

What is proficiency-based learning?

The Education Quality Standards (EQS) state: *‘Proficiency-based learning’ and ‘proficiency-based graduation’ refer to systems of instruction, assessment, grading and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma (EQS).*

Essentially, this means honoring the commitment we’ve made to our Vermont learners that what they learn in school they can apply outside of school so that they are successful in their career and college.

In a proficiency-based system:

1. There are clear expectations for learning (aligned to EQS 2120.5: Curriculum Content):

- Proficiencies based on transferable skills and standards adopted by the State Board of Education include explicit, measurable learning targets aimed at empowering students;
- Learning outcomes emphasize proficiencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions. (Patrick & Sturgis, 2013)

2. Student progress is measured and used to inform next steps in the learning process (aligned to EQS 2123.2: Local Assessment Systems):

- Assessment is meaningful and is a learning experience for students;
- Students receive timely, differentiated feedback and support based on their individual learning needs;
- Students are empowered to demonstrate what they know and can do in multiple ways;
- Students advance (e.g., to new experiences, content and grade levels) upon demonstrating proficiency, not based on hours in a seat;
- Learning related to clear expectations is the goal, recognizing that students will vary in how and when they meet expectations.

3. Personalized learning opportunities include flexible pathways to proficiency-based graduation requirements in which (aligned to EQS 2120.2: Flexible Pathways; 2120.4: PLPs; Act 77):

- Students take responsibility for their learning and assessment;
- Students collect evidence of their learning over time through personalized learning plans;
- Students’ personalized learning plans reflect opportunities for flexibility in where, when and how they learn.

Critical goals for proficiency-based learning are the elimination of persistent achievement and opportunity gaps and the expansion of opportunities to extend learning. Proficiency-based learning can provide equitable, relevant, and rigorous learning opportunities that engage all students and foster the skills, knowledge, and habits of work necessary to be successful in the 21st Century.

Why is proficiency-based learning important?

“One consistent finding of academic research is that high expectations are the most reliable driver of high student achievement, even in students who do not have a history of successful achievement.” ~Doug Lemov

Proficiency-based systems are characterized by a sustained focus on student learning, application of learning to new contexts, and enabling all students to meet high expectations. This is a significant change from traditional practice where not every student was provided the opportunity to meet high expectations, nor provided the opportunity to extend their learning and apply it to novel situations. In a proficiency-based, personalized system with flexible pathways, educators are putting into place the structures, supports, and

instructional practices necessary for every student to succeed. Educators are asking questions such as, Did the student actually learn what was taught? If not, what strategies or supports can be put into place to help the learner? If students demonstrate proficiency, how can they be challenged to strengthen a skill or deepen their level of understanding?

In Vermont, we need students to graduate from high school with the skills, knowledge, and abilities that allow them to continue their education or enter the workforce and receive a livable wage. Additionally, jobs that can be automated are disappearing at a rapid rate. This increases the importance of a diploma that certifies a student has demonstrated proficiency related to graduation requirements that can then lead to career opportunities in the 21st Century.

A well-educated citizenry is essential for the health of our Vermont communities regardless of the path students take after graduation. The world has changed significantly in the last ten years. Technology allows us to do things we once only dreamed about. Education needs to innovate and respond to these changes. In order to succeed in the 21st Century, our students need to be prepared to work in a global economy, communicate effectively through social networks, use technology to access reliable information, and problem solve critical issues. Those are just a few of the challenges facing our graduates.

Finally, at the heart of proficiency-based learning is equity. Educational equity means that every student has “access to the resources, opportunities and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, whatever their race, gender/identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, family background, or family income may be.” (Adapted from CCSSO, Leading for Equity) Every child deserves the opportunity to succeed. That is what sustains healthy and economically viable communities, and that is the goal of proficiency-based learning.

Why is the shift to proficiency-based learning challenging?

Proficiency-based learning is an adaptive change; it’s not just a small tweak to what has been done in the past. Adaptive change requires new learning as well as changes in behavior, culture, and beliefs. Adaptive change takes place over time and requires systems to evolve.

Technical changes, such as proficiency-based grading and transcripts, seem to be getting the most attention in some parts of the state. These challenges can be resolved with guidance from experts, and solutions may vary depending upon context. Some schools are using conversion charts to translate proficiency-based grades into traditional letter grades with success. Others are using a proficiency-based transcript that is complimented by a traditional transcript. The [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#) is modernizing transcripts by changing them from “a flat, two-dimensional accounting of student time spent on single subjects and a listing of grades without context, to an interactive, digital transcript that highlights mastery of both content and interdisciplinary skills.” There are many strategies that supervisory districts/unions can pursue to address these technical challenges.

How Act 77 and Proficiency-Based Learning Work Together

Vermont is viewed across the country as a leader in innovative practices in education and an advocate for all children. In 2013, the legislature was innovative and demonstrated forethought to provide multiple pathways to graduation through Act 77. High school certainly does not work for all students. The Vermont State Board of Education was equally innovative to provide the necessary regulatory support to strengthen the impact of Act 77 through the inclusion of proficiency-based learning within the Education Quality Standards. Working together, flexible pathways to graduation with proficiency-based graduation requirements and clear expectations for those requirements ensure that students following flexible pathways are held to the same level of rigor as those following more traditional paths.