Implementing Competency-Based Instruction in High Schools

National High School Center

Since 1908, Carnegie Units have been the primary means of determining course completion credit and graduation eligibility in the nation's high schools. In brief, a Carnegie Unit represents how many "contact hours" or how much "seat time" a student has devoted to the study of a particular school subject (usually 120 hours per credit). Competency-based instruction provides an alternative to the Carnegie Unit system by focusing on the mastery of a set of specific competencies or skills that encompass the course content. Students in competency-based courses must demonstrate and apply what they have learned by performing real-world tasks (Wiggins, 1990). Through an outcome-focused approach, competency-based instruction in high school enables and supports the following:

- *Flexibility*: Students can shorten the time needed to meet graduation requirements (e.g., by placing out of a course or mastering the required skills in a reduced timeframe) and take advantage of extra-curricular learning opportunities such as interdisciplinary and independent studies, dual enrollment programs, and internships;

- *Multiple assessments*: Educators can look to multiple measures of what students actually know and can do rather than rely solely on large-scale, standardized, norm-referenced achievement tests that are predominantly multiple-choice (Schmoker, 2008; 2009); and

- *Responsiveness to individual student needs*: Competency-based instruction allows English language learners (Gomez, 1998) and special education students (Venn, 2000) alternative mechanisms to demonstrate their proficiency in a content area.

Most state policies permit students to earn proficiency or competency-based credit whether by completing an activity that demonstrates mastery of the required content from a list of approved activities or case-by-case upon approval by a local school board or superintendent. One of the more common mechanisms for demonstrating competency-based mastery is performance assessments (Marzano et al., 1993; Wiggins, 1998), which include projects and portfolios such as those used in Michigan, New York, and Maine. Project-based learning (PBL) is a type of competency based instruction that engages students in meaningful and relevant work and builds on student interests. PBL is characterized by extended student inquiry activities; deep study over a breadth of topics; some degree of self-directed learning; and a presentation of findings, results, or conclusions (Ravitz, 2008).

Portfolios are another strategy used in competency-based instruction to showcase and document student work as exemplars of achievement and/or progress towards achieving learning standards (Gomez, 1998). Additional competency-based instructional approaches currently in use by states include courses offered at occupational centers, postsecondary institutions, and technical training programs; community service, internship and externship activities that are monitored or structured by the school; foreign exchange programs or demonstrated fluency in a foreign language or American Sign Language; private instruction; distance learning opportunities; and artistic performances and visual art demonstrations and exhibitions (Education Commission of the States, 2006; Lloyd, 2007).

Action Principles

For State

1. Provide assessments for all core courses in line with state standards that students can take to earn credit. These exams should emphasize authentic and challenging content and skills, be validated as accurate predictors of postsecondary performance, and should be aligned with postsecondary school systems (e.g., California, Washington, New York), as well as 21st century knowledge and skills (Achieve, 2004a; 2004b).

2. Provide resources and expertise to districts to support professional development on effective performance assessment.

For District

1. Develop resources (e.g., rubrics, content- and grade-specific models and exemplars) to support implementation of performance assessment at the school level.

2. Provide professional development in effective performance assessment in the subject areas.

For School

1. Develop and implement mechanisms (e.g., policies, procedures, guidelines, checklists, portfolio rubrics, block scheduling, student advisories, career academies) for structuring, monitoring, documenting, and evaluating students' out-of-school and extra-curricular learning experiences.

References and Resources

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