

Proficiency-Based Learning in WWSU

What is Proficiency-Based Learning?

Act 77 and the State Board of Education's Education Quality Standards (EQS) state that Vermont public schools must provide students with flexible and personalized pathways for progressing through grade levels and to graduation. The notion of Proficiency-Based Learning is a key component of this, requiring that students advance based on demonstration of attainment of skills and knowledge, rather than based on time spent in a classroom.

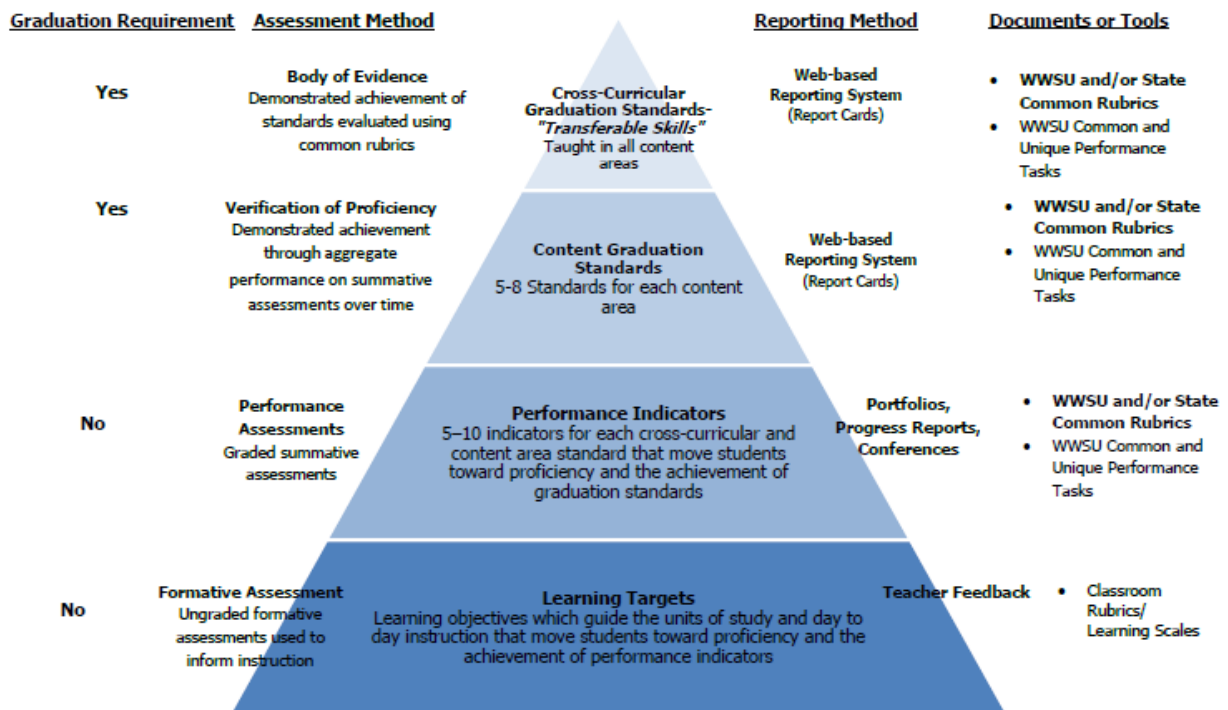
Proficiency-Based Learning can take many forms, and is already a critically important part of many school and SU/District instructional models statewide. Classroom activities that give students opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do, support student-specific assessments of proficiency. Methods of relaying progression in learning to students and their families, through proficiency-based portfolios and reporting systems, for example, can create a deeper and more accurate sense of each student's strengths and areas of need.

"Schools use proficiency-based learning to raise academic standards, ensure that more students meet those higher expectations, and graduate more students better prepared for adult life." --The Great Schools Partnership of Portland, Maine

In general proficiency-based learning is based on the following core principles:

- 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.
- 2) **Proficiencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.** In this case, proficiencies are merely a synonym for learning standards. Explicit, in this context, means clearly described standards that are clearly communicated to students and parents. Measureable 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.



This graphic represents the Proficiency-Based Learning System in WWSU. **Cross-Curricular Graduation Standards** ("Transferable Skills") are aligned with cross-curricular state standards, and describe the most essential skills and work habits that students will need to succeed in adult life. Students demonstrate achievement of cross-curricular graduation standards through a body of evidence, such as **portfolios, exhibitions, or capstone projects** that are evaluated using **common rubrics**.

