

District Policy Considerations: Revising local policy to support a proficiency-based learning system

What You Need to Know

- The highest leverage and most impactful local district policies reflect state requirements and support for the components of proficiency-based learning in district and school policy.
- The best policies balance prescription with flexibility, providing essential guidance yet allowing for adaptability in implementation for teachers and leaders.
- The set of policies related to proficiency-based learning districts can be very far reaching, but at a minimum should include those that address graduation, multiple pathways, transcripts, and athletic eligibility.

What You Need to Do

- Conduct a review of all relevant policies (See GSP Policy Checklist for Maine).
- Adopt or adapt exemplary policies located on the GSP website that support a proficiency-based system.
- Formally adopt a stand-alone policy on multiple pathways that is aligned with state statute and attends to diverse student interests and strengths.

Timeline

Spring 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.

As districts transition to a proficiency-based system of teaching and learning, they will need to review and revise existing k–12 policies to align with state statute and changes in local practice. Individual schools will also need to align building level practices and rules with district policy. There should be a balance between prescription and flexibility in written policy as, by design, a proficiency-based system allows for more teacher and student flexibility in assessing and demonstrating achievement. The GSP website provides a policy review checklist and a collection of exemplar policies that districts may use or adapt to meet local needs.

District Graduation Requirements need to be based upon Maine's Learning Results. Districts have the additional flexibility to add local requirements such as proficiency in habits of work, presentation of a capstone project, and service learning. Local district policy needs to reflect that the decision to award a diploma must be based on the achievement of proficiency on graduation standards—as opposed to credit accumulation and course completion.

As districts transition, many are using a hybrid approach that reports achievement of performance indicators and graduation standards using a credit-based system. While this hybrid approach is not required to adopt, it does meet the expectations listed in the state statute.

Achievement of proficiency may not necessarily coincide with the end of a school year, requiring districts to adopt policies and practices that convey reasonable timeframes in which proficiency is expected. While proficiency-based learning systems provide tremendous flexibility for supporting instruction and for students to demonstrate their learning, it is advisable to establish a consistent approach across a school with respect to when standards are expected to be met.



State statute requires districts to provide students with a variety of learning options—often called **multiple pathways**. The options can be within the broader school system (e.g. Career and Technical Education and virtual learning) as well as beyond the school (e.g. dual enrollment and extended learning opportunities). District policy should describe these options and include how they will be approved, documented, and assessed. While encouraging personalization of the learning journey and increased student voice and choice, clear guidelines are needed to align these experiences with performance indicators, school graduation standards, and how achievement in these pathways will be confirmed. The flexibility needed to support students' participation in multiple pathways (e.g. attendance requirements, transportation, supervision practices, etc.) also need to be described in policy.

How student learning will be assessed, how proficiency will be verified, and how **grades** will be determined in a proficiency-based system represents a shift from a typical number averaging or letter grading system (refer to briefs #5 and #6). District policy should articulate the purpose of grades, standards for proficiency, and processes for aggregation of student scores to demonstrate proficiency. Further, districts should detail in policy how the scoring will impact **academic recognition** and determination of student honors. As an example, many schools have opted to eliminate class rank and replace it with Latin honors. This approach is more inclusive and aligns more readily with a proficiency grading system rather than a norm-referenced system, which is based on ranking students relative to one another. Revisions in the **transcript policy** need to address how proficiency-based grades are determined, how the GPA is calculated (if used), and how to represent the student's program, participation, and achievement.

The GSP website offers two sample policies on **athletic eligibility**, one based on Grade Point Average (GPA), the other on course completion. Be advised that classroom hours and course completion are moving targets in a proficiency system, and that using a GPA may be more beneficial to the student. At the end of any grading term, hardworking and conscientious students may not have completed a course due to failure to achieve proficiency on one or more required performance indicators, though the overall GPA on what has been completed to date could indicate proficiency has been achieved. At the beginning of a term, students may be struggling and may require significant support or assessment "retakes." This is a complex concern as simply noting pass or fail may not take into consideration the full student learning experience. In some situations, it may make sense to consider the current academic struggle and limit athletic participation until the student shows better progress toward proficiency.

Rather than emphasize academic grades, some schools focus on whether students maintain proficiency on their habits of work, believing that if students persist, manage their work and time well, and demonstrate ongoing respect for the peers and adults in their learning community, academic success will follow. Some schools determine eligibility weekly, some by mid-term progress reports, and some at the end of a grading term. Short-term considerations give the student more opportunity to improve and a greater chance to participate. The high-stakes nature of athletic competition across districts requires schools to develop a fair policy that can be easily and consistently applied to all students.

Most schools offer a range of **academic supports, enrichment, and interventions** to all students. A proficiency-based system requires a greater range of supports to accommodate more diverse ways of learning and the expectation that all students will achieve proficiency on rigorous, college- and career-ready standards. Articulating the support systems and interventions in policy reassures parents that supports are available for students at all levels.

Other policies that are impacted by a proficiency-based learning system include policies related to **grade promotion and retention**. How will grade levels, at the elementary and secondary levels be redefined in a proficiency system? Students will generally spend about thirteen years in a k–12 system, but proficiency systems blur the lines between grades and allow for more flexibility of movement across grade levels, potentially altering the traditional graduation timeframe. Further, school organizational structures at the middle and high school level are impacted when students take longer than the academic year to complete a class, or if they complete courses early.

As policies shift, the more difficult work will be changing local school structures and practices that have been part of the school culture over decades. A proficiency system does not require a "freshman" student to complete a specific number of credits to become a sophomore. It dissolves lines across leveled courses as all students are working to achieve proficiency on common performance indicators. Within the classroom, practices that reward students for good behavior or participation (habits of work) are assessed independently from academic work. Students are not able to substitute "extra credit" projects for proficiency on a graduation standard. Students will be able to demonstrate proficiency in multiple ways and to redo assessments without penalty where they fall short in the learning process. How schools and teachers consistently interpret and implement policy will determine whether they will fulfill the promise of a proficiency-based learning system.

Resources

- *Maine and New England State policy examples and local exemplar policies*
- *New England Secondary School Consortium State Policies*

Addendum

Maine District and School Policy Checklist

Implementing Proficiency-Based Systems and Graduation Requirements

The following checklist is intended for use by district and school leaders looking to review, revise, and develop policies for guiding the implementation of proficiency-based learning. The checklist provides a recommended order of priority, with the high-priority policies appearing at the top. Note that additional policies may need to be revised or created by districts and schools transitioning to proficiency-based learning.

1. Graduation Requirements (Policy File IKF)
2. Multiple Pathways (Policy File IKFF)
3. Academic Recognition: Latin Honors and Grade Point Averages (Policy File IKD)
4. Transcripts (Policy File IKC)
5. Grading and Reporting System (Policy File IKA)
6. Dual Enrollment and Early College (Policy File IHCDA)
7. Assessment of Student Learning (Policy File ILA)
8. Promotion, Retention, and Acceleration (Policy File IKE)
9. Demonstrations of Learning, Exhibitions, and Capstone Projects (Policy File ILA)
10. Academic Interventions (Policy File JC DL)
11. Personal Learning Plans (Policy File ILAPL)
12. Portfolios (Policy Files ILA and ILAPL)
13. Attendance (Policy File JEA)
14. Academic Eligibility: Athletics and Co-Curricular Activities (Policy File JJIC)

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