RESEARCH FOR ACTION

Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in Arizona: A Case Study of Implementation in an Elementary School in Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District 35

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Introduction

In 2019, the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) developed the Arizona Personalized Learning Network (AZPLN), a cohort of four districts that made a five-year commitment to shift to a personalized learning approach: Amphitheater Public Schools, Mesa Public Schools, Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35, and Yuma Union High School District. District leaders in the AZPLN participate in district systems building and school implementation efforts and receive customized support from CFA and KnowledgeWorks.

Research for Action (RFA), a nonprofit education research organization, partnered with KnowledgeWorks to document how personalized, competency-based learning is taking hold in two sample schools and districts in Arizona. In this case study, we will be exploring the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning in an elementary school in Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35 (SCV35). This case study was informed by qualitative sources from KnowledgeWorks and CFA, as well as classroom observations, interviews and focus groups with district and school administrators, teachers, students and parents from SCV35. The analysis also includes survey data from district staff and students administered in 2022 and 2023.

> ### Defining Personalized, Competency-Based Learning
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> KnowledgeWorks defines personalized, competency-based learning as an approach that centers each students' strengths, needs and interests and provides differentiated supports and ways to demonstrate what they know and know how to do, ensuring each learner graduates ready for what's next.

This case study will first explore the district context and history behind the adoption and implementation of personalized, competency-based learning, and systems put in place to support the work on the ground. The discussion will then shift to the school level by describing what personalized, competency-based learning looks like in a sample elementary school in the district, including implementation in the classroom, perspectives from teachers, students, and parents, and concluding with successes, challenges, and lessons from the field.

KnowledgeWorks has conducted extensive research on the district conditions necessary for scaling personalized, competency-based learning. The conditions along with goal setting metrics and outcomes are explained in KnowledgeWorks' [Finding Your Path: A Navigation Tool for Scaling](#)

[Personalized Competency-Based Learning](). The twelve conditions are highlighted in Figure 1 and described below:

Figure 1. Conditions for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning
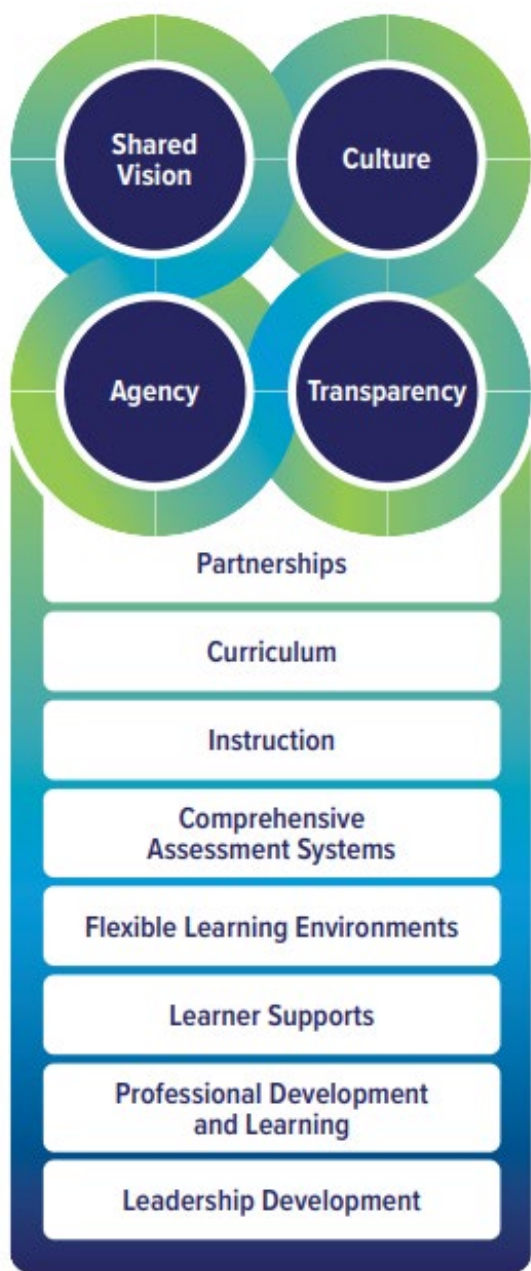
- A **shared vision** unifies the learning community's commitment toward a common purpose.
- **Culture** is a set of collective behaviors, beliefs and values that drive transformation toward the shared vision.
- **Agency** grows from a culture of trust that enables individuals to have a voice in achieving the shared vision.
- **Transparency** builds inclusivity and trust through common language, shared decision-making and accountability that are visible and accessible by all members of the learning community.
- **Partnerships** develop more inclusive and diverse opportunities for how learners pursue their learning goals and demonstrate what they learn.
- The **curriculum** drives learning and equitable outcomes.
- **Instruction** is centered around the learner experience.
- The **comprehensive assessment system** is aligned to the learning continuum to ensure equitable outcomes for all learners, cultivating learner ownership through personalization.
- Cultivating **flexible learning environments** empowers learner agency and ownership of how, when and where they learn.
- Learning is centered around the whole child with equitable access to a system of personalized **supports**, providing each child what they need to be successful, when they need it.
- The **professional development** plan, based on personalized educator needs and preferences, fosters a systemwide culture of collaboration, making continuous improvement cycles a reality in service of the learners and the shared vision.
- Through capacity building strategies and continuous improvement cycles, **leadership development** grows the collective efficacy of the learning community to cultivate shared accountability and growth in leading for equity to execute the shared vision.[1]

