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STUDENTS TAKE OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

TENNESSEE PROGRAM DEVELOPS AGENCY THROUGH COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

BY ADRIANA HARRINGTON, REGINA HENRY, RACHAEL MILLIGAN, NINA MOREL, AND JULIA OSTEEN

Imagine walking into an 8th-grade science classroom and hearing a discussion among students about a challenging assignment they recently completed. These students have spent the last few days studying how earth's mineral, fossil fuels, and groundwater resources are distributed across the globe and have written paragraphs on how these resources have influenced population growth in certain areas of the globe.

Two students are evaluating their work using Webb's Depth of Knowledge (Aungst, 2014), a framework that categorizes tasks by the complexity of thinking required to complete them, and one says to her partner, "You know you have to create something new using the information

you have learned for it to be level 4."

Another student who found a recent unit on mechanical versus electromagnetic waves especially challenging decided to attend optional review sessions, complete retakes, and be persistent in asking clarifying questions. Working through the content in multiple ways and taking time to build her knowledge and confidence meant that the next time she didn't understand a concept in class, she raised her hand and asked — something she never would have done before.

These students in Beth Hines' 8th-grade physical science class at West Collierville Middle School in Tennessee are building ownership and agency for their learning. As a result of owning

the learning process, they and their peers are seeing grades as reflections of learning rather than a prize or status to attain. These shifts can only occur if principals, teachers, and students have opportunities for agency — the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative.

West Collierville Middle School is one of 18 diverse schools across Tennessee piloting implementation of competency-based education. Competency-based education creates individualized pathways for students by focusing on demonstrating mastery and allowing students to advance through curricula as mastery is achieved.

One of several personalized learning strategies led by the Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.), the

competency-based education pilot, launched in 2018, supports educators in shifting learning to a more student-centric endeavor. It offers flexibility in how students learn, demonstrate mastery, and progress through content, all of which requires the development of agency.

The teams represent 18 schools from 11 districts, both urban and rural. Planning began in spring 2018 and implementation in the fall. Seventeen teams developed their own plans, while one worked with Summit Learning, an online personalized learning platform. Professional learning for educators was at the center of planning and implementation. Teams of educators from the pilot schools participated in professional development coordinated by the Tennessee Department of Education, Lipscomb University, and the Appalachian Regional Comprehensive Center to develop and implement elements of competency-based education.

Five professional development days covered topics including how to develop a competency, what agency is and how it can be developed, and developing a growth mindset. The sessions included guided team time for each school to develop an implementation plan with goals, strategies, logistics, and communications plans.

When the professional development team (of which we were a part) began working with the pilot schools in spring 2018, each team had a different comfort level with competency-based education. Some schools had spent two years transitioning to mastery-based grading, in which educators build proficiency scales that define the progression of learning and rate students on levels of proficiency to signify mastery of content standards. Some were in the very infant stages of the journey but believed deeply in building efficacy in students.

Taking into account their respective starting places, we walked school teams through the process of developing and

implementing a plan that made sense for their specific context. We supported the school teams as they began to think differently about high-quality instruction and the role of the teacher, and we pushed them to build on work all schools in the state had already been doing to implement rigorous college- and career-ready standards.

From the beginning of our work with these schools, we knew that building student agency was going to be a focus of the work, as it is a key to the success of competency-based education. Eventually, it became clear that teacher agency was paramount and that teachers must experience agency themselves in order to cultivate it in their students.

Over the course of the pilot, three lessons on agency surfaced: Developing agency is more than offering choice; agency is a skill that needs to be explicitly taught and scaffolded based on teacher and student levels of readiness; and developing agency requires educators to shift to a facilitative approach.

BEYOND CHOICE

Our first day of professional learning with the pilot schools focused on laying the foundation of competency-based education implementation strategies. We engaged teams in developing "why" statements about the new approach and in goal setting. We also reserved a block of time for teams to think about what strategies to implement in their schools, such as student goal-setting, blended learning, systematic formative assessments, student-led data conversations, and flexible scheduling.

