

Senate Committee on Education

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Good afternoon. For the record, my name is Don Tinney and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of nearly 13,000 members of Vermont-NEA. While I currently serve as the president of a labor union of educators, I taught high school English Language Arts for 31 years in Vermont, including eight years at Middlebury Union High School and 16 years at Bellows Free Academy in St. Albans.

I appreciate your committee's efforts in assessing the current state of affairs regarding Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements in Vermont schools. Despite my desire to avoid clichés in my speech and writing, I have said a number of times that the experience of our members with this initiative has been “all over the map.” This “all over the map” experience reflects the lack of consistency in the implementation of PBGRs across the state.

We have members who have been very much engaged with this reform effort and work in school districts that had the resources to take their time in building the district's capacity to make these changes effectively. Where the school administration engaged educators, parents and other community members early in the process and had them be a part of the development of this particular approach, the student experience and the educator experience have been quite positive. In other districts, the word debacle applies perfectly.

As a professional educator and as a union leader, I am seriously concerned by the fact that too many educators were afraid to speak out about these issues in a public way. Some of our members have felt threatened by building administrators just for pointing out the flaws in how these reforms have been implemented. No matter where one stands on this issue, it is a sad day when dissent is not tolerated within our academic institutions. Too many of Vermont educators heard that PBGRs and PLPs were state mandates and that was that!

With technical assistance from our national organization—the National Education Association—we surveyed over one thousand of our members last April in an attempt to gauge their experiences with the implementation of PBGRs. I have provided you with the results of this survey and would like to highlight some of the specific findings.

On the third page of the document, which is actually labeled page 10, you will note that 77% of our educators were not involved with the development of the strategic plans which set the transition to PBGRs in motion. Obviously, this finding is of concern to us. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act at the Federal level, I am hopeful that our members will be included in future discussions and planning in related matters, since ESSA requires educators to

be on all school districts' continuous improvement teams. There was no such requirement to include educators in the planning of the transition to the PBGR system.

Over half of our members do not believe that they have adequate resources to implement PBGRs; only 18% said they received adequate professional development to implement Personalized Learning Plans and only 29% said they received adequate professional development in transitioning to PBGRs. Professional development opportunities are critical if educators are expected to change their instructional and assessment practices.

As I am sure you are aware, assessment and grading practices have raised a variety of concerns across the state. I think that it is important to note that neither the legislature nor the Agency of Education mandated a change in grading practices. I am not clear about the source of the confusion around the abandonment of letter grades. Personally, I was sitting in a faculty meeting in August of 2016, at BFA-St. Albans a few days before the opening of school, when the district's curriculum director announced that the state had mandated a change in our grading practices and that we were moving to a proficiency grading system using the scores of 4-3-2-1; he told us that A-B-C-D were considered meaningless. A number of our faculty, as you can imagine, took exception to that assertion.

While we know many districts implemented an entirely new assessment process, 44% of our members report receiving fewer than two hours of professional development devoted to calibration with their colleagues. Without calibration, how would a school district know that their students are being assessed fairly and consistently? While 41% of our members say their school's calibration of assessment practices is effective, 51% say they are ineffective. Again, the experience is all over the map.

Assessing student work in the PBGR system probably needs more study, but 54% of our members report spending more time assessing student work today than in previous years. When it comes to reporting their assessment results, 61% say they spending more time on reporting, a third of our members report spending "much more time" (page 29). Many schools have incorporated new reporting systems and new software which have presented real challenges to our members.

I think that the Great Schools Partnership may have contributed to part of the confusion regarding the grading practices. While I did not participate directly in any of their workshops, I recently noted that their website espouses the wholesale changes in grading practices that our members are experiencing. I do not know the history of the partnership that was formed between the Agency of Education and the Great Schools Partnership, and I am unclear as to why this group came into Vermont to tell our educators what to do.

Did the leadership of our AOE and the leadership of the school districts in Vermont genuinely respect the collective wisdom found in the ranks of Vermont educators? When 77% of our members say they were not involved in the development of the plans for this transition, I would say no. I do not know what the financial arrangements between the AOE and the Great Schools Partnership have been or how much money our school districts have paid to other outside consulting groups in this transition, but with time and clear intentions, the collective wisdom of

Vermont educators could have developed a system that would be more effectively implemented across the state rather than programs that were imposed upon us. I believe that it was the Vermont AOE's original intention to have school districts take a truly collaborative approach to both the PLPs and PBGRs.

As one of our members recently wrote to me, "I know exactly what kids need: structure, expectations, accountability, and, most importantly, teachers who are passionate, invested, and knowledgeable enough to know when to push and challenge while offering the right level of support and encouragement."

Returning to specific results of our survey, as you will see on page 31, 47% of our members report seeing a decrease in their students' content knowledge, which is most likely linked to the fact that 72% of educators report seeing a decrease in student work ethic. Even our members who have great appreciation for the proficiency approach and like the new system of grading have expressed concerns about what is happening in the realm of student work ethic. It requires further study, as does the concern about content knowledge.

I suggest that our CTE educators have some insights to offer in the area of content knowledge, since many of them are required to administer traditional examinations and assessments in their particular career fields. A broad-based study of those test results might very well lead to conclusions about the reform movement we now label as PBGRs.

In the "outcomes" section of our survey, you will also note that only a fifth of our members report that this new reform movement has led to expanded equity and opportunity. We probably should return to the "Why?" question about this reform, since I think expanding opportunities for all students was one of the missions of Act 77. Only 7% of our members say that student behavior has improved while 31% report a worsening of behavior, but that probably suggests a correlation and not causation. A third of members report an increase in student frustration. Most of our members report that parents do not have a clear understanding of their students' experience in this new system. I think the uproar from parents in certain communities earlier this school year reflects this finding. I have heard from a number of members who anecdotally report that parents remain confused by the new system and feel "left out" of the process.

As members of this committee, you know that our organization often takes positions in supporting or opposing specific pieces of legislation. In this case, we are not taking a single position on Personalized Learning Plans, Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements or Proficiency Based Learning in general. Obviously, as educators we believe in the value of personalizing learning for our students, the value of students reaching levels of proficiency and the value of effectively assessing student learning on the way to reaching those levels of proficiency. On behalf of our members, however, we are asking for clarity on the issue of grading requirements and what has been specifically mandated by this body or the Agency of Education. We believe that our members should have a clear understanding about what problems were meant to be solved by implementing this new approach.

I will be happy to answer any questions and address any further concerns you may have.