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Competency-Based Education Under Review: Lessons from a Michigan Middle School

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Empirical

**Competency-Based Education
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.1><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Danielle Sutherland****Abstract**

This qualitative case study examines how a Michigan middle school implemented competency-based education (CBE) practices through an advisory program designed to support flexible pacing, personalized intervention, and student agency. Drawing on interviews with administrators and teachers at Williamson Middle School, the paper uses implementation fidelity as an analytical framework to assess program successes and challenges. Findings reveal that the advisory program successfully created protected time for academic support, cultivated student choice in seeking remediation, and integrated social-emotional learning to develop students' metacognitive skills. However, significant challenges emerged: insufficient time limited meaningful re-teaching, and support structures primarily served students working below pace while excluding on-pace and advanced learners from academic enrichment. These findings illuminate tensions between CBE principles and traditional schooling constraints, offering practical implications for schools implementing competency-based approaches and policy recommendations regarding resource allocation for sustained CBE implementation.

Keywords

Competency-Based Education, Education Policy Implementation, Implementation Fidelity, Middle School, Teachers

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Introduction

In recent decades, educational policy and school districts have increasingly focused on identifying innovative instructional frameworks and pedagogies to improve student achievement. The mastery of higher-order skills like creativity, critical thinking, and flexible thinking becomes increasingly crucial for students entering a labor market where these abilities will complement evolving technologies. An increasing number of states are aligning their strategies with competency-based education, with states like New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Utah developing comprehensive frameworks that combine academic standards with performance-based assessments. Given today's technological advancements, workforce realities, and consistent concerns regarding student achievement, to meet the needs of this watershed moment in education, some communities are turning to Competency-Based Education (CBE).

CBE is a learning system in which students progress by demonstrating mastery of rigorous, transparent learning expectations rather than accumulating seat time, while receiving timely, differentiated support tailored to their individual needs. It empowers students to take ownership of their learning through active, flexible pathways and embeds equity-focused strategies into the culture and structure of the educational experience (Levine & Patrick, 2019). CBE represents a substantial shift from traditional approaches to learning. A competency-based framework prioritizes student agency, flexible pacing, and personalization (Aurora Institute, 2022; Basham et al., 2016; Colby, 2017; Patrick & Kennedy, 2013; Torres et al., 2015). Advocates argue that it disrupts the traditional organization of schooling (e.g., age-based, grade-based, course-based, time-based) that is currently failing to prepare students for post-secondary and workforce opportunities (Jones et al., 2021; Moumoutjis, 2022). The Aurora Institute, a leader in research and implementation support for CBE, argues:

The entire education ecosystem of learning needs a revolutionary change whereby schools can facilitate high-quality, borderless learning anchored in culturally affirming practices and personalized youth development support. Student recovery efforts will need to meet students where they are, organize a team of advisors to support learners, and allow students to advance based on the acquisition of knowledge acquired, not according to seat time. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 18-19)

The interest in borderless and more personalized learning was apparent even before the pandemic and incentivized by both government (e.g., Race to the Top) and philanthropy (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). Unfortunately, the current principles that organize schools (e.g., grade levels, bell and course schedules, credits, transcripts, GPA) create conditions that do not allow CBE to thrive (Bingham, 2016; Bingham 2017; Mehta & Datnow, 2020; Moumoutjis, 2022). Research has highlighted the resiliency of these organizing principles, and the difficulties districts have had adopting CBE as a result (e.g., Evans et al., 2019; Evans & DeMitchell, 2018). CBE may prove to be an especially relevant reform because it provides students with a more authentic and engaging learning experience that moves beyond traditional credentialing to focus on demonstrated mastery of skills.

Drawing upon qualitative data from a more extensive mixed-methods study of CBE implementation in Michigan, the paper examines the implementation efforts at Williamson Middle School and how they have designed an advisory program that supports competency-based practices. This paper identifies the successes and challenges Williamson's administrators and teachers experience trying to provide their students with flexible pacing, timely and differentiated support, and increased student agency. These data answer two primary research questions:

RQ1: How do advisory programs support opportunities for students to experience flexible pacing, personalized intervention, and choice and voice?

RQ2: What successes and challenges are associated with advisory programs incorporating key CBE

components?