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[1] Finding Your Path A Navigation Tool for Scaling Personalized, Competency-Based Learning: https://knowledgeworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/finding-your-path-navigation-tool.pdf

This case study will ground the discussion of SCV35's implementation of personalized, competency-based learning in these conditions, offering insights on scaling efforts. Several discussion points encompass multiple conditions which are reflected where applicable.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDY

SCV35 reflected many of the practices associated with the district conditions for personalized, competency-based learning. Based on interviews, focus groups and observations, the conditions identified included shared vision and culture, agency, curriculum, instruction, comprehensive assessment systems, flexible learning environments, learner supports, professional development and learning, and leadership development.

- **Shared vision and culture:** The district has adopted new policies and frameworks and leveraged opportunities available through state legislation to support the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning. These new policies, such as a Portrait of a Graduate (expectations and attributes for graduates in SCV35), facilitate the district's movement toward the common purpose of personalized, competency-based learning implementation.
- **Agency:** Classroom observations at the case study school and interviews with teachers and leaders from the school illustrated that student agency has increased in the classroom. In addition, students were beginning to take ownership of their own learning through strategies such as monitoring their progress toward learning goals.
- **Curriculum, instruction, and comprehensive assessment systems:** The district has adopted standards-based grading, a new process of formative student assessment that allows students to work through a learning continuum with standards for each unit of study. Teachers designed their curriculum so that students could work toward the standards at their individual pace and take assessments designed to meet them where they were in the curriculum. At the case study school, and in the district, teachers also had access to technological resources for instruction that aligned with personalized, competency-based learning.
- **Flexible learning environments and learner supports:** Students received targeted instructional time, and teachers practiced learner-centered strategies such as small group work, self-paced online curricula, allowing students to work at their own pace, and providing opportunities for students to retake assessments. The case study school also provided increased flexibility to students in terms of where and how they learn (e.g., flexible seating, pacing of assignments, learning centers).
- **Professional development and learning:** SCV35 has welcomed educators from other AZPLN districts to attend their Inquiry Lab where they showcase strategies used to shift instruction to personalized, competency-based learning. At the case study school, teachers had access to an instructional coach to provide support and guidance in implementation.
- **Leadership development:** Agency as the result of the culture at SCV35 has enabled individual principals, district-level instructional specialists, and teachers to participate in decision-making through membership in district design teams and school Launch teams.

Respondent perspectives were positive overall. Teachers and administrators reported that students were more reflective in their learning, set individual goals, and made choices about how to learn. Students were aware that they were learning in a new way and had become comfortable with learning at their own pace. Family members were also familiar with personalized learning and appreciated the flexibility their children received.

District Context, History and Systems to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

District Context and Inception of the Work

SCV35 is a small, PreK-12 district with five schools (two elementary, one middle, one PreK –8 , and one high school) serving approximately 3,600 students in southern Arizona. As of the 2021-22 school year, most students (97%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx while 2% were White. The district dropout rate was below 2% in 2022.[2] The district spans 265 square miles of rural communities and includes one of the largest ports of entry between the United States and Mexico.

The district's involvement with personalized, competency-based learning began in 2019 with a trip to Marysville Exempted Village School District in Marysville, Ohio to observe classrooms leveraging the instructional approach. That trip proved to be a motivating factor in adopting personalized, competency-based learning. The practices district representatives witnessed in Marysville aligned with their shared belief that instruction should center on the needs of students. After the trip, SCV35 became a founding member of the Arizona Personalized Learning Network (AZPLN), a consortium guided by the CFA in partnership with KnowledgeWorks.

