NORTH CAROLINA EDUCATION INNOVATION LAB

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Tailored Learning:

Defining and Identifying Personalized Success for North Carolina's Students

NORTH CAROLINA EDUCATION INNOVATION LAB
CONFERENCE BRIEF

2026

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WELCOME TO THE 2026 NORTH CAROLINA EDUCATION INNOVATION LAB!

The following briefing paper provides framing that informed the design of the day's sessions. Our goal is to establish a common thread around how North Carolina can better support students through Tailored Learning — highlighting where elements of competency-based education, mastery-based learning, and personalized learning are already taking root across the state, while also building a shared understanding of what these approaches mean in practice. By surfacing promising examples and clarifying key concepts, the 2026 Innovation Lab aims to align participants around a common definition and vision for Tailored Learning that can guide future conversations, policy considerations, and implementation efforts in North Carolina.

Introduction: Organizing Schools Around Learning Rather Than Seat Time

For over a century, public education has been organized around time: grouping students by age, following semesters, and awarding credit for hours rather than mastery. While administratively consistent, this model has not reliably produced the academic gains students need, and its limitations are increasingly clear as expectations rise.

Reform efforts like competency-based, mastery-based, and personalized learning have surfaced repeatedly but rarely sustained impact. A major challenge has been unclear terminology; making alignment among educators, policymakers, and communities difficult. COVID-19 briefly renewed interest in flexible models, but lasting change has not occurred. At their core, these approaches prioritize what students know and can do over time spent in class.

Student-centered education advances learners based on demonstrated readiness, recognizing different learning paces while maintaining high expectations. The question for North Carolina is not whether instruction responds to individuals — teachers already differentiate daily — but whether the system itself should tie advancement, opportunity, and recognition directly to learning.

For the 2026 North Carolina Education Innovation Lab, "Tailored Learning" unifies these models — competency-based, mastery-based, and personalized learning — aligning instruction, assessment, and progression with what students know and can do.

Section I. — Defining Tailored Learning with Precision

Tailored Learning aligns three core elements: **clear competencies**, **mastery-based progression**, and **responsive instruction**.

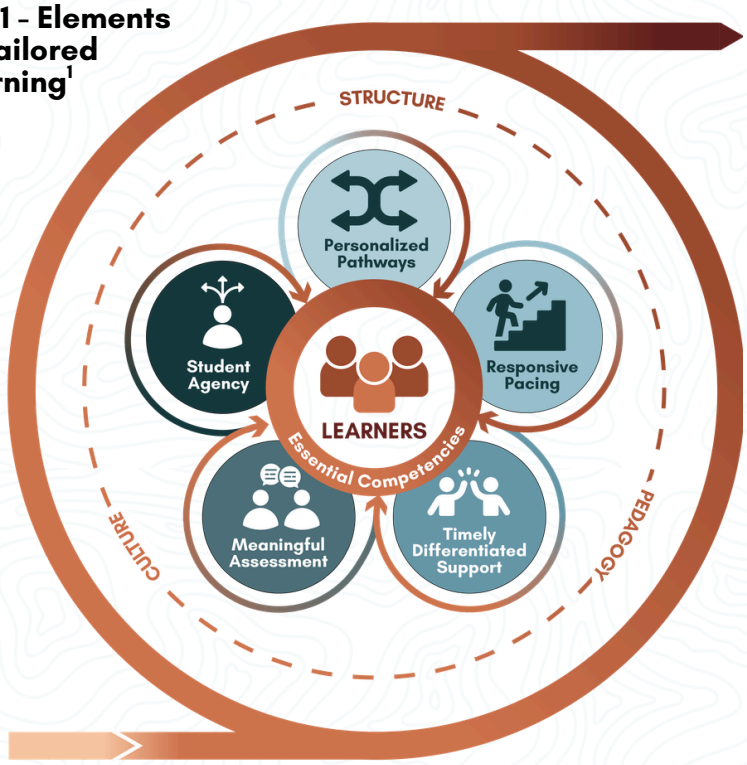
First, learning expectations must be clear and measurable.

