Planning for Proficiency: Brief #9
Revising the High School Transcript

What You Need to Know

- Changes in the transcript need to be aligned with revisions in district graduation policy.
- A proficiency-based transcript captures the full meaning of proficiency and includes a listing of learning activities a student has completed that has led to proficiency.
- The revised transcript is accompanied by an updated school profile that provides districts with ample opportunity to expand on and describe how proficiency based learning works in their schools.
- School profiles accompany every student’s college application along with transcripts and other supporting materials.

What You Need to Do

- Adopt or adapt the exemplar transcript, school profile, and related policies provided by GSP.
- Authentically engage the community in transcript redesign by including a diverse group of school leaders, counselors, and teachers.
- Develop a consistent plan for how transfer students’ previous work will be reflected in the transcript.

Timeline

2017–18 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.

Secondary school transcripts are the official academic record for high school graduates. It is essential that this document clearly communicates what a student has accomplished to prospective college admissions officials, employers, recruiters, and others. The Great Schools Partnership’s exemplar transcript includes many of the key essential elements found in traditional transcripts. This include a listing of courses, internships, independent learning, dual enrollment, and capstone projects. Proficiency-based transcripts also include information such as the overall level of proficiency achieved in each learning experience, habits of work, any honors earned, and proficiency in both graduation and cross-cutting (Guiding Principles) standards. Some schools may elect to report an overall Grade Point Average (GPA), though in this case, GSP recommends using an overall standards-based GPA.

Organizing and fully explaining this information in a way that is easy for others to interpret and understand is essential. The school profile is also critical to assisting colleges in understanding the transcript and the school’s system of proficiency. For additional guidance refer to the GSP exemplar transcript policy, transcript, and school profile.

As proficiency-based education becomes more common, some parents have raised concerns about how college admissions officials will view proficiency-based transcripts and whether students will be disadvantaged in any way in the application process. The Great Schools Partnership has worked with college admissions officers across New England on this important issue. As of March, 2017, sixty-nine institutions, both public and private, have signed letters indicating that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in any way during the admissions process. Admissions officers have pointed out that they receive transcripts from around the country and the world and have rich experience in holistically assessing the information provided by the transcript and school profile. Schools should view this as an opportunity—as they revise their transcripts and school profiles—to further strengthen the position of their graduates for candidacy in institutions of higher education.

At a 2016 convening of admissions officials from highly selective colleges, hosted by the New England Board of Higher Education and the New England Secondary School Consortium, attendees discussed this important issue. Admissions leaders present overwhelmingly supported the proficiency-based transcript as it provides them with a wealth of information...
not just about course outcomes, but also about performance on habits of work and lifelong skills. Admissions officials are well aware of the skills required for success in college and the workplace. When transcripts report proficiency on such cross-curricular skills as “a self-directed and lifelong learner,” “creative and practical problem-solver,” and “clear and effective communicator,” admissions officers know the school is targeting high-demand workplace skills, according to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. By presenting these skills alongside habits of work and content area proficiency, the transcript provides highly relevant information.

The school transcript differentiates students within the same school and the school profile differentiates one school from another. The richness and clarity with which the information is presented in the transcript and school profile cannot be overemphasized. Schools need to carefully consider how their transcript and profile will be revised and who will be involved in that process. Since this is a significant change, and because communication and reassurance to parents is so critical, the refining of these documents may be best accomplished by a team consisting of teacher leaders, guidance counselors, the curriculum coordinator, district superintendent, and members from the community.

The superintendent and high school principal are often the leaders outfront describing (and, in some cases, defending) the transcript to parents. Partnering with admissions officers and employers to engage parents in conversations about the revised transcript is one way to allay parent concern and confusion. Further, involving both employers and admissions officers ensures all post-secondary pathways are considered in the process.

There are a wealth of resources to support the development of a proficiency-based transcript and school profile on the Great Schools Partnership website. The GSP exemplars were informed and shaped by an advisory committee of college admissions officials and high school principals and guidance counselors who expressed the urgent need for schools to dramatically revise and improve these important documents. It is notable that the GSP exemplar transcript and school profile have received strong support on its design from the public college and university systems in Maine as well as Bowdoin, Harvard, and MIT who have singled out this exemplar as being clear, comprehensive model to follow.

Resources

- Exemplar High School Transcript
- District Policy Exemplar: Transcripts
- Exemplar High School Profile
- NEBHE article: How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate Proficiency-Based High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools
- Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified: Transcripts and Reporting
- 69 New England Institutions of Higher Education State that Proficiency-Based Diplomas Do Not Disadvantage Applicants