

## **Proficiency-based Learning and Graduation Requirements Testimony**

Dr. Amy L. Cole  
Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment  
Essex Westford School District

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Dr. Amy Cole and I am currently the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for the Essex Westford School District. I also teach graduate courses at Saint Michael's College, Southern New Hampshire University and McGill University. I was a middle school classroom teacher for nine years before becoming a curriculum director. I am also a parent of two Essex High School graduates.

### **First, the what and the why.**

I'll begin by clarifying some terms that can often cause confusion. In the field of education, like many professions, we have our own terms and acronyms which can often confuse people. I believe that this has the case with proficiency-based learning. In short, proficiency-based learning, standards-based reporting, mastery learning, competency-based learning, outcome based education....they all mean the same thing. You may hear me refer to them today using one or more of those terms. The concept of proficiency-based learning is relatively simple and has been around for centuries. It is rooted in the learning theory based on behavioral psychology which simply argues that a learner will learn a concept, content, or skill more effectively if he or she knows what the learning goals are, how they will be assessed, what success looks like and if they are given clear and specific feedback on how they are doing as they progress towards meeting those goals. If you think about any time you have learned something new, you may agree that it is challenging to learn something if you don't have that kind of information to work with.

Educational research overwhelmingly supports these basic practices. For those of you who are unfamiliar with his work Dr. John Hattie produced a significant body of research in 2009 with his seminal text *Visible Learning*. In this text he conducted a massive meta-analysis of over 800 quantitative research studies in search of the factors that have the strongest influence, or "effect size" on student learning. Hattie's research indicated that one of the single greatest influences on student achievement is the student's clear understanding of the learning goals and the expectation the student has for how they will do on an assessment of skills or concepts. Hattie also found that teacher formative feedback on those learning goals was another factor with a significant effect size on student learning.

So if this is good for students, why didn't you and I experience this when we were going to school? I think it would be helpful to take some time to provide some historical context for you. The basic concept of proficiency-based learning has been in place for

centuries, however the movement towards institutionalizing it as a practice across all schools really took off in the 90's with the 1989 Governor's Conference where the governors reached consensus to support a push for outcome-based education. The movement was led by the then Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton and was supported by then President George H. Bush. What followed was a movement across the country for each state to adopt state standards and to design state assessments to measure those standards and was one of the drivers, along with the Brigham case, which resulted in the development of the Vermont Standards in 1997.

What did that look like in schools? First, teachers began designing lessons and schools began designing curriculum around common state standards. If you had a child in elementary school at the time, you may have seen that the shift to outcome-based education set off a trend for elementary schools to move towards standards-based report cards. This movement began primarily in elementary schools but over time we saw a transition up to middle schools. Essentially once educators were focusing their instruction around teaching and assessing specific standards it only made sense to revise report cards to communicate and record how a student was doing towards meeting those standards. Traditional grading mechanism no longer matched our practices because, returning back to the learning theory related to proficiency-based learning, if our goal is to support each individual student with progressing towards meeting specific learning goals, we needed to be more specific about their strengths and areas for improvement whereas traditional grading, or using single letter grade (A) or a two digit numeric (93), does not provide that specific level of detail.

**What are the challenges and why is there so much controversy now?** You are probably asking yourself if this has been in place for over two decades, why is it so controversial now? I'm going to shift my attention to proficiency-based graduation requirements because I suspect this is one of the reasons why you may be devoting time to this topic today.

As you probably know, until 2014 every high school was required to set graduate requirements around a specific formula that was outlined in the Vermont School Quality Standards (SQS). The formula will sound very familiar to you. They included things like four years of English, three years of math, one and a half credits of Physical Education, and so on. There were slight variations across high schools with local school districts adding to that basic state formula here and there but these variations were minor. You may know that this system was invented in 1871 by the Committee of Ten, a group of university scholars who met and designed the system of Carnegie Units, agreed upon the minimum number of credits, the number of hours required to earn a credit. They also took knowledge and split it into the content areas that we currently see today as high school departments. The design was predicated on measuring learning by counting hours, days, years, and credits.

