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It's About Time!



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Proficiency-based instruction focuses on what students know and can do.

A proficiency movement in Oregon uses teacher coaches and online resources to help teachers make the transition.

Early results show increased achievement and improved student and teacher satisfaction.

Jared did not like math. He knew it was important to excel at math if he wanted to get into college, but he struggled to understand “math talk” and didn’t like to do his homework. Although his test scores weren’t too bad, he failed Algebra I as an eighth grader because 40% of his grade was based on his homework and daily work. Jared took Algebra I again as a ninth grader with the same failing results. It appeared that Jared was not a strong math student. And because current practice required that if a student failed a class, he or she had to take it again, Jared’s teacher recommended that Jared enroll in Algebra I a third time.

Jared enrolled in Algebra I with Mr. Lee in his sophomore year. Mr. Lee was one of the teachers who used proficiency-based teaching practices at West Memorial High School. And Jared finally excelled at math! Not only did he achieve a proficient score on the state math assessment test, but he also earned an A the first semester and a B the second semester. The following year, Jared enrolled in Algebra II so that he could take another proficiency-based class. This meant that he would work with his math teachers to decide whether he would take Geometry or Precalculus as a senior. By November of his junior year, only three months into Algebra II, Jared knew he was going to continue to find math success.

Mr. Lee’s proficiency-style approach helped make everything understandable. And although practice and daily

work were important in Mr. Lee’s class, they were not 40% of Jared’s grade. Instead, Mr. Lee held Jared accountable for displaying proficiency on assessments and during daily practice activities. There were never any artificial constraints put on Jared’s learning, such as running out of time. Proficiency was always achievable.

Current Practices

Two traditional practices contributed to Jared’s discouragement about his math progress. First, although Jared knew that he was failing a couple of months into each term, his school required him to stay in the class until the end of the grading period in hopes he would change his practice of not doing his homework and daily work and, as a result, pass the class. Jared might have benefited from intervention courses that could help him understand some of the more confusing math concepts and make it easier for him to complete his work, but he wasn’t allowed to take them until he had completed the course, which required him to put in the full amount of seat time scheduled for a grading period.

The second practice was having daily work and homework contribute such a high percentage to Jared’s overall final grade. Although those practices were indicators of Jared’s responsibility, personal management, and commitment to practice and skill improvement, they didn’t indicate how much Jared knew or could do in Algebra I.

Resources

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Proficiency Initiative Overview

During the 2010–11 school year, four Oregon districts (the Greater Albany Public School District, the Medford School District, the Morrow County School District, and the Three Rivers School District) identified a total of 150 teachers in 16 schools and 3 alternative programs to participate in a proficiency initiative offered by Oregon's Business Education Compact (BEC). The BEC conducted initial interviews with administrators and teachers, provided on-site introductory training in proficiency-based practices, and followed up with content-specific coaching with teacher experts. During coaching sessions, teacher coaches from other districts, who had been using proficiency-based learning in their classrooms for at least two years, talked about implementation strategies, changes in teacher practice, the standards requirements, and techniques for developing a high-quality assessment and evaluation system.

At the center of this work were concerns about quantifying high school learning through the use of the Carnegie unit, which has been used since the early 1900s to inform colleges and universities about what they should expect students to know. In actuality, the Carnegie unit defines a "credit" as approximately 130 course hours and reflects time in class, not what a student knows or can do. In recent years, educators have questioned whether it is time to redefine or even replace the Carnegie unit with a more accurate and more dependable measure of student learning.

The four districts in the BEC proficiency initiative began to examine whether the Carnegie unit really reflected the learning that was going on in their classrooms. They discovered that time was driving their students' learning and was also a barrier to it. That was obvious when the end of a grading period was what dictated when students could advance to the next course in a sequence and when teachers were required to measure and report on student learning.

Teachers in the proficiency initiative expressed concern about the ineffectiveness of the current practice of teaching to the standards but not breaking them down into achievable, scaffolded learning targets that students could master and keep track of. Because of the frequent confusion about and inconsistency in what teachers were holding students accountable for, the teachers conceded that in many cases, students were guessing what their teachers expected in the way of proficient performance.

The teachers also concluded that measuring seat time

Proficiency History in Oregon

Proficiency-based teaching and learning is a teacher-led initiative in Oregon that began in the early 1990s with efforts to establish a proficiency-based admissions requirement system for Oregon's state colleges and universities. Meanwhile, many public alternative schools decided to offer credit to students who met industry certification standards, passed alternate testing options, or completed required learning activities. From 2000 to 2007, great strides were made to establish pockets of proficiency across Oregon's secondary schools as state officials and legislators established proficiency options for all comprehensive high schools.

Oregon currently provides three proficiency options: credit for prior learning that occurs through other life experiences, credit for learning that takes place outside the classroom, and credit for learning within the classroom under proficiency-based practices.

was not a good way to set the instructional calendar. Even if students didn't hit the mark, the instructional calendar required teachers to move on to the next unit or lesson, leaving some students behind. Gifted students who needed less time to demonstrate proficiency were also held to the same time schedule and were forced to endure a slower pace of instruction than they needed. Teachers admitted measuring success by how many students accumulated enough points to earn As instead of confirming that those As students were earning stood for high levels of academic rigor and skill.