Students, educators, and families should share a common understanding of what proficiency requires. Competencies should describe not only the knowledge students acquire, but also how they apply and transfer that knowledge in meaningful contexts. Clearly defined learning targets help students understand what success looks like and how their work will be evaluated.

Second, progression must be anchored to demonstrated mastery rather than time.

Advancement should reflect readiness, supported by evidence aligned to transparent criteria. Mastery is not the completion of assignments, the accumulation of points, or simple participation; it is a demonstrated level of understanding that meets established standards.[2]

EX I.1 - Elements of Tailored Learning[1]



Third, instruction and materials must be responsive to student needs while maintaining consistent expectations for all learners.

Personalized pathways allow students to receive support or acceleration without lowering standards. Differentiation focuses on varying strategies and timelines, not varying expectations.[3]

When these elements operate together, learning becomes more precise. Students who need additional time receive structured support until mastery is achieved, while students ready for deeper work are not constrained by uniform pacing. Feedback becomes actionable, and assessment supports improvement rather than simply recording performance.

It is equally important to clarify what Tailored Learning is not.[4]

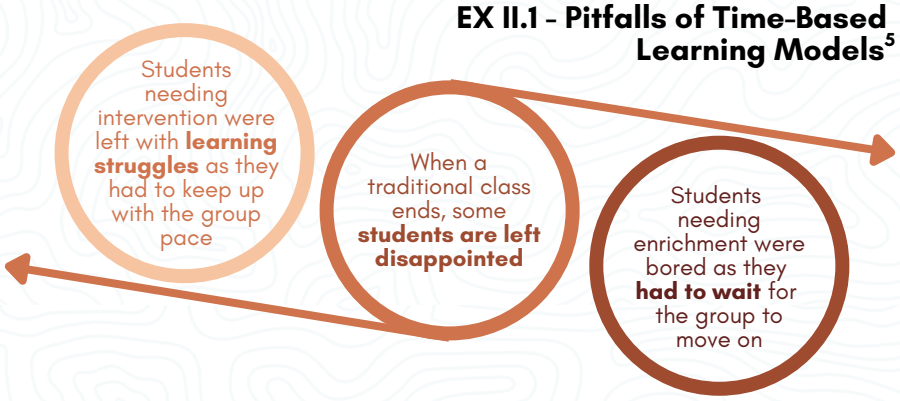
Tailored Learning is not flexible pacing without defined mastery thresholds, the replacement of instruction with technology, or isolated grading reform. Tailored Learning represents a system-level alignment of expectations, instruction, assessment, and policy around learning rather than time.

Section II. — The Structural Limitations of Time-Based Schooling

Time-based schooling advances students in age-based cohorts and awards credit for course completion rather than mastery. Grades often combine achievement with behavior, effort, and compliance, which can obscure what students truly know and can do.

When progression depends on time instead of learning, predictable outcomes follow: students may advance with incomplete understanding, gaps accumulate over years, and those ready for advanced work may lack timely access to challenging content. Opportunities for acceleration often rely on informal judgments rather than consistent criteria. Teachers must reteach material, interventions are reactive, and students may disengage when content is too easy or too difficult.

EX II.1 - Pitfalls of Time-Based Learning Models[5]



Shifting to mastery-based progression addresses these limitations by defining advancement around demonstrated readiness. However, this change cannot occur in isolation. If mastery principles are added to policies that still prioritize uniform pacing and seat time, schools face conflicting signals.[6] Sustainable redesign requires coherence across instructional practice, grading, graduation requirements, and accountability systems.

So... Why Are We Still On Square One?

Earlier mastery reforms failed when concepts were unclear and accountability misaligned, causing confusion and eroding trust. Sustainable Tailored Learning requires clarity, policy coherence, and phased capacity building, with scaling guided by disciplined alignment rather than speed.

