

NSPRA Entry - 2025 Golden Achievement Awards
Spring Lake Park Schools, Communications and Marketing Team
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Communicating Competency-Based Learning

Creating awareness, understanding and support
for a new approach to learning



**SPRING LAKE PARK
SCHOOLS**

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SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Spring Lake Park Schools has been moving toward a competency-based approach to learning. In the 2023-2024 school year, the shift that had been more focused on teachers and learning design became much more visible and impactful to parents. We shifted how we were reporting on student progress at grades K-6 including report cards. In the 2024-2025 school year, we've continued the shift to competency-based learning at secondary grades 7-12.

Competency-based learning provides flexibility for how students demonstrate their mastery of subject areas and career and life skills. Instead of just spending a set amount of time in a classroom on a particular topic, it's about truly understanding and being able to apply their learning. While grades and report cards remain, this is a new way of approaching learning that requires a mindset shift. Communication was identified as being critical to supporting a successful change effort.

Research

Our research included looking at key factors inside our district, identifying best practices and learning from others who had made the shift to a competency- or proficiency- or mastery-based approach to learning.

- Our current reality had to inform our approach to communicating this important change. We have 63 languages spoken in our schools. Fourteen percent of our students are English Learners. Forty-six percent of students qualify for Educational Benefits. Our efforts needed to cover heritage language and use a variety of delivery methods.
- Identifying best practices was challenging. A May 2021 article published by the National Association of State Boards of Education found only 8-10 percent of schools were currently implementing or taking steps to implement competency-based learning. While momentum has grown, we didn't have districts to consult. A handful of schools in states like Colorado and Utah were further along in their journeys. They inspired us with ideas for how to support a successful implementation.
- Cautionary tales highlighted key priorities and goals. Some of our most significant insight came in the form of what not to do - from districts who had encountered challenges doing similar work. Through analysis of failed efforts, we identified hot button issues like letter grades and transcripts along with resistance to anything that communicates "lowering the bar." In addition, a broad swath of research reminded us that 70 percent of change efforts fail. Failures occur due to a variety of reasons, but lack of clarity is central.

Planning

Our research led to goals and strategies in four areas with a focus on students and their families as our primary audiences at this point in the implementation:

- **Articulating the story:** One of our primary goals was to achieve message clarity and consistency while balancing people's needs for depth of information. We identified the need for a short, medium and long explanation of the what and why of competency-based learning that we could apply in a variety of formats.
- **Storytelling and imagery:** We knew we had to make this technical idea "sticky." In the absence of real examples during the initial launch, our goal was to find (and test) images and analogies to help make this story "stick" with our audiences. Later, as examples from classrooms emerged, we planned to leverage them through storytelling.
- **High-leverage tools:** What we developed had to be done well and provide maximum impact. Looking at what has worked (and not worked) for our community in other projects helped us identify a handful of high-leverage tools to invest our time and effort to develop and be used over and over again. This also provided efficiency in language translation and supported our desires for clarity and consistency.
- **Systems and structures:** At all levels - district, school, classroom - our messages must be aligned. Because understanding grows over time and with new examples, we also had to consider frequency. Our tactics had to support alignment and visibility at a frequency to help reinforce the why and what of competency-based learning AND bring it to life in a concrete and meaningful way.