Overall, our evidence suggests that the advisory program has experienced some success in providing students opportunities for flexible pacing, differentiated academic support, and more choice and voice. Additionally, the program has created opportunities for students to develop their social and emotional skills (e.g., goal setting, metacognition, executive functioning) to better prepare themselves to design and evaluate their learning. However, our data also suggest this intervention primarily aids students who are working below pace and excludes students performing at or above teacher pace. These data have important implications for policy and practice. First, it provides a roadmap for other schools working to implement innovative instructional practices within a traditional school structure. Second, it highlights the continued focus on struggling learners and the need for more differentiation in interventions to serve the needs of learners across all levels in a CBE setting. Finally, these data highlight the need for increased resources to support more intervention time.

Barriers to Competency-Based Education Implementation: A Review of the Literature

The implementation of competency-based education (CBE) presents a series of distinct challenges for districts and schools. Previous studies have documented difficulties related to defining mastery (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018), aligning standards with proficiency (Johnson et al., 2017; Stump & Silvernail, 2015), disrupting normative beliefs and school practices (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Evans et al., 2019; Scheopner Torres et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2017), and motivating students while developing positive work habits (Steele et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018). These barriers can be understood through three interconnected categories: structural and resource constraints; stakeholder beliefs and resistance; and external institutional pressures.

Structural and Resource Barriers Represent A Fundamental Challenge to CBE Implementation

Previous empirical research consistently identified the need for districts to incorporate structures outside the classroom to support student learning, including advisory periods, academic support periods, credit recovery, extended days, and enrichment periods (Evans et al., 2019; Scheopner-Torres, 2019; Stump et al., 2017; 2018). However, it is most common for these supports to be enacted informally without institutional buy-in or resources (Stump et al., 2016, 2017; 2018). Yet these structures primarily served students working below pace, neglecting those at or above pace. The limited scope of these interventions is antithetical to one of CBE's core principles of personalization and advancement upon mastery for all students. Furthermore, these structures are strengthened when teachers have access to an effective learning management system to track student progress (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump & Silvernail, 2014) and adequate common planning time to personalize instruction and collaborate with colleagues (Evans et al., 2019). Without these resources, implementation remains incomplete.

A second category of barriers relates to stakeholder beliefs about schooling. Teachers have expressed concerns that focusing strictly on proficiency would cause mass failure among students who are still developing foundational skills (Steele et al., 2014). This tension is compounded by institutional pressure to move students to the next level without demonstrating proficiency, creating conflict between CBE principles and practical school operations (Steiner et al., 2017). Parent and community support has emerged as another critical challenge. Previous studies have highlighted districts' struggles to generate parental and community support for competency-based reforms (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Pane et al., 2015; Shakman et al., 2018; Stump et al., 2016), without which altering traditional practices becomes considerably more difficult. External stakeholders, particularly parents, have expressed significant discomfort with shifts away from traditional schooling structures, including concerns about how their children's work would be assessed by colleges and universities and how new systems would affect meritorious awards such as scholarships

and class rank (Evans & DeMitchell, 2019).

External institutional pressures constitute a third barrier category. Districts working to strictly implement CBE frequently had to navigate intense external pressures, including aligning curriculum with accountability measures and testing requirements (Stump et al., 2018). These pressures extended to consequential decisions about whether to retain students who did not demonstrate mastery, risking lower graduation rates (Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2017), as well as meeting the expectations of parents, secondary institutions, and post-secondary institutions (Pane et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018).

These implementation barriers can be understood through the concept of the "grammar of schooling"—the deeply embedded organizational and pedagogical structures that shape education and resist reform (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Labaree (2021) argued that entrenched school practices persist because they balance social mission (what society expects) with organizational needs (what schools can realistically do), signaling merit for colleges and employers while providing an efficient system for educators. Mehta (2022) contended that this grammar, designed for efficiency and control rather than learning, must be replaced with approaches emphasizing student agency, authentic assessment, and mastery demonstration. Competency-based education represents precisely this kind of fundamental shift. However, reforms that destabilize this balance—regardless of pedagogical merit—face significant resistance. The challenges documented in the CBE implementation literature reflect this tension, as districts attempt to introduce a system that may be a lofty goal but proves difficult to operationalize within existing institutional constraints and stakeholder expectations.

This paper seeks to address several limitations in the CBE literature related to overcoming these implementation barriers. First, there is limited empirical evidence of districts formalizing structures or incorporating them within the academic schedule to support CBE. Netcoh and Bishop (2017) offered some insight into this as they highlighted the efforts of one middle school to create a daily class period, E-Time, where students "engaged in long-term project work on a topic about which they self-identified as curious, interested, or passionate" (p. 38). E-Time remains distinctive however, as it operates as part of the school schedule, includes all students, and does not solely focus on academic support. Second, although CBE requires students to assume more control over their learning, there is little evidence as to how districts are incorporating social-emotional learning to prepare their students to take ownership of their learning.

