

## Proficiency Based Grading

### Testimony of Dan Cunningham to the Vermont Senate Committee on Education, 2/13/19

Thank you for having me.

I am an alum of Mount Anthony in Bennington, and my four children attend Burlington public schools. I believe deeply in excellent public education. In Burlington, a switch to 100% proficiency based grading (PBG) is not affecting us directly today. We had at least one administrator who wisely held back. Other children in Vermont are not so fortunate.

Our excellent public education has been threatened by an earthquake-sized change: the removal of a traditional report card and traditional course grades. We view the traditional report card as a clear feedback mechanism. Teachers know how to write it. Students know how to read it. Parents know how to understand it (sometimes to their children's chagrin). And colleges and scholarships know how to evaluate it.

It is, after all, a report card. Without the clear reporting, it's just a card.

The burning question so many parents have asked me is "How did we get here? We didn't see this as a problem. Our measurement system wasn't flawed. How does a switch to a confusing report card make anyone more proficient?" Many people in Vermont helped me understand how this happened.

Act 77 is a good law. It opens the gates to needed flexibility in the system. But Act 77 focuses on "alternate pathways." The intent was not to change the primary system of education or grading. It does not use the term "grading" at all, and the word "proficiency" is only mentioned once, and not in a way relevant to us today. The Agency of Education took this law and passed a regulation that, in 270 vague words, opened the door to proficiency-based learning. I say "opened the door" because this regulation did not mandate proficiency-based grading, and in fact leaves decisions to local control. This regulation was approved by the citizen Board of Education. I doubt they intended what followed.

Local school staffed lacked a clear understanding of what this meant, so principals and superintendents went back to the Agency to ask for help. Out of state non-profits, particularly the Nellie Mae Foundation and to a lesser degree the Gates Foundation, saw their chance. This was their golden opportunity to run their unproven experiments in a small petri dish, and they funneled money into Vermont, largely through the Great Schools Partnership of Maine, to hijack Act 77. Using professional development budgets and paid consultants, they extended the focus from proficiency-based learning to the radical proficiency-based grading. Operating beyond the scope of elected policy makers and the public, they redefined what a Vermont diploma means. And they were effective: last week, the Vermont Principal's Association submitted a poll to the House Education Committee: 57% of our high schools have done away with letter grades.

You can see the snowball rolling.

It picked up speed as bureaucrats told local schools, or implied strongly, they needed to implement PBG. In some cases, a local advocate abetted the process. No one bothered to survey teachers, ask parents, or query students. In fact, there was not a single controlled test of clarity or effectiveness of the new report card versus the control. Administrators pushing the implementation have no idea if this more complex system adds value against the control.

The snowball rolled off the roof, to where we are today. As it spirals toward the harsh reality of the ground below, we have a short period of time to reverse the damage these administrators and out of state non-profits have done.

Why is this damaging?

In their own research brief on proficiency-based grading, the Agency mentions no fewer than three times that the goal of a report card is clarity. This is beyond laughable. Clear was A – F, 0 – 100 grading that we all understood as a common language. The report cards they have designed, with complex systems of statistics and difficult codes and metrics that vary from town to town and school to school, are not understandable by parents and students. Amazingly, for much of a course, students and parents may not even know where they stand! Proficiency based grading uses vague terms, the grades aren't differentiated, they're not standardized, and they introduce foreign concepts such as "arc grading." They are a consultant's dream and a user's nightmare. One parent likened it to playing a soccer game with no goals.

This system will emphasize standardized testing even more as post-secondary schools look for some quantitative differentiation. Not only does this favor test-takers, the rigidity of the classifications is inequitable to children with disabilities. How does someone who has speech difficulties achieve proficiency in "clear and effective communication," to use an actual metric from Harwood Union High School? The scale is not supposed to change by student. To use Harwood again: what does it mean to get an "AD" on "Analyzing Influence" in Health? What does that even mean!

I've watched how traditional grades motivate a large, diverse percentage of the student body at Burlington High School and middle schools. With them, students know quickly where they stand and where they need to improve. Given how obvious this is and how not-broken it was, I have difficulty believing we are here.