Finding a Framework

Oregon educators realize that as proficiency-based teaching and learning moves forward as a reliable set of practices to improve teacher effectiveness and increase student achievement, they must look closely at some long-standing instruction and grading practices. Proficiency is based on clear instructional targets, so teachers must talk with one another about whether they are interpreting the standards consis-

tently and accurately. They must also engage in focused discourse about what it means for a student to be proficient in the standards and how this proficiency will be measured and reported.

In an effort to define what it means to use proficiency-based practices, the BEC authored and provided *It's About Time: A Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Framework* for teachers to use to self-evaluate strengths and identify areas for growth. Modeled after *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* by Charlotte Danielson (2007, ASCD), the proficiency framework includes scenarios that describe teachers in elementary, middle, and high school levels using proficiency-based teaching and learning in their classrooms. Rubrics reflect essential elements in the role of teacher and the role of student in learning environments that use proficiency. (See figure 1.)

During the school year that teachers implemented proficiency practices, they also used the structure of the framework to question traditional practices. Their questions included the following:

Figure 1

Teacher Rubric Sample

Teacher Elements	Beginning	Emerging	Proficient	Masters
Builds multiple opportunities and intervention methods into planning so students can learn the standard at a proficient level or higher.	Teacher plans on how to "teach to the masses," without built-in opportunities for students who need multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency or those who are ready to move on without additional support.	Teacher has a rudimentary set of interventions to help struggling students demonstrate proficiency in selected standards; however, students who are working at an advanced level are not provided opportunities to move to the next learning level.	Teacher has a well-developed set of classroom interventions to help each student reach proficiency in the selected standards. Teacher also plans how to provide for students to move to the next learning level when they have demonstrated they are proficient in selected standards.	Teacher is part of a department and school team with a well-developed set of interventions to help each student demonstrate proficiency in selected standards and move on to the next learning level without restrictions.

Source: Business Education Compact. (n.d.). *It's about time! A framework for proficiency-based teaching and learning*. Beaverton, OR: Author.

- How to develop a high-quality, transparent instructional model that connects achievable standards with engaging, student-led learning activities and frequent, meaningful assessments
- How to hold students accountable for measure and report academic achievement and nonacademic factors, such as attendance, attitude, behavior, and effort
- How to increase the role of time as a flexible learning factor instead of a barrier to learning
- How to create a learning environment where students don't chase points to earn a grade, but rather understand the importance of taking charge of their learning and owning their personal academic growth.



To help teachers involved in the initiative, as well the other 2,200 teachers the BEC has trained, BEC created a portal (www.becpdx.org/proficiency/default.aspx) that contains more than 2,100 teacher-created documents that reflect a wide range of proficiency-based elements. During the 18 months of the initiative, teachers made documents they had developed for classroom use available on the portal for other teachers to review and edit for use. BEC staff members also connected teachers in like-content areas who could offer ideas about implementation, sustainability, workload, consistency, and communication with all proficiency stakeholders.

Data Reflects Promise

During the proficiency initiative, outside evaluators collected and reviewed metrics in student achievement on statewide assessments as well as indicators of their college and career readiness, including how early they took Algebra I and how many Fs they earned. Despite the short time frame of the project, initial data reflects strong student achievement:

- 17% more high school students met or exceeded the state assessment in math in 2010–11 than in 2009–10
- 11% more high school students met or exceeded the state assessment in reading and literature in 2010–11 than in 2009–10
- 11.84% fewer students earned more than one failing grade in 2010–11, as compared with 2009–10.

In addition to collecting student achievement data, evaluators conducted pre- and postattitudinal surveys of all educators and students involved. Across the board, teacher and student attitudes were more positive when proficiency-based teaching and learning was part of the routine learning landscape:

- 75% of the students who participated in the postattitudinal survey stated they understood standards more clearly in their proficiency classroom than other classes as compared with 64% during the preattitudinal survey
- 71.3% of students who participated in the postattitudinal survey stated that they are involved with their learning goals as compared with 63.1% in the preattitudinal survey
- 84% of the teachers stated that proficiency provides multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge
- 83% of the teachers stated that proficiency helps students understand learning targets and standards
- 79% of the teachers stated that using proficiency has renewed their commitment to being a teacher.

Every Student, Every Classroom

Teachers in the proficiency initiative challenged one another to think differently about their craft as educators. They affirmed that they would never return to more traditional teacher practices that were creating a regimented, assembly-line model of learning by teaching content through the master schedule, calendars for grading, and structured course catalogs that compartmentalized standards.

Oregon's proficiency movement offers hope to all students that learning is not about chasing points before time runs out, the teacher moves on, or the bell rings. Proficiency holds the potential for each student, like Jared, to find a place where the learning expectations are clear and achievable, the role of a student is redefined, and each student has a personalized pathway to achieve solid academic achievement. **PL**

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