

## What is Proficiency Based Learning?

Proficiency-based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating that they have learned the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education. The general goal of proficiency-based learning is to ensure that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are deemed to be essential to success in school, higher education, careers, and adult life. If students fail to meet expected learning standards, they typically receive additional instruction, practice time, and academic support to help them achieve proficiency or meet the expected standards.

Debates about proficiency-based learning tend to be focused on the methods used by schools, rather than the overall objective of the strategy (i.e., all students meeting high standards and achieving proficiency—a goal few would dispute). These overall objectives can be obtained without Vermont radically changing our education system.

### Background Information on Act 77 and EQS Regulation

**Act 77, the 2013 Flexible Pathways Law**, did NOT require the state to move to this radical experiment. That law requires that students be allowed to graduate in new non-traditional ways, including graduation based on proficiencies. Examples include dual enrollment, early college enrollment, work based learning (internships) virtual/blended learning, increased access to career and technical education and personalized learning through personalized learning plans (PLPs). The goal was to increase the number of students graduating from high school and hopefully pursuing post-secondary degree education. The law allowed for students to graduate showing that they were proficient in a number of different ways beyond typical credit hours and hours sitting in a classroom.

**The Education Quality Standards (EQS)** regulations were approved by the Board of Education (BOE) and were effective in April 2014. This radical change in how Vermont educates its children was done without legislative debate and approval—rather a board of appointed officials created it. Act 77 created an exception in the law that allows for high school students to graduate by proficiencies as an alternative to the historic credit hours based graduation. It was this EQS rulemaking, in a few vaguely worded paragraphs, that now requires graduation only by proficiencies. *A law allowing for graduation by proficiencies is very different from a regulation mandating that all Vermont students must graduate and be graded ONLY by proficiencies by 2020.*

### Vermont's Proficiency Based Learning and Grading Mandate Conflicts with the Scott Administration's Policy Goals

1. **Reduce K-12 Education Spending:** *“Having fiscal discipline means facing facts. We know our school population is shrinking. We’ve lost nearly 30,000 students in the last 20 years. Yet staffing levels and costs continue to rise, and property taxes continue to overburden families and businesses.”* From Gov. Phil Scott’s State of the State Address on January 4, 2018.
2. **Grow our economy and tax base by having families, individuals and businesses relocate to Vermont:** *“We can come together, and focus our efforts on growing our working-age population. If we do this, we can expand our tax base. My*

*administration is developing a workforce expansion plan that looks at how we educate and place our students... and how we recruit more families...to live and work here...But we also must do more to reach workers – specifically younger workers and entrepreneurs – who currently live elsewhere, but would like to live and raise their family in the safest and healthiest state in the country.”* From Gov. Phil Scott’s State of the State Address on January 4, 2018.

**3. Vermont’s Proficiency Based Learning & Grading (PBL & PBG) 2020 Board of Education (BOE) regulatory mandate is a risk to both of these policy objectives:**

- a. *It takes more than safety and health to bring families to Vermont—we must have great and stable K-12 schools with proven success. Few families, entrepreneurs and businesses will willingly relocate to a state that is in the midst of a radical K-12 education experiment. Vermont’s use of experimental and unproven teaching, grading and high school transcript systems are not likely to be viewed positively by those considering relocation. Savvy shoppers will have other state choices available to them without having to take on the risks related to Vermont’s PBL & PBG implementation.*
- b. *Education cost reduction, Act 77 & Act 46 implementation and totally reinventing our education system at the same time are incompatible. You cannot reduce the cost of education when you are reinventing, in a radical manner, how every student is taught and graded in the state of Vermont. When schools transition to a proficiency-based system, it entails significant changes in how a school operates and how it teaches students, affecting everything from the school’s educational philosophy and culture to its methods of instruction, testing, grading, honors, reporting, promotion, and graduation. Act 77 (PLPs), PBG & PBL require a material increase in the customization of student education. Businesses are unable to increase client customization and reduce costs—why should we expect this to be done successfully in education?*
- c. *The Vermont-NEA will likely argue that these state mandated regulatory changes require already overburdened teachers to spend large amounts of time—and possibly uncompensated time—on extra planning, preparation, and training, and that proficiency-based learning is very expensive to implement. Cutting funding will harm the successful implementation of this important education transformation. They will argue that no cost savings are currently available given these dramatic policy mandates and EQS, Act 77 and Act 46 implementation.*
- d. *Is the ongoing implementation of PBL & PBG beginning in the 2015 academic year hurting our standardized testing results? Interestingly, three of the fifteen SBAC testing states ([Vermont](#), [New Hampshire](#) & [Oregon](#)) had overall score reductions in both math and English over the past two tests. This is not happening in most SBAC states. What do these three states share in common? They are all "advanced" proficiency based learning states according to a map displayed on the AOE’s website (see:*

<http://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/proficiency-based-learning>). No other SBAC testing state has this PBL designation. See [September AOE Press Release on SBAC Results](#): “We can’t know for sure why scores declined, but several factors could contribute,” Fowler said. “It could be in the last year people were focused on issues other than assessment. It could be as people are moving to implement the Education Quality Standards and other initiatives, attention has been diverted from improving learning...” Also see VTDigger article on this issue: <https://vtdigger.org/investigations/making-grade-part-2/>.

