

# **Defining Practice, Informing Policy**

*Practitioner Networks Voice a Call to Action*

**Oregon Proficiency Project Report**

**Phase 2**

**August – December 2010**

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# **Defining Practice, Informing Policy: *Practitioner Networks Voice a Call to Action***

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***Executive Summary of Phase 2 Report:***  
**Defining Practice, Informing Policy**  
***Practitioner Networks Voice a Call to Action***  
**Oregon Proficiency Project Report**

Networks of school/district administrators and teacher leaders worked with highly skilled coaches on real-time problems of practice as they pursued their implementation of Proficiency-Based Education (PBE), which is guided by principles of student-centered teaching, standards-based achievement, ongoing assessment, engaging students' initiative, and collaborative professional learning for instructors. A policy panel of education leaders and practitioners used the activities, reflections, and results of those networks to develop a definition and description of PBE and conclusions, recommendations, and communications strategies for building capacity and taking the practices to scale in Oregon.

There is an accumulated sense of urgency to redesign and transform Oregon's K-12 and postsecondary systems which began at least three decades ago. In spite of intense efforts, previous reforms did not result in the high and equitable levels of student performance and educational attainment that Oregon needs for economic health and that students need and deserve for their lives. Given economic realities, it is unlikely that the current systems are fiscally sustainable, which puts additional pressure on effective, efficient system transformation. However, Oregon has a policy environment that supports system transformation and an incoming administration committed and eager to make powerful positive changes to the state's education systems. PBE has the potential to drive system redesign and student educational achievement to produce a greatly improved return on the public's investment.

The leverage point for the transformation of public education in Oregon is acquiring greatly deepened and focused expertise among the state's teaching corps and equally intensified instructional leadership on the part of school and district administrators, supported by systemic infrastructure redesigns affecting the use of resources and measures of progress of critical systems: time, people, budget, data, standards and curricula.

Recommendations for action are grouped into two categories: those that support the development of capacity among practitioners and those that will build a sustainable redesigned education system to support the tenets and outcomes of PBE. Both categories of recommendations are based on the proposition that higher-level expertise in teaching and instructional leadership is the lever for student achievement of high and equitable outcomes and thereby the attainment of Oregon's economic and social goals. Both categories of recommendations will best be supported by sufficient economic and political resources to provide expansion of the work begun by the Oregon Proficiency Project. Oregon has everything it requires to effect tremendous performance gains and in so doing will model for the rest of the nation a true student-centered education system that delivers on its promises.

## **I. What was the second phase of the Oregon Proficiency Project and how did it build on the initial phase?**

### **Phase I Background**

Within the permissive environment of Oregon's education policy, proficiency-based work is gaining ground rapidly. A number of schools are offering proficiency-based core classes; several districts have committed to move to a fully proficiency-based model. We believe this is a very high-leverage practice that will compel dramatic changes to teaching and learning that greatly increase student engagement and achievement.

There is increasing evidence that we are not gaining much toward student achievement of standards and that Oregon is losing ground to other states and nations. In the three decades since *A Nation at Risk* was published, any number of single focus or incremental reforms have been attempted and discarded. It's becoming apparent that what is required is a fundamental system change. We think proficiency-based teaching and learning is the vehicle to make that large scale sustainable change.

Oregon Business Council/Employers for Education Excellence, with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched the Oregon Proficiency Project in May 2009 with the goals of: 1) advancing the instructional capacities of two schools [Academy of International Studies at Woodburn (AIS) and Health and Science School in Beaverton, (HS2) from the original Oregon Small Schools Initiative (OSSI) project] as far as possible in an academic year through expert coaching in instructional leadership with the principals and in teaching and learning practices with classroom teachers (at AIS); 2) developing useful open-source tools for any school to use in its efforts to transform its instructional effectiveness; and 3) convening a policy panel of practitioners and education thought leaders to study proficiency-based education and determine implications for the policy and practice elements necessary to bring the implementation of proficiency-based education to scale in Oregon. For a full description of the activities and conclusions of Phase 1, see *Defining Practice, Informing Policy, Oregon Proficiency Project Report for 2009-10*.

From the beginning of the project, we understood our key challenges were to define proficiency-based education in a broadly understandable way and to determine if sufficient capacity could be developed to implement it in the state to scale. We quickly realized we needed to expand the scope of the project and the range of participants involved. Early in the project we incorporated a number of schools and districts that became the genesis of the networks in Phase 2.

The theory of action we developed during Phase I of the project remained the guide during Phase 2. It can be stated in four parts. 1) Too many students are not graduating from high school, and among those who do graduate from high school too many are not ready to succeed in postsecondary studies, work, and life. 2) Effective teaching is key to helping more students to succeed, but such teaching is not a capability that people either have or don't have. It consists of expertise, skills, and discrete techniques that can be defined, taught, and improved through proficiency-based practices explored by this project. 3) This effectiveness can be implemented and scaled in schools of all sizes, locations, and demographics with targeted investment to help

early adopters of proficiency-based education to better structure, support, and sustain proficiency-based practices, and to share the techniques and outcomes of that effort with other practitioners in overlapping networks of teachers, principals, superintendents and other school district leaders. 4) These lessons of practice need to inform, revise and create policy to support large scale implementation of proficiency-based education.

## **Phase 2 – July through December 2010**

We had not exhausted the project funds at the conclusion of Phase 1 in June of 2010, so we sought and were granted from the Gates Foundation the ability to develop a second project phase that would extend from July through December 2010.

OBC/E3 planned three primary activities in order to capitalize on Oregon’s policy environment, continue the networks and tools built during Phase I, and be a bridge to larger scale implementation beyond 2010.

The activities included:

- 1) Continue to develop the model of applying expertise in an embedded coaching approach. Three proficiency-based education sites, the Academy for International Studies (AIS) at Woodburn, Hillsboro High School (Hillsboro School District), and Sunset High School in Beaverton District would receive intensive support in teaching and instructional leadership. All three schools would participate, additionally, in the instructional leadership network and the teacher leader network, as described next. Schools would begin to develop such products as standards based assessment tools, rubrics, learning targets, lesson plans and grading systems to be shared across a network of schools.
- 2) Form and convene networks to make and assess progress toward the development and improvement of proficiency practices and support elements. Principals from 10 selected schools, including large, comprehensive high schools, would form a network to develop skills to lead and manage the building of capacity in proficiency-based teaching and learning. In addition, teacher leaders from some of the schools in the affiliates’ network would receive support to develop content, methods, tools and processes to implement proficiency-based teaching and learning and improve effectiveness of teachers in their schools, focusing on math and language arts.

- 3) The Practice and Policy Panel would continue to expand the role of the Phase I Policy Panel. The Panel would follow the progression of strategies and tactics pursued during Phase I:

Problem   →  Theory   →  Practice   →  Policies   →  Scale Implementation  
Statement   of Action   & Tools   & Systems

## **II: What progress did we make in Phase 2 on the two key challenges: defining proficiency-based education and exploring ways to build capacity?**

### **Defining Proficiency-Based Education**

Our most obvious challenge in Phase 1 was to find a common definition for proficiency-based education. As we engaged in collaborative deliberations with the policy panel, which now included a number of practitioners, we began to develop and refine a collection of attributes. Building on this work, the policy panel provided a venue for vigorous discussion and development of a shared understanding of proficiency-based practices. That broad definition

and grouping of attributes has evolved into a robust articulation. *In brief, proficiency-based education is guided by principles of student-centered teaching, standards-based achievement, ongoing assessment, engaging students' initiative, and collaborative professional learning for instructors.* It links curriculum, learning targets, and lesson plans to high postsecondary standards. Skilled teachers transform their work so that students become active, intentional partners in the learning process, developing strong intellectual habits, academic knowledge and content knowledge. Consequently, proficiency-based education involves students in understanding learning targets, rubrics, and the assessment process. It gauges student progress on an ongoing basis through formative assessment. It allows students to learn at their own pace – time becomes a variable. Achievement of standards becomes the new constant. In a proficiency-based system, student grades and transcript credits are based on demonstrated proficiency. Offering this kind of learning experience requires developing significantly greater expertise in teaching and instructional leadership.

