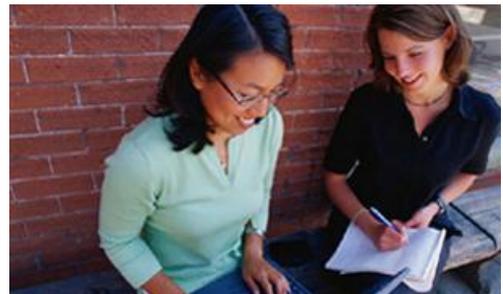


Proficiency-  
Based  
Instruction and  
Assessment

A Promising  
Path to Higher  
Achievement  
In Oregon  
Education

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OREGON  
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## **Acknowledgments and Credits**

This paper on proficiency-based education is excerpted from a 2008 Oregon Education Roundtable white paper entitled *Taking Promising High School Practices to Scale*. Among the best practices discussed in that paper, proficiency was described as the practice with the greatest potential to boost widespread student achievement, and at the least cost.

The paper from which this excerpt was drawn was the final white paper in a series about the vital importance of getting as many Oregonians as possible to and through a postsecondary education, whether a graduate, undergraduate, or two-year degree, or a certificate in a skilled occupation. That series of white papers was made possible by a generous grant to the Oregon Education Roundtable from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the ongoing support of the Oregon Community Foundation.

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## SUMMARY: THE POTENTIAL OF PROFICIENCY-BASED PRACTICE

Proficiency-based instruction and assessment has the greatest potential to realize the best outcomes at the least cost, and it completes Oregon's long journey to achieve a standards-based education system. Schools in Redmond, Scappoose, and Beaverton are showing the way. Others are starting to join them.

In a proficiency-based classroom, students start a course knowing exactly what proficiencies they need to master to demonstrate that they have acquired content knowledge and skills. They work at it at their own pace until they get it right. Teachers, often working in teams, use formative assessment at every step of the way to measure learning and to gauge and adjust instruction. When students master the required proficiencies, they are assessed and graded on that basis only. Inconsistent, arbitrary, and inflated grading across classrooms, schools, and districts is not a part of proficiency-based education. In a proficiency-based system, teachers flourish as much as students.

Oregon has laid a good policy foundation for proficiency-based education, but it needs to do more to encourage adoption of this practice statewide, to support professional learning communities, and to get its teacher education institutions, public and private, engaged with this practice and the schools.

**Policy Recommendations** (see page 22 for more detail)

***Make proficiency-based practice the definition of standards-based education.*** Oregon should adopt the official position that the standards-based education system it seeks to establish requires proficiency-based assessment and instruction.

***At the secondary school level, require proficiency options and features that lead inevitably to proficiency adoption.*** State education policymakers should choose either of two implementation paths to accomplish a standards-based system defined by proficiency practice. The first path, which is less assertive, would require high schools and perhaps middle schools to offer students a portion of credits or classes that are proficiency based. The second, more assertive path would be to mandate proficiency-based *assessment* (but not necessarily instruction) for all content classes according to proficiencies defined in content standards. Because assessment based on standards tends to drive and define instruction, such a mandate would lead to proficiency-based instruction.

***Define proficiency-based practice.*** There is a tendency for practitioners comfortable with traditional time- and grade-based instruction and summative-oriented assessment to say of proficiency-based practice, "Oh, we already do that." That is not likely. Proficiency-based practice should be defined by its salient characteristics, which are described in this paper and summarized in the table on page 4.

***Preserve out-of-class experience in proficiency practice.*** As proficiency-based education moves into the classroom in favor of traditional assessment and instruction, out-of-class proficiency credit should not be lost or minimized as a learning venue.

***Increase state staff support.*** The Oregon Department of Education should continue and step up its support for the adoption of proficiency practice, perhaps by reconstituting the Credit for Proficiency Task Force as the Proficiency-Based Practice Office.

***Build professional learning communities.*** Oregon schools should be organized to operate as professional learning communities as defined on page 6 whether or not they adopt proficiency practice, but *especially* if they adopt proficiency practice.

***Make proficiency-practice prominent in educator development.*** Oregon policy should align educator preparation and in-service training to focus substantially on standards-based, proficiency-based assessment and instruction. Proficiency-based practice should be part of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum for prospective administrators, teachers, and counselors at all schools of education. Faculty from schools of education should be encouraged to spend meaningful time in working classrooms learning about proficiency-based practice. One of Oregon's schools of education, whether public or private, should make a seed investment to develop a leadership role in proficiency research and advocacy.



## PROFICIENCY-BASED PRACTICE

Proficiency-based assessment and instruction, often called credit for proficiency,\* could be one of the most promising practices now emerging and gathering adherents in Oregon education. It is being practiced in only a handful of school districts today, but its initial results surpass conventional assessment and instruction. In the spring of 2008, a conference of leading Oregon educators identified proficiency-based assessment and instruction as the practice that can probably improve student learning the most and at the least cost.

**Proficiency-based assessment and instruction is the practice that can probably improve student learning the most and at the least cost.**

*Proficiencies can take us where we want to go.* These educators said, further, that proficiency-based education can transform teaching and learning and help Oregon achieve its ambitious goals to raise education attainment for more Oregonians.

Proficiency-based practice is *real* standards-based practice. In a true standards-based system, which Oregon has been laboring to achieve the past 17 years, schools and teachers would build the entire learning experience for students on achieving proficiencies in well defined skill and knowledge standards. Teachers in the few schools who are now engaged in proficiency-based instruction use those standards, in both skills and subject matter content, to 1) set performance objectives that students see, understand, and strive to achieve, 2) gauge student progress through formative assessment, 3) individualize the learning experience (in particular through projects and collections of evidence) for each student based on those objectives and ongoing assessments, and 4) determine that students are proficient in the standards through summative assessment.

Oregon does not lack for both high and plentiful standards. It has well-defined standards for core academic subjects, standards for essential skills, and standards for career-related skills and behaviors. The state's content standards – which it adopted in conjunction with the optional CIM and CAM certificates, and which form the basis of state benchmark assessments – are academically rigorous, and even now they are being updated and improved.\*\* Any student who achieves them is probably ready to succeed in postsecondary education and work.

**Oregon will not achieve statewide, standards-based secondary education and its benefits in student attainment without resolving the gap between its standards and predominant classroom instructional practice.**

*Standards-based education doesn't exist unless it is practiced in the classroom.* According to proficiency advocates, however, these standards do not form the backbone of classroom practice in most Oregon high schools, which may explain why so many students perform poorly on statewide assessments keyed to the standards and why so many high school graduates flounder when they move on to postsecondary education. Proficiencies that define Oregon's standards are harder for students to acquire, if they acquire them at all, in a traditional teacher-centered classroom based on seat-time and grades influenced by a host of subjective factors. Oregon will not achieve statewide, standards-based secondary education and its benefits in student attainment without resolving the gap between its standards and predominant classroom instructional practice.

Oregon is taking one step to close this gap in its new high school diploma requirements, which will go into effect with the graduating class of 2012. That step is requiring students, as a condition of receiving

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\* "Credit for proficiency" appears to be the most popular term for the concept of helping students to achieve proficiencies based on standards (sometimes called *standards-based instruction* or *standards-based assessment*). The term, however, doesn't adequately convey the impact this practice represents on instruction, learning, assessment, and their relation to standards. Moreover, credit for proficiency is a term used in postsecondary education where it means something different, typically credit granted where a student can demonstrate proficiency in a set of skills required as a prerequisite for admission to an upper level course.

\*\* Oregon's PASS standards, which indicate college readiness, are even more rigorous, and they are available for use as well.

the new diploma, to demonstrate proficiency in four essential skill standards: reading, writing, applied math, and oral presentation.\*\* But state policymakers have not yet decided whether or how to require similar demonstration of proficiencies in content standards. Except for districts that adopt proficiency-based instruction on their own initiative, that part of Oregon secondary education remains seat-time and grade-based.

There is some indication that a number of school district personnel are anxious about how to implement and assess the essential skills requirement. State officials have taken pains to explain that students will have ample opportunity to demonstrate essential skills proficiency in any one or combination of several ways, including 1) achieving a passing score on statewide assessments in reading, writing, and math, 2) completing a work sample or student project that passes muster in a locally scored assessment, or 3) achieving a passing score on another standardized test yet to be determined and approved by the state.\*\* Proficiency practitioners and advocates say such worries would not even surface in a proficiency-based system because essential skills (the four to be required plus others) would be acquired and demonstrated by students as a matter of course in the varied learning formats of proficiency-based instruction.

***Proficiency practice has gained a foothold here in a short time.*** Oregon laid the foundation for proficiency-based instruction in 2002 when the State Board of Education adopted a range of options for awarding students credit. Oregon Administrative Rule 581-022-1131, titled Credit Options, included not only typical classroom work and exams as a basis for awarding credit in required and elective courses, but also documented prior experience, independent study, internships, group projects, and sample work products that demonstrate student skills and knowledge. The earliest applications of the proficiency credit were mostly to student experiences outside the classroom in non-core subjects. In fact, the Department of Education supported a pilot program on this application of proficiency credit in a handful of Oregon high schools from 2004 through 2006. School districts in the program included Beaverton, Canby, Albany, Gresham-Barlow, Hood River County, Scio, and Willowa. About that time the Business Education Compact began to train school personnel in the concept, especially in out-of-class practicum and project work. Since then, a number of schools have embraced it as a way to teach and evaluate students in the classroom in core subjects.

