale for why change is needed. To accomplish all of this, a state will need a strong and specific rationale for how CBP will help.

The CBP community of practice in Colorado has engaged stakeholders from school districts, state leaders, education philanthropists, and higher education partners to define a state strategic plan for CBP and to learn about CBP in other

## Legislation Supporting Competency-Based Learning Systems: Illinois Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act (HB 5729)

Section 20 of the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act directs the state superintendent of education, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Community College Board, and Illinois Board of Higher Education to develop a competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot.

The competency-based learning systems authorized through the pilot program are required to include all of the following elements: Students are assessed using multiple measures and advance upon demonstrated mastery of all required adaptive and academic competencies. Students have the ability to attain advanced postsecondary education and career-related competencies beyond those needed for graduation. Students are able to earn credit toward graduation requirements in ways other than traditional coursework, including learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom setting.

School districts participating in the pilot program must:

- Demonstrate that the proposed competency-based learning system is a core strategy supporting the community's efforts to better prepare high school students for college, career, and life. The application must identify the community partners that will support the system's implementation.
- Have a plan for educator and administrator professional development on the competency-based learning system and must demonstrate prior successful implementation of professional development systems for major district instructional initiatives.
- Demonstrate how the competencies can be mastered through integrated courses or career and technical education courses if the district is replacing graduation requirements in the core academic areas of mathematics, English language arts, and science with a competency-based learning system.
- Develop a plan for community engagement and communications.
- Develop a plan for assigning course grades based on mastery of competencies.
- Establish a plan and system for collecting and assessing student progress on competency completion and attainment, including learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom setting.
- Establish a system for data collection and reporting and provide the State Board of Education with such reports and information as may be required for administration and evaluation of the program.
- Partner with a community college and a higher education institution other than a community college for consultation on the development and administration of the competency-based learning system. The plan must address how high school graduates of a competency-based learning system will be able to provide information normally expected of postsecondary institutions for admission and financial aid.
- Create a plan for engaging feeder elementary schools with the participating high school or schools on the establishment and administration of the competency-based learning system.

contexts and within the state. The evolution of Colorado's community of practice has also led to collaboration between CDE, CEI, and the Great Schools Partnership that provides learning resources and technical assistance to support districts and schools implementing CBP.

The work in Illinois, culminating in the passage of HB 5729, has resulted in an innovation zone for CBP in the state. The statute outlines the conditions and requirements for the competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot, which could also be described as an innovation zone. The statute was based on the P-20 Council's college and career readiness recommendations to the General Assembly. These recommendations stated that one of the goals of the pilot program was to create a library of CBP models that eventually can be replicated across the state. This library will consist of CBP models from the districts that participated in the pilot program. In the future, districts interested in implementing a CBP can choose from the library of models that were collected from the pilot program districts. The intention is for the pilot program to support broad and potentially statewide implementation by replicating districts.

## Recommendations

1. Engage a broad set of stakeholders to develop a mission and rationale around why CBP generally makes sense in terms of state priorities and strategic plans. Stakeholders should clarify why they are pursuing CBP and determine how CBP will support other state reform priorities and address priority problems; how CBP will be integrated into technology in assessment, instructional, and student support systems; and how CBP will be structured to ensure that it does not become a less rigorous path for students.<sup>2</sup>
2. Consider creating an innovation zone to pilot CBP if stakeholders are willing to commit to ensuring quality, equity, and transparency by sharing data, information, and expertise within the state and with other innovation zone districts.<sup>3</sup> Part of the rationale for developing a CBP innovation zone is to create a space for interested districts to test new strategies that can inform other districts or a statewide shift. State leaders could seek to capture knowledge about participating districts' efforts for the benefit of other districts. Transparent communication about outcomes and lessons learned could also help a state sustain a shared understanding of and confidence in CBP.

## Colorado's Competency-Based Learning: A Systemic Approach Seminar Series

Collaboration has provided the CBP community of practice in Colorado with resources and tools to implement competency-based learning. Since summer 2015, the Great Schools Partnership has developed and delivered a series of webinars and meetings based on its comprehensive CBP philosophy and CBP topics. Sessions have included:

- *CBP Framework and Planning* focused on understanding the conceptual framework and core principles of CBP.
- *Assessment in a CBP* addressed understanding the roles performance indicators, scoring criteria, and summative assessments play.
- *Grading and Reporting* focused on the principles of formative assessment, separating habits of work from grading, and transitioning to standards-based grading and the necessary community and parent outreach required to support it.
- *Instructional Planning and Collaborative Culture* focused on instructional and school strategies that support CBP and the importance of community engagement.
- Webinars on performance indicators, policies for sustaining personalized learning, and feedback and formative assessment strategies have also been provided.

