

**Summary of Testimony before the Vermont State Board of Education, Tuesday, January 21 2020**

**Introduction:** I come before the board as both an advocate for the basic principles of Proficiency-Based Learning (PBL), and as a serious critic of certain specific implementations of PBL promoted by some schools and education consultants. In presenting to the board, I am not speaking for VUHS but rather sharing my personal judgements and trying to summarize the collective experiences shared with me by many teachers and students across Vermont.

**The bolded points below represent the main ideas of my presentation:**

- 1) The **basic principles of PBL are not usually controversial.**
- 2) **Controversy appears with the specific implementation of PBL principles.**
- 3) **Controversy is worsened when any one approach to PBL is idealized.**
- 4) **Research support for any specific PBL implementation is extremely limited.**
- 5) **There is no one best approach to proficiency-based learning.**
- 6) **General claims about the value and impact of specific PBL practices should be viewed skeptically.**
- 7) **All PBL systems must find balance between competing principles.**

**Some specific areas of concern in some PBL implementations:**

Risk of masking fundamental needs by focusing on grading scales or reporting systems without improving curriculum and instruction.

Risk of unintentionally encouraging low effort and procrastination through extended time and low weight early assessments.

Risk of misleading students and parents by combining a wide range of ability levels into one category of "proficient."

Risk of lowered student achievement and grade inflation if robust intervention systems to support students are not in place before transition to PBL.

Risk of inadequate college preparation by reducing subject area expertise to abstract "transferrable" skills.

### **Statewide Needs for Implementing and Improving Proficiency-Based Learning**

School and District administrators and teachers need additional training in how to facilitate and implement significant institutional change.

Training and support must be long term and more consistent than sporadic one-time grant funded opportunities.

Teachers need fewer general PBL lectures or workshops and more time to work with colleagues, especially within their subject areas, to develop and refine nuts and bolts PBL practices in their systems.

Teachers need significantly more time during the day under PBL to revise curriculum, provide detailed feedback to students, and carry out interventions to support students not yet achieving proficiency.

**Professional Experience:** My secondary education career spans seventeen years, after teaching college for ten. I have master's degrees in Anthropology and English. Today, I teach English at VUHS. I have supported PBL initiatives for over a decade in various school and district leadership roles. I received training through a variety of PBL workshops, courses, and organizations, including the League of Innovative Schools and the Great Schools Partnership, and have been active in the VUHS team designing and coordinating our current PBL system. Since 2016, as a Rowland Foundation Fellow I have discussed PBL with students and faculty around the state.

### **I will reference the academic paper below in my presentation:**

Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., Stevens, M.T., Welsh, M. E. (2016). A Century of Grading Research: Meaning and Value in the Most Common Educational Measure. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 803-848.