The experiences of these schools, a number of which are discussed below, have shifted the conversation about proficiency from a focus on “credit” to a system of instruction, learning, and assessment based on student proficiency in accepted content standards rather than seat time or grades as an indicator of what students know and can do.\*\*\*

### **What Proficiency-Based Practice Replaces**

***Time becomes the variable rather than learning.*** Proficiency is an alternative to the current time- and grade-based system. In this system students typically study a given subject for 130 hours and put in 990 hours of classroom time a year, and they are credentialed in a system of letter grades. Critics of the current system and proponents of proficiency argue that letter grades are so arbitrary, so inconsistent, and in many cases so inflated they are effectively meaningless.

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\*\* The other significant change in the new diploma is that it raises minimum Carnegie Units required for graduation from 22 to 24, with more credits required in core subjects such as math, English, and science. Some Oregon high schools already meet or exceed that requirement as a matter of local school district policy.

\*\* As currently envisioned, student reading proficiency will be assessed on a statewide standardized test administered on paper or online. Writing and applied math may be assessed this way on paper or online but will probably be assessed most often by teachers using state-developed scoring guides. Oral presentation will be assessed locally with state-developed scoring guides.

\*\*\* Proficiency-based instruction, or standards-based instruction, can trace its roots to what was called standards-based or outcome-based reform philosophies of the 1980s and ‘90s, which focused on objective standards that all students are expected to meet by demonstrated performance.

The seat-time or time-based system, consisting of Carnegie Units\* of credit, is what Clayton M. Christensen, a Harvard professor and expert on innovation, calls “monolithic batch system” teaching. “When a class is ready to move on,” he writes, “all students move on, regardless of how many have mastered the previous concept (even if it is a prerequisite for learning what is next). On the other hand, if some students are able to master a course in just a few weeks, they remain in the class for the whole semester.” As a result, he contends, a portion of students tune out from either boredom or frustration. “Both the bored and the bewildered see their motivation for achievement shredded by the system.”<sup>1</sup>

***Objective assessment replaces a grading system often tainted with subjective factors and inconsistency across classrooms, schools, and districts.***

In current prevailing practice, teachers assign grades on the basis of points awarded for a range of tasks that include performance on tests and papers. But a host of subjective factors – not related to proficiency – are often mixed in. These can include attendance, student effort, student discussion in class, homework, and extra credit work. Grading students “down” from their proficiency level is also employed as punishment for various behavioral infractions, including turning work in late. In one case, published on a teacher’s website, students lose points if their parents don’t sign off on a course syllabus. The net effect of these non-objective factors is that no one knows exactly what capabilities high school grades signify. Grades awarded in one class, one grade level, one school, or one district may mean something entirely different than similar grades awarded in another. A student with a ‘C’ average at one high school may be doing the kind of work that would gain an ‘A’ in another. Without strict adherence to proficiency-based assessment, grading becomes susceptible to inflation, which can arise from any number of intangible factors, such as teacher sympathy for student effort or parental or student pressure. In fact, there is evidence and widespread belief that both high school and postsecondary grade inflation is rampant in American education. (Secondary grade inflation bedevils postsecondary educators; postsecondary grade inflation bedevils employers.) As a consequence, postsecondary educators report that some high school ‘A’ students arrive at their doors well prepared to succeed and other ‘A’ students have to take remedial classes to shore up weak skills in reading, writing, and math. One postsecondary admissions official told Oregon’s Credit for Proficiency Task Force that she is rooting for adoption of a proficiency-based system because she has “no idea” what high school grades indicate.

**If experience, research, and common sense teach nothing else, they confirm the truism that people learn at different rates, and in different ways with different subjects. But we have put the cart before the horse: our schools and the people involved with them—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and staff—are captives of clock and calendar. The boundaries of student growth are defined by schedules for bells, buses, and vacations instead of standards for students and learning.**

– from *Prisoners of Time*, Report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, April 1994

**No one knows exactly what capabilities high school grades signify.**

### **Characteristics of Proficiency-Based Instruction**

What then, makes proficiency-based instruction so compelling to its advocates?

***It’s student centered.*** First, it consciously puts the student at the center of the learning process. In doing so, it rejects the notion that some students will succeed and some will not. Proficiency-based instruction expects that *all* students will achieve at a proficient level and move on successfully. In effect, it does away with the bell curve.

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\* A Carnegie Unit is a standard of measurement representing one credit for completion of a one-school-year course meeting daily.

## COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL AND PROFICIENCY-BASED SECONDARY EDUCATION

	Traditional	Proficiency-Based
<b>View of Learners</b>	Some will excel, some will do average work, a portion will fail.	All of them can achieve at high standards; failure is not an option.
<b>Learning Program</b>	Time based; learning is a variable. It's effective for a portion of students	Learning based; time is a variable. It's effective for all students.
<b>Grades</b>	Based on various, and sometimes subjective, points rather than proficiencies; may reflect quantity over quality (such as extra credit work); may be used in part to punish, reward, or control student behavior; subject to inflation. Grades are sometimes locked in before a course ends.	Indicate only what student has learned (knows and can do) by demonstration of proficiency; quality of work is based on agreements about evidence of proficiency. End-of-course grades reflect student proficiency <i>at</i> end of course.
<b>Assessment</b>	Relies heavily on summative assessment, including standardized testing.	Includes summative assessment, but heavily favors formative assessment as a feedback mechanism to continuously measure and guide student learning, and to drive and improve instruction.
<b>Nature and Structure of Schools</b>	Often adult centered in practice. Self-contained education factories in a management hierarchy modeled on 20th Century industry.	Student centered in practice. Home base for flexible learning experiences where students can assume more initiative, work in teams, and learn in community settings, online venues, and other education institutions as well as in their school of record.
<b>Curriculum</b>	Disciplines are independent of one another and content is independent of standards for postsecondary success.	Based on recognized standards. Rigor and relevance are driving criteria. Disciplines are often integrated. Content is keyed to what students need for postsecondary studies and job success.
<b>Student Credentialing</b>	Students accumulate graded units of instruction to graduate through "seat time," regardless of skill levels acquired or grades assigned, and a standard diploma is regarded as the end point of the high school experience.  For students capable of doing more and advancing while still in high school, the senior year is often spent coasting to the finish line.	Students are assessed to assure that they have acquired high standards of knowledge and skills defined by minimum state diploma requirements matched to state standards.  Students with an interest in advanced certification and credits (AP, IB, college credits) are supported in going beyond minimum diploma requirements.
<b>Teachers</b>	They dispense knowledge about subject matter; lead class discussion, make assignments, motivate students, assign grades.	They do many of the traditional things but also are content experts, mentors, resources, partners in school management, partners with community resource providers, skilled assessment practitioners, members of teaching teams, and members of professional learning communities.
<b>Students</b>	They receive or absorb information passively, recite when asked, achieve on tests.  Often don't know at the beginning of a course what constitutes successful learning.	They envision and help plan their education path, partner in their own progress, learn by observation and application as well as by reading and taking class notes, and they develop both individual and group skills.  From the very beginning of a course, they know precisely what proficiencies demonstrate desired attainment of knowledge and skills, and they work to achieve those proficiencies.
<b>Student Performance Data</b>	Infrequently collected and analyzed, if at all.	Frequently collected and analyzed (currently and longitudinally) by teachers, professional learning communities, and curriculum and instruction administrators for program improvement.

***It's standards-based and focused on student proficiencies.*** Content and skill standards define not only what students should be able to know and do to succeed in postsecondary studies, work, and life, but also how well. Standards are drawn from what thoughtful teachers, employers, and others at all levels have concluded are the knowledge and capabilities that individuals must possess to function well in general, and in today's more demanding job market. As noted above, Oregon has well defined content and skill standards but educators can enhance these from a wide range of additional standards, and, in proficiency-based systems, many do. In addition, schools may identify what are sometimes called "power" or "core" standards as more important than others because these are regarded as key or prerequisite knowledge and skills without which students cannot advance to others.

**Proficiency-based instruction expects that *all* students will achieve at a proficient level and move on successfully. In effect, it does away with the bell curve.**

Standards form the foundation for proficiencies\* that students can demonstrate and that teachers can assess in a variety of formats such as tests, written papers, oral presentations, individual or group projects, collections of evidence, and performance in a work or service setting. Assessments may be diagnostic (to form a baseline of where students are before they start a learning program), formative (an ongoing part of the learning process), or summative (to determine what students have gained as a result of the learning program).

