

# Competency-Based Approaches to Graduation

## WHAT MA CAN LEARN FROM ITS NEW ENGLAND NEIGHBORS

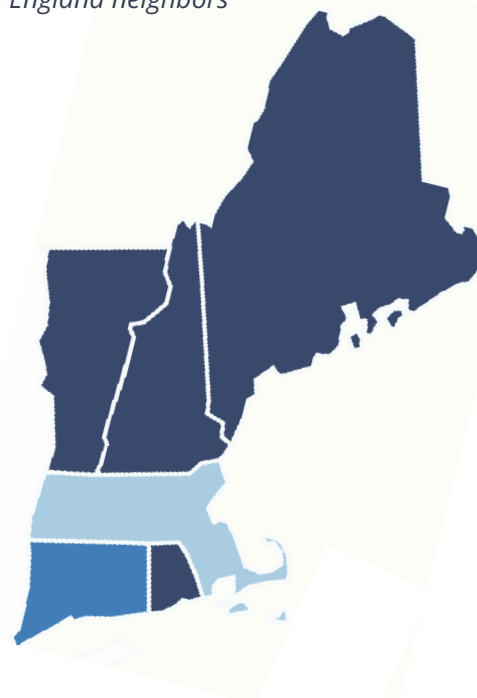
Following November’s ballot initiative that ended the use of the MCAS as a graduation requirement, Massachusetts policymakers have begun rethinking what it means to earn a diploma within the state. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently proposed [amendments](#) to the state’s competency determination regulations to provide clarity for schools and districts while long-term changes remain under discussion. Meanwhile, a [Massachusetts K-12 Statewide Graduation Council](#) is currently being formed that will gather community feedback, learn from existing models, and ultimately generate recommendations for the governor and legislature.

As these conversations move forward, one important point of reflection is to consider what Massachusetts can learn from its neighbors about measuring students’ readiness for graduation. Several of the New England states are recognized leaders in competency-based education (CBE), also known as mastery-based, performance-based, or proficiency-based education. CBE is grounded in the concept that students should progress through their learning (and achieve milestones such as a diploma) when they have acquired and demonstrated mastery of specific skills and knowledge, rather than when they have completed a required amount of “seat time.” According to the [definition of CBE](#) put forward by the Aurora Institute, CBE also includes elements such as offering students “different pathways and varied pacing” and making assessment a “meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience.

Inherent in this definition is the idea that students gain and demonstrate learning in many different ways, rather than through a single form of instruction or assessment. As long as educational opportunities are focused on the core skills and competencies that students need to develop, they represent meaningful learning experiences. This has significant implications for both how students take in new information and how they share their understanding. For instance, in a CBE model, out-of-school programs such as internships or

### COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION POLICIES VARY BY STATE

*With Massachusetts lagging behind its New England neighbors\**



- **Advanced:** States with clear policies in support of competency-based education and established roles in building educator capacity in local systems for competency-based education.
- **Developing:** States with pilots for competency-based education, and/or credit flexibility policies for school districts to transition to competency education.
- **Emerging:** States getting started with task forces; some state policy flexibility requiring waivers for systems to shift to competency-based education.

*\*This map uses the categories and state-level designations developed by the Aurora Institute. For the full map and additional detail on how these categories were determined, visit the [Aurora Institute website](#).*

community service projects can represent equally valid ways of building students' competencies as in-school coursework, as long as they are focused on helping students gain and apply critical skills. Additionally, CBE recognizes the value of varied approaches to assessment that go beyond standardized tests, including authentic, real-world performance tasks. Students could demonstrate their understanding of persuasive writing by composing a letter to the editor about a relevant community issue, or they could show their grasp of biological systems by cultivating and maintaining a healthy tomato plant. As long as these activities offer meaningful opportunities for students to reflect on and share their knowledge, they can indicate just as much (or more) about students' competencies than traditional forms of testing.

While discussions about CBE may be newer in Massachusetts, they are well-established within other parts of New England. As the map on page 1 indicates, Massachusetts lags behind most of its neighbors in considering policies that advance competency-based education.

The purpose of this brief is to offer snapshots of existing policies in other New England states that provide useful food for thought as policymakers discuss changes to graduation standards. Engaging in these conversations without considering the potential value of competency-based approaches would represent a missed opportunity to move toward a system that promotes the success of all learners.