In Phase 2, the network and panel participants further refined the work and we have agreed upon the following document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning*, that defines and describes the elements of proficiency-based education, employing both a set of attributes and a matrix of principles and practices.

## **Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems**

### **Defining Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning** ***From Practice to Policy***

Proficiency-based teaching and learning practices are based on principles of standards-based achievement, student-centered instruction and assessment techniques, and collaborative professional learning for teachers. Proficiency-based practices hold great promise for ensuring high and equitable educational outcomes for all Oregon students K-12. The distinct process attributes of proficiency-based practices described below were developed from the practices of early adopters in Oregon and elsewhere.

#### **Key Attributes of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems**

1. A shared vision for student learning expresses the mission of preparing all students for success in postsecondary education and careers.
2. Curriculum and instruction are aligned to rigorous, well-defined standards for success in postsecondary education and careers.
3. Proficiency-based practices are grounded in evidence-based research on effective instructional and assessment techniques
4. Professional development – both pre-service and in-service – is focused on student-learning, is classroom-centered, and is supported with individualized instructional coaching
5. The school schedule is designed to support teacher collaboration and the development of expertise throughout the instructional cycle.
6. Learning outcomes are expressed in explicit learning targets that give students a clear understanding of the content standards and essential skills they must meet in each course.
7. Instructional techniques, including assessment, expand the role and responsibilities of students as learners, ensuring that students are active, intentional partners in the learning process.
8. Assessment practices drive the instructional cycle from beginning to end.
9. Formative assessments are used to develop explicit student learning goals based on what students already know and focus instruction on what students still need to learn.
10. Teachers use on-going assessment to monitor students' learning progress and adjust instruction. Teachers use moderated summative, end-of-unit assessments to provide information on student mastery of key learning targets. These assessment practices help teachers plan individualized learning activities for students.
11. The school schedule is flexible and provides time for individualized student learning support.
12. Grading and awarding credit on the basis of proficiency makes student learning straightforward and transparent.

## Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems

Proficiency Entry Points	Defining Practices
<b>Standards &amp; Curriculum Alignment</b>	<b>Standards-Based Achievement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Districts and schools develop a clear academic vision that expresses the mission of preparing all students for success in postsecondary education and careers without need for remediation.</li> <li>Teachers and principals promote instructional coherence and rigor by collaborating to ensure curriculum is appropriately aligned to postsecondary and career readiness standards and is articulated between grades and among courses within grade levels.</li> <li>Teachers and principals share a common understanding of how standards are used to develop explicit student learning objectives/targets for both academic content and essential skills in every course.</li> </ul>
<b>Instructional Practices</b>	<b>Student-Centered Teaching Practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching practice is collaborative as teachers work together to plan curriculum, develop lessons, assess and score student work, and provide observational feedback regarding instructional practice.</li> <li>Teachers utilize instructional strategies that engage students in becoming active, intentional partners in the learning process.</li> <li>Teachers adjust instruction to allow students to learn at individualized rates and provide individualized supports to all students, drawing from a full portfolio of tools, rubrics, and technology aimed at including those not yet meeting standards as well as those exceeding standards.</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Assessment Practices Inform Instruction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment practices drive the instructional cycle from beginning to end.</li> <li>Formative assessments are used to develop explicit student learning goals based on what students already know and focus instruction on what students still need to learn.</li> <li>On-going assessment is used to systematically monitor students' learning progress, adjust instruction, and give students prescriptive feedback on learning goals.</li> <li>Teachers use moderated assessment practices to provide summative, end-of-unit information on student mastery of key learning targets and to plan individualized remediation and extension activities for students based on their rate of proficiency development.</li> <li>The awarding of credit is addressed below in Systems Requirements.</li> </ul>
<b>Student Learning</b>	<b>Outcomes/Results</b>
<b>Student Engagement/Ownership</b>	<b>Student Engagement Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students understand the explicit learning objectives/targets in each lesson, unit, course, and school year.</li> <li>Students can discuss their own learning outcome data as well as next steps toward their learning goals.</li> <li>Student understanding of their responsibilities as learners fosters a self-directed approach to their learning.</li> <li>Student engagement is evidenced by a high degree of student discourse in the classroom (e.g., student discussions are directed student-to-student as much as student-to-teacher).</li> </ul>
<b>System Requirements</b>	<b>Necessary Conditions &amp; Supports</b>
<b>Policies and Conditions</b>	<b>Professional Development Supports</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and principals support one another to continuously develop expertise in teaching and learning.</li> <li>Teachers have regular collaboration time to study student work together, design interventions for students, discuss adjustments to instructional strategies, etc.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers carry out peer observation in one another's classrooms to provide objective, non-evaluative feedback.</li> <li>• Teacher development can be accomplished through instructional leadership from principals and/or highly skilled instructional coaching.</li> <li>• Principals develop expertise as instructional leaders through coaching, peer networks, etc. in order to lead the development of a proficiency-based teaching and learning system.</li> </ul> <p><b>Structural Supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible school schedules allow teachers time to collaborate on common curriculum development, review student assessment results, and design instructional interventions.</li> <li>• Flexible school schedules allow time for teachers to work with students requiring additional instruction to meet proficiency standards.</li> <li>• Robust data systems allow access to multi-dimensional student information.</li> <li>• Student-centered, performance based, transparent budget system design distributes resources to best support student learning.</li> <li>• Grading is based on mastery of learning targets, which make learning expectations straightforward and transparent to students.</li> <li>• Credit is awarded when students meet proficiency standards rather than accumulated seat time.</li> </ul> <p><b>Policy Supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District and state policies are informed by practice.</li> <li>• Districts evaluate policies, practices, and structures to ensure the necessary conditions exist to support the implementation of proficiency-based learning systems.</li> <li>• Schools/Districts engage the community in the implementation of proficiency-based teaching and learning systems through intentional communication with stakeholders.</li> <li>• Communication of the vision and value of proficiency-based educational practices will use research and field evidence where appropriate.</li> </ul>
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## **The Capacity Issue as defined in Phase 1**

Work with the practitioner networks in Phase 2 confirmed for us that there is not a short cut to a better education system. In order to become more effective, teachers and administrators need to spend time reflecting on their practices and building skills, individually and with colleagues. We will pursue this in depth in Section III.

In every state, including Oregon, there are new expectations for public schools. We want all students to reach high academic standards which graduate them ready for career and college. This means much higher academic standards will be in place and there will be expectations for much higher high school graduation rates. The best current education thinking appears to be strongly in agreement that effective teaching is at the heart of meeting these goals. It is what happens in the classroom with teachers and students that determines how well prepared students will be. This underscores the need to increase the level of expertise of teachers. Just as we believe that all students can rise to very high levels of achievement, we believe that teachers can greatly increase their effectiveness.

