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Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements: Implementation and Practice

In June 2016, the Class of 2020 at Lamoille Union Middle School descended the brick staircases that led to their waiting buses for the last time. Showered in a line of applause from the younger grades, the rising freshman had little idea how a newly-implemented systemic change would greatly affect the next four years of their education. I was twelve when I stood clapping, guiding my friends out the door. In the coming months I would witness confusion, anger, and overall dissatisfaction that would dramatically shift Lamoille's learning environment. Some saw the new Proficiency Based Grading Requirements (PBGRs) as a breath of fresh air— others saw it as confusing and binding. I was a part of it, the self-dubbed “guinea pig class.” I was an eighth grader taking high school classes, and I had never questioned the system: school was school. You cram for the test, get the grade, forget everything, and repeat. I grew tired of this, and with the implementation of the PBGR, I decided to get involved.

After years of extensive research, the State of Vermont passed on July 2013 Act 77 in an effort to combat disengagement in Vermont high schools and improve postsecondary preparedness and graduation rates. Act 77 was created to support students needing flexible pathways to reach graduation, thus giving rise to the dual-enrollment system guaranteeing Vermont high school students access to two college-level courses without charge. The option of early college for high school scholars interested in combining their senior year with a first year

of college emerged as an additional option. The act also signed Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) into law. Starting with the class of 2020, all Vermont secondary school students would be required to draft a PLP. To be updated annually by November 30th, the PLP would serve as a document to showcase each individual student's journey, highlighting the usage of flexible pathways. The Vermont Agency of Education notes that students "can take charge of their own learning in the PLP process." Act 77 did not mandate that the Class of 2020 graduate with a PBGR transcript, however the 2014 amendments to Vermont's Education Quality Standards did, which set in motion what would become the most controversial change in Vermont's education history.

The PBGR system, in theory, paved the way for personalized learning, flexible pathways, and learner-centered environments. Indeed we were presented with a wonderful system— what it lacked was a smooth implementation. When Act 77 was put into law in 2013, it was met with mixed reactions. Some took the change with enthusiasm, while others were skeptical and resistant. The lack of success in implementation cannot solely be pinned on this resistance however. Although the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) laid the groundwork for the system and provided some reference documents, the presence of experts in schools and trainings that would have helped to smooth the transition were absent.

PBGR was a massive shift in not only policy, but thinking and culture. Educators had been taught to teach in one way for many years, and the prospect of completely reinventing their teaching and grading styles was a daunting one. Changing policies is one thing-- to change thinking, you need to provide support. This support was needed from the AOE. A lack of training was one of the major reasons for PBGRs shortcomings in Vermont. The agency of

education had a tremendous opportunity to inspire the future of education culture in this state, and yet the new system has become demonized in the eyes of students and teachers alike simply because of its lack of a comprehensive implementation.

A lack of consistency emerged around the state when it came to implementing PBGRs. From the outside looking in, it seemed as if many schools had very different ways of grading prior to the Act passing. After the language and guidelines emerged from the AOE, it appears that each school interpreted the reform in their own ways and slowly began adapting their graduation requirements and grading conventions to conform to the set of guidelines laid out by the AOE, as they each understood them. Some used a four point scale. Others simply abandoned number grades entirely, shifting to words indicating merit, such as “proficient,” or “expanding” into the graduation vernacular. While consistency can be harboring, it can also be constraining. The consistency of the traditional school systems oppressed personalization, and did not accommodate all styles of learning in the way that the PBGR system does.

Regardless of its poor implementation, PBGR has paved the way for incredible programs that would not have been possible in a traditional grading environment. The PBGR system embodies progressive education. Today’s nationwide effort is to transform the classroom into a learner-centered environment. Proficiencies are the way that we truly attain that. They eliminate the credit system, carnegie units, and grades as we know them, and open up opportunities in which a student can personalize their learning. When a student can personalize their learning, they can bring relevance and passion into the classroom. When this happens, the student is much more likely to retain not only information learned, but skills gained. Due to the system’s capability of supporting learner-centered environments, there have been many success stories

from across the state. The establishment of these programs is what is needed to turn the tide of nay-sayers and critics into open-minded advocates for a system that has freed many students from the binds of a traditional education environment. One such program is EPIC Academy, located at Lamoille Union High School in Hyde Park, Vermont. Student-driven project-based learning is highlighted at EPIC Academy, allowing students to bring passions into school and earn credit towards graduation. This program stands to reinvigorate student learning. It certainly did so for me.

The PBGR system on a four point scale does not have the tools to properly and effectively evaluate traditional coursework. It is often asked how we can change the new system to conform to the traditional classroom setting. To that notion I ask you: what can we do to change the traditional classroom setting to conform to the new system? Here's my answer. Prioritize transferable skills and habits of work as the main assessments of progress in school, allowing the skills that will help learners in the future to be built in a positive manner. In addition to this, implement student voice practices, and work with students as full partners, as students have a tremendous capacity for work in education reform. Allow students to take charge of their own learning. Assess them on advocacy, and assess them on how well they can develop summative displays of skills and knowledge. Don't do school *to* students, do school *with* students.

In order to truly create an equitable system of education, students need to be at the table. Too often are changes to education done to and for students without student guidance or partnership. How strange is it to implement a system for the benefit of students without seeking out student voices and partnering to make decisions? Student leaders have a tremendous capacity

for dealing with this work that is extremely pertinent to their lives. Since the implementation of the PBGR system, students in leadership clubs have worked to mitigate negative effects of the change and increase the comprehensibility of the system. A shining example of this is YATST, student leadership group standing for Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together. The program pairs students and educators as equals in becoming agents of change, and each group works in their respective schools to improve school environment and policy.

Proficiency Based Learning was hindered by both a skeptic response to its implementation, as well as a lack of support from the AOE. Though confusion ensued about the system, it has provided many opportunities to students that have revolutionized what was thought to be possible. The proficiency system is progressive but requires major school change to be effective. In order to create an educational system that serves all learners, we must learn not to demonize PBGRs, but to work to build awareness around the incredible doors that they open.

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