***Ongoing assessment is integral to instruction and learning.*** In a proficiency-based system, formative assessment drives instruction and therefore has primacy over summative assessment. The teacher employs assessment as part of a daily and weekly learning feedback loop to determine what a student still needs to learn to achieve proficiency. In addition to quizzes and tests, teachers use informal questioning, observation, discussion, and student presentation to gain a better understanding of each student's progress in gaining pertinent skills and knowledge. The student works at gaps in proficiency until they are closed. This contrasts with the application of summative assessment primarily to fix the student somewhere on a scale of success or failure indicated by points or grades. In a proficiency system, failure or poor performance may be part of the student's learning curve, but it is not an outcome.

**In a proficiency-based system, formative assessment drives instruction and therefore has primacy over summative assessment.**

Because assessment has such a key role in standards-based education, and because so much assessment occurs at the classroom level, teachers and professional learning communities are developing a deeper understanding of assessment principals and methods, which are also evolving with advances in measurement and statistics, technology, cognitive psychology, and learning in the domains. Teachers are becoming more skilled in quantitative measurement, observation, and interpretation of student performance to determine student progress toward and achievement of proficiencies. Newer understandings of what learning looks like, and how it can be measured, are exemplified in such works as *Knowing What Students Know, The Science and Design of Educational Assessments*<sup>2</sup> by the National Research Council. Closer to home, Rick Stiggins of the ETS Assessment Training Institute recently issued the *Assessment Manifesto*,<sup>3</sup> which calls for the elevation of assessment *for* learning in education practice.

***Students know where they're going, propel themselves, and take various paths.*** In a proficiency system, students take more responsibility for their progress. The teacher makes it clear from the beginning precisely what proficiencies they are expected to master and what they will have to be able to do to demonstrate that they have attained those proficiencies. Then the teacher (or the teaching team) gives them ample support and allows them to move at their own pace in a variety of learning activities.

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\* Some proficiency-based teachers believe the standards would be more helpful if they identified more specifically, in terms of behavioral objectives, the proficiencies that indicate accomplishment of standards.

Proficiency practitioners report that this changes the student mindset and vocabulary. Students speak of proficiencies they have acquired or have yet to acquire, rather than points or grades.

***Instruction and learning break out of the “cemetery model.”*** Proficiency-based practice typically goes beyond what one school superintendent calls the “cemetery model” classroom in which students sit in rows receiving what is sometimes called direct or frontal instruction – knowledge dispensed by the teacher in a lecture format, often with teacher moderated discussion and drills, seatwork, and reliance on textbooks. There is still room for direct instruction in a proficiency-based system because some of it is useful and effective, but it doesn’t work well as a steady diet for all students. Proficiency-based instruction balances a variety of approaches that also include hands-on learning activities (in and beyond the classroom), student-led discovery, group projects, and use of online resources. Textbooks are used sparingly if at all. Learning activities often integrate knowledge from different subjects. The nature of the learning activities typically call on students to improve their skills in planning and organizing, working in teams, taking personal responsibility for assignments, finding and analyzing data, documenting their work in writing, and presenting findings.

***Teaching flourishes.*** In this setting the teacher deploys a broader array of learning tools, engages students in a wider range of formats, and gauges student progress daily and weekly on well defined competencies. Managing a learning environment this way, often in tandem with like-minded colleagues, is less restrictive and more creative than direct instruction. Practitioners also report that the degree to which learning is individualized in proficiency practice makes the student-teacher relationship far more rewarding.

***Professional learning communities enhance student success and enrich teaching practice.*** The creation and maintenance of a professional learning community in a school is a best practice in and of itself. It is also a frequent corollary to proficiency practice, creating a continuous means of improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment, developing teacher capabilities, and improving staff cohesion. A professional learning community typically consists of teachers, and often counselors and administrators, who are organized in smaller teams around grade levels, academic subjects, or other common factors to improve student learning and teaching practice. They are collaborative, oriented to inquiry and evidence, quick to take corrective action, and committed to results and continuous improvement. These learning communities appear to work best where building professionals buy into the practice, organize themselves, and secure ample time in the daily and weekly schedule to meet, share approaches and results, and make improvements. There is a large body of literature on professional learning communities, and a vast number of entries online. A good basic site on the concept is <http://www.allthingsplc.info/>.

### **Benefits of Proficiency-Based Practice**

***Everyone is expected to succeed.*** Education equity and access is a growing concern, especially as Oregon school children become increasingly diverse and as achievement disparities persist in secondary education. Proficiency-based practice holds the promise of leveling the playing field, expecting all students to be successful and giving them an equal chance to achieve at high levels. Because learning is interdisciplinary and often made more relevant by hands-on projects, students achieve a better grasp of material both conceptually and contextually.

**There should be no graduates of a proficiency-based program who need remedial instruction in postsecondary education.**

***Learning itself is a valued skill.*** Because students know explicitly the skills and knowledge they must achieve, and because they take more responsibility for their progress, they learn better *how to learn*.

***Everyone does succeed.*** Because students don’t move on until they have gained demonstrated proficiency, they are fully ready for the next level of study. There should be no graduates of a proficiency-based program who need remedial instruction in postsecondary education. This alone would prevent high schools from sending unprepared graduates to the next level, give more first-year

postsecondary students a strong start, and relieve taxpayers from the burden of paying for the same instruction twice through remedial programs.

***Standards-based education is good for mobile students.*** To the extent that standards-based curriculum and proficiency-based instruction is offered across Oregon school districts, it has the potential to maintain equity and access in curriculum and instruction for that 10 to 20 percent of students who frequently move among school districts. These students, often from low-income families, frequently have the most trouble adapting to different curriculum and instruction in new settings.

***Proficiency-based practice supports Oregon's direction in personalized learning.*** Since 2002 State Board of Education policy has required schools to provide students with personalized learning experiences, and that policy is built into Oregon's new diploma requirements to be implemented fully by 2012. Proficiency-based practice, which lends itself to both in-classroom and out-of-classroom learning, is especially well suited to support personalized learning as expressed in the policy. Requirements include 1) that students have an education plan and profile to guide them toward their goals, 2) that students participate in real world experiences in the workplace, community or school that connect to classroom learning, 3) that students have an "extended application" experience that calls for them to apply thinking and problem solving skills to tasks related to their interests, and 4) that students develop a good work ethic and a range of essential and career-related process skills such as reading, writing, applying mathematics, making oral presentations, and working well in team settings.

### **Where Proficiency-Based Instruction Is Under Way**

Apart from second language teaching, where it is well established, proficiency-based instruction is relatively new and so geographically scattered – both in Oregon and beyond – that what we know about its application depends on word of mouth, occasional journal articles, and random internet postings. There appear to be no international, national, or Oregon-wide surveys of its practice.

Beyond Oregon its successes have drawn attention in locations as diverse as Alaska, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, and here in the state it is being used in comprehensive high schools, small rural schools, and small learning communities within larger school districts.

***Chugach (Alaska) School District.*** Proficiency-based education made its public school debut in the United States with dramatic results in one of the most remote school districts in North America. In 1994 student progress could not be much worse in this south-central Alaska district of then 214 students, half of them Native Alaskans, scattered over 22,000 square miles and three school sites. Dropout rates were high, test scores were low, and the average student was reading three years below grade level. At that point, with community backing, Roger Sampson, who was then superintendent, began a complete overhaul. By 1999, composite standardized test scores soared from the 28th percentile in 1995 to the 72nd percentile. In the same period, reading scores rose from 28th to 71st, language arts from 26th to 72nd, math from 54th to 78th. When state proficiency exams began in 2000, Chugach students topped the Alaska average by 8 percent in reading, 17 percent in math, and 35 percent in writing. The percentage of Chugach students taking college entrance exams increased from zero to 70 percent. The district was recognized for this accomplishment in 2001 when it won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, making it the smallest organization ever to be so recognized.

**Chugach turned things around by strengthening its partnership with the communities it serves and by throwing traditional education practice out the door.**

Apart from its commitment to quality improvement, Chugach turned things around by strengthening its partnership with the communities it serves and by throwing traditional education practice out the door. With approval of state education authorities, Chugach eliminated Carnegie Unit seat time and letter grading. Curriculum and instruction were standardized on proficiencies in 10 areas. Evaluation was keyed to the standards. Chugach created an individual learning plan allowing each student as little or as long as

necessary to achieve the proficiencies. Teachers began to facilitate learning in a variety of formats in and out of the classroom. Students were given additional support to improve their social skills, broaden their cultural horizons, maintain good health, serve the community, and gain real world work experience for the transition out of high school.

Since it first reached national attention, Chugach has continued to achieve impressive outcomes with its students, which now number 247. In 2006-07 assessments, nearly 91 percent of Chugach students in grades 3 through 10 were either advanced or proficient in reading, compared to 82 percent statewide. In writing they bested their state peers nearly 78 percent to nearly 75 percent, and in math, 75 percent to 72 percent. In 2007-08 the district exceeded the Annual Yearly Progress benchmarks of No Child Left Behind by wide margins. Two-thirds of the students who graduated between 2003 and 2007 went on to postsecondary education where they have either graduated or persisted in school. Among the rest, all but one are employed.

