

## PROFICIENCY BASED LEARNING

Pre-K to Graduation



# PROFICIENCY BASED LEARNING



## Preparing Students for Success in a Global Environment

Vermonters are often described as being independent, creative, and resourceful. We have to be. We live in a state with a challenging geography (not to mention climate); relatively small economies of scale; and fewer avenues to what is commonly defined as success: we have fewer colleges, fewer employers, and fewer young people than most of the other 50 states. Because of this, we constantly have to look at and think differently about how we educate and prepare our children for life after high school.

For decades, we Vermonters educated our children in the hundreds of small, one room, community-based school buildings that dot our back roads and villages. As teaching methods (and our state highways) improved, village schoolhouses were consolidated, regional high schools came into being, and our educational system took the form that it largely has today.

But now, new changes are taking place that require us, once again, to re-think how we can best prepare our children for a world that, in so many ways, is vastly different than the one in which we grew up. A world that, given today's technology, is changing at a record pace.

As Bob Dylan so aptly put it...

***"The times they are a-changin'."***

**U**nlike 20 years ago, when learning took place in the classroom, on chalkboards, and from textbooks, today's students have access to information in "real time," 24 hours a day, about history, politics, geography, math, science, world languages, and literacy. They are no longer limited by traditional boundaries such as time, geography, or available teacher/instructional resources.

If they're going to keep pace with their peers in other parts of the world, whether it's Burlington, Boston, Boise, or Beijing; they're going to need the same skills, knowledge, and opportunities those students have. No one is going to give a Vermont student a "pass" because they came from a remote village with dial-up Internet service. And while some of the knowledge and skills our children need can still be found in textbooks, much of what they'll need to know can only be taught through other means such as hands-on experience, internships, online learning, early college, or independent study. And for this kind of learning, they will need to develop skills related to discipline, working independently, and networking with wide range of people.

What's more, traditional letter grades that measured learning based on essays and multiple choice exams are no longer an indication that a student fully understands a concept or body of knowledge. To succeed in today's competitive world, students have to truly understand the material they're learning; they have to become proficient in skills such as literacy, math, and science; in "transferable skills" such as problem solving, working independently, and self direction; and they have to understand how to apply that knowledge in a quickly changing world.

**And that is the basis behind Proficiency-Based methods of teaching and learning.**

For most of us, Proficiency Based Learning is a brand new concept. There are teaching, assessment, and reporting methods – not to mention words and phrases – that many of us still don't fully understand. And that is the purpose of this booklet.

On the following pages, we invite you to learn more about Proficiency Based Learning: how it's structured; its benefits and challenges; how we are implementing it here at WCSU; and how you can participate. We hope it will help bring you up to speed on how Vermont, and your local school system, are educating your students.

We all want the best for our children. Our challenge – and privilege – every day, is to guide them as they discover their strengths, pursue their interests, and, in keeping with their Vermont heritage, grow into independent, creative, and resourceful adults who can, and will, succeed in an ever changing world – be that in Burlington, Boston, Boise, or Beijing.



Proficiency Based Learning & Graduation became mandatory in Vermont following the passage of Act 77 (The Flexible Pathways Initiative) in 2013, and the adoption of new Educational Quality Standards approved by the Vermont Agency of Education in 2014. But it wasn't simply the passage of those rules that brought about these changes. WCSU schools have been moving toward this model for some time, especially as Internet-based and other student learning opportunities (e.g., early college and dual enrollment) have come into being.

# WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

In a proficiency based educational system, students will be able to demonstrate that they have gained the skills, abilities, and knowledge required in specific areas of study such as math, science, and English; and in a number of “Transferable” Skills such as problem solving and working independently, that will allow them to be successful in college, career and civic life.

**B**efore we can explain what Proficiency-Based Learning is and why we believe it can address the challenges of educating students in today’s quickly changing world, it’s probably a good idea for all of us to “get on the same page,” so to speak. Like anything new, sometimes half the battle is simply understanding what everyone is talking about.

## *What the words mean.*

**Proficient** means that a student has demonstrated competence in (or, mastery of) a body of knowledge and/or a set of skills related to identified standards.

**Proficiency-Based Learning (PBL)** is an approach to academic instruction, assessment, and reporting that is based on students being able to demonstrate proficiency in the knowledge, skills, and abilities they are expected to learn – at their grade level - before advancing to the next level, graduation, or the next step in their learning journey.