Section III. — Cultural Transformation: Changing Mindsets About Learning and Progress

Tailored Learning requires a cultural shift in defining and communicating success.

For educators, the focus moves from covering content on fixed timelines to ensuring students demonstrate mastery. Teachers act as facilitators, coaches, and collaborators in calibrating proficiency standards.[7] This shift demands sustained professional learning and structured collaboration to build shared understanding of what mastery looks like and how it is assessed.

For families, traditional A–F grades are replaced with mastery-based reporting that separates achievement from behavior and effort. Clear communication is essential to help families interpret progress within this new framework.

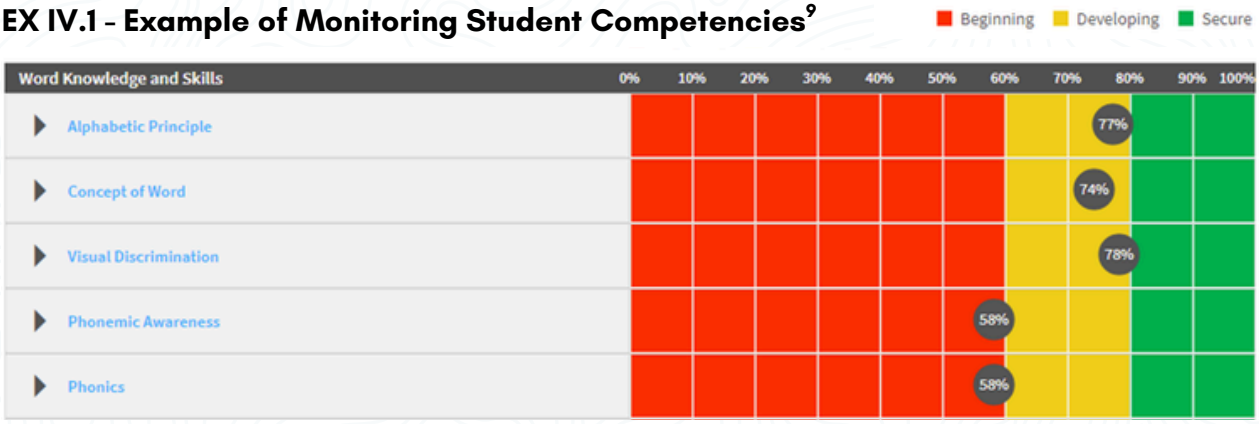
For students, the shift encourages ownership of learning. Students engage with learning targets, reflect on feedback, and revise work until proficiency is demonstrated, building metacognitive skills and connecting effort to growth. Teachers must model goal-setting, feedback interpretation, and revision processes.

Cultural change cannot rely on policy alone. Alignment between expectations, grading policies, and advancement criteria must be visible in daily practice. Consistent communication and application strengthen trust and support stable implementation.

Section IV. — Technical Infrastructure: Building Systems That Support Mastery

If students advance based on demonstrated readiness rather than time in a classroom, schools must provide shared definitions, reliable tools, and consistent processes. Without this infrastructure, mastery remains an aspiration rather than an operational system.[8]

EX IV.1 - Example of Monitoring Student Competencies[9]



Key Elements of a Functioning Mastery-Based System

Clear Competencies[10]

- Define what students must know and be able to do.
- Must be explicit, measurable, and aligned to state standards.
- Organized along learning progressions that reflect increasing complexity.
- Include both skills and application of knowledge across contexts.
- Provide a shared understanding of proficiency.

Aligned Assessment Systems[11]

Assessments must connect directly to competencies and serve different purposes:

- Formative assessments guide instruction through ongoing feedback.
- Performance tasks allow students to apply learning in authentic contexts.
- Summative assessments provide comparability and accountability.
- Calibration processes such as rubrics, exemplars, and collaborative scoring help ensure mastery standards are applied consistently.

Intentional Scheduling

Mastery-based systems require dedicated time for intervention, enrichment, and teacher collaboration. Teachers need structured time to analyze student work, review data, calibrate expectations, and plan responsive instruction. Without this time, differentiation becomes difficult to sustain.

