WINTER 2027

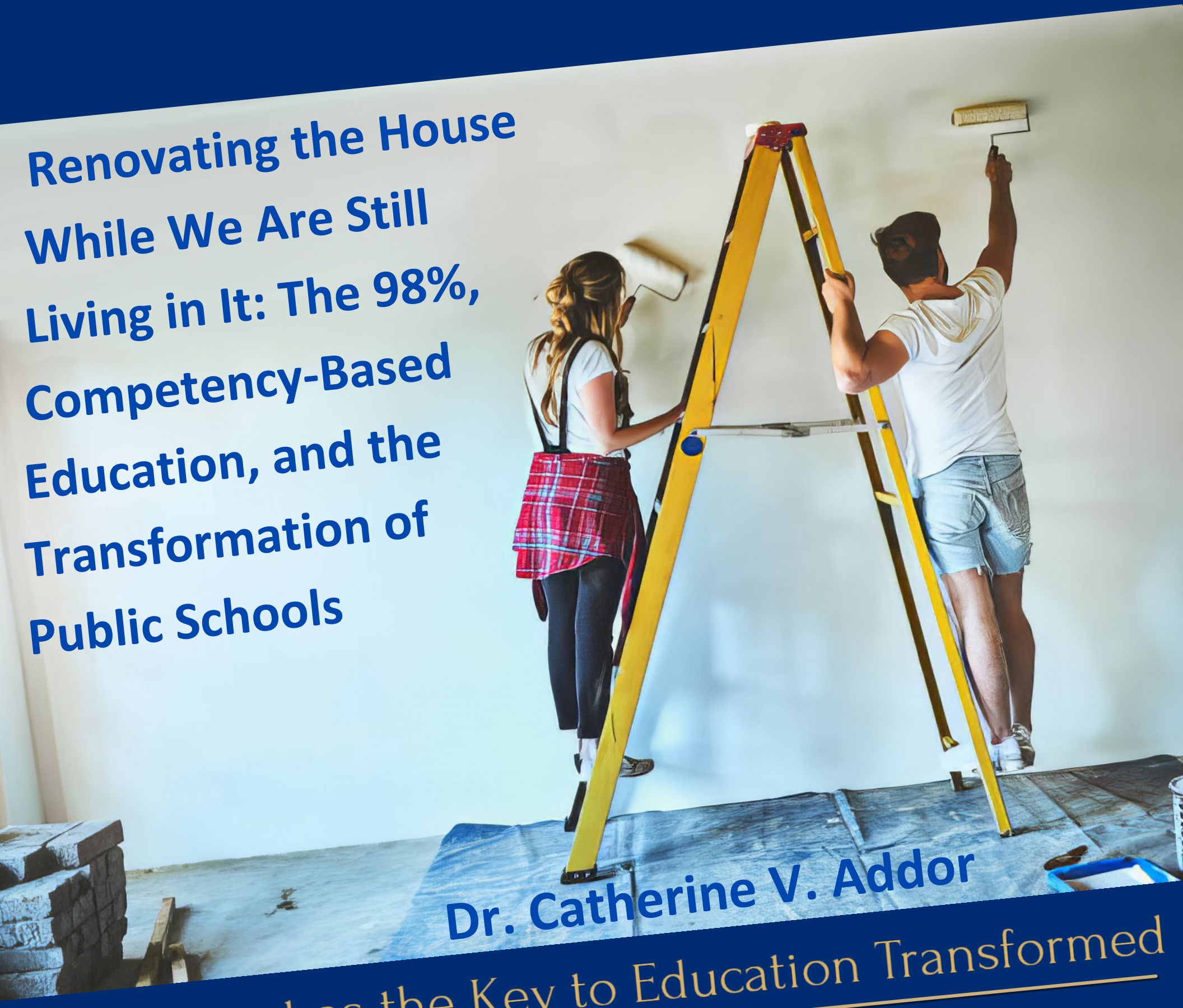
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Renovating the House While We Are Still Living in It: The 98%, Competency-Based Education, and the Transformation of Public Schools



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Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

The Worthy Educator
theworthyeducator.com



Renovating the House While We Are Still Living in It: The 98%, Competency-Based Education, and the Transformation of Public Schools

doi.org/10.67428/2027winter07

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Public education was constructed over generations.