**Standards** identify the essential knowledge, skills, and behaviors that should be taught and learned in school at each grade level, and are aligned with Learning Outcomes in the areas of Core Knowledge and Transferable Skills. (See page 5 for WCSU’s Student Learning Outcomes).

**Performance Indicators** are a more detailed articulation of what students should know or be able to do at a grade level or in a course. They are measurable, and allow students to demonstrate progress towards proficiency over time. They are also used to determine whether a student is meeting or exceeding course expectations, or needs additional assistance.

**Flexible Pathways** are expanded learning opportunities such as online classes, internships, early college courses, and independent study that allow students to work towards proficiency in the standards in ways that reflect their interests, strengths, and needs. Flexible pathways are incorporated into a student’s Personalized Learning Plan, the foundation of which is developed in the elementary grades.

**Personalized Learning Plan (PLP)**  
A PLP is developed for each student by the student and their teachers, parents and advisors; and reflects the student’s abilities, aspirations, interests and dispositions. The PLP defines the scope and rigor of both the academic and experiential opportunities necessary for the student to successfully demonstrate proficiency, complete secondary school and attain college and career readiness.

**Proficiency-Based Reporting** is designed to clearly define expectations for what will be learned, including the depth of learning necessary to demonstrate proficiency. It is also designed to indicate areas of weakness that need to be addressed; document and report learning over time; and communicate with students, parents, and guardians about how students are progressing towards proficiency.



# Student Learning Outcomes

**Student Learning Outcomes can best be defined as what we believe our students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate. WCSU has divided its Student Learning Outcomes into two broad categories of Core Knowledge and Transferable Skills.**

## **Core Knowledge of Essential Academic Subjects**

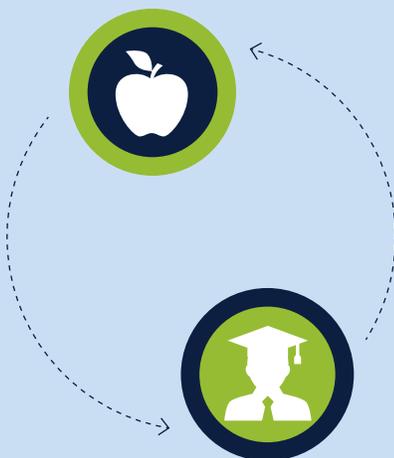
**Core Knowledge of Essential Academic Subjects include traditional academic subjects:**

- **Literacy**
- **Mathematical content and practices**
- **Scientific inquiry and content**
- **Global citizenship (including World Languages)**
- **Physical education and health**
- **Artistic expression**
- **Financial literacy**

## **Transferable Skills**

**Transferable Skills are abilities and behaviors that prepare students for lifelong learning and success:**

- **Creative and practical problem solving**
- **Effective and expressive communication**
- **Engaged citizenship**
- **Working independently and collaboratively**
- **Informed, integrated, and critical thinking**
- **Self-awareness and self-direction**



Beginning in pre-kindergarten and extending all the way to graduation from U-32 High School, students will work towards demonstrating proficiency in the Standards aligned with both sets of SLOs. In the early years, both the Standards and Performance Indicators associated with the SLOs reflect our students' initial exposure to the subjects they are studying. As they advance through the elementary grades, into middle school, and on to high school, the Performance Indicators associated with the Standards become more complex – reflecting both our students' growing exposure to the subjects they are studying, and our expectations at each advancing level. Once a student has demonstrated proficiency in the Standards at the graduation level, they will not only be eligible to graduate, but they will also have opportunities to achieve advanced levels of proficiency.

# ROAD MAP TO PROFICIENCY

STEP

1

## *The Journey Begins...*

When students enter kindergarten (or pre-K), right away they gravitate to games and activities that make them happy. Some play with building blocks; some play with puzzles; others like to draw. Some are social; some are solitary. Some are independent, while others rely on their friends. As they advance through their elementary school years, they sharpen these skills and interests as they grow and progress towards middle school. What they are really doing, however, is laying the foundation on which their Personalized Learning Plans will be built when they enter 7th grade.

STEP

2

Beginning in 7th Grade... students, teachers, parents and advisors all work together to develop a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) that takes into account each student's interests, strengths, needs, and aptitudes. Over time, the PLP will drive both the direction a student pursues – such as college, a career, the military, or the trades – as well as the selection of classes (or pathways) that will best prepare them for that outcome.

