

Testimony
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State Board of Education Inquiry Re Proficiency-Based Learning
January 21, 2020
Rutland High School

The legacy of Acts 60, 66, and 46 has been a school finance system so complex that voters don't understand what they are voting for.

Similarly complex, school grading systems are befuddling students, parents, even teachers. It's not the doing of the Education Quality Standards (EQS). It is instead a model favored by the Maine-based Great Schools Partnership, funded largely by Bill and Melinda Gates. The local education leaderships grabbed onto this model in the name of the EQS, and even less accurately, Act 77. Members of these local education bureaucracies have misled the public, including teachers, into thinking that Montpelier was requiring this model of proficiency-based grading.

This Great Schools-Gates model is the 1-4 model. Some schools have .1 increments. My school has .5 increments. Some schools have just the whole numbers. Generally homework is formative and doesn't count. Summative assessments can be retaken. Projects have extended deadlines.

In my social studies department, we assess 22 different convoluted performance indicators. Some several times. Some a time or two. Some are never assessed. An overall average of 2.5 gets a passing grade. In some schools a passing grade is even lower. Our graduation system is still based on credits earned.

I dare say schools with this model, given the gaps and redundancies they are likely to have, do not have "proficiency-based graduation requirements" and will be out of compliance with the spirit and letter of EQS.

We have a 50-30-20 decaying average system in our school, which means the last time an indicator is assessed, it counts 50 percent. There's one person in the district who can explain a student's grade. I refer questions and complaints to him.

The claim among proponents is that "clear and transparent learning expectations connected to standards being clearly communicated to students" is "best practice." That's the rhetoric. The reality is the students don't look at the performance indicators. (Let me say it again, they are convoluted.) Their eyes glaze over at the rubrics. They don't take in the learning targets I've written on the board, and the learning targets on the board don't make me a better teacher.

Why were we told to abandon our traditional grading system? 1) Grades are inconsistent. 2) Grades are not transparent. 3) Teachers can't explain their grades.

What do we have now? 1) Grades are inconsistent. 2) Grades are not transparent. 3) Teachers can't explain their grades. Only even more so.

One teacher in our school prophesied that the 3 grade would be gravitational. Teachers would readily give them, and students would readily receive them. Indeed that is

Curtis Hier
Fair Haven Union High School
Page 2

happening. Everyone seems content with a 3. Is a 3 an 85? An 88? A 90? Nobody seems to care. It's proficient. Good enough. And 2.5 seems acceptable to many students.

I'm finding that my students are not retaking their assessments. They don't know if a retake is worth the effort. They could go from 2.5 to 3.5 on an indicator or two, and it might not move the needle on their overall grade.

PBL, indeed all that we do, is about grades. For the most part, students do not pursue learning for its intrinsic rewards. We cannot separate PBG from PBL. Lessen the external incentives, and we will lessen student motivation.

Calling something best practice doesn't make it so. Students are not doing their homework. Students are not respecting deadlines. Students are not studying for tests. This is not best practice. This is *malpractice*, and it will seriously jeopardize the education of a generation of Maine and Vermont students. I can think of no other fad, not even open classrooms or whole language instruction, as destructive as this one.

The qualitative research is in. 72 percent of actual teachers surveyed by the Vermont-NEA said proficiency-based grading is demotivating. These teachers see the outcome of this disastrous experiment. That is the takeaway. Students are less motivated and are achieving at a lower level with this Great Schools-Gates model.

I am a 33-year veteran teacher at Fair Haven Union High School. I have a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College and an M.Ed. from Castleton University. I am also president of the Vermont Alliance for the Social Studies, although I am not speaking on its behalf. I have two years of experience implementing PBL and PBG in my classroom.