

Melissa Connor
Stafford Technical Center- Rutland, VT

Proficiency-Based Learning in Career & Technical Education

Proficiency-based learning has been the foundation of all Career and Technical Education (CTE) curriculum and instruction for over thirty years. Having started in CTE here in Vermont in 1994, I have seen many changes to the educational landscape. When the Agency of Education announced that Vermont would be moving to Proficiency Based Learning and graduation requirements, we at Stafford Technical Center felt that in many ways, the rest of education was finally getting on board with what we had successfully been doing for many years.

We developed a process for transitioning how we looked at our curriculum and relied on the work of the Marzano group to serve as a guide. We examined the approved Vermont State competencies for each of our program areas and sought input from our industry partners in the development of Overarching Standards parent standard and Prioritized Standards (child standards). The question we asked in the development of these standards was, "What do we want students to know and be able to do when they complete this program or course?" Once these overarching standards were developed we looked at the specific skills and dispositions that would provide evidence of their proficiency in a certain area. Once the standards were developed; our teachers began creating grading scales for each prioritized standard. The Rutland City Public Schools chose to use a 1-4 grading scale district-wide. This process took approximately two years to complete.

Teaching and assessing based on standards has resulted in richer conversations among our students and a clearer picture of what students know and are able to do. For instructors it has informed their teaching and really made them look at their lessons and their assessments to ensure they are helping students achieve the desired outcomes.

Embedded academic credits have long been a part of Career and Technical Education. If a student is enrolled in our Natural Resources and Forestry program, for instance, they would earn an embedded science credit when they successfully completed the program. With embedded credits going away, we are now in the process of clearly identifying the academic proficiencies we teach and assess in each of our programs so that we may provide a comprehensive list to our partner high schools. This is necessary as many of our students depend on these standards to meet their individual local graduation requirements which also vary greatly by school.

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The challenge that we are currently facing with all of this work comes down to the multiple reporting and grading systems and the varying graduation requirements that are used throughout our region. We serve 9 partner high schools and no two are alike, even those that are in the same supervisory union do things differently. What is a passing score/grade at one school (2.5) differs greatly from another (1.0). What students need to do to be deemed proficient varies greatly from school to school; some schools “average” the individual proficiency scores for an overall course grade which then determines overall mastery while others report out a score for each proficiency and require a student to be proficient in every standard. Some of our partner school’s average individual proficiency grades and then offer remediation for any standard that is not proficient. The actual standards each school is using vary as well due to the fact that Vermont has “suggested standards.” When we send final grades to our partner high schools at the end of each semester we are having to recalculate to each individual system so that the students receive the credit they have rightfully earned. Some schools are asking us for a final course grade and some are asking for individual grades for each proficiency. The variances create inefficiencies in the system and confusion for both students and parents.

I believe proficiency-based learning is a great path for us to be on in the State of Vermont but it needs to be a complete system which includes a unified grading system, a unified standards bank, and a unified method for determining proficiency. I really do not think it matters if we use a grading scale of 1-4, 1-100 or letters. We simply need to have a unified system so that students and parents can clearly understand where they stand in their learning. As we know, families are very transient these days and it makes it very difficult to move from one school to another when the grading & reporting systems and graduation requirements vary so widely. This creates inefficiency and potential equity issues for our students to access their education, especially technical education.

Professional Bio for Melissa Connor

I taught Business and Financial Services at the River Valley Technical Center in Springfield, Vermont for a total of eighteen years. In 2014 I took on an Interim Assistant Director role at the River Valley Technical Center and then moved on to Stafford Technical Center in 2015. I served as Assistant Director for four years and moved to the Director role this current year. I have a Master’s in Education and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in School Leadership from Antioch University New England.