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THE DEN · ESSAY SERIES

On the FullScale Competency-Based Learning Scan

An essay from The Den, the Fox Curriculum series on AI, writing, and learning.

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New landscape scan from FullScale looked at 106 high schools across 30 states doing competency-based learning. Their core finding: "If we cannot clearly define and see competency-based learning in practice, we cannot effectively support, measure, or scale it."

That's the same problem my dissertation is asking, just at a different scale.

I'm investigating why the same AP course, taught by the same instructor, with the same resources, produces inconsistent exam outcomes across years. This report is asking why competency-based learning produces inconsistent outcomes across schools. Same structure, different zoom level: you cannot fix what you cannot see, and most systems are built to see the easy parts, not the parts that actually determine quality.

The finding that stuck with me most: schools describe their goals and design philosophy for CBL far more often than they describe the actual systems that make it work, assessment, mastery progression, aligned supports. That gap is exactly where quality lives or dies. Anyone can write a mission statement about mastery. Far fewer can show you the rubric that actually measures it.

It also validates something I have believed for a while working inside AP assessment design: multiple choice alone was never going to capture mastery. AP's answer is a messier, harder-to-scale mix of FRQs, DBQs, LEQs, and rubric-scored performance tasks, because that is what it actually takes to see whether a student can do the thing, not just recognize the thing. CBL is running into the same wall at a much bigger scale, across 30 states, with far less shared infrastructure to solve it.

If the field wants CBL to be more than a mission statement, the unglamorous work is assessment design and progression systems, not just redesigning the student experience.

Worth a full read if you work anywhere near high school redesign, assessment, or ed policy.

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