Current approaches for improving teacher effectiveness are often focused on evaluation, compensation incentives and teacher tenure as the primary levers for education reform. The emphasis among many reformers is on refining the hiring process, deselecting those who are judged not to be a good fit with the profession, and renegotiating long standing employment contracts.

We see it differently. Although the number of participants in our project is small, it appears that when teachers and principals who genuinely want to raise their levels of expertise are provided expert embedded coaching, there is significant and immediate gain in skill and confidence. This suggests that an effective strategy for building greater capacity is to provide focused resources to develop instructional leadership capacity in principals and teacher leaders who then have the skills to develop effective teaching expertise throughout the teaching ranks of the school. However, let us be clear. We are not suggesting that this is a silver bullet or that there is such a thing to transform education. This kind of transformation requires readiness to learn and access to expertise among the adults in the system.

We turned to the Center for Education Leadership (CEL), based at the University of Washington, to deliver expert coaching to our two schools. We had seen the impact of their work in the field, in addition to their well defined theory of action for teaching and learning, as consistent with proficiency-based education. This work is about adults attaining proficiency in content, in teaching that content, and teaching habits of mind that support post secondary and career success for every student.

The primary issues and implications for scaling proficiency-based education which have emerged from the work of the panel are about capacity building at all levels: 1) practice must inform policy; 2) the ranks of the majority of existing teachers can be developed into excellent and highly effective teachers by providing specific expertise in teaching and learning practices; 3) leadership of teaching and learning is a primary role which the principal of the school can learn; and 4) the classroom is the key base for accomplishing these three strategies.

An important pre-condition for the viability of scaling proficiency-based education is the readiness of the practitioners to develop new levels of expertise and to persevere in the hard daily work of changing practices. When conditions for readiness are present among all involved, remarkable progress can be made in a surprisingly short period of time.

### **III. Three Primary Phase 2 Activities**

#### **A. Teacher Leader Network**

##### **Framework**

In August 2010, we formed a teacher leader network whose purpose was: 1) to develop a professional learning community within which to examine, challenge, deepen and hone their individual practices in teaching and learning; 2) to collaborate in developing a shared understanding of proficiency-based education, with particular attention to how student engagement, student ownership and formative assessment are central to proficiency-based teaching and learning; and 3) to develop the capacity of the teacher leaders as instructional coaches in proficiency-based education working with their colleagues in their schools.

The network was comprised of 10 teachers from the Academy of International Studies and Wellness, Business and Sports School at Woodburn School District; Sunset High School and Westview High School at Beaverton School District; Hillsboro High School at Hillsboro District; and Redmond School District. The teachers selected were leaders in their Language Arts or Mathematics Departments – some had additional roles as instructional coaches.

The group initially convened with the administrator network in August, met four times as a teacher network, and participated in the two policy panel meetings. The teacher leaders joined the network as practitioners who had initiated some proficiency-based practices in their own classrooms at their respective schools. They entered their individual work from different entry points: standards and curriculum alignment, instructional practices or assessment (see *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8.)

The teaching experience in the group ranged from 2 years to 30 years, with most having between 8 and 10 years of experience. The teachers' interest in proficiency-based education and their motivation to change their teaching practices was generated by their dissatisfaction with their ability to meet the learning needs of their students, particularly those who were at each end of the spectrum: those not meeting standards/graduation requirements or those who were exceeding them and ready to accelerate. This factor was a common driver with all of the teachers experimenting with proficiency-based practices who were visited in the project.

##### **Process**

The group began by identifying problems of practice with their administrators. In subsequent sessions, the instructional coach from the Center for Educational Leadership, Jenn McDermott, continued the process by leading the group through an examination of their understanding of the relationships between student engagement, student ownership and formative assessment as key components of their proficiency-based work. Early in the process, the group began to

converge on a shared understanding of these elements of proficiency-based teaching and learning and began to elevate their understanding of the potential of the practices to reach all students. By the last network session, teachers were able to identify the greatest obstacles to changing teaching practices and to articulate the supports necessary to scale the work. (See *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8 and the OPP Teacher Leader Network Narrative, found on the website: [www.k-12leadership.org](http://www.k-12leadership.org).)

## **Reflections on Practices**

The teachers in the network are the proficiency-based education innovators in their schools. They brought their wisdom, experience and learning stance from their classrooms. They examined their practices and what they knew, moving to deliberations about what they didn't know, culminating in articulations of what they wanted to learn to further their teaching and learning.

The network yielded significant movement forward in the shared understanding of what proficiency-based education is, how powerful its promise is and how to develop enough capacity to authentically move to scale and realize the promise. An early and consistent tenet of the project was to carefully listen and study practice in order to inform policy.

The teachers examined together the practices involved in proficiency-based education and articulated what they are still doing, what they are no longer doing, and what they are learning to do instead. Ground zero for effective instruction is the classroom – the instructional core. As a consequence of these practices, students become much more self sufficient, with a greater sense of agency and ownership. That leads to the return on investment argument: effective teaching and learning reduces the need to remediate in both secondary and postsecondary levels.

In the following section, teachers' voices tell the story, as heard in network and policy panel meetings. We include a summary paragraph at the end of each segment.

### ***The Case for Change***

*[In the current system] you're teaching all students, but, if you're lucky, 60% get it.*

*Instruction has to change...it's about their learning, not about my content.*

*Teachers need to change our skills; I need to erase 10 years of work that wasn't efficient, not what I should have been doing. Is what I'm teaching today related to the target?*

*Formative assessment is the key. Getting students to engage requires teachers to change.*

*When you get feedback, you can't ignore it; you will have to change what you're doing, if you're listening to the students. Some teachers may want to stick to behavior management and not change their practices, so they don't seek the feedback.*

*We started by building a framework, then backwards mapped it. We built capacity for formative and summative assessments. My part is to coach, to make sure it is consistent across classrooms.*

*I see evidence in the teachers' lounge – the conversation is about teaching and learning rather than complaining about behavior. The energy is shifting.*

*The framework is changing. The class period is the students' as much as it is mine. It's about ownership and engagement. In our teacher leader network, we concluded you can have engagement without ownership. It is not the teacher doing something to them. They own it. The idea of ownership is really central. The 55 minutes is time for learning to happen. It's not about pleasing the teacher.*

*[At my school, in the LA Department] we have the same frameworks and learning targets and are in each other's classrooms. We can use similar assessments and have better conversations. It's not, 'they failed vocab test' – whatever that meant; now, we share language and assessments.*

*We're trying to make sure they all are career and college ready. I can look not just at my students, but how do I get ALL students in the department and the rest of the school ready? We can do this!*

Teachers in the network realized that their teaching practices need to change. In order to do that, they expanded their shared understanding of what effective teaching looks like. This is detailed in the document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8 of this paper, where it is clear that proficiency-based practices are centered on an evolving framework which rests on the foundation of student agency and ownership. (Recommendation #1, p. 26, in section IV.A.1)

### ***Student Ownership of Learning***

*Teachers flourish when students own their own needs.*

*Proficiency-based work demands the active engagement of teachers and students in the relationship between teacher ownership of proficiency based instruction and students' ownership of their learning.*

*Student ownership is a necessary aspect of proficiency. It's envisioning students who are different from what they are now, i.e., who advocate for their own learning. Students must be able to tell us what they do or do not know and how they can get [or how we as teachers can help them] to the point of proficiency.]*

*A teacher will say, "You mean students can hand in work late? I'm preparing them for the outside world." But the conversation needs to be, "Who are the students we want to create?" It's not about compliance, but critical thinkers who have agency and ownership of their learning – a student who can say, "I need this today – not that (which you have prepared for me.)" These are huge equity issues.*

