

National Thought Leaders' Perspectives State Board of Education Systems Integration Policy Discussion 2002 Credit for Proficiency

In August 2001, the State Board of Education identified three policy issues to be addressed relating to the integration of the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM), the certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM), and the diploma. In December 2001, following extensive discussion and input from stakeholders, the Board made policy decisions on two issues: (1) the relationship between the CIM and CAM: and (2) the relationship between the CAM and diploma. As a result, the Board adopted administrative rules and amendments that define the CAM and create four new diploma requirements (581-022-1120 and 581-022-1130).

In an effort to guide its discussion of policy issue # 3, the relationship between time-based and proficiency-based systems and the awarding of units of credit, the Board identified issues, concerns, and questions in a conceptual framework and enlisted the assistance of seven national "thought leaders" for their educational perspective on the framework. As a result of their input and the Board's ongoing discussion, the Board adopted administrative rules regarding Credit Options (581-022-1131). This Credit Option rule is the current Credit for Proficiency policy under which districts in the state of Oregon have awarded credit based on proficiency since 2002.

The following compilation is a composite of the "thought leader" responses to give the 2008 Credit for Proficiency Task Force a sense of the 2002 discussion and key points leading to adoption of the current rule. Because the "thought leaders" originally addressed all three policy issues, this document is only inclusive of their comments directed at proficiency-based systems and the awarding of units of credit.

Thought Leaders:

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*These four thought leaders participated in the State Board of Education retreat, August 21-22, 2002

Betsy Brand, American Youth Policy Forum

I agree strongly with your conceptual framework, but would suggest adding a slightly different perspective. As I read your outline (and this may be solely related to the brevity of the material I was provided), I am assuming that your conceptual framework of high school is limited to a physical high school. In my work in secondary education policy reform, I prefer to talk about the 'learning experience for high school aged students.' I think this begins to signal that the learning experience for teens can happen in many ways and places outside of the high school that draw heavily on the resources of the community. As such, you may want to consider extending your conceptual framework to learning for adolescents throughout the community, but using the high school as the main mechanism for introducing change.

With that said, it is an exciting prospect to consider a learning system that is based on proficiency, not time. I wholeheartedly support the Oregon State Board of Education's desire and interest to move to a proficiency-based system, and urge you, even in the face of uncertainty, difficulty, and opposition, to continue your efforts. Making the kinds of changes you are suggesting will not be easy and will not come quickly. It will take a great deal of resolve and long-term commitment to see these changes come to fruition.

For too long we have accepted an educational system in which time is the constant and student performance the variable. We must change our educational system to one that embraces performance and proficiency as the constant and time the variable.

In creating a proficiency-based system, I also assume that you will want to utilize multiple assessments of student performance, relying more heavily on alternative assessments in addition to standardized tests. The use of multiple and alternative assessments is important to determine how well students are doing and to ascertain their proficiencies in areas that cannot be measured through standardized approaches.

Finally, your proposal really involves a complete transformation of the high school. Instituting a proficiency-based system does not happen in isolation. As we have seen with the standards movement, assessment drives curricula and teaching practices, which in turn leads to professional development for teachers, leadership issues, school structure, and on and on.

It will be very difficult to align a proficiency-based system with a time-based system, based on seat time or number of credits taken in high school. It will be easier to align a proficiency-based system with a state assessment system that measures what a student should know and be able to do. As states put their assessment systems into place, this transformation to a performance-based system should become easier. Another alternative is to have two systems side by side: students would be required to fulfill the seat-time or credit requirements to graduate while they are also being asked to demonstrate their proficiency through other means. Another option is to do the hard work of trying to crosswalk student proficiencies into

existing credits or courses. This is based on the assumption that high school courses have the specific competencies that are supposed to be learned from that course expressed in detail, not generalities, and expressed in terms of skills and abilities, and not theoretical knowledge.

Creating an efficient and valued proficiency-based system will require work in a number of areas. The State Board must ensure that the proficiency-based system is transparent, fair, objective, relatively easy to use, and not overly expensive. The board will also have to demonstrate that it does not change student outcomes that would be produced under a time/credit-based system and that students are not being penalized (especially with regard to the application and acceptance process for colleges and universities) by being in a proficiency-based system.

