PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING

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The term proficiency-based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education. In most cases, proficiency-based systems use state learning standards to determine academic expectations and define “proficiency” in a given course, subject area, or grade level.

Defining proficiency-based learning is complicated by the fact that educators may use a wide variety of terms to refer to the general approach, and the terms may or may not be used synonymously from place to place. A few of the more common terms include competency-based, mastery-based, outcome-based, performance-based, and standards-based education, instruction, and learning, among others. In addition, proficiency-based learning models and strategies may differ significantly from state to state or school to school.

The general goal of proficiency-based learning is to ensure that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are deemed to be essential to success in school, higher education, careers, and adult life. If students fail to meet minimum expected standards, they typically receive additional instruction, practice time, and academic support to help them achieve proficiency or meet expected standards.

In practice, proficiency-based learning can take a wide variety of forms from state to state or school to school—there is no single model or universally used approach. While schools often create their own proficiency-based systems, they may also use systems created by state education agencies or outside educational organizations. Proficiency-based systems are more widely used at the elementary level, although more middle schools and high schools are adopting the approach. As with any educational strategy, some proficiency-based systems may be better designed or more effective than others.

Reform

Proficiency-based learning is generally seen as an alternative to more traditional educational approaches in which students may or may not acquire proficiency in a given course or academic subject before they earn course credit, get promoted to the next grade level, or graduate. For example, high school students typically earn credit by passing a course, but a passing grade may be an A or it may be a D, suggesting that the awarded credit is based on a spectrum of learning expectations—with some students learning more and others learning less—rather than on the same consistent standards being applied to all students equally. And since grades may be calculated differently from school to school or teacher to teacher, and they may be based on divergent learning expectations (i.e., some courses may be “harder” and others “easier”), it may be possible for students to pass their courses, earn the required number of credits, and receive a diploma without acquiring important knowledge and skills. In extreme cases, for example, students may be awarded a high school diploma but still be unable to read, write, or do math at a basic level. A “proficiency-based diploma” would be a diploma awarded to students only after they have met expected learning standards.
While the goal of proficiency-based learning is to ensure that all students learn what they are expected to learn, the practice can also provide educators with more detailed or fine-grained information about student learning progress, which can help them more precisely identify academic strengths and weakness, as well as the specific concepts and skills students have not yet mastered. Since academic progress is often tracked and reported by learning standard in proficiency-based systems, educators and parents often know more precisely what specific knowledge and skills students have acquired or may be struggling with. For example, instead of receiving a letter grade on an assignment or test, which may address a variety of standards, students may be graded on specific learning standards, each of which describes the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire.

When schools transition to a proficiency-based system, it can entail significant changes in how a school operates and how it teaches students, affecting everything from the school’s educational philosophy and culture to its methods of instruction, testing, grading, reporting, promotion, and graduation. For example, report cards may be entirely redesigned, and schools may use different grading scales and systems, such as replacing letter grades with brief descriptive statements—e.g., phrases such as does not meet, partially meets, meets the standard, and exceeds the standard are commonly used in proficiency-based schools (although systems vary widely in design, purpose, and terminology). Schools may also use different methods of instruction and assessment to determine whether students have achieved proficiency, including strategies such as demonstrations of learning, learning pathways, personal learning plans, portfolios, rubrics, and capstone projects, to name just a few.

**Debate**

While there is a widespread agreement that students should be held to high academic expectations, and that public schools and teachers should make sure that students acquire the most important knowledge and skills, there is often disagreement and debate about the best way to achieve these goals. For this reason, debates about proficiency-based learning tend to be focused on the methods used by schools, rather than the overall objective of the strategy (i.e., all students meeting high standards and achieving proficiency—a goal that few dispute).

Proponents of proficiency-based learning may argue that the approach greatly improves the chances that students will learn the most critically important knowledge, concepts, and skills they will need throughout their lives, and that proficiency-based learning can help to eliminate persistent learning gaps, achievement gaps, and opportunity gaps. For these reasons, advocates of proficiency-based learning argue that the practice is a more equitable approach to public education, since it holds all students to the same high standards regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, or whether they attended schools in poor or affluent communities (uneven standards being applied to minority and non-minority students, or the uneven quality of teaching and facilities from school to school, are often seen as major contributing causes of issues such as achievement gaps). Proponents may also point to the weaknesses or failures of existing systems—which allow students to get promoted from one grade to the next and earn a diploma without acquiring important knowledge and skills—as evidence that proficiency-based approaches, of whatever sort, are needed.
Critics of proficiency-based learning may argue that the transition will require already overburdened teachers to spend large amounts of time—and possibly uncompensated time—on extra planning, preparation, and training, and that proficiency-based learning can be prohibitively difficult to implement, particularly at a statewide level. Critics may also take issue with the learning standards that proficiency-based systems utilize, or with the specific features of a system used in a particular school. For example, parents often express concern that the abandonment of traditional letter grades, report cards, transcripts, and other familiar academic-reporting strategies will disadvantage students who are applying to colleges and universities (because the reporting strategies will be unfamiliar or incomprehensible to college-admissions professionals, or because proficiency-based systems may eliminate many of the competitive dimensions of academic achievement, such as GPAs or class rank, that tend to favor high-achieving students). Others may question whether there is sufficient evidence that proficiency-based learning will actually work as intended.