The district partnership with KnowledgeWorks includes the development of a state level learning community around personalized, competency-based learning through the AZPLN; convenings on best practices around personalized, competency-based learning; and regular consultation between KnowledgeWorks and key points of contact in each district. KnowledgeWorks also helps to support district design teams that lead the work locally and provides access to customized professional development and ongoing technical assistance.

It is critical to remember that just as this work was beginning in the district during the 2019-20 school year, the nation found itself in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which required remote instruction and slowed professional development and implementation. The district gave schools flexibility in approaching learning during school closures and hybrid schooling periods during the peak of the pandemic. While SCV35 distributed computers to students to facilitate remote learning, schools needed to give students additional flexibility in completing assignments. At the same time, the pandemic supported personalized, competency-based learning in a few important ways: the pandemic helped prepare the district to further implement the approach by shifting teacher mindsets, transitioning training materials to an online platform, and incorporating student choice.

District Systems to Support Classroom Practice

While the instructional strategies included in personalized, competency-based learning take place in the classroom, district systems need to support these pedagogical shifts. In SCV35, the district has adopted new policies and frameworks and leveraged opportunities available through state legislation to support the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning. These policies and frameworks align with several district conditions necessary for change, as discussed below.

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[2] https://azreportcards.azed.gov/districts/detail/4458

Shared Vision and Culture

The district administrators and case study school respondents included in the data collection described a shared vision for the work and clear values to support that vision as evidenced through the following common themes:

- **The case study school displayed a shared vision around student agency and ownership.** The administrators and especially teachers reported that personalized learning should lead to students taking ownership of their learning. The teachers saw the future of the work as creating a space in which all students take control of their classroom experience, work through material at their own level and pace, and master the learning targets and standards through technology, centers, projects, and whole group instruction to become proficient across content areas. One teacher noted, "I think we do share the same vision in that we want our students to take ownership and… be a part of their learning journey[3]."

- **Districts involved in personalized, competency-based learning in Arizona have each worked to create a district-designed portrait of a graduate**. This document was designed to create a clear set of expectations for the attributes that SCV35 graduates should possess to be ready for college, career and beyond, as well as clarity on how to leverage personalized, competency-based learning to meet these expectations. The portrait of a graduate also helps develop a shared vision for the district overall. During the 2021-22 school year, SCV35 began their process of community engagement through focus groups, round table staff meetings, and site councils to gather input for their district's portrait of a graduate; the document was unveiled in time for the opening of the 2023-2024 school year. As displayed in Figure 2 below, it includes several attributes expected of district graduates, specifically: 1) Creative and Critical Thinkers, 2) Effective Communicators, 3) Engaged Citizen, and 4) Resilient, Lifelong Learners.

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[3] SCV Teacher Focus Group

Figure 2. SCV35 Portrait of a Graduate

PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE

Creative & Critical Thinkers

- Apply learning to new situations
- Evaluate and synthesize information
- Use their curiosity to ask questions, seek solutions, and generate ideas
- Express ideas in meaningful and creative ways

Effective Communicators

- Actively listen to others in order to understand various perspectives
- Speak and write with purpose and audience in mind
- Use their voice to influence change

Engaged Citizens

- Cooperate and collaborate with others
- Recognize and respect diversity
- Exhibit empathy, integrity, and honesty
- Care for others and serve their community
- Demonstrate responsibility for oneself and their community
- Advocate for others and oneself
- Utilize leadership skills to impact the community

Resilient, Lifelong Learners

- Take initiative and ownership in areas of academic, career & personal interest
- Exhibit a growth mindset by preserving through challenge, learning from mistakes, and taking risks.
- Hold themselves accountable by setting goals and reflecting on progress
- Adapt to change by practicing self-awareness and self regulation skills
- Use time and resources effectively

The Portrait of a Graduate attributes were developed by the SCV35 community. Students, families, teachers, and community members reported these attributes as the most important habits, mindsets, and characteristics of successful learners.

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35

Curriculum, Instruction and Comprehensive Assessment Systems

Through observations at the case study school and interviews and focus groups, the district conditions related to curriculum, instruction, and comprehensive assessment systems were illustrated through standards-based grading and the technological resources available.

- **Standards-based grading:** The district as a whole adopted this new process of formative student assessment. Unlike a traditional grading system using letter grades A-F, standards-based grading allows students to work through a learning continuum with standards for each unit of study. Instead of completing a unit and then moving on to the next unit regardless of the grade they receive on a summative assessment, students work toward proficiency on each standard until they have met that goal, only then moving to the next unit or level. With traditional grading, gaps in understanding the content and skills included in a unit may still exist after the summative assessment. In contrast, students who have yet to meet proficiency in standards-based grading create a learning plan with their teachers to determine how they will reach proficiency. A member of the district administration noted that "you can't do personalized, competency-based learning without standards-based grading at the district level[4]."

