

Vermont Principals' Association

Supporting Leaders & Learners

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House Education Testimony: 4/14/23

Testimony Provided by Mike McRaith, Associate Executive Director of the VPA

RE: S.133, Miscellaneous Education Bill

(Specifically Sec. 2., the Proposed Proficiency Based Learning Student Committee)

Dear House Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on Section 2 of the Senate's Miscellaneous Education Bill. This section proposes a study committee to:

"Make recommendations for whether proficiency-based learning is the most effective way to ensure Vermont students attain rigorous standards in high quality programs or whether there are other systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that would better serve Vermont students."

The VPA recommends against having this study committee for three primary reasons:

1. **The recommendations that would come from such a committee can be well anticipated today.** While there is always more room for improvement and learning, the very likely upshots of the committee will be:
 - a. That proficiency-based learning is a basic foundation of education which fundamentally means having student-learning built out from national standards such as the common-core and related subject area standards.
 - b. That there have been inconsistencies in understanding and effectiveness in the implementation around the state since 2014.
 - c. That the solution to the problem of those inconsistencies is support and clarity at the state-level, the necessary appropriations to resource that leadership, and clear measures of success on a specific timeline.
2. **The anticipated recommendations from the committee are unlikely to be adopted with fidelity in the 2024 legislative session.** The VPA has been [testifying since February of 2020](#) that any concerns that legislators and their constituents may have in regards to proficiency based learning would be well addressed by the above recommendations. It seems that due to competing priorities, these recommendations have not been followed and we do not believe a study committee would change that outcome.

- 3. Study committees require valuable time, taking away from other efforts amidst an already strained state educational leadership network.** Passing education related legislation, or asking for study committees that may be redundant, unfunded, and/or lack a comprehensive accounting for other changes, laws, requirements, and the current significant shortages of personnel at all levels causes a stretched system to be stretched even thinner. The VPA has consistently shared that we need clear and consistent integrated legislation with the necessary appropriations, timelines, and measures of success.

While the pursuit of an ever-improving effective learning environment for positive outcomes for students is *the* pursuit of our education system, the VPA does not view this proposed study committee as a good use of time in that pursuit for above stated reasons. For those who would like to better understand the details on this topic in the past nine years or the common frustrations related to inconsistent understandings and rollouts, please refer to the below testimony from January of this year.

Previously Shared Testimony in Senate Education on this Topic (1/31/23)

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 will we 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.

- In a nutshell, proficiency based learning is using 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.

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 in partnership with the Great Schools Partnership. 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 implementation of ACT 166 (Universal Pre-Kindergarten), ACT 46 (School District Unification), and later ACT 173 (Block Grant Funding), ACT 1 of 2019 (Ethnic & Social Equity Standards), and a new Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) to standardize financial management and reporting for schools statewide, the onset of the pandemic and all of its repercussions in the winter of 2020 and many more initiatives and responsibilities.

Given the scale and complexity of Vermont’s educational reforms of the past eight years, there is no surprise that there has been a range of readiness across different school communities for proficiency based learning implementation. 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, 2020 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

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 worked 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 significant initiatives and laws at once, and may be the result of some specific localized factors as well. To help alleviate some common concerns of the past, 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 hundreds of proficiency-based graduating seniors accepted around the country without issue for many years now. What also remains true is that high schools should always put their best foot forward with an elegant, 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 a practical 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 marginalized students, provide the answer to our opiate crisis, response to the pandemic, mental health crises, close the access 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.

Proficiency Based Learning: Going Forward

As a Vermont school counselor, principal, consultant, association leader, and parent, I have been fortunate to be in the thick of the proficiency based learning growth in our educational systems. 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 has raised important discussions about curriculum and assessment in learning and supported opportunities for student personalization. I recommend we need to pay closer attention to our capacity to operationalize statewide with appropriations more than regulations. We need sustained support, time, measures of success to gauge 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' concerns with fidelity while staying the course on meaningful change and improvement.

Thank you,

Mike McRaith