### Which States Are Implementing Proficiency Based Learning?

According to the [National Conference of State Legislators](#) (NCSL) most states are experimenting with PBL on a **voluntary basis**—very few are mandating these dramatic educational changes. States are doing this through the creation of voluntary programming such as grants, pilot programming and expense reimbursements for school districts interested in experimenting with proficiency based learning. These states include: **Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, South Carolina, and Utah**. The map of “advanced” proficiency states referred to in number 3.d above, identifies four states that are not referenced in the NCSL research: **Idaho** (has a 20 school district pilot program), **Colorado** (running a pilot program); **Arizona** (allows schools to voluntarily move to a PBL & PBG system, but does not mandate it); and **Ohio** (allows students to voluntarily chose to graduate based on proficiency—basically the same requirement at Vermont’s Act 77).

Two states, **Oregon** and **Rhode Island** have modified graduation requirements to require some proficiency while also retaining the credit hour/course structure with typical grades and GPAs. For example, to earn a diploma in **Oregon**, students need to successfully complete the credit requirements for classes, demonstrate proficiency in the Essential Skills, and meet the personalized learning requirements. **Rhode Island** was initially interested in PBL & PBG but backed away from a radical adoption of this strategy in July 2017 when it approved new rules for class of 2021. **Rhode Island** requires students to take 20 high school courses in order to graduate and courses in six content areas (English language arts, math, science, social studies, the arts, and technology) must include demonstration of proficiency and students must complete at least one performance/proficiency based diploma assessment.

Three states, **Maine, Vermont** and **New Hampshire** have mandated proficiency-based learning for all K-12 students. Much of the PBL & PBG radical experimentation is being done in New England primarily as a result of advocacy, funding and support from the Nellie Mae Foundation and other non-profits it supports (Nellie Mae only funds educational projects in New England). PBG & PBL was rejected by **Massachusetts** the largest state with the best education in New England and probably in the nation. **Maine’s** implementation (particularly PBG) is likely to be delayed due to concerns that proficiency based learning [may violate the Federal law—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#).

The three states implementing PBL & PBG in all school districts on a mandate basis with changes to traditional grading and credit hours are quite small in population. All are in New England. [Estimated enrollment data for the fall of 2017 for Grades 9-12](#):

- **Total Number of 9-12 Students Enrolled in Public Schools: 15,148,100**
- **Vermont: 24,900** (0.16% of nation's HS students) *policy approved in 2014, effective class of 2020;*
- **Maine: 54,300** (0.35% of nation's HS students) *policy approved in 2012, effective class of 2021*
- **New Hampshire: 56,900** (0.38% of nation's HS students) *policy approved in 2005, effective class of 2016*
- **Total VT+ ME + NH: 136,100** (0.9% or 9/10ths of 1% of the nation's high school students)

### **What Data Led Vermont's Education Leaders to Conclude That This Dramatic Change Was Required?**

Relative to the rest of the nation [Vermont does not have a high school graduation problem](#). At the time Act 77 and EQS were being approved, Vermont was in the top 10 states in high school graduation rates.

Vermont's [National Assessment on Educational Progress \(NEAP\)](#) results are quite impressive. NEAP is the only nationally representative assessment of what students know and can do at the state level (other than SAT and ACT scores). Nationally, in 2015 Vermont was in the top 5 states for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading results and top ten states for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math. Vermont's NEAP ranking in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math was about top-third in the nation. *The vast majority of states envy Vermont's educational testing results.*

*The question that remains unanswered: What was so broken in Vermont's education system that it needed to be one of the first states in the nation to radically redesign how it educates and grades its students? Why are we forcing all Vermont students to participate in this unproven education experiment for what are likely to be marginal benefits, at best? Why would we make this change when **no state** has proven that PBL & PBG is clearly successful when implemented on a statewide basis and is applicable to all K-12 grades?*

### **How is Proficiency Based Learning Being Implement in Vermont?**

In practice, the implementation of proficiency-based learning in Vermont is taking a wide variety of forms from school to school—there is no single model or universally used approach. Vermont schools are each creating their own proficiency-based systems. Report cards and high school transcripts need to be entirely redesigned, and Vermont schools are using many different grading scales and systems. Vermont schools are using 1-5 whole number systems; 1-4 number system with no, few or many additional gradations; A, B, C, Incomplete grading system; 1-11 grading system, no numerical grades or GPA only words, etc. Typical A-F and 0-100 grading scales are being replaced with brief descriptive statements (and some with numbers as well)—e.g., phrases such as does not meet, partially meets, meets the standard, and exceeds the standard. Each school district is also creating its own unique list of proficiencies that student must demonstrate competency in prior to graduation. Thus there may be as many as 60+ different grading, proficiency definitions and high school transcript systems in the tiny (by population) state of Vermont. In addition many schools are adopting grading arcs that make in nearly impossible for a student to be considered highly proficient during most of the academic year. This has even happened to a bilingual student born in Spain who speak Spanish at home every day and was taking a Spanish course in high school. The educator told him no one can be highly proficient until the last grading period of the course.

