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Breaking With Tradition: The Shift to Competency-Based Learning in PLCs at Work™

By Brian M. Stack and Jonathan G. Vander Els

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Breaking With Tradition: The Shift to Competency-Based Learning in PLCs at Work™* by Brian M. Stack and Jonathan G. Vander Els. *Breaking With Tradition* features a framework that school leaders can use to foster healthy school cultures and moderate divisions among staff members.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire team to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote a healthy school culture.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

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Chapter 1

**Understanding the Components of an Effective
Competency-Based Learning System**

1. How does your experience with first learning how to drive compare to Brian's experience, and what, if anything, would you change about how you first learned to drive? For what two reasons does driver education reflect the topic of competency-based learning?
2. From what notion is the model of competency-based learning born? What five parts make up the model of competency-based learning?
3. In your own words, describe the Carnegie unit and why school and education leaders argue for American schools to remove and to not remove the Carnegie unit.
4. Define *blended learning* and *move-when-ready systems*. What blended learning models can schools use to develop move-when-ready systems?
5. How would you respond if students' parents asked you what supports your school has in place to help their child succeed? In what ways do effective schools ensure their practices allow all students to gain the timely, differentiated learning support they each require?

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6. List the four overarching work-study practices that schools can embed in any grade level or course. How could you adapt or embed one of these work-study practices into your learning program, and how would this practice benefit students?

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Chapter 2

**Building the Foundation of a Competency-Based Learning System
Through PLCs**

1. Briefly define the four pillars of a professional learning community (PLC) and the four questions that correspond to the pillars. Then outline your school's specific four pillars.
2. What can you learn from the actions Lindsay Unified School District and Regional School Unit 2 took to frame a shared purpose for their learning communities?
3. When should teacher teams formally assess their SMART goals, and what can they report on during these checks? What does having awareness of progress toward these goals help teacher teams understand and cause them to do?
4. How do standards differ from competencies? How do priority standards, enduring standards, and power standards differ from each other?
5. What characteristics make questions essential, and what should teachers ask themselves when they try to develop essential questions? Provide an example of a question you find essential for your purposes, and explain how this question meets the characteristics of an essential question.

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6. List the three big ideas of a PLC related to the fundamental purpose of school.

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Chapter 3

Developing Competencies and Progressions to Guide Learning

1. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, what qualities should learning goals have? Analyze a learning goal that you use in your classroom. If your learning goal is missing any of these qualities, how could you alter the learning goal to incorporate these qualities?
2. In your own words, define *learning progressions* and what they provide.
3. In what ways can teachers make it possible to support all their students as they each find themselves at a different point in a learning progression? Why is student ownership of learning a critical component of a competency-based learning system?
4. What theme should all competency implementation scenarios include? Why do the authors believe a bottom-up approach with top-down support best helps develop appropriate, rigorous competencies and learning progressions?
5. Why must a school embed professional development as it transitions to a competency-based learning environment?

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6. Describe the project-based learning (PBL) model and how it supports students' understanding and challenges students to learn. What does the practitioner perspective on PBL (page 66) teach you about how work with PBL can enhance students' learning?

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Chapter 4

Changing to Competency-Friendly Grading Practices

1. On the day Brian's outlook on grading changed, what did he learn? What two key points about homework does Brian's grading experience demonstrate, and what fundamental purpose of grading did Brian not grasp before that day?
2. What flaws exist in the traditional point-based grading system? What philosophy must pervade every aspect of a competency-based school, and how can this philosophy shift a school's grading culture?
3. What considerations should schools make as they determine what common set of grading expectations to set for all teachers? What grading expectations do you think your school should include in its common set of expectations, and why?
4. Why do rubrics play an essential role in developing quality assessments in a competency-based learning system? Why does a flawed logic exist in a hundred-point-scale system and in a grading system that assigns value to academic behaviors?

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5. What reassessment policy do you currently use in your school? How can teachers channel the power of reassessment as a learning tool? Should the reassessment grade supplant or combine with the original grade, and why is this the case?

6. What existing procedures, policies, beliefs, and traditions in your own school's culture and community must you carefully consider before you make a plan to gradually change your grading practices to a competency-based learning model?

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Chapter 5

Creating and Implementing Competency-Friendly Performance Assessments

1. In your own words, define *performance assessment*. How did Jonathan experience performance assessment when he went through training in the U.S. military? What do teachers and drill sergeants have in common?
2. What components must a well-designed, balanced competency-based assessment system include?
3. Why does validating a collaborative team's assessments play a crucial part in building performance assessments? List the components of a typical performance assessment validation process.
4. Describe the five major steps in building a performance assessment.
5. Why should teacher teams look for ways to refine a performance assessment after they administer the assessment? Describe a case in which you administered a performance assessment and then refined it. For what reasons did you alter the assessment after you gave it?

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6. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, what top-four skills do employers look for in potential employees? How do you integrate the learning of these skills into your classroom, and how could you increase your integration of this learning?

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Chapter 6

Responding When Students Need Intervention and Extension

1. What event led Brian Pickering’s school to move away from traditional U.S. schooling methods? How does this example illustrate what schools often undergo as they shift to a more personalized approach to learning?
2. Consider the example elementary and secondary school schedules in figures 6.1 and 6.2 (pages 134 and 135). How do these schedules make time for intervention opportunities and for specialist support, and why are these methods advantageous for these different school settings?
3. List the four questions that can help a school leadership team build a schedule. Why should these questions guide the leadership team’s scheduling process?
4. What questions should guide a school leadership team’s discussions in planning for how to provide daily opportunities for support and extension? Which of these questions are specific to planning academic structures, and which of these questions allows teachers to consider the human resources aspect of intervention and extension?

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5. For what four main reasons do schools often not move forward in allocating time in the school day for reteaching and extension? Which of these reasons and what other reasons have you heard teachers give as reasons for them not providing reteaching and extension in their school?

6. In what ways can schools help teachers so that they have adequate preparation to support their students?

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Chapter 7

Sustaining the Change Process

1. How is it that competency-based learning may do for the education industry what the Internet did for the entertainment and music industries?
2. Briefly describe the eight steps of successful change management.
3. What is disruptive innovation, and why has competency-based learning disrupted the educational system?
4. What personality types should school and district guiding teams consider in choosing team members? What traits or behaviors do these personality types exhibit? Which of these types best describes your personality?
5. Why should school leaders observe small, short-term wins as their school works to shift to competency-based learning? Provide a few examples of short-term successes that schools may have in moving to competency-based learning.
6. Define *blocker* and the blocker types school leaders may commonly encounter when encouraging a competency-based learning culture. Describe a situation in which someone

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behaved as a blocker for your school, and describe how school leaders responded to that person's behavior.

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Chapter 8

Using a School-Design Rubric to Assess Where Your School Is in Its

Competency Journey

1. What five competency-based learning design principles is the competency-based learning school-design rubric based on?
2. How may a school adjust its school time structures as it moves from the onset of its competency-based learning journey to the developing and highest-performing levels of its journey?
3. What qualities best separate developing competency-based learning schools from high-performing competency-based learning schools?
4. How may a school adjust its differentiated support structures to meet students' individual learning needs as it starts competency-based learning work, expands on that work, and reaches the highest level of that work?
5. What do schools just starting their competency-based learning journey, schools at the developing level, and competency-based learning schools at the highest-performing level do to measure academic skills and dispositions?

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6. What critical questions should stakeholders reflect on as their school's leaders embark on a journey to competency-based learning?