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From Seat Time to Mastery

Maine schools transition to proficiency-based diplomas

BY VICKI RITTERBAND AND RAFAEL HELLER

In the vast majority of the nation's schools, students are grouped by age and move along in lockstep from one yearlong course to the next until, at the end of the 12th grade, they acquire a sufficient number of credit hours—or Carnegie units—to graduate. It doesn't matter whether they soak up the given material in September or barely grasp it in June; provided they get a passing grade, everybody gets promoted every year, all on the same schedule. Named after steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, the Carnegie unit (120 hours of seat time over a year) became the organizing principle of schools in the early 20th century, as the number of youth attending high school exploded and educators needed a standard way of tracking student progress in secondary and postsecondary education.

Slowly but surely, however, educators and policy makers are pushing back against the logic of promoting students solely on the basis of seat time or credit hours. Thanks to a burgeoning interest in proficiency-based education (sometimes called competency- or mastery-based learning), 42 states now permit schools and districts to award course credit and/or high school diplomas based on students' ability to demonstrate mastery of key content and skills, regardless of the amount of time spent in the classroom.

Perhaps no state better illustrates this burgeoning movement than Maine, where, in 2012, state legislators passed a law requiring that by 2018 all of its high schools issue proficiency-based diplomas—a "certification," as a Maine Department of Education official puts it, that students are proficient in district-defined standards and other skills. The law was the culmination of six years of work by the state department of education to identify a better way to prepare high school students for the next chapter of their lives. Maine educational officials organized proficiency-based

education training across the state and underwrote pilots in several school districts.

While the state has not prescribed what a proficiency-based diploma must look like, or how districts need to retool their schools to satisfy the mandate (although it has offered guidance), most districts are focusing on many of the same tasks: They're debating the most important learning standards and mapping them to curriculum; implementing software to carefully track student progress on standards; revamping grading systems; and educating students, parents, and the community about the new regime. Although most, if not all, of the state's districts are still fairly early in their journeys, they're already seeing benefits that include improved student engagement, greater attention to the development of robust intervention systems, and more deliberate, collective, and collaborative professional work.

What the state *has* dictated—and what the diplomas will need to attest to—is that every graduating high school student in Maine has shown mastery in all eight of the content areas covered under the state's Learning Results standards, as well as command of what the state calls the "guiding principles" that inform those standards (see "At a Glance: Proficiency-Based Education in Maine," p. 4). Those principles state that each student must graduate high school as a clear and effective communicator, a self-directed lifelong learner, a creative and practical problem solver, a responsible and involved citizen, and an integrative and informed thinker. (For two of its eight content areas—math and English language arts—Learning Results relies on the Common Core State Standards.)

"I've been in education 32 years, and I haven't seen anything that impacts what we're doing on a day-to-day basis the way this has," says Suzanne Godin,

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the superintendent of schools in South Portland. "Proficiency-based education is a huge mindset change for teachers, students, and the community." In Godin's district, schools are shedding old grading systems in favor of ones that clarify exactly what students know and can do; working to define what mastery looks like for different learning standards; and implementing a new electronic student progress tracking tool, among other activities.

An Evolving Model

What defines Maine's approach to competency education? According to a number of superintendents, principals, and department of education officials interviewed for this article, the 2012 law doesn't require districts to adopt a particular set of rules or teaching practices; it even leaves what exact standards students must master up to the districts. But it does put a couple of stakes in the ground.

First and foremost, the law serves to declare that the state has had enough of inexact high school credentials. Henceforth, course credits and diplomas must represent genuine mastery of academic content and skills and not just the accumulation of seat time. As of 2018, things like attendance, good behavior, and class participation—which do not necessarily imply a command of the subject matter—will be bracketed off from the determination that a student is ready to move on in the curriculum or to graduate. "In the past, if a student received a 65, say, you would have to wonder what that meant," explains Poland Regional High School principal Cari Medd. "Did the student get a D because he or she didn't understand the material, or for neglecting homework? We could never really trust the grade to tell us much of anything about the kid's mastery of specific content and skills."

"Now we're getting much better data about what students are doing well and what they're struggling with," continues Medd, whose chief proficiency-based project this year has been, as with other schools, implementing a software system that will better track student progress on standards from year to year. "Our goal isn't just to hand out a composite grade at the end of the term but, rather, to figure out exactly how to help each kid learn what he or she needs to learn."

Second, the law has prompted Maine's school districts to make their standards and curricula much more transparent to students, parents, and teachers alike.

Transparency is hardly a new concept in education, but it does seem to be taking on a greater importance given the state's new imperative to ensure that students truly grasp what they study. "Our hope is that if you go into any classroom, the learning goal is spelled out clearly, in kid language," says Katy Grondin, superintendent of the Auburn School Department. "The students should be able to say, 'I'm working on this

standard, and I'll know I'm proficient when I've met this criterion. And when I have, I can go on to this new standard or that new unit.'"

Last year that student-paced approach resulted in some ninth-graders racing ahead of others at Auburn's Edward Little High School, where a cohort of Algebra I students completed the entire course midyear and then moved on to geometry. In late spring they successfully clamored for a summer program that allowed them to advance even further. iPad-based lessons, targeted instruction by the two co-teachers, and lots of small-group work were key to the success of the students, says Grondin.