However, 45 minutes into the two-hour block, it was clear that this was quickly turning from a productive struggle to an unproductive one. We had fallen into the trap of designing professional learning without assessing prior knowledge and without sufficient scaffolding of the learning.

We gave school teams resources on different strategies to implement and

time to reflect on which would be best suited for their schools. Many teams, however, did not have enough context on what each strategy was and how it could be used to make a decision. In retrospect, we could see that teams needed an overview of each type of strategy and then time to reflect on the pros and cons for their unique settings.

After this experience, we focused more intentionally on thinking about where appropriate facilitator-directed learning needed to occur and how to phase in choice and appropriate differentiation based on session feedback. When rolling out larger, newer topics, such as assessment in competency-based education, we started with facilitator-directed learning, then designed the rest of the sessions with options for participants to select their own topic or team time with guidance from the Lipscomb University team. Schools could then select the order that made the most sense for them based on their comfort level.

As part of this scaffolding, we recognized the need to explicitly confer agency upon the teachers. Like students, most teachers are not used to having the freedom and being trusted to make their own choices. We found that by saying, "You have the autonomy to make these changes in your classroom and school," then modeling those changes allowed educators to view their role differently and feel supported with making changes in their school contexts.

SCAFFOLDING AND SKILL-BUILDING

Because each school team was at a different spot along a continuum of knowledge and adoption of competency-based education elements, it was clear from early in the process that most of the work would have to be personalized for each team. With the guidance of the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), we personalized and customized the sessions through modeling, reflective questioning,

Beth Hines, science teacher at West Collierville Middle School in Collierville, Tennessee, works with students on showing mastery of the chemistry concept of balanced chemical equations.

coaching, and providing feedback.

Teams developed their own rationale, goals, and communication and implementation plans. Their plans served as the basis of the continued work together during the pilot training days, and we employed varying types of support depending on their needs. Teams regularly reflected on what was going well and the challenges to address so that we could all learn and improve as we went.

Through this process, we modeled the kind of agency-building strategies that principals could use with staff and that teachers could use with students. As Principal Beth Robbins from West Collierville Middle School said, "Building teacher agency allows the teachers to build student agency."

She provided support for teachers to build their own agency through professional learning community meetings that included teachers sharing and analyzing student progress data and then taking the lead in determining ways to increase student outcomes. Beth Hines, the 8th-grade science

teacher, reported that as a result of the support she received, she in turn built her students' agency. She provided students with tools to track their own progress and communicate that progress to their families themselves.

At Gibbs Middle School in Knox County, the 6th-grade team also created opportunities to develop student agency, initially by building classroom community. From day one, students develop their own classroom norms and verbalize what type of learning works best for them in different settings. Furthermore, when something doesn't work in class, teachers work with students to reflect on where the learning didn't work or where the process went wrong, and then they develop solutions together.

Cindy White, Gibbs Middle School principal, said, "Our schoolwide strategy was to provide staff with a toolbox of ideas for building a student-centered learning environment through promoting student agency." The school provides structures for student goal-setting and tracking progress. It also

instituted weekly student advisory sessions to connect every student with a caring adult and weekly student circles where students can share their voices.

FROM A DIRECTIVE ROLE TO A FACILITATIVE ONE

Teachers in a competency-based education approach are encouraged to move from a directive role — the "sage on the stage" who sets all the expectations and guidelines — to a facilitative role in which they guide students to become drivers of their learning outcomes.

A facilitative approach supports student success in a competency-based education model because students are responsible for choosing how they will learn and determining their own progress towards mastery. Amanda Varney, a 7th-grade math teacher at Vance Middle School in Bristol, explained, "Learning is achieved at different paces and not in a rigid, linear fashion."