## Assessment Considerations

Assessment in a competency-based system is complex and challenging, as stakeholders in both Colorado and Illinois have made clear. As states and districts attempt to develop or identify measures of the competencies they want their students to master, they must bear in mind that the overarching goal of their assessment systems must be to measure the full range of college and career readiness skills and to support richer instruction. As such, in a competency-based system, the content and rigor of assessments have to be grounded firmly in what it takes to be successful in college and career. States will also have to deal with a number of technical issues. These include:

- **Validity and reliability of the assessments themselves.** Do the assessments actually measure the competencies in a consistent manner, at a sufficient level of rigor, while aiming for college and career readiness? Can the results from a variety of assessments be combined in a meaningful way?

- **Comparability.** If students are allowed to take the assessments when they are “ready,” can results be compared across schools and districts?
- **Generalizability.** If states and districts use a capstone project or summative performance assessment as a way for students to demonstrate competency, will the results from those kinds of in-depth applications of knowledge and skills be transferable to other settings?

These technical issues become even more important if the competency-based assessments are used for high-stakes decisions, such as high school graduation or classifying schools in an accountability system.

States and districts need to move cautiously here, and they will most likely need to rely upon the guidance of experts and the knowledge of district and school practitioners who have experience in implementing CBP-aligned assessments. State departments of education can be helpful by providing technical support themselves or by serving as a broker for districts, assisting them in finding and paying for technical support. As we pointed out earlier, CDE has supported districts in assessment development. The Adams 50 and Thompson school districts in Colorado have developed competency-based assessments by either hiring outside experts to develop measures (in the case of Adams 50) or using outside expertise to train their own teachers to develop high-quality assessments (as in Thompson). In both cases, CDE has helped districts locate the appropriate support that meets their needs.

**TABLE 1: CBP ASSESSMENT MODELS**

	Flexible pacing model	K–12 competency model	Graduation distinction by exhibition model
<b>District Context</b>	System leaders were concerned that too many students were not passing the state-required summative assessment in math in 10th grade. Teachers were challenged by the wide range of preparation of students entering geometry and algebra classes. Some students lacked prerequisite skills; others were so well prepared they could have accelerated through curriculum.	The community in this small district had concerns that students were advancing to the next grade without having attained requisite skills. There were also concerns that too many students were not being adequately challenged in their coursework.	The district had rigorous college and career readiness standards, and its students performed well on state and national tests. However, students reported struggling in college and career with nonacademic skills such as collaboration and research design.
<b>Description</b>	The district created a series of eight curriculum and assessment units for algebra and geometry courses. Each of the eight units culminates in an assessment and is intended for students to complete at their own pace.	The district decided to move to a competency-based education model. The district adopted the state model graduation competencies and developed grade and course competencies. The competencies were embedded into instructional units that were designed to allow for deeper and differentiated learning.	The district decided to develop a requirement for and competencies encompassed by a senior capstone project. The capstone would allow for the learning and demonstration of competencies around written and oral communication, critical-thinking, problem-solving, and contextual organizational skills — trans-academic skills.
<b>Benefits</b>	Provides a robust, comprehensive system that increases confidence in score comparability and uniform measurement.	Provides for demonstration of deeper learning and focuses on students’ rigorous demonstrations of learning tied to expectations.	Allows for the measurement of high-level trans-academic competencies that are not easily measured.
<b>Challenges</b>	Requires substantial investment of resources. Does not necessarily promote deeper learning or provide a process to provide diagnostic feedback.	Requires special attention, such as frequent internal and external review, to ensure standardization and comparability.	Although not a focus of a capstone project as an assessment tool, allows minimal standardization. Requires significant engagement of community partners.

## Recommendations

1. Consider using these assessments in a low-stakes, formative way until states and districts are confident they are technically sound. Achieve, along with the Center for Assessment, has identified several models that districts could use to develop competency-based assessment programs. These models are shown in Table 1. An in-depth description of these models along with a detailed overview of the technical issues associated with their implementation is available in the brief entitled *Assessment to Support Competency-Based Pathways*.<sup>4</sup>
2. Acknowledge the important role state summative assessments play in vetting the results from district CBP assessments. If the state assessment is based on college- and career-ready standards, then students who demonstrate mastery on local CBP assessments of college and career readiness should also perform at that level on state summative assessments. The critical point here is that local assessments of competency should not have lower standards for students than the state summative assessment. Local leaders need to ensure that students who demonstrate mastery are college and career ready or making progress toward that goal.

## Accountability

### Considerations

Accountability and public reporting systems can — and should — provide critical information about how well prepared a school's graduates are for postsecondary education and careers. Determining whether some pathways or learning experiences disproportionately leave students poorly prepared for postsecondary success is important. In a competency-based system, whether students are *on pace* to demonstrating proficiency as well as the *rate* at which they are demonstrating proficiency on standards within a specified time frame should also be clear. Without attention paid to risks to equity, existing disparities in performance among students by race/ethnicity, income, special education, and English language learner status could be exacerbated. Far worse, new achievement gaps also could open up — ones not based on different levels of performance but on the time it takes to reach standards, if different groups (or individual students) are moving at disproportionately slower paces through the content.

Stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois are beginning to think about how to make accountability less focused on one statewide, standardized assessment and make it more flexible to accommodate local needs. Stakeholders are exploring ways to approach accountability so that it can take into account growth or how fast students are progressing. But across the board, stakeholders had more questions than answers about accountability and wanted to know: How would growth be measured? Does it matter how fast students move through standards or progressions? How would deeper learning be incentivized? How would any standardized statewide assessments, currently being administered annually, be measured and tracked? The stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois reflected that they were at the very beginning of the process of discussing and conceiving of accountability in a CBP environment. This reflection indicates a need for multiple and meaningful conversations about accountability and continued research into accountability models and metrics.

Generally, states should be focused on determining the right performance indicators for the state, districts, and schools to evaluate student progress in a competency-based system. State leaders also have an important role to play in ensuring that the accountability system reflects that true college and career readiness is a goal for all students. State leaders will want to ensure quality, consistency, and alignment of performance indicators based on student progress on mastering standards and ensure alignment of performance indicators across K–12 and postsecondary.<sup>5</sup> It is critical that state and district leaders monitor the impact of CBP on student outcomes, especially readiness for college and careers, to ensure that CBP fulfills its potential to help all students be prepared for success after high school.

### Recommendation

1. Convene a cross-sectional group of state and local leaders for the express purpose of designing a framework that will describe accountability within the state's CBP environment. In addition to proposing a set of accountability indicators, the framework should address progress that students make over the course of a year, the rate at which students are learning, whether students are exceeding expectations by demonstrating deep mastery, and whether students are going beyond high school graduation requirements by earning college credit. The development of this framework can be supported with Achieve's *Sample CBP Report Card*.<sup>6</sup>

## Educator Engagement and Capacity Building

### Considerations

A critical step in implementing a CBP system is building a shared understanding of the level of performance that is needed for students to receive credit for courses or learning experiences. Some of the most significant risks to equity emerge where there is a risk of variation in how teachers define proficiency or mastery, with a serious risk that some will lower the bar, particularly for underperforming students. Using empirical evidence and strong stakeholder engagement to define the performance level and build trust and broad understanding is critical. Variation in the quality and alignment of performance assessments or tasks is also a substantial risk. Educators and instructional leaders will need clear and shared criteria and a common process for selecting, procuring, curating, and/or developing high-quality instructional materials and performance tasks. This will require calibrating judgment at all levels of decision-making, including in scoring student work and assessments across the district.

Stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois recognized that one of the biggest challenges in implementing CBP is in shifting how teachers teach and helping them understand that a competency-based approach requires teachers taking on different roles than they have had in the past. The teaching shift in a competency-based approach requires aligned and effective professional learning, which in turn requires significant changes to existing professional learning systems — selecting and developing instructional materials, planning lessons, evaluating student work, identifying and training coaches, planning and piloting cycles, etc. Stakeholders in Colorado are working on this issue through their Great Schools Partnership efforts, including seminars that have addressed instructional planning and collaboration and grading and reporting. Leaders in Illinois are just starting to reconceive professional learning in a CBP environment and reflect a need to review how district professional learning systems are designed and how they can support the changes required of teachers and teaching for CBP.

### Recommendation

1. State leaders can support the teaching and learning shifts required by CBP by identifying resources and funding streams to support districts' professional learning and capacity building. State leaders can also support this work by engaging with education philanthropists who can help identify external experts and funding and potentially provide direct funding. Districts should incorporate CBP

learning into their existing professional learning systems. District leaders will need to determine what changes to the existing professional learning system are required, how much the district is currently investing in professional learning, and what returns are realized from those investments. District leaders should explicitly track and measure professional learning effectiveness and its impact on student success. Districts may want to review *Designing the Infrastructure for Learning*<sup>7</sup> for examples of how districts and schools have designed professional learning to support CBP.

## CTE Integration

### Considerations

In contemplating CBP advancement, state leaders may want to explore multiple ways to support CTE and CBP integration. CTE and CBP can have multiple common leverage points such as contextualized learning and teaching, self-directed student pathways, experiential learning opportunities, project-based learning, and performance-based assessment.

Stakeholders in Colorado and Illinois were interested in using CTE to expand students' options and recognized that integrating core academics and CTE has mutually benefited both. Stakeholders also expressed a desire to more fully engage with business and industry. In Illinois, CTE has a strong reputation and is widely deployed. Recent legislation in Illinois, HB 5729, cites CTE as a critical component in students' ability to demonstrate mastery. Some Colorado and Illinois stakeholders also indicated that engaging a state's CTE community in this work is one way to capture the business and industry voice in designing meaningful CBP.

