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Portland-area schools debate proficiency-based education

By [Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian](#)
February 24, 2010, 7:33PM



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Scappoose High sophomore Candice Thompson works to determine the area of a parallelogram, one of about 20 key skills she must master this term. Her math teacher, Mark Sprenger, uses proficiency-based education, which emphasizes demonstrating skills over homework and class participation.

Educators at more than two dozen Oregon high schools are teaching and grading their students in a new way that they say ramps up how much students learn and retain.

Known as "proficiency-based education," the approach is generating controversy because students receive little to no credit for homework, attendance, classwork or extra credit -- only for demonstrating knowledge of key material.

Teachers are using the method in Beaverton, Forest Grove, Portland and other districts across Oregon.

Students must prove on tests, essays and other assignments that they've mastered the essential skills and content for the course. If they don't prove proficient the first time, they can redo tests or projects until they get them right.

Supporters say students emerge knowing their stuff. Strong students can

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forge ahead if they demonstrate know-how, while teens who struggle can circle back and retest or rewrite until they prove they grasp the concept.

"I can't believe I didn't use this method for the past 10 years," says Mark Sprenger, a **Scappoose High** math teacher who gets misty-eyed talking about students who failed math in the past but now are eager to relearn concepts, re-take quizzes and earn A's.

But the idea is generating pushback from teachers, students and parents -- particularly in Beaverton, where it's being used in various degrees at middle and high schools.

Some teachers resent the extra work required to re-teach and re-test outside class. Many students prefer the traditional paths to good grades and balk at having to retake tests until they demonstrate knowledge of every skill.

Critics say that switching to the proficiency method means throwing out established ways of teaching and grading for an approach that's gotten lots of hype but has little hard evidence that it works better.

This month, Beaverton officials agreed to return to using traditional letter grades on middle school progress reports instead of marking "proficient," "highly proficient" and "not yet proficient."

Two Beaverton middle-schoolers started a Facebook page called "**I Hate The Proficiency Scale**" that has drawn more than 850 fans and allowed students, parents and teachers to post their frustrations about grading inconsistencies and fears of falling grade-point averages.

Advocates of the proficiency method include the Oregon Department of Education and the Business Education Compact, a Beaverton nonprofit started by high-tech employers.

Before, "students were accumulating points instead of accumulating knowledge," says Tamra Busch-Johnsen, head of the business compact. "They'd go off to college and wonder why they need to (take remedial courses). ... When students earn their credits this way, we'll know that our high school diploma stands for something."

Oregon's application for \$200 million of federal education money says that proficiency-based teaching will be a centerpiece of the state's school reform push in the next few years.

Hal Plotkin, senior education adviser in President Barack Obama's administration, says proficiency-based education is "an antidote to boredom in the classroom and a way to make sure that students are being exposed to the most relevant education possible."

Already the approach is used in places as diverse as Redmond, Hermiston, Falls City, Albany, Gresham, Roseburg and Lincoln City.

Scappoose High was an early architect of the idea. Teachers don't have to use it, but everyone who does, including the entire math department, is enthusiastic.

Some students still balk, but many are fans.

"I like that I can move at my own pace," says freshman Julia Grabhorn, who charged through two terms of algebra in a single term and advanced into geometry mid-year by demonstrating mastery of key skills.

When she got ahead of her class, she had to teach herself some skills and learn others from older schoolmates, but she says that worked fine.

"In a traditional class, we have students who are bored," says teacher David Richardson. "If they know it, why should we slow them down?"

Mixed results

Step into a class using the proficiency approach and it can feel much the same as a class using traditional methods, only with new lingo.

Forest Grove High mandated that every teacher use proficiency this fall.

"It used to be in the first six weeks, if a student got an F, they gave up," says Principal John O'Neill. "Now, they have all year to bring up the grade by retaking until they 'get' that skill."

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Amanda Nichols is among the students who have blossomed, moving from Ds and Cs to As and Bs.

Typically, Nichols does homework only until she understands the concept. Under the old system, she received incompletes, which pulled down her grades.

Now, homework, work ethic, and other skills account for only 10 percent of her grade. The rest is her ability to demonstrate knowledge.

Proficiency has had the opposite effect on her freshman brother, who used to get straight As.

"It's working well for one but not the other," says Trista Nichols, their mother. "He's not as willing to go in after school to retake" tests.

Despite that, she says, her kids seem to be grasping more in their classes. "It's not just doing the homework and turning it in; they do seem to be getting it."

More work for teachers

In Beaverton, **Westview High** parent Glenda Ah Nee says her daughter is concerned that the grading system might affect scholarships or college admission.

"I told my daughter 'You're a guinea pig basically, so you're just going to have to deal,'" Ah Nee says.

For teachers, proficiency classes can require significantly more work.

Allison Marks, a Forest Grove English teacher, says the extra time is worth it.

