COMPETENCY BASED GRADING
IN STUDENTS’ ACHIEVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Competency-based grading models are trending in public schools all across the nation. The driving impetus of this study was to evaluate the impact of competency based grading in Missouri high school students’ achievement. Much of the research is theoretical with a distinct void of extensive research-based analysis of intended outcomes. Secondary school administrators need information and quality research to guide best practices within their buildings.

Four key elements are found to be prevalent in all competency-based grading models. First, a comprehensive learning progression aligned to and identifying state standards is developed. Second, levels of proficiency are pre-determined. Third, a meaningful assessment process that emphasizes formative assessment practices promotes learning. Finally, the fourth element is a unified grading policy that promotes academic growth and provides continued learning opportunities.

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study first identified schools through a qualitative survey that have fully implemented a competency-based model, are transitioning to a competency-based model, or are maintaining a traditional grading model. After identifying and classifying schools using a competency-based rubric, then Algebra 1 and English 2 EOC scores were analyzed of identified schools fully implementing a competency grading model.

Of school principals responding for their respective high schools, 9% had fully implemented a competency-based grading model prior to 2015. Additionally, 14.6% of
respondents indicated their schools to be transitioning to a competency-based model. Whether implemented, transitioning, or remaining with a traditional grading model, 90% of respondents indicated their school had implemented a comprehensive learning progression through a state-aligned curriculum.

Analyzing the eight schools fully implementing a competency-based grading model, 50% of schools improved EOC scores following full implementation in both Algebra 1 and English 2. Of the four schools implementing four or more years, 75% of these schools increased their Algebra 1 and English 2 scores.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. One conclusion is that Missouri high schools have moved towards standards based education. Survey responses indicated a trend and interest in competency-based grading models similar to national trends. Survey responses also supported that changing grading practices and reporting systems is an intensive and extensive process. While attempting to quantify learning and analyze impact has proven difficult, some schools have shown an increase in EOC scores and benefited from implementing a competency based model.

Three recommendations are given. First, a need for professional development and clear understanding of grading philosophy and practices exists. Second, an understanding of and recognition of implementation process requirements is necessary for educational leaders. Finally, more research is necessary further evaluating the impact as well as completing a human resource cost analysis study for competency-based grading in schools.