Time may have been used as an equity measure, but in reality for many youth, especially in urban schools, there was nothing equitable about sitting in class for twelve years of a lousy education. Time alone does not guarantee equity, and policymakers should be clear that equity of educational experience relies on many factors other than time. That is why the standards movement is so important in focusing on the needs of all you and in ensuring their performance to a high standard.

By their inherent nature, proficiency-based systems should be more equitable than a time/credit system, because they measure what each student knows and is able to do, rather than measuring how many courses were taken or hours seated in high school classes. The public, I believe, is smart enough to make this leap of faith to proficiency-based measures, sooner, than most educators. The problem is really in operationalizing a performance-based system and in dealing with transparency, objectivity and fairness, ease of use, and cost.

Karen Pittman, Forum for Youth Investment

Connecting time- and proficiency-based systems. Educators have several options as they attempt to merge time- and proficiency-based systems of accountability. Merge is likely an important word – since removing time-based accountability entirely runs counter to so many current conditions, and because our means of assessing proficiency need to be substantially improved before we use them as our sole way of measuring student success. One option is to maintain all time requirements while adding proficiency requirements, and measuring student success based on both. Another possibility is to do as the Board has with its previous efforts and truly blend the two forms of accountability, providing options to students in the process. We would vote for the second option. It might be useful to look at the growing number of options being created to measure adult-proficiency for placement in the workforce or in higher education. The parallels are fairly clear with adults and there are systems and assessment tools in place to guide the development of metrics to translate competence into credits.

Elevating proficiency in a time-based climate. The normal route through which states “create value” for a new educational priority is mandate, tied to assessment and on to funding. This approach has, in the past, had relatively little effect on the heart of education – teacher-student interactions. Is there an alternative role for states, with greater promise for long-term results, while recognizing the reality of resource constraints? One radical but straightforward way to elevate proficiency is to allow a few districts to experiment with financing schemes. If personalization means adults working with students annually to determine the best use of their educational time and dollars, it should be possible to think time in terms of years rather than attendance days and to think of dollars as funds that follow the student rather than being assigned to the school according to the number of days the student shows up. If the goal is really focused on proficiency and students and their advisors truly feel that they have control over the learning menu, the time and dollars will be used more efficiently.

Equity, time, and proficiency. It is true that equal seat time has been used as a proxy for educational equity. But it is an extraordinarily poor measure of equity, and has resulted in outcomes and learning experiences that are disastrously and chronically inequitable. Access to a seat in a classroom does almost nothing to guarantee access to a high-quality learning environment, much less to proficiency. The question, then, is how to use the transition to a proficiency-based system as an opportunity to build equity.

Hilary Pennington, Jobs for the Future

As I will argue below, the most effective shift to a proficiency-based system will not only allow for change in how student proficiency is measured, but also in how instruction, time, and institutional relationships (between high schools, and postsecondary institutions, high school and work; in school and out of school time) are structured. OR’s policies will be stronger if they encourage comprehensive change and innovation across all these dimensions.

As the state considers how to move its high schools towards a proficiency-based system, I would encourage it to think of it as a way to improve the performance of its entire secondary system, not simply its high schools.

In *Transforming the American High School*, a recent report from Jobs for the Future and the Aspen Institute, former Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Michael Cohen argues for a more radical approach:

The current education system, including high schools, provides students with a constant amount of time and a single approach for learning – and produces unacceptably large variations in student performance. The only way to get all students up to common, high performance standards is to flip this formulation on its head. We must provide students with multiple learning options and pathways and varied lengths of time to complete high school and gain the skills necessary to enter postsecondary education without remediation (Cohen, 2001).

In many ways, this argument calls for a return to the original intent of Oregon's standards-based reform efforts in the early 1990's, when leading advocates saw higher standards and varied lengths of time in which to achieve them as part of an integrated reform agenda. Oregon's early reform efforts argued strongly for a competency-based system of multiple pathways in which time would be the variable and the achievement of a core set of academic and applied learning standards would be the constant. This should still be the goal: a fundamental restructuring of our secondary education system towards multiple pathways and more deliberate variation in pedagogy, time and institutional arrangements.