## STATE SNAPSHOTS

Each of the New England states listed below has taken a different route toward CBE, and each one has policies and practices in place that could offer useful lessons for Massachusetts. In order to focus attention on elements of the system that are specifically geared toward graduation standards, this brief will highlight three specific policies, as shown in the table below.



**New Hampshire**  
**COMPETENCY-BASED**  
**CREDIT ACCUMULATION**



**Rhode Island**  
**READINESS-BASED**  
**GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS**



**Vermont**  
**FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS INITIATIVE**



# New Hampshire

## COMPETENCY-BASED CREDIT ACCUMULATION

New Hampshire has long been at the forefront of creating a pathway to graduation grounded in demonstrating competency. [Starting in 1998](#), the state organized competency-based education pilots in 27 high school sites. Policymakers took the lessons learned from this six-year initiative—as well as a series of convenings on the goals of the education system—and passed regulations in 2005 allowing districts to award academic credits based on the demonstration of mastery rather than seat time in classes. This was initially an option rather than a requirement. However, the regulations also stipulated that, beginning with the 2008-09 school year, schools would be required to shift to awarding credits only when students demonstrated competency in the subject matter.

State regulations on minimum standards for public schools were recently updated, with the latest revision [approved by the New Hampshire State Board of Education](#) in December 2024. The [current regulations](#) maintain a commitment to using competency—rather than time spent in class—to determine credit accumulation and, therefore, readiness for graduation. For instance, section 306.22(h) states, “The local school board shall require that graduation be based on demonstrated achievement of competencies through the accumulation of credits,” while section 306.22(j) confirms, “Credits shall be awarded for achievement of competencies. Credits shall not be awarded based on time spent achieving these competencies.”

As laid out in section 306.22(g) of the regulations, competency can be demonstrated in multiple ways, including “[a] collection of evidence demonstrating a student’s achievement of competencies” or “[a]n assessment demonstrating achievement of competencies approved by the local school district for a particular course.” The New Hampshire Department of Education supports schools’ use of performance-based methods to measure competence through initiatives such as the [New Hampshire Performance Task Bank](#), which includes a variety of sample assessments that teachers can use to gather evidence of students’ understanding. For instance, one high school geometry example asks students to generate two potential designs for a sprinkler system that will water the entirety of a rectangular field while wasting as little water as possible. The task requires students to apply their understanding of geometric modeling and calculating area to a real-life situation while working first in a small group and then individually.

Another longstanding state policy in New Hampshire has allowed students to demonstrate competency through participation in [Extended Learning Opportunities \(ELOs\)](#). An ELO, [defined](#) as “a credit-bearing learning experience that takes place outside the traditional classroom,” recognizes learning gained through internships, community service opportunities, apprenticeships, and other activities. [Beyond the Classroom](#), a website maintained by Keene State College in collaboration with the New Hampshire Department of Education and other partners, offers a wealth of resources on ELOs, including sample policies, educator resources, and examples of ELOs in subjects ranging from creative writing to engineering to the arts. While state policies regarding ELOs are distinct from the regulations related to competency-based credit accumulation, the two are closely linked: New Hampshire’s longstanding commitment to awarding credit based on mastery rather than seat time allows for creative thinking about how students can demonstrate competency in particular subjects, including through out-of-school experiences.



# Rhode Island

## READINESS-BASED GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Rhode Island has had proficiency-based graduation requirements in place for nearly a decade, since passing regulations in 2016 [requiring](#) students to demonstrate proficiency in six core content areas prior to earning a diploma. Those regulations further specified that students must complete both coursework and a performance-based assessment (e.g., a capstone project, portfolio, or exhibition) in order to graduate. However, an [Educational Opportunity Audit](#) conducted in 2020 by the XQ Institute found continuing, widespread gaps in access to the classes that prepare students for college or a career. Among other findings, “only six out of 10 students in Rhode Island were taking the courses they needed to be eligible for college,” as the Commissioner of Education referenced in a [column](#) for The 74 Million outlining the process of updating the state’s graduation standards.

