Communication and Community Engagement: Building Understanding and Support for Proficiency-Based Learning

What You Need to Know

- Communicating clearly, transparently, and consistently with students, families, teachers, staff, and community members is essential at every stage of the transition to a proficiency-based system—from planning to implementation to ongoing refinement.
- Stakeholders want opportunities to have a voice, they want to know they have been heard, and they want to see that their priorities, aspirations, or contributions have been acted on or incorporated into the plan.
- Anxieties about proficiency-based learning are often based on misconceptions or assumed disadvantages, so school leaders need to directly and consistently dispel misunderstandings and reiterate advantages. But remember that concerns typically come from a well-meaning place: understandably, parents and families want to make sure their children will receive the education they deserve.
- Yet even strong communication strategies will only get school leaders and educators so far: students, parents, and families don’t just want to be told what is happening, they also want to be involved in making it happen.
- Proficiency-based systems that are informed and shaped by the needs and contributions of teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders are generally stronger and more successful systems.

What You Need to Do

- Make sure to communicate—over and over—why proficiency-based approaches to teaching and learning can improve student preparation. While stakeholders may not understand all the technical details, surveys and polls (http://greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/research-evidence/surveys-college-educators-employers/) show that parents, community members, employers, and college instructors overwhelmingly want students to graduate with the skills, knowledge, and work habits they will need to succeed in life after high school—and that’s the purpose of proficiency-based learning.
- Communication (i.e., sharing information) should be balanced with engagement—the intentional, proactive involvement of teachers, students, families, and community members in the process of developing a proficiency-based system. The best approach is to blend clear and understandable communication with opportunities for stakeholders to inform or contribute to the process.
- Authentic engagement always begins with listening. Make time for teachers, students, families, and community members to voice their values, desires, and concerns, and then explicitly address their feedback and suggestions in the design, implementation, and rollout of the new system.
- Set appropriate expectations by clearly and transparently establishing “negotiables” and “non-negotiables.” While teachers will determine the curriculum, assessments, and grading practices, for example, schools can create opportunities for students, parents, and family members to contribute to the design of a grade-reporting system that works for them.

Timeline

Plan now for ongoing communications and engagement with stakeholders. It’s never too late in the process to create a plan.

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.
Develop a Plan for Communication and Engagement

Although students, parents, and community members may be aware that districts are required to implement a proficiency-based system for the graduating class of 2021, they may not have a strong grasp of the details and what the day-to-day impact may be on student learning, grade reporting, and transcripts. Naturally, many stakeholders will want to know how proficiency-based learning works in practice, and whether new systems—particularly grades and transcripts—will pose any disadvantages to graduates when they apply to postsecondary programs. To address potential concerns, district and school leaders should proactively develop a blended plan for ongoing stakeholder communication and engagement.

Here are a few tips for creating your plan:

- When it comes to community forums, meetings, websites, publications, and other opportunities for communication and engagement, don’t assume that “if you build it, they will come.” Instead, districts and schools need to intentionally reach out to individuals and groups—especially those who have historically been marginalized or underserved by the system, and those who may distrust the system for any number of reasons—to ensure diverse participation and to create meaningful opportunities for all stakeholders to be part of the conversation.

- When school leaders and educators know what their stakeholders want, or what they may be anxious about, it becomes much easier to develop communication strategies or engagement opportunities that will result in stronger understanding of and support for proficiency-based learning.

- One of the best ways to start is by asking students, parents, and families some basic questions: How do they typically receive information from the school? How do they prefer to receive information? Is it through the school website, email newsletters, Facebook, or handouts sent home with students? What do they want to learn more about? What are they concerned about? How would they specifically like the school to improve communications or engagement in ways that work best for them?

- When collecting this information, schools should utilize multiple formats to ensure they are reaching as many stakeholders as possible. For example, some people prefer email or social-media survey, while others prefer face-to-face conversations. A mix of surveys, focus-group-style discussions, and one-on-one conversations will reach a much larger number of stakeholders and elicit more diverse viewpoints and actionable insights.

- This advice is absolutely critical: avoid all forms of jargon, abstraction, and technical education language. Terms like “seat time,” or even “assessment,” may be meaningful to experienced educators, but they can be alienating and deeply frustrating for parents and community members who simply want to understand what’s happening. If school leaders want to communicate or engage more effectively, the use of jargon makes both of those goals nearly impossible to achieve.