The reason to move to a proficiency-based system is not only to measure student achievement in more meaningful ways, but also to encourage better results for all students by allowing greater variation and customization of instruction in order to allow diverse students to meet the same high standards. In other words, the best way to design a proficiency-based system that does not diminish quality is to allow variations in time and the nature of instruction, but hold the standards constant. Over time, the goal should be to move away from a time-based system in conjunction with adopting proficiency-based measures for student achievement; as Oregon's experience over the past decade to some extent shows, the state will have trouble creating sufficient value for proficiency-based education in an essentially time-based system.

Another pressing task for states as they review and improve their standards and assessment systems is the need to develop more competency-based or performance-based assessments that can help move away from the construct of "seat time." Effective assessments should be multiple and authentic and allow significant flexibility in how performance is demonstrated in subjects other than literacy and math, including upgraded course requirements and end-of-course exams.

John Ferrandino, National Academy Foundation

First and foremost, the state should encourage diverse implementation. School districts must not feel financially threatened when devising avenues for student success in the proficiency-based system. Funding must take into account both the number of students and their relative progress (and projected progress) toward proficiency and graduation goals and requirements. The state must clearly define the funding formula and use that funding to encourage schools to guide students toward success in the new system. Be prepared for high costs to provide this personalized attention to each student. Incentives, financial if possible, should be offered to districts that go above and beyond the projected time line for implementation of the proficiency-based system in the near future.

Over the long-term, incentives could be used to reward schools that provide innovative replicable strategies for student success. Provide a forum for Oregon teachers and administrators to share these strategies. Encourage or require districts to send school-based

teams to state planning sessions and professional development to highlight these plans and work in teams to devise local solutions. These sessions should include feedback time. Teams should include administrators, teachers, and school board members and, if possible, parents and students. Create these sessions as annual sharing and recognition events. Involvement of the business community during these sharing moments is critical to penetrate human resource departments and establish an understanding of the new language. I assume and should have said so before that throughout all of this there will be active involvement of the state university system as well as private post-secondary institutions within the state and beyond where possible.

The state must give teachers and principals the tools and skills to operate and take advantage of the new system. The proficiency-based system will make many educators very uncomfortable. It is vital that they have the tools they need to realign their classrooms and teaching with an entirely new philosophy about the structure of education.

Staff should be encouraged to incorporate new assessments and tools into classrooms and coursework gradually over a number of years to alleviate the potential fear of wholesale immediate change and to foster thoughtful integration of assessments and tools that already exist which easily adapt to a proficiency-based system and new tools that may need to be created.

S. Paul Reville, Harvard University

The National Commission on Time and Learning, in its groundbreaking report entitled, "Prisoners of Time" stated that on the matter of educational time, we have the wrong paradigm. American schools, the Commission argued, are structured so as to hold time constant and let learning vary. Either you get it in the allotted time or you do not. If you do not, we have one of two equally unsatisfactory alternatives for you: we'll retain you in grade or we'll socially promote you. The Commission challenged American educators to turn the paradigm around, to make learning the constant and let time vary to meet the needs of the learner.

The departure point for any credit system ought to be the attainment of mastery or proficiency as measured against a system of agreed upon standards. The flexibility within the system should come through the various ways and means of assisting different students to meet the standards. One of the key flexibilities is time, another is type of instruction. Students enter school with varying levels of mastery so it stands to reason that the length of instructional time will vary to meet their specific needs. Students learn in different ways so that the type of instruction will vary to meet the learning style of the student. However, the standards remain constant notwithstanding the variance in kind and length of instruction. There are many and various way for students to master the standards.

Personalization is an educational approach rather than an end in itself. Personalization usually aids in accelerating student's progress toward attainment. However, personalization is neither a substitute for nor a guarantee of proficiency.

The Board is wise to strive for policies that balance continuity and change. Policy should be "tight" on outcomes, "loose" on process. The policies should specify "the what" and leave "the how" to the discretion of local educators. At the same time, the state may want to consider providing incentives for those piloting truly, innovative practice. Standards should be clear and lean. Methods of achieving the standards should be many and diverse.

Policy-makers need to be wary of creating so much complexity and so many layers of reform and compliance that the field and the public become hopelessly confused.

