

Plan for State Board of Education's 15 January 2020 information-gathering session re Proficiency-Based Learning (PBL)

Introduction: At its November meeting, the State Board agreed to use its January meeting to conduct an information-gathering inquiry about a topic of current interest in education in Vermont. The Board considered different possible topics and then directed the Chair to inquire of the Chairs of the House and Senate Committees on Education on what topic might be of interest to the Committees. The House and Senate Chairs both advocated that the Board gather information on Proficiency-Based Education (PBL). Because of the scant time available to plan and organize the January meeting and inquiry, the Board Chair has begun the task of organizing the structure and logistics of the January information-gathering session. This report summarizes the plan as of 18 December.

Overview: On 15 January 2020, as part of its regular monthly meeting, the State Board of Education will convene an information-gathering session to learn more about Proficiency-Based Learning and its current state of implementation in Vermont. The purpose of this undertaking is two-fold:

- i. to give the Board experience in convening information-gathering sessions on education topics of current interest – in anticipation of the Board's future role as an independent overseer of education in Vermont; and
- ii. to provide balanced and impartial information to the House and Senate Committees on Education about education topics of interest to the Committees – in anticipation of the Board's future role as trusted independent advisor to policy-makers in the Legislature and the Executive.

Guided by these purposes, the Board's work will be in five parts, in the following order:

1. organize the information gathering session, select witnesses, and arrange logistics;
2. convene the January 15 session in Rutland and gather from a diverse and balanced group of knowledgeable witnesses and the public a balanced overview of the current state of PBL's implementation in the state;
3. after the 15 January meeting, prepare a well-informed and impartial report on the Board's findings from the information-gathering session;
4. in February, present to the Senate Committee on Education and to the House Committee on Education the Board's report of its findings about the current state of PBL in Vermont.
5. after presentation of briefings to the Legislative committees, debrief on the undertaking, identify what worked well and what needs improvement, and agree on next steps.

Impartiality: Even at this early stage, we know that there is broad diversity across the state in the degree of individual schools' roll-out of PBL. We also know that across the state there is a wide diversity of views and opinions about the efficacy of PBL.

In contrast, the Board will not take sides on issues that may arise in connection with PBL. The Board's central purpose in this undertaking is to gather information even-handedly and to report to the Committees on Education its impartial findings. It is not the Board's role or purpose in this undertaking to form opinions. Similarly, each Board member is expected to refrain from expressing personal judgements about PBL during this process of inquiry and during the process of reporting to the Legislature. In all respects, the Board and its members will do their best to convene, conduct, and report on PBL in manner that is fair and even-handed.

Logistics: The Board's information-gathering session will take place at Rutland High School on 15 January. As at all State Board meetings, this information-gathering session will be open to the public and the press. It is the Board's hope that the public and the press, like the Board itself, will become better informed about PBL by hearing from Vermonters who have hands-on experience with PBL and who have differing views.

The 15 January inquiry will be conducted in two sessions: an afternoon session from 2:00 to 4:30 pm and an early-evening session from 5:30 to 8:00 pm. It is hoped that these hours – and Rutland's comparatively accessible location – will make the information gathering sessions readily available to the public and witnesses alike. Moreover, in the interests of encouraging learning among people of different views, witnesses and the public alike are encouraged to attend the sessions in their entirety – and even to join the Board for supper between the two sessions -- so as to hear as many different points of view as possible.

Each session – afternoon and evening -- will consist of testimony by six knowledgeable witnesses – individuals with hands-on experience in the design, administration, or implementation of PBL. Each witness will have 20 minutes to present their testimony, including responses to questions posed by members of the Board. Additionally, during each of the two sessions, thirty minutes will be reserved for comments by interested members of the public.

Balanced testimony: Twelve witnesses (six in the afternoon, six in the evening), each with hands-on experience with PBL, will testify before the Board. Also, the Board will hear from as many members of the public as time permits. The Board has invited education-related Vermont organizations (Vermont Superintendents Association, Vermont Principals Association, Vermont School Boards Association, Vermont NEA, Vermont Curriculum Leaders Association, Vermont Agency of Education, and The Tarrant Foundation) to propose knowledgeable individuals to serve as witnesses. From their lists, the Board will do its best to put together a diverse array of expert witnesses, including:

- >> advocates as well as critics.
- >> theorists as well as practitioners;
- >> administrators as well as front-line educators;
- >> students as well as educators; and
- >> schools that are far-down-the-road with PBL as well as schools that are just starting the journey

Similarly, during periods reserved for public testimony, the Board will encourage, to the extent practicable, a diversity of points of view.

Next steps: The Chair welcomes Board-members' suggestions for improvement of this plan. The Chair will continue to take the lead in organizing the 15 January information-gathering session and will call upon individual members to assist with specific elements of the organizational work. As always, Agency staff will provide support where appropriate.

John Carroll
Chair, Vermont State Board of Education
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