The rollout has been unpopular. In one of the few surveys done in the state, more than a third of Stowe students hate it, and half said it is demotivating. In Maine, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader said, almost word for word, what I overheard a group of Burlington high schoolers saying: "I just feel like I'm not getting challenged enough because I know if I don't pass it, I can just do it again and do it again." Over 70% of teachers in Maine, when finally polled last June, said their districts should not continue with proficiency-based diplomas at all. In Lewiston Maine, more than half the students are failing one class because they don't have a 76 in one standard. This situation hit home for me, when my 6<sup>th</sup> grader brought home a report card from shop which displayed an A+ as her academic grade, but the average of her proficiencies was a B-.

When parents have shown up to meetings, en masse, to complain, they are told by local administrators something untrue: that PBG is mandated by the Education Quality Standard. Teachers have told me their administrators are instructing them not to speak out – they are fearful to do so.

Last week, an over-arching theme of the Vermont Principals Association survey submitted to the House Committee on Education was that there was no parent buy-in. I would describe that as a polite way of summarizing what I am hearing from almost every parent with whom I speak. Just calling into schools to meet with principals, a receptionist whose child attends a PBG school told me, paraphrased: “I hate this system. No one understands how our kids are doing. Please do something about it.”

I don’t want to go into the financial cost of all of this, but it’s enormous.

The rest of the world, all 99.988% of America’s college seniors who are not Vermonters going to in-state Vermont colleges, use traditional grades. Universities and colleges need a numerical transcript with clear, differentiated grading and GPAs. This is a basic requirement given the large number of applications they evaluate. Scholarships require the same, and by taking this from our students, we put them at a disadvantage on both fronts.

I am disturbed by the inaccuracy of information the Agency has promoted here. Of course some colleges will say publicly “Apply, please apply. You are not affected.” There are application fees, colleges want to publish an impressive selectivity rate, and each student, in the case of private colleges, is worth over a quarter million dollars. As Warren Buffett says, “Don’t ask the barber if you need a haircut.” But research shows that high schools should abide by the GPA standard in the application process.

The Agency’s communication is misleading on this front. They repeatedly reference a list of colleges that claim PBG is not an issue. On that list, fully 50% of the schools do not even have selective admissions! And the list they publish is less than 2% of all post-secondary institutions!

Mount Anthony’s principal queried the top 100 colleges in the country. He said in the media, “The one thing we heard over and over again from colleges was that they need the GPA.” A critical point: when admissions officers speak privately, they often deliver a different message. An MIT admissions officer told an associate, quoted in Seacoast Online, that there “are so many applications that you get 16 seconds for the first pass. PBL transcripts go to pile B.” Whether public or private in communication, transcript clarity is a requirement.

As a state, our administrators and their non-profit sponsors decided to switch the language to say, Mongolian, when everyone else speaks Spanish. In Burlington we are preserving the common language of traditional grading and extending the vocabulary of the report card with some proficiency-based metrics. These will be printed in a clear, color-coded way. And they will be available separately on the transcript. In short, we’re adding a little frosting.

But we got lucky. Our administrator tasked with the project thought through the process. Importantly, she was a teacher, and she approached it from the perspective of a teacher.

I ask this committee to add several sentences to Act 77 to solve this problem. Given the history here, it is important that this be done in the law, and not only by the Agency as a regulation.

Mandate schools must use traditional grading at a minimum. This grading:

1. Must be the primary means of measuring and reporting progress in Vermont middle and high schools.
2. Must use a differentiated scale of a minimum of 100 numerical increments, preferably 0 - 100 integers.
3. Must be used throughout the course of every academic class, as well as presented as a single final grade; it cannot be translated to a 0-100 numerical minimum increment result at the end of a course. Translation systems are not allowed.
4. Must be visible to students and parents throughout a class.
5. Must be presentable to a post-secondary institution, scholarship, or other requester on a transcript in a way that matches national standards.
6. Transcripts must include a numerical GPA that meets national standards.
7. The 0 – 100 numerical minimum increment system may be summarized on a quarterly report card in classic A+ through F denominations, though it must exist on the transcript for the class as 0 – 100 numerical minimum increments.
8. Locally, the decision may be made to add other, supplemental grading metrics. There must be clear and plentiful evidence that students, teachers, parents/guardians, and post-secondary programs understand any supplemental grading metrics before they are implemented.

If schools want to add other metrics, or dual grading, this would not impinge them. This would enforce compatibility and protect our children but allow for extensions and flexibility. If a school violated this, a parent would have recourse in the law. And this is important, because as a working, time-restricted parent, teacher, or even student, you stand no chance against an Agency or a wealthy non-profit. You need the law.

Thank you.

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