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The Vermont Framework for Proficiency: Participatory Action Research

Introduction

Beginning in 2021, the Student Pathways Division at the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), in partnership with supervisory unions/districts (SU/SD), has been using an action research approach called Participatory Action Research (PAR) to develop and refine the Vermont Framework for Proficiency and support SU/SDs in meeting the Education Quality Standards.

What is Participatory Action Research?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach that involves inquiry, research, and reflective practices to empower participants as active agents in the decision-making process and support continual improvement. According to [The Institute of Development](#),

PAR focuses on social change that promotes democracy and challenges inequality; is [context-specific](#), often targeted on the needs of a particular group; is an iterative cycle of research, action, and reflection; and often seeks to 'liberate' participants to have a greater awareness of their situation in order to take action.

What are the Benefits of Participatory Action Research?

PAR legitimizes and prioritizes the expertise and perspectives that come from lived experience and situated knowledge, particularly among those that have been historically marginalized. In education research, a PAR approach typically centers the wisdom and experience of students (or school-age youth) and educators, positioning them as architects of research rather than objects of study. ([Galletta and Torre, 2019](#))

Participatory Action Research offers an approach that can lead to meaningful and lasting improvements in educational systems by actively involving a variety of stakeholders in the research and decision-making process. PAR ensures that the work is relevant to the specific needs of an educational community and therefore can lead to solutions that are more likely to be effective and sustainable. Additionally, PAR generates resources that are informed by the knowledge and experience of the participants. The perspective of educators is an essential



component that contributes to a deeper understanding of issues and solutions.

Supporting the Implementation of the Framework for Proficiency

The Framework for Proficiency (Framework) supports a systemic approach to PK-12 teaching and learning that is proficiency-based, student-centered, and connected across contexts (e.g., schools, Career Technical Education and Adult Education and Literacy centers, etc.). It describes the relationship among the [Vermont Portrait of a Graduate](#), [personalized learning and planning](#), [flexible pathways](#), [Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements as well as the related Critical Proficiencies and Priority Performance Indicators](#), content literacies, [performance assessments](#), proficiency scales, and [proficiency-based grading and reporting](#).

Beginning in 2021, members of the Student Pathways division at the AOE engaged in two-year cycles of embedded work with one or two SU/SDs at a time to support advancing their implementation of proficiency-based learning. Together, AOE staff and SU/SD leaders and educators collaborate to define the focus of the collaborative work (i.e., what problem are we trying to solve), set goals (i.e., what do we want to accomplish?), develop and refine resources (i.e., what are we learning along the way?), and identify implementation strategies (i.e., how do we put what we've learned into action?). Through this partnership, both local resources are developed or improved as well as components of the Framework are made available to the larger Vermont educational community.

What Does PAR Look Like in Action?

SU/SD leadership typically reaches out to the Student Pathways Division and requests support related to components of Vermont's Framework for Proficiency. Leadership from both the AOE and the SU/SD meet to determine the focus of the participatory action research, clarify roles and responsibilities, and develop a schedule to support predictable planning and debriefing sessions. Teacher leaders are identified who co-plan and co-facilitate sessions with AOE staff related to the area(s) identified for improvement. A kick-off meeting, ideally facilitated by the superintendent or other district leader, is used to introduce the PAR initiative and AOE colleagues, engage educators and outline the work for the coming year. Work sessions take place at regularly scheduled times and check-ins with leadership occur throughout the year to ensure that the needs of educators are being met, to identify any needs or problem-solve issues that arise, and to reflect on learning and progress toward the goals identified.

If you would like to learn more or are interested in how a PAR partnership might support your SU/SD, please contact the Student Pathways Division and identify your focus area [through this form](#).