

May 14, 2013

Representative Betty Komp
Senator Rod Monroe
Representative Lew Frederick
Representative Sherri Sprenger
Senator Chris Edwards
Senator Fred Girod

Joint Ways and Means Education Sub Committee
Salem, Oregon

Dear Representative Komp, Senator Monroe, and Committee Members:

I am Mike Durrant, a math teacher of 16 years, currently teaching in rural Southern Oregon in the Three Rivers School District at Hidden Valley High School. I am speaking today as a teacher of hundreds of students that have benefited from the improved instruction, curriculum, and assessment that professional development in proficiency-based teaching and learning (PBTL) has provided. I am also speaking as a father of two daughters, one of them, Abby, has agreed to help me today. Abby and her sister are students in Grants Pass, a neighboring school district that is in the middle of training and implementing proficiency practices. I support creating a network of services that brings proficiency training and use to each Oregon classroom.

A few years ago, I attended a workshop where the presenter started the session with a quote. He said, "Teachers are either green and growing, or ripe and rotten." He then asked, "Which one are you?" I had to admit to myself that I was once a green and dynamic teacher that had developed incredible rapport with virtually all of my students. My students routinely crushed whatever standardized test I prepped them for (AP Calc, SAT, ACT, CIM, OAKS, etc.), and many of them did so well they earned college credit in my high school classes.

Over the course of a decade of teaching, the quality of imagination began losing to the comfort of ease. My lessons were recycled, my assessments were made to grade quickly, and classroom activities became infrequent. My students' learning, and consequently, my test scores plummeted. I was becoming a red, ripe, and rotten teacher. The lowest point of my professional career occurred five years ago: Hidden Valley High School had the worst math scores in Josephine and Jackson Counties, and the statistics were shown on the front page of our local paper.

As you might expect, this prompted some self-evaluation and reflection of our practices and policies. We realized that we had knowledgeable math teachers who recognized the need to change the structure of instruction and assessment. But how and to what? Like you, we had heard the term “proficiency-based teaching and learning” (PBT), but we had little understanding of it was and were unsure if PBT was best for our students. To coax our transition from red to green, we needed to see these best practices in the context of a high school math class. Luckily we had the resources to do just that.

Our district used federal funds and grants to cover professional development. Teachers wanted to see what it looked like in classrooms, so we visited districts that were already using proficiency. Then, we brought in the BEC and their team of coaching specialists to spend time over the course of a year working with our teachers to help make proficiency a sustainable practice. What made this professional development appealing to our veteran teachers was that the training and support was content specific; the coaches talked the same language as our Hidden Valley teachers and the strategies and resources were immediately useful.

The classroom results were immediate and staggering. In one year’s time, we nearly doubled the number of students earning passing scores on OAKS, we cut our total number of student F’s by a third and more students were taking college-level math courses. We have sustained these improved scores for the past four years.

Let me give you a close-up view of my classroom now, in comparison to pre-proficiency days.

- Like most freshmen, Jared struggled with the transition to high school. He was placed in Algebra, the same class he took his previous year in middle school. After earning exceeding scores on his first three assessments, he earned an A on his first progress report. Jared was puzzled, his homework score was low and he missed an entire week due to illness. In a PBLT-classroom, grades reflect student’s knowledge on specific standards and skills. Jared was able to work ahead and was placed in our Honor’s Geometry course in the winter trimester.
- Katy is a gregarious, hard-working student. She also struggled with her basic math skills. She was able to “get by” in previous courses by hiding these deficiencies with her effort and charming personality. In my PBLT-classroom, assessments are frequent and diagnostic. I was able to pinpoint her problems and provide her with several interventions. Katy became more confident throughout the year and eventually earned college credit in my Algebra II course.
- PBT has raised the bar for achievement in my math courses; students have higher expectations than ever before. This higher level of expectations has influenced my teaching in a positive way. With higher demands on the students it has required me

to reevaluate the way I design and implement my lessons. I have always recognized the importance of collaboration with my colleagues in my building, but have found it necessary to extend my network of educators; now I collaborate with teachers across my district and across the state. I have had to increase the size of my “teacher toolbox” in order for my students to become proficient in the standards. I lean more heavily on cooperative learning, formative assessments and many educational technology tools that my students and I utilize. I am confident my teaching has improved and I know that learning has improved.

Even the districts around the state that we would call “experts” in proficiency require the professional development to make these new changes part of their daily learning climate. Creating a network of resources and demonstration sites where others can visit and learn from colleagues going down this same road is a valuable tool and a critical component to reach the goals Oregon has set for our students.

For years, my students have been asked to rehearse the fundamentals of math and regurgitate formulas to solve random questions in multiple-choice formats. While these fundamentals will still be important, they are no longer sufficient. The new Common Core Standards, and subsequent assessments, require students to “create,” to “analyze,” and to “critique.” Most of us math teachers have never asked our students to do these higher-level tasks and are unsure how to teach or assess them.

Resources are critical to provide embedded and meaningful professional development, to share models, and create templates and examples. You and I know that there are experts around the state; we need to share the expertise, to learn from AND with one another, and to do anything we can to create a professional learning community across Oregon. Our students, like Abby and those that I work with every day, deserve a green and growing classroom. Perhaps the greatest endorsement that I can give you of how effectively PBTL can improve teacher effectiveness and student learning, is that I want my daughter, Abby, and her sister, to learn in a classroom where proficiency is used. Every student deserves the same opportunities that PBTL has given to my Hidden Valley students. Your support of proficiency in HB3233 will help make this happen.