Finally, the literature does not provide empirical evidence that demonstrates the capacity of districts to expand academic support structures to go beyond catching students up and meet the needs of developing and advanced learners.

Theoretical Framework "Implementation Fidelity" as an Analytical Lens

This study employs implementation fidelity (IF) as its primary analytical framework. Implementation fidelity, also called program integrity or treatment fidelity, refers to the degree to which an intervention or program is delivered as originally designed and intended (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; O'Donnell, 2008). This framework offers a systematic approach for examining how educational innovations translate from policy design to classroom practice, making it particularly well-suited for studying competency-based education (CBE) implementation at the school level. Implementation fidelity provides an appropriate lens at this level of analysis because it allows us to examine both the execution of specific interventions and the contextual factors that shape outcomes. Importantly, IF helps account for variance in how programs are enacted, acknowledging that implementation is rarely uniform across settings or practitioners.

O'Donnell (2008) identified five core components for measuring implementation fidelity, each of which provides a distinct vantage point for evaluating program delivery. *Adherence* refers to whether program components are delivered as designed, capturing the extent to which the intervention corresponds to what was originally intended. *Duration* encompasses the quantity, frequency, and length of sessions implemented, addressing questions of dosage and intervention strength. *Quality of delivery* concerns the way implementers deliver the program using prescribed techniques and methods. *Participant responsiveness* captures the extent to which participants engage with program activities and content, including their attentiveness, interest, and acceptance. Finally, *program differentiation* examines whether the critical features that distinguish the program from comparison conditions are present or absent.

This paper focuses on the successes and challenges of Williamson Middle School's advisory program, examining both administrator and teacher perceptions of the program's effectiveness in supporting students within a competency-based system. Our analysis draws primarily on three IF components: quality of delivery, participant responsiveness, and program differentiation (O'Donnell, 2008). The data reveal specific barriers to program success, including insufficient time and limited capacity to address the full range of student needs. These findings speak directly to the quality of delivery, the practical constraints that shape how well the program can be enacted as intended. Participant responsiveness emerges in how teachers and administrators evaluate the program's ability to meaningfully support students as they progress through the competency-based system. Program differentiation proves particularly illuminating for understanding CBE implementation challenges. Our findings highlight ways in which the advisory program operates similarly to other response-to-intervention programs rather than creating distinctive opportunities for students to learn at their own pace—a core promise of competency-based approaches. This conceptual overlap is significant: part of what makes CBE implementation complicated is that its components are not always clearly distinguishable from other educational reforms and practices. When programs intended to support CBE function much like conventional interventions, they may fail to deliver on the distinctive benefits that competency-based approaches are designed to provide. Implementation of fidelity offers a framework for identifying and analyzing these tensions between intended innovation and actual practice.

Methods

Advisory and Extended Day at Williamson Middle School

At Williamson Middle School, educators recognized that helping students succeed in a competency-based system required more than academic instruction required building the foundational skills students need to take ownership of their own learning. This insight led to the creation of the advisory program and the innovative use of the extended day. Additionally, district administrators emphasized the need to use existing spaces and structures within the school to support competency-based practices.

The advisory class focuses on developing students' social-emotional learning and self-regulation skills. As part of the class, students set weekly goals by reviewing their grades in the learning management system and creating action plans. On Fridays, they reflect on their progress and determine next steps. If a student needs to retake an assessment, they identify what additional learning is required and where they will access support. Students also select their own advisory sessions based on their individual needs. These executive functioning skills are reinforced with specific lessons related to grit, perseverance, and empathy that help students become self-motivated learners. As the principal explained, "Kids do want to be successful. There's not a single kid in this building that wakes up every morning and goes, 'you know what? Today, I hope I fail.' " The goal is to nurture students' intrinsic desire to succeed rather than relying on teachers to push them forward.

The extended day program provides additional time at the end of the day where core teachers offer extended support for students who need it. Students who are on or above teacher pace can select elective programming

during these times. The school also implemented flexible academic support classes that rotate every four and a half weeks, allowing students to receive targeted intervention without being locked into a fixed schedule for an entire trimester. Once students demonstrate proficiency, they can return to their elective courses. Together, these structures create a responsive system where time becomes a variable in student learning, ensuring every student has the support and skills needed to succeed.