SUMMARY

Implementation

- **The story in 3's:** We created a 30-minute, 3-minute and 30-second version of our competency-based learning explainer. These narratives and images served as the basis for all our communication efforts and have been used in high touch communications like in-person presentations and low touch communication like fact sheets and online content.
- **Imagery and storytelling:**
 - » In planning, we tested analogies and images. We settled on learning to drive a car as a means of helping people understand the concepts of competency-based learning. A secondary analogy was learning to swim. We used the driving analogy on our fact sheet and in presentations – and continue to use it today. Analogies have helped people make connections.
 - » The image of Tetris-like building blocks has helped parents understand one goal of competency-based learning is to minimize learning gaps.
 - » Imagery and icons help make visual connections to the concepts being explained. We use an image to show how competency-based learning fits with our approach to personalized learning. We use icons for our career and life competencies to help make visual connections.
 - » Storytelling that highlights examples from across our district through photojournalism features and video have helped make this approach to learning human and deepen understanding and commitment.
- **High-leverage tools:** Our top tools included a mix of high touch and low touch communication:
 - » **Fact sheet (1-page):** This is our 3-minute version of the what and why of competency-based learning. It is translated into our top five languages and used across K-12.
 - » **Report card sample and rubric example (K-6):** When the time came for reporting on student progress at K-6, we provided a rubric example and report card sample – along with screencast recording describing what to expect. The examples and report card sample were also translated.
 - » **Parent-facing presentation (K-12):**
The parent-facing slide presentation was used at PTO meetings by principals, by teachers for parent conversations and recorded and provided online. We still use the presentation today.
 - » **Student-facing presentation (7-12):** For the implementation at secondary grades, we started with students and developed a consistent student-facing presentation to help orient students to a competency-based approach and the differences they'd experience in Schoology (our LMS). Our strategy here was to build student understanding and engagement knowing that if they were on board, their parents would be more likely to support.
- **Systems and structures:** We established a system to keep the communication consistent and frequent across classrooms, schools and the district as a whole:
 - » **Classrooms:** Teachers were equipped with all our high-leverage tools and shared the fact sheet in their classroom newsletters and presentation in conversations. In addition, we developed a regular cadence of message prompts – sentence starters - to remind them and support them to include examples in their classroom newsletters.
 - » **Schools:** Principals used the high-leverage tools in school-wide communication efforts like PTO meetings. For weekly school newsletters, we prompted principals to share an example or two from different classrooms each week to help bring the competencies to life collectively.
 - » **District:** District channels focused on storytelling – through our website, school newsletters, magazine and more - once we had examples coming in. Inclusion of teacher and student voice helped make the examples real and move competency-based learning from concept to real life.

Evaluation

Mindsets take time to shift. We did not anticipate wholesale cheering for a new approach to learning and reporting on student progress. We've followed – and continue to stick to - our plan. We monitor for feedback – and we've used it to improve. We use an SMS text/email micro-survey tool to do pulse checks with families. The tool accommodates translation into our top languages, and we've heard from parents across many languages – with positive as well as challenging feedback.

Feedback on the K-6 report card has influenced adjustments over three trimesters. Constructive feedback has provided important insight. For example, after receiving several comments about not being able to easily tell on the report card if a child is actually doing okay, we added a summary page and a scannable “on track” or “needs attention” to each competency area. This has been well-received.

Our first month after implementation at the secondary level, we had 20 comments confused and/or angry about competency-based learning and reporting. In our last pulse check, we had only three and this comment – “I think competency-based learning has made my child have higher expectations for himself and I appreciate that even though school seems a little harder (not in a bad way).” – SLP secondary parent

Specific to communication, we've seen many comments praising teachers for their classroom communication as well as the overall approach to communication like this, “I like how the school keeps us informed with everything that is happening and changes that are coming up.” Nearly a year in, we continue to be in the 30 percent of change efforts that succeed.

Articulating Our Story

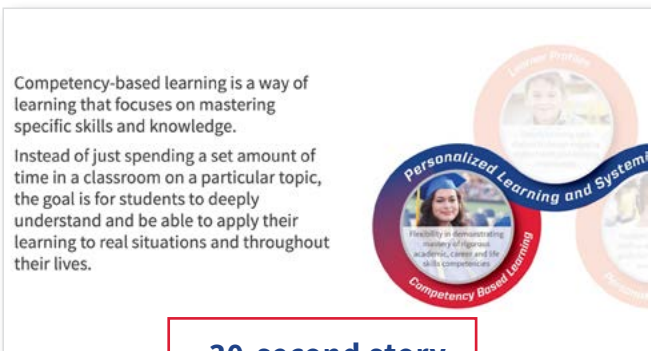
We developed a 30-minute, 3-minute and 30-second version of our story and used them in a variety of formats.



30-minute story



3-minute story



30-second story

Storytelling & Imagery

Early on, we didn't have a lot of real examples to share. We leaned on images and analogies to help people understand the what and why of competency-based learning.

Analogy
Like building with blocks

Competency-based learning is a little like these Tetris-like building blocks.

Each block is put in place before adding the next block and we work to ensure a strong foundation to build on . . . and prevent gaps in learning.

Analogy
Like driving a car

Safely driving a car is an example of something many parents hope their children will learn to do someday.

- When you are *beginning your learning*, you focus on the rules of the road in a classroom setting.
- When your learning is *in progress*, you practice with support and guidance.
- When you are *proficient*, you are able to show what you know to get your license and apply your learning in real situations (like on a patch of ice!).