As the discussion progressed, teachers in the network gradually realized and were able to articulate the critical reason for why student ownership lies at the core of proficiency-based teaching and learning: it produces deeper and more authentic learning. PBE is

about much more than changing the grading system. It fundamentally changes the understanding of what powerful and effective instruction looks like and the practices teachers use to get there. (Recommendation #1, in section IV.A.1, p. 26) These are outlined in detail in the document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems* (pp. 6-8 of this paper)

### ***Using Time Differently***

*Time is our scarcest commodity; in the first year, there was a lot of push back from students and parents. It was a shock to parents, to be doing progress reporting on end-of-year targets; we needed the five teachers in Language Arts to be together; we looked at targets and rewrote them. The measurement (evidence) is students' performance. "I know what I can expect leaving my sophomore year." Every day, I can go to another teacher and ask, "Could you read this paper? Or, "My kids are here, are yours? What are you doing?" Targets are so specific, we can pinpoint what we talk about explicitly.*

*Proficiency-based teaching and learning takes the element of time [as a controlling structure] out of it – the Essential Skills [requirement] guarantees the proficiencies are the target and [the flexible use of] time guarantees they [students] get there.*

*Some students finish "early," some "late." We have wonderful outcomes, but the system does not support it.*

Teachers were clear that they need a system that is flexible and that will enable the variable use of time to allow students to advance at their own rate of progress. (Recommendation #1, p. 28, in section IV.A.2.)

### ***Assessing and Reporting Student Progress***

*Students need to be able to critically think about a character [in literature]. We have separated targets for critical thinking and writing. A student can be a good writer but not a good critical thinker. Shifting from emphasis on the task to a focus on learning shows students where they are in a continuum. Parents may not understand this and ask, "What are they looking for?" The teacher looks across the classroom and may have 5 to 7 grade levels of readers. An English Language Learner (ELL) student, for example, can still be successful. It's about making progress. You don't have to make gains from level 1 to level 4 in one class, but, "I went from a 1 to a 2," underscores it's about progress. A small success makes a difference to struggling students, or with advanced students, we can provide more material and accelerate their learning.*

*Conversations with parents are about acknowledging that this is a learning progression. They don't earn points. We want students to practice during the first four weeks, so nothing may be scored. They get feedback, and may need to rewrite. They need to understand, it's developmental, that they will develop into writers.*

*We need a clear and consistent way to report and share student progress; if we have that, it will push other teachers to get on board. We need, as a district, a reporting tool that separates behaviors from proficiencies.*

*I know where each individual student is now. In the past, a student's D or F could have been due to tardies or missed vocabulary, but I didn't know anything about their skill set. Once you know, and they know you know, you can focus on meeting the targets. For example, for an ELL student, I know exactly where she is and what she needs.*

*We are changing Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). The accommodations are already in place due to PBE practices – it's very compatible. Learning Targets are written for the IEP the same as I would write them in my classroom.*

*Learning Targets (LTs) are a starting point. We need to change and adapt all the time. You can't just open the binder to page 9. It may work for one class but not another on any given day or semester. We need to adapt. If we just see LTs as the end result, we're missing out.*

*Targets are there, but you need some flexibility; if you discover a student is not a grade level reader, you may need to move them down to an earlier comprehension target.*

*Students do self evaluations and assessments. They know the rubrics and targets. They are constantly assessing each other and themselves and reflecting. I worked with Jenn [from CEL] on what I do to help student learning and what I do [as an instructional coach] to help the teacher. I get students to reflect on what they need from the teacher. It's pulling back the veil from teaching – getting the students to help themselves. Teachers need the ability and desire to hear from students. I am constantly asking students, "What do you need from me?" I've learned a lot from this network.*

*A proficiency-based system can be hard for students who expect to be "A" students because they have been successful in the traditional system by accumulating points and extra credit. As they enter a class, they may not meet proficiency in assessments until later in the course.*

Among early implementations of proficiency-based education, much emphasis has been placed on assessment and grading. As teachers in the network shared their practices and challenges with this aspect of PBE, their discussions underscored two aspects reflected in the document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8 of this paper. 1) Teaching practices need to change at a deep level, with emphasis on student ownership and progression at their own rate of learning and 2) district level data systems and revised grading systems are needed in order to support implementation of proficiency-based practices with a consistency that does not force students and their parents to choose between two approaches to learning: a traditional system or more effective learning to ultimately achieve higher outcomes. (Recommendation #2 in section A.2., p. 28) This also has clear implications for instituting appropriate state level budget and data systems and institutional and curricular articulation from K-12 through post secondary levels. (Recommendation #3 in section IV.A.2, p. 28. Also, see the OPP Teacher Leader Network Narrative, found on the website: [www.k-12leadership.org](http://www.k-12leadership.org).)

### ***Incompatible Systems***

*We have too many masters to try to serve. We are college, not proficiency based – there are state tests, AP tests, IB tests, etc. etc. – a lot of different standards and we don't have solid*

*alignment among them. We're trying to accommodate everything and nothing in the system accommodates progression. We move students from reading at grade level 3 to grade level 8 but there is no way to acknowledge that progress, because they are still below grade level for their age and proficiency stops at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It's not reflected in college classes.*

*I am also a parent. It causes me to be more reflective. My accelerated sophomore moved to a [traditional] points-based class. Do I think proficiency-based education is preparing students for work and life? Yes! They will go into a job not knowing everything and will be taught and mentored and experience life long learning. BUT...have I done them a disservice with PBE? Will they be unable to qualify for presidential scholarships and other awards tied to the current system's inflated GPAs? Often these are based on points which may be unrelated to their mastery of the course. Am I setting up my students for failure in this system? Can we do this piecemeal? How do we straddle the two systems? Is it fair?*

In order to allow continuity and support a proficiency-based system that allows students the time to progress at their own rate of learning, a revised grading system must be included. (Recommendation #2, in section IV.A.2, p. 28) This brings out the fundamental incompatibility between the traditional system and proficiency-based education. The more that proficiency-based teaching occurs, the greater the gap between the two approaches and the greater the confusion for students and complexity for all involved. Administrators also wrestled with this issue (see section III.B.)

### ***Implications for Professional Development***

*Teachers are scared. They don't want to throw the binder away. Teachers have ego there: "You're telling me I have to throw the binder away, that I'm not a good teacher?"*

*We need time to talk. The professional development (PD) is that we learn from each other. Some people are scared because they haven't grown in their practice.*

*[This approach to PD] is saving money by keeping PD in house. We have people on staff who know what they're doing and can ask good questions. We have live laboratories going on right now in our classrooms. This is more powerful than sending people to seminars.*

*PD is a progression. Proficiency-based education is about meeting students wherever they are. So, apply this same principle to teachers. It sounds daunting to teachers to have to change everything, but they may realize on their own they can let go of some practices that are no longer useful. Teachers, just as with students in proficiency-based education, need to take ownership of their learning. [Referring to an example: a colleague felt that grading every homework assignment was essential. After exposure to proficiency practices in her department she realized that homework is practice and self assessment for the student and provides the teacher an opportunity for formative assessment of the student's progress. Every assignment is not a summative assessment.]*

*We all entered proficiency-based practices with baby steps. We went forward and realized what else needed to be done as we went along.*



*We need time for teachers to collaborate. Most collaborative groups don't work without support and guidance. You need a good coach.*

