

Rutland South Supervisory Union

64 Grange Hall Road
North Clarendon, Vermont 05759
Tel: 802-775-3264 www.rssu.org Fax: 802-775-8063

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Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are nearing somewhat of a turning point in education. The Common Core was adopted by Vermont in 2010. In 2013 Vermont passed Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Law. For federal accountability, New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests are currently being phased out and replaced by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests. Just this year, No Child Left Behind was updated and replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act--and Vermont is actively seeking input from all stakeholders about what school accountability will look like for the foreseeable future.

Why now? The traditional model of schooling has been successful in many ways for many years. Yet, now, more than ever, colleges and companies are encountering high school graduates that lack the skills to be successful. We need a better way to ensure that our students are well prepared before they graduate.

The phrase we keep hearing these days is "Proficiency-based Learning." This is the turning point. Vermont law requires that students of the class of 2020 and beyond graduate under a proficiency-based system. So what does that mean? You may already be familiar with a standards-based system from some of our elementary schools. Basically, the state sets standards of learning (in VT's case, the Common Core State Standards) that tell us exactly what students should be able to do in each course and at each grade level. Then our district works with teachers to identify local standards that are based on those Common Core standards. Our local standards represent what we feel are the more important areas of learning for our students. A proficiency-based system takes those standards, and works to accurately identify a student's proficiency on those standards. In other words, it measures what a student knows or is able to do in relation to those standards--and does not let other factors muddy the water, such as attendance, behavior, or homework completion. While those are all important, they do not reflect a student's level of proficiency. Many of our elementary report cards already use these local standards, and students levels of proficiency are measured on a 4-point scale.

Starting with the graduating class of 2020, all students will need to demonstrate proficiency in the following areas to graduate high school as outlined in the Vermont Education Quality Standards:

- Math
- English Language Arts
- Science
- Global Citizenship (Social Studies and World Language)
- Health
- Physical Education
- Visual and Performing Arts
- Transferable Skills (Clear and Effective Communication, Self-Direction, Informed and Integrated Thinking, Responsible and Involved Citizenship, Creative and Practical Problem Solving)

So what's different about that--besides the addition of Transferable Skills? Making the move from a standards-based system to a proficiency-based system does call for changes in how classrooms and schools are arranged. Unlike a traditional system, the a proficiency-based system must allow students to demonstrate proficiency under a flexible pathway such as work based learning, early college, or dual enrollment. A proficiency-based system must also allow students to progress at their own pace. We have already begun implementing many of these pathways and working with our educators to make these shifts.

Another important tenet of proficiency-based learning is that students are given multiple opportunities to improve their work as long as long as new learning has occurred. In other words, a student who fails a quiz will have the opportunity to relearn the material and retake a alternate version of the quiz. This is a shift in many of our classrooms currently and something that we are working to implement during the 2017-2018 school year for students in grades 7-10.

Further, Proficiency-based report cards separate academic performance from work habits/behavior in order to provide parents a more accurate view of a student's progress in both academic and behavioral areas. Variables such as effort, participation, timeliness, cooperation, and attendance, are reported separately from academics--and will not affect academic grades. This is mostly current practice at the elementary level--but a shift for many of our high school courses.

You will see several changes in the upcoming years concerning student report cards, how GPA is calculated, expectations for graduation, and school policies. Some of those shifts are as follows: beginning next year (2016-2017) K-6 schools are transitioning to a proficiency-based reporting system that is uniform across the four elementary schools; beginning with the class of 2019, GPA calculations will be unweighted; beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, grades 7-10 will transition to a proficiency-based report card and will report out on a 4-point scale.

Next year we will be holding community forums around the transition to proficiency-based graduation and Act 77's flexible pathways. This is an exciting shift in education for our students, but it will take time and collaboration to fully realize the intentions of Act 77. More importantly, it is something that cannot be achieved without community collaboration.

There are some frequently asked questions from the Vermont Agency of Education and resources at the end of the letter that may give you a better understanding of proficiency-based graduation. If you have any questions or would like more information please feel free to contact your building administrators, or contact me at bfarrell@rssu.org.

Sincerely,

Brooke Farrell

Brooke Farrell
Assistant Superintendent

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Proficiency Based Graduation:

How does a proficiency-based reporting improve teaching and learning?

Knowing where the students are in their progress toward meeting proficiency-based learning targets is crucial for planning and carrying out our classroom instruction. The assessment system is designed to give teacher more information about the student's progress in meeting the level of proficiency required by each standard. Teachers teach to the needs of their students. In addition, teachers share standards with students and parents, helping them to better understand the learning that needs to take place.

"By comparing one child's performance to a clear standard, parents, children and teachers all know precisely what is expected. Every time a student attempts a take, the performance is compared to the standard, not to other children's performances. The most important advantages for children and families are fairness clarity, and improved learning. " ~ Doug Reeves, 2004

What happens when an individual does not "pass" a given proficiency?

If time is a variable, then there is not an event that would mark 'not passing.' Information about a student's status relative to the standards would be considered in a formative context and continuing instruction designed to enable the student to meet the proficiency.

How soon before graduation does the process of demonstrating a given proficiency begin?

The demonstration of proficiency against the standards begins when the student enters the school system. Referring specifically to the graduation requirements, it is conceivable that proficiencies may be met anywhere along the grade continuum. However, since there should be multiple demonstrations of proficiency over time, most students will meet these proficiency based graduation expectations during high school.

Could a 9th (or 10th or 11th) grader demonstrate all of the proficiencies and graduate at the end of that year?

While this is possible, there may be good reason for a student to continue taking advantage of learning opportunities in high school. For example, the student may decide to improve proficiency and college readiness by participating in a dual enrollment course. And it is also possible to continuously improve on one's proficiency beyond the graduation expectation. The hope is that students will choose to do so and take advantage of the opportunity.

How is the new system of proficiency-based learning being rolled out?

Minimally, this year's 7th graders will progress to graduation in a proficiency-based system. In practice, that probably means having the system in place when those students become 9th graders. Next year's 7th graders will likely be in the system as 8th graders. Eventually, hopefully no later than 2 years down

the road, every new 7th grader will enter a proficiency-based system, so that by 2020 every secondary student (7-12) will be progressing through and graduating in that system.

What happens to class ranking and valedictorians and salutatorians?

In a personalized, proficiency-based system such rankings become irrelevant. There will be other ways to acknowledge and honor student achievement, but it would not be based on class rank.

Resources:

Vermont Agency of Education- <http://education.vermont.gov/proficiency-based-learning>

Great Schools Partnership- <http://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/>