Its brick-and-mortar buildings are visible in nearly every community. Its calendars shape family life. Its schedules determine when children wake, when parents work, when buses travel, and when communities gather. Its courses, grade levels, report cards, credits, and diplomas have become so familiar that they can feel permanent.

Familiarity should not be confused with effectiveness.

Many structures in public education were designed to efficiently organize large numbers of students. Children are grouped by age. Learning is divided into subjects and class periods. Schools measure progress in semesters, course credits, and years completed. Students move forward because time has passed, even when their understanding remains incomplete.

Competency-based education asks us to reconsider these arrangements.

In a competency-based system, students progress based on clear evidence of learning rather than the amount of time they have spent in a classroom. Learning expectations are transparent, assessment is meaningful and ongoing, and students receive timely support when they have not yet demonstrated mastery. Learning pathways may vary, but expectations remain rigorous (Sturgis, 2018; Levine & Patrick, 2019).

The shift sounds straightforward until we attempt to make it happen.

Changing from a time-based system to a learning-based system is not the educational equivalent of repainting a room. It involves opening the walls, examining the wiring, moving the plumbing, strengthening the foundation, and sometimes questioning why a room was built where it was in the first place.

At the same time, the children are still here.

Teachers are still teaching. Families still need schedules. Students still need meals, transportation, relationships, safety, support, and meaningful learning. Diplomas still need to be awarded. Colleges still need transcripts. Communities still need confidence in their public schools.

We are renovating the house while we are still living in it.

That is what makes educational transformation both necessary and extraordinarily difficult.

The House Was Built Around School

Traditional public education generally assumes that formal learning occurs inside the school building.

School is the place where children learn. Home is where they complete homework. The community provides enrichment, recreation, employment, volunteering, or extracurricular activities.

This division does not reflect how children actually develop.

Across childhood and adolescence, only a small percentage of a young person's life is spent inside formal K–12 schooling. The overwhelming majority occurs in the other 98%: in homes, neighborhoods, cultural institutions, workplaces, athletic programs, libraries, community organizations, online spaces, houses of worship, and relationships with family members and other trusted adults.

Children do not stop learning when they leave the brick-and-mortar building.
A student who helps care for a sibling may develop patience, communication, judgment, and responsibility. A teenager working in a family business may apply mathematics, language, customer service, organizational skills, and problem-solving skills. A young person participating in athletics, dance, music, agriculture, civic action, or community service may be learning perseverance, leadership, collaboration, precision, creativity, and how to respond to feedback.

These experiences do not replace strong academic instruction. They demonstrate that learning is larger than schooling.

Competency-based education provides a framework for recognizing that reality. Competencies encompass connected knowledge, skills, and dispositions that can be measured, transferred, and applied across settings (Levine & Patrick, 2019; Gagnon, 2024b).

A competency-based system can therefore ask deeper questions:

- What does this student know?
- What can this student do with that knowledge?
- Can the student apply it in an unfamiliar setting?
- What evidence demonstrates the learning?
- Where did that learning occur?
- What support or challenge does the student need next?

The walls around the traditional schoolhouse become less rigid once we begin asking those questions,

The school remains essential. It can no longer behave as though it is the sole owner of learning.

We Cannot Put New Furniture in an Old Floor Plan

Many competency-based initiatives begin with grading.

Schools replace percentages with performance levels. Teachers use terms such as emerging, developing, proficient, or exceeding. Report cards list competencies or standards. Students may be allowed to revise assignments or reassess. These changes may be valuable, but they do not automatically create a competency-based system (Sturgis, 2018; Gagnon, 2024a).

A school may use proficiency scales while still averaging every score. It may promise personalized pacing while requiring every student to complete the same task on the same day. It may encourage reassessment without giving students or teachers time to do so. It may promote authentic learning while keeping students inside rigid schedules that prevent interdisciplinary or community-based experiences.

