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Key Characteristics of a Proficiency-Based Learning System of Education

Proficiency-based learning is a significant paradigm shift in education that requires learners to demonstrate competence in targeted knowledge, skills, and abilities before progressing to the next level or challenge. Students not only gain the skills, abilities, and knowledge required in an area of study, but more importantly, those necessary to be successful in college, career, and civic life. Proficiency-based learning is designed to identify and address gaps in order to provide equitable learning opportunities for each and every student. This is in contrast to traditional systems which advance students based on seat time and grades.

This document can be used to provoke important discussions among educators regarding their school system's strengths as well as areas in need of improvement in relation to proficiency-based learning. Key characteristics along with related indicators of proficiency-based systems are identified.

The following protocol* provides a strategy for guiding this work:

1. Independently, review the Key Characteristics along with their descriptions. (5 minutes)
2. As a large group, select one of the Key Characteristics to focus on. (5 minutes)
3. Independently, use stoplight highlighting to identify areas of strength (green), priority areas in need of improvement (pink), and areas that are not a priority (yellow). Record evidence for areas of strength in the first column. (15 minutes)
4. In small groups, compare highlights and evidence. Discuss similarities and differences. Select two or three indicators as priorities. (10 minutes)
5. As a large group, share priorities, look for patterns, and identify two or three indicators that the group agrees are priorities. Identify action steps in the third column related to the priorities that are identified. (15 minutes)
6. Debrief process. (5 minutes)
7. This process can be repeated for other Key Characteristics.

The Indicators are not in any particular order. Readers will notice overlap between Key Characteristics because they are not mutually exclusive.

* Times and the number of indicators selected may vary based on the needs of the group and the context.

Key Characteristic: Equity

Equity requires an environment that fosters strong social and emotional development and encourages high achievement for each and every learner.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leaders, educators, and students appreciate and celebrate diversity. 2. Each and every student knows what is expected and has clear targets for success. 3. Each and every student works with educators to identify where they are now and sets goals (academic, behavioral, social-emotional) to move to the next level. 4. Each and every student has access to a variety of learning opportunities and resources, including Dual Enrollment, Early College, internships, work-based learning, Career & Technical Education and virtual/blended learning. 5. Learning and opportunity gaps are addressed through high expectations and tiered levels of support for each and every student. 6. Each and every student is college and career ready upon graduation. 7. Leaders build relationships, develop the culture, and provide the structure and organization necessary for enabling all students to meet high expectations. 	

Key Characteristic: Culture

The culture is composed of the beliefs, relationships, perceptions, and attitudes that shape and influence the way a school system functions.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leaders, educators, and students are committed to equity as a core belief. 2. Learning is a social enterprise; relationships are essential. 3. Each and every student is challenged with high expectations and can be successful in attaining proficiency. 4. Pursuit of personal aspirations is expected for each and every student. 5. Students drive their learning with the guidance of educators, leaders and facilitators. 6. Leaders, educators and students embrace and embody a growth mindset in their learning. 7. Students, educators and leaders use collaborative techniques to focus and advance learning. 8. Productive challenge, deliberate practice, self-assessment, reflection, and discovery are part of the learning process. 9. Students, peers, educators, leaders, community members, and others are viewed as sources of knowledge. 10. Community partnerships foster learning. 	

Key Characteristic: Standards & Proficiencies

Standards and proficiencies identify the explicit expectations that students need to meet in order to graduate.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proficiencies are explicit, measurable performance indicators based on standards and/or bundles of standards. 2. Standards-based instruction, assessment, and reporting incorporate the standards adopted by the Vermont State Board of Education including: Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts, National Core Arts Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, SHAPE (health and physical education), Global Citizenship Standards, and National Educational Technology Standards for students. (EQS 2120.5) 3. Transferable skills are taught, practiced, and assessed as a broad set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are believed to be critically important to success in today's world. 4. SU/SD must determine proficiency-based graduation requirement, including academic content areas and transferable skills, for students graduating in the 2019-2020 school year (EQS 2120.5). 5. Evidence is necessary for students to demonstrate proficiency. 	

Key Characteristic: Learning: Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are responsive to the needs and interests of learners.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Educators utilize advances in brain research to provide information about how people learn and inform instructional practice. 2. Curriculum is a collaboration between leaders, educators, and students. 3. Curriculum is culturally and socially relevant and emphasizes real-world concepts and applications. 4. Instruction for student learning uses Universal Design for Learning so that attaining proficiency is achievable for each and every student. 5. Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems assess the standards approved by the State Board of Education (EQS 2123.2) to provide students, parents/guardians, and educators with meaningful information regarding student progress. 6. The emphasis is on deep student learning rather than content coverage. 7. The educator activates deep learning by providing feedback, triggering the next learning challenge, and continuously developing the learning environment. 8. Learning is constant, time is the variable; the time needed for students to demonstrate proficiency of graduation requirements may vary. 9. Transferable skills are assessed and reported to demonstrate proficiency of college and career readiness. 10. Students have a proactive role in designing their own education. 11. Students can be working at different levels on proficiency-based learning progressions. 	

Key Characteristic: Structure/Organization/Scheduling

All of the organizational factors that influence the process of learning make up a system’s structure.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leaders support structural changes necessary for the success of a proficiency-based learning system. 2. Structures are in place to allow for collaborative meeting time for educators, scheduling of classes for students, organization of the physical environment, interdisciplinary opportunities, and flexible pathways. 3. Professional learning for educators is personalized, relevant, active, collaborative, sustainable and allows for feedback and reflection. 4. Student schedules are flexible and allow for tiered levels of support, personalized learning, community involvement and in-depth learning. 5. Time is embedded during the school day for special and general educators to collaborate on instruction and assessment. 6. Students are dynamically grouped by interest, ability, or content and also for behavioral support, if needed. 	

Key Characteristic: Reporting

Reporting happens throughout the year and communicates evidence of learning to students, parents/guardians, and community members.

Strengths	Indicators	Areas for Improvement
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Feedback is frequent, timely, and used to inform student learning and instructional decisions.2. Proficiency-based report cards accurately reflect a student's learning progress and achievement.3. Content grades are reported separately from behavior or transferable skills.4. Proficiency level, rather than a percentile average, is reported.5. There is a continuous, ongoing reporting system in place that allows students and their parents/guardians to track progress over time.	

Resources:

[Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching](#)

[Five Key Shifts for Mastery Learning Startup](#)

[Global Best Practices: An Internationally Benchmarked Self-Assessment Tool](#)

[Reaching the Tipping Point: Insights on Advancing Competency Education in New England](#)