Participants and Data Collection

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University (Protocol #4821). All participants provided written and verbal informed consent to participate in the study. Additionally, the informed consent included consent for publication of relevant findings. To protect participant confidentiality, all names of participants and districts presented in this manuscript are pseudonyms. Any potentially identifying details have been altered or removed to ensure anonymity. The analysis presented here primarily relies on interviews with district and school administrators and teachers at the middle school. See Table 2 for the number of participants. Except for two, each of the 8 teacher participants had been teaching at the middle school for over a decade. See Table 3 for a breakdown of teacher participants' experiences and content area.

Table 1

Participant by Job Position

Participant Type	N
Classroom Teachers	8
District Administrators	2
School Administrators	1

Table 2

Teacher Participants

Participant	Years Teaching	Subject Taught
Ms. Alexandra	21	Humanities/Social Sciences
Ms. Carrie	16-20	STEM
Mr. Daniel	6-10	STEM
Ms. Emily	11-15	Humanities/Social Sciences
Mr. Jesse	11-15	Humanities/Social Sciences
Mr. Lawrence	16-20	World Languages
Ms. Maya	11-15	STEM
Mr. Tim	6-10	STEM

Administrators participated in two interviews, and teachers participated in two interviews and multiple informal debriefings. All interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted prior to school closings in the spring of 2020 in school classrooms, shared spaces, or local

coffee shops. Follow-up interviews were conducted after the school closings primarily over Zoom, to comply with public health advisories. Initial discussions with administrators and teachers covered instructional practices and their understandings of CBE. The second interview focused more in-depth on the development of the advisory program and its successes and challenges in supporting CBE. Additionally, these interviews served as a space for participants to evaluate implementation efforts and reflect on specific successes and challenges.

Data Analysis

Prior to beginning this analysis, data were transcribed using the AI software Otter.ai and then read and cleaned. After cleaning the data, all transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. As the first step in the data analysis procedures, I conducted multiple readings of the Williamson participant data—reading across participant type, grade levels, and subject. In addition to initial impression formation during the data readings, I regularly contributed to a series of memos to identify potential codes and emerging themes across the data. It was part of the initial reading of the data, where the Lehigh administrators emphasized the need to use existing spaces and structures within the school to support competency-based practices. Additionally, both teachers and school leadership at the middle school specifically cited the advisory period and extended day as existing school-based structures that were pivoting towards supporting CBE implementation efforts.

Data analysis followed a two-cycle coding process using a hybrid approach that combined deductive codes derived from the implementation fidelity framework (O'Donnell, 2008) with inductive codes that emerged from the reading of the data. In the first cycle, I applied an initial set of deductive parent codes aligned with the three components of implementation fidelity central to this study such as “quality of delivery,” “participant responsiveness,” and “program differentiation.” Additionally, I applied a set of inductive codes that emerged from reading the data. These codes related to how effectively these programs supported CBE implementation. I primarily used two large parent codes in Dedoose—success and challenges—and subsequently developed child codes, such as “managing multiple paces” “targeted support” and “opportunities for re-teaching.”

In the second cycle of coding, I revisited coded excerpts to refine the coding scheme. During this process, codes were merged, renamed, or reorganized as patterns became clearer and relationships among codes were more fully understood. For instance, overlapping codes were collapsed into broader thematic categories, and child codes were repositioned under parent codes that more accurately reflected the data. Throughout both cycles, analytic memos documented coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and instances of disconfirming evidence. Data visualization tools within Dedoose enabled us to develop matrices to compare coding applications across participants.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed. I engaged in prolonged engagement with the data through multiple readings across participant type, grade level, and subject area. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document emerging interpretations, challenge initial assumptions, and track the development of themes. As part of both the process of memo writing and member checking, I actively sought disconfirming evidence within the data to test the robustness of emerging themes and guard against confirmation bias (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, member checks helped to ensure that participants' experiences and perspectives were accurately and authentically represented by the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Together, these strategies strengthened the rigor of the analysis and supported the credibility of the study's conclusions.

Results

Interviews with Williamson's teaching staff and leadership largely described the advisory program positively. For many teachers, the advisory and extended day programming enabled them to incorporate key competency-based practices (e.g., student choice and voice and flexible pacing). Additionally, teachers expressed how the advisory program also created dedicated time for social-emotional learning instruction, which is critical for helping students become co-facilitators of their learning; opportunities for students to self-monitor their academic progress and seek out remediation and re-teaching; and opportunities for students to make choices about content and other learning activities. Despite these successes, teachers also described significant barriers that limited the effectiveness and long-term viability of the advisory period and extended day programming.

