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**TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO:** Senate Education Committee

**FROM:** Jess DeCarolis, Student Pathways Division Director, Agency of Education  
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**TOPIC:** Proficiency-Based Grading and Transcripts  
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### **Parental Concerns regarding Proficiency-Based Grading and Transcripts**

Parents are concerned that a system of grading that is narrative and not based on the traditional A, B, C, D, F system puts their children at a disadvantage with applications to colleges and scholarships when compared to children within a traditional grading system.

### **Response**

Act 77 was passed in 2013 and described the state's commitment to:

1. Providing access to flexible pathways to secondary school completion for publicly-funded students beginning in grade 7, and
2. A personalized approach to learn embodied in the proviso that all publicly-funded students beginning in grade 7 would have personalized learning plans.

In 2014, Education Quality Standards were adopted. Section 2120.8. Local Graduation Requirements states:

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.

The focus of proficiency-based learning (PBL) is on students' demonstration of desired learning outcomes. Students not only gain the skills, abilities, and knowledge required in an area of study, but more importantly, those necessary to be successful in college, career, and civic life. PBL is designed to identify the skills and dispositions students need in order to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the equitable learning opportunities that ensure they meet these expectations. This is in contrast to traditional systems which advance students based on seat time.

As educators move forward with the implementation of personalized, proficiency-based systems, new grading systems that communicate where a student is along a continuum of learning are being designed. These decisions regarding grading are made at the local level considering research, community need, and transition timelines. The goal is to create grading systems that accurately convey what students have learned in relation to learning expectations.

Grading is a local decision. Important questions regarding grading should be discussed at all levels. For instance, why do we grade students?

- Is the intent of grading to rank and sort students?
- Is the intent to communicate where a student is along a continuum of learning?

Agreement on the purpose can then drive decisions regarding what information is shared with students and their families as well as how this information is shared. Educators, students, and parents/guardians need to be involved in clarifying the purpose of grading and report cards so that a collective understanding can be developed.

### **Research and Application**

1. According to the [New England Secondary School Consortium](#) as well as other organizations, a well-developed proficiency-based transcript can:
  - a) be an asset to college admission staff;
  - b) provide an opportunity to present what the student has learned and accomplished in a clear and meaningful way;
  - c) represent a student's academic performance, the level of rigor of the course of study, communication skills as indicated by essays and interviews, and extracurricular activities.
  - d) *capture students' mastery of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills; and*
  - e) allow admissions officers to make appropriate judgements.

Additionally, a school profile should provide the necessary context to interpret and understand the academic accomplishments of individual students. The New England Secondary Schools Consortium research demonstrates that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in the college admissions process. Visit their site for a list of colleges and universities who have signed the pledge.

2. Rebecca Holcombe in an opinion piece, [Proficiency-Based Learning Beneficial for Students](#), states:
  - a) Proficiency-based approaches ensure that students who want to improve have the specific feedback they need to actually do better.
  - b) Proficiency-based approaches don't need to – and should not – constrain students to whom mastery comes quickly, any more than traditional systems should require students to take a course that presents content they have already mastered.
  - c) Across the state, students have taken advantage of extension and enrichment opportunities to pursue independent and student-driven application of learning, often by taking their work into their communities.
3. Emily Rinkema & Stan Williams, teachers at Champlain Valley Union High School write in their book ([The Standards-Based Classroom: Make Learning the Goal](#)):

*What we used to do with grading is wrong. But at the same time, we didn't know that; now we do. So, if we keep doing what we know is wrong, we are culpable. Students failed our classes because of zeroes on a 100-point scale. That's a big deal. Because of our grading practices, it's possible that students were kept out*

*of other classes, opportunities, or colleges where they would have been incredibly successful. Because of our grading practices, it's possible that students thought they weren't capable, when in reality, they had underdeveloped habits of learning. Because of our grading practices, it's possible that students had inflated views of their skills and then failed out of college. We're saying "possible" to let ourselves off the hook a bit. The reality is that all of that is true, and we can still see the faces represented by those zeroes or extra credit points or Fs on the final report card. That's guilt, and it is not comfortable to live with, but we can either choose to defend old practices in order to sleep better, or we can do everything we can to make it better from now on (p. 127).*

4. Thomas Guskey, in his article [The Case against Percentage Grades](#), raises concerns about traditional grading systems. Key points include:
  - a) Percentage grades typically include 60 or more distinct levels of failure and only 40 levels of success;
  - b) Nearly two-thirds of the percentage grading scale describes failure; and
  - c) The fine discrimination required in determining the differences among categories allows for greater influence of subjectivity, more error, and diminished reliability.
  
5. Sam Prouty, Associate Director of Admissions Middlebury College states:

*I would say that we see all kinds of transcripts from all kinds of schools; transitioning to a proficiency-based transcript will not affect how we evaluate candidates for admission. Similarly, when schools ask us about how curricular offerings impact their students in the process, we say simply that schools should do what they want to do (offer APs versus the IB, for example, or drop the AP curriculum altogether, etc.). What's most important to us in both scenarios is that the school use its profile to make clear what its course offerings are, what kind of "grading" scale is used and what the different "grades" mean within the context of that particular school — perhaps a distribution scale showing us how many students achieve at certain levels. We always look at applicants within the context of their individual high schools; we do compare one school to another. So, again, it's important that each school use its profile to give us as much information about that school context as possible.*
  
6. Great Schools Partnership - [75 New England Institutions of Higher Education State that Proficiency-Based Diplomas Do Not Disadvantage Applicants](#): 75 public and private institutions of higher education from across New England provided statements and letters stating — unequivocally — that students with proficiency-based grades and transcripts will not be disadvantaged in any way.
  
7. iNACOL: Snapshot of K-12 Competency Education State Policy Across the United States

