

Testimony on Proficiency-Based Learning

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Good morning. My name is Michael Ruppel and I am a math teacher at Springfield High School. This is my fourth year as a Vermont educator and my eighth year as a math teacher (the first four were in Providence, Rhode Island). The past three years, I have worked to implement proficiency-based learning practices in my classroom. This year, I am on a Rowland Fellowship in which I am researching best practices for implementation of proficiency-based and personalized learning at our school while also supporting educators at our school in the daily work of this transition. I am testifying today to share why we feel proficiency-based learning is best for students at Springfield High School, some of the major decision points we have faced and why how we have approached those decisions, and some of the challenges and needs we have in moving this work forward.

I will note that the term proficiency-based learning and its related practices may take on different forms and meanings depending on the school and setting, and my testimony today refers only to its implementation at Springfield High School.

What is Proficiency-Based Learning?

At Springfield High School, the term proficiency-based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students **demonstrating mastery on particular skills** as they progress through their education. In a proficiency-based learning system, teams of teachers come together to identify the criteria that students need to meet in order to demonstrate mastery of a particular learning goal. Rather than being given a score based on the accumulation of points, teachers use rubrics with well-defined success criteria to evaluate student work. Additionally, in a proficiency-based learning system, teachers use the best evidence of student learning to evaluate success, meaning that early challenges in learning do not punish a student once they have met a particular learning goal. One final component of proficiency-based learning is that students are assessed on academic skills (algebra, biology, etc), transferable skills (effective communication, problem-solving, collaboration, etc.), and non-academic skills (completing work on time, participation, etc.) separately, and are given feedback to improve their learning in each of these areas.

Why Proficiency-Based Learning?

Because our work, fundamentally, is about improving outcomes for students, we think of the benefits of proficiency-based learning in terms of the student experience at our high school and beyond. Though the benefits are numerous, we identify three crucial benefits that are central to our work:

- **Proficiency-based grading and reporting is consistent with what we know about effective learning.** Some grading systems present student learning only as a single grade that says little about a student's actual achievement. Research has indicated that feedback on learning is one of the greatest predictors of student learning (Hattie 2012). Proficiency-based systems, by having clear scoring criteria and reports that make learning transparent, provide opportunities for dialogue between teachers, students, and families about progress and enable students to do self-reflection on their learning.

- **It helps define a broader, school-wide understanding of success.** In many school systems, student learning is heavily driven by content knowledge and rote memorization of material. Additionally, student learning goals and grading practices can vary widely from teacher to teacher, which means that student learning is based largely on which teacher a student is assigned to. In a proficiency-based learning system, content, transferable, and non-academic skills are all assessed and given emphasis in the classroom, which is critical given that our workforce demands are shifting to non-routine, cognitive work that elevates soft skills like communication, creativity, and collaboration (Autor and Price 2013).
- **It promotes opportunities for student choice in learning.** Although Act 77 does not specifically address proficiency-based learning, proficiency-based learning is a vehicle through which schools are able to offer personalized learning experiences to students. By clearly defining *what* it is that we want students to learn, we can craft a variety of learning experiences that can help students meet them. Rather than all students needing to take traditional high school courses to earn required credits, students are able to enroll in project-based learning experiences, independent study, internships, and other pathways to achieve proficiency. Although we are only in the early phases of this work in Springfield, we are confident that proficiency-based graduation is an important vehicle in helping us provide flexible pathways for students to meet learning goals.

Classroom-level Implementation at Springfield High School

Although the Educational Quality Standards only mandate that schools use proficiency-based systems for tracking progress towards graduation, many schools, including Springfield High School, have decided to implement proficiency-based learning practices within classrooms. This has resulted in numerous changes to the classroom practices that teachers at Springfield High School use. Here are a few of the major changes that all of us at SHS have made to practice as a result of this shift:

- **Common standards and goals across courses:** Our teaching teams have spent substantial time over the last few years re-examining our curriculum and revising those learning goals. This has resulted in many cases in more narrowed and focused teaching; rather than try to “cover” a large amount of material, teachers are now focused on fewer and more important topics in their classrooms. Additionally, these standards are common across different teachers, resulting in student learning being consistent no matter whom the child’s teacher may be.
- **More opportunities for feedback, revision and practice:** Because students learn at different rates and at different times, teachers have focused on giving better feedback to students throughout the learning process and using teaching strategies that incorporate feedback. Additionally, teachers are committed to providing students opportunities to retry or revise assessments that aren’t yet proficient.
- **Holistic grading:** Rather than grade students using a 100 point scale, deducting points for mistakes or incorrect answers, teachers make a holistic assessment of student performance. This results in students being graded for what they do or don’t know and makes clear to students why they earned the score they did. Although we have probably sacrificed some precision by shifting to a 4-point scale, we feel that our grades are more accurate as a result. Additionally, we now separate academic performance from non-academic performance, which provides a more accurate measure of student learning.
- **More consistent assessment and grading practices:** An additional benefit of this work is the development of grading and assessment practices that are common across classes. We have worked to

develop some common grading policies and expectations that balance the line between consistency for students and autonomy for teachers to use professional judgement.

- **More thoughtful lesson planning:** By starting with our learning goals and developing assessments aligned to those learning goals, teachers are now developing lessons that ensure that students meet goals. This is consistent with best practices for planning; teachers who start with the end goals and then build instruction from there are more effective at moving students towards those goals.

Implementation Challenges

Although we feel strongly about that the shift has been and will continue to be beneficial for students, we also have faced some challenges. As we have observed these challenges, we are working diligently to overcome them.

- **Curriculum development time:** As we have tried to have increased teacher collaboration to support proficiency-based curriculum, it has taken more time than expected to ensure that our proficiencies and scoring criteria are as effective as possible. Despite the time, we feel the benefits of increased collaboration and consistency have been worth the effort.
- **New grading software:** Our old grading software was not as effective in promoting proficiency-based learning as we would have liked. Consequently, we have made the decision to shift software programs, which has been a learning curve for teachers. That said, the increased clarity that our new software program provides to teachers and students outweighs the time and frustration involved in learning new software. Additionally, we are now at a point where teachers have reached the apex of their learning curve and are more comfortable with the new software.
- **New teacher supports:** Although proficiency-based practices are new to some extent for all of us, proficiency-based learning has been part of the conversation at our school for a few years. Because we experience a moderate degree of staff turnover, we are in a situation where we need to induct new staff into these changing expectations. Our school is in the midst of a conversation about how to improve this process.

Overall, we feel that proficiency-based learning, despite some of the challenges and new learning, provides more opportunities for students to pursue differing pathways to proficiency and ensures that our graduates are prepared for the national and global economy. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

Enclosures

- Proficiency-based Learning at SHS: Frequently-asked Questions for Families
- Springfield High School Proficiency-based Learning Guidelines
- Public Description: What is Proficiency-based Learning

Sources

- Autor, David H. and Brendan Price (2013). *The changing task composition of the US labor market: An update*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Retrieved from: <http://economics.mit.edu/files/11600>
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. London: Routledge.

Enclosure 1: Proficiency-based Learning at SHS: Frequently-asked Questions for Families

Proficiency-Based Learning at SHS:

Frequently-Asked Questions for Families

Spring 2018



What is proficiency-based learning?

A proficiency-based system is one that holds all students to the same expectations, or learning targets. In order to earn credit for a course or to be eligible for graduation, students must demonstrate their understanding of certain skills and content rather than accumulate a particular number of credits or particular assignments. In this type of system, student grades are organized by target (writing, reading, collecting data) rather than by category (test, quiz, homework, attendance). Additionally, academic grades are separated from habits of work grades, including factors like participation, dependability, and respect, which are also reported.

Why is Springfield High School moving to a proficiency-based learning system?