Protected Time in Advisory

District administrators explained that what distinguishes Williamson Middle from other CBE schools is protected time for both academic support and social-emotional instruction. Prior to the district's CBE commitment, the advisory period served multiple competing demands. When leadership redesigned the program, they created two distinct spaces: one for tutoring and another for social-emotional learning. For Mr. Lawrence, a humanities teacher, this separation allowed him to avoid splitting his focus:

I'm always telling my students to not try to do everything at once, and here we used to be trying to do announcements, build relationships, monitor kids' social development, and also try to support some students who are falling really behind in your class.

Many teachers agreed that the protected time relieved pressure to meet competing demands. Additionally, the creation of the elective time for on-pace students further alleviated classroom management challenges for teachers. For Ms. Alexandra, also a humanities teacher, the absence of her on-pace students allowed her to focus exclusively on supporting her off-pace students. Ms. Alexandra explained: "It's uninterrupted time for students who legitimately need it." Ultimately, the protected time for academic support allowed teachers to address students' unique learning needs and provide them with interventions, learning activities, and assignments that were better suited to their individual learning needs and pace.

Cultivating Student Agency Through Choice

The advisory program curated student choice in two primary ways. First, students select which classes to seek remediation based on their self-assessment of progress. Although a "low grade" alert can limit selection, teachers explained that more students have been proactively signing up for academic support where they are working below pace. This choice allowed students to evaluate their needs and prioritize areas requiring additional instruction—essential self-monitoring skills for CBE success.

Second, students working at or above pace also have opportunities for choice and voice—they can sign up for electives. Elective offerings provide students enrichment opportunities in their content courses or more extracurricular style activities such as coloring club, where students can color and engage in other art projects, or physical activities like calisthenics or jump rope club.

Overall, staff considered advisory successful in increasing students' control over the school day. The principal explained, "Advisory is 22 minutes a day. That offers students some sense of control that they have some level of choice in how their day flows." She acknowledged that on-pace students' choices were not tied to academic competencies but still considered the program successful for developing social-emotional skills. Ms. Maya, a STEM teacher, also acknowledged this flaw, "I know that advisory is not perfect because there are a lotta students who are on pace who are just doing weird stupid crap during

advisory that is completely unrelated what they're learning." Still, she believed these choices would scaffold more complex decision-making as students advanced in CBE.

In addition to the emphasis on academic support, cultivation of students' social-emotional skills by the Williamson advisory program is additional evidence of its fidelity to CBE principles. Within these sessions, students focus on developing emerging skills in goal setting, self-assessment, and other components of executive functioning. Williamson is unique in the way that they formalize and regulate this skill building. For Williamson's principal, fostering students' social-emotional skills is essential in successful CBE implementation. She explained:

When we first started [implementing CBE] we weren't focusing on the social-emotional learning piece. But because CBE is about teachers facilitating learning, and students really taking ownership and really understanding themselves and learning and understanding what they need, how they learn, where they're at in their progressions, and being able to articulate and advocate for themselves as well. We have to really build those learning blocks of education to make them self-motivated, to make them have those skills to be able to do those things that we just talked about. That's where we are built in our [social-emotional learning] class.

In the early stages of implementation, administrators and teachers assumed their students possessed considerably more knowledge and capacity to take ownership of their learning; however, the students were not prepared. Recognizing this, the advisory program was designed to explicitly address social-emotional learning and cultivate the skills students would need to take ownership. For Williamson students, these skills are still in their infancy; however, teachers reported encouraging early success. Mr. Jesse, one of the social science teachers, explained:

We really work hard to encourage them to sign up for what they need. Not every kid's gonna do that so we have to sign some kids up, but every day I'm tutoring I have at least four or five kids who have chosen to come and either retake a test or work on getting caught up in my class so it's kinda nice.

Attending to both students' academic and social-emotional needs helps to make Williamson's advisory program a success. More than providing the time, the school's decision to undertake the work of fostering skills (e.g., metacognition, goal setting) that will help their students experience greater agency over their learning is what distinguishes it from other programs and increases the fidelity of its CBE implementation.

Undermining Implementation Fidelity: Insufficient Time and Inconsistent Programming

Despite multiple successes associated with Williamson's advisory program, teachers also described significant barriers to this intervention's success. Chief among these barriers were concerns related to time and efficacy. Overall, teachers did not consider the time allotted to advisory sufficient to meet the needs of their students. At Williamson, students split a 44-minute period between academic tutoring and instruction in social-emotional learning. Although teachers strongly valued the time their students participated in the social-emotional class, they felt this significantly cut into time for academic support.