**Proficiency practice has helped Chugach go from 50 percent annual teacher turnover to nearly zero.**

Proficiency practice has also agreed with Chugach teachers. Up to the time of its transformation, the district had a 50 percent annual turnover in teachers. That attrition dropped to near zero, with only a few teachers retiring and several others leaving to become consultants on the proficiency model.

**The Met.** The Met, a network of six small public high schools in Rhode Island, is probably the most pronounced embodiment of a student-centered education philosophy expressed in the motto “educating one student at a time.” It inspired the formation of The Big Picture Company, which has developed principles for the pedagogical design of 68 schools across the nation, including Terra Nova High School in Beaverton. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has prominently supported expansion of The Met model.

At The Met students design their own course of study along with teachers, advisors, and parents, and they learn at their own pace. They build collections of work, which they exhibit periodically, and they accomplish a large share of their learning through internships in community settings. Each campus has about 120 students. There are no grades, no bells, and no block scheduled classes. Unlike most proficiency-based programs, The Met has no standardized curriculum, no published standards and proficiencies. But it does have a framework of high standards and academic rigor. Just as study is highly individualized, so is assessment, which is based on real-world standards and which focuses on student progress in five well developed categories: empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, social reasoning, communication, and personal qualities. Assessments are based in narratives written by both students and their advisors. Students also keep journals to reflect on their learning. As a bridge to postsecondary education, many students take courses at local colleges.

Outcomes at The Met are impressive. Since the school graduated its first class in 2000, 98 percent of its students have been accepted into a variety of respected colleges, 80 to 90 percent have enrolled, and about three-quarters have persisted, which The Met notes is remarkable because most are first-generation college-goers.

**Madison (Wisconsin) Metropolitan School District.** This district of 25,000 students, the second largest in Wisconsin, began standards-based reform in the latter half of the 1990s. It has developed a comprehensive array of content standards even more rigorous than Wisconsin’s high state standards. It has made a concerted effort to tighten the alignment between standards, curriculum, instructional practices, assessments, and professional development. In 2001-02 the district implemented proficiency-based assessment and eliminated grade-based report cards at the elementary level. It recently did the same with its middle schools and is now working with stakeholders on similar redesign at the high school level.

**Adams County School District 50.** This school district, which serves 10,000 students in the suburb of Westminster north of Denver, Colorado, is planning a conversion to a proficiency-based system as comprehensive as the one that Chugach undertook in the mid 1990s, and for much the same reason. About 72 percent of the students in this district are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 38 percent don’t

speak English as a first language, and the school has been placed on a state watch list for poor performance. School leaders and the community decided they had to do something different than keep using the old delivery model. The district's initiative complements an omnibus education reform package that Gov. Bill Ritter pushed through the Colorado Legislature in May 2008, including a strong standards-based component, but it's on a much faster schedule than Colorado's statewide implementation plan for K-12 reform.

Standards-based reform, featuring proficiency-based assessment and instruction, will be a feature of the district's 13 elementary schools and three middle schools beginning in the fall of 2009. It will be implemented in the district's three high schools in the fall of 2010.

Adams County hasn't worked out all of the details yet, but wants to do away with time-based units and grade levels, allowing students to move through a number of levels defined by proficiency. Standards will be clearly defined so teachers know exactly what they are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. Students may use a variety of ways to demonstrate what they know and can do. Proficiency will be assessed at four performance levels, and students will be permitted to advance only if they perform at level 3, "proficient," or level 4, "advanced." The district has not decided yet whether to stay with or abandon letter grades, but if it keeps grades, they will be proficiency-based.

The district has identified 10 rigorous performance levels in 10 content areas that students will need to pass through in order to meet local graduation requirements. It has also identified levels 11 and 12 in some of the content areas which will enable students to go beyond graduation requirements and earn college credit.

### **Oregon Schools Are Also Pushing the Envelope**

Although they are still in a distinct minority, an increasing number of teachers and administrators in Oregon districts are pioneering proficiency-based instruction in the classroom and in core subjects, often without fanfare and working within their existing budgets and human resources. As noted earlier, there is no comprehensive survey of proficiency-based practice in Oregon, so these stories are presented to illustrate approaches to proficiency in a variety of settings.

**Redmond High School.** In fall 2007 Redmond began what it hopes will be just the first phase in converting its 1,700-student high school to a proficiency-based instruction and assessment system. It did this with the creation of a freshman academy, which also provides an intensive "family" support environment for its 300 ninth graders. Redmond is adding the proficiency approach to the 10th grade in 2008-09, and then it wants to move it to 11th and 12th grade in the subsequent two years.

**An increasing number of educators in Oregon are pioneering proficiency-based instruction, often without fanfare and within their existing budgets and human resources.**

Whether or not it can stick to this schedule remains to be seen.

Redmond has strong support from its superintendent and board. It was very successful in recruiting its first 18 teachers to the freshman academy and then preparing 10th grade teachers for proficiency-based practice in 2008-09. According to Michael Bremont, assistant principal and curriculum director, these teachers embraced the approach, developed its implementation, and treat it with a sense of ownership. However, many of the most adventurous teachers have signed up. Expanding proficiency into faculty ranks that may be unsure of the new practice, skeptical, or even hostile to it may be more difficult.

As a complement to proficiency efforts at Redmond High School, the school district has been planning since early spring 2008 to create a charter school that's completely proficiency based, starting with 50 to 75 students and growing to about 200. Redmond Proficiency Academy (its tentative name) would operate at its own site six days a week from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Faculty would be drawn from a mix of certified teachers and registered professionals (those without a teacher education background but with industry or professional credentials). Teachers would be on non-union short-term contracts.

“We believe there are benefits to providing a proficiency-based school in an alternative setting that will allow students learning options they can’t find in a traditional setting due its governance structure.” Bremond said. “We’ll be able to use what we learn from the charter to assist our progress at Redmond High School. The charter school will go forward regardless of our progress at the high school.”

Like Chugach which inspired it, Redmond saw that many of its students were in crisis. “We had students at 3.5 GPA and above while they were here who needed remedial support in college and were scoring less than 1000 (combined) on their SATs,” said Bremond. “Seventy-three percent of our graduates needed remedial math, 60 percent remedial writing and reading.”

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Many of Redmond’s incoming ninth graders in particular were struggling. The year before the freshman academy conversion, 12 percent of ninth graders failed all of their courses and 18 percent failed two or more classes. This was worrisome because nationally 60 percent of freshmen who fail two or more classes drop out of high school. Redmond freshmen had an 18 percent dropout rate that represented more than 55 students, and its discipline referral rate for ninth graders ran above 40 percent.

In the first year of the conversion 60 percent of Redmond ninth graders demonstrated proficiency in their subjects the first time through, and Bremond estimates that fewer than 3 percent of students were still struggling. The dropout rate went to zero and discipline referrals fell to 8.7 percent. Attendance also improved from 91 to 92 percent, which is significant because a 1 percent difference spread over the number of classes involved represents a large number of absences. In regard to academic improvement Bremond said reading is telling. “We do know that 56 percent of our freshmen pass the state’s 10 grade CIM reading standard, versus 62 percent of statewide 10th graders, so only six percent of the state’s 10th graders are ahead of where our ninth graders are.”

Teachers recruited for the freshman academy used six days of release time in the winter of 2007 to plan the program. During the summer the same teachers attended a paid 10-day program development workshop, with five of those days assisted by Mike Call, an Atlanta-based expert in creation of freshman academies. Redmond’s grade 10 teachers went through a similar program development process in the summer of 2008. Teacher retention in the ninth grade program is high.

In a proficiency system, formative assessment is the key link between instruction and standards. For its grounding in formative assessment, Redmond relied on *Checking for Understanding*<sup>4</sup> by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey and *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work*<sup>5</sup> by Robert Marzano. For proficiency standards, Redmond adopted a combination of Oregon content standards, College Board standards, standards from the Standards for Success (S4S) program at the University of Oregon, Oregon PASS standards, and even some standards from Virginia.

Unlike some proficiency programs, which have abandoned grades in favor of numerical measures of proficiency, Redmond’s proficiency-based classrooms still use letter grades. However, the grades are gauged strictly to proficiencies based on standards. They are not skewed by upgrading or downgrading for subjective factors.

Bremond said the biggest challenge that teachers face in changing to a proficiency program is the amount of labor it takes to create scoring rubrics to assess student progress. “State [of Oregon] and College Board rubrics are OK,” he said, “but we need our own how-to on rubrics. The state has developed only 10 percent of the rubrics needed. But the state could never develop a rubric for everything needed. Rubrics have to be tailored to the teachers and the assignments. The key is how to write a rubric that is meaningful for a student to translate learning into demonstration.” Redmond is working on that challenge right now.

**Scappoose High School.** Proponents argue that proficiency-based education is contagious among teachers once they understand its power. Scappoose High School may be the best proof of that assertion. That contagion started in 2006 when Michelle Parsons, a social studies teacher at the high school attended an Oregon Department of Education meeting where Doug Boyer described in-class proficiency practice he was applying in his science teaching at Beaverton's Southridge High School. Inspired, she developed an out-of-class proficiency-based summer school program that turned out so well she decided to take the concept into her classroom in the fall.

