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The Family-School Partnership in a Competency-Based Future



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Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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The Family-School Partnership in a Competency-Based Future

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For more than a century, the basic architecture of American secondary education has remained remarkably familiar. Students are organized by age and grade level, move through courses on a fixed calendar, accumulate credits largely based on instructional time, and receive letter or numerical grades meant to summarize their performance. Families may not understand every curricular decision, but they generally understand the system. They know what a report card looks like, what it means to pass a course, how many credits are required for graduation, and why a student is considered a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior.

Competency-based education changes that familiar architecture.

In a competency-based system, students progress by demonstrating mastery of clearly defined knowledge, skills, and dispositions rather than simply completing a prescribed amount of seat time. Learning expectations are explicit and measurable. Assessment is ongoing. Students may receive additional time and support when they have not yet demonstrated competency, and they may move more quickly when they are ready. Learning may occur through projects, internships, work-based experiences, community partnerships, interdisciplinary courses, and other settings beyond the traditional classroom (Aurora Institute, 2018; Sturgis & Casey, 2018).

This is not simply a change in grading. It changes how schools define learning, progress, readiness, responsibility, and success.

That distinction matters because districts sometimes treat family communication as one of the final steps of implementation. Leaders design competencies, revise assessment practices, select reporting platforms, train teachers, and then schedule a parent information night to explain the new system. By that point, many of the most significant decisions have already been made.

When the entire learning system changes, families cannot be treated merely as the audience for an announcement. They must be engaged as partners in understanding, shaping, implementing, and evaluating the change.

Why the Shift Is Particularly Complex at the Secondary Level

Competency-based education can be challenging to explain in any setting, but the transition is especially complicated in middle and high schools. Secondary families are navigating credit accumulation, graduation requirements, athletic eligibility, honor rolls, class rank, college admissions, scholarships, advanced coursework, career preparation, and postsecondary planning. A change to grading or advancement may therefore feel as though it carries immediate consequences for a child's future.

Traditional grades are familiar, even when they are imprecise. A grade of 82 may be based on test performance, homework completion, attendance, extra credit, participation, effort, behavior, and assignment timeliness. Families recognize the number, but they may not know exactly what it communicates about learning.

Competency-based reporting attempts to provide more precise information by identifying what a student knows, what the student can apply, and what the student still needs to develop. Yet greater precision does not automatically produce greater understanding.

Competency-based grading reforms can generate significant concern at the secondary level because families are trying to translate an unfamiliar reporting system into familiar questions: Is my child passing? Is this an A? Will this affect the transcript? Will colleges understand it? Is my child on track to graduate? These concerns are intensified when changes in grading are introduced without clear, consistent explanations of how competency levels connect to credits, transcripts, graduation, and postsecondary opportunities (Aurora Institute, 2018; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2025).

Schools must take these concerns seriously. They should not dismiss them as resistance to innovation. Many questions arise as families attempt to fulfill their responsibility to protect and advocate for their children within a system they no longer fully understand.

The challenge is not that families focus too much on grades. The challenge is that schools have changed the language of success without yet helping families become fluent in it.

Family Engagement Cannot Mean Selling the Change

A meaningful difference exists between communicating a reform and engaging families in it.

Communication is often one-directional. The district explains the new model, distributes a frequently asked questions document, demonstrates the reporting platform, and assures families that the change will benefit students.

Authentic engagement is reciprocal. Families have opportunities to ask questions, identify risks, describe their needs, test new tools, challenge assumptions, and influence implementation decisions. The system treats their concerns not as barriers to overcome, but as information it needs. Research on family-school partnerships consistently emphasizes that meaningful engagement depends on reciprocal relationships, shared responsibility, trust, and opportunities for families to contribute to decisions affecting students (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

KnowledgeWorks has described a shared, community-developed vision as a foundational condition for personalized, competency-based education. Families, students, educators, community partners, businesses, and postsecondary institutions all have a role in defining what graduates should know and be able to do. An inclusive process creates greater ownership, coherence, and shared accountability across the system (KnowledgeWorks, 2023).

