

Testimony on Proficiency-Based Learning in Vermont

On many measures of educational quality, Vermont ranks among the most effective state systems in the U.S. Indeed, according to one prominent analysis, if Vermont were treated as a nation in international comparisons, it would rank in the top 5 among 33 developed nations in the world for proficiency in reading.¹ And Vermont's high school graduation rate is among the highest in the country.² In contrast to its high school graduation rate, however, barely half of Vermont's graduates transition directly to two- or four-year colleges, ranking Vermont 42nd in the country.³ Vermont's youth on average may score well on standardized tests and graduate, but startling numbers drop out of the postsecondary pipeline, resulting in stark social and economic costs to individuals, families, and the state alike.

A significant disparity exists between the skills and knowledge traditionally assessed in secondary schools and those associated with success in college and careers.⁴ Research has identified four main factors that contribute to college readiness:

- **Cognitive Strategies.** The thinking skills students need to learn material at a deeper level and to make connections among subjects.
- **Content Knowledge.** The big ideas and organizing concepts of the academic disciplines along with the attitudes students have toward learning the subject area.
- **Learning Skills.** Student ownership of learning that connects motivation, goal setting, self-regulation, metacognition, and persistence with techniques such as study skills, note taking, and technology skills.
- **Transition Knowledge and Skills.** The aspiration to attend college, the ability to choose the right college and to apply and secure necessary resources, an understanding of postsecondary education expectations and norms, and the capacity to advocate for one's self in a complex institutional context.⁵

Focused on these outcomes, a wide range of researchers and organizations concluded that high schools must establish systems that yield 1) a keen understanding of individual learners; 2) flexible learning pathways responsive to individual students' needs and interests; and 3) personalized, ongoing assessment of that learning.⁶ These same practices help address socioeconomic, ethnic and racial inequity and promote deeper student engagement in high school, including among students at risk of dropping out of school.⁷ Montpelier has advocated for a remarkably consistent vision for effective education. The 1968 report, *Vermont Design for Learning*, the 2002 report *High Schools on the Move: Renewing Vermont's Commitment to Quality Secondary Education*, and in 2013, *Act 77, An Act Relating to Encouraging Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion*.

The combination of Act 77 and the related updates to the Educational Quality Standards established three pillars of personalized learning: 1) personalized learning plans (through Act 77); 2) flexible pathways to learning (through Act 77); and 3) proficiency-based assessment (through the EQS). Table 1 below summarizes some of the limitations of not focusing on all three pillars simultaneously.

Proficiency-based learning systems typically share some common characteristics: clearly articulated competencies focused on readiness success in college, career, and civic life; task-neutral scoring criteria applicable across a wide range of in-school and out-of-school learning; portfolios and/or exhibitions of evidence of student proficiency to authentic audiences; multiple opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate mastery until proficiency is achieved; students to take ownership over their own learning; and reflection is a critical component of the performance assessment process.⁸

Table 1. Interdependence of the Three Pillars.

The Pillars of Personalized Learning					Results in
Personalized Learning Plans	+	Flexible Pathways	+	Proficiency-Based Assessment	= Engaging, authentic, personalized learning
Personalized Learning Plans	+	Flexible Pathways	+	Proficiency- Based Assessment	= Loss of engagement, authenticity, student voice
Personalized Learning Plans	+	Flexible Pathways	+	Proficiency- Based Assessment	= Loss of differentiated, ubiquitous learning opportunities
Personalized Learning Plans	+	Flexible Pathways	+	Proficiency-Based Assessment	= Loss of accountability, equity, community support

The interdependence of PLPs, flexible pathways, and proficiency-based assessment necessarily poses challenges for implementation. But it can also offer solutions. For instance, regular student-led PLP conferences promote student learning and responsibility while also informing families about what proficiency-based learning looks like. And students engaged in real-world, flexible pathways to learning legitimize proficiency-based assessment. Yet reforming a century old assessment system requires enormous energy and commitment. The effort is easier to sustain with a frank appraisal of the traditional system in light of current needs. Stiggins observed a number of “shameful realities” associated with traditional assessment that a reformed system should rectify:

- Schools Have a New Mission Which Demands a New Assessment Vision [to prepare all students for career, college, and civic life demands a shift from sorting and ranking to every student succeeds]
- We Have Failed to Clearly or Completely Define "Academic Success."
- We Have Never Really Cared About the Quality of Our Assessments.
- Our Communication of Assessment Results Has Rarely Been Truly Effective.
- Until Recently, We Have Not Wanted All Students to Succeed.⁹

While resisting change is natural and often prudent, it is important to identify the deficits of specific practices in the current system, those practices that are not worth preserving. The perceived benefit of a change can be in relation to oneself, such as the individual student, for instance, or a parent’s concern for their own child.¹⁰ Or the perceived benefit of the change can be in relation to society, such as the welfare of other or all students, and the future of communities and the economy.