- **Technological resources for instruction:** Teachers at the case study elementary school had access to technological resources for classroom instruction, such as Google classroom, iReady[5], and MyPath[6]. Teachers were also able to assign students work on Chromebooks and gave all students diagnostic tests to individualize assignments and check proficiency. According to one administrator, technological resources purchased within the district must align with personalized, competency-based learning.

Flexible Learning Environments and Learner Support

The Instructional Time Model (ITM) provided SCV35 with the opportunity to create flexible learning environments which facilitates more support for learners. Arizona HB 2862 was passed by the state legislature in 2021 and allows a school district or charter school to adopt an Instructional Time Model (ITM) to meet instructional hour requirements through approaches like remote instruction, project-based learning, mastery-based learning, weekend courses, and evening courses. The district had to apply to the state for approval of their ITM plan, which has allowed for flexibility in the daily schedule, encouraging students to learn in more flexible ways, including outside of the classroom.

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[4] SCV District Administrator Focus Group
[5] i-Ready programs support every learner on their path toward grade-level success. By connecting to actionable, intuitive data, teachers know where to focus and students become more capable and engaged: https://www.curriculumassociates.com/
[6] MyPath is an adaptive intervention program for grade-level success in reading and math: https://www.imaginelearning.com/products/mypath/

District Planning and Leadership Development

SCV35 had several structures in place to support the work at the district and school levels, making sure to include teachers in the leadership of the work, including the following:

- **District design team:** The District Design Team for Santa Cruz Valley is one of multiple committees that focus specifically on personalized, competency-based learning. This committee is expected to engage in KnowledgeWorks training, pilot new practices, monitor implementation, and share their learnings with a broader staff audience. The committee includes the principal and one other key staff leader (typically the assistant principal or instructional coach) from each of the district's five schools, three district-level instructional specialists and a district-wide administrator.

- **Initial "coalition of the willing":** Two teachers per school were strategically invited in the beginning of the work to participate in professional development and pilot personalized, competency-based learning in their classrooms. The district expanded the number of teachers involved by sharing the initial teachers' progress and inviting other educators into their classrooms.

- **School Launch team:** As the work progressed, it was determined that instead of just the "coalition of the willing," schools across the AZPLN each needed a Launch team, 4-7 teachers per school site, to guide the work at the building level. Indeed, interview and focus group respondents explained that the Launch team was seen as an integral part of ensuring implementation. Teachers serving at the case study site lead professional development for the different grade bands. Launch team members can go and present at other schools as well if they have promising practices to share.

  At the case study school, every grade level also has a lead teacher who gathers teachers together every six weeks to meet and plan activities; families are also included to ensure they are knowledgeable about the school's plans for personalized, competency-based learning. During the focus group with family members, participants indicated that they felt they were included in planning processes by the principal, remarking that they were asked for opinions and recommendations and believed that the principal was open to their ideas.

Professional Development and Learning

Personalized, competency-based learning is a complex instructional and systems approach that influences the roles of both teachers and students in the classroom by calling on teachers to facilitate a process through which students have agency and ownership for their own learning. For this level of instructional change to take place, educators need increased knowledge of the approach and structures to support them in the work. In SCV35, along with the supports provided by KnowledgeWorks, several strategies were leveraged to build educator capacity, including the following:

- **Inquiry labs and showcases**: On multiple occasions SCV35 has welcomed educators from other AZPLN districts into the district's Inquiry Lab where they showcase various ways they have shifted instruction toward personalized, competency-based learning. Visitors have toured multiple schools in the district and participated in small group sessions that shared lessons learned about the various components of the model. Students also share their

perspectives through panel discussions on how the approach has impacted their learning.[7] Showcases involve teachers presenting artifacts and examples of their personalized competency-based learning strategies to co-workers and colleagues across the district during an in-house professional development day that is hosted at a school site each May after school has ended for the year.

- **Instructional coaches:** At the case study elementary school, the instructional coach had an office adjacent to the main office and principal, making it clear that teachers had access to guidance in the work when needed. Participating teachers indicated they felt supported by the coach and the school administration in implementing personalized, competency-based learning. One teacher noted that if she had questions or issues the coach is there to help brainstorm or connect her with a colleague who could help.