STEP

4

Just like traditional, classroom-based instruction in subjects such as English, math, and science, each study option/pathway will be assessed from the perspective of both "Core Knowledge" Learning Outcomes and "Transferable Skill" Learning Outcomes. Pathways that lead to a knowledge of writing and speaking, for example, would be assessed as "Literacy" Learning Outcomes; Transferable Skills such as Working Independently or Communicating Creatively and Effectively are assessed in all pathways.

STEP

3

As they progress through middle and high school, students will choose from a range of study options, also known as "flexible pathways." These study options/pathways might include:

- traditional courses offered at the high school
- early college courses
- dual enrollment courses
- internships/work-based learning
- courses at a local career center
- independent study
- online classes/learning



STEP  
**5**

**Standards** appropriate to each grade level are then assigned to each of the Learning Outcomes. The Standards define what we expect students to know or be able to do at that grade level.

**Performance Indicators**, are a more detailed articulation of what students should know or be able to do at a grade level or in a course and help assess their advancement towards achieving proficiency in the Standards. This advancement towards proficiency will be reported quarterly on a student's report card.

STEP  
**6**

On their report cards, students will be scored on their work as they progress through their areas of study. As they move from beginning to meet expectations in a particular course/pathway, to progressing towards meeting expectations to meeting (or) exceeding expectations, they will receive a number that corresponds to where they are on that scale:

- 1 = Beginning to meet**
- 2 = Progressing towards meeting**
- 3 = Meeting**
- 4 = Exceeding**

Students who encounter difficulties meeting course/pathway expectations (and thus are not moving towards proficiency) will be given additional time and/or more focused instruction to bring them up to a level where they are meeting current expectations at their grade level.

STEP  
**7**

As students advance through middle and high school, we will track their progress towards achieving proficiency in the Standards, at the graduation level, by using the following letters:

- B = Beginning** (to show proficiency at the graduation level)
- D = Developing** (making progress towards proficiency at the graduation level)
- P = Proficient** (the student has demonstrated proficiency at the graduation level)
- A = Advanced** (the student has demonstrated advanced proficiency at the graduation level)

STEP  
**8**

Once a student has demonstrated proficiency in all of the Standards assigned to each of the Learning Outcomes at the graduation level, they will be deemed to have met our "Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements" and will be eligible to graduate. If they achieve this proficiency prior to their senior year, they will be given opportunities to achieve advanced levels of proficiency.



# LET'S LOOK AT SOME EXAMPLES

To better explain how Student Learning Outcomes, Standards, and Performance Indicators work together to define and measure progress towards proficiency, let's look at how they are being incorporated into learning in all of our schools.

## At the Elementary Level...

In many ways, the ideas and approaches behind proficiency based learning and reporting – especially at the elementary level – are not new. The elementary grades have always been focused on helping students acquire and expand the skills and knowledge they'll need for success later in life. Here are a few examples of how PBL is being implemented at our schools.

**Berlin Elementary** has been creating a "Maker Space" that lets students create and design in a hands-on manner using electronics, paper, fabric, and other craft supplies. Some classes are using community service projects to learn problem solving, critical thinking, and working collaboratively, while others are learning citizenship, self-awareness, and communication through working outdoors.

**Calais students** are learning a range of Transferable Skills by investigating and taking a hard look at conflict resolution, dealing with peer pressure, preventing bullying, and understanding concerns around diversity and stereotypes. Using reflection and innovative thinking, the students are finding opportunities for creating a positive school-wide environment.

At **Doty Memorial School**, students use the All School Play to learn lessons in literacy, effective and expressive communication, artistic expression, and global citizenship. Students create a completely original play from scratch, including writing the original script and songs; set design; and costumes. A major tenet of the play is to include every single student in some unique and critical way.

**East Montpelier students** combine both Core Knowledge and Transferable Skills into their all-school hike, holiday feast, circus residency, and winter wellness activities, and their new Physical Education lab takes students off campus three times a year for various outdoor learning activities.

**Rumney students** have been learning how to bring their "voice" to how the school operates, especially in the areas of improving the school culture and climate. They are learning organizational and communication skills; how to listen to and respect others' thoughts and opinions; and how to work collaboratively to create an environment that's sensitive to the learning needs of everyone.

