

Gregory Schillinger, Associate Principal  
Rutland High School

What we call “proficiency based learning” is in reality a constellation of educational practices developed around the ideas:

- of being specific about what we want students to be able to do and
- teaching and assessing directly to those specific objectives.

These are neither new, nor revolutionary concepts. The reality is that research on learning has repeatedly reinforced the value of these practices.

A study of the research done by Lipsey and Wilson in 1993 study synthesized findings from 204 reports. They found that the average score in classes where goal setting was effectively employed was 21 percentile points higher than the average score in classes where goal setting was not employed. That’s a huge difference. [The Great Schools Partnership](#) has collected a wealth of additional research.

The Education Quality Standards require that “Each school shall enable students to engage annually in rigorous, relevant and comprehensive learning opportunities that allow them to demonstrate proficiency” (2120.5) *How* schools do that is not defined. The reality is that the EQS have identified the destination and left the schools to determine how to get there. This has resulted in significant variation between schools as each have responded to their own starting points, their communities, their strengths and weaknesses. Guidelines and criteria would be a beneficial addition to the AOE’s work moving forward.

At Rutland High School we engaged in a rigorous and valuable curricular discussion of which standards are essential which are not. This important work was a step toward implementing proficiency based learning practices. We developed proficiency scales to measure those standards. Again, important work done by collaborative, dedicated and hardworking teachers and school staff. We’ve revised how we report student learning which required in-depth discussions of what we’d been doing for decades. I share these anecdotes from our journey towards proficiency based learning practices to highlight the fact that these steps were undertaken as a result of the decision to move Vermont schools toward proficiency based practices. Each of these steps were a win. If you’d like to learn more about Rutland High School’s process, you will find a wealth of information here, in our [Parent’s Guide to Proficiency Based Learning](#).

We are about five years into our work that is encapsulated by the term “proficiency based learning”, but the reality is that we started down this path long before the Education Quality Standards codified the need to do so. We did so because good schools examine and modify their practices based on research and an understanding of *best* practice. The reality is that we are still far from done. But we will continue to examine our practices carefully, collaboratively develop proposals on how to proceed, and then engage in the hard work of putting them into practice and communicating with our constituencies the value of the practice.

As the Board considers where we are as a state educational system and where we are headed, I believe that it is important to recognize the good that has come from the move toward proficiency based practices. Schools across the state have reexamined what they’ve been doing and asked if it’s best practice. Many of us have responded to that look by adapting what we’ve been doing to better reflect

Gregory Schillinger, Associate Principal  
Rutland High School

the educational practices that are supported by research. The decisions that we've made about how to adopt those practices have been our own.

Looking forward, those of us who have undertaken this work need the continued and unwavering support of the Secretary and the Board of Education. By reiterating your commitment to the principles you've already adopted, you ensure that the work that's been begun can continue without distraction. Of course there are those who are opposed to change in education; change is, by its very nature, difficult. Individual schools will also need to adapt as they continue to navigate the needs of students, parents, and taxpaying community members. It is that difficult process, though, that makes for great education. By giving schools the mandate to improve by adopting research based best practices, and the self-determination to decide how exactly to do so, you have balanced the need for universal improvement with the freedom that improvement requires.