Teachers explained that without adequate time, they were limited in what meaningful support they could provide to their students. For Ms. Emily, one of the humanities teachers, the abbreviated period for academic support meant she regularly had to forgo re-teaching and focus on what she described as a "patchwork approach." For Mr. Tim, one of the STEM teachers, he often "ended up re-teaching the test or assignment they failed." In addition to the abbreviated minutes, to continue offering the electives, teachers could not provide academic support every day—stretching the limited time they had even further.

Mr. Jesse, who generally shared his colleagues' concerns, struggled to assess the advisory program's effectiveness. He explained, "There are some good points to [the remediation]. They walk out of remediation knowing more than they walked in, usually, but not in a deep level." For him, the remediation proved valuable, but it also felt less connected to the goals of CBE.

Part of what drove some teachers' dissatisfaction with the advisory model was related to the loss of another intervention—extended day. During the prior school year, Williamson operated an extended day option, which was offered four days a week. For Ms. Maya, the extended day was vastly more effective. She explained:

We used to have the [extended day] up until this year it was afterschool tutoring, but it was basically just—it was we provided transportation for students to go home. It was an hour and a half after school, four days a week. Students could come in and they could retake tests, they could catch up on work. That was huge—compared to 22 minutes. If I have tutoring for advisory, that's only two days a week. If you miss a test that took us a whole class period to take, it's gonna take you two weeks of coming to my advisory because I only have 22 minutes on Thursday, 22 minutes on Friday, and then you're gonna have to come in the following Thursday.

In addition to being able to catch students up in a timelier manner, the extended day provided teachers with what they perceived to be adequate time to have students participate in meaningful learning activities. For Daniel, this went beyond "patchwork." Daniel explained,

It was a time for me to sit some of those kids down that were asked to leave class, that didn't pay attention in class, that were in a whole bunch of different places. We would redo labs. We would talk through experiments. I would actually get them—and I had the time to actually reteach some.

Daniel and Maya's preference for the extended day not only highlights the insufficient time allotted during the school day but also teachers' concern about their efficacy in supporting their students through advisory alone.

Persistent Teacher-Student Role Tensions

Despite Williamson's investment in fostering their students' social-emotional development, teachers were skeptical of their students' preparedness to take ownership of their own learning. Working with students with varying levels of social-emotional proficiency is a regular occurrence. Mr. Daniel, a STEM teacher at Williamson, explained:

I have a relatively large group of students, probably 70 percent fail something, or they don't get as high as they want. Make it up, do this, advisory, first level, great. I have probably an additional 10 percent that could easily do it within that, but I have to—I have to pull them. I have to babysit them. I have to sit next to 'em and just say, "Do it."

Mr. Daniel and other teachers' experiences highlight the need for additional scaffolding for students; however, in the meantime, the burden of facilitating students' learning continues to fall disproportionately on teachers. Some teachers expressed considerable frustration with this challenge. Prior to implementing CBE, teachers were accustomed to controlling learning within the classroom. Now though, some teachers felt forced into contradictory roles, where they are expected to share responsibilities for learning with their students, but their students are unprepared to meet that burden. Echoing similar feelings from some of his colleagues, Mr. Tim explained: "They have to walk before they run, not the other way around."

Limited Opportunities for Students Above Teacher Pace

While teachers at Williamson appreciated the time to focus on their students working below pace, many expressed concerns that by excluding students working at or above pace, the advisory program was not sufficiently aligned with CBE's two most core principles of flexible pacing and advancement upon mastery. Among some of the concerned, Ms. Emily explained that the segregation of on- and off-pace students "was the feature not the bug." The principal elaborated and explained in more depth: "When we wanted to do advisory, we wanted to build in choice in our advisory system so our kids who are on pace and don't necessarily need tutoring can do something fun." In part, the selection of electives was designed as a reward; however, the principal continued to explain that the decision was also in part to lessen the burden on teachers.

Although teachers explicitly remarked on the nascent opportunities for flexible pacing for more advanced students, they also expressed concern regarding the feasibility of a more inclusive program. In the program's current state, teachers are working with fewer students. In some cases, teachers explained that they had the ability to assign students to tutoring with similar learning deficits, which helped them to limit management concerns. However, in a more inclusive program, teachers would be forced to manage multiple paces, which could limit their ability to meet any of their students' needs sufficiently. Mr. Tim pondered, "If we're just going to see all our students again, why not give us another period with fewer students? We'd have more time and maybe be more effective at differentiating." Finally, some teachers expressed disappointment that by the limited scope of the program, Williamson was "creating a ceiling for performance." For Ms. Alexandra, the creation of a ceiling would disincentivize students to take their learning further. The barriers identified in isolation and taken together have implications for resource allocation and procurement as other districts consider implementing CBE.

