

Members of the education committee, thank you for inviting me and my fellow educators here today. I am Tom Payeur, the 2019 Vermont State Teacher of the Year and a math teacher at Winooski Middle/High School.

I am motivated to live, grow, and teach here in Vermont because I firmly believe that educating with proficiency based graduation requirements is critical in preparing future generations for the challenges of global climate change and emergent technologies. This motivation is deep and powerful, a force that wells up from inside and keeps me moving forward when things get uncomfortable, like when a new lesson falls apart mid-class; when conversations about grading and curriculum become muddled and confusing; or when I hear, over and over again, “I’m not good in math”, “I’m never going to use this in my life”, and “They don’t even know their multiplication tables”.

You see, when I encounter these challenges, I take it personally. As a teacher, and especially as Vermont’s Teacher of the Year, I am both praised and condemned. Praised for accepting and responding to children whose families struggle with securing fundamental needs like nutrition and heat at home. Condemned for attempting to respond to those needs with innovative practices and addressing systemic bias head-on. And because I take these challenges personally, I often find myself facing crippling self-doubt and anxiety. If not for my motivation to make sure that all children have a chance to honestly understand and lead in the world they will inherit from us, I would have burned out years ago.

My students are no different. In fact, their experience is ten fold that of mine. Me, I’m a thirty-one year old, fairly established with my spouse, a house on an acre and a half of land in Starksboro, and years of higher education. My students struggle with agency over their lives each and every day. Perhaps they’re not sure if they will be living in the same apartment next week. They may be grappling with a family member falling prey to the opioid epidemic. They may be shocked and confused by the sudden change of a system that once honored “grades” but now honors “proficiencies”. Where is, and what is, the motivation that moves them forward?

This question is on my mind and in my heart each and every day I teach at Winooski in my proficiency-based classroom. PBGR’s, implemented with fidelity, have given communities the chance to break past the barriers of imposed credits and seat time to explore the deeper, and more powerful driver of personal motivation. A student and their family, in a truly proficiency-based setting, can no longer see a 4.0 and perfect attendance as the key to success. Now, success becomes personal to each individual, and is found in the exploration of one’s passions and interests. This is a big change from the external to the internal, and no doubt difficult. This is great practice for the large disruptions our children will encounter in the future world.

Motivation is close to impossible to measure. It comes through most powerfully in our moments of uncertainty and failure, moments that a “traditional education system denies our students’ the right to. It is uncovered in trends and patterns that emerge through years of curious exploration. It exists inside and outside a school building’s walls, and illuminates the paths our students walk

in their communities all seven days of the week. Our students deserve to be recognized for who they are, where they come from, and where they would like to go.

As such, I ask you to consider this fundamental question when discussing not only PBGRs, but all equity-producing legislation that you will take up in the future: Will this help all students develop and uncover their own personal motivation? You can do this by ensuring that learning environments are safe from the threat of gun violence; by instituting education funding structures that are clear to understand and fair to all Vermonters; and by supporting collaboration, rather than competition, between school districts in their quest to discover what PBGR's mean to their community. Safety, common sense, and communication will create environments where all of us can honestly and earnestly get to the work of empowering every single student.

Thanks you for your time and consideration.