This is the equivalent of buying new furniture while refusing to reconsider the floor plan.

Authentic competency-based education requires changes to the house's structure (Sturgis, 2024; Steele et al., 2014; Pane et al., 2017).

Curriculum must identify the learning that matters most.

Assessment must provide credible evidence of what students know and can do.
Reporting must communicate progress more accurately than a single letter or percentage.

Scheduling must create room for intervention, enrichment, interdisciplinary inquiry, community learning, revision, and reassessment.

Professional learning must help educators develop shared expectations and examine evidence of student learning together.

Technology must support the learning model rather than become the model.
Student support systems must respond when a learner is not progressing rather than waiting until the student has failed an entire course or marking period.
Policies related to attendance, credit, graduation, transcripts, course sequences, class rank, special education, multilingual learners, athletics, transportation, and staffing may also need to change.

Several of those structures are educational.

Others are political.



Every Renovation Is Political

People often discuss educational change as though the best idea should naturally win.

It rarely works that way.

Public schools are not private homes. They are public institutions shaped by law, regulation, labor agreements, budgets, elections, community history, local identity, state mandates, board policies, and competing beliefs about education's purpose.

Every structural change affects someone’s authority, responsibility, workload, resources, status, or sense of security.

Changing the schedule may affect transportation, athletics, childcare, contractual time, and family routines.

Changing grading may affect class rank, honor rolls, scholarships, college applications, athletic eligibility, and deeply held beliefs about merit.

Recognizing community-based learning raises questions about supervision, safety, access, transportation, assessment, liability, and which community experiences are viewed as legitimate.

Changing graduation requirements may involve state education departments, school boards, colleges, employers, unions, families, and students.

Even language becomes political. Words such as mastery, proficiency, equity, personalization, standards, flexibility, and student agency can mean different things to different groups.

The politics of change are not simply partisan politics, although public education can certainly become entangled in partisan conflict. The politics also include questions of power:

- Who defines the competencies?
- Who decides what counts as evidence?
- Whose knowledge is recognized?
- Who receives flexibility?
- Who has access to internships, mentors, transportation, and technology?
- Who is asked to do additional work?
- Whose concerns are treated as legitimate?
- Who gets to say whether the renovation is successful?

Leaders who ignore these questions may create a technically thoughtful model that is politically impossible to sustain.

The solution is to make power, decision-making, and tradeoffs visible without avoiding the politics.

People are more likely to support significant change when they understand why it is necessary, have meaningful opportunities to influence its design, and can see how decisions are being made. Family-school-community partnerships are especially important during systems transformation because they help communities develop a shared understanding of what constitutes a high-quality education (Winthrop et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2024).

Educational transformation therefore requires both a strong instructional vision and a strong political strategy.

The instructional strategy explains how learning will improve.

The political strategy identifies who must be involved, what interests are affected, what fears are present, where resistance may emerge, and how trust will be built over time.

People Become Attached to the House They Know

Change is emotional, not only structural and political.
Schools are places of memory.

Adults remember their classrooms, teachers, report cards, lockers, sports teams, graduation ceremonies, successes, embarrassments, friendships, and disappointments. Even when people recognize the limitations of the traditional system, it remains the system they understand.

Competency-based education can unsettle that familiarity.

- A parent who knew how to interpret an 85 may feel uncertain about a report stating that a child is progressing toward proficiency.
- A student who has learned to earn points through compliance may become anxious when asked to revise work until it demonstrates mastery.
- A teacher who has developed expertise within a traditional course structure may fear losing professional competence, autonomy, or identity.
- A school leader may deeply believe in transformation while worrying about public criticism, board support, staff morale, state accountability, and whether the system can actually deliver on its promises.

Emotion is not an obstacle separate from the change process. Emotion is part of the change process.

People may grieve the loss of familiar practices even when those practices were imperfect. They may feel anger when change is imposed, embarrassment when they do not understand new language, fear when expectations become unclear, or exhaustion when one more initiative is added to an already overloaded system.

They may also feel hope.