Cross-District Implementation and Sustainability

It takes time to implement personalized, competency-based learning due to the significant changes required from both teachers and students. Initially, SCV35 adopted an organic approach to implementation, collaborating with a small cadre of teachers willing to explore the work and function as leaders in their schools and the district overall before scaling the work district-wide. While implementation has expanded over the life of the initiative, teachers continue to have considerable flexibility in whether and to what degree they adopt personalized, competency-based learning practices in their classrooms.

Implementation in the district is strengthening over time but continues to be a work in progress. This organic approach is evident in both the student and teacher implementation survey data collected by KnowledgeWorks and analyzed by the research team. While the trend data from the 2022 and 2023 administrations of the survey were stronger in SCV35 than the other three AZPLN districts, implementation continues to be a work in progress in the district.
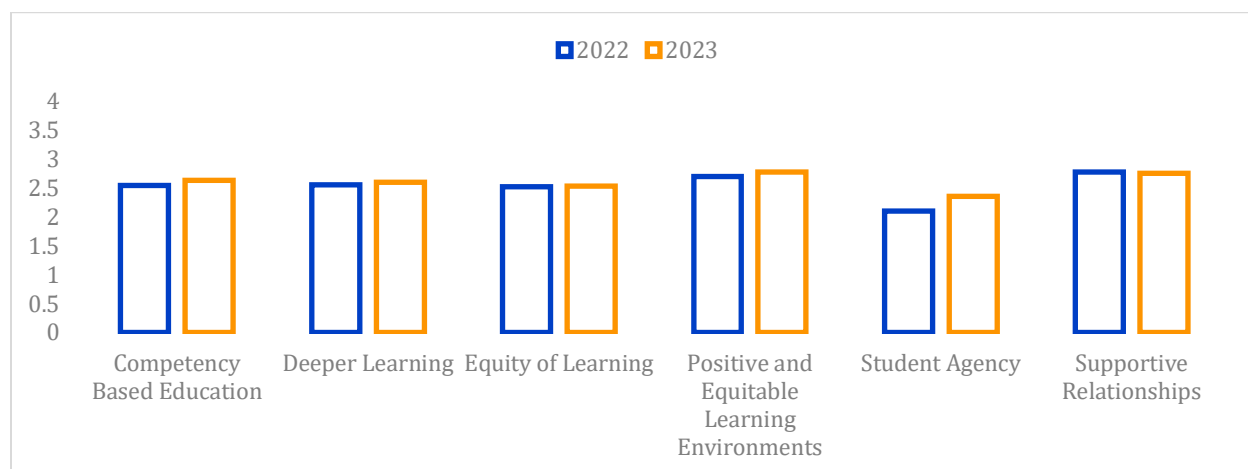
The implementation survey constructs were measured on the same scale as the underlying survey items (4 point Likert scale, where a value of 1 indicates the most negative attitude and 4 indicates the most positive attitude).[8] The analyses reported below display average scale scores across survey items that fall under a particular implementation construct. Figure 3 below outlines the analysis of student survey data by construct, while Figure 4 outlines teacher survey data based on a different set of survey constructs related to implementation.

[7] https://www.scv35.org/news_room/what_s_new/scv35_personalized_learning
[8] Survey items used different language such *as strongly disagree-strongly agree* or *none of the time-all of the time*, but the numerical scales were consistent across items.

Figure 3. Student survey data on implementation by construct: 2022 and 2023
(n=1229-1455 (2022); n=1415-1723 (2023)

Across most constructs, student survey data indicated moderate to strong evidence of implementation. As shown in Figure 3, average student perceptions of the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning fell between a 2.5 and a 3 across most constructs, with the exception of student agency. The strongest survey data was found in the supportive relationships (2.78-2.76) and positive and equitable learning environments constructs (2.7-2.78). Average survey scores from 2 to below 3 are considered moderate to strong evidence of implementation. In all but one construct, student perceptions of implementation improved slightly from 2022 to 2023.

