

Competency-Based Learning Comes to Wickenburg High School

The traditional high school structure and design have not changed much in the last 150 years. Students basically arrive from various feeder schools as freshman and are educated in batches (i.e. everyone takes Algebra I regardless of their readiness to do so). Throughout a student's four year experience in high school their goal is to put in the "seat time" to earn enough credits to ultimately graduate. This is the system I was educated in, you were educated in, and your parents and grandparents were educated in.

Over the course of the past couple of years this has changed in Wickenburg as we now offer the Grand Canyon Diploma (GCD). The GCD affords a student who passes a series of end of course exams in certain subjects to graduate as early as the end of their sophomore year and go on to community college on the school district's dime. Implementing the GCD has been a move to shift Wickenburg High School toward a "competency-based" system as opposed to a "seat time" system. In this type of system we switch from time in school being constant (4 yrs.) and learning being variable to time being variable (students may graduate in 2 yrs., 3 yrs. or 4 yrs.) and learning (or mastery of content) being constant. In other words, if it takes me three years to master Algebra that is ok as long as I can show that I have truly mastered the subject by passing an end of course exam which indicates, using national and international benchmarks, that I am college and career ready.

Starting this coming year we are expanding upon this idea through being selected as a national model high school by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). In the fall, Wickenburg High School will become one of 15 high schools across the nation to demonstrate how the high school model can be transformed to serve student's individual learning needs rather than asking them to move through their four years in batches. To make this possible we are developing subject level progressions where students will enter at their individual level of ability. To use math as an example, students will be pre-tested upon entry into high school and will then enter one of five progressions based upon their knowledge and abilities. This means that some students will enter taking advanced math courses such as Algebra II, but it also means a student may start in Algebra I, or in a more basic math course if they are not ready for Algebra I. Throughout their time at WHS we will work to help them master Algebra and Geometry at a minimum, but based upon their ability to do so, we will move them forward into more advanced math courses.

In this new system we will also differentiate the diplomas which students can earn. Although completion of the Grand Canyon Diploma will be our "standard diploma", an advanced student may select to pursue an Advanced Placement International Diploma (APID). If a student is not able to show the competency required for the GCD, we will also offer the current WHS diploma which is based upon earning 22 credits including required courses. Designing the system in this way allows students to individualize and personalize their learning rather than following one rigidly designed structure.

Conversion to this type of system makes total sense to me as a veteran educator. I have long wondered how we might change the system to make a student's learning more personal and individualized. We all know people (possibly ourselves!) who excel in math, but struggle in English or

visa versa. Why not give these individuals the ability to pursue their maximum ability in both areas rather than holding them in a singular, rigid system where everyone moves through as a single group? I believe this idea will make a huge difference for students in our system and will enhance their level of success.

I will make sure to keep the community informed as we progress through this process and look forward to seeing how Wickenburg students blossom in this new system. Please feel free to contact me, or WHS Principal, Jackie Jacobson, if you have questions.