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Opinion: Proficiency-Based Learning Beneficial for Students

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A recent opinion piece from a Fair Haven Union High School teacher argued we should rid the state of proficiency-based learning and grading systems to “let teachers teach.”

I can’t comment on how individual teachers, schools, or districts chose to interpret or implement the State Board of Education’s requirement that our schools move to “proficiency-based learning.” However, the piece seems to misunderstand the logic and research related to proficiency approaches to instruction, as well as the responsibility of districts with respect to standards. In Vermont, by statute, curriculum and instruction are local responsibilities, and success depends on the skill and judgment of those who develop and implement curriculum in each classroom in each school.

Any discussion of proficiency-based approaches needs to consider the research that led the Board to adopt and the legislature to endorse this approach four years ago.

Proficiency-based approaches are driven by three basic principles. First, when we can tell students clearly and specifically what we expect them to learn, they are more likely to learn it. When students don’t know what “quality” looks like, it’s hard to meet the standard.

Second, practice helps us get better, whether we are playing baseball, learning how to play the trombone, figuring out how to create a 3D scale model using trigonometry and a 3D printer, or learning how to write a persuasive letter to a legislator or state official to advocate for a statutory change.

Third, giving students the specific feedback they need and the opportunity for additional practice helps them to develop and demonstrate these same skills. Some people are lucky enough to grow up in environments where these skills are cultivated and reinforced regularly. Some young people with great potential are not so lucky. As a state without enough skilled workers to power economic growth, we can’t afford to leave the potential of these Vermonters undeveloped.

Of course, some teachers have always focused on these principles, even in so-called “traditional” grading environments. I was not in office for the development of the Education Quality Standards, but I suspect the intent was to encourage more teachers to focus on mastery, rather than simply moving students on to the next topic, whether

they learned the material or not. Certainly, employers have expressed concern about the idea of promoting students regardless of whether skills were mastered.

Mastery matters. If you don't master number sense before moving on to fractions, you struggle to understand fractions. If you don't understand fractions, you struggle with algebra. If you can't do algebra, you will struggle in any STEM-related career. The students who walk through our doors vary widely in their interests, levels of skill and home support, but we are responsible for doing all we can to ensure they learn as much as they can, as well as they can, while they are in our care.

I don't love the jargon of education, because sometimes it confuses as much as it informs. Proficiency-based approaches are well developed and supported by research that dates back to the 70's. Benjamin Bloom piloted and evaluated "mastery-based" approaches that involved breaking learning into clear and defined units of learning, and assessing students just after they taught, to verify what they learned. In his model, if students can't demonstrate mastery, they immediately get remediation and practice and try again, so that learning gaps don't grow and compound. Bloom reasoned that giving children a second chance to succeed would increase their motivation, and subsequent research proved him right.

Bloom realized that some students would be quicker to demonstrate mastery, and he recommended these students be allowed to move on to other learning in an individualized way. As [Thomas Guskey](#) explains, "Enrichment activities give these students exciting opportunities to broaden and expand their learning." With careful personalization, high performing students are also appropriately challenged.

Proficiency-based approaches ensure that students who want to improve have the specific feedback they need to actually do better. As one student who was struggling told us, in traditional grading systems, "you're never given much information besides you just got a lower grade, but if you do proficiencies and you get a lower proficiency score, it tells you exactly what parts you are lower on and what parts you did really well, and I really appreciate that." Our students want to learn and thrive; we need to give them the means to do so.

Proficiency-based approaches don't need to – and should not – constrain students to whom mastery comes quickly, any more than traditional systems should require students to take a course that presents content they have already mastered. Across the state, students have taken advantage of extension and enrichment opportunities to pursue independent and student-driven application of learning, often by taking their work into their communities. In some cases, enrichment has led to work-based learning

and internships, which in turn, has led to an enduring interest in a subject field or new career.

Good education depends on a skilled and purposeful teacher, who structures what happens in the classroom in ways that challenge all students – both those who struggle and those who don't—to achieve more and aspire higher than they did before walking in the door. These teachers take guidance and standards, and adapt them to their unique contexts and their students' needs. It takes time and practice for any new tool to be developed and used with skill.

One of the biggest risks we face as a state is the belief that every challenge requires a change in policy. If we change the game for teachers every few years, they are compelled to spend all their time on changing direction, and never are able or allowed to spend time getting good at doing what they care about most: teaching well. No policy is perfect, but as a state, we count on the professional expertise of our teachers to take the tools we give them, and make them robust and powerful in their individual classrooms.

I encourage you to [learn more about proficiency-based learning](#) and how it will benefit students.