### Recommendation

1. If they are not already, CTE leaders should be involved in CBP strategy, planning, and implementation at the state and local levels. State leaders should identify avenues within the state's support of districts that are already pursuing CBP (e.g., targeted technical assistance, resource development, communities of practice) that will facilitate alignment with CTE. State leaders should convene or otherwise engage district, CTE, and business community leaders to determine the existing leverage points between CBP and CTE and the major challenges in making use of those leverage points. This work can be guided by *Building a Strong Relationship Between Competency-Based Pathways and Career Technical Education*.<sup>8</sup>

## Higher Education Engagement

### Considerations

Quality CBP requires an engaged higher education presence in CBP planning and implementation efforts. Colorado and Illinois stakeholders are at the beginning stages of outlining how the state and individual districts can approach and engage higher education partners. In Colorado in particular, the philanthropic community has been involved broadly in CBP and has taken an interest in supporting the relationships between higher education and K–12. In April 2016, the CDE convened higher education admissions officers and K–12 school and district staff to align transcripts and K–12 and higher education admission practices for students applying to Colorado colleges and universities from CBP schools and districts.

Illinois' P–20 Council was instrumental in developing the recommendations for the competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot in HB 5729. The committee that developed the recommendations had representation from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Central College, Illinois Community College Board, Northern Illinois University, and Waubensee Community College. Furthermore, HB 5729 explicitly requires districts participating in the high school graduation requirements pilot to have a both a community college and a non-community college higher education partner to support program design and advise on college admission and financial aid application issues.

### Recommendation

1. State leaders should engage higher education partners early in the visioning and planning process to increase buy-in from stakeholders. Higher education engagement is also critical in determining high school graduation requirements that ensure students graduate truly college ready. Higher education partners should also be fully engaged in conversations around college entrance requirements and high school transcripts to ensure seamless transitions to postsecondary. District leaders should reach out to their local higher education partners to build meaningful relationships. Local higher education partners serve in an advisory capacity to districts and schools, as well as provide resources and programs that are important in building students' college and career readiness.

## CONCLUSION

State leaders and stakeholders in both Colorado and Illinois are optimistic about the potential of CBP to bring more options and flexibility to their students. Many see it, as one stakeholder says, "as a tool to blur that line between high school and postsecondary, between schooling and training, and between college and career." The work that stakeholders have undertaken in Colorado and Illinois has provided a preliminary roadmap for how other states can structure and deploy CBP learning, planning, and implementation to support college and career readiness for their state's students.

## APPENDIX A — COLORADO AND ILLINOIS CBP LANDSCAPES

### Illinois Key Stakeholders and Priorities

#### Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)

James Meeks, chair of the Board, has stated his support for continuing to implement the Common Core State Standards. The Board's current strategic priorities focus on college- and career-ready standards and assessments, the PK–20 longitudinal data system, improving teacher and leader effectiveness, and interventions to support the state's lowest performing schools and students.

Superintendent Tony Smith shared in his first media interview that he wanted to move away from seat time to demonstrated competency and free districts of regulatory burden to spur innovation in learning. One of his five key priorities is encouraging competency-based learning.

#### Third-Party Organizations

**Advance Illinois** works closely with the Department of Education. Current relevant bodies of work include:

- **Making Assessments Work:** In 2015, Advance Illinois published a series of briefs that outline what good assessments look like and how, when done well, they can support instruction.
- **Educator Advisory Council:** Advance Illinois incorporates feedback, suggestions, and guidance from educators on policy through this council. It co-hosts an annual Educator Leadership Institute for hundreds of educators to share experiences, resources, and best practices, as well as make recommendations to ISBE.
- **Legislator Outreach:** Advance Illinois tracks all education bills considered by the General Assembly, regularly works with the General Assembly, and hosts an annual Education Legislative Institute with at least 200 policymakers.
- **Real Learning for Real Life:** Advance Illinois leads this coalition, which includes several organizations in the state. The coalition promotes high standards, curriculum, and aligned assessments.

**Illinois 60 by 25 Network**, a coalition led by Advance Illinois, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, and the Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University, has created a community of practice to help local and regional teams reach the goal of ensuring that 60 percent of all adults have a college or career credential by 2025. The community of

practice kicked off in January 2014. Through the network, local community teams and statewide partners (e.g., the Illinois P–20 Council and Illinois Board of Higher Education) are working together to align policy, use data, and mobilize leaders around a common agenda. Participating teams also have access to technical assistance and resources. They have adopted three strategies:

1. Supporting the implementation of the new Illinois Learning Standards.
2. Developing Illinois Pathways as a key strategy to increase the number of degrees and credentials their students earn.
3. Using the principles of collective impact to support collaboration among public and private partners.

### Illinois State Policy Supporting CBP

#### Illinois State Assembly

In 2014 and 2015, the Assembly passed major overhauls in assessment (Senate Bill [SB] 3412 and SB 1455), accountability (House Bill [HB] 2683), and postsecondary transitions (House Resolution [HR] 477). SB 3412, which was passed in August 2014, required ISBE to administer no more than three assessments in English language arts and mathematics in high school. One of those assessments must include a college- and career-ready determination and is required for students to graduate. High schools were given the flexibility to assess students on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Algebra I/Integrated Math 1 test; Geometry/Integrated Math 2 test; or Algebra 2/Integrated Math 3 test to meet this requirement. In July 2015, the language for “college- and career-ready determination” on the required high school assessment was clarified via SB 1455 to state that the college and career readiness assessment shall be accepted by Illinois’ public higher education institutions for “the purpose of student application or admissions consideration.”