She hands out a scoring guide for every lesson, spelling out exactly what students must do to be graded proficient. On this day, she's assessing classroom discussions about "The Great Gatsby." She tells her class of juniors to make connections to the text, compare it to another novel and avoid repeating ideas.

Marks is a high-energy teacher who advises three after-school clubs. Still, the workload required for proficiency nearly pushed her out of teaching when she piloted it last year.

"I was exhausted," she says.

Proficiency requires more feedback so students understand how they failed to meet a standard. Marks also had to fit in time after school for students to retake tests.

This year, she's more efficient, having learned to squeeze in retakes during the day. But she says she still works at least 50 hours a week.

As a result, some teacher unions have taken notice, including Forest Grove's and Beaverton's.

Beaverton Education Association President David Wilkinson says some teachers are supportive, while others see a lack of time and training. "It's such a major cultural shift," he says.

Some Beaverton teachers who dislike the system say they are afraid to speak up because of possible repercussions. They have more papers to grade but aren't given more time. They also question whether proficiency has proven effective.

Evidence is slight because it's new and began primarily among high school freshmen, who do not take state tests.

"We know we need better data about how kids from these classes are doing," says David Wood, Portland's director of high school curriculum.

About 100 Portland high school teachers use the proficiency method, primarily in algebra and geometry. Fewer students now fail those courses, but the district wants to see whether their performance on the state math test also improves, Wood says.

The longest track record of proficiency teaching is in the Westview High math department. The rate of Westview students who meet state math benchmarks has risen -- but so have scores in reading and writing, which were taught

using traditional methods.

At Scappoose High, math achievement had long been mediocre. The share of students passing the state math test shot up last spring, to 62 percent from 47 percent in 2008.

Oregon education leaders predict proficiency will spread to more schools.

"Teachers are engaging each other, saying 'How are you making it work in this subject?'" says Colleen Mileham, assistant state superintendent for improvement and innovation.

-- **Betsy Hammond, Wendy Owen** and **Melissa Navas**

Traditional high school class	Proficiency-based class
Covers a wide array of skills and topics.	Covers select skills and content, based on state standards.
Lessons are determined by teacher judgment. Some adhere to textbooks; some use other resources.	Each lesson is explicitly tied to a core skill; the teacher stays on each topic until most students demonstrate proficiency. Use of textbooks may be selective.
Homework, class participation, assignments count heavily toward grade.	Grade is based almost entirely on tests, essays and assignments that measure understanding of skills; homework and participation typically count 10 percent or less.
High scores on some tests or assignments can offset weak scores on others; extra credit can boost a low grade.	Failing to pass a single standard can mean failing the course; students must relearn and retake tests or rewrite papers until each standard is met.
No do-overs if you fail a test.	Students can retake tests or redo papers.

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Posted by **caveman1313**
February 24, 2010, 8:04PM

Known as "proficiency-based education," the approach is generating controversy because students receive little to no credit for homework, attendance, classwork or extra credit -- only for demonstrating knowledge of key material.

what is education coming to? i am glad I can afford to send my kids to a private school if necessary.

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
February 25, 2010, 6:26AM

It also narrows the entire horizon to nothing but 'key knowledge', which shows a profound lack of understanding of how knowledge works. 'Key Knowledge' means knowledge stripped of context. It means tricks and procedures stripped of meaning. If it is done properly, it means nothing that can't be done on a computer.

By the bye, Big O, this exercise in reductionism is neither new nor is it a teaching method. Maybe some research would be helpful?

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Posted by **Gonzo**
February 24, 2010, 8:31PM

Holy c*ap, the kids will actually have to know something before they leave school, and not just skate by based on meaningless (mostly) measuring elements. And that they'll actually have to be proficient before moving on? Amazing! And why is everyone fighting this? Obviously it's a big transition, but as long as the school district gives enough support to the teachers, than there should not be any problems. This is basically a college-based model, which appears to be ions better then what is in place now.

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Posted by **oregon_fan**
February 24, 2010, 9:14PM

Without getting into the problems that arise when dealing with students who are ELL or Special Ed, colleges are not going to like this. They like the traditional A, B, C, D, and F. This, like many of it's forefathers, will be an educational fad that will fall by the wayside. One other thing. Proficiency is EXTREMELY expensive to do correctly. Is this something that should be happening during a time of huge budget concerns??? If this is something that will be done, it should be done the right way, not half-assed.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **user42**
February 24, 2010, 10:15PM

oregon_fan -
"...colleges are not going to like this. They like the traditional A, B, C, D, and F."
Colleges want students who can do things. Proficiency-based education shows clearly what a student can do. If colleges like letters, why do they seek out homeschoolers? Because homeschoolers have learned how to think and solve problems. They haven't been collecting points for just sitting in class and turning in reams of homework.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **oregon_fan**
February 24, 2010, 11:24PM

