

State Rep. Sampson: In Maine schools, 'proficiency' may not mean what you think it does

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By Heidi Sampson Special to the Press Herald

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AUGUSTA — Mainers, we've been hoodwinked. Proficiency-based diploma and proficiency-based education are not the same thing, yet Maine's insistence that our diplomas be based on "proficiency" has begun dismantling traditional methods of instruction.

The purpose of any diploma is to certify that a student has met the state's requirements for graduation. In 2012, Maine became the first state to pass the proficiency-based diploma law, requiring that this certification be based on "proficiency" in eight content areas and the five Guiding Principles.

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In contrast, proficiency-based education is a specific system of instruction, assessments, academic reporting and grading in which traditional grading of 0-100 is eliminated in favor of 1-4 grading: 1 – does not meet proficiency; 2 – partially meets proficiency; 3 – meets proficiency, and 4 – exceeds proficiency.

As school districts have implemented this experimental grading system, parents have learned the dirty little secret that there is no standard, agreed-upon definition of what proficiency means in the context of learning. Neither the Maine Department of Education nor the Maine Legislature has been able to define proficiency, even while requiring it for the attainment of a diploma.

In schools adopting proficiency-based education, parents are bewildered by the 1-4 grading system and students are worried about the proficiency-based transcript putting them at a disadvantage for admission to college. Advocates for proficiency-based education point to a report in which 74 New England colleges and universities said they would not disadvantage students with proficiency-based diplomas in evaluating them for admission. However, nearly half of those schools are institutions with open admissions policies. Of the remaining respondents, the vast majority have admissions requirements that still value the rigor of secondary school record, standardized test scores, class rank, high school GPA and SAT scores. But the plan in Maine is to phase out these criteria when schools become fully compliant with the proficiency-based diploma law.

Despite what many have been led to believe, the law does not require that any particular system be used to attain or evaluate proficiency – adopting proficiency-based education is not required. Yet schools across Maine are rushing to implement proficiency-based education in the mistaken belief that it is their only option to comply with the proficiency-based diploma law.

The proficiency-based diploma law has created a niche market for a special group of education "consultants" with financial backing, mostly from the Nellie Mae Foundation, to dictate to policymakers what a diploma should mean. Using this new diploma paradigm as leverage, the well-paid consultants have traveled the state to persuade superintendents and school boards to adopt an untested and costly education system.

Maine's public education system has been manipulated to force an agenda without engaging parents, teachers and students in the process. Apparently, this was by design. Michael Horn, co-founder of the Christensen Institute, has argued of education reform that the "tools of democracy will not get us to where we need to go." Perhaps that is why the tools of democracy are seemingly being abandoned in pursuit of undefined "proficiency."

After six years there are still no rules to comply with this law. The Department of Education readily admits it has been unable to cobble together language to support the law's implementation. According to the department's own statement to the Legislature's Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, Chief Academic Officer Paul Hambleton acknowledged that "this is not working" and "it's broken and needs to be fixed." This law has been tweaked and tortured since its inception, most recently rewritten in 2016 by L.D. 1627, and yet the department still finds it impossible to implement.

Now the Legislature is considering a bill, L.D. 1666, to delay full implementation of the proficiency-based diploma law by one more year, to 2025-2026, well beyond the original target of 2017-2018. One more year and new "consensus-based rulemaking" will not suddenly fix the unfixable. It is time to acknowledge that this experiment has failed. Our children are not guinea pigs, and we should stop gambling with basic principles that might jeopardize their acceptance to college.

Instead of a last-ditch attempt to save a misleading scheme that is not working, the Legislature should repeal the entire proficiency-based diploma law, which would return the decision-making process to the local school districts. I have introduced an amendment to do this.

If the proficiency-based diploma law were repealed, school boards would be free to implement the approach that best suits their district. Teachers would regain autonomy to do what they do best, teaching with creativity and freedom to engage and capture the imagination of their students. We need to let teachers teach and students learn.

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