## ...And at U32

To explain how SLOs, Standards, and Performance Indicators are applied to coursework at the high school level, let's look at a 10th grade Social Studies course called "Democratic Roots." Like all high school courses, Democratic Roots would have two types of Student Learning Outcomes: Core Knowledge Standards and Transferable Skills (see page 5). Of the seven Student Learning Outcomes, Democratic Roots would fall under "Global Citizenship."

The **Standards** aligned with the Global Citizenship SLO include Civic Literacy, Economics, Geography, Culture, and History. It is important to remember, however, that not all Standards are applied to all courses. In the case of Democratic Roots, specific Global Citizenship Standards might include:

- Civic Literacy: Understanding and participating in a democratic society; and
- History: Using historical inquiry to gather information about the past; make sense of the present; and make predictions about the future.

The **Performance Indicators** designed to articulate how a student is progressing towards proficiency in the above Standards might include:

- Being able to evaluate the purpose, structure, and function of government, including explaining its roles and responsibilities; and
- Evaluating recurring themes in history to make predictions about the future.

There are several **Transferable Skill SLOs** that might be associated with Democratic Roots (see page 5), but for this example, we'll use Working Independently and Collaboratively. The actual Skill for this SLO would be:

- Exhibiting the skills to work independently and collaboratively with efficiency and effectiveness.

## Working Towards Proficiency

We have a number of supports in place to help students as they work towards achieving proficiency.

At U32, **Call Back** is a period of time that's set aside during the school day for students who either need extra assistance in a particular course or who exceed current expectations and want to pursue additional enrichment opportunities. Teachers will generally "call a student back" to this class period to accomplish or pursue this extra work.

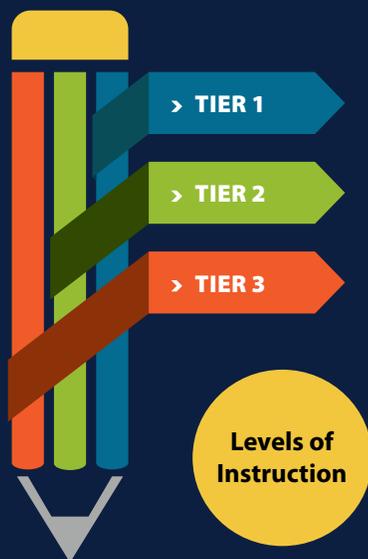
**Multi Tiered Systems of Support and Response to Intervention** – These terms describe how teachers, supported by paraprofessionals, help students learn at a pace, and in an environment, that is most suited to their behavioral and / or academic maturity. Throughout your student's school career, you may also hear reference to the following terms:

**Tier 1 Instruction** generally takes place in the classroom and is offered to all students at the same time.

**Tier 2 Instruction** is offered when it becomes evident that a student needs additional or supplemental support in order to achieve proficiency in a particular subject area. When areas of need or weakness in a subject area have been identified, Tier 2 instruction helps students address those needs as they advance towards proficiency.

**Tier 3 Instruction** is offered to students who require more individualized attention and support as they work towards achieving proficiency. For some students, Tier 3 instruction occurs in place of Tiers 1 and 2.

Schools that use learning tiers such as these sometimes try to address both behavioral and academic concerns at the same time, recognizing that they often go hand in hand. A student who is struggling to understand what's going on in the classroom is more likely to act out; and a student who is contending with behavior issues will be less able to focus on academics. In these situations, teachers are often able to provide students with focused, targeted instruction, helping them learn at a pace and in an environment that is better suited to helping them achieve proficiency.



# PROFICIENCY BASED ASSESSMENT, SCORING & REPORTING

For many years, assessment, scoring, and reporting meant the issuance of quarterly report cards. It was there we learned whether our child was doing well in their studies (they got an “A”); average (they got a “C”); poorly (they got a “D”); or that they failed or withdrew from a class.

Often a single-sentence teacher comment appeared in the margin: “[Name] contributes to class discussions.” But there was little else to indicate whether a student was really learning and understanding the material or whether they were meeting course expectations.

An unfortunate consequence of this kind of assessment, scoring and reporting system was that students could earn a “D” in a course and still move on to the next level. Even though it was clear that they knew little about – and could do very little with – the course material, they “passed” the course from a purely technical point of view.

