



A Middle and High School Learning Community

January 16, 2020

I want to thank the Chair, John Carroll, and the members of the Board of Education for inviting me to speak about Proficiency-Based Learning, PBL. I will be speaking about how we evaluate our implementation of PBL at U-32 and Washington Central.

I assumed the principalship at U-32 in the fall of 2014, just as Act 77 and the Educational Quality Standards were being rolled out from the AOE, and while there were clear mandates and timelines, there was little initial guidance or support from the AOE. In the beginning of my learning about proficiency and personalized learning, I quickly felt the need to have some criteria that I, and the school, could use to benchmark our performance and identify our strengths and weaknesses. I found that in the [Global Best Practices](#) published by NESSC along with a companion [research guide](#). Global Best Practices gave us an assessment tool where we could reflect on all aspects of our school programs and systems and therefore build a plan for improving our weaknesses while leveraging our strengths.

Having clear criteria for evaluating our work is a foundational element of any PBL system. Students need clear learning targets and so do schools. I want to point out the importance of having criteria and how it helped shape what we do as a school district.

In Global Best Practices the first dimension is Equity, an area of high importance to our local Board. When we first evaluated our work, we identified that our students performing below grade level were struggling to catch up to their peers, our discipline program was more punitive rather than restorative, and that areas of our curricula did not promote high expectations and engagement for all students. This led us to build new interventions in reading and math for all of our students, implement Restorative Practices schoolwide, and begin revising our pre-K through 12th grade curriculum to increase rigor and challenge. We are still developing our systems and programs and we strive to have a school that has equitable opportunities for all students. We continually reassess our practices against the Equity rubric to see what progress we are making and what remains to be done.

Another dimension in Global Best Practices is Assessment Practices. Our evaluation of our program helped us see that we did not have common scoring criteria or rubrics, and when students struggled to demonstrate learning we seldom changed the reassessment strategies. We recognized a need to provide scoring criteria that was clear to students and provided useful feedback for their growth. We developed a summer “curriculum camp” where we began to

develop learning scales and rubrics that were aligned pre-K through 12th grade and we added professional development to improve formative assessment.

The final dimension I would highlight is Time + Space. We identified a need when we first used Global Best Practices, yet we did not address all our weaknesses at the time. We did pilot and then fully implement writing conferences with support from a Rowland fellowship. We have tried to create more flexibility in the length of time students are in intervention classes. We provided summer school, and we built in a time for re-teaching or enrichment during the school day. We try to provide teachers as much planning time as possible for working teams, but we have not yet tackled the larger issues of a flexible school day and/or year although we did start negotiating teacher contracts to include more flexibility of teacher time. Overall, school is still a very timebound system because of contracts, bus schedules, career center schedules and state defined number of school days and hours.

I hope that these examples show the importance of clear criteria. As the [AOE Research Brief](#) on grading practices states, “In a proficiency-based system, the purpose of grading is to let all stakeholders... understand what students know and how they perform in relation to expected learning outcomes.” When asked about how we rank against other schools, I hesitate, because while U-32 may be stronger than another school in one area, we are weaker in another. Criteria allow us to see our strengths and weaknesses and since every school is different in its own assessment of its progress we can work together on areas of need and learn from the strengths of others. More than anything else, I would encourage the AOE and Board to consider adopting clear criteria for success, like Global Best Practices, that all schools are held to.

At U-32 we believe that a PBL system can help us achieve the highest levels of performance. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with the Vermont State Board of Education about proficiency-based learning.

Respectfully Submitted,

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