The order matters.

Schools should not decide what competency-based education will look like and then ask families to support it. They should invite families into determining what student success means, how evidence of learning should be communicated, what protections students need, and how the community will know whether the new system is working.

This does not mean that every technical decision becomes a public referendum. It means the system is designed with families, not delivered to them.

The First Shift: From Explaining Procedures to Building Understanding

Families need more than a definition of competency-based education. They need opportunities to examine why the change is being considered.

What problem is the district attempting to solve? Are students earning credits without mastering essential skills? Are traditional grades obscuring learning gaps? Are students receiving a single average rather than actionable feedback? Are learners advancing according to the calendar rather than readiness? Are current structures limiting interdisciplinary learning, student agency, career exploration, or real-world application?

Without an honest discussion of the existing system's limitations, the new model may appear to be an unnecessary experiment.

Districts must also be clear about what competency-based education is not. It is not eliminating standards. It is not the absence of deadlines, structure, rigor, or accountability. It is not allowing students to do nothing until they decide they are ready. It is not converting every course into independent online work. It is not simply about replacing letter grades with numbers from one to four.

High-quality competency-based systems establish rigorous, transparent expectations for learning; use meaningful, varied forms of assessment; provide timely support; develop student agency; and require students to demonstrate they can transfer and apply their knowledge. Equity, consistency, transparency, and continuous improvement must be intentionally designed into the system rather than assumed (Aurora Institute, 2018; Sturgis & Casey, 2018).

Families need repeated opportunities to see these ideas in practice. They should review sample competencies, examine student work, compare traditional and competency-based reports, participate in mock student-led conferences, and practice interpreting evidence of progress. One presentation will not be enough. Understanding must develop over time.



The Second Shift: From Report Cards to Learning Conversations

In traditional systems, family communication often centers on reporting events. Progress reports are issued. Report cards are posted. Conferences are held. Families are told what has already occurred.

Competency-based education should encourage families to have more frequent, forward-looking conversations about learning.

A competency report should help a family answer:

- ✓ What is my child expected to know and be able to do?
- ✓ What evidence has my child produced?
- ✓ What has my child demonstrated consistently?
- ✓ Where is additional learning needed?
- ✓ What feedback has been provided?
- ✓ What opportunities will the student have to revise, practice, or reassess?
- ✓ What support is available at school?
- ✓ What can we discuss or reinforce at home without attempting to become the teacher?
- ✓ Is my child making sufficient progress toward graduation and postsecondary goals?

This is a fundamentally different conversation from “Why did my child receive an 82?”

Competency-based reporting can make learning more visible, but only when families understand the competencies, performance levels, evidence, and next steps. Transparency must go beyond access to a digital dashboard. Information is not useful simply because it is available.

Research on family engagement suggests that information is most effective when it is understandable, actionable, timely, and connected to trusting relationships between families and educators. Simply providing access to data does not ensure that families know how to interpret it or use it to support learning (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

Every secondary student should therefore have an adult who can help the student and family interpret progress across courses and competencies. Advisory systems, student-led conferences, case managers, counselors, and family liaisons can provide this coherence. Without such structures, families may receive fragmented information from multiple teachers who use different terminology and have different expectations.

The Third Shift: From Monitoring Compliance to Supporting Adolescent Agency

Family engagement changes as children enter adolescence. Secondary students need increasing independence, and families should not be expected to monitor every assignment or manage every interaction with a teacher. At the same time, schools should not use adolescent independence as an excuse to keep families at a distance.

Research on secondary family engagement indicates that academic socialization is especially important during adolescence. This includes discussing educational goals, communicating expectations, connecting current learning to future possibilities, encouraging effective learning habits, and helping young people make decisions. These practices may be more developmentally appropriate and academically influential than traditional school-based activities such as volunteering or attending events (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jensen & Minke, 2017).

Competency-based education creates new opportunities for this form of engagement. Families can help students reflect on questions such as:

- ✓ What are you currently working to master?
- ✓ What evidence best demonstrates your learning?
- ✓ Which feedback are you using?
- ✓ Where do you feel confident?
- ✓ Where are you stuck?
- ✓ What support have you requested?
- ✓ What is your next learning goal?
- ✓ How does this competency connect to your future interests?