Strong Data Infrastructure[12]

Progress must be transparently tracked against competencies. Students and families should clearly see what has been mastered, where gaps remain, and what steps lead to advancement. Dashboards and progress-monitoring tools make learning data actionable for educators and understandable for families.

Institutional Commitment[13]

Successful implementation requires alignment across leadership, policy, instructional practice, and data systems. Sustainable funding supports professional learning, calibration processes, and technology tools, while clear policy frameworks maintain consistency and protect the integrity of mastery-based progression.

When competencies, assessments, scheduling, data systems, and leadership are aligned, mastery-based learning moves from theory to practice — creating a system that is both reliable and sustainable.

Section V. — Classroom Practice: From Coverage to Competence

In Tailored Learning classrooms, instruction centers on competence rather than content coverage. Students begin with clear learning targets and transparent criteria for success.[14] Instruction emphasizes application, problem-solving, and transfer, while students may progress at different points along a shared learning progression.[15]

EX V.1 - CBE Mastery Framework[16]

STRUCTURE	CULTURE	TEACHING	LEARNING
Assessment System	Institutional Mission	Teachers as Facilitators/Coaches	Student Ownership of Learning
Seat Time	Knowledgable Staff	Personalized Learning	Student Voice
Learning Management System	Culture of Innovation	Tools/Resources for Teaching	Lead Learner
Scheduling	Engaged Parents/Families	Content Expertise	Learning Anytime, Anywhere
Standards/ Defined Competencies	Engaged Stakeholders	Curriculum Design	
Professional Development	Effective Communications	Assessment Design and Use	
Physcail Infrastructure	Culture of Relevance		

Assessment is embedded in daily instruction. Teachers continuously gather evidence of learning and use feedback to guide students toward mastery. Revision focuses on meeting defined standards rather than improving an average.

Flexible grouping allows instruction to respond to student readiness. Some learners progress quickly through competencies, while others receive additional time and targeted support. These adjustments occur within consistent expectations for all students. Students take greater ownership by tracking progress, setting goals, and reflecting on feedback, while teachers structure opportunities for revision and improvement.[17]

However, classroom practice alone cannot sustain Tailored Learning. Without aligned grading systems, calibrated proficiency standards, and coherent policy frameworks, instructional innovation risks fragmentation.[18] Mastery must carry a consistent meaning across classrooms and schools for the system to function effectively.

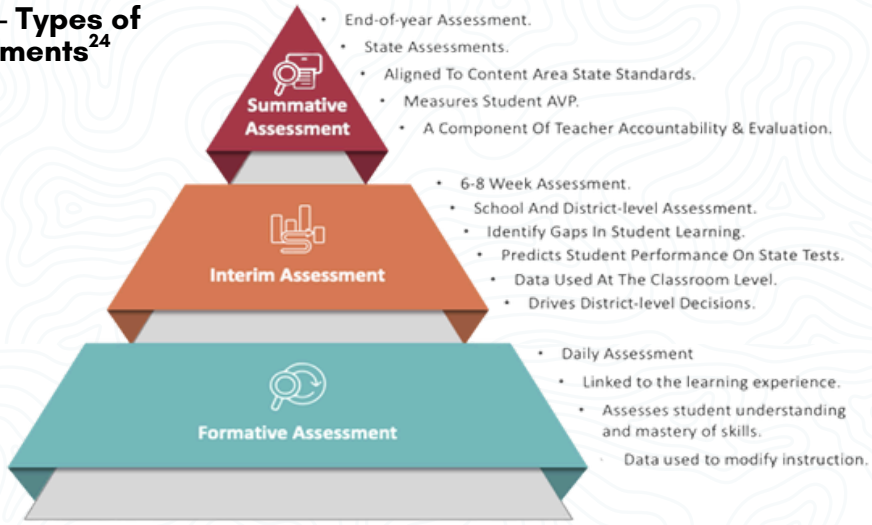
Section VI. — Accountability and Policy Alignment

