

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

How Does Proficiency-Based Learning Work?

How is it possible that a student can graduate from high school and yet be unable to read or write well, do basic algebra and geometry, identify major countries on a map, understand how our political system works, or explain the scientific method? While it may be difficult to believe, countless students graduate from high schools every year without the fundamental knowledge and skills they will need to earn a college degree, succeed in the modern workplace, or contribute meaningfully to their communities. How is this possible?

The answer is that many schools do not use teaching, testing, grading, and reporting methods that require students to prove they have actually acquired the most critically important knowledge and skills. In fact, high schools give out thousands of grades, report cards, and diplomas every year, but many of them would not be able to tell you what their students have specifically learned or not learned.

Luckily, there's an alternative option for today's schools: **proficiency-based learning**.

How It Works

- ✓ **All students must demonstrate what they have learned before moving on.** Before students can pass a course, move on to the next grade level, or graduate, they must demonstrate that they have learned what they were expected to learn. If students fail to meet learning expectations, they are given more support and instruction from teachers, more time to learn and practice, and more opportunities to demonstrate progress. Until they acquire the most essential skills and grasp the most important concepts, students do not move on to the next level.
- ✓ **Teachers are very clear about what students need to learn.** In every class, students know precisely what teachers expect—no guesswork required. The learning expectations for the course are clearly described and communicated, and students will know precisely where they stand throughout the course—for example, a student will know that she has achieved three of six expected learning standards, but that she needs to work harder to achieve the last three before she can pass the course. Importantly, her parents will also know precisely what she's learned and what she may be struggling to learn.
- ✓ **Common, consistent methods are used to evaluate student learning.** In many schools, different learning expectations are applied from course to course, and different methods and criteria are used to evaluate what students have learned. Consequently, one Algebra I course in a school may be very challenging, for example, while another Algebra I course may be comparatively easy—and a B earned in the “difficult” course might actually represent stronger learning achievement than an A in the “easy” course. Proficiency-based learning applies the same standards to all students, while teachers use consistent methods of evaluating and reporting on student learning—everyone knows precisely what grades stands for and what each student has learned. As a result, grades mean the same thing from course to course, and schools can certify that students are prepared when they move on.
- ✓ **While learning expectations are fixed, teachers and students have more flexibility.** Even though learning expectations and evaluation methods are common and consistent, teachers can be given more flexibility in how they teach and students can be given more choice in how they learn. For example, teachers don't need to use the same textbooks, assignments, and tests—as long as their students learn what they need to learn, teachers can develop new and more creative ways to teach. Similarly, students can be given an assignment—research an American president, for example—but they can choose which president to study or how they want to show what they've learned (one student may write an essay, while others may create a short documentary using archival photos or an audio podcast in the style of a presidential address). As long as students meet the course expectations—demonstrate a strong understanding of the election system, the executive branch of the federal government, and the role of the American president—teachers can teach and students can learn in the ways that work best for them.