This theme was evident at all of the participating schools in this
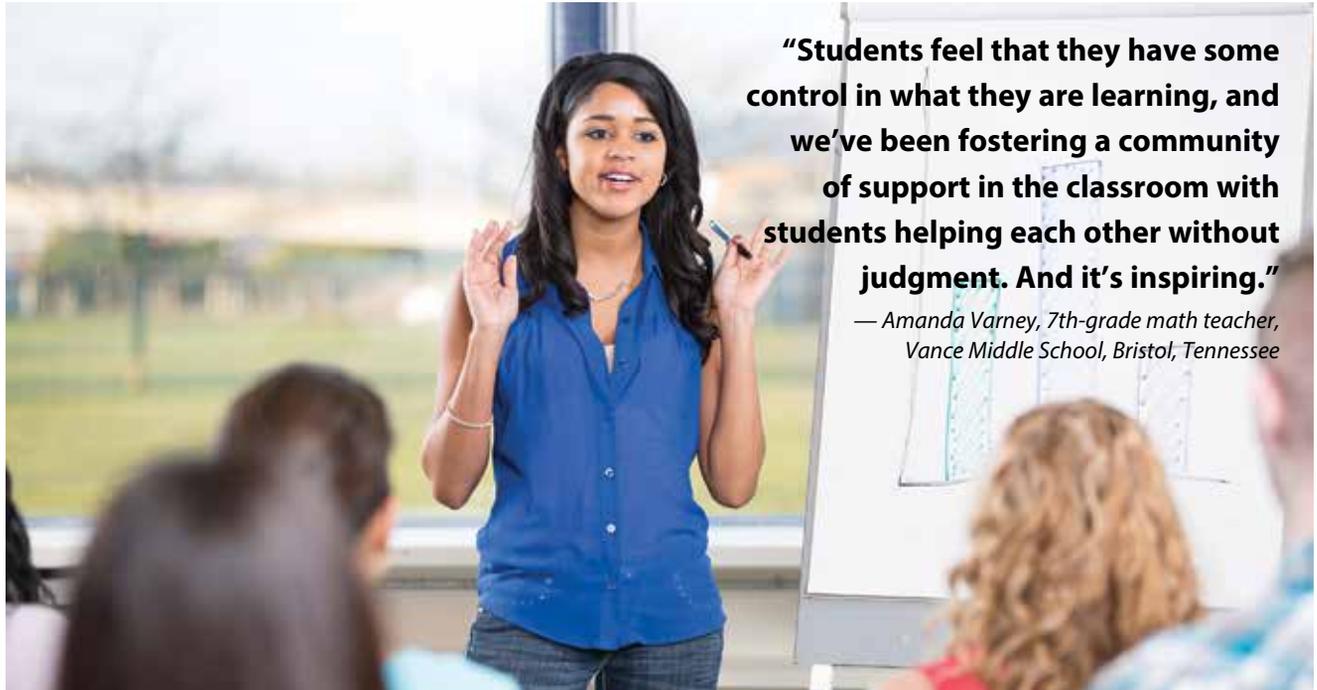
"Students feel that they have some control in what they are learning, and we've been fostering a community of support in the classroom with students helping each other without judgment. And it's inspiring."

— *Amanda Varney, 7th-grade math teacher, Vance Middle School, Bristol, Tennessee*

pilot initiative, although each school made the shift in different ways. One way that Varney demonstrated that she made the shift from directive to facilitative was in classrooms tasks. For example, she asked the students, "How we can develop an energy savings plan for our new middle school?" Students completed research and developed a plan using ratios, rates, and proportional relationships to analyze costs and determine the most cost-effective plan.

Even though parameters were in place, students had the freedom to apply and analyze the information about the various types of energy and its costs as they saw fit. Varney facilitated student thinking through questioning and feedback. As a result, she said, "Students feel that they have some control in what they are learning, and we've been fostering a community of support in the classroom with students helping each other without judgment. And it's inspiring."

As another example, in a traditional setting, the teacher directs when the student will be tested based on when the content has been covered. But in Hines' science classes at West

Collierville Middle, students determine when they are ready to demonstrate mastery of the content.

ENGAGED LEARNING

All of the teams in the competency-based education pilot joined voluntarily and were eager to learn together. During the course of the pilot, team members often felt uncomfortable, as if they were building a plane while flying it. But intentional development of agency has eased the discomfort and sparked excitement over the potential that the work ahead will raise educational outcomes to a new level.

Principal White from Gibbs Middle School believes it is important for teachers to stop directing and keep pushing toward maximizing facilitation. "Only then will we begin to have motivated students engaged in the learning," she said.

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