As we had more and more examples coming out of classrooms, we seeded sharing through classroom and school newsletters as well as features and video clips.



READ: "Encouraging Emerging Scientists"

READ: "Learning...to Do"

High-Leverage Tools

Systems & Structures

Teachers receive a regular cadence of message prompts – sentence starters and sentence stems - to remind them and support them to include examples in their classroom newsletters.

Competency-Based Learning
What, Why and How

Competency-based learning is a way of learning that focuses on mastering specific skills and knowledge. Instead of just spending a set amount of time in a classroom on a particular topic, it's about students deeply understanding and being able to apply learning throughout their lives. We have two types of competencies in Spring Lake Park Schools:

- Academic competencies** are aligned to different content areas and the Minnesota state standards for those areas.
- Career and life competencies** are skills and mindsets needed for success in school and beyond.

SKILLS & MINDSETS

ACADEMIC COMPETENCIES

CAREER AND LIFE COMPETENCIES

KEY ELEMENTS

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW – Competencies are clear goals that represent the most critical and enduring concepts from each content area and the skills and mindsets needed to be successful.

- There are 4-8 competencies in each content area.
- Competencies are consistent from kindergarten through grade 12. They grow in complexity at each level.
- Each competency includes what students need to demonstrate to be proficient in that competency.

LEARNING AT YOUR PACE – Competencies are designed to be challenging but achievable. It's personalized and flexible. Students focus on what they need to learn and understand deeply before they move on to the next concept. This helps students build on and develop the skills they need for their next steps.

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING IN A REAL SITUATION – Proficiency is the ultimate goal.

Fact sheet in top 5 languages

In these first weeks of school, one of the competencies we've been working on is... Students are doing... Here are a few ideas for how you can help support this learning at home...

For [subject area] we're working on XX this week. This competency helps us...students are working on...

Park Terrace Elementary NEWSLETTER

See translation information below / Consulte la información de traducción a continuación.

Principal Points

Greetings Park Terrace Families,

I hope you all had a great Thanksgiving break filled with delicious food and wonderful times with family and friends. It has been great to have the kids back in the building as we wrap up these final days of the first trimester.

As we continue our journey into competency-based learning, I'd like to highlight what our first graders have been working on. In language arts, first graders were focused on the competencies of informative writing & informational text. They engaged in reading to learn about how books change lives around the world. Students identified the main topic and key details of a variety of texts that shared stories of how different people around the world gain access to books and libraries. Students then focused on writing to communicate their own ideas about how books can impact their own lives with the use of details and evidence to support their ideas. It's so fun to see the kiddos grow in their writing.

Principals receive regular reminders to highlight a few classroom examples in the school newsletter.

At the district level, feature storytelling that goes into more depth, like "A Day in 3rd Grade" embeds video examples of what the experience is like and helps make the ideas more concrete.

A Day in 3rd grade: Competency-based learning in action

Third graders enthusiastically welcomed a video crew into their classrooms to follow along in their learning for one day last May. As we start a new school year, short video stories from that day provide tangible examples of competency-based learning in action. From collaboration to math to science to digital literacy, let's roll!

First, here is 30 seconds of background. Spring Lake Park Schools has different **academic and career and life competencies**. Academic competencies are aligned to different subject areas, then, English Language Arts, ELA, and mathematics state standards for those areas. Career and life competencies are skills and mindsets needed for success in school and beyond.

There are many benefits to a competency based approach to learning. This approach supports each learner in mastering the learning in front of them before moving on to the next step - a learning plan. It also helps students learn, retain and be able to apply what they know to their work at school and beyond. As students engage in their learning, they develop ownership over

COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

READ + VIDEOS: "A Day in 3rd Grade"

Intro to Competency-based learning & K-6 experience

Why competency-based learning?

Students are able to apply learning throughout their lives.

Family and student presentations: in-person meetings and recordings

Competency Rubric Example: Science - Patterns (Grades 3-4)

This is a competency rubric for the Patterns competency within Science for grades 3-4. It is a tool for teachers to use to determine where students are in their learning.

There are competency stems that describe the competencies. Each stem is a statement that describes the skill or knowledge that students are expected to demonstrate. Each stem is aligned to the Minnesota state standards for Science for grades 3-4.

This is the competency description for Patterns. This is the goal for this competency. This is the goal for this competency. This is the goal for this competency.

Report card and rubric examples