Discussion

While advocates argue that CBE's emphasis on personalization, flexible pacing, and student agency can improve student outcomes, research has consistently documented the resiliency of traditional school structures, which makes implementing CBE's more ambitious components considerably more difficult (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Evans et al., 2019; Pane et al., 2015). This study examined how one school, Williamson Middle School, within a CBE pilot district attempted to use their advisory period to incorporate competency-based practices. Drawing on implementation fidelity as our analytical framework, these data highlight how Williamson experienced both notable successes and significant challenges in using their advisory program to support CBE.

Our first research question asked how advisory programs support opportunities for students to experience flexible pacing, personalized intervention, and choice and voice. The findings reveal that Williamson's advisory program created several of these opportunities, though circumscribed by resource constraints. The protected time structure allowed teachers to provide dedicated academic support to students working below pace, enabling personalized intervention essential for CBE implementation (Evans et al., 2019; Stump et al., 2017). Students were given meaningful choices: those below pace selected which classes to seek remediation, while on-pace students chose from enrichment electives, aligning with CBE's emphasis on student agency (Aurora Institute, 2022; Basham et al., 2016).

Particularly noteworthy was Williamson's integration of social-emotional learning within the advisory structure. Administrators recognized that students needed explicit instruction in goal setting, self-assessment, and metacognition to become effective co-facilitators of their learning, addressing a gap in existing literature on how districts prepare students for the greater ownership CBE requires. Our data suggests that formalizing social-emotional skill development is foundational to CBE implementation; without these skills, the burden of facilitating learning falls disproportionately on teachers, undermining

competency-based transformation.

Our second research question examined successes and challenges associated with advisory programs incorporating key CBE components. Through implementation fidelity—particularly quality of delivery, participant responsiveness, and program differentiation (O'Donnell, 2008)—our findings illuminate how structural constraints shaped Williamson's program. Teachers reported that 22-minute tutoring sessions were insufficient for meaningful re-teaching, reducing intervention to a "patchwork approach" and comparing unfavorably with the previous extended-day program's 90 minutes of support four days per week. This finding corroborates previous research documenting the critical importance of adequate time for personalized intervention in CBE settings (Scheopner Torres et al., 2018; Stump et al., 2018).

The dimension of program differentiation proved particularly illuminating. Despite its CBE orientation, Williamson's advisory program functioned similarly to conventional response-to-intervention programs: academic support targeted students below pace, while on-pace and advanced students received enrichment largely disconnected from academic content. This design "created a ceiling for performance," as one teacher noted, disincentivizing extension beyond teacher-established benchmarks. This echoes previous CBE studies documenting how support structures focus on struggling learners while neglecting advancement opportunities across the full range of performance (Stump et al., 2016, 2017, 2018), undermining CBE's promise that all students can progress at their own pace.

An additional theme that emerges from these data concerns the role of teacher input in shaping CBE implementation structures. Throughout the interviews, teachers did not simply report on the advisory program's successes and challenges, but they offered substantive critiques of its structural design and, in several cases, proposed alternatives. Mr. Tim's suggestion for restructuring intervention periods and multiple teachers' detailed comparisons between the advisory model and the prior extended-day program reflect a practical knowledge of what works at the classroom level that is essential for effective implementation. This finding aligns with research on teacher leadership and instructional reform suggesting that teachers who are positioned as active participants in the design and refinement of school-level interventions are more likely to implement those interventions with fidelity and commitment (Bingham & Dimandja, 2017; Bishop et al., 2020). In Williamson's case, several of the program's most significant challenges (e.g., insufficient time, limited scope, and persistent role tensions) were issues that teachers identified clearly and, in some cases, had already begun to envision solutions for. These data suggest that CBE implementation may benefit from structures that formally incorporate teacher voice into the ongoing design and adaptation of support programs, rather than positioning teachers solely as implementers of administrator-designed interventions. Given that CBE itself emphasizes agency, voice, and responsive adjustment, extending these same principles to the adults who deliver it represents a logical and potentially powerful alignment.

