

# Collaborating to Scale and Sustain Competency-Based Learning

*How 3 Hawaii charter schools are bringing competency-based assessment to life with learners*

## By Altitude Learning

In collaboration with Buffy Cushman-Patz, Executive Director, [SEEQS](#); Denise Espania, Director, [Malama Honua](#); Matt Zitello, Associate Director, [Hawaii Technology Academy](#)

## School Profiles

**SCHOOL** Hawaii Technology Academy (HTA)  
**LOCATION** Oahu, Maui, Kauai, and Hawaii islands  
**PROFILE** Public Charter School serving grades K-12  
**STUDENT IMPACT** 1200 students across 4 islands



*Hawaii's largest tuition-free, public charter school offering a blended-learning program with face-to-face, virtual and independent components coupled with field-based study and work-based learning programs to enhance college and career readiness.*

**SCHOOL** Malama Honua  
**LOCATION** Waimanalo, Hawaii  
**PROFILE** Public Charter School serving grades K-8  
**STUDENT IMPACT** 165 students



*A Hawaiian culture, community-focused, project based learning community offering a rigorous learning environment guided by their "Mind of the Navigator" framework rooted in cultural values. Malama Honua aims to equip graduates to successfully navigate the many voyages they will have in life while being grounded and confident in their cultural identity.*

**SCHOOL** SEEQS: the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability  
**LOCATION** Honolulu, Hawaii  
**PROFILE** Public Charter School serving grades 6-8  
**STUDENT IMPACT** 180 students



*A community-focused, interdisciplinary, project-based, tuition-free secondary school experience that fosters a joy of learning through collaborative and interdisciplinary investigation of questions essential to Hawaii's future. SEEQS graduates will be stewards of planet Earth and healthy, effective citizens of the world.*

## Introduction

*Brought together by a shared vision to create a more expansive student transcript reflecting whole child learning, three charter schools in Hawaii offer a glimpse into their process—from vision to implementation. Aligned to competencies ranging from Common Core standards to social justice competencies and indigenous cultural values, their journeys offer a model for public, charter, and private schools looking to create a clear, shared, and actionable picture of student learning and progress toward desired outcomes.*

## Goal

Founded on learner-centered principles that promote agency, authentic and culturally embedded learning, and a personalized learning experience, these three Hawaii public charter schools sought to make student progress toward desired learner outcomes more visible and to create a clear, shared picture of learning for students, educators, and families.

*How might we increase visibility of student progress toward desired outcomes?*

*How can we create a clear, shared picture of learning for students, educators, and families?*

## A Phased Approach to Shifting to Competency-Based Assessment

Each of these Hawaii charter schools, while part of the statewide Hawaii School District, have their own unique vision and model for learning and pedagogical approach.

Their key standards, competencies, and habits vary, yet they all share a desire to push beyond competency-based teaching and to actualize an evidence-based assessment approach that captures and articulates progress toward desired competencies. As each school has worked to operationalize their competency-based assessment vision, their journeys have followed common pathways applicable to a wide range of schools, districts, and learning communities.

Gain insight into how each school approached their journey toward competency-based assessment and how the Altitude Learning platform and partnership supports their work.

## Phase 1: Streamlining to focus on highest priorities

Transformative change requires deep, intentional, focused work. Creating “space” to engage in this process often starts with simplifying and prioritizing in order to unleash time and resources for innovation.

- ▶ At **Malama Honua** the team started with a focus on further developing and articulating scope, sequence, rubrics, and progressions aligned to their Mind of the Navigator learner profile. They aligned on what it looked like in grade K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 to demonstrate each of their six Mind of the Navigator skill areas. This included developing their scope and sequence, building rubrics, and documenting the curriculum and instruction to align with the assessments. With a clear and robust articulation of learning, Malama Honua was poised to build their rubrics, progressions, and projects into the Altitude Learning platform, setting the foundation for capturing and demonstrating student progress aligned to desired skills, standards and competencies.
- ▶ **Hawaii Technology Academy** took another approach to make way for iteration and innovation. Following a start small and scale model, they selected a few teachers at a new middle school place-based program to pursue a competency-based assessment approach to learning. Once they have established the tools, routines, infrastructure, and practices needed to make this successful in one learning community they will be well positioned to scale it with learners throughout other grades and campuses.
- ▶ For **SEEQS** the work started with consolidating technology platforms to a streamlined set of tools aligned to their vision for learning. In the end they consolidated four core technology platforms for managing student information, learning, collaboration, grading and reporting, and portfolios to two platforms. Their primary platform for interfacing with students is now Altitude Learning, which they use for managing learning, feedback, grading, reporting, collaboration, and portfolios in a way that enables learner-centered practices, including competency-based assessment.

