Planning for Proficiency: Brief #4
Ensuring Success for Students with Disabilities

What You Need to Know

• Proficiency-based learning promotes multiple learning pathways that enable all students to demonstrate common learning expectations.

• In a proficiency-based system, accommodations and supports provided for students with disabilities apply to learning standards and not to an entire course.

• Since graduation in a proficiency-based system is based on achievement of standards—and not the accumulation of course credits—replacing one or more required courses (e.g. Algebra II) with a less rigorous one (e.g. Business Mathematics) is not an option.

• As districts shift to a proficiency-based system, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) remains in effect so that students are provided with the most appropriate accommodations and supports.

What You Need to Do

• Provide general and special education teachers with necessary professional learning and collaboration to ensure personalization, equity, and rigor for all in the classroom.

• Review current school practices to maximize academic and social inclusion.

• Support the professional development of special education teachers to enhance their understanding of new IEP requirements and how best to incorporate these in a proficiency system.

• Create a verification process to make judgments about student achievement of graduation standards in ways that are fair and equitable for all students, including those with special learning needs.

Timeline

Summer 2017

Reminder: The steps we recommend and the resources we provide are grounded in the PBL Simplified Model we have created and assume a general level of familiarity with it.

Regardless of the system of learning expectations in place or of changes that are being proposed, we stand with educators who consistently advocate for a fair process and appropriate supports so that students will not be disadvantaged in any way. We want to be certain that we don’t underestimate the capabilities and promise of students with disabilities. A proficiency-based system helps us realize the goal of supporting the achievement of high expectations for all students.

In our coaching efforts with schools across Maine, we have heard three consistent and frequent challenges regarding proficiency and students with disabilities:

1. How can we rethink the pace of learning?

2. How can we maximize our inclusion model?

3. How can we benefit from the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to maintain the fidelity and intent of our proficiency-based system and ensure the students we support can graduate?

The ability to adjust the pace of learning is a frequently noted feature of proficiency-based learning and is often misapplied. While there are distinct advantages to personalizing learning via pace, we must exercise caution. Students benefit from regular involvement and interaction with their peers and from continuous feedback and support from their teachers. As students engage in curriculum units, some students will learn faster, some right in alignment with our anticipated timeline, and some need more time. In a PBL system, teachers are constantly monitoring the progress of their students and making decisions about when to provide additional enrichment opportunities, when to provide extra supports, and when to move to the next unit.
The Promise of Proficiency-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities

We see proficiency-based learning as a suite of practices that are essential for supporting personalization and addressing equity. Such a system maximizes the opportunity for each individual to engage in diverse learning experiences in varied settings with a full range of tools and supports along the way. Personalized learning is not the same as individualized learning. Creating an environment that personalizes learning for all students is precisely what we aspire to have in place for students with disabilities. This inclusive setting promotes focused attention on student needs and unique talents, supports the development of learning strategies, provides meaningful choices about learning, and leads to assessments and feedback designed to determine individual student progress toward goals. This kind of environment fosters meaningful opportunities for students to demonstrate progress toward the Guiding Principles.

Proficiency-based learning challenges educators to think of teaching and learning in new ways. Consider how these following practices—which apply to all students—can support the successful learning of students with disabilities:

• Providing multiple means to learn and demonstrate proficiency, based upon student choice and strengths;
• Giving students multiple opportunities to improve their work when they struggle;
• Focusing on achievement by offering additional opportunities to demonstrate learning without penalty;
• Sharing advance notice of daily learning targets and what is expected to demonstrate proficiency;
• Using regular formative assessment to measure learning progress and provide feedback about next steps in learning;
• Assessing and supporting the development of habits of work, including class behaviors, attitudes, and participation apart from academic achievement;
• Encouraging opportunities to learn outside of the classroom and the school;
• Having opportunities to work and learn in groups; and,
• Fostering partnerships and co-teaching with other educators.

These opportunities are increased when students with disabilities learn primarily in a regular classroom. The proficiency-based classroom also enhances a school’s Response to Intervention (RTI) program. Formative and summative assessment data inform RTI teams’ decisions about practice and timely interventions.

As districts implement proficiency-based graduation, local policy concerning special education must remain in compliance with both state and federal requirements. In a proficiency system, the IEP will detail the individual accommodations allowable under federal law. Further, the IEP will outline how supports—such as one-on-one or self-contained classroom assignment—will lead to a student’s demonstration of the district’s graduation standards. The continuous monitoring of learning progress informs the design of supports and interventions before students fall too far behind. In a proficiency classroom, students will be provided with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning—with appropriate supports and a variety of pathways—until proficiency is achieved, allowing for flexible pacing and fostering encouragement and persistence.

