Planning for Proficiency: Brief #7
Assessing Maine’s Guiding Principles

What You Need to Know

• Student demonstration of achievement of Maine’s Guiding Principles is statutorily required.
• Creating standards, performance indicators, and scoring criteria aligned with the Guiding Principles supports assessment of student proficiency.
• Maine’s Guiding Principles performance indicators should be integrated into curriculum and instruction across all content areas.
• College admissions officers and employers appreciate and support documentation of proficiency of the Guiding Principles on the student transcript.

What You Need to Do

• Provide learning and planning time for staff to establish common expectations for performance.
• Ensure progress toward proficiency is documented on the report card and transcript.
• Encourage a range of strategies for achieving and demonstrating proficiency both within and beyond the classroom.

Timeline

2017 school year

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.

Certifying proficiency of Maine’s Guiding Principles provides teachers a unique opportunity to work collaboratively across disciplines and to design projects that allow students to apply knowledge in new ways, often transferring skills across content areas. Why is assessing these skills important? In the workplace, there is increased demand for the type of thinking and transferable skills described in the Guiding Principles, including more complex communication and problem-solving skills, that can be applied across diverse situations. A focus on both transferable skills, of which the Guiding Principles are an example, and content area skills encourages the design of more authentic tasks for students.

Teaching and assessing transferable skills is also an important way for schools to address equity among students. Children who have few opportunities to learn effective communication skills, organization skills, self-direction, or collaboration outside of school are at a significant disadvantage compared to others who do. By teaching and assessing transferable skills in purposeful ways at all grade levels, schools can help all students develop these critical skills.

Similarly to the steps followed previously with content areas, schools begin by defining graduation standards that align with the Guiding Principles. Once these are established, schools then identify aligned performance indicators that will be used in the assessment process—again in similar fashion to content areas. Finally, teachers collaborate to develop scoring criteria for each performance indicator. Once these steps are complete, schools may begin to assess student demonstrations of the Guiding Principles using one of three strategies.

Scoring content area and Guiding Principles performance indicators independently allows teachers to generate unique scores which may be reported separately. As teachers design summative assessment tasks, they determine which—if any—Guiding Principles are relevant. In such cases, teachers generate a rubric for this task consisting of the task-neutral scoring criteria for each of the content area and Guiding Principle performance indicators assessed. Once students submit their work, teachers assess it and enter separate scores for each of the performance indicators addressed.
Ideally, summative assessments consist of authentic tasks within a discipline which assess both content and elements of the Guiding Principles. For example, a social studies task might ask students to research and analyze the social and economic consequences of a particular piece of state or federal legislation, such as the Affordable Care Act. Another example might be to make the case for the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement as it relates to pressing human rights and social justice issues in the United States. These tasks are open-ended and provide students with multiple ways to demonstrate integrative thinking skills and depth of learning across disciplines. While the teacher is assessing student work using content area scoring criteria associated with the relevant social studies performance indicators, she is also using scoring criteria from appropriate Guiding Principles performance indicators, and entering the resulting scores separately in her gradebook.

The very nature of the Guiding Principles—application of skills and knowledge that hover above specific content but are important in all content areas—suggests they are supported within daily instructional strategies in the classroom, not as add-ons. As teachers design units of study, some of their daily learning targets will need to support the development of knowledge and skills related to the Guiding Principles. While these are eventually recorded independently, they should not be taught or demonstrated in isolation from content. This strategy supports the documentation of proficiency of each transferable skill separately on the report card and transcript, and illustrates that these important graduation requirements have been met.

A second strategy is to embed the Guiding Principles performance indicators within those from content areas by conducting a crosswalk between all content areas and the Guiding Principles to identify appropriate connections. Teachers will know from this crosswalk the specific Guiding Principles they are assessing within their particular content area performance indicators. In this case, districts certify that students have achieved the Guiding Principles through the combination of ongoing assessment of their work in each of the content areas and the establishment of a separate category of work habits. As a result, they do not score and report the Guiding Principles performance indicators independently and consequently assume they are met by virtue of having met content area indicators. Consider the following example of a Guiding Principle and its associated performance indicators:

An Integrative and Informed Thinker who:

- Gains and applies knowledge across disciplines and learning contexts and to real-life situations with and without technology.
- Evaluates and synthesizes information from multiple sources.
- Applies ideas across disciplines.
- Applies systems thinking to understand the interaction and influence of related parts on each other and on outcomes.

For students to demonstrate proficiency on this graduation standard, teachers need to ensure that the language from each performance indicator is captured in other appropriate content area performance indicators. From the example in the previous section—making the case for the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement as it relates to pressing human rights and social justice issues in the United States—students may also be assessed on being able to evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources.

This strategy requires time for teachers to collaborate in conducting the crosswalk between content areas and the Guiding Principles, but it also ensures that there is appropriate focus on these cross-curricular skills within the classroom. As with many elements of Maine’s Proficiency-Based Graduation statute, districts have the flexibility to develop approaches that best meet the needs of their communities and reflect the progress they have made regarding their continuous improvement efforts.

A third strategy some schools may use a body-of-evidence approach, which involves assessing the Guiding Principles using portfolios of best work, independent capstone projects, internships or service work in the community, and other evidence that showcases unique student accomplishments and achievements. Due to the level of sophistication required to demonstrate proficiency in this way, these approaches may be more appropriate in the junior and senior years of high school. This strategy may also be applied in either of the first two approaches. Some schools require students to make formal presentations about topics of their choice to a panel of teachers, experts, and students, as an integrated way to demonstrate the Guiding Principles. Requiring students to defend their work before an audience or a panel of experts provides a real-world environment for authentic work. While this approach to assessing the Guiding Principles does not lead to multiple scores for each performance indicator level, it does create a collective derived from multiple pieces of student work.
Assessing the Guiding Principles both in the classroom and through a body of evidence allows the student a broader spectrum of opportunities to demonstrate depth of proficiency in these important cross-cutting skills. Further, strategies that allow for independent reporting on progress toward the Guiding Principles provide valuable information regarding students’ unique capacity to be successful in a variety of settings. Our conversations with prospective employers and college admissions officials indicate that student proficiency in the Guiding Principles provides meaningful and valuable information about prospective candidates for the workforce and postsecondary education. The school profile—which accompanies a student’s official transcript—should clearly describe where and how the Guiding Principles are assessed during each student’s learning journey.

Resources

- Maine’s Guiding Principles
- Habits of Work Grading and Reporting
- Example High School Transcript that includes assessment of the Guiding Principles
- Vermont Transferable Skills, Scoring Criteria, Sample Projects