The family's role is not to direct every step. It is to help the student develop the language, confidence, habits, and self-advocacy needed to take increasing ownership.

Student agency, however, must not be confused with student self-sufficiency. Telling adolescents to "own their learning" without providing clear expectations, coaching, relationships, and timely interventions simply transfers the burden of navigating the system to the student. Agency develops through structured opportunities to make decisions, reflect, receive feedback, revise work, and experience the consequences of choices within a supportive environment (Aurora Institute, 2018).

Families should understand how schools are teaching these skills. They should also know when the school will intervene rather than waiting for a student to initiate support.

The Fourth Shift: From Family Buy-In to Family Capacity

Schools often say they need parent buy-in. The phrase suggests that the primary task is persuading families to accept a decision the institution has already made.

A more productive goal is family capacity.

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships argues that effective engagement requires both educators and families to develop the capabilities, connections, confidence, and beliefs necessary to work together. Family engagement is not a skill families must acquire alone. Educators also need the capacity to listen, communicate clearly, share power, navigate disagreement, and recognize families' knowledge of their children and communities (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

For competency-based education, family capacity includes understanding:

- ✓ The competencies students are expected to master.
- ✓ The difference between practice, feedback, and summative evidence.
- ✓ How proficiency levels are determined.
- ✓ How reassessment works.
- ✓ How habits of work are reported.
- ✓ How students progress through courses or learning levels.
- ✓ How the transcript communicates achievement.
- ✓ How graduation readiness is monitored.
- ✓ How special education, multilingual learner services, interventions, advanced learning, athletics, and extracurricular eligibility operate within the new model.
- ✓ How colleges, employers, and other institutions will interpret student records.

Educator capacity includes explaining these elements in plain language without becoming defensive or retreating into technical terminology. Teachers and leaders must be prepared to answer difficult questions consistently. When staff members provide different explanations, trust erodes quickly.

Capacity-building must also be accessible. Workshops should be offered at varied times and in families' home languages. Materials should include examples, visuals, recordings, and opportunities for individual support. Families without reliable technology should have equivalent access to information. Students themselves can play a major role by demonstrating the learning and reporting systems to their families. These practices align with federal guidance emphasizing accessible, two-way, meaningful communication with families and removing barriers to participation (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).



The Fifth Shift: From Uniform Opportunity to Equitable Access

Competency-based education is frequently presented as an equity strategy because students receive the time and support needed to reach common expectations. That promise will not be realized automatically.

Families with greater time, confidence, educational experience, access to technology, or familiarity with school systems may be better positioned to request reassessments, secure internships, interpret competency reports, arrange transportation, locate external learning opportunities, or advocate when progress stalls. Other families may assume that no news is good news or may not know which questions to ask.

This creates a serious risk. A model intended to personalize learning can reproduce inequity if access to information, support, advanced pathways, and out-of-school experiences depends on a family's ability to navigate the system. Research on family engagement similarly warns that schools must recognize differences in access, power, language, time, and familiarity with educational institutions rather than assuming all families can participate in the same ways (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

Schools should conduct an equity audit throughout implementation:

- ✓ Which families are participating in design and feedback processes?
- ✓ Whose questions are shaping decisions?
- ✓ Who understands the new reporting system?
- ✓ Who is using reassessment and extended learning opportunities?
- ✓ Which students have access to transportation, technology, mentoring, internships, and community-based learning?
- ✓ Who is progressing more slowly, and what support is being provided?
- ✓ Are students with disabilities and multilingual learners receiving appropriate access and scaffolding?
- ✓ Are families receiving information early enough to act?
- ✓ Are some students being labeled as "not yet proficient" repeatedly without a meaningful change in instruction?

Equity requires proactive outreach. Schools cannot depend solely on families to attend meetings, read emails, or log in to portals. Engagement efforts must reach families in the places, languages, and formats that are most accessible to them (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

The Sixth Shift: From Final Products to Continuous Co-Design

Competency-based education is not an initiative that becomes fully formed before implementation. It is a system that must be studied, refined, and improved.