**Proponents argue that proficiency-based education is contagious among teachers once they understand its power.**

That caught the attention of Rebecca Steinke, who was then a second-year, second-career science teacher at the school with a background in medical science. Unhappy with what she described as a lecture- and textbook-approach to teaching the first year, Steinke said what Parsons was doing “got me really excited.” Five weeks into the fall trimester, and convinced her students were “hating science” in the traditional class format, she started planning a proficiency-based biology class that she implemented in the second trimester. In the third trimester, she taught oceanography with the same approach. After the first week in both classes, she said, “the kids loved it.” She added, “They don’t talk about grades any more. They talk about proficiencies and how well they are doing to achieve them.”

They are achieving them very well, apparently. Steinke said four years ago only 41 percent of Scappoose students were passing the state’s CIM science standards. Seventy-eight percent of Scappoose students now meet those science content standards. She said her sophomore biology students can handle photosynthesis questions generally reserved for advanced placement biology students.

In the spring of 2007, following a staff presentation on proficiency by Parsons and Steinke, Emily Anderson and Susie Erickson decided to adopt proficiency practice in math as a way to help almost half of incoming freshmen who were two years behind grade level in math proficiency.

Their plan was to get 63 math-deficient students through pre-algebra 1, pre-algebra 2, and algebra 1 in three trimesters. With a school stipend for summer planning, they launched their two-person team teaching program in the fall of 2007. By the spring trimester, its impact was striking. After a few weeks in the fall, half a dozen students were assessed proficient and moved on to algebra 1, which they all passed. By spring 2008, among the 55 students still enrolled in the proficiency classes, 52 were proficient in algebra 1 and ready to move to algebra 2 in the fall of 2008.

Over this period, the balance of the school’s six math teachers converted to proficiency-based instruction. “They love it,” Anderson said. “We all use the same grading scales so there’ll be no confusion for kids as they move through different classes and teachers in the department.” Other math teachers now have the students that Anderson and Erickson brought along so rapidly.

**“We all use the same grading scales so there’ll be no confusion for kids as they move through different classes and teachers in the department.”**

Proficiency-based classes at Scappoose are predominantly project based with a lot of formative assessment. Steinke said she uses lecture time now only to launch new lesson segments, where she briefs students on the academic standards they must achieve and the specific proficiencies they must be able to demonstrate to prove they have achieved those standards. Anderson said she and Erickson “try to use as many real life examples as possible, such as buying a car,” to achieve such state standards as computing percentages with decimals. They introduced the use of Excel spreadsheets and developed a wiki format where students can work on math problems online – building on individual and group work with additions, deletions, and comments. The wiki has links to pages that help parents understand content standards, as well as links to sites with math videos, games, and practice problems.

Scappoose students in proficiency-based classes are accorded grades for their work, but those grades are based strictly on proficiencies assessed on a scale of 1 through 6 levels in most classes, and 1 through 10

in math. The upper third of those scales is considered proficient, but teachers say that students typically push themselves to the highest level of proficiency.

Scappoose teachers tend to talk about their proficiency-based efforts as “standards-based” since they place so much emphasis on starting with standards. Even before Scappoose teachers adopted proficiency-based practice, the school saw its 2004-05 student scores in reading, math, and science jump significantly after it aligned its curriculum to state content standards. Oregon’s content standards form a baseline at the school, but Scappoose teachers use other standards, too. Steinke said she teaches all of her life science courses using Standards for Success (S4S) and industry standards from her college pre-med experience and her medical science background. She said the state standards are a useful guide in creating curriculum but she believes they would be more helpful if they were broken down into more specific behavioral objectives.

Proficiency-based practice is now in place at Scappoose in biology, anatomy, oceanography, ninth grade world history, pre-algebra, algebra, algebra II, and geometry. The English department is starting to move in that direction, and the high school continues to work with the Business Education Compact on teacher development in proficiency-based practice.

**Beaverton wants to move all of its high schools to a proficiency-based system in the next 10 years.**

Steinke and Anderson credit high school principal Sue Hays for her “amazing” support of proficiency-based practice. They said her first response was “If it’s good for kids, let’s do it.” Scappoose, it should be noted, requires a minimum of 27 credit hours for a high school diploma, well above both current and new state diploma requirements.

**Beaverton School District.** Like Redmond and Scappoose, Beaverton illustrates how teachers and principals can take the initiative to develop a proficiency-based instructional program. However, Beaverton, which serves nearly 38,000 students from five comprehensive high schools, eight middle schools, 31 elementary buildings, and 22 option schools and programs, also illustrates how a *large* district can encourage and support a sustained bottom-up effort of this nature.

A small cadre of Beaverton teachers made their first foray into proficiency more than five years ago when a number of them became interested in its potential. According to Robin Kobrowski, an assistant principal who has been involved in supporting the district’s proficiency development efforts, many of these teachers were influenced by “Inside the Black Box,”<sup>6</sup> a 1998 essay by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam on the power of classroom assessment. Their interest was cemented in 2003-04 when they attended a proficiency-based assessment workshop run by Rick Stiggins, whose ETS Assessment Training Institute is located in Portland. As noted earlier, Stiggins is a strong advocate for proficiency-based assessment, with particular focus on formative assessment as a driver of effective instruction and learning.

Kobrowski describes the Stiggins workshop as a turning point for Beaverton, which soon after hosted its own district workshop for teachers called the Balanced Assessment Project. That effort was led by Matt Coleman, then principal of Westview High School, who had done his doctorate studies and independent research on assessment. “He influenced us on the power of formative assessment,” she said. “He convinced us that we needed a formative assessment driven system. In 2004-05 we did a lot of work in the district building assessment literacy.” Coleman has since joined the Springfield School District as director of secondary education.

That early interest in proficiency by teachers and principals has found two bases of support in the district: the High School Enhancement Initiative and the Middle School Proficiency-Based Assessment Project. The High School Enhancement Initiative brings district-level support to teachers using proficiency-based assessment and instruction; it has focused the district on proficiency assessment as a priority endeavor. The high school group adopted as its paramount goal moving all of Beaverton’s high schools to a proficiency-based system in the next 10 years. Proficiency efforts are under way most prominently at Southridge and Westview among the bigger high schools and at two small learning communities, Health and Science High School and the Terra Nova High School (all described below).

Begun in spring 2007, the Middle School Proficiency-Based Assessment Project promotes common proficiency-based assessments focused on grade level learning targets in all content areas. Middle school principals have been the driving force behind the project to address concerns about rigor at the middle school level. In this model, progress on the learning targets is typically reported on a continuum from novice to expert. As part of the project, middle school teachers are working to build collections of evidence, draft sufficiency guidelines, and define proficiency criteria. Kobrowski describes the middle school effort as an important extension of formative assessment practices that are a fairly routine, natural approach at the elementary level.

**Beaverton's proficiency efforts are teacher and principal led rather than district mandated, but the district supports these endeavors.**

Kobrowski notes that Beaverton's proficiency efforts are teacher and principal led rather than district mandated. The district, however, supports these endeavors at the highest levels. District leadership, Kobrowski said, understands that real change happens with teachers, that they need support in the form of release time, and that the process takes patience. Both the high school and middle school initiatives are expected to go on for a number of years. The assessment initiatives, she added, go hand in hand with the district's commitment to professional learning communities.

To support its learning communities in developing proficiency initiatives and other programs, Beaverton is building a data warehouse that will be accessible to teachers and help them capture, analyze, and use data to improve teaching and assessment.

**Southridge High School.** Southridge, which opened in 1999, was designed as a high school made up of four small learning communities or houses with names like Discovery and Renaissance. Southridge became a district pioneer in proficiency-based practice after some of its teachers participated in the Stiggins workshops on assessment and the school became part of the state pilot program on credit for proficiency. The school was initially interested in awarding students credit for prior learning (in areas such as the arts, second language, and, in one case, biology content standards centered on a student's experience with chicken husbandry).

Given teacher interest in assessment of standards-based proficiencies, credit for proficiency at Southridge has evolved into classroom practice focused on proficiencies in core academic subjects and skill standards. Vice Principal Randy Dalton said that ten of the school's 90 teachers have moved completely away from subjective factors in grading and toward proficiencies based on learning targets. He said he expects this to grow as other teachers ground themselves in the philosophy of proficiency. Presently, more than half of the school's 2,000 students spend some part of their time in proficiency-based classes that are represented in all departments.

At present Southridge teachers are developing what they call common learning targets, the equivalent of power standards for key proficiencies. Dalton said this sets the stage for common assessments down the road developed through professional learning communities.

**Westview High School.** Proficiency-based practice is established and growing at Westview. In the school's mathematics program, 17 of 18 teachers use proficiency-based assessment and instruction, and other departments and teachers are taking steps to adopt proficiency practice. As evidence that proficiency-based practice is effective, Matt Coleman, former Westview principal, cites results the first year in which students took an algebra and geometry survey course in the proficiency-based model. Eighty percent passed proficiency scores at levels corresponding to 'A' through 'C.' In the prior year's class, taught with a traditional instruction model, only 40 percent reached that level of proficiency.