Accountability systems shape instructional practice by signaling what counts. When policies emphasize seat time or single-point performance, schools organize around those incentives. For Tailored Learning to take root, accountability must reinforce mastery rather than contradict it.[19]

Statewide summative assessments remain important for transparency and comparability across districts.[20] However, they do not need to dictate instructional pacing or prevent mastery-based credit. Several states allow students to earn credit through demonstrated proficiency — such as performance tasks, portfolios, or validated evidence — while still participating in statewide testing.[21]

Balanced accountability systems combine summative benchmarks with multiple sources of evidence aligned to clear competencies.[22] This approach preserves rigor while allowing students to advance based on mastery rather than the calendar.[23]

EX VI.1 - Types of Assessments[24]



Policy alignment extends beyond assessment.

Graduation requirements, credit policies, and funding structures shape whether mastery-based progression is feasible. Seat-time credit rules create barriers, while competency-based credit and flexible pathways create space for innovation.[25]

Sustainable Tailored Learning depends on policy coherence.

When accountability, credit policies, and instructional expectations align, schools receive clear signals that advancement reflects demonstrated competence.[26]

Section VII. – Scaling and Sustainability

Scaling Tailored Learning is not rapid replication but a sequenced process of alignment and capacity building. Systems that move from pilot programs to broader adoption typically progress through clear stages of development.

Early phases focus on defining competencies and clarifying what mastery looks like in practice. As clarity grows, schools align curriculum, assessment design, grading policies, and reporting structures so that all components reinforce shared expectations.[27] Professional expertise develops alongside these changes as educators strengthen their understanding of learning progressions, calibration practices, and evidence-based feedback.

Attempting to launch all structural components simultaneously – competency frameworks, grading redesign, flexible pacing, performance assessments, and policy adjustments – often overwhelms educators and strains operational capacity, resulting in uneven implementation and diluted fidelity.

Successful scaling begins with coherence.

Shared definitions of proficiency, transparent communication with families, and alignment between classroom practice and policy expectations create the foundation for expansion.

Continuous improvement is essential.

Schools and districts must analyze student outcomes, examine calibration consistency, and refine practices based on implementation data. These feedback loops ensure scaling becomes adaptive improvement rather than simple replication.

Sustained professional learning remains central.

Ongoing collaboration, calibration of proficiency standards, and leadership development help maintain instructional coherence.[28] Without continued investment in educator expertise, assessment practices fragment and the integrity of mastery-based systems weakens.

Section VIII. — Measuring Mastery, Growth, and Readiness

Traditional summative assessments provide comparability but capture learning at a single point in time, offering limited insight into student progress.[29] A coherent measurement system integrates multiple sources of evidence: formative diagnostics, performance tasks, adaptive tools, documented growth, and calibrated summative benchmarks aligned to clear competencies.[30]

Balanced systems ensure advancement reflects demonstrated readiness rather than seat time or subjective judgment.[31] Explicit, consistently applied proficiency criteria allow reliable mastery determinations and give students and families clarity about what is required to move forward.

Measurement shapes opportunity. Advancement, intervention, and access to advanced coursework depend on what students know and can do. Without transparent evidence, access may rely on informal recommendations or inconsistent grading.[32] Anchoring decisions in validated assessments and calibrated criteria provides a defensible pathway for acceleration and allows timely, targeted interventions when competency gaps emerge.[33]

Conclusion: Designing Schools Around Demonstrated Readiness

Tailored Learning shifts schooling from time-based to learning-based progression. By aligning clear competencies, mastery-based advancement, responsive instruction, and coherent accountability, it ensures students move forward based on what they know and can do.

North Carolina has the opportunity to move beyond incremental reform and design schools around demonstrated readiness. With coherence, clarity, and sustained commitment, Tailored Learning creates a system where progression reflects competence, instruction meets students' needs, and rigorous opportunities are accessible to all.

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