

## **Proficiency Based Learning: Stay The Course, Iterate & Improve**

On Tuesday, January 21st, The Vermont State Board of Education hosted an inquiry on proficiency based learning at Rutland High School. The Board invited experts from the Vermont PK-12 education field and provided time for public comments as well. The board members were listening for evidence of proficiency based learning helping to create excellence, equity, and efficiency in Vermont schools. The day was filled with thoughtful discussion. Most of what was shared by witnesses was in support of the proficiency based learning model, with concerns raised by some stakeholders especially around grading and reporting. The Board's inquiry followed a few recent articles in Vermont media regarding variance in implementation and related assessment concerns. Those articles seemingly have sparked energy in the 2020 legislative session around proficiency based learning. That energy includes a recently proposed bill (H665) in the State Senate to allow schools to "choose whether to offer proficiency based learning and proficiency based graduation". As the day carried into the evening, I could not help wondering, how did we get here, and is this really the issue for us to be examining and considering for vote?

### **What is Proficiency Based Learning?**

Proficiency based learning is a well established framework for schools to help answer two basic questions: "What will students learn?" and "How we will know they have learned it?" Across the country and throughout the world, proficiency, sometimes called competency, mastery, or standards-based learning is a fairly simple and straight-forward evolution for schools. At its center, the work asks educators to be clear about what the learning goals are within a given learning opportunity. It asks educators to identify the skills that will be taught, practiced, and assessed. With those learning goals established in curriculum maps, course catalogs, and class syllabi, teachers can then work backwards to design assessments that will measure the demonstration of learning, and develop activities that will engage students in opportunities to practice the given skills.

That's it really. Use national/global proficiencies (standards) as the drivers for answering "*What will students learn?*" and then design quality assessments to answer "*How will we know they've learned it?*" Vermont is not unique in undertaking this effort, nor is this effort new to Vermont.

The current version is standing on the shoulders of previous similar Vermont educational initiatives. In the 1960's, Vermont launched "The Vermont Design for Education". In the 1970's, it was the "Basic Competencies". In 2000, "The Vermont Framework of Standards & Learning Opportunities" was enacted. As learning standards continued to evolve at the national and international level (e.g. CommonCore), it was a natural step for the Vermont State Board of Education to author and adopt new Educational Quality Standards in 2014. That work included requiring local Vermont school districts to have their curriculum and courses rooted in the given proficiencies (standards) of the area of study and included the crucial addition of transferable skills— sometimes called 21st Century Skills. The 2014 Educational Quality Standards incorporated work in Vermont's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), and the 2013, ACT

77-Flexible Pathways Law. All of this makes good practical sense. After all, what would the alternative be? To *not* require local schools to have an articulated curriculum and goals for learning? So why was there a State Board inquiry, the recent media scrum, and the proposed Senate bill in 2020? Where's the controversy?

### **Implementation Since 2014**

For more context, in 2014-15, after the new Educational Quality Standards were adopted, most (not all) districts around the state attended a professional learning series that the Agency of Education offered. The series was designed to help districts conduct self-assessments about where they were in their progress in being able to answer those two key questions: *"What will students learn?"* and *"How will we know they've learned it?"* At nearly the same time, school leaders had been asked to understand and implement several major educational reforms and state policies: ACT 77 (The Flexible Pathways Law), new guidance for a Multi-Tiered System of Support (VTmtss), shortly followed by the complex and controversial implementation of ACT 166 (Universal Pre-Kindergarten), ACT 46 (School District Unification), and later ACT 173 (Block Grant Funding), ACT 1 (Ethnic & Social Equity Standards), and a new Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) to standardize financial management and reporting for schools statewide, among others.

Given the scale and complexity of Vermont's educational reforms of the past six years, there is no surprise that there has been a range of readiness across different school communities for proficiency based graduation in 2020. Furthermore, sustained support for proficiency based learning from the Vermont Agency of Education was limited by 1) the quantity of initiatives for the Agency to attend to at the same time, 2) the lack of sustained funding attached to the work of implementation, and 3) a lack of clear implementation success measures for districts to work towards, or for the Agency to verify. Despite the limited resources of various school communities, some high schools made big shifts as early as 2016 (when the class of 2020 entered 9th grade), adopting proficiency based graduation requirements as their local board graduation policy. And as witnessed at the January 21st State Board Meeting, many Vermont educators have reported that the work of building better systems to answer *"What will students learn?"* and *"How will we know they've learned it?"* has positively impacted how students learn, the rate of personalization, how teachers work together, the quality of assessments, and how school culture celebrates rigorous learning, while some others have struggled with the changes and the ability to navigate some of the technical and cultural shifts.

