

Universal Ecosystems for Education

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Abstract

New Hampshire is in the ongoing process of building and refining an Innovative Learner Ecosystem where Universal Design for Learning combines with several other New Hampshire activities and programs to provide students with personalized educational pathways to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to learn. This session describes New Hampshire's strategic ILE plan by exploring the state's implementation of competency-based education, academic optional advancement opportunities, flexible in and out of school learning experiences, and establishment of routine family and community engagement.

Keywords

Ecosystems, UDL, Family Voice, Mastery, Learning Streams, Personalized Pathways, Competencies, Advancement, Extended Learning Opportunities, Family Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the inception of its “Vision 2.0: New Hampshire Goes First - A Blueprint to Scale Competency-based Education,” the New Hampshire Department of Education (2014) accelerated its efforts to implement a personalized learning educational system flexible enough to meet the needs and strengths of each learner. Four guiding principles were key to Vision 2.0: Develop a competency-based system, support educators, use local innovation as change drivers, and develop integrated learning systems.

Since 2014, New Hampshire has steadily carried out its mission to scale up a personalized learning and competency-based educational system. Over time, this work has resulted in the creation of an Innovative Learner Ecosystem (ILE), which makes use of customizable, integrated programs to meet individual student needs and ensure all students succeed. Four core components make up the ILE: Competency-Based Learning, Competency-Based Advancement Options, Flexible Learning Pathways, and Family and Community Engagement Efforts. Districts throughout the state, such as the Fall Mountain Regional School District, the Manchester School District, and the ConVal School District have begun systematically implementing and supporting these four ILE components.

THE INNOVATIVE LEARNER ECOSYSTEM

The ILE is responsive to students' needs and supports students by opening avenues to multiple learning resources, including families and communities. Within the ecosystem,

New Hampshire students work at their desired pace to advance through competency-driven learning tiers on their way to demonstrating mastery of competencies. As such, the ILE makes use of real-time learning and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) structures that encourage students to direct their education via multiple types of learning paths and through options on how they can demonstrate skill mastery.

COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

Competencies are a vital component of New Hampshire's ILE as they indicate underlying expectations of what students must learn on their way to becoming productive college and career ready citizens. New Hampshire has several types of validated State Model Competencies. This includes K-8 and High School Competencies in English, Math, and Science. It also includes Work-Study Practices Competencies that cover areas such as communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction. In addition, it includes Program Competencies that span across career fields like agriculture, business management, health science, manufacturing, and others.

COMPETENCY-BASED ADVANCEMENT OPTIONS

In New Hampshire's competency-based program, students can choose how to go about proving they've mastered competencies relevant to their personalized educational paths. Whereas one student may demonstrate mastery on a standardized assessment, another may show mastery through a portfolio project, while another through a school-work experience. By allowing students access to multiple learning pathways and various ways to demonstrate mastery, New Hampshire's ILE encourages students to personalize their educational experience.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS

New Hampshire's ILE affords students access to multiple learning pathways, both in and outside of the school setting. These pathways include sets of educational programs, curricular, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities (e.g., learning math and art simultaneously). Opportunities within the school might consist of a routine instructor-led class that utilizes UDL as well as access to similarly flexible, equity-driven online courses such as those found in the Virtual Learning Academy (which New Hampshire students can attend tuition free). Outside opportunities, such as extended learning opportunities (ELO) provide students chances to demonstrate learning in real circumstances (Gfroerer, 2009).

ELOs may include company and non-profit organization internships, self-studies, and extracurricular participation in activities like robotics clubs or music programs.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Student empowerment and success connects to family and community involvement, which is why New Hampshire's ILE engages families and caregivers in the educational process by helping them make meaningful, substantive decisions regarding policy, learning pathways, curriculum, competencies, and advancement. To help districts establish impactful family and community engagement practices, the New Hampshire Department of Education has partnered with Scholastic through its Family and Community Engagement program, which also makes use of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships model developed by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory and the United States Department of Education (2013).

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