Here are three major reasons:

- **It acknowledges students for what they can prove they know or know how to do.** In some grading systems, grades are averaged. This may result in a student earning a lower grade than they deserve because low grades early on have an impact on the final score. In a proficiency-based system, teachers use most recent or best evidence of student learning to arrive at grades. Additionally, student reports provide more clear information about areas of achievement and areas for growth.
- **It offers students more choice in their learning.** Because we know the specific skills that students need to learn as high school students, we can find different ways for students to meet these skills. Students can demonstrate their proficiency in different courses, in work-based learning experiences, or many other settings.
- **It ensures consistency for students.** Students enrolled in a course will be evaluated based on the same targets and rubrics regardless of the teacher. This promotes consistency and fairness for all students.

How can I know if my student is making progress in their classes?

In proficiency-based classes, Springfield High School is using the JumpRope grading platform. All parents and students have received login information so that they can access detailed information about progress towards course goals. Families can log on by accessing the parent and student portal at www.jumppro.pe. To provide more information about how to take advantage of this portal, we have produced a video tutorial of the parent and student portal accessible at goo.gl/Py4Ajb. Finally, we encourage you to reach out directly to your student's teachers to establish a communication system if you would like more consistent and detailed progress on your student's progress.

What is happening to report cards and transcripts?

- **Report cards:** This year, Springfield High School decided to eliminate the five week progress report because we felt that our JumpRope portal (www.jumprope.com) gave students and families up-to-date information about student progress. While we still send out report cards each quarter, students in proficiency-based classes have until the end of the semester to prove their knowledge and/or skill in each learning target, so grades and assignments from the first or third quarter are not set in stone.
- **Transcripts:** As we move to a school-wide proficiency-based system, we anticipate that our transcript will be changed to report more information about student learning, including their performance on specific learning outcomes. We still plan to report course grades that summarize achievement. We anticipate that the increase in information that is shared with colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions will provide our applicants with a competitive advantage in the admissions process.

How is my student graded in classes?

In proficiency-based classes, students are scored based on their performance on learning targets. In order to determine how a student is doing relative to a target, teachers use something called a proficiency scale that describes student performance from a Level 1 (beginning) to a Level 4 (expanding). Our goal is for all students to reach a Level 3 on each target, but we hope that some students will go above and beyond to achieve a Level 4. Here is an example of a learning target and proficiency scale from an Algebra I class:

| | | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Department: Math Course: Alg I Grade level: 9-12 | | | | |
| ELO/Performance Indicator: A.REI.B - solve equations and inequalities in one variable | | | | |
| Learning Target | 4. Expanding | 3. Proficient | 2. Developing | 1. Beginning |
| I can solve equations in one variable 3.3 | I can solve simple rational and radical equations. | I can solve equations in one variable | I can begin to solve equations in one variable. | I can state whether a quantity will be a solution to an equation. |

Students then receive an overall course grades based on an average of their learning targets. For now, we are converting these proficiency-based grades into letter grades using the following conversion:

| Letter Grade | Score | | Letter Grade | Score | | Letter Grade | Score |
|--------------|-------------|--|--------------|-------------|--|--------------|-----------|
| A | 3.75 - 4 | | B | 3.00 - 3.24 | | C | 2.25-2.49 |
| A- | 3.50 - 3.74 | | B- | 2.75 - 2.99 | | C- | 2-2.24 |
| B+ | 3.25 - 3.49 | | C+ | 2.50-2.74 | | No Credit | 0-1.99 |

What does my student need to do to graduate?

The Classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021 will graduate based on their achievement of credits specified in our Program of Studies. Students in the Class of 2022 and beyond will graduate based on their demonstration of

proficiency in the school's proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGR's), including both content and transferable skills.

Are you making any changes to GPA or academic honors?

At this point, we are still planning to report a single GPA, class rank, honor roll, and valedictorian & salutatorian. Each of these designations are compatible with a proficiency-based learning system.

Where can I go to get more information or to offer feedback?

