

Good afternoon. I'm Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran teacher of English from South Hero, and current president of Vermont-NEA. Last June, I completed my 16th year of teaching at BFA-St. Albans. In addition to teaching and working at various levels within the NEA, I served on the Vermont Task Force for Teacher and Leader Effectiveness, which wrote the guidelines for teacher and leader evaluation, and also served on the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators for four years, serving as chair for two years before leaving to take on my current role last July.

I appreciate being invited to speak with you today about Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements and to offer the perspective of a practitioner who has lived through the implementation of this new approach to learning, instruction, curriculum design and assessment. I have a few reflections to offer about the experience of a classroom teacher but would like to allot most of my time to answering any questions you might have.

To start, I would like to recall that the genesis of this new approach came from the Pre-K-16 Council a few years ago; it was not generated by classroom teachers nor was it based on student performance data from the field. It was based on theory and theoretical research from a variety of sources. One of my former superintendents, Robert Rosane, was one of the people involved with the council at the time and one of the proponents of a proficiency-based system.

While it is beyond the scope of my testimony today to review the entire history of this system to figure out how we got to where we are today, but when we refer to **Vermont State Board of Education Rule 2120.8 Local Graduation Requirements**, we can see that there is a very basic requirement that graduation credits “must specify the proficiencies demonstrated in order to attain a credit and shall not be based on time spent in learning.” I am, personally, unclear about how we went from

that simple rule to making the wholesale changes we have made in some of our schools, including entirely new grading policies and systems.

Our members are experiencing a very broad spectrum of new programs and policies with the new proficiency-based system. It's a cliché to say that the devil is in the details, so I will say that the snafus are in the implementation. Anyone would be hard-pressed to find any two school districts that have implemented this new approach in the same way. The anecdotal evidence we have gathered reflects the variety of approaches each school district has taken.

As I have been asked about our members' experiences with PBGRs, I realized that we do not have adequate data or evidence to reach a conclusion about the effectiveness of this new approach. At our next board of directors meeting this coming Saturday, I will be asking the board to authorize some type of survey of our more than 13,000 members to ascertain where they stand on this issue and dive more deeply into their experiences. If you have specific questions that you would like answered, I am more than happy to include those on the survey and report back to you at a later date. I would rather not reach any general conclusions without gathering more evidence.

One area of serious concern I have heard from members is the change in the grading system and the subsequent confusion. For example, in my school district, the curriculum coordinator announced that the State of Vermont had mandated that we change our grading system from the traditional A-B-C-D system to a four-point, proficiency system. I do not know the source of his confusion, but neither the AOE nor the State Board of Education ever issued this mandate. Somewhere along the way, however, many districts followed the same pattern and began changing the grading system, the report cards and transcripts. This has been a source of great confusion and consternation on the part of our members. One of my colleagues, a math teacher, has calculated that she spends

four times as much time calculating her grades than she did in previous years.

This also creates an awkward situation for teachers who are teaching dual enrollment classes, since they have to follow the requirements of the Community College of Vermont which are not consistent with their high school requirements.

I also wonder how much money school districts have spent on software systems that have been designed to manage the new grading practices. This might be an area that your committee would like to investigate further, because the thousands of dollars being spent on software is money not spend on books, materials or services for students. Maybe school districts should be required to report the per pupil cost for these new software programs.

I believe we have work to do in assessing this new approach. How will we know that the PBGR approach is effective in improving student learning? How will we know that this proficiency-based approach is effective in dealing with the issues of equity? Will this lead to our students being more successful in college and in the workplace? I have yet to see any statewide or districtwide assessment plan of this nature.

In closing, I want to express my concern about the very high stakes decisions that will be made next year regarding whether or not students will graduate from high school. How will we know that every school has policies and programs in place that will allow these decisions to be made with fidelity? If there is doubt about the efficacy of this new approach, I ask that you consider extending the deadline to the Class of 2022, or to consider other options.

Thank you.