Assessment and Other Challenges

Over time, proficiency-based education could easily come to mean very different things in different places. "The responsibility for developing this work lies at the district level," says Maine's acting commissioner of education Rachelle Tome. "The basic philosophy of competency-based education and the core beliefs can be found in some fashion in every district, but the route to get there and the vendors employed will differ."

Whatever their chosen routes, districts have found the early going to be slow. Among the state's 113 districts that include high schools, the vast majority are applying for a one- or two-year extension to the legislature's 2018 deadline. So far only eight have said that they'll be ready to issue proficiency-based diplomas on schedule.

What's holding them up? Districts say the new system is a complicated cultural and pedagogical transformation that warrants taking things slowly. Many also are wrestling with thorny challenges having to do with defining and assessing proficiency. Seat time, course grades, and credit hours may be poor proxies for student learning, but at least they're simple to measure—and school systems have been doing so efficiently for more than 100 years. Proficiency, however, turns out to be a mysterious and elusive creature, compelling district leaders to confront difficult questions, such as: How proficient is proficient enough? Does everybody have to be assessed in the same way, or can one student demonstrate her mastery by way of an oral presentation, another via a written essay, and others by completing a group project? Does seat time matter at all, and, if not, could students miss out on the social development that goes on in stable cohort groups, where the same students interact with each other over the course of a full year? And, to repeat a question that comes up often, in a proficiency-based system does it still make sense to grade students or to rank them?

At this point, it's too soon to tell how Maine's districts will resolve such issues. A number of the state's middle and high schools have dispensed with the 0–100 scale or letter grades in favor of a simple

At a Glance: Proficiency-Based Education in Maine

- Mastery of learning standards matters, not seat time.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on individual learning needs.
- Technology helps differentiate learning and track student progress on standards that are transparent to everyone.
- Averaging based on a 0–100 scale is out; 1–4s on individual standards is in.
- Students graduate with a proficiency-based transcript by 2018 or, in most cases, one or two years later.

four-point scale (already common practice in many elementary schools). At the end of a unit or marking period, students receive scores that range from 1 (“doesn’t meet proficiency”) to 4 (“exceeds proficiency, across multiple learning targets”). The 1–4 system provides a much more transparent accounting of what students do and don’t know, supporters argue, whereas traditional grades muddy the water, mixing up proficiency with effort, behavior, and more.

Not everybody welcomes such changes. As South Portland superintendent Godin notes, “We’re a traditional community that reveres its top 10 performers. Everyone drives around with a bumper sticker that says, ‘My middle school student is an honors student.’ A lot of people don’t want to give that up.” The South Portland district has signaled to the community that the traditional ranking of students, if not completely abandoned, has at least been dramatically revamped: it has switched to a Latin honors system of cum laude, magna cum laude, and summa cum laude that recognizes students “based on their proficiency to targets,” says Godin, not their GPAs.

Nonetheless, state officials are confident that if districts continue to rethink or even abandon their traditional grading systems, then parents and others will adjust to the change. Indeed, 60 New England colleges and universities have already announced their formal endorsement of proficiency-based diplomas, indicating that a redesigned transcript without grades will present no barrier to admission. “What we hear from higher education is that what’s most important is clear communication in the documentation,” says Diana Doiron, the state’s standards-based education

specialist. “They remind us that they receive transcripts and applications from all over the world, and they don’t all look the same.”

The greater concern, perhaps, isn’t what will happen to students who earn proficiency-based diplomas but what will happen to those who don’t. Inevitably, there will be young people who can’t reach the necessary level of proficiency in one or more subjects. What will be their fate after 2018 if they are not permitted to graduate? “I think in a couple of years there will be a big ‘aha’ moment, when the 30 percent—the percentage of kids who currently aren’t meeting math standards in our district, for example—won’t get a diploma,” predicts Regional School Unit 16 superintendent Tina Meserve. “There will be a public outcry, and everyone will try to figure out what to do next.”

Acting education commissioner Tome concedes that the new system does force districts to take a hard look at support and intervention systems and in some cases to rethink their deployment. As for students who don’t obtain a diploma, there will still be second chances. “It’s not a time-based system,” explains Doiron. “Just because a kid exits high school, that doesn’t mean the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency stops. We have adult education where they can work toward proficiency. If you don’t get it by 20, the window doesn’t close.”

The new approach has been largely positive, Meserve hastens to add, as it has encouraged her teachers to collaborate like never before. “It used to be that you went into your room and did your own thing, and if you had a really great teacher, that was wonderful. It was more like an independent contractor model,” she explains. In contrast, her district’s elementary teachers, for example, now meet twice a month to talk about standards, instruction, and assessments—what is working in their quest to pull every student up to proficiency on learning targets and what is not. “They’re learning from each other and raising the bar for everyone,” she says.

Meserve admits there will be some bumps in the road, especially when it comes to deciding what a proficiency-based diploma will mean for low-performing students. But, she says, she and her colleagues across the state are committed to staying the course. ■

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For Further Information

Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness: A State Policy Framework for Graduation Requirements, Assessment and Accountability. Washington DC: Achieve, 2013. Available online at www.achieve.org

CompetencyWorks website: www.competencyworks.org

Maine’s Getting to Proficiency website: www.maine.gov/doe/proficiency