Figure 4. Staff survey data on implementation by construct: 2022 and 2023
(n=108-121 (2022); n=78-86 (2023)
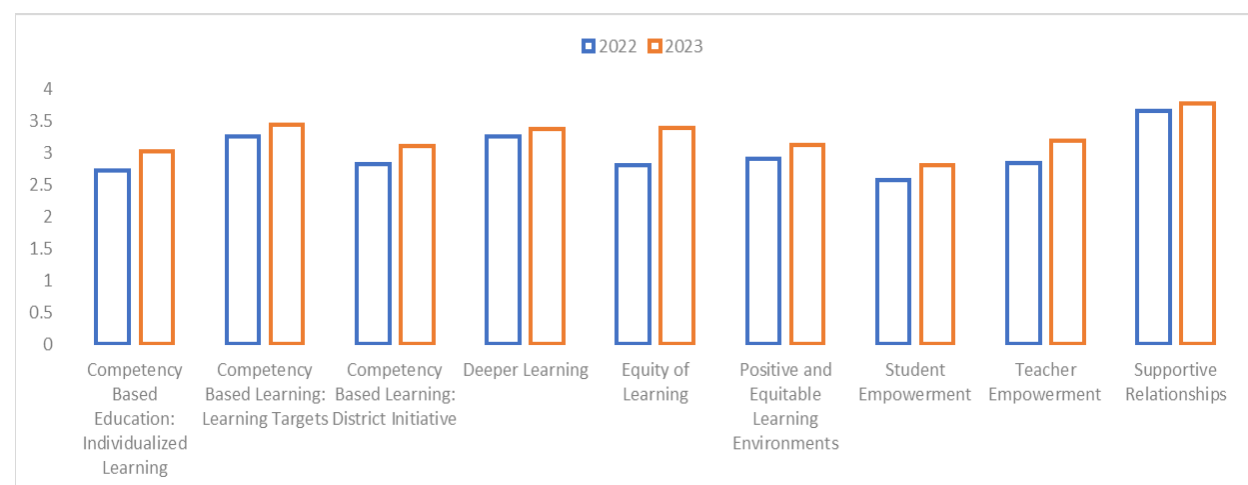
Across all constructs, staff survey data indicated either moderate to strong or strong evidence of implementation. As shown in Figure 4, staff perceptions of implementation were stronger than student perceptions, perhaps due to the faculty's understanding of the approach and what they are trying to achieve. In 2022, average staff perceptions of the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning were above 2.5 across constructs and above a 3 in three constructs. Across all constructs, staff perceptions of implementation improved from 2022 to 2023, with eight out of nine constructs averaging above 3 in 2023.

Plans for sustainability within the district include teachers and principals. SCV35's plans to sustain PCBL include adding a second Launch cohort of teachers at each school with funded professional development that will be built around implementation of personalized, competency-based learning strategies. In addition, according to a district administrator, SCV35 will be completing a task force process to align teacher evaluation instruments with the personalized, competency-based instructional model. Finally, there are efforts to create a cohort of principals who are all implementing personalized, competency-based learning to provide support to each other as they go through the process.

Personalized, Competency-Based Learning on the Ground: Observations and Perspectives from an Elementary School

To understand what implementation looks like on the ground, the research team conducted a site visit to the sample elementary school in the district in late October 2023 to observed classrooms and conducted focus groups with teachers, students, and parents. Before the site visit, interviews were also conducted with KnowledgeWorks, CFA staff, and district and school administrators. The following discussion outlines the findings from those data collection activities.

Student Agency and Learner Support: Implementation in the Classroom

Implementation began slowly in Santa Cruz Valley and required changes in the mindsets of teachers and administrators. Nevertheless, the sample school and the district have steadily become more focused on personalized, competency-based learning.

Student agency has increased in the classroom. The development of student agency was a significant component of personalized, competency-based learning in discussions with district administrators, school leaders, and teachers. Teachers reported providing students with more voice and choice and having the freedom to create various ways for students to learn and demonstrate mastery. New instructional practices were being leveraged to facilitate student agency; one teacher noted that they use "more center based [learning and instruction] so that [students] have a menu of choices for what they can work on[9]." Students as young as kindergarten are now demonstrating increased agency.

Faculty have slowly adjusted to the challenges of implementing this approach to teaching. Personalized, competency-based learning runs counter to traditional pedagogical models in which teachers lead classroom instruction and students follow the teacher's direction. At first, teachers found the shift overwhelming, but now many are embracing this new model and incorporating it into the classrooms.

Students were monitoring their own progress against standards. Teachers were using data walls that list each learning unit's standards and track where individual students were in the process of meeting them. In one kindergarten classroom observed at the elementary school, students were taking ownership for their progress by tracking whether they had met their goals; they were eager to earn a sticker posted on the data wall for each goal that they met. Students also led parent, teacher, and student conferences by showing their parents their data binders that list

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[9] SCV Teacher Focus Group

their learning goals and individual progress. Students walked parents through their learning goals and showed them the areas where they still needed to improve their skills. One teacher noted that students "know what they are learning, and they own it[10]." When asked if they had learning goals and knew how they were progressing in meeting those goals, one student in the focus group noted "we have a binder where you move… from i-learn to i-practice, and then to i-show[11]."