In a proficiency based system, this is no longer the case. As students progress in their courses throughout the year, they are assessed on a wide variety of levels in numerous and varied ways; and they receive feedback on an almost daily basis. If it becomes evident that a student needs additional instruction or guidance, they are either “called back” for more personalized assistance, or they receive “Tier 2 or Tier 3” instruction. (See page 9).

We no longer have to wait for report cards to see how students are doing. Communication around scoring and assessment happens regularly, and in numerous ways: when students are dropped off or picked up from school; during field trips; at parent nights and school events; in newsletters. There is an ongoing discussion about what children are learning; where they are in relation to course expectations; what they’re going to learn next; and how it all relates to their being able to demonstrate proficiency in the Standards aligned with their grade level.

In this way, learning becomes a partnership between students, teachers, parents, and advisors, with each taking an active role in ensuring that knowledge and skills are being built and practiced on a daily basis. To that end, everyone involved in this partnership – including the student – knows on any given day whether the student is beginning to meet course expectations; progressing towards meeting course expectations; meeting course expectations; or exceeding course expectations. On their formal report cards, this progress is reflected by a “score” corresponding to each level: (1 = beginning to meet; 2 = progressing towards meeting; 3 = meeting; 4 = exceeding expectations).

As students advance from pre-K to graduation, their knowledge and mastery of our Core Knowledge Standards and Transferable Skills Student Learning Outcomes is assessed by Performance Indicators aligned with the Standards at the different grade levels. This “advancement” over the years culminates in a Transcript that measures proficiency at the graduation level. The Transcript lets us know when a student has demonstrated proficiency in the Standards at that level, and also provides a 4-year look-back, showing the student’s progress towards graduation-level proficiency in the following manner: B = The student is beginning to achieve proficiency; D = The student is developing proficiency; P = The student is proficient; and A = The student has demonstrated advanced proficiency.

Both of these scoring, reporting and assessment methods are outlined in pieces available on our website or from the Central Office.

The bottom line: in a proficiency based assessment, scoring and reporting system, students not only become more engaged in learning, but as they advance through their elementary, middle, and high school years, they grow in both knowledge and proficiency. At WCSU, we are graduating students who are prepared for the next “learning stages” of their lives, be that college, a career, an internship, or simply their pursuit of their dreams.



## A Community Effort

**A**s we make the transition to a proficiency based learning system, it will take more than just the work of our students and teachers. In fact it's a student / teacher / family / community partnership, and only by working together will we graduate students who are well-prepared for college, the workforce, the military, the trades, or literally, any field of endeavor they pursue.

### **Families can help us accomplish this by:**

- Asking your child questions about their learning.
- Helping your child set learning goals that are connected to their interests and strengths, while remaining mindful of and attentive to areas in which they need extra help. (Hopefully this booklet will help you do that.)
- Staying informed on what is going on in your child's classroom by reading newsletters and blogs and asking questions.
- Participating in Parent Information Nights, Open Houses, and other school/community related events.
- Understanding the types of assessments your child is given and how these are used to measure progress.
- Understanding how teachers use assessment data to plan and develop a learning path for your child.
- Encouraging your child to communicate their hopes and dreams with their teachers.
- Understanding that all children have different interests in and aptitudes for different subjects, and that their progress towards proficiency in the various Standards will be impacted by those interests and aptitudes.
- Volunteering at school, or on a hiring committee.



### **The Community can help us accomplish this by:**

- Providing a budget that supports the personalization of student learning and hiring of high quality staff.
- Supporting budgets that use data and educational best practices to adjust the services the schools provide.
- Understanding that learning occurs everywhere, not just in a classroom; and supporting student learning through internships, service and other community based learning opportunities.
- Being willing to mentor students in areas of interest related to jobs and careers.
- Supporting the use of high quality, authentic, assessments to measure student success.
- Volunteering at school or on a hiring committee.

## **HOW CAN YOU HELP?**

### **ASK YOUR CHILD QUESTIONS!**

- ? **What are you working on in class?**
- ? **Which Standard or Transferable Skill is linked to what you are studying?**
- ? **How do you know if your work is "proficient" and, if it isn't proficient, how do you know where you are in terms of becoming proficient?**
- ? **What have you learned so far, and what do you need to learn next?**
- ? **What was engaging at school today?**
- ? **What can I do to support what you're learning at school?**



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