At Springfield High School, we are always looking for feedback on our implementation of proficiency-based learning. Here are some people we would encourage you to contact with comments, questions, or concerns:

Michael Ruppel
Instructional Coach
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Bindy Hathorn
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Enclosure 2: Springfield High School Proficiency-based Learning Guidelines

Proficiency-based Learning

Common Classroom Grading & Assessment Practices



As Springfield High School shifts to a proficiency-based learning model, there is a need for a number of unifying guidelines regarding expectations for assessing and tracking learning.. While we as a community of educators respect the nuances and complexities of each classroom setting, it is important that general guidelines and expectations are common across the school. We have tried to strike a balance between teacher flexibility and school consistency in our assessment and grading models. Should questions arise about these expectations, or if you want to propose a change to these practices, please contact your I-Team leader, an instructional coach, or administration.

Learning targets

- It is critical that the PLC develop or approve a common set of learning targets for each course. These learning targets should be accompanied by a proficiency scale that defines four levels of student performance (beginning, developing, proficient, and expanding).
- All learning targets should be uploaded into JumpRope by the third day of classes. Learning targets should also be listed on the course syllabus. It is important that the teacher communicates the learning targets to the students as early as possible.
- Learning targets are most effective when used with students; teachers are encouraged to share learning targets with students during class each day.

Developing assessments

- Assessments are used to determine student proficiency on one or more learning targets.
- This [document](#) describes some possible methods you might use to assess student proficiency on a learning target.
- Where possible, faculty that teach a common course should use the same formative and summative assessments to measure student performance on proficiency scales.
- Where possible, students should have flexibility and choice in choosing a method of assessment for a particular learning target.
- Calibration of the proficiency scale and assessment is key; using student work to check alignment of assessment, proficiency scale, and learning target is a powerful PLC tool.

Scoring Assessments

- All assessments to be entered into JumpRope should be aligned to one or more learning targets and its associated proficiency scale.
- Formative assessments (if insufficient for evidence of proficiency) can and should be entered at a weight of 0 or 0.1. Using the weight is particularly important if a teacher is using a weighted average calculation method.
- If an assessment does not provide students with the opportunity to earn at least a 3, it can be entered into JumpRope, but with a weight of 0. The expected level of performance should be noted by using the rigor rating.
- It is common to assess students on multiple learning targets on a single assessment; in cases where multiple learning targets are assessed, a student's performance on each learning target should be assessed separately.
- Teachers should use a proficiency scale to assess student performance on an assessment; therefore, teachers should rarely use non-whole number scores.
- In general, teachers should report an assessment into JumpRope at least once every two weeks. If that is not feasible (perhaps due to a long-term project or students taking longer than expected to master a concept), teachers should communicate that to administration so that administration can more effectively communicate with families. Teachers should also communicate this information directly with families.

Feedback and Communication

- Timely feedback facilitates learning; feedback on assessments should be given to students in a timely manner.
- Feedback should be specific to the goals of the assessment and go beyond simply reporting a score.
- Feedback should guide students to their next steps in achieving proficiency on specific learning targets or give specific feedback about larger learning trends
- As often as possible, students should self-reflect and monitor their own progress toward proficiency and personal learning goals.
- Families should be given access to feedback on student learning, emphasizing more than just a grade. Some suggested methods of providing specific feedback to families include Google Classroom, Comments in PowerSchool attendance, or deliberately using the M or X codes in JumpRope.

Evaluating student proficiency on a learning target

- There are a number of calculation methods that you can use in JumpRope to evaluate student proficiency on a particular learning target. The recommended methods are weighted average, decaying average, or max value. This [document](#) includes more detail about when each method might be more appropriate.
- Calculation methods should be common to all faculty teaching the same course.
- Teachers have the authority to use "final rating" to override a student score on a learning target, but are under no obligation to do so. If final rating is used, it should only be used to increase a student's grade versus the other calculation method being used.

Course Final Grades

- A final grade for a course summarizes a student's body of achievement in a course at a point in time, and, at this point, we plan to continue to calculate and report final grades. As of Spring 2018, we are converting scores to traditional letter grades using this [conversion](#) scale.
- There are two options for computing a course final grade:
 - Calculate the course final grade based on the weights of the underlying assessments. This means that learning targets that have higher assessment weights pushing up to them are given more weight in the final grade.
 - Set weights for *each* learning target. This computes the final grade based on a weighted average of the learning targets. This [document](#) includes more information about setting final grades.