*“My advice to schools on this journey is to get clarity, first, about your values around assessment, so that you have a solid foundation to build on. The work is nearly impossible without a shared agreement about what assessment is for, and the kind of feedback we want to give students to help them make meaning out of the work they do in school.”*

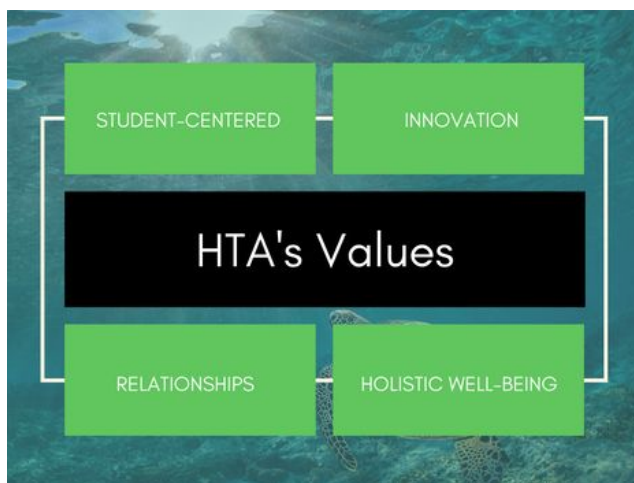
*Buffy Cushman-Patz, SEEQS*

## Phase 2: Aligning on competencies and a platform

One of the most critical steps in shifting to competency-based assessment is defining the critical competencies—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions—a learning community envisions for learners and gaining alignment throughout the community. As evidenced by these three Hawaii charter schools, “competencies” can encompass standards, habits, skills, desired outcomes, and academic, social and emotional competencies. Competency-based assessment demonstrates progress toward these desired learning targets that span various taxonomies.

With a clear set of learning targets, the next step is to select a platform that can “ingest” a school or district’s full breadth of competencies. For these three Hawaii schools, Altitude Learning was a clear choice given its flexibility around learning taxonomies and comprehensive tools that enable a full competency-based assessment cycle. Each school’s competencies in the platform varied widely in both content, type, and breadth. While this did not impact their “how” when it came to realizing competency-based assessment practices, it has yielded unique experiences for each learning community.

- ▶ Continuing with its “start small and scale” model for change, **Hawaii Technology Academy** started with Common Core standards, which come embedded in the Altitude Learning platform, and added their core values— **C**ollaboration, **C**ritical thinking, **C**ommunication, **C**reativity, and **C**haracter— they aim to instill in all their learners.