Working within this system, Vermont high schools worked hard to adhere to the traditional system of credits required by VT SQS while also transitioning to a system that ensured that students were meeting the new state standards. However, once again, teachers and schools were challenged with a mismatch between our grading and reporting systems and our teaching practices.

In 2014, the Vermont Education Quality Standards (VT EQS) changed everything and set off considerable amount of concern among teachers, parents, student and community members. EQS required that each Vermont high school transition to a system of proficiency-based learning and graduation requirements. Essentially schools are now held more accountable for ensuring that students are not just graduating with a score sheet of credits but that we are ensuring that all students could actually demonstrate that they met these proficiencies. It's not enough to teach and assess to the standards. We now owe it to our students to also report their learning against the standards and hold them accountable to meeting those standards. Again, the goal is increased transparency and clarity for the learner. In the same way that standards-based grading lifts the veil on grading practices, when done well shifting away from the traditional system of Carnegie Units (or credits) as a score sheet for earning a high school diploma and towards a proficiency-based graduation requirement system, it should provide students, parents, employers and colleges with more, rather than less, information about the individual student's achievements.

Vermont is not the only state that has put in place proficiency-based policies. In fact, most states have made some shift in this direction and many of the countries producing the highest educational outcomes as is measured by international assessments, use proficiency-based or competency-based systems for teaching, learning, grading, reporting and graduation requirements.

**What are our challenges?** Overhauling a system that has been in place since the late 17th century is no easy task, a system that our teachers and parents have experienced themselves as learners, is no easy task. First, our teachers and school leaders need time. We need to provide time and professional learning for teachers to shift pedagogical practices and we need time to redesigning our systems and structures. Unfortunately we are asking our schools to build the train tracks while also driving the train which proves to be challenging. As school leaders we are working hard to support our teachers while also collaborating across schools to ensure that we can meet the needs of students who transfer from school to school during this time of transition. Second, we need to do a much better job of communicating the what, the why and the how to parents and community members all while assuring them that these changes will ultimately provide for a stronger education for their child. One of the most common concerns I hear from parents is that a change from the traditional high school grades, report card or transcript will somehow put our students at a disadvantage when they are applying to colleges and universities. In order to address this fear, the New England Secondary School Consortium reached out and collected assurances from over 70

colleges and universities throughout the region stating that as long as their high school has a clear school profile describing their grading system, students with non-traditional transcripts, including proficiency-based transcripts, will not be disadvantaged in any way during the admissions process. I've included the link to the white paper produced by NESSC outlining those conversations with admissions offices.

[http://www.nebhe.org/info/pdf/policy/Policy\\_Spotlight\\_How\\_Colleges\\_Evaluate\\_PB\\_HS\\_Transcripts\\_April\\_2016.pdf](http://www.nebhe.org/info/pdf/policy/Policy_Spotlight_How_Colleges_Evaluate_PB_HS_Transcripts_April_2016.pdf). I believe that communication is one of the greatest challenges we face in this work and an area where we as educators could be doing better.

As I close my testimony I want to return to the Why of Proficiency Learning. As an educator I do use proficiency-based teaching and grading practices myself because I believe in the practice and I have seen the shift in ownership of learning to the student when provided with the opportunity to learn in a proficiency-based system. When done well, proficiency-based learning systems produce self-directed learners who are more actively involved and engaged in their learning. Shifting to proficiency-based learning systems also provides more equity for our students. Students should not have disparate educational experiences based on their town of residence, the school they attend, or the classroom teacher they are assigned. Proficiency-based learning holds us as educators more accountable to better support individual student needs while moving all students towards the same learning outcomes. Transparency and clarity are critical elements in proficiency-based learning systems because it lifts the century-old veil that we've all experienced with traditional grading and reporting systems. A good indication of when it is working well is when you stop hearing students ask the question "Is this going to be on the test?" or "Will this count towards my grade?" or even "How am I doing in this class?" In a true proficiency-based learning environment, the answers to those questions should never be a mystery to a student or a parent.

Thank you for your time today. I hope that my testimony was helpful for you to understand what proficiency-based learning, as well as understand the kinds of challenges our schools face in this work. Ultimately we all want what is best for our students. Every teacher wants to do their very best for their students and every parent wants to know that their students is cared for, challenged and prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

I'm happy to answer any questions you have.