*It's team work. It gets teachers out of their (individual classroom) bubble.*

*I'm a learner, every single day, in every classroom. I don't use a binder. I have a calendar and a road map. I live in the environment. I have a piece of paper with a couple of targets. It is rare to get everything you planned done in a class session; it puts the burden on the students to speak up if they are not getting it. They know they need to do this and that teachers will listen. They will shift focus. Recently, I realized, we're behind two weeks. My first impulse was, I need to make that up. Then I calmed down. Okay, this is where they are. What do they need in order to learn?*

As the conversation in the network continued, the teachers gained in their conviction that being in classrooms together, observing and analyzing their teaching and the learning of their students as a professional learning community, led them to become better teachers. They concluded that it is essential that they have time set aside, structured into their school week, to visit one another's classrooms to observe teaching strategies and provide objective feedback. They concluded that schools and districts need to provide professional development that is compatible with this focus on student-centered instruction in classrooms and guided by expert coaches. The teachers would then be able to develop expertise in the use of a portfolio of skills, tools and resources to apply in designing individualized instructional approaches for each and every student, i.e., apply differentiation, at the root of how proficiency-based education achieves equity in the classroom. (See Recommendations #2 and #3, in section IV.A.1, p. 27.) Capacity is built by individual teachers working together. Each teacher is embracing change in their individual practice. Working together in a community is an efficient way to move toward scale.

### ***District Support***

*[In response to a question about support at the District level] We as teachers need to change the teaching model, change how we do our work. We need a strong system of support for those who are trying to make the changes, especially in frustrating times. We need ways to encourage those who dig in their heels. We need systems for teacher evaluation and support – and to learn how to do this. We also need systems for reporting and sharing student progress.*

*I wish our district was supportive; we don't have district awareness. As teachers leading this effort, we are not invited to the table. We need agreements on definitions of proficiency, and while the [Oregon Proficiency Project] policy panel is talking about teaching and learning, others think it is just about credits. There are teachers who are not on board and need to move on. It is hard to have 6 or 7 on board in a department, but 3 or 4 who won't participate.*

*At my school, the teacher voice is there. Administrators say you need consistent learning targets, then teachers come together to develop them. However, there is a disconnect between the school and the district. I have a concern that the district will make decisions that run counter to what the school has done.*

As the network of teachers considered implications for their districts in supporting them as teachers of proficiency-based practices and instructional coaches of their colleagues, they articulated a call for expanding a shared understanding in districts of what effective teaching looks like, as detailed in the document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems* (pp. 6-8 of this paper). They further advocated that district policies and professional development be grounded in the classroom practices of those actually implementing PBE teaching and learning – i.e., focused on student-centered instruction. They acknowledged the need for policies and strategies to develop all teachers in a school or a department to achieve consistency of practices and avoid the pitfalls of a piecemeal approach of implementing PBE practices. This parallel processing approach acknowledges that expertise is developed one teacher at a time, but can be done simultaneously across a network of teachers, using an embedded approach in which instructional leaders guide other teachers in developing PBE teaching practices. (See Recommendations #1 and #2 in section IV.A.1, p. 26-27)

### **The Value of the Networks**

#### ***Important takeaways from the Teachers' Network:***

- *Being consistent in how I coach and ask questions. The Student Engagement/Student Ownership discussions made me think.*
- *Resources from this work; I'm not an island. The network provided frames to work within as a coach and teacher.*
- *Better articulated theoretical framework.*
- *It reminds me I am a learner. It means there will be successes and failures.*
- *It's a process; we are all at different points. Just as with students, progress is what's important.*
- *I had forgotten about the theory and philosophy of proficiency-based work. The conversations are important and will inform the work.*
- *Concrete teaching and student learning strategies and actions.*

Teachers in the network, in reflecting on the benefits of their participation, concluded that they would like to continue such a network structure to support them in developing the skills of instructional leaders by providing a professional learning community in which to discuss problems of practice and share strategies that work. (See Recommendation #4 in section IV.A.1, p. 27.)

## **B. Administrator/Instructional Leader Network**

### **Framework**

Concurrent with the initiation of the Teacher Leader Network, we formed an Administrator/Instructional Leader Network whose purpose also was: 1) to develop a professional learning community within which to examine, challenge, deepen and hone their individual practices in teaching and learning; 2) to collaborate in developing a shared understanding of proficiency-based education, with particular attention to how student engagement, student ownership and formative assessment are at the heart of proficiency-based teaching and learning; and in addition, 3) to support developing the capacity of the teacher leaders as instructional coaches in proficiency-based education and to develop their own expertise as instructional leaders.

The network consisted of 10 administrators from Beaverton District's Health and Science School, Sunset High School and Westview High School; North Eugene High School; Redmond School District; Tigard Tualatin School District; Woodburn District's Academy of International Studies and Wellness, Business and Sports School; and Hillsboro School District's Hillsboro High School and Century High School. Most of the administrators were high school principals; two held district leadership roles.

The administrators met together with the Teacher Leader Network in August, convened twice as an administrator network, and participated in two policy panel meetings. Innovations in proficiency-based education were underway in all of their schools. As was the case with the Teacher Network, most of the administrators joined the network as practitioners who had led some proficiency-based practices in their own schools. They entered their individual work from different entry points: standards and curriculum alignment, instructional practices or assessment (see *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8.)

The administrative leadership experiences in the group varied from 1 to 10 years, with most in the middle of that range. The administrators' interest in proficiency-based education stemmed from an awareness that student needs were not being met. They grappled with how to support teachers in serving students while living in the tension between system requirements and parent expectations.

### **Process**

The group began by identifying problems of practice with their teacher leaders. In subsequent sessions, the instructional coach from the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), Max Silverman, guided the administrators through development of expertise using CEL's Problem of Practice Protocol. A visit was hosted by the principal at Academy of International Studies in Woodburn District and by the principal at Century High School in Hillsboro District.

## Reflections on Practices

As the discussions progressed, the administrators' view of their roles began to evolve – they explored how to support teachers in developing and changing their practices and how to address systemic barriers to increasing capacity to scale proficiency-based teaching and learning. This also required them to identify and engage with the implications for district systems. They acknowledged an overwhelming range of tasks and responsibilities which keep them out of classrooms. They reported that pressures on districts to support a range of initiatives make it difficult for principals to carve out sufficient time to be in classrooms. In addition, they said that their administrator preparation programs do not prepare them to be instructional leaders.

In the following section, the administrators' voices tell the story, as heard in network and policy panel meetings. A summary paragraph is included at the end of each segment.