Families should be included in that continuous improvement process.

Districts can establish family design teams, parent advisory groups, student-family focus groups, multilingual listening sessions, and structured opportunities to review data. Families should be asked not only whether they like the new system but whether they can use it.

Do families understand their child's current level of learning? Can they identify the next step? Do they know whom to contact? Are progress reports arriving early enough to support intervention? Does the transcript accurately communicate student accomplishments? Are reassessment practices manageable and consistent? Are flexible pathways expanding opportunities or creating confusion? Do families believe the system is more transparent and equitable than the one it replaced?

Meaningful engagement requires leaders to listen without approaching every interaction as an opportunity to defend the reform. Shared decision-making and reciprocal communication help schools identify both misunderstandings and genuine design problems before those problems become embedded in the system (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; KnowledgeWorks, 2023).

Some family concerns will reveal misunderstandings that require better communication. Others will reveal genuine design flaws. Leaders must be willing to distinguish between the two.

What Families Need During the Transition

As secondary schools move toward competency-based education, families need six things from the system:

- ✓ They need clarity about what is changing, why it is changing, and what will remain constant.
- ✓ They need translation between the familiar language of courses, credits, and grades and the new language of competencies, proficiency, evidence, and progression.
- ✓ They need evidence that the new system is rigorous, reliable, equitable, and aligned with graduation and postsecondary expectations.
- ✓ They need timely, understandable information about their own child, not only general explanations of the model.

- ✓ They need voice in decisions that affect reporting, support, scheduling, pathways, transcripts, and measures of success.

- ✓ Most importantly, they need trust that the school will not allow a student to disappear inside a flexible system.

Trust is built when expectations are transparent, concerns are answered honestly, inconsistencies are acknowledged, and the district demonstrates it is monitoring the change's impact on every group of learners. Strong family-school partnerships are grounded in relational trust, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and an ongoing commitment to student learning and well-being (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

A Systemic Change Requires a Systemic Partnership

Family engagement has long been associated with improved student learning, relationships, attendance, and school climate. Research supports the importance of schools actively partnering with families rather than limiting engagement to events, volunteering, or one-directional information sharing (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jensen & Minke, 2017).

In competency-based education, that partnership becomes even more important because many of the signals families have historically relied upon are being redesigned.

A family may no longer be able to look at a single course average and assume it tells the whole story. A student may need more time to demonstrate one competency while advancing rapidly in another. Evidence of learning may come from a performance, portfolio, internship, presentation, investigation, or community-based project. Habits such as timeliness and participation may be reported separately from academic mastery. Students may follow different pathways while still meeting common expectations.

These changes may ultimately provide a more accurate and humane picture of learning. But accuracy has little value when it is not understood, and personalization has little value when families cannot navigate it.

Schools cannot ask families to trust a system they have not been invited to understand. They cannot ask parents and caregivers to support learning when the meaning of progress remains unclear. They cannot claim to be creating student-centered systems while excluding the people who know students across the other hours, relationships, responsibilities, cultures, and experiences of their lives.

The move to competency-based education departs from one of the most deeply rooted assumptions in schooling: that time is fixed, and learning varies. The new promise is that expectations will remain rigorous while time, pathways, supports, and learning experiences become more responsive (Aurora Institute, 2018; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2025).

To fulfill that promise, family engagement must also become more responsive. It must move from notification to partnership, from buy-in to shared ownership, from reporting to interpretation, and from occasional participation to continuous co-design.

When the whole system changes, the family-school relationship cannot remain the same.



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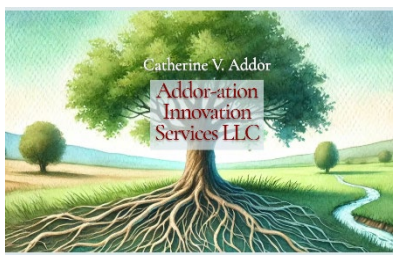
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