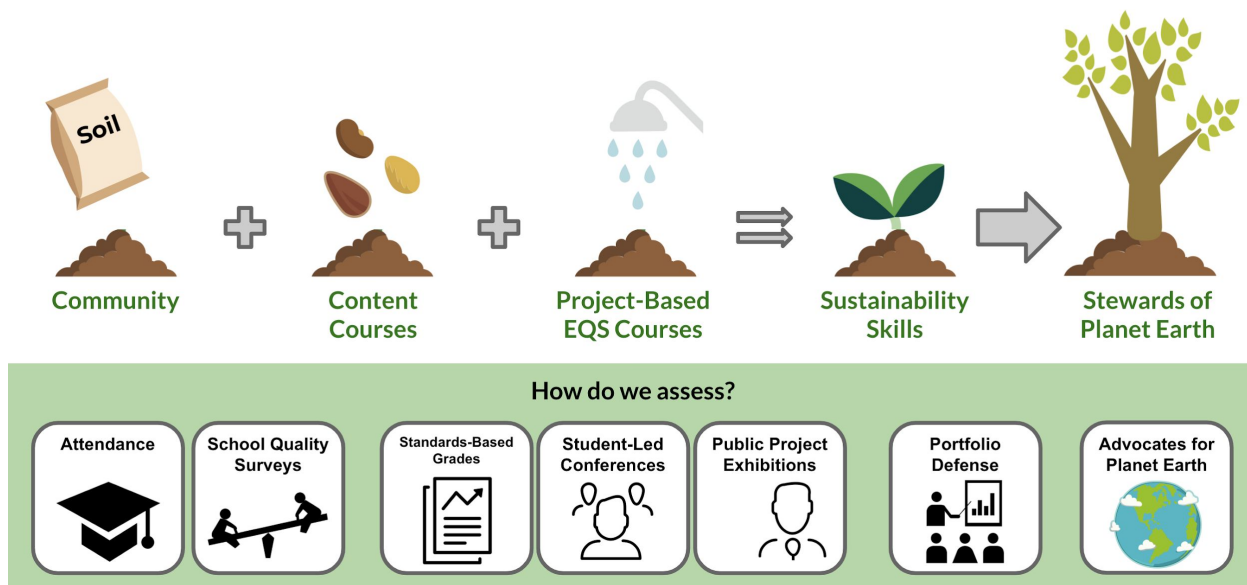


- ▶ **SEEQS** has been able to further realize their competency-based assessment vision thanks to customizable taxonomies in the Altitude Learning platform. Their competencies are anchored in their recognition that students need a broad set of skills and content coupled with experience on how to implement those tools and skills in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their lives, their communities, and their future. In addition to core academic standards, SEEQers self-reflect on and build portfolios of work to demonstrate their understanding of SEEQS Sustainability skills, which include: Reasoning Analytically, Managing Effectively, Communicating Powerfully, Collaborating Productively, and Thinking Systemically. The connection between academic content and real-world application comes together in their Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) year-long courses where students participate in an interdisciplinary, project-based, experience designed around examining an Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS). In their EQS course, students are assessed on Education for Sustainability standards, which have been customized into the Altitude Learning platform.

THE SCHOOLS FOR EXAMINING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY  
s e e q s

The SEEQS Vision:

*SEEQers will be stewards of planet Earth and healthy, effective citizens of the world.*



*The SEEQS school model*

▶ With **Malama Honua's** rich set of competencies integral to all they do, it was important for them to launch with a full articulation of their six “Mind of the Navigator” skill areas: Environmental Awareness, Communication & Collaboration, Global Awareness, Civic Responsibility, and Ethical Problem Solving. Learners progress toward these outcomes by demonstrating learning aligned to key Common Core standards, Next Generation Science standards, Hawaii-specific standards, and school-specific standards. Additionally, with deep connections to Hawaiian culture, Malama Honua has infused Hawaiian language and culture into their learning framework which includes skills such as **Kilo** (to observe), **Ho’Ihi** (show respect and understanding), and **Malama** (take care of). With the flexibility of the Altitude Learning platform Malama Honua has been able to build out their custom taxonomies in their instance of the platform.



### Phase 3: Shifting assessment practices to drive learning

With the enabling tools and conditions in place, the next step is bringing the work to life with educators and learners, which involves shifts in practices and routines. Such change is best achieved when technological and adaptive shifts are coordinated and in support of each other. Tapping into Altitude Learning’s Competency-Based Assessment learner-centered pathway and working as a collaborative community of practice, the three schools come together several times each quarter for professional learning with Altitude Learning that helps deepen teaching practices that support competency-based assessment and to optimize and expand their use of technology.

With each school’s unique standards, competencies and rubrics in their instances of the Altitude Learning platform an early step was to update and align learning projects to the prioritized competencies in order to capture and demonstrate learning as students progressed through their work and projects. From here, each school has leveraged the Altitude Learning platform to support their specific goals.