### ***Supporting Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems***

*The traditional method of teaching and awarding grades has an illusion of consistency because of the quantitative nature of it. But it's actually very subjective. The consistency between these proficiency-based education practitioners [members of the Teacher Leader Network] from all these different schools and districts is remarkable.*

*What are the components of the proficiency-based teaching and learning cycle? There are different starting points. For teachers, really, the change is about instructional practice. How can we change the conversation about student learning? We just have a few teachers doing this. How do we scale it up in a way that will stick? There are two approaches: 1) short term – get everyone to take on a specific practice; and 2) long term, figure out how to change the system.*

*[Considering the issue raised by the teacher panel of piecemeal implementation of proficiency-based education]*

- We're grappling with this now; is this disjointed push within the system and school [between traditional and proficiency-based systems] equitable for students?*
- There are a lot of things we are losing sleep over. This is the biggest one.*
- We are hiring new teachers all the time. So, some have been developing in this direction, but we are constantly adding more who are at the beginning of this work.*
- This gets back to career arc. None of the teacher panel is funded as full time coaches in their schools. [Given our economic constraints] A policy question is: how can we create formalized instructional coaching positions? If we rely on these teachers to just somehow be leaders, too, [it's not sustainable.] For example, what is the impact when a teacher leader was funded last year, and not this year? The credibility you get as an instructional leader comes from being in the classroom often. The things you say and what you focus on, around instruction, make an impact.*

- *Why can't support for teachers be leveled? What does every staff member need? What do I do for some and what do I do for all? Who needs what and how can I leverage my very limited resources? How fast do I move? It is tricky to navigate. How do you recognize skilled teachers and others who are more traditional? You need to differentiate [with PD approach]; what do you need as the instructional leader to be able to support teachers?*
- *Sometimes groups need coaching on how to be effective. We are supporting the process rather than just the content. Coaches (or Teaching and Learning Facilitators) need to have a unique and special skill set. Leaders are trying to bridge aspects of the old system and focus on the new system of instruction.*
- *PD has traditionally been a lot of static training. I go in classrooms and see implementation of it, but not to any depth. We got teachers to go into classrooms, but they don't know what to look for yet.*

The administrators in the network carefully considered the issues raised by the teacher leader network – in particular, they engaged with the concern about consistency of classroom practices and piecemeal implementation of proficiency-based education. They remarked on the consistency they observed among the network teachers who had developed a shared understanding of the practices and the principles that support them. (Recommendations #1 and #4 of IV.A.1, p. 27.) Many of the administrators have teachers who are designated part time as instructional coaches. They realized the need to maintain and support the teachers in these roles, including setting aside time for them to collaborate and visit one another's' classrooms to observe teaching strategies and provide objective feedback. (See Recommendation #1, in section IV.A.1, p. 26.) Administrators commended the benefits of the network as a strategy for providing professional development for teachers. The network supported the teacher leaders in developing skills as instructional leaders through a professional learning community in which to discuss problems of practice and share strategies that work. They also noted that at least initially, such networks need the guidance of expert coaches who have experience and knowledge in using proficiency-based practices and know how to help others acquire them (See Recommendation #4 in section IV.A.1, p. 26.)

### ***Instructional Leadership Skills***

*I've never seen any training about how to delegate and use your staff. As a former teacher, you are hands on, DIY. You have to learn how to distribute leadership so time is freed up for being in classrooms.*

*We provide support to secondary leaders. To do that, we have formed a secondary professional learning community (PLC); it meets every 2 weeks around instruction. We conduct learning walks and share problems of practice. We are moving the coaching role into classrooms. Rather than being delivered from the District, it is side by side with the teacher.*

*What is the priority of my job? To spend two days in the classroom each week. My time should be focused around instruction.*

*I support the idea that administrators can learn best in collaboration. Coaching has been a catalyst. There is a need in our system for instructional leadership and its accountability. If I ask X of the teachers, am I, as their leader, providing support for that?*

*Modeling. We have learning targets for our staff meetings at my school. Assessment means knowing where your staff is, engaging them in self assessment and being in classroom in order to get more consistency in practices.*

*Secondary Ed administrators at my district have been using check lists for observing students for evidence of learning and then analyzing what we're seeing. It's taken awhile to move from an evaluative lens to seeing student learning and asking, "What do I do with that information?" By trying to understand what student learning looks like from their individual student viewpoints [ELL, SPED, etc.] we move toward equity.*

A consistent theme among administrators in the network was that they see a key part of their job is to be in classrooms with teachers, observing instruction to give non-evaluative feedback. Some of them are involved with district wide networks of principals who are observing classrooms together and discussing implications for instruction and how to support development of teachers in proficiency-based teaching practices. (See Recommendations #1-#5, section IV.A.1, p. 26-27)

### **System Implications**

*Trying to create a culture of college and career readiness. I want students to pass classes, not just pass the OAKS test. When they're done, students should be ready for their next step. It's about collaboration. It's helping people change habits; evidence will be in behaviors of teachers and students.*

*[In response to question about university GPAs undercutting students.] Privileged parents keep supporting [inflated] GPAs because it plays to their advantage. The current system was designed to sort children. This runs counter to achieving equity. There is a belief that with a 3.7 GPA a student can go to OSU and have a golden ticket. So, the GPA is the control– the master of what the student can do. It is frustrating when parents think GPA really conveys success at the next level. Knowing how to 'game the system' for grades excludes some students who don't have the skills or support to do this. The current system's emphasis on grades being the exclusive factor to determine the future potential of students cuts our legs right out from under us. Communications with parents and students is a critical strategy in implementing PBE. The evidence part will happen with conversations with parents and students – when they understand that PBE better prepares the student for success in their next steps and take ownership for this system change.*

*PBE is administrator driven, but teacher led. Administrators get systems things taken care of. An effective support system at a district level would differentiate as you do with students. The conversations about system supports must include classroom teachers who work with students – not just TOSAs (Teachers on Special Assignment), but the ones who live and breathe classroom practice every day. Teachers on district policy committees often want to be administrators. We need to bring in teachers whose goal is to be a 30 year classroom teacher. These are the*

*practitioners who can best inform policy. I would also like to see some students there, who have experienced a wide range of teaching practices. We need to hear their actual voices.*

*District Information Technology (IT) Directors should provide systems that support proficiency-based evidence collection and detail student's achievement, skills and unique abilities.*

Administrators in the network are committed to change policy at the district and state level to support teachers who are trying to implement proficiency-based practices. The implications for policy included 1) adopting a flexible or variable use of time that will allow students to learn and advance at their own rate of progress; 2) instituting more robust district level data systems and revised grading systems; and 3) instituting appropriate state level budget and data systems and institutional and curricular articulation from K-12 through post secondary level. They also concluded it was necessary to implement a clear and effective communication strategy using effective, consistent messages and credible, compelling advocates, particularly parents. (See Recommendations #1-#4, section IV.A.2, p. 28)

### ***The Value of the Networks***

*The network value is in coming together and having conversations about what good instruction is.*

*I've gained a lot of skills in this network. We need to open up a collaborative culture around instruction. It has been helpful to visit different school sites and dialogue deeply with colleagues. I would like folks to come to my site and talk with me and give me feedback.*

*The value of the network of teachers and administrators is to be in the classroom as a professional learning community (PLC) and then discuss what we observed. We could also make smaller networks, within schools or districts, for example.*

*The value of the networks is in getting opportunities to be in classrooms with colleagues to examine what it is about our practice that is not getting the results we want. At my district, we went into elementary schools and saw a K12 continuum. I wasn't thinking before about the entire system.*

*The network provided opportunities to learn valuable processes for instructional improvement, for example, the Problem of Practice Protocol (POP). It was extremely helpful to identify habits of mind and observe the approaches students take as they become agents of their own learning.*

*This is a collective cultural change. The strength of this project was practice informing policy. I valued the time spent in collaboration with other practitioners and policy makers. It is easy to feel isolated as an innovator of this work. It's clarified my thinking around the integrated nature of instructional improvement and the assessment system.*

*There are teachers there who have taken PBE farther than I could have imagined. I feel supported by having colleagues who are headed in the same direction.*

The administrators found value in a network structure that facilitates administrators in convening and supporting one another to exert adaptive leadership skills. They observed that

teachers have begun the work of defining their problems of practice and policy issues; as administrators, they now have the challenging task of figuring out how to develop solutions to remove systemic barriers and create new systems in order to facilitate new ways for practitioners to collaborate in their work together. (Recommendation #5, section IV.A.2, p. 28).