In 2014, Illinois received an Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver to move away from an accountability system solely focused on student achievement and developed a “Multiple Measures Index” for evaluating student, school, and district performance. In July 2015, HB 2683 was passed, making changes to Illinois’ accountability system and state reward/intervention system. The bill shifted school performance standards from being based on student achievement, attendance, graduation rates, and assessment

participation to a “balanced accountability measure” that includes two components: student performance and professional practice.

- The student performance component focuses on achievement status (graduation rates and college and career readiness), achievement growth, and annual measurable objectives (achievement gaps) metrics.
- The professional practice component focuses on the degree to which a school is implementing evidence-based best practices; is exhibiting continuous improvement; and uses compliance, evidence-based practice, and contextual improvement metrics.

## HR 477

In 2012, the Illinois P–20 Council established the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Steering Committee, which met regularly from May 2012 through July 2013. The committee issued a report identifying various key success factors for supporting student transitions from high school to postsecondary and careers. Recommendations included expanding the use of personalized learning plans, increasing opportunities for early college credit, ensuring that expectations for high school graduation signify readiness for college and career, and augmenting career exploration and work-based learning options.

These recommendations were addressed in HR 477, which was adopted in May 2015. It called for the establishment of advisory committees addressing five areas that had been identified by the P–20 Council’s College and Career Readiness Committee as key to the promotion of successful student transitions from high school into postsecondary education and careers. One of these areas was piloting competency-based high school graduation requirements. ISBE, the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission were encouraged to establish an advisory committee to provide recommendations on competency-based high school graduation requirements by Feb. 1, 2016. The advisory committee’s final recommendations describe the general pilot parameters:

- Purpose: The district’s proposed approach to competency-based learning must be a core strategy supporting the community’s efforts to better prepare high school students for college, career, and life. It cannot be a technical exercise disconnected from a broader vision. The application must identify community partners that will support its implementation.

- Flexibility at two key levels: (1) Districts can select which graduation requirements they intend to replace with a competency-based system (e.g., math, language arts, or both; elective requirements) or which years they intend to replace (e.g., the requirement for two years of math). (2) Flexibility is not a one-time event — districts can obtain flexibility for implementation throughout the pilot.
- Required plan components:
  - Development of a map between competencies and academic standards.
  - An approach to assessment and determination of mastery. This approach should include assessment of out-of-school experiences.
  - An approach to data collection and data reporting (external validation, report to the state, and a collaboration component to cross-reference data).
  - An approach to the development of grades and external reporting for students.
  - A plan for professional development, including an assessment to determine teacher/staff needs (i.e., professional development for creating performance assessments and teaching adaptive competencies).
  - A plan for community engagement and communication.
- Academic and career and technical education (CTE) integration.
- Inclusion of adaptive competencies (e.g., work ethic, professionalism, communication, collaboration and interpersonal skills, problem-solving).
- Competency translation for higher education.
- A plan for providing information to the state.
- A range of district types participating in the pilot implementation.

## HB 5729

The recommendations were submitted to the Illinois General Assembly on Feb. 1, 2016. With some changes from the committee recommendations, HB 5729, the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act, directs the state superintendent of education, ISBE, and other stakeholders to develop the high school graduation requirements pilot and passed both houses of the Assembly in May 2016. The proposed timeline assumes a June 30, 2017, date by which ISBE will publish the application for the pilot program; an April 1, 2018, date by which ISBE will select the first cohort of school districts for the pilot; and

implementation by pilot districts during the 2018–19 school year. Advance Illinois is leading efforts to provide technical assistance to districts interested in applying for the pilot.

## Colorado Key Stakeholders and Priorities

### General Assembly

In 2015, top priorities included overtesting, school finance, and school safety. Other issues relevant to CBP included testing opt-outs and repeal of the Common Core and PARCC. One of the more significant pieces of legislation was a compromise on overtesting, HB 1323, which was passed in the final hours of the legislative session. The bill significantly reduced high school testing, streamlined school readiness and early literacy assessments, guaranteed parent opt-out rights, gave districts and teachers extra time on use of assessment data for accreditation and evaluation, and offered districts testing flexibility.

The Assembly's legislative priorities for the 2016 session included a number of issues relevant to CBP. However, the session adjourned on May 11, 2016, without much progress made on education issues. Going into the most recent session, the state had an \$880 million education funding shortfall. Efforts to significantly reduce the shortfall failed, and the shortfall currently stands at \$831 million. Significant legislation that did pass during the 70th session addressed student data privacy and teacher recruitment and funding in rural schools.

