

To: Senate Education Committee
From: Dr. Andrew Jones & Gabe Hamilton
Re: Proficiency-Based Learning & Grading
Date: February 13th, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Andrew Jones and I am the current president of the Vermont Curriculum Leaders Association (VTCLA) and director of curriculum for Mill River Unified Union School District. With me is Gabe Hamilton, a VTCLA member and the proficiency-based learning coordinator at Mount Abraham Union High School in Bristol. We are here today to discuss the topic of proficiency-based learning and grading.

Proficiency-Based Learning Complements Personalized Learning

We have a tremendous opportunity in Vermont, with the convergence of statewide initiatives rooted in best practice and brain research about learning, to bring coherence and strength to transformational practices in the classroom while at the same time strengthening relationships within schools and communities. Proficiency-based Learning (PBL), Personalized Learning (PL), and Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) are at the heart of these initiatives, bolstered in Vermont by state policies like the Education Quality Standards (EQS) and Act 77. These three initiatives must be integrated as a unified framework for schools to embrace for transformation of learning.

As pointed out in Bill (H.665), The Flexible Pathways Initiative does much to support schools in developing and expanding high quality education that better prepares a wide-range of students for postsecondary readiness. What is not included in Act 77 are the parameters in which schools can ensure these opportunities are a valid and reliable means to this end. This is precisely why proficiency-based learning must be included as a supporting pillar for this work. The interdependence of personalization and proficiency cannot be underestimated. Although the tenets of flexible pathways promote powerful pedagogies and open the doors to collaborative and flexible learning opportunities, without a new language of learning that emphasizes transferable skills, clearly defined outcomes, and mechanisms for effective feedback and communication of learning, flexible pathways has no leg to stand on. Teachers and learners have to understand the principles of proficiency before teachers can become effective guides of learning or students can become self-directed learners. In other words, the destinations for proficiency have to be clearly articulated, otherwise the student or collaborator in any flexible learning environment lacks clear guidance or connections to standards. Transferable skills must be clearly embedded in these expectations as the 21st

century increasingly demands skills in areas of communication, collaboration, and problem solving for postsecondary success. The feedback mechanisms have to be understood so students have a sense of where they are in the continuum of learning so that teachers can differentiate and personalize in ways that know the learner. And finally, without the valid and reliable assessment, grading, and reporting practices that are tied to expectations, to what end can we ensure all students are ready for postsecondary experiences?

Proficiency-Based Learning Makes School More Equitable

Issues around equity present some of the greatest challenges we face in education today. The links between demographics and outcomes is no secret and the fact that our archaic educational systems perpetuate inequities is clear. For low-income and minority students, education is seen as the key to success and upward mobility. But evidence has shown in past decades that education has not been acting as the Great Equalizer that Horace Mann envisioned over a century ago. The current education system simply does not work for millions of low-income students. Reardon (2013) finds that over the past 25 years, the achievement gap between high- and low-income students has increased by 30-40 percent. In simple terms, traditional models of school are unfair because students that can play the “game of school” do better than those that can’t, and to play the game well, factors like compliance and behavior trump a students’ capacity to learn. Joe Feldman (2018), an assessment and grading expert states succinctly that “...the ways we grade disproportionately favor students with privilege and harm students with less privilege...” (pp. xxii-xxiii).

Every student comes to school with varying resources, abilities, and needs. Schools must do their part to level the playing field so that every student can flourish. Fair isn’t always equal. This requires that schools follow practices rooted in the tenets of proficiency-based learning that have previously been outlined. Furthermore, this ties directly to proficiency-based grading practices, an element of PBL that has undoubtedly garnered the most attention in the current transformation work of schools. Grades should be a reflection of what students know and can do, not how compliant they are or whether students have the resources to complete homework or extra credit. Proficiency-based grading and reporting is a more fair system that still emphasizes the importance of behavior, such as timeliness, but separates that element from academic achievement. When behaviors are woven into the fabric of grades, they can cloak a student’s actual abilities and provide a false sense of achievement. This grade inflation negatively impacts many students, especially those who are college bound. According to ACT’s annual Condition of College and Career Readiness where 1.8 million or 52% of graduating seniors were tested, only 37% meet 3 of the 4 college and career readiness benchmarks. Additionally, according to a 2016 report by the Center for American Progress upwards of 60% of students require some sort of remediation in their first year of college, costing students and families over \$1.3 billion each year. Just because a student has

a 100% or an A+ in the traditional system, does not mean they are actually proficient. In short, the traditional grading paradigm of points and percentages negatively impacts all students, even those that can play the “game of school” successfully.