**Health and Science High School.** This school, a member of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, was planned and launched as a proficiency-based program in the 2007-08 school year with a special focus on preparing students for health care and science careers. In its initial year the school had 116 ninth graders. In the following years it will gradually add grades from 6 to 12 until it reaches 750 students in 2110-11.

Principal Steve Day, who attended the initial Rick Stiggins workshops, started conceptual planning of Health and Science High School three years ago. With district approval, he and a team of 12 staff began operational planning in the summer of 2007.

Health and Science High School is designed around the Expeditionary Learning Schools format (<http://www.elschools.org/>). “Learning expeditions” are central to the ELS approach. Keyed to content and skill standards, learning expeditions engage students in long-term, cross-discipline research projects that culminate in media products and public presentations. In one such project, the school’s ninth graders researched the great influenza pandemic of 1918-19, often called the Spanish Flu, which helped them understand the genetic, social, political, and human dimensions of the outbreak that killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide. As a practical outcome of that research, the students produced a brochure explaining the importance of people getting flu shots. The ELS learning approach, said Day, is especially effective with students who have struggled in the past, but it makes learning engaging for all students.

In just the first trimester, 100 percent of the school’s ninth graders were passing math, and 90 to 100 percent were passing all core subjects. Those results dropped slightly but held up generally well through the rest of the 2007-08 school. This was all the more remarkable among a population where half the students are on free or reduced lunch and 25 percent speak English as a second language.

**Terra Nova High School.** As noted above, Terra Nova is a Big Picture school modeled on The Met in Rhode Island. This Beaverton district high school was created in partnership with the Northwest Regional Education Service District. In 2007-08 the school had 60 students in grades 9 through 12, and it expects 80 students in the following year. The school describes itself as a personalized learning community emphasizing individual responsibility, academic rigor, and productive citizenship. Students do extensive, independent project-based work and are awarded credits based on proficiency in state and district content standards. Learning experiences include participation in classes at Terra Nova, on-line classes, community college classes, work/internship experiences, and in-depth, long-term projects. Internships and community service are particularly important at this school as learning experiences. Students spend two days per week working in internships with the guidance of certified teachers and community mentors.

**Greater Albany Public Schools.** The Albany district, which was part of the state’s credit for proficiency pilot program, has proficiency-based classes available in both of its comprehensive high schools and its alternative school, which serves grades 6 through 12. Albany proficiency classes are generated by teachers and administrators in cases where a credit option appears to be needed. Students develop a collection of evidence to demonstrate proficiency in a particular content area.

Despite the use of proficiency-based assessment and instruction, Albany does not have a concerted district-wide commitment to adopt proficiency practice. Diane Smith, the district’s director of curriculum and instruction, and a prominent workshop speaker on proficiency practice, cites a number of cultural barriers that teachers must navigate before they can embrace the practice. “Very few things come along that can change teacher practice like proficiency can,” she said. “Very few things can improve a teacher’s understanding of what it means to ‘teach to standards’ like this can.”

**“Very few things come along that can change teacher practice like proficiency can. Very few things can improve a teacher’s understanding of what it means to ‘teach to standards’ like this can.”**

“Job security can be a concern,” she said. “Teachers worry, for example, that if kids flood to teachers using the proficiency model, those who don’t offer proficiency-style courses won’t have students. Teachers don’t have practice in articulating what proficiency means for their content area, and they frequently lack training. They know that students don’t learn at the same rate [fast enough] while the calendar is moving to a finish point, and they worry how to translate proficiency into grades.” Other challenges include weaning teachers away from using subjective factors (attitude, effort, attendance, and behavior) in grading and onto content standards as a way to build learning activities and proficiency measures.

**Gresham-Barlow School District.** Gresham-Barlow, one of the original districts in the state’s proficiency for credit pilot program, plans to expand into in-class proficiency practice in the 2008-09 school year. Beginning in the second semester, several proficiency-based pilot classes will be offered at both Gresham and Sam Barlow high schools in math and social studies. Over 1,300 students have earned proficiency-based credit for outside-the-class learning in the district. The two high schools still offer students a number of courses where they can earn credit this way, but the new pilot classes represent a move toward models similar to Redmond and Scappoose.

### **Oregon Districts Setting Their Sights on Proficiency-Based Education**

**Forest Grove School District.** Forest Grove plans to implement proficiency-based practice at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year at its 1,900-student high school. It began to lay the groundwork in 2007 by aligning its grade 5 through 12 content standards and summative assessments. High school principal John O’Neill says that teachers are forming professional learning communities to identify power standards and formative assessments, and he expects that every course on campus will be aligned to proficiencies by spring 2009. Forest Grove High School will still use grades but base them on proficiency assessments. O’Neill said Forest Grove teachers know that as a part of the transition to proficiency they will have to give up grading based on discipline or behavior. But he’s confident “they’ll go for it,” he said, “We have a lot of student-centered teachers rather than teacher-centered teachers.”

**Forest Grove Principal John O’Neill is confident his teachers will embrace proficiency practice because “We have a lot of student-centered teachers rather than teacher-centered teachers.”**

**Springfield School District.** Springfield is taking the preliminary steps necessary to achieve a proficiency-based system in its middle and high schools. It is building a model of core standards and next it will create a matching framework for formative assessment. Matt Coleman, the district’s new director of secondary programs, believes in a main tenet of standards-based instruction: that proficiency assessment, in particular formative assessment, drives curriculum and instruction. He helped frame that philosophy during his tenure in the Beaverton district where he was principal at Westview High School. At Springfield he envisions that every credit will be based on proficiency in the next two years. As a corollary effort, Springfield is laying the groundwork in its secondary schools for professional learning communities in which teachers can build, evaluate, and constantly improve proficiency-based curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

Springfield’s Academy of Arts and Academics, an Oregon Small School Initiative site, currently has important elements of proficiency-based practice in place. Students are assessed on proficiencies at the ‘A’ or ‘B’ level and keep working until they achieve that level of competence. There are no grades of ‘C,’ ‘D,’ or ‘F.’ Students develop proficiencies through multiple learning activities, and learning time is open ended.

### **Factors Favorable to Proficiency Adoption**

Besides the pioneering local efforts described above, Oregon has a number of things going for it in creating proficiency-based education. With the support of business groups, foundations, and other stakeholders, state education officials have long labored for comprehensive content and skill standards. Those standards, which form the platform for proficiency-based practice, are reflected in the new Oregon diploma requirements. The Department of Education staff has been a catalyst for proficiency practice and credit, most notably through statewide pilot projects it sponsored on student achievement issues from 2004 to 2007, on proficiency pilot projects it sponsored at various school sites from 2004 to 2006, and then through the recent Credit for Proficiency Task Force, which it organized as part of the new diploma process. The Business Education Compact has been tireless in advocating proficiency practice and in training educators statewide. From 2004 through 2008, the combination of the pilot projects, the task

force, and BEC's work in teacher development had a central role in raising awareness of proficiency, bringing practitioners together, creating new practitioners and advocates, and building relationships.

***Stature in the new Oregon diploma.*** Department of Education literature describing Oregon's new diploma requirements specifies that schools must provide students the option to earn credit by demonstrating proficiency. This raises the profile of proficiency-based credit as a factor in the new diploma requirements and gives it added importance, as suggested in the comments of some administrators interviewed for this paper.

The importance of proficiency was underscored in the policy statement that the Department staff was preparing (at the writing of this paper) to present to the State Board of Education in the fall of 2008. Based on input from the Credit for Proficiency Task Force process (see below), the Assumption section of that document makes it clear that the best way for Oregon to achieve a standards-based education system is for classroom instruction and assessment to be proficiency-based. The kernel of that draft, the Recommended Policy Statement, requires schools to offer proficiency credit "in lieu of, or in addition to traditional clock hours." It goes on to require 1) by the 2009-10 school year districts adopt policies and processes to do that, 2) by January 2012 they demonstrate progress in doing that, and 3) by June 2014 they can document they have done that.

