

To: Members of the Vermont State Board of Education
From: David J. Ruff, executive director, Great Schools Partnership
Re: Testimony to the VT State Board of Education regarding its inquiry about proficiency-based learning
Date: January 21, 2020

My name is David Ruff and I am the executive director of the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), a non-profit organization that supports educators in creating more equitable learning for all students. Our work focuses on secondary schools in New England. GSP also coordinates the New England Secondary School Consortium, which brings together state education agencies from all New England states. Over 190 schools actively participate in its League of Innovative Schools to network, exchange best practices, and otherwise work toward a more equitable, rigorous, and personalized education system that prepares every student for college, careers, and citizenship. Currently, there are 25 schools in Vermont that participate; additionally, we work on the ground with five Vermont districts in a coaching capacity to achieve the goal of more equitable education.

Proficiency is a strategy that is being implemented across the country. A recent Excel in Education report noted that there are no states with state policies that would prohibit a school from implementing proficiency-based learning. In its most recent scan of state education policies, the Aurora Institute reports that all but one state has policies that encourage, support, or require some level of proficiency.

Vermont has taken a more cohesive approach to this question than many states, and to the benefit of their students. I'd argue that Vermont has taken a personalized learning approach that combines proficiency and the development of multiple pathways for student learning, including such strategies as robust Career and Technical Education programs, early college, dual enrollment, internships, etc. This dual approach is fundamentally important for equity. Proficiency alone simply requires clearly articulating learning standards students are expected to gain, but doesn't require any level of differentiation. While pathways create the opportunity for increased personalization, without clearly defined and collaboratively develop performance indicators and scoring criteria, we face the likelihood that varied learning options also lead to varied levels of rigor and value and the consequences of growing inequity. Only by combining both are we able to provide students with personalized learning that ensures equity.

It is impossible to create a clear causal relationship between the efforts of the six New England states with proficiency and large scale student attainment gains over the past ten years, but we would be remiss not to note that as this effort has gained momentum across the region, the four-year graduation rate has increased 8 percentage points and the six-year graduation rate has increased to just under 90%. In Vermont, the graduation rate—already notably high when this work started—has increased almost 4 percentage points. And regionally, the six-year graduation rate gap between economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students has decreased 5 percentage points, over a 25% decrease in this measurement gap. Clearly, these efforts have not negatively impacted these students.

Finally, there are many lessons we have learned as states have collaborated on this work. I would briefly note the following:

- 1) Successful schools have limited the number of learning standards students must demonstrate for graduation. These schools have a fairly large number of standards that are used to design

and implement the curriculum and a smaller number of standards that are assessed regularly; typically, there are an even smaller number of standards to which students are held accountable for graduation.

- 2) While we highly encourage personalized learning, we caution against excessive individualized and isolated learning. Much learning is best undertaken in collaboration with other minds, not in isolation. Success requires bringing these two components together.
- 3) Transferrable skills matter, and have been heavily influential for both teachers and students in Vermont. These are the outcomes most noted by businesses and educational institutions as being connected to future student success. Vermont educators have listened to this wisdom.
- 4) Once graduation standards are clear to all, students often exceed these standards in areas of personal interest. Not only does this add to the overall learning of students, but when students feel a sense of agency the learning that results is often deeper and exceeds what is expected of them.
- 5) College admissions isn't the issue many claim; we have received signed statements from 85 New England institutions of higher education, including many in Vermont—the University of Vermont and Middlebury College, for example—that say proficiency-based diplomas do not disadvantage applicants. While scholarships present a hurdle largely because there are so many available, each with its own requirements, our experience has shown that, in most cases, a conversation between a school and those administering the scholarship (or a written explanation of the school's grading and reporting systems) can successfully resolve any concerns.
- 6) The success of a proficiency-based system requires providing teachers sufficient time and resources over an extended period of time. Time and resources are easy enough to understand; consistency, however, is often overlooked. Teachers are amazingly adept. This can be seen on a daily basis throughout Vermont. Given a clear picture of expectations that don't change, teachers make amazing progress in a challenging work environment. When we look at successful large-scale change in education across the country, what we see doesn't change: It takes years to implement a new system, and the supports are maintained consistently over time despite changes in governors, legislatures, education chiefs, and state boards of education. That consistency is essential to the success of any large-scale change.

Overall, I would give high praise to the entire state of Vermont for their work over the past ten years. This work has been comprehensive, thoughtful, and supportive. Through statute and regulation, the state has created clear expectations and developed support for implementation. But there is still work to do and progress to make. Let us stay the course and provide the consistency Vermont educators so desperately need.