

Preface

We are called to be architects of the future, not its victims.

—R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER

AS WE CHUG OUR WAY into the twenty-first century, we wonder what happened to all the hopes and aspirations we had for truly preparing our students for the twenty-first century. Education in most of our schools looks nearly the same as it did in 2000, 1990, or even 1980. However, a growing number of teachers and leaders recognize that the one-size-fits-all industrial model of teaching and learning has not met the needs of their students. These educators have, in fact, become the new architects of the future of teaching and learning, and what they are designing and building is *competency-based education* (also called competency education).¹ If you have decided to become an architect of the future of your school, or if you are interested in contemporary education, *Competency-Based Education* was written for you.

I became involved with helping schools and school districts develop their competency-based learning systems in New Hampshire in 2007. Because of new state policies enacted in 2005, high school students could only earn credit for a course by showing that they met course competencies. This new requirement opened the opportunity to go beyond the classical Carnegie unit, which is defined by seat time. Learning outside the classroom was now acknowledged and counted as credit if the competencies for the course were met. As I began helping teachers define high-quality competencies and design performance assessments for those competencies, my own thinking in competency education developed. If we are

serious about bringing all students to competency so they are ready for college and careers, we must address how and why we structure our schools throughout the K–12 learning experience. In working with many schools in New Hampshire, and nationally over the past ten years, I have seen a new framework for competency education—a blueprint different from that found in traditional schooling—begin to emerge.

This book provides this new blueprint for teachers, principals, and district leaders who seek to become the architects of the future of education for their schools and districts. It offers an overview of competency education and explains how to evolve and redesign your current school structure. Every school embraces this work differently, with different entry points, resources, and structures in place. Creating a one-size-fits-all template for competency education would be no better than rebirthing traditional education. Every school or district that embraces the move toward competency education has a unique civic, cultural, learning, and professional footprint. Charter schools, private and independent schools, and public schools each have their own unique governance and financing structures. In addition to the unique profile of each school that embraces competency education, their motivations for this move may differ.

Contrary to our expectations, competency education can look very different in different schools and communities. As a society, we are used to all schools looking basically the same in all communities across our country. Shifting this paradigm becomes a leadership challenge that requires a long-term commitment to a new vision for learning. It also calls on educators to draw on their own expertise and that of their colleagues to become innovators.

An important question readers must ask themselves as they contemplate competency education is, *Why change?* Some of you may have evidence that your current model is meeting the needs of *each* of your students to be fully college and career ready on graduation. If so, then your current model is working for you. Others of you may have realized that continual attempts to change the curriculum or otherwise tweak the traditional system have not improved student outcomes. Or you may have found that despite efforts to regroup students for instruction within grade levels, you have persistent cohorts of students unable to demonstrate adequate growth in their learning over time. For you, continually trying to

improve the existing system just hasn't worked. You are faced with the reality that if students at the elementary level never really reach their full learning potential during those years, they may never be ready for success later in college or workforce settings. This book is written for you—to guide you as you become the architect of the future of your school.

In *Off the Clock: Moving Education from Time to Competency*, Fred Bramante and I defined competency-based learning as any pace, anyplace, anytime learning. In our book, we explored this concept in detail within the context of New Hampshire's journey to competency education since 2005.² We believe passionately that time is the barrier that has shackled education into a traditional mode of teaching and learning—a tradition that can be broken. Shareholders of a learner-centered—not time-centered—vision need to embrace the notion that children learn day in and day out, in school and out of school, in winter and summer, in brick-and-mortar schools and online, and in community settings. We need to create an educational system that supports the reality of learning in today's society. Consequently, the shareholders of competency-based learning systems include the students themselves and all who touch their lives: parents, teachers, school leaders, school policy makers, and community members.

In this new book, I take you deeper into the constructs of competency education and introduce you to a wealth of tools that will support your developmental work in competency education. The competency-based education (CBE) framework introduced in this book is firmly based on the educational research that has led to best practices in K–12 curricula, instruction, assessment, and grading.³ Using this body of research and the findings from current work in competency education, teachers and leaders can best adapt the new constructs of competency education to the unique teaching and learning cultures of their school. Tools that support this work, as well as a wealth of practical examples of how schools have developed their competency education models, will be featured throughout the book. Drawing from the large network of educators doing this work nationally, the book will introduce the work of CBE pioneers through essays they've written for this volume. In these “Voices from the Field” essays, teachers and other school leaders will share their perspectives and experience on the work that has taken place in their school or district.

Although there are many ways of implementing competency education, this book describes four pillars that make up CBE: competencies (including academic competencies as well as personal success skills such as communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction); performance assessment; learning pathways; and competency-based grading. Special attention is paid to the challenges to the development of this work, especially in public schools. Laying a foundation for a new vision of education within a community is difficult but important work. Vision setting and leadership guide the design and implementation to transform teaching and learning to CBE over many years.

Because every learner's journey is unique to the person's particular talents, learning assets, and challenges, we are called to design for the masses systems that can deliver customized, personal learning approaches. A competency education system also recognizes that academic success alone is not the true measure of the learning and proficiency required for students to be ready for, and successful in, the next phase of their lives. But how do we teach and assess those personal success skills as part of the K–12 continuum of learning? This question lies at the heart of student-centered learning. As architects of the future of your school district, you will find that answering this question is an essential part of the design work.

There's an often-repeated saying, "Don't let schooling interfere with your education." With that in mind, I sincerely hope that *Competency-Based Education* helps you overcome the barriers to your work in moving teaching and learning into its future design. We owe this to our learners, our educators, our families, and our communities.