

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

I Want to Know More

A *Leadership in Action* Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative high schools.

"The big idea behind a proficiency-based system is that failure is no longer an option and that students must demonstrate proficiency before advancing on to the next lesson—A, B, or try again."

—Susan Patrick, *THE Journal* interview
"[Beyond Seat Time: Advancing Proficiency-Based Learning](#)"

How Does Proficiency-Based Learning Work?

First, let's address a potential point of confusion: proficiency-based learning may be called many different things from state to state or school to school, including *standards-based education*, *competency-based learning*, *performance-based learning*, *mastery learning*, *outcome-based education*, and other things. Educators tend to use a lot of different terms to describe similar educational strategies, which frequently—though inadvertently—generates unnecessary confusion.

In addition, proficiency-based systems may appear difficult to understand because they are designed differently, schools may report grades differently, and educators may be doing it more successfully or less successfully. Like any specialized professional system, proficiency-based learning may be sophisticated in practice, but the concept is actually extremely practical and easy to understand: **make sure all students are taught the most important knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in adult life, and then make sure they have actually learned it before awarding them a diploma.** It's really that simple.

Schools that use proficiency-based learning systems often look like any typical American high school. The difference is that teachers, students, and parents know precisely what students have learned or not learned, and students don't move on to the next lesson, course, or grade level without demonstrating that they have learned the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn. Again, it's that simple.

Something to Think About

The great irony is that proficiency-based learning—while an unfamiliar concept to many people—is relatively simple and easy to understand; it's the existing systems of traditional report cards and letter grades that are nearly impossible to comprehend. Why? Because only the teacher awarding a letter grade knows precisely what it stands for and why it was awarded. In most cases, the student, the student's parents, the other teachers in the school, the principal, and the college-admissions officers who read a student's transcript simply don't know what the letter grades actually mean. They have to take it on faith that the grades stand for something—and, at best, all that can be said is that most grades represent strong, average, or weak performance in one teacher's view.

While it's not easy to build a really good proficiency-based learning system, it's certainly easy to understand why it matters: **making sure that students are prepared for college, work, and adult life is extremely important.** That's why we have public schools, why our country invests so much in education, and why polls consistently show that the quality of our education system is a top concern among Americans. At the same time, we also have countless high school graduates who are barely literate, companies bemoaning the scarcity of skilled workers, and college professors complaining about the absence of basic academic skills among undergraduates.

So it's deeply ironic that the more familiar mechanisms of schooling—A through F letter grades, having “tough” and “easy” teachers, handing out high school diplomas to students who earned all As and to students who earned only Cs and Ds—are actually exponentially more confusing and difficult to understand. Why? Because we really don't know what students were taught, what they learned, or what they are now capable of doing as a result. **Grades are only meaningful when you know what they stand for.**

In our traditional system, schools are often black boxes—students go in and come out and no one will ever be entirely sure what they learned or failed to learn. But in a proficiency-based system, every school becomes a glass box. Parents can look in and see what teachers are teaching, what progress their child is making, and what the child is excelling at or may be struggling with. And at the end of each student's journey, schools can tell us what was learned by every student. So which system makes more sense in today's world?

A Definition of Proficiency-Based Learning

In 2011, the [International Association for K-12 Online Learning](#) brought together educational experts from around the country to develop a definition of proficiency-based education (for a more detailed explanation of the definition, see [It's Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency-Based Summit](#) and [When Success Is the Only Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning](#)). Here's the definition with some additional explanation:

- 1. Students advance upon mastery.** Students demonstrate learning acquisition before moving on. Failure is no longer an option for students—they either earn the equivalent of an A or B or they have to try again until they achieve the required learning standards. (For more information on standards, see [What Are Learning Standards?](#))
- 2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.** In this case, *competencies* are merely a synonym for learning standards. *Explicit*, in this context, means clearly described standards that are clearly communicated to students and parents. *Measurable* means that learning progress can be evaluated and measured in practical, repeatable, and reliable ways. And *transferable* means that students can apply what they learn in a course to other subject areas, and that what they learn prepares them for the next grade level and for success in college and modern careers.
- 3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.** In other words, assessments—all the things teachers do to evaluate and measure what students have learned—need to be designed to facilitate and improve learning, and they have to measure the most important knowledge, skills, and work habits that students will need to succeed in college, future careers, and every area of adult life. In addition, assessments should not be designed to punish poor performance or discourage learning; they should reward learning progress and encourage students to work harder.

4. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

When students are struggling to learn certain concepts and skills, the school provides a variety of personalized assistance or modified teaching strategies to help them achieve learning expectations—that’s the basic idea behind a wide variety of instructional and academic-support strategies broadly known as *differentiation* or *differentiated instruction*. For example, students may be given more time to learn and practice skills, they may be moved on to more challenging material when they are ready, they may be given more choices in their education to help engage and motivate them, or they may be provided with a variety of support services intended to address specific learning gaps.

5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Learning standards need to go beyond facts and figures—they must also intentionally address the critical skills, understandings, personal dispositions, and habits of work that are required for success in college, careers, and adult life. For example, critical thinking, problem solving, analytical reading and writing, oral communication, research skills, technological literacy, personal responsibility, self-reliance, work ethic, or planning and organizational skills would be the kinds of things that schools should evaluate in a proficiency-based system.

Proficiency-Based Learning in New England

In November 2012, [CompetencyWorks](#) and the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#) released [Making Mastery Work: A Close-Up View of Competency Education](#), a report that investigated ten New England schools using proficiency-based-learning systems: [Big Picture Rochester](#) (Rochester, VT), [Big Picture Depot Campus](#) (Storrs-Mansfield, CT), [Boston Day and Evening Academy](#) (Boston, MA), [Casco Bay High School](#) (Portland, ME), [Brockton Champion High School](#) (Brockton, MA), [Charlestown High School](#) (Charlestown, MA), [E-Cubed Academy](#) (Providence, RI), [Gray-New Gloucester High School](#) (Gray-New Gloucester, ME), [Medical Professions and Teacher Preparations Academy](#) (Hartford, CT), and [Vergennes Union High School](#) (Vergennes, VT). The report offers one of the first comprehensive, on-the-ground profiles of New England schools that are successfully using proficiency-based approaches to teaching and learning.

The Maine Department of Education’s [Center for Best Practices](#) recently released a series of three case studies of Maine school districts that have moved to proficiency-based systems of teaching, learning, and reporting. Detailed information about the three districts—[Kennebec Intra-District Schools](#), [Messalonskee and China Schools](#), and [Massabesic Schools](#)—can be found on the Center’s website, including videos, interviews, and materials that describe how proficiency-based learning works in the districts.

In May 2012, the Maine Legislature passed [An Act To Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy](#), which was signed into law on May 21, 2012. The legislation made Maine one of the first states in the country to require public high schools to award diplomas based on demonstrated proficiency—not passing grades and course credits. While Maine is one of the first states to require a proficiency-based diploma, at least 36 states have legislation that supports proficiency-based learning, according to the [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices](#) and the [Education Commission of the States](#). In addition, states such as [New Hampshire](#) and [Oregon](#) are actively supporting proficiency-based schools and building statewide support systems, and thousands of districts and schools across the country have used proficiency-based strategies successfully for decades.

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