

To: Senate Education Committee
From: David Young, Michael Martin & John Painter
Re: Proficiency-Based Learning in South Burlington School District
Date: February 13th, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Michael Martin and I serve as the Director of Learning for South Burlington School District. With me is Superintendent David Young and John Painter, Department Head & Math Teacher at South Burlington High School. We would like to share with you some of our work to date to implement proficiency-based learning and grading. We would also like to ask for your support so that we can continue this important work.

Proficiency-Based Learning in the Statute

As you likely already know, the Vermont Educational Quality Standards (EQS) of 2014 require school districts to develop a system of “instruction, assessment, grading and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.” The Educational Quality Standards also require Vermont school districts to adopt a local graduation policy for proficiency-based graduation and to develop a local comprehensive assessment system. We have accomplished all of the above, and we continue to refine all aspects of our work in proficiency-based learning (PBL), which requires significant and system-wide changes in schools.

To be perfectly clear, we are still working on it, and we are committed to two guiding principles: 1) we will hold students harmless during the change process, and 2) we will make the work doable for teachers.

The Educational Quality Standards require that students be allowed multiple ways to show proficiency. The Educational Quality Standards also allow schools to continue to use traditional “credits” for the purpose of graduation, provided they explicitly link to proficiencies. We are pleased to report that we have followed the guidance closely in each of these areas. Our Culminating Assessment Period has replaced traditional exam week with rigorous and varied assessments of student work, including but not limited to, performances, portfolios, and products that have value beyond the classroom. We also continue to use credits and document students’ grade point average, however, our grades are now based on clear shared benchmarks. Similarly, our course credits are based on proficiencies in both traditional subject areas and transferable skills.

This means that for the first time, we are graduating students based on evidence of their proficiency in the 21st Century Skills that employers are asking for, specifically:

- Clear and Effective Communication
- Self-Direction
- Creative and Practical Problem Solving
- Responsible and Involved Citizenship
- Informed and Integrative Thinking

Given the fact that we are now two decades into the 21st Century, we are particularly proud of the work that has led to this much needed modernization of our curriculum.

We would like to use this opportunity to share some of our work on proficiency-based learning (PBL) to date in South Burlington, including some of the challenges and benefits that we've encountered in our work as a district. Of course, since this work requires clear, consistent communication with our community, we've put a great deal of effort into developing a clear, shared purpose for these changes. We have found that the main benefits from PBL are its emphasis on clarity, mastery, and transfer of new learning.

Clarity

Proficiency-based learning is about clarity. Students deserve to know what they will learn in a given course or school year, and how, exactly, they will be assessed on what they've learned. Traditionally, this hasn't always been the case in school. In fact, some teachers relished the guessing game of what would eventually appear on the quiz, test, or exam to follow. In any other setting in the world of adults, we expect clear, explicit criteria of expectations when pursuing a new career, certification, or credential. It is only fair for us to do the same for our students in school, and it will come as no surprise that clear objectives improve student learning outcomes. After all, it is hard to persevere towards a goal when the goal is unclear or unknown.

This is why so much of our work has been about bringing teachers together to identify clear, share outcomes for each department, each course, and each unit of study. We have also been working to ensure that our assessments explicitly link to these stated objectives, so that students know what to expect. This year, we have used embedded professional development time to develop *learning targets* to help students meet smaller, tangible objectives along the way, as well as *learning scales*, so that students can measure their progress towards proficiency. Finally, at the High School, we have developed schoolwide language and scales around *learning practices*, reported separately from their proficiency scores, so that students are developing the specific dispositions that they need to succeed.

Mastery

Proficiency-based learning is about mastery. It is no secret that feedback helps us learn, especially when it is timely, actionable, and kind. An important aspect of our proficiency work has been to develop formative assessment strategies that give students specific, high frequency feedback so that they can master skills & concepts. Our proficiency work is also focused on ensuring that students have a strong foundation before moving on. In the past, students have too often not been retaught missing concepts after receiving a bad grade. Our current work in proficiency-based learning aims to achieve the following:

- ample practice opportunities before receiving a grade
- clear, specific, timely feedback for students to improve
- multiple ways for students to provide evidence of their learning
- strong support structures for students to get help if they haven't yet met proficiency

Transfer

Proficiency-based learning is about transfer of new learning. In South Burlington, in addition to content-area proficiencies in math, science, world language, etc., our Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) define graduation proficiencies in the area of transferable skills. These are the 21st Century skills that universities and employers say they look for when they review applications. These skills provide relevance for students because they provide a common language to connect learning across subject areas and across years of school. We currently teach and assess these transferable skills in Grades 6-12, and hope to grow that down to the lower grades in the years to come.

To increase student ownership over their learning, our middle school Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) are structured by these 5 key skills in the form of questions. Students are asked to collect evidence of learning and reflect on their growth in the area of the following transferable skills?

- Who am I as a learner?
- Who am I as a thinker?
- Who am I as problem-solver?
- Who am I as a communicator?
- Who am I as citizen?

This new focus on transferable skills provides a vertical backbone to our curriculum over several years of school, and also explicitly connects learning across different subject areas and classrooms in a student's daily experience. Additionally, these same key skills help students connect classroom learning to internships, service learning, and career goals. In other words, they help students see the relevance of schoolwork by connecting it to their lives outside of school.

Conclusion

The magnitude of this work has been humbling as we work to implement these system-wide changes, but it has forced us to roll up our sleeves and work together to develop a shared approach across classrooms, across departments, and across schools. We've also learned a great deal by collaborating across districts more than ever before, and this has been beneficial too. In many respects, we are, for the first time, "collaborating across our little valleys" to use an expression favored by Education Secretary Daniel French.

When we consider the fact that Vermont school districts have been scrambling to implement Flexible Pathways, Proficiency-Based Learning, Universal Pre-Kindergarten, Special Education Funding Changes, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, all in just a few short years, it is clear that we are not looking for our Legislators to hand down more sweeping policy changes. In fact, it would be most helpful for the State to *not* change the current rules, just we are beginning to see the benefits from this work. So we're here to ask you to not move the goalposts on us, as it were, and to use your authority to provide instead clear, consistent, and predictable support for the valuable reforms already underway.

Thank you for listening.