- ▶ **Malama Honua** was looking to enhance how data was being captured and collected throughout the trimester to inform more robust, data-supported progress reports that could be shared with students and families to provide a clear picture of student progress. Middle school teachers (grades 6-8) transferred their teaching and learning to the platform, linking their curriculum, instruction, and assessment and parent communication. The “Explorations” block utilized both content area standards and the newly created Mind of the Navigator benchmarks to assess the school’s integrated place- and culture-based program. The reports generated were then used to run student-led conferences with families for additional reflection and conversations about learning, growth, and goal-setting opportunities.
  
- ▶ One of the goals at **Hawaii Technology Academy** was to shift to student-owned reflections. With educators and students all having a clear view into student learning over time in the Altitude Learning platform, students are able to develop informed reflections that are shared with their families as well in semester progress reports. Through Hawaii Tech’s project-based units they are able to give feedback not only on academic standards, but also on each of their five Cores (their 5 Cs). With these systems and practices in place, both students and parents have the ability to track and reflect on their progress and growth at any time throughout the year. This transparency encourages rich conversations between teachers and families.
  
- ▶ At **SEEQS**, with their year-long interdisciplinary Essential Question of Sustainability courses, it is critical that teams of educators and advisors can collaborate on narrative feedback for each learner. The Altitude Learning platform facilitates this collaboration and houses the collective feedback in a way that makes it referenceable and useful both when reflecting on progress and looking toward the learning ahead. Additionally, the SEEQS team is leveraging the Portfolio feature to curate students' reflections on the Sustainability Skills. Through the platform, students are able to choose reflections and evidence that best represents their current understanding of the Sustainability Skills, so that by 8th grade they have a complete portfolio that displays their year over year progress throughout middle school, which they defend in SEEQS’s Portfolio Defense process.

For each of these schools, the shift from educators “knowing” how students are doing versus educators and learners sharing evidence and data aligned to specific standards has been a series of individual steps that are leading the schools to transformational change in how learning and progress is captured, measured, and used to drive future learning.

## Phase 4: Continue to build practices across the learning community

As the cohort of Hawaii schools looks ahead, their visions include continuing to deepen competency-based learning practices with students and also to leverage the platform for competency-based educator evaluations. As learning sciences research shows, setting goals, capturing progress along the way, reflecting, and improving is a gold-standard learning process for all learners, which is why it is equally critical to make it available to support educator growth. With all tools available to the entire learning community, educators not only model how to use the tools, but gain first-hand knowledge of the learner experience to inform their work with students.

- ▶ **SEEQS** will continue to refine its use of the Altitude Program, and all the opportunities it offers for students to have meaningful learning experiences, and for teachers to provide meaningful feedback to help them learn, grow, and have consciousness of their learning. Over the next few years, the Altitude Learning platform will help bring to light the significant learning students are doing around Education for Sustainability, by allowing students to get explicit feedback around, and documentation of progress in, Education for Sustainability standards. This will enable SEEQS to increase visibility into—with potential to showcase to an external audience—the important and meaningful learning that goes well beyond typical standards, about things that truly matter to students and our collective future.
- ▶ **Hawaii Technology Academy** will continue to run its competency-based learning program that leverages both state and HTA-specific standards and will further leverage the power of the Altitude Learning platform to support meaningful performance-based assessments that are integral to their place-based educational programs. With nearly an entire school year of competency-based assessment work captured in the Altitude Learning platform they are realizing their vision of being able to capture and demonstrate student progress over time, thus creating a clear, shared picture of student learning for students, educators, and families.
- ▶ **Malama Honua** will continue to refine schoolwide student learning outcomes specific to its mission and vision (such as their values and MON skills) in quantifiable ways that will add to the overall story of students' learning journeys. In time, when rolled out further, the platform will house all of the learning portfolios that are the foundation to the Hō'ike and Defense Presentations of learning. The schoolwide rubrics currently in development can be input for scaffolded use across all grade levels. That, coupled with the classroom content, can be utilized to inform schoolwide data profiles for internal and external use.

*To connect and learn more about implementing learner-centered assessment, email [partners@altitudelearning.com](mailto:partners@altitudelearning.com)*