These findings also carry implications for educational leadership at both the school and district level. Although this study was not designed to systematically examine leadership practices, the data reveal several leadership decisions that shaped the trajectory of CBE implementation at Williamson. District administrators' insistence on leveraging existing structures rather than waiting for new resources reflected a pragmatic orientation that enabled implementation to move forward but also constrained its scope. At the school level, the principal's mid-course recognition that students lacked the social-emotional skills necessary for CBE and her subsequent decision to formalize SEL instruction within advisory illustrates how responsive leadership can address implementation gaps in real time. However, these data also suggest that leadership decisions made without sustained teacher input may inadvertently create the very tensions that undermine implementation, as evidenced by teachers' frustration with the shift from the extended-day model to the more compressed advisory format. These observations suggest that the field of educational leadership would benefit from research that examines how school and district leaders can create organizational conditions, beyond scheduling, that support CBE, including structures for ongoing teacher

collaboration, iterative program evaluation, and shared decision-making about implementation design.

These findings can be understood through Labaree's (2021) framework on the grammar of schooling: traditional structures endure because they balance societal expectations with what schools can realistically do. Williamson illustrates this tension—administrators and teachers genuinely embraced CBE principles, yet resource constraints forced pragmatic compromises. The decision to segregate on-pace and off-pace students was “the feature not the bug,” as one teacher noted reducing classroom management burdens but limiting flexible pacing opportunities.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Our findings suggest several practical considerations for schools and districts working to implement CBE. First, schools should recognize that academic support structures require protected, adequate time to be effective. The contrast between teachers' experiences with the abbreviated advisory period and the more substantial extended-day program underscores that meaningful re-teaching and personalized support cannot be compressed into brief windows without sacrificing quality. Schools pursuing CBE should prioritize creating intervention periods of sufficient duration to support deep learning rather than superficial remediation.

Second, schools should invest deliberately in developing students' social-emotional capacities as a prerequisite for successful CBE implementation. Williamson's experience demonstrates that schools cannot assume students possess the metacognitive skills and executive functioning required to take ownership of their learning. Formal instruction in goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-advocacy should be understood as foundational infrastructure for competency-based approaches, not as an optional add-on.

Third, schools should critically examine whether their support structures truly differentiate from conventional interventions. A defining feature of CBE is its promise of flexible pacing and advancement upon mastery for all students, not only those who are struggling. Programs that primarily target below-pace students while offering only disconnected enrichment to others may satisfy organizational needs but fail to deliver on CBE's distinctive benefits. Schools should work toward interventions that provide meaningful opportunities for extension and acceleration alongside remediation.

Finally, policymakers should recognize that CBE implementation requires sustained commitment rather than one-time investments. This includes the ability for districts to innovate with scheduling and delivery of education, such as waivers of seat-time and other flexibility that may encourage such innovation. Williamson's loss of the extended-day program which teachers viewed as substantially more effective than the current advisory structure illustrates how promising initiatives can be undermined when funding or support is withdrawn. Solely repurposing existing time and resources significantly limits the success of CBE initiatives. States advancing CBE should build in mechanisms for stable, ongoing support to ensure that implementation gains are not lost to shifting budgetary priorities.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, as a single case study of one middle school within one Michigan district, the findings are not generalizable to all schools or districts implementing competency-based education. The experiences at Williamson Middle School are shaped by its unique context, including its specific student population, staffing, and resource conditions. However, the depth of analysis afforded by this approach provides insights that may be transferable to schools operating under similar conditions. Second, the study relies exclusively on administrator and teacher perspectives. The absence of student and parent voices limits our understanding of how the advisory program is experienced by its primary beneficiaries. Future research should incorporate

student perspectives to assess whether they perceive the program as fostering genuine agency and ownership over their learning. Third, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of three administrators and eight teachers suggesting that the range of perspectives captured may not reflect the full diversity of experiences within the school. Lastly, future research could more closely examine the role of educational leadership more directly, investigating how school and district leaders' decision-making, communication practices, and organizational supports beyond time and scheduling shape the conditions for successful CBE implementation.

Conclusion

This study presents a detailed examination of one middle school's efforts to implement competency-based practices through an advisory program. Our findings demonstrate that schools can achieve meaningful, if partial, success in creating opportunities for student choice, personalized academic support, and social-emotional development within existing school structures. At the same time, the challenges Williamson experienced—insufficient time, persistent teacher-student role tensions, and the exclusion of on-pace students from academic enrichment—underscore how difficult it remains to fully realize CBE's promise within the constraints of traditional schooling structures. These results suggest that while advisory programs can serve as valuable vehicles for CBE implementation, they cannot fully compensate for resource limitations that prevent schools from serving all learners equitably. As the field continues to explore how to operationalize competency-based approaches, attending to these structural and resource challenges will be essential for ensuring that CBE delivers on its promise to personalize learning and enable advancement upon mastery for all students.

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