PRIDE Scores

- PRIDE scores should be entered into PowerSchool Gradebook for each student weekly for every day classes, and semi-weekly for every other day classes.
- Teachers are encouraged to keep a tracking system that monitors student non-academic performance throughout the week so that PRIDE scores are reliable and calibrated. Please see this [document](#) for examples of such tracking systems.

Remediation and Reassessment

- An important component of our understanding of proficiency is that students demonstrate proficiency at different rates. To that end, it is important that students have opportunities to reassess when they are not successful with a learning target.
- A teacher's reassessment policies should be included on the course syllabus.
- Before completing a reassessment, students should complete some sort of remediation or extra practice. The exact structure of the remediation/practice is determined by the teacher and the student.
- The reassessment does not need to take the same form as the original assessment.

Zones of Control

| Item | School | PLC | Teacher |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| PBGR's | The school board sets PBGR's in consultation with the school team. | The PLC identifies which proficiencies are addressed, and at what level, for each course. | |
| Learning Targets | All learning targets should be developed from Vermont-adopted standards and use "I can" language. Learning targets should be listed on the course syllabus. | The PLC identifies essential PI's to meet in a particular proficiency area. | Teachers identify learning targets for a given course (with the expectation that teachers teaching the same course use the same targets). |
| Assessments | The learning target and proficiency scale should be posted on the assessment to facilitate student self-assessment. | Where possible, formative and summative assessments should be collaboratively developed by the PLC. | The teacher writes formative and summative assessments (with the expectation that teachers teaching the same course use the same assessments). |
| Scoring Assessments | All assessments entered into JumpRope should be scored using a proficiency scale. If an assessment assesses multiple learning targets, each should be assessed and scored separately. | The PLC develops scoring criteria (proficiency scales) for learning targets. The PLC also should calibrate scoring, where able. | The teacher is primarily responsible for scoring assessments. In singleton courses especially, the teacher may develop proficiency scales. |
| Scoring Learning Targets | The following scoring types are suggested to determine student proficiency on a target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decaying average • Weighted average • Max value • Final rating | | Teachers determine appropriate calculation methods for each learning target (with the expectation that teachers teaching the same course use the same calculation methods). The teacher has sole discretion to use final rating to increase a grade. |
| Final Grades | The school determines | | The teacher has the |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | reporting periods and conversion scales (if used). | | authority to determine whether and how to weigh learning targets (with the expectation that teachers teaching the same course use the same weights). |
| PRIDE scores | All teachers will complete a PRIDE rating for each student over the course of approximately five classes. The scoring guidelines are consistent across the school. | | The teacher specifies specific actions that support PRIDE achievement in a particular setting. Teachers identify appropriate tracking methods for PRIDE assessments. |
| Remediation and Reassessment | All teachers allow students to reassess on learning targets that they have not scored well on. Teachers should communicate a reassessment policy on the course syllabus. | | Teachers set criteria for permitting a reassessment and the method of reassessment. |

