



# Executive Summary



## The Challenge: Build Coherence and Clarity Around Competency-Based Learning

Across the country, schools and systems are rethinking how learning is structured, assessed, and experienced by students, with growing attention to mastery, personalized pathways, applied learning, student agency, and readiness for life beyond high school. Competency-based learning (CBL) is increasingly viewed as a key lever for redesigning the high school experience. **However, as competency-based learning gains traction, the field lacks a shared understanding of how the model is defined, communicated, and enacted across contexts.** For policymakers, funders, and system leaders, this creates a practical challenge. It is difficult to distinguish high-quality competency-based learning from broader redesign efforts, identify which practices are essential, or determine what policies and conditions may support quality implementation at scale.

## Our Approach: Scan the Field to See How Competency-Based Learning Shows Up

To understand how competency-based learning currently appears across the field, FullScale conducted a national landscape scan of 106 high schools identified as engaging in competency-based learning or related redesign efforts. We reviewed public school websites, publicly reported outcome data, and interviews with 23 leaders to understand how schools describe their models and what evidence of competency-based learning is visible to families, policymakers, funders, and other external stakeholders. We then used an initial set of *observable markers* to distinguish features most directly tied to competency-based learning so that we could distinguish it from related approaches such as personalized learning and whole-child development.

# Observable Markers

STRUCTURES/GOALS	ASSESSMENT	LEARNING DESIGN	CONNECTION
Clear Articulation	Demonstration Location	Learning Location	Relationships
Developmental Progression	Purpose	Goals	Culture
Mastery Progression	Rigorous Application	Choice	Wrap-Around Support
Targets	Calibration	Interest	Family/Community Engagement
Transparency	Pacing	Active	
Universal Application	Means of Demonstration	Differentiated Support	

Key

<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#003366; border:1px solid #003366;"></span> Competency-Based	<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#0070C0; border:1px solid #0070C0;"></span> Personalized Learning	<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#4CAF50; border:1px solid #4CAF50;"></span> Whole Child Developing
---	--	---

Culturally Responsive
Developmental Focus

The markers offer a starting lens for seeing what aspects of competency-based learning may be visible, what remains unclear, and where deeper inquiry is needed. Finally, we examined the student outcomes and policy conditions related to each site.

## Four Key Findings from the Landscape Scan

- 1. Competency-based learning is widespread but not consistently defined:** schools across diverse contexts are using competency-based learning language, but not with a consistently shared definition.
- 2. Competency-based learning is inconsistently visible:** schools more often describe the goals and design features of competency-based learning than the systems that make it work, including assessment, mastery-based progression, and aligned supports.
- 3. Existing outcome measures offer an incomplete view of competency-based learning quality:** traditional measures remain important, but they do not fully capture mastery, applied learning, learner agency, progression, or broader readiness outcomes.
- 4. Policy conditions are mixed and often misaligned:** state and local policies can create flexibility and friction, especially around grading, seat time, accountability, credit, and reporting.

# Findings and Takeaways for Policymakers, Funders, and System Leaders

Competency-based learning is advancing faster than the field’s shared systems for defining, supporting, and measuring quality. Funders can help the field move from enthusiasm to evidence by investing in shared definitions, aligned measures, and deeper implementation research. Policymakers can develop systems that recognize, enable, and measure the kinds of learning competency-based learning aims to produce. System leaders can use the markers and findings to strengthen coherence across curriculum, assessment, progression, staffing, scheduling, data systems, and communication.

FINDING	FUNDER TAKEAWAY	POLICYMAKER TAKEAWAY	SYSTEM LEADER TAKEAWAY
<b>1. CBL is widespread but not consistently defined</b>	Support shared language, clearer definitions of quality, and evidence-building, not just expansion of models labeled as CBL.	Policy design depends on clarity about which practices policies are intended to enable, require, or measure.	Coherent implementation requires a shared understanding of CBL among students, families, educators, and partners.
<b>2. CBL is inconsistently visible</b>	Invest in the infrastructure that makes CBL coherent, including assessment systems, progression tools, educator capacity, and implementation supports.	CBL-related policy should account for the systems that operationalize the model, especially assessment, progression, grading, and student supports.	Make the operating model visible by showing what students learn, how mastery is demonstrated, how progression works, and how students are supported.
<b>3. Existing outcome measures offer an incomplete view of CBL quality</b>	Support the development of more aligned measures and evidence systems that capture both traditional outcomes and model-specific aims.	Examine what current accountability systems make visible or obscure, and where additional measures are needed to understand quality.	Track mastery, progression, learner experience, and academic outcomes together, rather than relying on any single measure and make it visible.
<b>4. Policy conditions are mixed and often misaligned</b>	Support policy analysis, technical assistance, and implementation supports that help schools navigate or reduce system friction.	Examine not only whether policy allows CBL, but whether it supports coherence across assessment, grading, credit, progression, reporting, and accountability.	Identify where local adaptations help sustain innovation and where they add complexity for educators, students, and families.

## What Comes Next

This landscape scan is the first report as part of a broader initiative to support the field in moving from broad adoption to deeper understanding of high-quality competency-based learning. **Where this report helps identify what the field can currently see, the next phase intends to illuminate what matters most: how high-quality competency-based learning is enacted, experienced, supported, and sustained.**

The full landscape scan provides deeper detail on the markers, methodology, findings, and implications. The next phase of the project will move from broad visibility to deeper evidence by studying 10 high schools in greater depth and examining how competency-based learning is enacted, experienced, supported, and shaped by state and local policy conditions. This work will also inform a forthcoming policy landscape scan and updates to the [State of CBE map](#), developed in partnership with KnowledgeWorks.