Verifying Proficiency for Students with Disabilities

A challenge for special education students lies in the federal requirement that the standards for graduation cannot be changed through the IEP process. To promote equity of learning for all students, Maine statute changed from requiring credits for graduation to requiring standards. Substitution of courses in the same content area was an IEP practice in a credit-based system. In a PBL system, regardless of the courses a student completes, what matters most is whether the student demonstrates proficiency in the district’s graduation standards. It’s important for students to enroll in courses and learning experiences that eventually lead to the demonstration of the district’s graduation standards. We would suggest that schools (1) identify a small set of graduation standards (5-8 or fewer per content area); (2) measure achievement of performance indicators but hold students accountable in the aggregate at the graduation standard level; and (3) continue best practices in terms of providing accommodations and supports for students.

The flexibility provided by Maine’s proficiency-based graduation diploma means that there is a way to determine graduation standard proficiency without changing the standard itself or any of its related performance indicators. One of the ways educators can provide accommodations to students with disabilities is how the scores from multiple summative assessments are aggregated to determine graduation standard proficiency. Recall that while state and federal law requires that graduation standards for students with disabilities remain unchanged, state law is silent with respect to performance indicators.
In our proficiency-based simplified model, evidence of student learning from assessments are scored using task-neutral criteria aligned with performance indicators. These scores are collected over time and are used to determine proficiency at the performance indicator level. Using a consistent school-wide approach, these scores determine whether minimal graduation standard proficiency is met. Schools have tended to require minimal proficiency (usually represented by a minimum score of 3 on a 4-point scale) on most—if not all—indicators.

For students with disabilities, GSP considers changes in the way the graduation standard proficiency is determined to be an appropriate accommodation allowable by the IEP team. The following table lists the ways graduation standard proficiency can be determined in accommodated ways for students with disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>How standard proficiency is determined</th>
<th>Number of standards required for graduation</th>
<th>Number of performance indicators required</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency in every performance indicator is not required—though attempting proficiency in every performance indicator is required.</td>
<td>While overall proficiency in all of the performance indicators associated with each standard is required, there is no minimum proficiency score established on each indicator. (e.g. One content area graduation standard has six associated grade span performance indicators. While taken as a whole, the average score on all of the performance indicators must be 3.0 or above, it is possible that one or more PIs have an overall score less than 3.0. An IEP Team might establish a minimum proficiency score for one or more PIs.)</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All (though proficiency is not expected for each one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving a minimum number of proficient scores at the performance indicator level is not required.</td>
<td>While overall proficiency in all of the performance indicators associated with each standard is required, a school’s provision for any stated minimal number of successful attempts in place is removed. (e.g. A district has established the practice – unless otherwise indicated – that students must demonstrate PI proficiency on at least three demonstration tasks. In this case, an IEP Team would remove this requirement if this approach were deemed appropriate for the student in question.)</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempting proficiency in every performance indicator is not required.</td>
<td>Overall proficiency in the graduation standard is still expected and still determined based on aggregate performance on its grade level related performance indicators, though the IEP Team determines that not every PI must be met.</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Most</td>
</tr>
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Note that in the above examples, accommodations reflect changes in mathematical aggregation, not in the actual graduation standards, performance indicators, or scoring criteria. This practice makes it easier for special education teachers working with students in the regular classroom. To be clear, the above discussion is focused on how proficiency will be determined. It goes without saying that special education—indeed all students, will receive appropriate accommodations in instructional strategies and supports.

Be mindful that under federal rules the state has the authority to allow an alternate set of standards for up to 1% of the students in the district. Federal law also says that “students with significant cognitive disabilities are allowed to be measured against what are called alternate achievement standards, though their IEPs must be aligned to the content standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled.” For these students, the IEP would determine the most appropriate modification of graduation standards while making every effort to adhere to the spirit regarding the state’s statute of college and career readiness for all.
Some educators and stakeholders may challenge the meaning of the diploma if special education students receive the same recognition at the end of their high school journey as everyone else. We would argue that a proficiency system purposely works to find different ways of learning while staying true to a core set of learning expectations. We believe the above strategies do just that.

Resources

- District Policy Exemplar: Academic Support
- Global Best Practices, 2nd Edition (see personalization and organizational design)
- Maine DOE Policy on Standards-Based Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Goals
- Proficiency and Special Education: Making Quality Learning Work for All Students
- Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified: Supporting Students with Disabilities
- First Response: A Guide to Designing and Delivering Classroom Interventions