A student may finally believe that one early failure will not define the entire semester. A family may receive clearer information about what a child understands and still needs. A teacher may be able to respond to learning rather than rush through content. A community member may see that expertise developed outside school can contribute to a young person's education.

Leadership must make room for all of these emotions.

Calling every concern resistance is neither accurate nor productive.

People may resist because they disagree with the purpose of the change. They may resist because previous reforms were poorly implemented or quickly abandoned. They may fear that students will be harmed during the transition. They may support the idea but not trust the system's ability to carry it out.

Trust is central to educational transformation because change depends on whether families, educators, students, and communities believe the institution is competent, honest, inclusive, and acting in learners' interests (Hoysala & Morris, 2025).

Leaders must therefore communicate more than the technical details of the renovation. They must acknowledge what people believe they are losing, what they fear may happen, and what they hope could become possible.

Families Cannot Be Invited in After the Blueprints Are Finished

Schools frequently involve families after the most important decisions have already been made.

A committee develops the new system. Leaders approve it. Teachers receive training. Then families are invited to an evening presentation where the school explains the new report card, grading scale, schedule, or graduation pathway.

That is communication, but it is not shared design.

When the educational house is being fundamentally renovated, families cannot be asked only to admire the blueprints.

They need a place at the design table.

Families must help schools understand what they value in education, what they believe graduates need, what they fear losing, and what would help them trust a new system.

They need opportunities to ask practical questions:

- How will I know whether my child is on track?
- What happens when a student needs additional time?
- Will students still be challenged?
- How will this affect graduation?
- How will colleges interpret the transcript?
- What happens to honor rolls and class rank?
- How will special education services be incorporated?
- How will multilingual learners demonstrate competencies?
- Who determines whether evidence is sufficient?
- What prevents bias in performance assessment?
- How will students access internships and community learning?



– Will transportation be provided?

– How will learning outside school be recognized?

– What happens when a family disagrees with a school's judgment?

These questions should not be treated as evidence that families do not understand innovation. They are evidence that families understand the stakes.

Family-centered systems position families and communities as essential partners, honor their knowledge, develop trusting relationships, and create a shared vision for student learning and well-being (Winthrop et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2024).

Engagement is not meant to convince families to accept the school's plan.
It is to create a better plan by involving families.

Families connect the 2% and the 98%

Families occupy a position no other group can fully replicate.

They see children across settings and over time. They understand how children respond to challenge, public feedback, uncertainty, disappointment, success, and relationships. They often recognize interests, responsibilities, cultural knowledge, language abilities, and talents that may not appear during the school day. In a competency-based system, this knowledge should matter.

Families can help develop learner profiles. They can identify experiences in which students have demonstrated skills. They can help schools understand cultural and community contexts. They can participate in exhibitions of learning, contribute to conversations about graduate competencies, connect students to local expertise, and provide insight into how school learning transfers into everyday life (Winthrop et al., 2021).

Family engagement must not become an equity trap.

Families vary in their access to flexible schedules, professional connections, transportation, financial resources, technology, and confidence navigating school systems. If community-connected learning depends primarily on what individual families can arrange, existing inequities may deepen.

The school system must remain responsible for ensuring that all students have access to meaningful experiences, strong mentorship, transportation, technology, academic support, and opportunities to demonstrate learning.

Competency-based education does not automatically produce equity. Equity has to be built into the design through transparency, access, responsiveness, and careful examination of who benefits from each new structure (Sturgis & Casey, 2018).

Families should be partners, but they should not be required to compensate for gaps the public system has failed to address.

The Community Must Renovate Too

A transformed school system cannot exist inside an unchanged community.

Students may graduate with portfolios, performance assessments, internships, exhibitions, industry credentials, interdisciplinary projects, and evidence of applied competencies. Yet if employers, colleges, scholarship committees, and community institutions recognize only traditional grades and course titles, the value of that learning may remain invisible.

The community must understand what the redesigned system is producing.

Employers must know what it means for a graduate to have demonstrated collaboration, communication, problem-solving, adaptability, or technical competence.