## **C. Policy and Practitioner Panel**

### **Framework**

The policy panel was a feature of the project designed during Phase 1 to insure that practice informs policy and policy supports practice. The project has done this by bringing together proficiency practitioners and local and state education leaders for day-long sessions focused on examining evolving proficiency practices and discussing next steps, needed resources, and policy issues. Policy panel members included school principals, superintendents, other district leaders, state education agency officials, school of education deans, nonprofit education advocates and others who are acknowledged leaders in their respective fields and institutions who have an interest in improving teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. The Oregon Proficiency Project has been a valuable information resource to both practitioners and policy makers; it created opportunities for professional networking and shared understanding of proficiency practices through deliberative sessions of the policy panel.

### **Process**

In Phase 2, panel members convened twice. CEL Associate Director Anneke Markholt was a partner in developing and conducting the meetings. The focus of the first meeting was to verify the attributes of proficiency-based education, to hear about the progress of the networks, and to form some initial conclusions and recommendations about the continuation of the work of the project beyond Phase 2. The second meeting centered around practitioners delivering powerful testimony that formed the foundation for developing a set of concise core messages and specific messages tailored for key stakeholder groups to influence policy.

### **Reflections: Practice Informing Policy**

#### ***Definition and Description of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning***

The panel reviewed and affirmed the draft of attributes which had been revised and refined by the practitioner networks. The final version, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, can be found on pp. 4-6 of this report.

#### ***Continuing to Build Capacity to Scale***

Panel members from schools and districts said that the networks play a crucial role and that others outside the current networks would benefit from inclusion. Many of the current network members committed to support the continuation and expansion of the networks. Designing district and state information systems to accommodate the deeper and broader range of data required in a proficiency-based education system is essential to scale to a system level. The policy panel concluded that an effective communications strategy to build advocates is vital to the success of building capacity to scale proficiency-based education.



## ***Building Advocacy through Communications***

At the second meeting, the policy panel agreed that the time was right to build advocacy and create a call to action by developing strategic communications. The work of the project had reached the point of need for strategic communication; the essential elements are in place to develop a cohesive communications effort in aid of scaling up:

- Proficiency-based teaching and learning is a powerful story.
- We have key stakeholder audiences identified: students and parents, the governor and legislative committees, education provider communities, employers and business leaders, community groups and editorial boards.
- We can craft effective messages to each of these groups.
- The policy panel and practitioners are well positioned as advocates of scaling up to deliver these messages.
- Proficiency-based education is the label we are using for clarity and convenience in this document, but we need to remember it is not a program, but a set of practices.

After listening to testimony from the two practitioner panels of teachers and administrators, the policy panel members developed the following communications messages.

### **1. Core Messages for All Audiences**

Proficiency-based practices hold great promise for ensuring that Oregon K-12 students receive high and equitable educational outcomes for postsecondary and/or career success. Proficiency-based teaching and learning practices are based on principles of standards-based achievement, student-centered instruction and assessment techniques, and collaborative professional learning for teachers and administrators. An important characteristic of proficiency-based practices is that time becomes a variable. A number of policy and system changes will be required to bring these practices to scale.

### **2. Specific Key Audience Messages**

#### **2. a. Students and parents**

Proficiency-based education is a method of teaching and learning that is built on continuous instruction and assessment toward clearly defined learning targets. Because this is a teaching and learning system that more powerfully engages students in ownership of their learning, it is much more likely than the current approach to bring all students to meet or exceed graduation requirements and work at levels closer to their potential.

#### **2. b. Governor and legislative committees**

Proficiency-based education would positively affect Oregon's competitiveness and quality of life. Lawmakers and policy makers should be ready to adopt legislative and policy changes that align with the support requirements of proficiency-based education (e.g. preK-20 initiative continuum, the state's "40-40-20" education attainment goal, the

proposed budget redesign, a more comprehensive data system, and federal waivers, i.e., four year graduation cohort reporting.)

### **2.c. Education provider communities (schools, districts, boards, heads of education sectors, including community colleges, OUS, Superintendent of Public Instruction)**

There is consensus that the status quo is not working: we don't have equitable outcomes or high enough outcomes for students. Economic forecasting for the next several years indicates that the current structures are not sustainable. Leaders within the education community must step up to system redesign. It will require long term commitment to achieve its potential to build capacity to scale.

### **2. d. Employers and business leaders**

Proficiency-based education would provide a real return on the public's investment in K-12 education because it would foreclose current low graduation and high remediation rates, both of which incur high system and social costs. It would better meet employers' needs for innovative and diverse people who know how to problem solve and learn throughout their lives.

### **2. e. Community groups and editorial boards**

Strategic use of the core messages and many of the specific messages will need to be utilized in order to assist community groups and editorial boards in informing and shaping their capacities to be effective advocates and conveyors.

## **IV. Conclusions, Recommendations and a Call to Action**

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." – Margaret Mead*

We have based our recommendations on the conclusions drawn from testimony in both practitioner networks' sessions and the two panel convenings held during Phase 2 of the Oregon Proficiency Project. Our method has been to bring the voices of teachers and administrators who are practicing proficiency-based teaching and learning to the policy panel for collaborative consideration of policy implications for building capacity to scale. We have continued to develop, refine and move the conversation between the networks, policy panel and other interested and informed stakeholders along the way. The conclusions and recommendations are grounded in the work of Phase 1 of the project, which included classroom based visits at several sites and culminated in the document *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, which includes system requirements to support the practices described, found on pp. 6-8 of this report.

Numerous education improvement initiatives have been tried without great success over the past several decades. These quick fixes have not adequately addressed teacher practice, student performance or the role of the principal and central office leaders. As Phase 1 of OPP and the work of other education policy and thought leaders around the state have concluded, it is clear

that what is needed is system redesign. (*See Defining Practice, Informing Policy, Oregon Proficiency Project Report for 2009-10*). In Phase 2 of this project, we set out with two very focused goals – 1) to refine and confirm with practitioners and policy panel members their shared understanding of proficiency-based teaching and learning and 2) to test and demonstrate how to scale the practices, using practitioner networks as our primary strategy. The practitioner work of Phase 2 was continually checked against the *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems* document. In drawing up conclusions and recommendations, the System Requirements section of that document was particularly useful in providing a framework for necessary conditions and supports to scale the practices.

#### **A. Recommendations for developing a new system:**

We have grouped the emergent recommendations into two categories: those that will support the development of capacity among practitioners and those that will build a sustainable system designed to support the tenets and outcomes of PBE. Both categories of recommendations are based on the proposition that higher-level expertise in teaching and instructional leadership is the lever for student achievement of high and equitable outcomes. As is the case with all professions, this will require excellent on-going professional development.

##### **A.1. How do we build capacity to create practitioners with the requisite expertise and avoid the trap of inconsistent or piecemeal implementation?**

As the document *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems* (pp. 6-8 of this paper) makes clear, proficiency-based education is a collection of practices, and the heart of proficiency-based education, instructional practices, is centered in the classroom. Some efforts toward proficiency-based education to date have been based on quick assessment strategies. Deep changes in instructional practices are needed, including the use of formative assessment methods which are used to inform instructional strategies.

Classroom discourse provides an example of the differences between a more traditional approach and proficiency-based teaching and learning. In the traditional teacher-directed discourse, the teacher calls on one student at a time to respond to the teacher. In an effort to avoid calling on the same small set of students, techniques such as randomly drawing student names are used. In this instance, a dramatic change in practice to develop student agency and ownership of their learning would cultivate student-directed discourse. Students would call on one another to justify and defend their ideas and arguments. This allows the students to continuously conduct self assessments and the teacher to carry out formative assessments. Proficiency-based education is not a specific strategy or technique, such as random student selection; it's about deep fundamental changes in teaching and learning.