### **Proficiency Based Assessment**

The work of implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum is typically paired with taking a much closer look at the consistency and quality in grading practices as well. This aspect of change is more visible and can be where fear of the change can take root. When schools move to proficiency based learning, they often (not always) also adopt the "Marzano 4 Point Scale". This scale is a method of grading that is built upon criterion based rubrics versus a normative based system. It gears the learning towards demonstrating skills which makes the scoring more task neutral and the learning more targeted. It also means that a rubric can be reasonably

written with quality, whereas, a rubric with 100 points of proficiency would be unreasonable to write or use for meaningful feedback. Well-written rubrics with student friendly language provide all sorts of improved opportunities for timely and targeted intervention, self-assessment, peer-assessment, consistency across instructors, consistency across supervisory unions, alignment across courses, and precision in identifying outcomes. Sharing that progress and demonstration in learning with students' parents/guardians and with post-secondary institutions still requires an understandable report card and transcript of some kind.

### **Reporting Proficiency Based Learning, the Flashpoint**

Reporting learning has always taken on different forms, but perhaps we have not paid much attention to that before now. For example, some schools have added GPA weight for honors, others have not, some schools have used the 100 point GPA, others have used a 4.0 GPA, some have used a 4.33 GPA to account for A+ 's while other schools have not used A+' s at all, and still others have counted A+ in the GPA the same as an A. In some schools a 96 is an "A" and in other schools, a "93". Individual schools and teachers have totaled scores, weighted assignments, allowed for second tries (or not), and added extra points and extra credit in ad-hoc ways. In International Baccalaureate schools, they have used a 7 point scale for reporting, while less traditional schools have chosen to report learning based on narrative, color scale, or otherwise. In other words, variance in reporting is not new.

To better serve students and meet the goals of the Educational Quality Standards, schools around Vermont have begun to evolve their consistency in grading practices. That work has led to changes in learning platforms, gradebooks, and student information systems. Some of those complex technical transitions and localized choices have been smoother than others. Most high schools in the state have overhauled report cards and transcripts in the past several years, some with multiple iterations to find a path forward that more accurately represents growth in proficiency based graduation requirements and is understandable and useful for the students, families, and post-secondary institutions.

The variance in consensus on grading practices, report cards, and transcripts, again, is a result of an organic process of growth, may signal a statewide lack of capacity to operationalize multiple right-minded policy and laws at once, and may be the result of some specific localized factors as well. Rolling back any policy decisions about proficiency based learning because of that variance of implementation is an unnecessary action from legislators, and would be newly disruptive in what is just starting to find secure footing throughout the state. To help alleviate some common concerns, below are responses to some of the frequently asked questions.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

- *Will colleges accept a proficiency based transcript without risk of harming the student's admission?*
  - A resounding "Yes". All of the Vermont colleges have joined colleges around the country, including places like Harvard, MIT, and Dartmouth in publically supporting proficiency based learning and the resulting transcripts as being as

viable as any other transcript. Furthermore, there are high schools in the state that have already seen proficiency-based graduating seniors accepted around the country without issue for several years. What also remains true is that high schools should always put their best foot forward with a tidy, readable, and understandable transcript with a well done school profile accompanying the transcript.