Vermont’s youth face a future for which the current system of secondary schooling was never designed. And in spite of Vermont’s world class ranking on high-profile standardized tests, there is compelling evidence that the current system poorly serves many students. Fortunately, research and experience in the field charts a course forward. And it is a course Vermont anticipated decades ago.

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¹ Hanushek, E. A., Peterson, P. E., & Woessmann, L. (2014, May 13). *U.S. Students from Educated Families Lag in International Tests*. Education Next. <https://www.educationnext.org/us-students-educated-families-lag-international-tests/>

² The National Center for Higher Education Management System. (2020). *State Profile Report*. <http://www.higheredinfo.org/stateprofile/index.php?>

³The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. (2020). *College Participation Rates: College-Going Rates of High School Graduates - Directly from High School*. <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=63&year=2014&level=nation&mode=graph&state=0>

⁴National Research Council. 2012. *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13398>; Hart Research Associates. (2015). *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success Selected Findings from Online Surveys of Employers and College Students*. Conducted on Behalf of the Association of American Colleges & Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-results>

⁵ Conley, D.T. 2014. *A New Era for Educational Assessment. Students at the Center: Deeper Learning Research Series*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-New-Era-for-Educational-Assessment-092414_0-2.pdf

⁶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018). *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24783>; National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2011). *Breaking Ranks: A Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement*. Reston, VA: Author; Dary, T., Pickeral, T., Shumer, R., & Williams, A. (2016). *Weaving student engagement into the core practices of schools: A National Dropout Prevention Center/Network position paper*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/studentengagement/student-engagement-2016-09.pdf; Immordino-Yang, M.H., Darling-Hammond, L., Krone, C. (2018). *The Brain Basis for Integrated Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. How emotions and social relationships drive learning*. National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. The Aspen Institute. https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/09/Aspen_research_FINAL_web-9.20.pdf

⁷ Guha, R., Wagner, T., Darling-Hammond, L., Taylor, T., & Curtis, D. (2018). *The Promise of Performance Assessments: Innovations in High School Learning and Higher Education Admissions*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.; Martinez, M., et al. (n.d.) *Reimagining College Access: Performance Assessments From K-12 Through Higher Education*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Hernández, L., et al. (2019). *Deeper Learning Networks: Taking Student-Centered Learning and Equity to Scale*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Noguera, P. A. (2018). *Deeper Learning: An Essential Component of Equity*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Choi, Y.W. (2017). *Oakland's Graduate Capstone Project: It's About Equity*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Dary, T., Pickeral, T., Shumer, R., & Williams, A. (2016). *Weaving student engagement into the core practices of schools: A National Dropout Prevention Center/Network position paper*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/studentengagement/student-engagement-2016-09.pdf

⁸ Guha, R., Wagner, T., Darling-Hammond, L., Taylor, T., & Curtis, D. (2018). *The promise of performance assessments: Innovations in high school learning and college admission*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Promise_Performance_Assessments_REPORT.pdf; *The Power of Performance Assessments: Oakland Unified's Graduate Capstone Project*. (October 27, 2017). Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/power-performance-assessments-video>; Kaul, M. (2019). *Keeping Students at the Center with Culturally Relevant Performance Assessments*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/keeping-students-center-culturally-relevant-performance-assessments>; Great Schools Partnership (n.d.). *Scoring criteria design guide*. <https://www.learningpersonalized.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Scoring-Criteria-Design-Guide.pdf>

⁹ Stiggins, R. (2017). *The perfect assessment system*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.

¹⁰ Frankin, A., Buckmiller, T., & Kruse, J. (2016). *Vocal and Vehement: Understanding Parents' Aversion to Standards-Based Grading*. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 4(11), 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v4i11.1923>