In response to these findings, state leaders embarked on an extensive 18-month community engagement process that culminated in the unanimous passage of new [Readiness-Based Graduation Requirements](#) in November 2022. One of the core elements of these requirements is that all students starting with the class of 2028 are, by default, enrolled in a sequence of courses that prepare them for college enrollment. At the same time, though, the regulations also include a number of provisions that promote flexibility in how students access core content. For instance, sections 2.3.1(E) and (F) highlight the potential for interdisciplinary “flex credit experiences,” noting that districts “may develop flex credit experiences that integrate multiple core or other content areas and associated learning standards into a single credit for the purpose of meeting credit requirements....[These experiences] allow students to develop academic learning experiences that support [their] passions and goals.” The state is committed to helping localities develop more individualized learning experiences over the next few years—its [five-year action plan](#) says state leaders will offer examples of flex credit opportunities and technical assistance on how to create them.

In adopting Readiness-Based Graduation Requirements, Rhode Island also required every high school to create a policy to offer academic credit for work-based learning (WBL) experiences. While this does not mean that all students must participate in WBL in order to graduate, it does mean that they will have the option of earning credit for “internship, apprenticeship, service-learning, school-based enterprise, and industry-based projects,” as laid out in section 2.1(A)(28) of the regulations. This section further stipulates that “[w]ork-based learning is a recognized and valued form of academic learning,” highlighting the connection between in-school and out-of-school experiences. To assist schools with establishing high-quality WBL opportunities, the Rhode Island Department of Education has put out [numerous resources](#), including sample policies, rubrics, and an implementation toolkit.



# Vermont

## **FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS INITIATIVE**

Local education agencies in Vermont have considerable leeway to set graduation standards for their students, though (starting with the graduating class of 2020) these must be based on [proficiency in seven core content areas](#) rather than time spent on learning. Rather than laying out specific guidelines for districts to follow as they determine graduation requirements, the state has produced numerous materials aiming to clarify and prioritize the critical proficiencies that students must demonstrate in each core content area. They have also created resources such as the [Vermont Portrait of a Graduate](#), which highlights six components of college and career readiness, including learner agency, well-being, and communication.

While the pathway to a high school diploma varies from district to district, it can also look considerably different for each individual student. This is thanks in large part to the [Flexible Pathways Initiative](#), launched through the passage of [Act 77 of 2013](#). Under this law, schools are required to create a personalized learning plan for each student beginning in grade 7 that articulates the student's individual abilities, interests, and career goals. As they move to and through high school, students have the option to participate in experiential learning opportunities that align with their personalized learning plan, including options such as work-based learning, career and technical education, and dual enrollment/early college.

Vermont's [Education Quality Standards](#), which lay out the rules by which districts must operate to ensure high-quality educational opportunities for all students, specify that local graduation requirements must take into account out-of-school learning experiences such as those offered under the Flexible Pathways Initiative. In particular, section 2120.8 states, "students may receive credit for learning that takes place outside of the school, the school day, or the classroom," so long as those credits are earned "under the supervision of an appropriately licensed educator." In this way, all districts are required to consider how they will recognize the learning that takes place through flexible pathways as part of measuring students' proficiency and eligibility for a high school diploma.

Furthermore, the skills that students develop through participation in a college or career pathway are particularly relevant to the domain of "transferable skills." This is one of the seven core content areas in which students must demonstrate proficiency prior to graduation, along with more traditional academic areas such as literacy, mathematical content and practices, and scientific inquiry and content knowledge. The state has [broken down transferable skills](#) into five sub-components, including "clear and effective communication," "self-direction," and "creative and practical problem solving," and offered a series of performance indicators for measuring each area. While these skills do not necessarily need to be demonstrated through work-based learning opportunities or other out-of-school experiences, students likely have numerous chances to showcase their transferable skills as they participate in college and career pathways.

*For more on Vermont's Flexible Pathways Initiative, see the Rennie Center's 2020 Condition of Education report, [Measuring Student Success](#).*

## CONCLUSION

Massachusetts policymakers have a critical and challenging task ahead of them as they begin to investigate and recommend a new set of graduation requirements. As this work gets underway, though, it is important to recognize that maintaining high standards does not necessarily preclude offering multiple pathways for student learning—as long as these pathways are grounded in a deep and shared understanding of how students demonstrate that they have acquired the fundamental skills and competencies needed to advance to the next step. The examples of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont listed above will hopefully provide useful starting points for Massachusetts leaders as they seek to determine how to measure students' progress toward graduation.

## ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).



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