We propose that the following recommendations be implemented:

1. Expand a shared understanding of what effective teaching looks like by continuing to use and amend as warranted the document, *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems*, pp. 6-8 of this paper.
2. Implement, at school and district levels, professional development that is focused on student-centered instruction in classrooms and guided by expert coaches. Research is clear that improving teacher practice to create effective teaching and learning is

centered on teachers being in one another's classrooms together. Parallel processing will be an important strategy – expertise is developed one teacher at a time, but this can be done simultaneously across a network of teachers using an embedded approach in which teacher leaders and principals serve as instructional leaders to guide other teachers in learning the PBE teaching practices.

3. Set aside time for colleagues to collaborate and visit one another's classrooms to observe teaching strategies and provide objective feedback. Teachers will develop expertise in the use of a portfolio of skills, tools and resources to apply in designing individualized instructional approaches for each and every student, which is differentiation and leads back to proficiency-based education.
4. Expand a network structure that supports the teacher leaders and administrators as they develop the skills of instructional leaders by providing a professional learning community in which to discuss problems of practice and share strategies that work. The network initially needs the guidance of expert coaches who have experience and knowledge in using proficiency practices and know how to help others acquire them.
5. Expand a network structure that facilitates administrators in convening and supporting one another to exert adaptive leadership skills. Teachers have begun the work of defining their problems of practice and policy issues; administrators have the challenging task of figuring out how to develop solutions to remove systemic barriers and create new systems in order to facilitate more effective ways for practitioners to collaborate in their work together.

#### **A. 2. What system and policy supports are required to build a sustainable system with a focus on instruction?**

The Structural Supports and Policy Supports sections, in the System Requirements section found on p. 7 in the *Principles and Practices of Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning Systems* portion of this paper, describe how to sustain the educational goals of high and equitable outcomes for students and get out of the chronic cycle of the silver bullet approach to education reform. These elements of support for a sustainable system make the case for achieving a return on investment in an education system designed with 21<sup>st</sup> century goals and skills in mind.

Currently we are giving the existing system in Oregon more credit than it is due for preparing students for career and college readiness. Oregon's standards are not high enough to be internationally competitive and too many students are not yet meeting them. This creates a huge remediation requirement for post secondary institutions and employers. If we flatten the remediation curve, we will get a much better return on investment and improve the quality of life for the individual students involved. The panel concluded that proficiency-based education methods are more likely than traditional ones to shape critical thinkers who are well prepared to move into higher education and productive careers.

In investigating scaling up PBE, we conclude that the two systems are not compatible. The early implementation efforts of practitioners have exposed the tension inherent in the gap between traditional and proficiency-based education approaches.

The following recommendations for implementation are proposed to move to a proficiency-based system:

1. Adopt a flexible or variable use of time that will allow students to learn and advance at their own rate of progress.
2. Institute more robust district level data systems and revised grading systems in order to support proficiency-based practices.
3. Institute appropriate state level budget and data systems and institutional and curricular articulation from K-12 through post secondary levels in order to support students' achievement of state education goals.
4. Develop and implement an effective communications strategy using effective, consistent messages and credible, compelling advocates. It is especially important to engage parents as advocates.
5. Make strategic use of technology tools both as instructional and as infrastructure supports.

We have intentionally not addressed some important issues given the brief time span of Phase 2. One such issue is teacher evaluation. This is currently being pursued as the focal point of some education reform efforts. We consider the evaluation of teachers to be just one aspect among many in the range of practices that make up proficiency-based teaching and learning, and not the leading factor in improved long term, substantive results for students. We concur with our colleague Steve Fink, Executive Director for the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington, who, in CEL's December 2010 newsletter (see item #13 in Appendix) points toward the complex work of developing expertise in the craft of teaching and the related requisite development of instructional leaders to lead and support it. This is work that takes the time that any advanced set of professional skills takes to develop. We think our students and the devoted educational professionals who have committed their careers to serve them deserve nothing less than this investment of time.

We should note, though, that a relatively small investment of time and dollars can begin to show fairly immediate gains in teacher effectiveness and student performance (*see Defining Practice, Informing Policy, Oregon Proficiency Project Report for 2009-10*). For those who would say we can't wait for the kind of system redesign and professional development we advocate, we can only point to the many failed short term education reform efforts in which billions have been invested since *A Nation At Risk* was published.

## **B. A Call to Action**

This important work must continue on two tracks, as recommended in the previous section: supporting practitioners in the field, and supporting the policy and structural changes required at the district and state levels.

### **B.1. Continue and Expand the Work of Practitioners**

The partners who have been involved in the Oregon Proficiency Project confirmed at the second policy panel meeting that they are committed to continuing to develop proficiency-based teaching and learning within their own individual organizations. However, they acknowledge that doing so would be far more effective with sufficient economic and political resources to

provide: leadership, consistency of practices and policy, access to policy makers, coordination of communications, and organization and support of professional learning communities. This combined effort with networks of practitioners and policy makers would ensure the efficiency of scaling up the practices. It would support teachers and administrators to leverage their own professional development and that of their colleagues in their schools and districts. It would simultaneously gather the field work going on in multiple districts throughout the state to share with policy panel members at focused convenings. The research being carried out in the living learning laboratories of the early adopters of PBE would directly influence moving policy work forward.

We need to collect and analyze student achievement data over time, including longitudinal studies to correlate proficiency-based education with remediation rates, graduation rates, etc. We also need to develop cost estimates for building capacity to implement proficiency-based education. Designing systems to collect this data and determining the cost of building capacity to scale the practices systemically is a critical next phase of this work.

## **B.2. A Sustainable System Redesign – Practice Informs Policy**

The recommendations for education system and policy supports are consistent with the new governor's transition plans. This is a time for "not business as usual." We need to reset. It is crucial to develop strategic partnerships that will assure that the new education policies and structures are designed and implemented to support practices that ensure high and equitable outcomes and thereby achieve Oregon's economic and social goals.

**V. Appendix – documents available on Oregon Proficiency Project website: [www.k-12leadership.org](http://www.k-12leadership.org)**

1. *Defining Practice, Informing Policy*, Phase 1 Oregon Proficiency Project Report for 2009-10
2. *Defining Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning: From Practice to Policy* (attributes of PBE)
3. *Proficiency Based Practice Instructional Cycle* (chart)
4. Documents from OPP's Phase 1 and Phase 2, including the OPP Teacher Leader Network narrative
5. Rosters of OPP Network

**VI. References:**

1. *When Failure Is Not An Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning- Executive Summary*, International Association for K-12 Online Learning
2. *When Failure Is Not An Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning* – full report, International Association for K-12 Online Learning
3. Oregon Diploma Requirements from Oregon Department of Education website
4. *International Benchmarking: State Education Performance Standards*, American Institutes for Research (AIR)
5. Oregon Student Achievement Data from Oregon Department of Education website
6. *Tough Choices for Tough Times*, National Center on Education and the Economy – title page, and pp. 2-20
7. *A Stronger Nation through Higher Education*, Lumina Foundation for Education – title page through page 7 and pp. 83-84
8. *2010: A check-up on the Portland-Region's Economic Health*, by ECONorthwest
9. *December 2010 Newsletter – "Teacher Evaluation,"* Center for Educational Leadership at University of Washington
10. *OECD Report: Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*