No. They take home schoolers because they believe they add to the 'diversity' of their student body. A huge problem with proficiency is that it doesn't teach kids some very essential skills that are missing in the younger generations. Things like meeting deadlines, diligence, organization/preparation, persistence to task, and plain old hard work. You may not believe this, but not all kids are 'college material'. There are thousands of kids that graduate every year in Oregon that will not go to college. These kids are not being taught how to work. Proficiency teaches kids that if you 'get it' you don't have to work. This is a very dangerous and potential disastrous road to walk down. The younger generations are already 'lazy' in comparison to those older than them. This will only exacerbate that problem. There is something to be said about hard work and diligence.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **lyn01**
February 25, 2010, 2:47AM

I would like to respond to the comment about teaching students responsibility, there are several Oregon Career Related Learning Standards and Essential Skills that can hold students accountable for turning their assignments in on time and being ready to take tests and completing the necessary steps in order to remediate--however the behavior of the student needs to be separated from the academic potential of the student. A well organized and responsible student--who has isn't the most academic student is just as likely to struggle in college as a smart--disorganized one.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **uglyone**
February 25, 2010, 9:19AM

user42:

If what you say about colleges why didn't they acknowledge the CAM/CIM? programs? My grand daughter did both at considerable effort and the colleges weren't interested.

I think this is just another fad that will affect the students studying under this program.

In the real world, you don't get many chances to get it right or "do overs" I don't think you will be teaching real world skills.

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Posted by **sandye**
February 24, 2010, 8:47PM

Thanks for this article. I have kids in Hillsboro where this method is under consideration. I am just starting to gather info and learn about it so I appreciate the different viewpoints laid out here.

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Posted by **blaze_n_good**
February 24, 2010, 9:18PM

My daughter is in a Beaverton school, and this method of grading is absurd. The teachers can't even explain to me what exactly "not yet proficient" means. If a kid doesn't get 100%, is that "not yet proficient?" It is just silly to give kids 15 chances to get an "A" on a test. Do bosses give employees 15 tries to get their work right? Kids need to be judged on their performances, not getting pats on the back because they have become "proficient" after 15 tries. This is why we are starting to fall behind other countries in Math, Science, and Reading.

This is also just another idea from idiot psychologist that making kids feel good about themselves is most important. This form of grading is along the lines of no longer keeping score during athletic competition so the losing teams don't feel bad.

We are not doing these kids any favors by babying them. They will not succeed in the real world.

I want my child judged on her performance.

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Posted by **oregonian555**
February 24, 2010, 9:55PM

blaze_n_good:
I agree with you that not every student will become proficient. Just like in sports, kids are different, and some are just better and smarter than others (not considering inequities in social economic status/etc...) but I think you are overreacting.

It's just silly for you to think that kids get 15 chances at getting and "A" on a test. I don't know one instance where a student would have to retake a test 15 times before they get it right. Proficiency is a way to assess whether students can accomplish certain skills. School is a place to learn those skills.

As you probably well know, learning comes best when correcting mistakes. If a student is not given the chance to understand what they did wrong and then fix it, not much learning will take place. (It shouldn't take a teacher or a student 15 times to learn something. If so, there are other issues at play.)

For you to claim that proficiency teaching is why our scores are behind other countries in math, science, and reading is a big stretch. Especially since proficiency teaching has just begun while the scores have been low for quite some time.

Proficiency judges students on their performanceS. (heavy emphasis on the plural there)

I challenge you to think about what it really took for your daughter to get an "A" in a class. Each teacher has a different way of weighting their grades. It seems the teachers you talk about need more help shifting their thinking to what proficiency means. It's based on learning targets and how the student performs and shows their knowledge towards the targets. It will take time, training, and patience for the old way of thinking to shift.

signed,
Beaverton School District Stakeholder

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Posted by **Oamp2ax3rnX8**
February 25, 2010, 2:26AM

I don't mean to attack you personally, but there isn't a single sentence in your rant that doesn't have a grammatical, spelling or sentence structure error. Don't you think you should set an example for your daughter, first?

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Posted by **mammakatt**
February 24, 2010, 9:43PM

Excuse me but if kids need to retake a test they should be doing it in class and not after school.

I agree with the idea that kids need to demonstrate that they know all concepts but they can be graded for demonstrating what concepts they know. Determine what concepts must be learned to move to the next grade and then the kids know what they need to do to move to the next grade. For those kids that like learning, provide additional opportunities to learn in the class room.

Proficiency needs to be spelled out for each concept that must be learned before moving to the next grade. What is so hard about defining concepts that a kid needs to be able to graduate - things like add fractions or do long division or explain science concepts like photosynthesis are examples of concepts that should be demonstrated for various classes.