- In place of jargon, use short descriptions. For example, instead of saying “assessment,” say “the many methods—such as tests, questions, or assignments—that teachers use to determine what students have or haven’t learned.” Instead of saying “course credits will no longer be based on seat time,” say “passing a course and earning credit will be based on students demonstrating that they have actually learned all the essential knowledge, skills, and work habits they were supposed to learn.”

- Another effective communications and engagement strategy is to share or describe new approaches to teaching and learning through illustrative examples. Instead of explaining proficiency-based learning in abstract language filled with jargon, tell the story of a powerful classroom project that engaged students in relevant, real-world learning or create a short video so people can see how the project works in real life. Exhibitions of learning are another powerful engagement strategy, particularly when they are open to all parents and the public. When people see proficiency-based learning in action, they typically understand intuitively how and why it works without needing someone to explain it to them.

- Have teachers and students tell their stories—they are usually the most credible and compelling voices in a school. When students stand up and describe learning experiences that transformed their view of themselves or the world, that made them more confident or excited about learning, or that set them on the path to higher education, parents and community members stop and listen.

- Create opportunities for students, families, and community members to be directly involved in decisions about proficiency-based learning. In the classroom, students can be given opportunities to shape learning experiences through personal learning plans, project-based learning, and other strategies. Parents and family members can participate in student-led conferences, demonstrations of learning, home visits, or advisory committees. And
community members can contribute through volunteerism, internships, mentorships, or service-learning projects.

- When students, families, and community members are actively involved in a proficiency-based system, they not only understand far better how and why it works—they also feel a sense of ownership. School leaders should map out and identify areas that can be informed by or co-created with stakeholders. For example, schools can set up planning and advisory committees for any number of number of activities, from grade reporting to internship programs—just remember that those teams, committees, or working groups should include a diverse and representative cross-section of stakeholders, viewpoints, and cultural backgrounds.

**Insights and Support from Higher Education**

To support districts and schools as they transition to proficiency-based learning, and to new forms of academic reporting, the New England Secondary School Consortium, in collaboration with the Great Schools Partnership, reached out to colleges and universities across New England to discuss high school transcripts and the college-admissions process. In our conversations with admissions officials, we encountered strong support for the goals of proficiency-based learning and for transcripts that clearly and accurately describe the knowledge, skills, and work habits students acquired in high school.

Here’s a few things we learned:

1. College and university admissions offices receive—and have always received—a huge variety of transcripts, including transcripts from international schools, home-schooled students, and any number of alternative educational institutions that do not have traditional academic programs or transcripts. Consequently, high school graduates with non-traditional transcripts—including “proficiency-based” or “competency-based” transcripts—will not be disadvantaged in any way. Colleges and universities are unequivocal on this point: they do not discriminate against students based on the academic program and policies of the sending school, as long as those programs and policies are clearly presented and described.

2. Schools use so many different systems for assessing, grading, ranking, and tracking students that the systems can only be understood by admissions offices when the school submits a comprehensive school profile or other clarifying information that provides the context needed to understand a graduate’s transcript. Even familiar recognitions bestowed upon graduates such as latin honors designations (e.g. Summa Cum Laude) don’t mean much unless an admissions office also has the “key” (i.e., the school profile) it needs to understand the system.

3. As long as the “school profile” is comprehensive and understandable, and it clearly explains the rigor of the academic program, the technicalities of the assessment and grading system, and the characteristics of the graduating class, admissions officials will be able to understand the transcript and properly evaluate the strength of a student’s academic record and accomplishments.

4. The rigor and quality of the school’s academic program matters far more than GPAs, class rank, or other practices intended to sort students, such as weighted grades. Admissions professionals want to know that the school’s courses and learning experiences are rigorous, that the applicant did well in those courses, and that an incoming student is fully prepared to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in their college or university—and this is precisely what a well proficiency-based transcript will do.

As a result of our conversations with admissions officials, the New England Secondary School Consortium secured 69 letters (as of April 2017) from colleges and universities across New England—including both public and private institutions—that articulate their position on proficiency-based learning and transcripts. And at a recent 2016 convening of admissions officials from several highly selective colleges, hosted by the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) and the New England Secondary School Consortium, attendees engaged in a discussion of this important issue, which resulted in a white paper that we encourage every district and school leader to read: *How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate Proficiency-Based High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools.*

**Resources**

- [Letters of collegiate support for proficiency-based learning](#)
- [New England Board of Higher Education white paper: How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools](#)
- [Community Collaboration for School Innovation Toolkit](#)