**The Assumptions section [of the state policy draft on proficiency-based credit] makes it clear that the best way for Oregon to achieve a standards-based education system is for classroom instruction and assessment to be proficiency-based.**

After taking up the policy statement, according to staff, the board will consider revisions to the Oregon administrative rule that governs proficiency practice and credit. At this writing it was too early to know what changes might finally be adopted in the OAR, but ideas under contemplation included a more inclusive title, school latitude to apply proficiency credit to all courses, and application of proficiency credit to classes where hours of instruction may vary and may be equal to or be less than the state's standard 130 clock hours. The rule will almost certainly add language requiring that a student's demonstration of proficiency meet state, local, or national evidentiary criteria and an acknowledged range of standards. These would include state standards for subject matter content and essential skills, and probably industry-based knowledge and skills and other national or international standards. The latter, for example, might include standards defined by the College Board, by Standards for Success (S4S), and by International Baccalaureate.\*

***Credit for Proficiency Task Force.*** The proficiency task force was one of five the State Board of Education created to look at the challenges and requirements of implementing Oregon's new diploma requirements.\*\* The proficiency task force, representing a variety of stakeholders and practitioners from secondary and postsecondary education, met five times over the winter and spring of 2008. Task force members expressed unanimous support for student demonstration of proficiency as a credit option, but their views differed on whether proficiency-based practice should be locally self-generating, state mandated, or some compromise between those two positions. Other points of agreement included a need for consistent standards (across schools, across districts) to which proficiencies apply, common criteria for assessing proficiency, and adequate release time and funding for professional development and development of materials and rubrics. The task force was assigned a limited life by the board and held its last meeting in June 2008.

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\* The Oregon schools implementing proficiency-based instruction and assessment have been using the state content standards in most cases but adding elements of the College Board standards or others, such as S4S. One district is leaning toward adoption of updated standards from the original Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS). PASS standards represent college-ready proficiencies.

\*\* The others were an advisory group focused on overarching implementation issues, one on standards and assessment, one on essential skills, and one on cost and capacity issues.

***BEC's pioneering training and advocacy.*** The Business Education Compact has been one of the strongest and most effective proponents of proficiency-based education in Oregon. Between spring 2005 and spring 2008, BEC has conducted more than 170 proficiency workshops for 700 teachers and administrators in two-thirds of Oregon's counties. Most of these have been for school districts and education service districts, but others have served personnel from the Oregon Department of Education, a community college, a private university, a charter school, and several education advocacy groups. Besides offering ongoing workshops, BEC has also made grants to schools to support the development of proficiency-based programs. One recipient was Gresham-Barlow High School, which has awarded over 1,000 elective credit hours for out-of-classroom learning activities. BEC initially focused on hands-on proficiency learning outside the classroom but now trains educators on credit recovery and on standards-based instruction and assessment for core subjects in the classroom. BEC advocates a state mandate for school districts to adopt proficiency-based education with timelines for implementation.

**BEC advocates a state mandate for school districts to adopt proficiency-based education with timelines for implementation.**

BEC has also formed a coalition of public and private universities, school districts, state education agencies and businesses to lead what is called the Collaborative Teacher Development Initiative. This is a five-year statewide project to create new models for teacher preparation and professional development that align with Oregon's plans for high school reform. The project has the support of the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, the Oregon Department of Education, the Oregon Education Association, and the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators.

### **State-Level Challenges in Adopting and Sustaining Proficiency-Based Education**

Oregon has 197 school districts, 235 high schools, and 225 middle schools. Only a handful of them have proficiency-based programs, and the initiative for building these programs has come primarily from teachers and principals at local levels taking advantage of the 2002 credit options rule. If state policymakers agree that proficiency-based classroom practice is the missing piece in transforming Oregon's secondary schools to a standards-based system, they must decide what role the state can and should play in statewide adoption of this approach.

***Deciding how assertive to be in closing the gap on standards-based education.*** From the standpoint of treating proficiency as a *credit option*, the state's role to date has been low key. In adopting the 2002 credit options rule, the state created the opening for proficiency advocates, and its 2004-05 pilot program in credit for proficiency it helped a number of high schools prove the concept. As noted above, it has also brought together people and ideas that have fueled interest and growth in proficiency. Despite these contributions, many proficiency advocates fear that if the state doesn't do more to influence adoption of proficiency-based practice, Oregon will have a standards-based system in name only and in only a portion of its districts. On the other hand, some say, a top-down mandate, especially without adequate resource and capacity support, could create a backlash.

**Many proficiency advocates fear that if the state doesn't do more to influence adoption of proficiency-based practice, Oregon will have a standards-based system in name only and only in a portion of its districts.**

Conversations with proficiency proponents suggest there are two middle paths that policymakers might consider. The first path, which is less assertive, would involve either or both of two directives designed to offer students school-level choices in proficiency-based classes: 1) require high schools, and perhaps middle schools, at some defined date to guarantee every student the opportunity to earn a certain number of credits – or credits in a specified set of subjects – by proficiency; 2) require schools to offer a proficiency-based option in at least one class in any subject where more than one class section is available. In the latter instance, students could vote on the proficiency approach with their feet. (On a larger scale, employing the same market principal, Oregon could adopt a policy that makes school district

boundaries permeable for students who want access to a proficiency-based education. Districts are obsessed with capture rates tied to budget allocations for enrollment, and they provide services to students only within their geographic boundaries. Now the only way a student can realistically attend a school outside his or her attendance area (except for charter and virtual schools) is to pay tuition out of pocket. Technically a student could seek an inter-district transfer agreement, but it isn't likely that a district would relinquish funding for a student to another district. If money truly followed students, districts would have to compete for these students on the strength of their programs and the kind of learning process and outcomes that would be enhanced by large-scale conversion to proficiency-based instruction.)

The second, more assertive path would be to mandate proficiency-based *assessment* (but not necessarily instruction) for all content classes according to proficiencies defined in content standards. Because assessment based on standards tends to drive and define instruction, such a mandate would lead to proficiency-based instruction. It might be argued that this bumps up against a provision in ORS 329.045 (Oregon's policy to achieve rigorous academic content standards) that allows school districts and public charter schools the latitude to "maintain control over course content, format, materials, and teaching methods." However, Oregon's content standards already exert substantial influence over K-12 curriculum, and the new diploma requirements further open the door by mandating proficiency-based assessment of essential skills.

***Preparing educators for proficiency-based practice.*** Oregon's schools of education, both public and private, as well as private and nonprofit teacher development programs, would be strained if they were called on to meet significant, rapid growth in school district demand for personnel skilled in proficiency-based practice. Demand would occur in four categories: in-service teacher training, teacher preparation, administrator training, and practicum settings. The Business Education Compact and private consultants are providing advocacy and leadership on proficiency while meeting limited in-service demand for teachers and administrators. What they are doing is valuable and could probably be scaled up to a higher level, but not enough to address system-wide conversion to proficiency. That, more than likely, would call for more capacity and expertise on proficiency in our schools of education.

Right now, it would be difficult to find new teachers and administrators with pre-service schooling in proficiency-based assessment and instruction. That's because Oregon's schools of education are not turning them out, according to high school practitioners interviewed for this paper. The leader of one teacher education program, who supports proficiency-based practice, said teacher educators often don't pay enough attention to what is happening in classrooms or to what leading practitioners are doing. Another teacher educator expressed the same sentiment. As for practicum settings, there are very few right now where student teachers and interns can gain hands-on experience in proficiency-based practice.

Rick Stiggins, who trains educators worldwide in proficiency-based assessment, underscores the importance of both teachers and building leaders with a deep understanding of proficiency assessment. "Pre-service teacher preparation programs typically don't include assessment training and when they do, it often focuses only on accountability testing," he said. "And administrator pre-service programs typically don't include anything at all." He takes the position that effective instructional leadership requires assessment leadership. "The well-prepared principal is ready to assure that assessments are of high quality and are used effectively. Yet, historically, preparation for productive assessment has been missing from principal training programs."

### **School- and District-Level Challenges in Adopting and Sustaining Proficiency-Based Education**

In adopting a proficiency-based system, local proponents must navigate a number of cultural, organizational, and technical issues. The organizational and technical issues are not insignificant, but cultural hurdles can be the most challenging.

***The staying power of time-based learning and subjective grading.*** Nearly the entire education establishment in Oregon, as elsewhere, is built around a time-based, batch-process approach to learning and a grading system influenced by a range of subjective factors that often have little or nothing to do

with a student’s acquisition of knowledge and skills. Even though these practices do not serve enough students responsibly, they are firmly rooted in the education culture, often because they serve the needs and convenience of adults in the system. Adults who are adept at rationalizing this disparity will not change easily. Seeing the inadequacies of these practices and replacing them with better approaches will require a great deal of what one proficiency advocate calls “unlearning,” and a difficult shift in perspective and expectations by institutions, teachers, and parents.