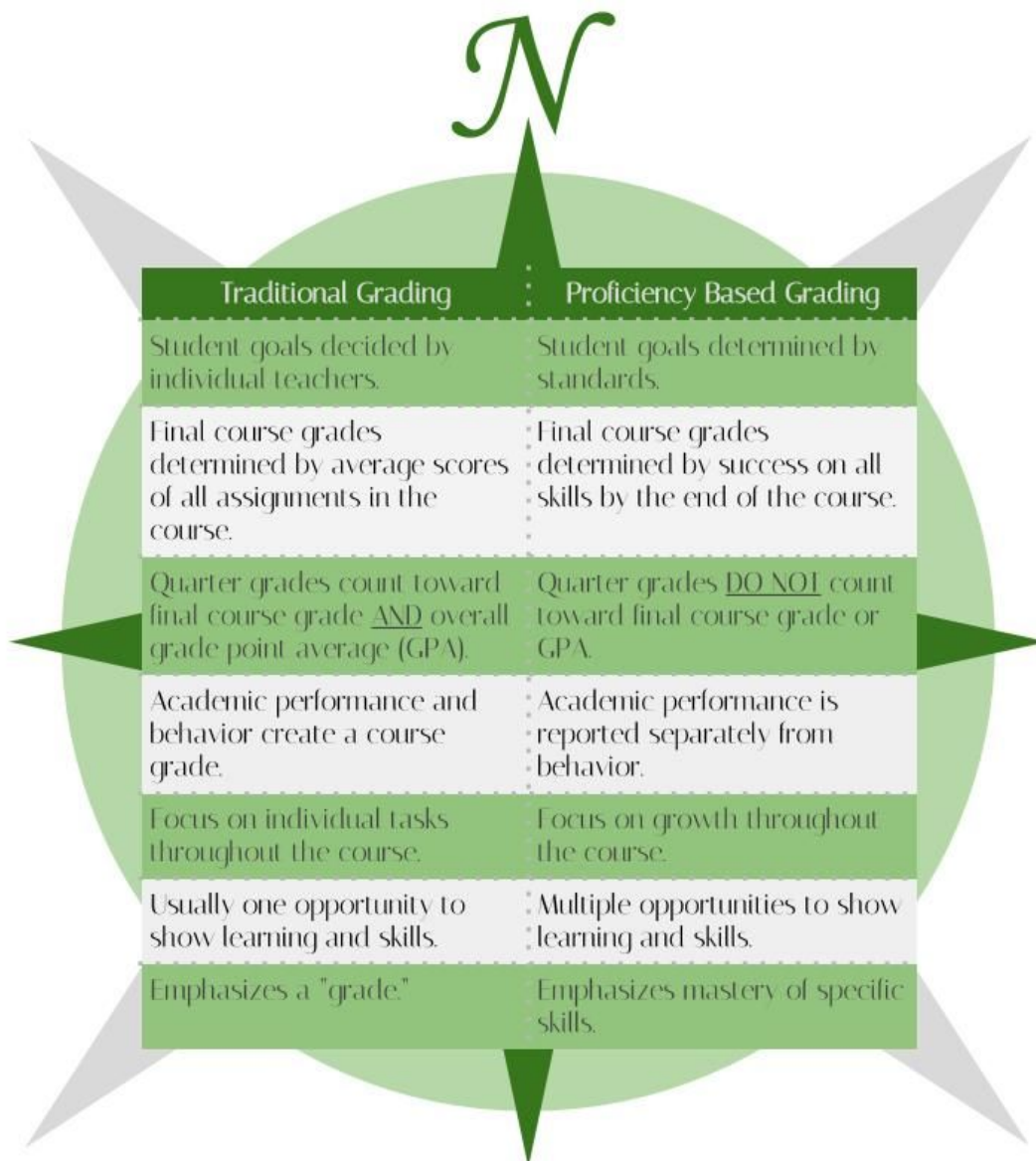
Revision History:

1/18/18

2/12/18

Enclosure 3: Public Description: What is Proficiency-based Learning

As the state of Vermont requires all schools to transition from traditional grading to Proficiency Based Grading, Springfield High School works to communicate the important and useful differences that will lead us to providing a clearer picture of our students.



| Traditional Grading | Proficiency Based Grading |
|--|---|
| Student goals decided by individual teachers. | Student goals determined by standards. |
| Final course grades determined by average scores of all assignments in the course. | Final course grades determined by success on all skills by the end of the course. |
| Quarter grades count toward final course grade <u>AND</u> overall grade point average (GPA). | Quarter grades <u>DO NOT</u> count toward final course grade or GPA. |
| Academic performance and behavior create a course grade. | Academic performance is reported separately from behavior. |
| Focus on individual tasks throughout the course. | Focus on growth throughout the course. |
| Usually one opportunity to show learning and skills. | Multiple opportunities to show learning and skills. |
| Emphasizes a "grade." | Emphasizes mastery of specific skills. |