Personalized, competency-based learning included strategies to meet the individual needs of students. During focus groups, teachers highlighted the learner supports they were implementing in their classrooms to meet the needs of their students. The strategies mentioned included *small group work* based on where students were in meeting the standards, *iReady* that provided online custom curricula in math and reading that provided differentiated instruction, and allowing students to *work at their own pace* and *retake assessments until they achieved proficiency* in the content.

Students received targeted instructional time in different classrooms from different teachers. Students in the elementary school that was observed were given 70 minutes four days a week in which they would go to a different classroom depending on the subject area where they need the most support. During this time, they received one-to-one support from teachers.

More supportive relationships between faculty and students have encouraged students to feel comfortable acknowledging when they need help. Teachers noted that because they spend time with students individually as a part of personalized, competency-based learning, they have learned more about their students' lives outside the classroom. As a result, teachers said that their students felt comfortable sharing when they were struggling in class and asking for help. One teacher explained that their students had "learn[ed] to be confident and comfortable with their own learning level… [students know] it's okay to say, 'I'm emerging' [or] 'I'm developing' and it's okay to ask for help[12]." During their focus group, students confirmed their comfort level with asking for help. One student noted, …" you need to ask three people [for help]… first, and if the three people don't know what to do and are stuck as well, then you give the teacher the help stick, and then when the teacher… sees the stick, [they] go to that student and helps them[13]."

Classrooms offer increased flexibility. When walking into classrooms in the observed elementary school, the research team noticed that the classroom itself was arranged differently than many traditional classrooms. The physical space provided students with flexible seating and different "learning zones" that students could choose from based on their individual learning levels. During the student focus group, several students described ways in which they could move around their classrooms. For example, one said, "every single day the center changes for everybody," while another explained that "yesterday, I was on the carpet and then today I'm at table one[14]."

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[10] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[11] SCV Student Focus Group
[12] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[13] SCV Student Focus Group
[14] SCV Student Focus Group

School Perspectives on Personalized, Competency-Based Learning

While personalized, competency-based learning has been implemented for several years in AZPLN districts, it is early in the process to measure the impact of the model due to 1) the deceleration of implementation due to COVID-19 and 2) the moderate level of implementation resulting, at least in part, from the organic nature of implementation in the early stages of the work. Respondent perceptions of the model's effectiveness, therefore, help measure its influence.

Teachers and administrators reported positive impacts of personalized, competency-based learning on students. At the district level, administrators reported that students were aware that they were learning in different ways and were reflecting on their learning. According to teachers, students wanted to learn and meet their goals and were making choices on how to learn and demonstrate their learning in different ways. They further noted that students were aware of their progress in meeting the standards and had become comfortable with learning at a different pace from other students.

Families were invested in personalized, competency-based learning and functioned as advocates for the model. In speaking with the parents of students in the elementary school, the research team recognized that they were knowledgeable about what personalized learning means. They explained that their children talked about it with them, and that the school provided community information sessions about the model and how it would be implemented. They were familiar with the children's learning goals, aware of the flexibility of the model, and appreciative of the individualized support their children received. One parent noted:

> *I think it's working for the kids. They are more engaged. It's not a linear learning path. They can trail back to something they didn't learn before. The big subjects they do as a class, but they do have the opportunity to revisit that subject[15].*

Families know that their students are learning differently than they were before and see their children as more engaged in their own learning.

Personalized, competency-based learning was described as advancing equity through the practices inherent in the model. Both administrators and teachers spoke about how this new instructional approach was helping them to address issues of equity. Teachers at the elementary school noted that they were able to provide support for those most in need, such as students with disabilities or English language learners by providing them with choice, individual support, and support in small groups, as well as pull-out interventions. One teacher said, "I can go and sit one-on-one with [the students] who I know need that extra support[16]." School administrators similarly reported that the school was creating a safe place for students and supporting them through small

Respondent perspectives were positive overall

Teachers and administrators reported that students were more reflective in their learning, set individual goals, and made choices about how to learn. Students were aware that they were learning in a new way and had become comfortable with learning at their own pace. Family members were also familiar with personalized learning and appreciated the flexibility their children received.

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[15] SCV Parent Focus Group
[16] SCV Teacher Focus Group

groups and additional time for assignments. Equity was further supported by providing more voice and choice in the ways students learn and demonstrate that learning.