Content-Area Graduation Standards are aligned with state and national standards and learning progressions, and describe the most essential content knowledge that students will need to succeed in adult life. Students demonstrate achievement of content-area graduation standards through their aggregate achievement of **performance indicators** over time which are scored using common rubrics (*see Assessment Pathways*).

In general, the measurement of progress on graduation standards is determined at the end of elementary school (grade 5) and middle school (grade 8), and the final achievement of graduation standards is determined at the end of high school (grade 12).

Performance Indicators are aligned with content-area and cross-curricular state standards, and they provide more detailed descriptions of what it means to meet a graduation standard. Achievement of performance indicators may be determined using summative assessments—either common SUI-wide assessments for a content area and grade level, or in

some instances through classroom assessments developed by individual teachers. Over time, a student's aggregate performance on summative assessments determines whether performance indicators have been met.

Learning Targets are aligned with state standards and guide the design of curriculum units intended to move students toward proficiency and the achievement of performance indicators. Achievement of unit-based learning objectives are determined using formative assessments, and teacher feedback prepares students for summative assessments. Teachers provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their emerging proficiency.

Students at the middle and high school may demonstrate proficiency through learning accessed via a flexible pathways and may augment their graduation portfolio through documentation of these learning opportunities.

WWSU Assessment Pathways

This model shows the various pathways for determining student proficiency in both the content areas and in the transferable skills. WWSU Common scoring guides (**rubrics**) for each **performance indicator** are used to score student work representing content standards and transferable skills, and a **body of evidence is used to determine student proficiency** in the overall area. The model shows many possible options which will vary depending on the content area. For example- in elementary or middle level mathematics option 1 or option 2 best represent the system in WWSU. WWSU uses many "common learning experiences" as we have the same math programs in most of our schools. Some of the student assessments or "performance tasks" will be common across the schools, and the same rubrics will be used. In another example, writing, option 3 may best represent the WWSU system of instruction. The same scoring rubrics will be used across schools, but the performance tasks (or writing prompts) will vary as will the learning experiences leading up to the summative assessment opportunity.



Glossary of Terms

Act 77- Vermont Act 77, June 2013 is also known as the "*Flexible Pathways*" Initiative and includes the following components

- Expansion of the existing Statewide Dual Enrollment Program
- Expansion of Early College Programs
- Increased access to work-based learning
- Increased virtual/blended learning opportunities
- Increased access to Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- Implementation of Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs)

Body of Evidence- *(see portfolios)*

Capstone Projects- Also called a capstone experience, culminating project, or senior exhibition, among many other terms, a capstone project is a multifaceted assignment that serves as a culminating academic and intellectual experience for students, typically during their final year of high school or middle school, or at the end of an academic program or learning-pathway experience

Content Area Standards- established learning expectations within content area domains approved by the Vermont Board of Education. Including Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, and more.

Education Quality Standards- The purpose of the rules is to ensure that all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education.

Exhibitions of Learning- Public presentation of an individual's growth and learning

Feedback- information provided to students about growth and leaning toward a goal or target

Flexible Pathways- *(see Act 77)*

Formative Assessment- informal assessment strategies used during the learning process in order to modify instruction so as to improve student understanding. It typically involves qualitative feedback (rather than scores) that focuses on the details of content and performance.

Learning Objectives- articulate the knowledge and skills you want students to acquire by the end of the unit or course

Learning Targets- frame the daily lesson from the student perspective providing the rationale or context for the learning, and start with the statement “*I can...*”. They are designed to support student growth toward the learning objectives and proficiency indicators.

Rubrics- a scoring tool that explicitly represents the performance expectations for an assignment or piece of work

Performance Indicators- descriptive statements identifying what students need to know or be able to do, aligned with standards, used for determining student proficiency within a domain

Performance Tasks - complex and challenging summative assessments designed to measure a student’s ability to integrate knowledge and skills across content areas using many performance indicators

Portfolios- compilation of student work assembled for the purpose of evaluating student attainment of proficiencies.

Proficiency- Mastery of a specific behavior or skill demonstrated by consistently superior performance, measured against established standards.

Summative Assessment- used to evaluate student learning, skill acquisition, and academic achievement at the conclusion of a defined instructional period—typically at the end of a project, unit, course, semester, program, or school year.

Transferable Skills- overarching skills, such as communication, problem-solving and citizenship. These skills are not assessed in isolation, but instead are demonstrated over a body of evidence collected through the content performance indicators in multiple curriculum areas

Resources Used:

Leadership In Action “How Does Proficiency Based Learning Work”
newenglandssc.org/leadership_in_action. Nellie Mae Foundation

Graphics originated from the Great Schools Partnership: What is Proficiency Based Learning? <http://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/>