Many Vermonter parents only became aware of this change this fall when their children took home report cards they did not understand. Many parents are also questioning whether there is sufficient evidence that proficiency-based learning will actually work as intended.

### **How Does PBL & PBG Impact College Admissions?**

Many Vermont parents are expressing concerns that the abandonment of traditional letter grades, report cards, transcripts, and other familiar academic-reporting strategies will disadvantage students who are applying to colleges and universities (because the reporting strategies will be unfamiliar to college-admissions professionals, or because proficiency-based systems may eliminate many of the competitive dimensions of academic achievement, such as GPAs, class rank and honors that tend to favor high-achieving students). New grading systems may have negative impacts on students' ability to obtain GPA based scholarships at some school districts. The new system is supposed to lessen the focus on high stakes exams like SBAC. Yet, when applying to college, particularly out of state, given the unique nature of Vermont's new grading system and transcripts, college admissions offices are likely to put even greater weight on the toughest of the high stakes test--the SAT and ACT. This outcome is ironic and sad. The reality is that college admissions officers must be able to review college transcripts in less than five minutes.

A [May 2017 Inside Higher Education article](#) confirms these concerns with PBL & PBG, its reporter noted that: "Several admissions experts, reached late Tuesday, said they were just learning about the concept and needed to study it." The following is a quote from [Michael Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers](#):

"My initial read is that this would be a good set of information to augment a traditional transcript but, by itself, could harm students seeking to attend institutions that are mandated to evaluate admissions, at least in part, on completion of a core set of courses and the performance (grades) in those courses," he said. "It is not unlike the challenge of higher education institutions looking to develop outcome or competency transcripts. Until these are common currency, students would be negatively impacted when they seek to transfer to more traditional institutions if that is the only document they present. Promising, but I'd like to hear how it would be transitioned into the existing processes."

Vermont is the second smallest state in the union, in terms of population. We graduate less than 8,000 students from high school each year. Of those, about 60% go to college (4,800). Of those about 50% go to college in Vermont (2,400). It is reasonable to expect that Vermont colleges will take the time to understand the new grading and transcript system in their admission offices because they have large numbers of Vermont students and actually live in the community and have friends and family with children here. It is easy for them to come up the learning curve.

However for the 2,400 students going to college out of state--there will be issues. Admissions offices may not spend the time trying to comprehend Vermont's uniqueness. In the fall of 2016, [20.5 million students](#) were expected to attend US colleges. The 2,400 new students going to college out of state are 0.012% of the students going to colleges in the US in 2016 (1/100th of one percent).

In 2013-14 there were [4,724 post-secondary institutions](#) in the US but only [22 of these \(1/2 of one percent of all colleges\)](#) are in Vermont. That means that 99.5 percent of all post-secondary degree institution in the US are outside of our state. So 2,400 students each year that leave the

state are going to one of these 4,700 institutions. There are more degree granting institutions outside our state than there are students.

Most websites on proficiency based graduation link to the same list of [71 post-secondary institutions](#) that have proactively signed a statement saying they will not disadvantage applicants the have proficiency based transcripts--all are in New England. Most on the list ARE NOT private competitive colleges--most are state institutions. 71 out of 4,700+ post-secondary degree granting institutions is far from a guarantee that this will work. That is 1.6% of post-secondary degree granting institutions in the country and none are outside of New England. Please note that not one private Vermont College is currently listed under Vermont--all Vermont colleges on this list report into the AOE or are funded by the Vermont legislature.

### **EQS Regulatory Language Requiring These Radical Education Changes (Series 2000 – Education Quality Standards)**

This radical education change was done with the following few regulatory words:

#### *2114 Definitions*

*10. "Proficiency-based learning" and "proficiency-based graduation" refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.*

#### *2120.7. Graduation Requirements.*

*A student meets the requirements for graduation when the student demonstrates evidence of proficiency in the curriculum outlined in 2120.5, and completion of any other requirements specified by the local board of the school attended by the student.*

*This requirement is effective no later than September 2014 for students entering seventh grade and through their secondary school progression, for the anticipated graduation date of June 2020, and with each subsequent incoming seventh grade class.*

#### *2120.8. Local Graduation Requirements.*

*Each secondary school board is responsible for setting graduation requirements in accordance with these rules.*

*Local graduation policy must define proficiency-based graduation requirements based on standards adopted by the State Board of Education. As required in 16 V.S.A. §261a(a)(1), it is the responsibility of the supervisory union board to ensure alignment in expectations for all students within a supervisory union.*

*Schools may or may not use credits for the purposes of demonstrating that a student has met the graduation requirements. When used, credits must specify the proficiencies demonstrated in order to attain a credit and shall not be based on time spent in learning. Further, students may receive credit for learning that takes place outside of the school, the school day, or the classroom. Any credits earned must occur under the supervision of an appropriately licensed educator.*