Colleges must know how to interpret mastery-based transcripts and evidence of learning.

Community organizations must see themselves not merely as hosts for volunteers but as potential learning partners.

Local businesses can help develop authentic projects and applied experiences.
Libraries can become learning hubs.
Local governments can invite students to engage in civic problem-solving.
Cultural institutions can support exhibitions, performances, and public demonstrations of learning.

Colleges can provide mentors, dual-enrollment opportunities, and validation of advanced competencies.

Community schools already demonstrate the potential of coordinating in-school and out-of-school resources through shared leadership among educators, families, students, and community partners (Gagnon et al., 2025).

The traditional schoolhouse may remain physically located on the same piece of land, but its educational footprint must expand.

The brick-and-mortar building becomes one important part of a larger learning ecosystem.



Renovation Does Not Mean Demolition

Deconstructing the traditional public education system does not require rejecting everything that came before it.

Renovation begins with deciding what to preserve.

Public schools embody commitments worth protecting: universal access, public responsibility, community connection, academic knowledge, qualified educators, services for students with disabilities, opportunities for social development, and the belief that every child deserves an education. High school redesign research likewise emphasizes that successful transformation should preserve rigorous learning while expanding belonging, meaningful relationships, student agency, and real-world preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2025).

The question is not whether we abandon the house.

The question is whether the house still serves the people living in it.

Certain walls may be load-bearing. Others may simply divide spaces because they were placed there decades ago.

Structures may need reinforcement, while others may need to be opened, moved, or removed.

Every familiar practice should be examined:

- Does grouping students by age always serve learning?
- Does the traditional class period provide enough time for meaningful work?
- Does the letter grade accurately communicate understanding?
- Does the course sequence reflect how knowledge connects?
- Does attendance measure engagement or merely physical presence?
- Does the transcript describe what a graduate can actually do?
- Does the school calendar allow learning to continue across settings?
- Does the graduation system represent readiness or completion?

Many traditional structures may remain useful. Others may need modification. A few may no longer serve the purposes we now claim.

Deconstruction is not destruction.

It is the disciplined examination of what we have inherited.

How Do We Renovate Without Making the House Unlivable?

Large-scale change cannot happen through announcement.

Nor can we change every structural element at once.

The work needs a coherent sequence.

Begin With the People Who Will Live There

Before selecting platforms, rewriting report cards, or changing schedules, communities must create a shared vision of the graduate:

- What should young people know?
- What should they be able to do?
- How should they communicate, collaborate, create, contribute, and respond to challenges?
- What knowledge, skills, and dispositions will allow them to thrive in college, employment, civic life, relationships, and continued learning?

Develop this vision with students, families, educators, employers, colleges, and community partners (Winthrop et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2025).

Examine the Existing Structure

Leaders must identify which current systems support the vision and which systems obstruct it.

This includes curriculum, assessment, grading, scheduling, staffing, technology, transportation, contracts, board policy, state regulation, student services, and community partnerships.

The purpose is not to criticize everything currently in place. It is to understand the system's dependencies before changing them.

Opening one wall may reveal pipes, wires, and supports connected to five other rooms.

Build Shared Understanding Before Requiring Implementation

Educators, students, families, and community members need a common understanding of competency, mastery, evidence, assessment, pacing, and support.

Without shared language, different groups may believe they are discussing the same system while imagining entirely different practices.



Renovate One Connected Area at a Time

A district may begin with graduate competencies and learning progressions. It may then develop a limited number of common performance assessments, improve reporting, create reassessment structures, or pilot community-based learning.

Each phase should produce information for the next.

Pilots should not become isolated showcase programs available only to a small number of students. They should help the system understand what works, what remains difficult, and what must change before expansion.

Research on competency-based and personalized learning has repeatedly shown that implementation requires attention to system conditions, educator capacity, policies, technology, and the coherence of multiple reforms (Steele et al., 2014; Pane et al., 2017).

Change the Conditions, Not Just the Expectations

Teachers cannot personalize learning without time, tools, manageable systems, and collaborative support.