A guiding principle should be that educational time needs to be restructured to match student learning needs. Proficiency is the goal. Students should be entitled to at least as much help as they need in order to attain proficiency. Students who already exceed the proficiency standard should be entitled to the opportunity to continuously improve their level of academic performance.

Proficiency can be measured through a variety of tests, demonstrations, collections of evidence, presentations and other means. Until we are ready to advance to a system that is entirely proficiency based, we'll need a hybrid system that includes some course requirements in addition to other demonstrations of proficiency. For a transitional period at least, both courses and proficiency demonstrations should be required for graduation. Each course should be required to embody its own proficiency requirements, which will be necessary in order to earn a passing grade.

State policy should not set the delivery models, but challenge local educators to come up with the most efficient, effective models of delivery. Many schools have been experimenting with mastery demonstrations, culminating projects and/or portfolios.

Policies to stimulate educational change ought to create opportunity, build capacity and provide incentives for those who desire to be change agents (Hill). Performance rather than process should be rewarded e.g. reward proficiency not personalization. In the education industry, excellence has generally gone unrewarded, poor performance is seldom sanctioned and so, mediocrity typically becomes the norm. Standards, clear proficiencies, provide the system with a metric against which to measure performance. The state should not try to dictate educational strategies, but rather should set locals free and highlight best practices while researching the causes of success and failure. The state should provide the incentives for experimentation.

Equity does not mean equality. Equity in education has often been defined as however clumsily, trying to give the same thing to everyone. Everyone attends school on the same

schedule and receives the same basic kind of instruction. A reformed education system says each student is different. We must assess each child's level of mastery and proceed at a rate and in a style that suits that child. Such a system requires much data that is made available through the use of regular classroom assessment of student performance. Pedagogy is shaped based on the success of student performance. This is a data driven instructional system.

The changes suggested by Oregon's movement toward a proficiency-based system will require an incremental policy changes coupled with massive investments in professional development surrounded by a major public engagement campaign designed to win the support of the field and the public.

Michelle Swanson, Vision Inc.

Moving from a seat-based to a proficiency-based system will require a system of mobility, flexibility, and consistency in systems integration.

A few Oregon districts have experimented with proficiency over time and credit. In these schools and programs, students utilize a variety of instructional and assessment resources that move them beyond clock hours: exhibitions where the work is judged by the use of state scoring guides of proficient and excellent work; scored samples and electronic portfolios; flexible time, schedule and credits; and web and community-based delivery systems.

Methodologies such as project-based learning – with its emphasis on authenticity, personalization, academic rigor, and community connections – is a core strategy that facilitates the simultaneous outcomes of crediting proficiency in a time-based system. Skillful project-based designs take time to mature to the point where they seamlessly integrate multiple initiatives and variables.

Although time has been used as an equity measure, Oregon teachers know the real equalizer is a teacher's belief that all students can learn and meet standards. The ability to design, differentiate, scaffold, and assess learning that is authentic and has meaning for the student requires skill by Oregon teachers and that requires on-going, extensive and strategic professional development – in context, with teaching and learning at the center and a systems approach to all initiatives.

Bob Pearlman, Consultant (formerly of the Autodesk Foundation)

The goal of the state in education reform is more than setting high standards for student proficiency and then testing for proficiency. It is to create a framework, or learning environment, in which students strive not just to demonstrate proficiency, but strive to become proficient, to acquire knowledge and skills, both hard skills and soft skills.

Most state systems today, with their standards and tests, are “gatekeepers” to students. They only tell students what they are required to do to mark their passageway to the great “afterlife” of college and careers. What these systems do not do is ‘engage” the students. They provide no motivation, no excitement, no interest, to students. What is in it for the kids?

The challenge facing the Oregon State Board of Education is to provide high school students with an educational experience that motivates them to learn, to direct their own learning, and to demonstrate their career-related knowledge and skills.

Time will always be a working standard connected to course completion. But proficiency, linked to standards, can be better judged if students produce products, present them, and defend their ideas. And graduation portfolios make a much better proficiency requirement for graduation than does time on task.

A “personalized, proficiency-based system” for students is a two-way street. It is personal, and engaging because students do projects based on their interest, and experience career-related learning experiences with adult mentors. But it is personal also because students communicate their ideas, and themselves, through work products to real audiences of peers, adults, colleges, and employers.