### CDE

Richard Crandall was approved as commissioner on Dec. 14, 2015, and began serving on Jan. 19, 2016. Crandall is a former state legislator in Arizona, serving as chairman of the education committees in the Senate and House. He is also a former chief of schools in Wyoming. Crandall resigned May 19, 2016, citing family reasons, and CDE Chief of Staff Katy Anthes was appointed interim commissioner on May 20.

### Third-Party Organizations

The *Colorado Education Initiative* (CEI) actively supports CBP. Next-generation learning is a central focus of the initiative, and it has embedded resources on CBP into that vision. CEI has developed tools that include videos, toolkits, and one-pagers that articulate specific pathways.

The *Learning Accelerator* is partnering with CDE and CEI to accelerate student-centered learning. The partnership launched a community engagement initiative to explore the

priorities and competencies parents, community members, and educators believe students should achieve before graduation. The community engagement initiative is occurring in Mesa County School District 51 and Archuleta School District 50.

The *Regional Education Lab Central* (run by Marzano Research Laboratory) is building capacity around state policy issues to better serve its states, including Colorado. It has several resources available online on state and district work on competency.

*2Revolutions* has been working with CDE to develop a shared workspace to store proficiency-based assessment items.

## Colorado State Policy Supporting CBP

### Statewide Vision for CBP

CDE's approach to promoting a vision for CBP has been to invite districts to learn, explore, and identify approaches that work in their individual contexts, in place of compelling districts to participate. CDE has developed a strategic plan that is guiding its internal work in supporting districts.

### Standards

In 2008, Colorado passed SB 212 to adopt the Colorado Academic Standards, which incorporate the Common Core State Standards; provide training, tools, and sample curricula; and require the development of Colorado Measures of Academic Success assessments. In 2009 and 2010, the General Assembly also passed legislation that tied accountability for schools, districts, and educators to student performance on the standards. CDE currently offers several resources to educators to support standards implementation, including sample curricula, instructional resources, and communications resources. CDE is also exploring academic and nonacademic competencies aligned to learning progressions.

### Graduation Guidelines

The Colorado State Board of Education (SBOE) voted to approve an updated menu of graduation guidelines in English language arts and math in September 2015 to apply to the graduating class of 2021. These guidelines were the culmination of efforts within the State Assembly, SBOE, and CDE since 2007 to set graduation guidelines. In 2007, the Assembly passed HB 07-1118, which required the development of state high school graduation guidelines. An 18-member Graduation Guidelines Council was formed to develop recommendations for the SBOE to consider.

Following timeline delays, restructuring within the council, and more than 50 stakeholder meetings, the council provided its recommendations, which were then adopted by the SBOE in 2013. Over the course of two years, CDE convened seven work groups, including more than 300 educators, business and industry leaders, parents, and students, to identify implementation recommendations, best practices, tools, and resources. The work groups addressed 21st century skills, assessment, capstone projects, individual career and academic plans, industry certificates, high school diploma endorsements, and special populations. In September 2015, the SBOE also motioned CDE to convene a study group to find more CTE options. Per the new guidelines approved by the SBOE in September 2015, districts must adopt at least one measure for each subject area from the menu to add to their graduation requirements. They can choose to adopt more than one or all of the measures on the menu. These competency-based measures do not replace district course credit requirements or other district requirements which are decided on by local school boards. There are no state level course requirements for graduation other than a course in civics

## Examples of Practice

Multiple districts across Colorado are currently pursuing CBP. Because of the lack of state requirements, graduation requirements vary across those districts, both in terms of what courses of study are required and how credit is awarded. However, some districts are in the process of incorporating measures from the state- graduation guidelines into their district graduation requirements.

*Adams District 50, Colorado Springs District 11, and Thompson School District* are participating in an initiative to expand next-generation learning, including CBP, in partnership with CDE and CEI and funded by Next Generation Learning Challenges. Each district will focus on two schools. Adams 50 was one of the early pioneers in transitioning to a competency-based system.

*Denver Public Schools* opened a competency-based high school, Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design, in fall 2015 with 100 9th graders. The school is part of Carnegie Corporation of New York's Opportunity by Design Initiative.

Seven schools in *Grand Junction District 51* transitioned to performance-based learning in fall 2015. The schools approached the transition in slightly different ways, but generally, students are allowed to progress upon demonstration of mastery and set their own learning goals; were encouraged to "take ownership" of their learning; and

were immersed in a concept called growth mindset, which teaches that any student is capable of doing well in school and can improve and that abilities or performance levels are not set in stone.

## District Capacity Building To Support CBP

CDE has supported a study group, originally facilitated by Achieve, to explore competency-based systems implementation. The first cohort kicked off in September 2014 with 12 districts and was designed to build a community of practice to support a network of districts committed to advancing competency-based learning. The districts included Adams 50, Boulder, Center, Denver, Garfield, Grand Junction, Mesa 51, Pagosa Springs, Salida, Strasburg, and Thompson. The study group met with leaders in Maine and visited Lindsay Unified School District in California. In 2015, CDE launched a second round of study group meetings, divided into two cohorts — a 101 for new districts and a 201 for the original cohort.