- *Does proficiency based learning limit high achieving students?*
  - Absolutely not. Proficiency based learning works to raise the bar on rigor and provide a guarantee of important skills to all of our students. It also challenges students to demonstrate 21st century skills in order to improve their capacity for a dynamic economy. Think of it as raising the bar of what is acceptable at the bottom, but having no limit at the top. Proficiency based learning also dovetails to make flexible learning opportunities within ACT 77 more rigorous and more mainstream. This means the potential to increase personalized learning opportunities in any given specific interest at any given level of skill. This gives students the chance to pursue purpose and mastery in more ways than ever. Many Vermont high schools have found ways to effectively meet school proficiency based graduation requirements while retaining or enhancing Advanced Placement courses, Early College, Dual Enrollment, and other flexible pathway opportunities for students.
- *How will students stand out if class rank is not retained?*
  - Vermont high schools have used this work to take a closer look at the usefulness of their GPA, class rank, honors, and valedictorian practices. In taking a closer look, many schools have realized that there are more pros than cons in moving towards a Latin system of honors, or readjusting in other ways to help all of their students be well represented. The most competitive high schools in the country typically do not use class-rank because of the misrepresentation that can occur when rigor of schedule, personal level of academic risk, or other subtle factors that are not accounted for in ranking. Students can continue to shine in their own powerful and unique ways in courses, in their specific demonstrations of learning, in their transcripts, in their co-curriculars, in letters of recommendation, and so on.
- *I've heard that homework does not count, is that true?*
  - No, not necessarily. The questions around the usefulness and equity of homework aside, proficiency based learning embraces the process of learning more than traditional teaching and learning has in the past. In an effort to recognize that students, like all people, need some time to practice new skills, some of the early assignments are considered, "formative," meaning that students can use it as a chance to practice, get feedback, and build towards a fuller demonstration of learning. Penalizing students for that practice with low marks to impact their overall report of learning is counterintuitive. Thus, proficiency based learning systems have worked to separate the skill of the given content area from the skills of executive functioning and habits of work. In that

manner, schools can provide instruction, feedback, scores, and intervene with more accuracy depending on whether the issue is the content skill or the habit of learning skill. Several schools have added scoring for timeliness and preparation as its own skill to be taught and assessed and incorporated into the scoring system.

- *Many traditional measures of learning in the state are flat or dropping, why is this not solving all of our challenges?*
  - Proficiency based learning is the practical and natural step in curriculum development, and improved assessment practices. It is one piece of quality design and instruction, and one piece of a high functioning education system. It will not, on its own, result in high quality instruction in every classroom, inclusive instructional and systemic systems, quality and timely interventions, equity for historically marginalized students, provide the answer to our opiate crisis, close the gap in health and mental resources in communities around the state, or any of the other major challenges facing our schools and state as a whole. It is however, absolutely a part of evolving our schools and an essential piece to the puzzle for not only surviving but thriving in the coming decades. Early data from the Agency of Education sees rising graduation rates, rising post-secondary attendance rates, and rising college retention rates in Vermont since 2017.

### **Proficiency Based Learning: Stay The Course, Iterate & Improve**

As a Vermont school counselor, principal, consultant, and parent, I have been fortunate to be in the thick of the proficiency based learning growth in our educational systems. Seeing the Vermont State Board of Education hold an inquiry into the status of the work affirmed my opinion that there is no question about the merits of proficiency based learning, and that it is both unnecessary and impractical to adopt the law and language of H665. While it might ease the fears and workload for a few, it would dumbfound and potentially alienate many of the state's most dedicated and effective educators in their work to build an ever-improving, 21st century, dynamic, and equitable learning experience for all Vermont students. The concerns that have been raised are almost exclusively in the area of grading and reporting, all of which are localized and can be responded to. The issues raised are reflective of our need to have a mindset of continuous improvement rather than giving way to an impulse for returning to a false safety of an outdated status quo.

School systems' ability to implement to the level that they have achieved is remarkable given the complexity and quantity of school related laws and initiatives currently on the books. Proficiency based learning, like so many of the school related laws and ideas in the past years, is a good idea. It has raised important discussions about curriculum and assessment in learning and supported opportunities for student personalization. And in order to actually see a good idea through, we need to pay closer attention to our capacity to operationalize statewide. We need sustained support, time, measures of success to gage the work, and the leadership wisdom to set researched informed, long-term goals for significant improvement which can

weather expected pockets of concern, and alleviate stakeholders' fears without knocking the work off course unnecessarily.

As the 2020 legislative cycle begins, we will hear all sorts of good ideas that could improve schools and improve Vermont. The effort is appreciated and the desire to take action is admirable; but, taking action to roll back proficiency based learning is ill-informed and off the mark. Instead, I encourage legislative leaders to take a closer look at our shared capacity to operationalize, integrate, and support the existing major initiatives (e.g. ACT 77, ACT 166, ACT 46, ACT 1, ACT 173 and more), provide sustained support for iteration and improvement, and plan for fidelity of implementation going forward.

With optimism-

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Vermont Principals' Association