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# The proficiency-based diploma: There was a better way



In this August 2015 file photo, teachers participate in the Pathways to Proficiency 2015 Summer Literacy Institute, hosted by Maine Department of Education. About 400 Maine teachers attended a two-day workshop held in several cities around the state, including the group that met at Jell's Cafe in Bangor. [Photo by David S. Lee for the Bangor Daily News](#)

By Lynne Miller, Special to the BDN • March 13, 2018 2:24 pm

In 2012, the Maine Legislature passed LD 1422, mandating a “proficiency diploma” as a requirement for high school graduation. The diploma was meant to guarantee that all students would graduate from high school with consistent levels of proficiency in the content area standards of the Maine Learning Results, no matter their background or where they attended school.

Since Maine is a local control state where school districts have authority over curriculum, teaching and student evaluation, the state cannot mandate, as other states have, a standardized measure to certify proficiency; it is left in the hands of the individual districts. Drummond Woodsum lawyers made this clear in their presentation to school leaders in 2005, explaining that districts are responsible for: 1) setting the level of performance that constitutes proficiency; 2) ensuring that there is more than one approach to learning and more than one method of assessing it; 3) using multiple measures to demonstrate proficiency; 4) deciding on the level of performance that constitutes proficiency; and 5) establishing the curriculum through which the standards are taught. All of this makes the guarantee that every district will graduate students with consistent proficiencies difficult to fulfill.

The Maine Department of Education was charged with guiding schools toward implementation of the law. Now, six years after passage, there is **yet another call for delay**. What went wrong?

Part of the fault lies with the contradiction between local control and a mandate for statewide consistency in the meaning of the diploma; and part lies with the direction the DOE pursued in its outreach to schools. Rather than assist each district in developing its own pathway toward proficiency, the department promoted one particular method of teaching and assessment, known as Proficiency-Based Learning/Proficiency-Based Education and billed it as essential to implementing the diploma.

This method is not part of the law, nor is it a recognized system validated through rigorous and objective research. Rather it is an amalgam of tools and methods that the department has embraced and advertised as necessary to put the law in place. It mounted an entire website devoted to it and sent out a slew of consultants to help schools adopt it. Bearing the education department seal of approval, this method has permeated almost every school and classroom in the state without legislative mandate or public discussion and debate. It has erroneously become viewed as having the weight of law.

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Proficiency-Based Learning/Proficiency-Based Education endorses a particular view of teaching and learning, and it promotes a specific assessment system that relies on a 1-4 scale to identify proficiency levels. In this system, or some variation of it, 1=not proficient, 2=partially or not yet proficient, 3=proficient, and 4=above proficient.

By introducing numbers as codes for proficiency, this method set in motion a trifecta of problems. Without going into detail about the differences in how numbers are used as codes for categories and how they are used as grades, suffice it to say the result has been confusing high school transcripts that are an indecipherable mishmash of numbers and indicators. This has proved baffling to parents, students, and teachers. Bowing to concerns voiced by these groups, several districts have returned to reporting traditional grades and GPA on the high school transcript in addition to proficiency scores.

All of the confusion surrounding implementation could have been avoided had the DOE not jumped on the bandwagon of yet another untested system (Does Mass Customized Education ring a bell?) and stuck to what the law intended. Schools are free to adopt proficiency-based education but they don't have to. There are other options. Teachers already use a variety of strategies, not just one, to reach their students.

Similarly, school districts already use a variety of methods to assess proficiency; they can choose from among them for certification. The Maine Educational Assessment is one option. It is aligned with the Learning Results and has long been a vehicle for certifying proficiency in the state. If a standardized test does not appeal, there are other possibilities such as high school courses, portfolios, performances, and exhibitions. Taken together as multiple measures to certify proficiency, they need not entail a 1-4 scale; a simple designation of proficient will satisfy the law.

It will take considerable time and thoughtful deliberation to put the proficiency diploma back on track — if it is to be salvaged at all. In the meantime, this year's high school freshmen are caught in a system that may adversely affect their education, their ability to graduate on time and their life chances.

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