Teachers should already be familiar with what concepts students in their class are supposed to learn for that grade level. Otherwise, how can they hope to teach the class????

Of course, from what I have seen of Oregon schools, the problems starts with the teachers not understanding what concepts the students are supposed to learn in their classes or else they do not care.

There are a few exceptions but for the most part this has been my experience

with Oregon teachers. All the more reason to move to a merit system of follow the example of that one school district back east where the students were doing so poorly - fire all of the teachers and start over.

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Posted by **frizbaloid**
February 25, 2010, 12:25AM

Taking up class time to re-teach a few students is going to bog down the overall class and result in everyone not learning as much as they need to. Teachers cannot teach concepts to students at an individualized pace, there are too many students, it can't be done.

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Posted by **dangerdave**
February 24, 2010, 10:09PM

You're right, mammakatt, that the test retakes should be during class, but how does a teacher in a classroom retest several kids, on different levels (because they're all at different levels) while still teaching the other kids?

It sounds like you feel like you're pretty confident about your knowledge of what happens in schools--lazy, apathetic, incompetent teachers, who don't "provide additional opportunities" while retesting and retesting all at the same time.

Try managing 25 seven-year-olds, while retesting some, pushing others, and keeping the scissors away from all of them.

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Posted by **ingersoll**
February 24, 2010, 10:21PM

I love the irony that blaze_n_good opposes proficiency and yet "wants her child to be judged on her performance". Did you read the article? That's the point! High school grades (and classes) have long been based on showing up, filling out worksheets, and doing what you're told. Whether you learned anything was incidental. You could really understand the material and fail, or barely get it and get a b, as long as the teacher liked you and you did your busywork.

The system may be young and rough, but how can anyone oppose the idea that education should be based on results (i.e. performance) rather than jumping through hoops.

And the nonsense about self-esteem demonstrates how little this issues is understood. The point is this: even if you're a nice kid, and you have good handwriting, and you smile and nod, you're not going to pass unless you understand the material. And even if you're a punk, and you don't do as you're told, but you understand the material, then you will pass the class. Performance. Not self-esteem.

If "Blaze" had a proficiency approach in a logic class this may never have happened...

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Posted by **rb5967**
February 24, 2010, 10:30PM

There is nothing bad about asking students to be proficient with skills. Lots of things in the real world ask you to demonstrate proficiency. Your drivers test for example. You have to show that you can operate the car skillfully and safely before you are awarded your license and you keep taking the drivers test until you can demonstrate this. Why should it be different with math skills or writing skills. The way things are in school traditionally is that if I fail my test in math...the class simply moves on..whether I "get it" or not. I would like the teacher to require me to keep trying to master the skill and show that I can be proficient with it. All kids don't learn at the same speed and simply moving on, whether or not I understand, is what is wrong with the way we teach now. It simply doesn't help many kids to learn skills. Parents and students should support a method that requires and gives kids opportunities to show that they "can do" something proficiently. Many of the comments here are about peoples' fears about proficiency based learning that are unfounded. No college that I have heard of is planning to penalize any student for being asked to demonstrate proficiency with learning standards and skills. Colleges would like students to arrive at college with "proficiency" in skills. I want my taxi driver to be proficient in driving, the chef at the restaurant to be proficient in cooking and I for sure want the pilot I'm flying with to be proficient in flying AND to be able to demonstrate his proficiency. Great idea asking students to demonstrate proficiency with learning what they study in school and thinking of creative ways to encourage this and give them opportunities to get it right!

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Posted by **amf123**
February 24, 2010, 10:54PM

I am cautiously optimistic with proficiency based learning. Being the parent of two kids, one that struggles and one that excels, is a learning curve in itself. Showing proficiency will mean that if you struggle, maybe someone will take notice instead of moving you along. If you excel then you show proficiency and get to move on...it's a win-win situation for all. Of course, it's all how you present it to teachers and parents. Make it clear, provide the training, and communicate. Will this stick around? Trends in education are cyclical and in five years there will be another new batch of research that says something else is the next best thing. We'll see how the districts roll out proficiency based learning and whether teachers and parents buy into it.

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Posted by **mb425**
February 24, 2010, 11:16PM

"demonstrating skills over homework and class participation"

How about doing all three? I guess this system kind of does but 10% for homework and participation is not enough. Maybe 30% would be better. That way it counts enough to not be ignored but demonstrating skills is still a primary goal at 70%.

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Posted by **pounder**
February 24, 2010, 11:23PM

I can't help but add a bit of snark... the people most opposed to this method could easily be the ones doing their kid's homework in order that they might make an Ivy school down the line.

I'm curious about the specific targeting of certain skills over a broader education. Does this narrow the focus of the education too much? I wonder what lessons are being traded off here.

The concept is a great idea... the execution concerns me, and I hope for checked egos refining this process over time.

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