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Student Agency through Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in the Classroom: Sketches from Different Grades at the Elementary School

While implementation of the personalized, competency-based learning model was similar across grades at the case study site, teachers in the classrooms observed provided examples of how they are leveraging the models strategies in different ways in their individual classes and how that facilitated student agency:

Kindergarten and 1st grade: While students in these early grades may not have the same level of agency as older students, teachers still give them more choice than in a traditional classroom. For example, students have the autonomy to go to use the restroom or get their backpacks when they need to without asking the teacher for permission. The teachers also made sure to provide students with individual support when they needed it.

4th grade: Students have flexible seating arrangements and provided input on what types of seats the school would purchase for their classroom. During the observation, students were seen sitting on the countertop, the floor, and on bouncy balls. The classroom also included a "calm down spot" students could visit for 10 minutes and do breathing exercises, read, and/or lie down. Students could also visit the teacher's desk whenever they experienced challenges and needed help.

5th grade: The teachers supported students in their learning using small groups and providing students with individual attention within the group. For example, students were given individual time to ask questions and demonstrate their understanding even within the small group itself.

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Successes, Challenges, and Lessons for the Field

Interview and focus group respondents identified several successes and challenges that the school and district has experienced through the implementation of personalized, competency-based learning.

Successes

In sharing perspectives on their children's experiences, family members explained that the **students "know they have choice"** and **take ownership of their own learning**. Parents also explained that students were **more self-reflective** about their learning. One parent noted that students could "look at [themselves] and evaluate" how they were doing in school.

Teachers we spoke with shared that **students wanted to learn and meet their goals,** had **more ways to show their learning,** and were **enjoying learning and making choices**, explaining that[17]:

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[17] All quotes taken from SCV Teacher Focus Group

Students are willing and want to learn and meet their goals. They want to get a certificate and see happy face [stickers] in their portfolio [that tracks their progress].

All the students make progress, and they enjoy coming to school and are ready to learn as soon as they walk in. I am better at teaching, and it is easier for me. All of the strategies have improved teaching and learning.

Students have more ways to show what they are learning, and they love having those choices.

Faculty members also reported that **students understood and accepted that people learn at different paces.** One teacher explained that students understand "we all learn at different paces, we make mistakes, that's how we learn[18]." Students reassured and encouraged one another, explaining that they will learn the material, but that it may just take a little longer.

At the district systems level, the **adoption of standards-based grading and other policies that facilitate personalized, competency-based learning** helped to make the model sustainable. Further, district respondents reported that **teacher collaboration had increased,** and they are **more willing to take risks in their teaching**: "If they try something and it does not work, it is okay[19]."

Challenges

Along with the successes, respondents also identified challenges with the model. In the family focus group, parents expressed concerns that the **focus on working with students individually might create gaps in learning**, and that **students who excel might not be encouraged to grow** further in their learning.

Teachers identified standards-based grading as a challenge, specifically the **adjustment of moving to proficiency scales**. **Limited classroom space** can also create challenges in trying to offer centers; one teacher explained that some classrooms "are too small to use centers[20]." Further, implementing the model can **take more time than traditional instruction.** For example, one teacher explained that "making all of the various lessons and creating materials takes time[21]." It also takes time to provide more individualized support.

Adjusting to student-centered instruction and fostering student agency is also a challenge. Personalized, competency-based learning requires teachers and students to play different roles than in a traditional classroom, and teachers need to relinquish some of the instructional control that they may have had previously. One teacher explained that "when starting this, I was off balance... [over time] I let go and realized I don't need that control[22]."

At the same time, respondents explained that there has been a **lack of clarity about what personalized, competency-based learning looks like in practice.** One respondent said:

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[18] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[19] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[20] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[21] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[22] SCV Teacher Focus Group

We understood the why, but we have struggled with the how in terms of what does [personalized, competency-based learning] look like in the classroom. We get it and we are [bought] in but we need more understanding of what mastery looks like[23].

This shift in instruction also **needs to be reflected in the teacher evaluation processes** used in the district. An administrator explained that "we are asking teachers to do something different, but the evaluation has not really changed[24]."

While challenges certainly still exist, it is important to recognize that the implementation of the model has also been an accomplishment in itself. One respondent explained that "after trying [personalized, competency-based learning] for a year, I saw the changes in the students and that they could track their learning and where thy needed help – that was a big success[25]."

[23] SCV Teacher Focus Group
[24] SCV School Leader Interview
[25] SCV Teacher Focus Group

About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit education research organization. We seek to use research to improve equity, opportunity, and outcomes for students and families. Our work is designed to strengthen early education, public schools, and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public; and enrich civic and community dialogue. For more information, please visit our website at www.researchforaction.org.

Acknowledgments