As previously discussed, there is ample data to show that large percentages of students are not well prepared for college and lack the requisite skills to graduate on time. The “game of school” has corrupted how parents and students engage with school. For many, it is viewed through a lens that places a heavy focus on grades, credits, and other credentials, over academic achievement. This mentality has led to grade inflation and a complete disregard for actual learning. Noted education researcher David Labaree (1997) indicates that “When they see education through the lens of social mobility, students at all levels quickly come to the conclusion that what matters most is not the knowledge they learn in school but the credentials they acquire there. Grades, credits, and degrees—these become the objects to be pursued. The end result is to reify the formal markers of education and displace the substantive content” (p. 56). Labaree goes on to say “The effect on education is to emphasize form over content—to promote an educational system that is willing to reward students for formal compliance with modest performance requirements rather than for demonstrating operational mastery of skills deemed politically and socially useful” (p. 56). Ultimately, playing this “game of school” is more about grade grubbing and chasing points as “compensation”, than it is about mastering content knowledge and skills. These point economies within classrooms distract from real learning. Some would like to argue that this system works, but empirical research on motivation and engagement are extremely clear: extrinsic motivation by carrots and sticks is detrimental in the long run. The century old grading system commodifies learning and provides the illusion of engagement and motivation (Feldman, 2018).

Implementation of Proficiency-Based Learning Requires an Extended Timeline

Though proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGRs), set forth within the Educational Quality Standards, have existed since 2014, not all schools immediately began work on implementing the statute. Some schools had been actively working to shift to a proficiency-based system of teaching and learning prior to the adoption of the EQS requirements, while others have only begun the work in the last year or two. Rushing implementation of complex education reforms will not ensure deep and lasting change. Decades of educational research on the implementation of school reform makes clear that any attempt to upend the “grammar of school” takes a significant amount of time, upwards of ten years or more. Shchultz (2019) argues that “Allowing enough time for changes to take hold is the greatest shift we will need to make in our approach to educational reform, but it is also what will allow us the greatest opportunity for meaningful and lasting change” (p. 119). Too often, we expect certain initiatives to be a silver bullet or panacea that will

immediately fix all of our problems, but this is not how change happens in schools. During school visits in Maine and the Pacific Northwest, one of our central findings was that shifting to a proficiency-based system of teaching and learning, particularly in the realm of grading and reporting, requires an extended implementation timeline. Specifically, most of the schools we visited had been engaged with the shift for eight to ten years, some longer than that. This threshold, backed by empirical research, indicates that for a large reform to be seen as “business as usual” in schools, requires more than just a couple of years of implementation. Change is hard. More than just putting into place new routines and practices, shifting to proficiency-based learning and grading requires new learning, unlearning, and a shift in beliefs and values regarding the purpose of schools. This is a paradigm shift. Proficiency-based grading in particular is unfamiliar to most stakeholders and will take time to be understood.

Now, this does not mean that schools are experimenting on students as “guinea pigs” as some have argued. Just because teachers are implementing new pedagogical strategies does not translate to negative impacts on students. Both in Vermont and in other states, there is little evidence to indicate that students are being harmed by the shift to proficiency. Many schools in Vermont still utilize a GPA, honors, and other traditional elements of high school reporting. Some schools are using a two-sided transcript (traditional side & proficiency side) to make sure students are not disadvantaged in the admissions process or with scholarship applications. Despite this, various myths, misconceptions, and falsehoods continue to swirl in certain communities and groups about proficiency-based learning and grading. These flashpoints of confusion in a few communities disproportionately represent the reality that overall, teachers and school leaders have aimed to incrementally implement changes while operating with the overriding principle to hold students harmless during the transition.

Conclusion

In sum, the shift to proficiency-based learning and grading is critical to support the successful implementation of personalized learning plans and flexible pathways set out in Act 77. Simply put, personalized learning is not possible without the foundation of proficiency-based learning. Additionally, the current systems and structures within our schools are not benefiting all students and more often than not, they perpetuate inequities. Proficiency-based learning makes the teaching and learning process more fair and offers more accurate information about student achievement. Furthermore, changing how schools operate does not happen quickly. Regardless of the specific initiative, making changes in schools is an evolutionary process. Therefore, sufficient time is needed to see this work to fruition. Let’s give our educators the time they deserve to implement this well.

References

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