In early 2016, Achieve and Carnegie Corporation of New York supported CDE in convening a cross-sectional leadership team of district, foundation, and nonprofit advocacy staff to learn what they believe the future holds for competency-based education and what the considerations are for implementing the CBP vision in Colorado. During the March 2016 summit, CBP system components were defined, priorities identified, and next steps cited. These CBP system components' roles include:

- *Accountability* becomes a way to acknowledge and value learning in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. It is not something that is done to students/teachers/schools/districts but is a way to provide value to students, teachers, schools, districts, and communities.
- *Funding* follows the student to ensure that the unique needs of each learner can be best met. Making a shift to personalized learning requires more resources; overall funding will initially need to be increased but will prove more cost-effective over time as students succeed at higher rates. Funding needs to be stable over time, be flexible so it follows students to the different sites where they learn, and be used to overcome the inequities that students face in gaining access to success as learners.
- *Standards and competencies* provide a bridge between K–12 and postsecondary in that they are developed to ensure that students meet a threshold of readiness for success in life and the ability to continue to learn and develop. Workforce, community, and higher education have a role to play in developing standards and competencies.

- When developing *curriculum*, the “whole” as well as the parts must be clear and allow for breadth of applications aligned to postsecondary competencies where students see their personal goal as the driver of the work.
- The role of *assessment* is to monitor growth and achievement in academic and nonacademic competencies so that the learner can direct his or her own learning pathway. Assessments should be authentic, varied and personalized, and timely.
- *Community engagement* should involve empowering all members of a community to serve as core design partners in the development and implementation of the system to serve system learning.
- *Higher education* can provide opportunities for students to show that they are ready to enter college-level coursework in a variety of ways and prepare teachers for a competency-based environment.
- The role of *graduation requirements* is to establish an expectation of lifelong learning and readiness for a myriad of postsecondary and workforce opportunities based on student and community needs, interest, and possibility.
- The multiple roles of the *educator* include:
  - Curator: delivering, finding, and creating resources to support the varied learning needs of students.
  - Analyst: using data to work with students to determine next steps.
  - Mentor: helping students identify what they want to do and scaffolding to that personal goal.
  - Tutor: working one on one with students to support learning, removing learning gaps and adding enrichment.
  - Activator: helping students connect with their passions and goals and helping them capitalize on their own unique skills.
  - Coach: helping students develop self-sufficiency.
  - Facilitator: supporting and guiding peer-to-peer interaction.

## APPENDIX B — SELECT CBP RESOURCES

TABLE 1: ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES SUPPORTING COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Resource	Description
<b>Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Innovation Lab Network (ILN)</b> <a href="http://www.ccsso.org/What_We_Do/Innovation_Lab_Network.html">www.ccsso.org/What_We_Do/Innovation_Lab_Network.html</a>	A group of states CCSSO is supporting to spur system-level change by scaling locally led innovation to widespread implementation, both within and across states. See <i>Innovation in Action: State Pathways For Advancing Student Learning</i> .
<b>CompetencyWorks</b> <a href="http://www.competencyworks.org/">www.competencyworks.org/</a>	Supported by the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL), an online resource with CBP reports, briefs, a blog, and a learning community.
<b>Next Generation Learning Challenges</b> <a href="http://nextgenlearning.org/topics/competency-based-learning">http://nextgenlearning.org/topics/competency-based-learning</a>	A section of the Next Gen site that details events, reports, tools, websites, and blog posts that discuss competency-based learning.
<b>Students at the Center Hub</b> <a href="http://studentsatthecenterhub.org/">http://studentsatthecenterhub.org/</a>	A Jobs for the Future online resource for student-centered approaches to learning.

**TABLE 2: CASE STUDIES AND IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES OF CBP**

Resource	Description
<p><b>“Competency-Based Education in Three Pilot Programs: What It Is, How It’s Implemented, and How It’s Working,”</b> Rand Corporation, 2014.  <a href="http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB9700/RB9796/RAND_RB9796.pdf">www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB9700/RB9796/RAND_RB9796.pdf</a></p>	<p>A brief describing CBP implementation and outcomes in Adams 50, Colorado; the Asia Society; and the School District of Philadelphia.</p>
<p><b>“New Hampshire: Our Story of Transformation,”</b> New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014.  <a href="http://education.nh.gov/documents/nh-story.pdf">http://education.nh.gov/documents/nh-story.pdf</a></p>	<p>A description of New Hampshire’s work to adapt its education system to current needs, including video clips, timeline, and a description of its efforts to implement competency-based education.</p>
<p><b>“Chugach School District: A Personalized, Performance-Based System,”</b> Chris Sturgis, CompetencyWorks, 2016.  <a href="http://www.inacol.org/resource/chugach-school-district-a-personalized-performance-based-system/">www.inacol.org/resource/chugach-school-district-a-personalized-performance-based-system/</a></p>	<p>A case study exploring how a K–12 district in Alaska transformed into a competency-based system.</p>
<p><b>“Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems: Insights from Local Leaders,”</b> Chris Sturgis, CompetencyWorks, 2015.  <a href="http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/iNCL_CWIssueBrief_Implementing_v5_web.pdf">www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/iNCL_CWIssueBrief_Implementing_v5_web.pdf</a></p>	<p>A paper that maps CBP terrain in districts across four stages based on interviews of and site visits to districts that are implementing CBP.</p>