Students cannot participate in community learning without transportation, coordination, adult supervision, and equitable access.

Families cannot understand new reporting systems without accessible communication, examples of student work, meaningful dialogue, and opportunities to ask questions.

Leaders cannot sustain transformation without policy support, budget alignment, governance structures, and political courage.

When expectations change, but conditions do not, renovation becomes additional labor for already exhausted people.

Create Visible Feedback Loops

People need to know what the process is learning.

- What has improved?
- What has not worked?
- What concerns have families raised?
- What have students experienced?
- Where are educators struggling?
- Which groups are benefiting?
- Where are inequities appearing?
- What will change as a result?

Transparency lets the community see that feedback influences the renovation rather than disappearing into a committee report.

The Most Important Work Is Often Behind the Walls

The visible parts of competency-based education may include new report cards, student exhibitions, portfolios, internships, flexible schedules, and redesigned transcripts (Gagnon, 2024a; Sturgis, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2025).

Less visible work matters more. It includes:

- Building trust.
- Developing common expectations.
- Calibrating assessments.
- Supporting teacher learning.
- Listening to family concerns.
- Negotiating policy changes.
- Addressing political conflict.
- Creating transportation systems.
- Protecting equity.
- Responding to emotion.
- Building partnerships.
- Admitting uncertainty.
- Following through on commitments.

A house may look beautiful after new paint and furniture are added, but its safety and durability depend on the foundation, wiring, plumbing, and structural supports that most visitors never see.

The same is true of educational transformation.

The 98% Changes the Purpose of the Renovation

Competency-based education asks schools to stop confusing time with learning.

The 98% asks schools to stop confusing school with the entirety of education.

Together, they challenge the belief that learning can be contained within a single brick-and-mortar building, a single schedule, a single curriculum, or a single measure of success (Gagnon, 2024a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2025). They invite us to create a system in which learning can occur across settings, relationships, and experiences while still being supported by clear expectations and public accountability.

Students can demonstrate what they know in meaningful ways.

Families can contribute knowledge that helps schools understand the whole learner.

Communities can become part of the learning infrastructure.

Educators can focus less on moving students through content and more on helping them develop competence, confidence, agency, and purpose. This will not happen through a new grading scale or isolated innovation (Sturgis, 2024; Steele et al., 2014; Pane et al., 2017). It requires changes to the structure, culture, politics, and emotional life of public education.

We Are Still Living Here

The challenge of transforming public education is that we cannot empty the house, complete the renovation, and move everyone back in when it is finished. There will be noise. There will be dust. Parts of the house will be temporarily unusable. People will disagree about what to preserve and what to change. They will worry about cost, timing, disruption, and whether the new design will actually be better. They will remember previous renovations that were started and never completed.

Children will still arrive every morning. Families will still depend on the system. Teachers will still need to create meaningful learning today while helping design something better for tomorrow. This is why the work requires more than a compelling vision. It requires patience, transparency, political awareness, emotional intelligence, sustained leadership, and the humility to revise the plans when the people living in the house tell us something is not working.

Families must be at the center because they connect the school-controlled 2% with the lived 98%.

Communities must be at the center because they will help create learning opportunities and eventually receive the graduates of the redesigned system.

Students must be at the center because this is their education, their development, and their future.

Educators must be at the center because no transformation can succeed without their knowledge, judgment, and trust.

We do not need to abandon the public schoolhouse. We need to renovate it thoughtfully, collectively, and courageously while remembering that the most important learning has never been confined to the building. The goal is not to build a fashionable new house. The goal is to create a public education system in which every learner has room to grow, multiple pathways to demonstrate learning, meaningful connections to family and community, and genuine preparation for life beyond the school walls.



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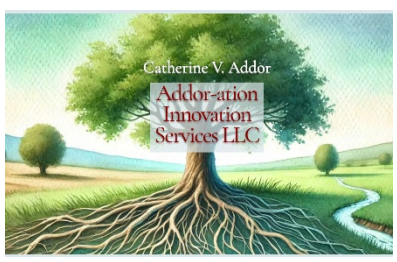
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