**Time based learning and subjective grading practices are firmly rooted in the education culture, often because they serve the needs and convenience of adults in the system.**

The inertia to be overcome to win stakeholder support has a range of cultural roots. For example:

- As noted by the participants of Uncommon Discourse, the idea that public education is a sorting process among students assumed to have different learning aptitudes is badly outdated, unfair, and economically counterproductive yet still imbedded in some parts of our general culture. It may be most persistent among parents who succeeded themselves in that competitive paradigm and whose children are equally adept in navigating the current system of “getting good grades,” even if such grades may indicate capabilities that students don’t possess. Proficiency proponents will have to make the case to those wedded to the prevailing grading system that it frequently cheats students who get good grades as much as it does students who struggle.
- Parents, administrators, and teachers are all invested in time-based education, from the school calendar to the daily schedule. From the perspective of student learning, it may take some effort for them to see the limitations of a time-based system and the higher return of a proficiency-based system.
- The prerogative to assign grades as they see fit is deeply held among teachers, so much so that some collective bargaining contracts forbid teacher supervisors from altering an assigned grade under any circumstances, or only in exceptional cases. At the same time, grading practice in Oregon schools is rife with subjective factors that have nothing to do with student acquisition of knowledge and skills. Proficiency advocates say teachers should understand that they can retain the authority to determine student grades in a standards-based system, but as indicators of proficiency, not as instruments of reward, punishment, and control.
- Some teachers fear that they will have to adopt proficiency-based practice without adequate grounding and with unrealistic expectations for rapid student improvement. Programs that have succeeded so far have not put teachers in that bind; districts that adopt proficiency-based programs will have to avoid that pitfall.
- The top down, politically contentious, and muddled experience with CIM and CAM implementation has left segments of the public and some educators suspicious of education reform in Oregon. Even though proficiency-based education seems to have its strongest advocates at the local level among teachers and principals, there are likely to be skeptics who see it as yet another reform that is confusing, experimental, or too complicated.

## **Technical Challenges**

***Developing the wherewithal to support proficiency-based practice.*** Implementation at the local level will take vision, program leadership and top district leadership support, a game plan, capacity, resources, and patience, which are all attributes and assets necessary to turn any organization in a new direction. Judging from the experience of schools and districts that have begun proficiency-based programs, it doesn’t appear that a lot of extra money is needed beyond existing professional development funds. It just has to be focused.

***Training and hiring a cadre of teachers who buy into the proficiency-based approach.*** From a local perspective, this is the flip side of the state’s capacity limitations in teacher education and in-service

training. Until teacher education institutions perceive local market demand, they are unlikely to adapt their programs in order to supply large numbers of teacher candidates ready for proficiency practice. Local districts probably would have to bridge this gap in the interim by using internal mentors and trainers, and by engaging private or nonprofit organizations that provide such service.

***Whether to standardize standards.*** As noted earlier, Oregon schools can draw from a range of content and skill standards as a foundation for proficiency-based curriculum, assessment, and instruction. While most proficiency practitioners base much of their instruction on state standards, some also incorporate PASS, postsecondary, and industry standards. Some schools are also developing “power” or gateway standards – those which serve as keys or prerequisite for acquisition of other standards. This proliferation of standards has some proficiency advocates concerned that proficiency-based instruction, assessment, and assigned grades based on that assessment will begin to vary too much from school to school and district to district. The Credit for Proficiency Task Force, in fact, cited a need for consistent standards across schools and districts for that reason. On the other hand, some advocates worry that too much uniformity in standards across schools will stifle the judgment and initiative of local professionals. As proficiency-based practice grows, Oregon educators will have to address that tension.

***Developing a sufficient body of rubrics to assess student proficiency.*** A rubric is a scoring guide that describes criteria for student performance and differentiates among different levels of performance within those criteria. Because rubrics set forth specific criteria, define precise requirements for meeting those criteria, and often assign numerical scores to each level of performance, they provide teachers with an effective, objective method for assessing student proficiencies that do not generally lend themselves to objective assessment methods. Rubrics also provide students with standards and expectations they can use to evaluate their performance while completing assignments.

**Developing proficiency materials, especially classroom-level rubrics for scoring student work is a very large undertaking requiring training and release time for teachers, both of which require organizational encouragement and funding.**

As noted earlier, Michael Bremont of Redmond estimates that between existing state rubrics and what has been developed in the field, no more than 10 percent of needed rubrics have been developed in Oregon. That would mean 90 percent of what is needed has not been developed, and, beyond that, new rubrics must be constantly developed as content and teacher material evolve. Rubrics are usually most effective when developed by teachers, and they take time to develop. Developing proficiency materials, especially classroom-level rubrics for scoring student work is a very large undertaking requiring training and release time for teachers, both of which require organizational encouragement and funding.

***Expressing proficiency in the form of conventional grades.*** Even where students are assessed strictly on their proficiency levels in given knowledge and skill standards, other parts of the secondary and postsecondary education system still think in – and require – grades. So, all proficiency-based programs must have a method of expressing assessed proficiencies in terms of grades. For example, Beaverton’s Health and Science High School and Scappoose High School score student proficiencies on numerical scales that are then translated into letter grades. Southridge and Redmond high schools, on the other hand, base grades directly on proficiency. In either system, students at the highest two levels typically are deemed proficient. Students at the higher of the two levels are sometimes viewed as advanced. Students below the proficiency level have to keep working until they are assessed as proficient.

New software products have come onto the market that make it easier for teachers to assess and grade students, and to report and analyze student performance data. One of the most prominent of these, which incorporates proficiency-based assessment, benefits from the expertise and collaboration of Robert Marzano.

***Working within the confines of a time-based system.*** In an ideal proficiency-based system, students who learn faster than their peers are not held back, and students who learn slower are not abandoned or rushed

to meet the conclusion of the academic calendar. But in the context of a time-based system, proficiency programs are forced to make some compromises. In some of Oregon's proficiency programs, quick learners are steered into advanced proficiency studies or asked to mentor struggling students. Struggling students or students who have not been sufficiently diligent, are sometimes steered into intensive catch-up mentoring or after hours study as the school schedule draws to a close.

***Collecting data to evaluate and improve proficiency-based practice.*** In daily and weekly classroom practice, and even in curriculum planning and development, teachers meeting informally or even more formally through professional learning community teams offer school districts a reliable way to collect and evaluate data and improve proficiency-based practice. However, it is useful for school districts to collect and analyze student performance data over a longer period of time – including follow-up results in postsecondary education – that can be used to evaluate and improve curriculum and instructional practice. Some school districts are creating what they call “data warehouses” for this purpose. Some of it can be generated through report card software, some cannot. The Oregon Data Project is making progress in developing a uniform class- and school-level data system that will enable student information to be uploaded securely to regional data warehouses, and from there to a state level data warehouse for analysis stripped of specific student names. Full operation of this system will be welcome. Redmond High School developed such data in building its proficiency-based program, but did so through personal interviews and through manual collection and tabulation of print records, a time-consuming process that would have been greatly aided by automated data collection and processing.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

***Make proficiency-based practice the definition of standards-based education.*** Oregon should adopt the official position that the standards-based education system it seeks to establish requires proficiency-based assessment and instruction.

***At the secondary school level, require proficiency options and features that lead inevitably to proficiency adoption.*** State education policymakers should choose either of two implementation paths to accomplish a standards-based system defined by proficiency practice. The first path, which is less assertive, would involve either or both of two directives designed to offer students school-level choices in proficiency-based classes: 1) require high schools, and perhaps middle schools, at some defined date to guarantee every student the opportunity to earn a certain number of credits – or credits in a specified set of subjects – by proficiency; 2) require schools to offer a proficiency-based option in at least one class in any subject where more than one class section is available. This should be sufficient to jump start proficiency practice on a school-wide basis in districts across Oregon. The more assertive path would be to mandate proficiency-based *assessment* (but not necessarily instruction) for all content classes according to proficiencies defined in content standards. Because assessment based on standards tends to drive and define instruction, such a mandate would lead to proficiency-based instruction.

***Define proficiency-based practice.*** There is a tendency for practitioners comfortable with traditional time- and grade-based instruction and summative-oriented assessment to say of proficiency-based practice, “Oh, we already do that.” That is not likely. Proficiency-based practice should be defined by its salient characteristics, which are described in this paper and summarized in the table on page 4.

***Preserve out-of-class experience in proficiency practice.*** As proficiency-based education moves into the classroom in favor of traditional assessment and instruction, out-of-class proficiency credit should not be lost or minimized as a learning venue. Real-world, hands-on experience tied to standards and proficiencies is a powerful, motivating learning experience for all students.

***Increase state staff support.*** The Oregon Department of Education should continue and step up its support for the adoption of proficiency practice, perhaps by reconstituting the Credit for Proficiency Task Force as the Proficiency-Based Practice Office. This office should be given a mandate and adequate funding to hold regular state and regional conferences devoted to proficiency adoption, to develop media materials on proficiency, and to provide school districts with information, resource referrals, and site consultations on proficiency adoption.

***Build professional learning communities.*** Oregon schools should be organized to operate as professional learning communities as defined on page 6 whether or not they adopt proficiency practice, but *especially* if they adopt proficiency practice. They should receive necessary staff development to operate in this fashion, and administrators should make ample time available in the daily and weekly schedule for their professional learning teams to work on student progress and instructional improvement.

***Make proficiency-practice prominent in educator development.*** Through persuasion, incentives, targeted funding, and mandates if necessary, Oregon policy should align educator preparation and in-service training to focus substantially on standards-based, proficiency-based assessment and instruction. Proficiency-based practice should be part of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum for prospective administrators, teachers, and counselors at all schools of education, public and private. Faculty from schools of education should be encouraged to spend meaningful time in working classrooms learning about proficiency-based practice. One of Oregon’s schools of education, whether public or private, should make a seed investment to develop a leadership role in proficiency research and advocacy, perhaps building an institute on proficiency practice by seeking foundation grant funding.

## References

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