

**To:** Vermont State Board of Education  
**From:** Mike McRaith, Vermont Principals' Association: Assistant Executive Director  
**Date:** Written Summary, 1/16/20 to Suzanne Sprague ([Suzanne.Sprague@vermont.gov](mailto:Suzanne.Sprague@vermont.gov))  
**Date of Presentation:** 1/21/20 (Rutland High School)

"If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."

— John Dewey<sup>1</sup>

Dear Board Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective. I have been fortunate to see the work of proficiency based learning from many angles and levels. I was in the initial training that the Agency of Education offered in 2014-2015. From there, I helped to lead Montpelier High School to full implementation of proficiency based learning, grading, and reporting in the fall of 2016. While there is a need for natural continuous improvement at Montpelier High School and in my own learning and leadership, that implementation has gone well for nearly four years. Part of Montpelier High School's story includes being featured in a video series for a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on proficiency based learning, taken by thousands of educational leaders from around the world. In addition to my time as a principal, I have served as a workshop presenter, a consultant, and as an instructor for the Castleton Continuing Education Course titled, The Big Three-- Proficiency, ACT 77, and MTSS.

Over this past New Year's Holiday, I had the chance to visit my extended family in Wisconsin. While visiting there, I took a work phone call about proficiency based learning. My 15 year old niece had overheard my conversation and asked:

"Are you going to be speaking about proficiency based learning or something?"

I could hear the passion in her voice when she asked the question. I wasn't sure if that passion was going to be **for** or **against**.

Me: "Yes, why?"

Niece: "Oh GOOD! Can't you PLEASE do something about that HERE too?!"

My 15 year old niece's experience, while personal and anecdotal, is an interesting case study. You see, she moved from a high school in Maine to a high school in Wisconsin this fall. Having only attended schools that were steeped in proficiency based learning practices in Maine, she was surprised and irritated to find her new high school in Wisconsin going about business in a more traditional manner.

Me: "What's the difference?"

Niece: "Well, it seems like everything is just memorizing here, we don't actually use what we are learning. And I never get a rubric, no syllabus with goals, nothing like that."

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, J., & Dewey, E. (1915). *Schools of tomorrow*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

She went on in a thoughtful manner, reflecting on the differences and urging me to, “Do something about it.” While this example is an anecdote, I hope it reemphasizes the points we’ve heard today regarding the core strengths of proficiency based learning. When done with support and fidelity, proficiency based learning means having clear standards, a skills-based learning approach, feedback on learning, and criterion based rubrics for assessing learning.

You have also heard how proficiency based learning, by naming essential-skill-based-standards in each learning experience, helps to support ACT 77 and make feasible an increase in non-traditional settings, extended learning for deep and unique projects, more passion-based learning, and all of the multitude of pathways that continue to develop and strengthen within ACT 77-Flexible Pathways. The requirement in EQS for proficiency based learning is a core driver for supporting the development of those opportunities and making the flexibility more possible.

School leaders have been asked to lead a multitude of complex school and community changes in the past five years. Schools leaders have worked to respond and implement with fidelity: ACT 77, EQS (including proficiency based learning), EQR (new measures of success & review process), MTSS, ACT 166, ACT 46, new and vital school safety expectations, and most recently ACT 1 & ACT 173, among other initiatives. I believe most school leaders see the value of these laws and policies and thus have worked beyond routine hours and efforts to serve Vermont students at the highest levels through the complexities of change and growth. Given the scope of that work, the fears that arise with change, and leading in a world of nearly instant access for critique of leaders and related rapid media flurries--there is no surprise that the implementation of this work has both perceived and actual variance. No matter the variance in community understanding, timeline, or learning curve, districts have responded with nearly universal voice in their dedication to hold students harmless through transitions and change, the leaders’ willingness to change and improve in what has to be an iterative process of growth, and in their integrity to serve Vermont students by taking the right path to the future, not just an easy path to a stagnant status quo.

I urge this Board and all Vermont schools to hold steady to their expectation of proficiency based learning. Doing anything else will be like asking a construction crew to get a difficult and vitally important bridge built, and then five years later asking them to not bother finishing it and in fact, go ahead and tear it down. It may be met by with relief for a few, but utter disbelief and cynicism by most. I thank you again for the chance to share my perspective.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Core Tenant #1: Proficiency Based Learning means having clarity about what students will learn.
- Core Tenant #2: Proficiency Based Learning means have criterion based rubrics to determine progress and demonstrate learning.
- Ignoring those two core tenets means ignoring well established best practices, opening the door to lower & inconsistent learning outcomes, and likely less attention to transferable/21st century skills and our growing dynamic flexible pathways for learning.