**TABLE 3: STATE COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION EFFORTS**

Resource	Description
<p><b>Multiple States</b>  <a href="http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/iNACOL-Promising-State-Policies-for-Personalized-Learning.pdf">www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/iNACOL-Promising-State-Policies-for-Personalized-Learning.pdf</a></p>	<p>A report from iNACOL detailing state efforts around competency-based education and personalized learning. See the resources section on page 43 for state examples on competency-based education policies and resources on assessment, accountability, and proficiency-based diplomas and transcripts.</p>
<p><b>Iowa</b>  <a href="http://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/standards-and-curriculum/competency-based-pathways/iowa-cbe-collaborative">www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/standards-and-curriculum/competency-based-pathways/iowa-cbe-collaborative</a>  <a href="http://iacomped.com/">http://iacomped.com/</a></p>	<p>Iowa Department of Education competency-based education site. See “Statement of the Problem and Rationale” and “Goals, Objectives, and Responsibilities.” Then go to the Iowa Forum for Competency-Based Education and see “Planning for This Change,” “Writing Competencies,” and “Model Competencies.”</p>
<p><b>Kentucky</b>  <a href="http://education.ky.gov/school/innov/Documents/KY_CBE_Final_HR1-10-13.pdf">http://education.ky.gov/school/innov/Documents/KY_CBE_Final_HR1-10-13.pdf</a>  <a href="http://education.ky.gov/school/innov/pages/districts-of-innovation.aspx">http://education.ky.gov/school/innov/pages/districts-of-innovation.aspx</a></p>	<p>Resources from a 2012 statewide summit organized by the Department of Education, which brought together 150 stakeholders to learn about CBP and how they can help prepare students for college and career. The state then introduced a culture of learning and innovation through legislation that established Districts of Innovation.</p>
<p><b>Maine</b>  <a href="http://www.maine.gov/doe/cbp/index.html">www.maine.gov/doe/cbp/index.html</a></p>	<p>Maine’s Center for Best Practice resources, including case studies, videos, and other state- and district-developed resources that support CBP.</p>
<p><b>New Hampshire</b>  <a href="http://education.nh.gov/innovations/hs_redesign/index.htm">http://education.nh.gov/innovations/hs_redesign/index.htm</a></p>	<p>New Hampshire’s High School Transformation resources. See “State Model Competencies” and “Reports and Documents” for advisories on required subjects and credits for high school graduation.</p>

**TABLE 3: STATE COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION EFFORTS *continued***

Resource	Description
<p><b>Vermont</b></p> <p><a href="http://education.vermont.gov/flexible-pathways">http://education.vermont.gov/flexible-pathways</a>  <a href="http://education.vermont.gov/state-board/rules/2000/">http://education.vermont.gov/state-board/rules/2000/</a></p>	<p>Resources on Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Bill, which was passed in 2013 by the state legislature to introduce a commitment to personalization, with a commitment to offer multiple pathways to college and career readiness and a requirement for every student in grades 7–12 to have a personalized learning plan. In 2014, the State Board of Education approved the Education Quality Standards, which outline the intention for districts to transition to proficiency-based diplomas beginning with the graduating class of 2020 and for schools to offer instructional practices to promote personalization and multiple pathways, including CTE, online learning, work-based learning, service learning, early college, and dual enrollment.</p>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Achieve. About Competency-Based Pathways. [www.achieve.org/CBP](http://www.achieve.org/CBP)
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- <sup>3</sup> Achieve. (2016). Creating Innovation Zones to Advance the Promise of Competency-Based Pathways. [www.achieve.org/files/Achieve%20Innovation%20Zone%20Final.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve%20Innovation%20Zone%20Final.pdf)
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- <sup>7</sup> CompetencyWorks. (2015). Designing the Infrastructure for Learning: Implementing Competency Education in K-12 Systems. [www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/iNCL\\_CWIssueBrief\\_Implementing\\_Designing\\_v2\\_web.pdf](http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/iNCL_CWIssueBrief_Implementing_Designing_v2_web.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> Achieve. (2015). Building a Strong Relationship between Competency-Based Pathways and Career Technical Education. [www.achieve.org/files/AchieveCBPCTEConnections.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveCBPCTEConnections.pdf)

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