

Testimony regarding **LD 1900** (*An Act to Repeal Proficiency-based Diplomas*)
Against the Bill
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It was Mark Twain who said, "I'm in favor of progress; it's change I don't like," and in a similar vein, Woodrow Wilson once said, "If you want to make enemies, try to change something." I can certainly understand the angst among adults and even some students that has resulted from the beginning of the current paradigm shift in education. It's different from their own education experience, and for some, measuring students against a standard rather than each other is downright un-American and tantamount to treason. After all, how will we identify the top one, two, or ten students in any cohort unless we rank order them?

The concern related to a proficiency-based learning model of teaching, learning, and assessing demonstrates commonly held misunderstandings about the principles of standards-based learning. It is far more than a grading system. It is a delivery model for teaching, learning, and accessing that reaches far beyond a reporting mechanism. Proficiency-based learning is also grounded in research about how students learn best and what motivates them to learn.

PBL is not new. It is neither an initiative nor a pilot project. It is far more than a grading system. PBL is about all of the following:

- being crystal clear with what we want our students to know and be able to do.
- teaching in multiple ways to ensure that everyone learns.
- being crystal clear with what it looks like to be proficient for every learning target/competency.
- having a plan for supporting a student when he/she did not demonstrate proficiency.
- having a plan for extending student learning when a student was proficient already.
- Developing strong habits of work (HOW) that will lead to success in the 21st century.

In short, PBL is about rigorous and engaging teaching and learning for all students.

Deploying a true standards-based learning model is critical for our students. It will help to ensure that students are graduating with a solid understanding of the most critical elements of what they need to know, be able to do, and be like. Gone are the days when students could graduate from high school with lackluster skills and knowledge and gaping holes in their education and still get a well-paying job. Even our students who are electing to enter the apprenticeship program at PNSY are held to high math and science standards. They must have a firm understanding of the

math standards through Algebra II as measured by the Accuplacer (a College Board assessment). I toured the PNSY training facility last summer. The message to us was clear—their civilian workforce relies on students who have secure math, science, and problem-solving skills. They need creative and collaborative problem-solvers and critical thinkers (all standards we are now deliberately teaching and assessing).

Beyond that, colleges are, in fact, supporting our work in this arena. College Admissions offices, even highly selective ones, are supporting proficiency-based learning and have acknowledged that a standards-based transcript will not place students at a disadvantage during the college admissions process. Which schools are among that group? Bates and Bowdoin here in Maine are included, as well as Dartmouth, Connecticut College, MIT, and Harvard across New England, just to name a few.

Here is what admissions offices are telling us—they are in the business of finding talented prospects, and they appreciate that schools are working harder to ensure students are prepared for the rigors of higher education and an ever-changing workforce. Entrenched attitudes about traditional grades based on arbitrary criteria, rank ordering students, and misplaced faith in an outdated system of teaching, learning, and assessing are barriers to improving education and facilitating the paradigm shift.

Traip Academy, Kittery's public high school, has done a great job with their PBL deployment. The Class of 2018 will graduate in a few months with a true proficiency-based diploma, the culmination of a four-year PBL experience, and we are very excited about that. A small but significant part of this has been the adoption of a data management system that captures student progress at the competency level (in my opinion, the true definition of a PBL system of teaching, learning, and assessing). The platform, *JumpRope*, allows us to capture a base-4 grade point average that can then be convert to base-100 (if that is necessary for post-secondary pursuits). It also allows us to (gulp!) rank students if a post-secondary school wants that data, although college enrollment specialists have told us time and time again that such a practice is gravely flawed and that the practice is ending. Traip Academy also continues to have all students take the SAT (often times more than once) so that colleges will have that data point as well.

It is important to note that Kittery has not relied on Augusta to realize the student benefits of a standards-based learning system. In March, 2012, the Kittery School Committee adopted the *Vision for the Future*, the underpinnings of which are a proficiency-based system for teaching, learning, and assessing. We are committed to ensuring that our students don't graduate with a 'Swiss Cheese' diploma...holes all through it!

From my perspective, the only thing hurting children is the flawed belief that a traditional delivery model for teaching, learning, and assessing is the gold standard.

I will concede, however, that if only the grading process is changing while teacher craft, assessment practices, and school policies related to learning do not, it is indeed time to rethink things.