Defining Practice, Informing Policy

Oregon Proficiency Project

Report for 2009-10

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I. *What is this project and how did it come about?*

When we began the Oregon Proficiency Project in May 2009, we had a straightforward purpose as described in the project proposal:

"Undertake a bold 'proficiency' project with the two highest-performing conversion and new-start 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] that will advance their instructional capacities as far as possible in an academic year, developing from that effort useful open-source tools for any school to use in its efforts to transform its instructional effectiveness while convening education leaders from forward-thinking districts, universities, and the Oregon Department of Education to identify proficiency-based policy and practice standards and the necessary architecture to bring the work to scale."

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 bring it to scale. We quickly realized we needed to expand the scope of the project and the range of participants involved. We'll say a good deal more about this in section III, but first, let us give you the genesis of the project.

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, including Beaverton, have committed to move to a fully proficiency-based model. We believe this is a very high-leverage practice in that it compels dramatic changes to teaching and learning that greatly increase student engagement and achievement for a relatively low initial cost increment.

The Oregon Proficiency Project is an outcome of OBC's education policy work over the past several years, which has included producing seven white papers that point to specific governance, curriculum, data, budget, and delivery system transformations that would significantly improve the quality and productivity of public education in Oregon.

OBC/E3, with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched the Oregon Proficiency Project with the goals of: 1) advancing the instructional capacities of the two schools 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.

II. *Two Key Challenges: What is proficiency-based education and how do we get more of it?*

Defining Proficiency-based Education

Our most obvious challenge was to find a common definition for proficiency-based education. Because the classroom has largely been the incubator of proficiency-based education in Oregon, we began to have conversations with practitioners about their proficiency-based work. People were enthusiastic about what they were doing but we noticed that they used distinctly different descriptions and definitions. One of the policy panel members, Dr. Matt Coleman, Director of Secondary Education for Springfield School District, encouraged us to bring together a range of early innovators of proficiency-based education to map their practices to a research-based assessment model (see Appendix J). The practitioners, a group of teachers and principals from 11 school districts, had no difficulty mapping their practices to the model but they located themselves at different places on it. That brought us to the understanding that their definitions of proficiency-based practices were different because each set of practitioners used elements of practice depending on the problems they were attempting to address. This caused an expansion of our project in two dimensions. First, it was clear that we needed to continue to engage practitioners heavily in our deliberations and continue to learn from them. Second, the definition of proficiency-based education would involve shared understanding of a broad set of practices.

We observed that schools come to proficiency-based practices through three entry points or portals: 1) teacher practices, classroom structures and student engagement; 2) standards and assessment; and 3) curriculum alignment and articulation. We believe that each entry point is equally valid, and regardless of the entry point, all three areas need to be fully developed to maximize the potential of proficiency-based practices.

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 found in Appendix A. *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.

The Capacity Issue

In every state, including Oregon, there are new expectations for public schools. We want all students to reach high academic standards which graduate them career and college ready. This means much higher academic standards are in place and 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 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 nor that there is a silver bullet to transform education. Such transformation requires readiness to learn and access to expertise.

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 career and post secondary 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. This understanding led us to a theory of action.

Theory of Action

The project's theory of action 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.

III. What happened during the project – with schools, site visits, panel

Strategic Overview of Project Components

The Proficiency Project, conducted during the 2009-10 school year, has consisted of several complementary efforts that address both practice and policy issues.

1) The project provided technical assistance (in one case instructional leadership coaching and in another both instructional coaching and instructional leadership coaching) to two small pilot site schools that are committed to proficiency practice. The project documented the challenges and successes of these schools in implementing proficiency-based education and the usefulness of coaching when it is focused on instructional outcomes and carried out with expertise.

2) In the past several years, more Oregon comprehensive high schools, or departments within such schools, have begun to implement proficiency-based practices. The project team has visited a number of those schools, observed their teaching and instructional leadership practices, asked students about learning in a proficiency-based format, and interviewed teachers and principals about their experiences. We have learned a great deal and, in turn, have served as an information and networking resource to those schools and others.

3) The policy panel was a feature of the project designed to insure that practice and policy inform one another. 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, with testimony of students and teachers, and discussions on next steps, needed resources, and policy issues. Policy panel members included school superintendents, principals and 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, and who have an interest in improving teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. The project has also been a valuable information and networking resource to both practitioners and policy makers. The project team provided this benefit to educators and policy makers by hosting observational visits to both of its two project field site schools and to other school sites where proficiency practice is taking place. In addition, the project has created opportunities for professional networking and shared understanding of proficiency practices through deliberative sessions of its policy panel.

1. Pilot Site Coaching and Support

As a part of the project design, OBC/E3 believed it would be important to test the effectiveness of proficiency-based education in one or more schools committed to improving student outcomes by developing greater expertise in instruction and instructional leadership. Two schools in the Oregon Small Schools Initiative stood out as eager to do this. Academy for International Studies (AIS) at Woodburn and Health and Science School (HS2) in Beaverton received coaching support and process documentation by the Proficiency Project.

CEL. OBC/E3 chose the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), based at the University of Washington, to provide coaching support to the two pilot schools. CEL's theory of action for teaching and learning and their field based success is consistent with proficiency-based education. It employs well-tested strategies for building expertise in teachers to enable students to gain agency in a learning process characterized by rigorous standards, transparent learning targets, active discourse, critical thinking, and frequent formative assessment to gauge progress. As part of the project, AIS received instructional leadership coaching for principal Chuck Ransom from Max Silverman and instructional coaching by Jennifer McDermott for two teachers, a classroom writing teacher and a teacher leader who was learning to be an instructional coach. At HS2, Expeditionary Learning and Outward Bound (ELOB) already provided two instructional program coaches. Principal Steve Day received instructional leadership coaching from Silverman. Anneke Markholt, CEL associate director, managed coaching at the two schools.

Academy of International Studies (AIS) in Woodburn

The primary instructional improvement goal for AIS during the 2009-10 academic year was focused on literacy and specifically on writing.

History/Demographics. AIS was created by the 2006 conversion of Woodburn High School, a comprehensive high school of more than 1,300 students, into four small autonomous schools, grades 9 through 12, in the Oregon Small Schools Initiative. AIS has a focus on what it calls social justice education, defined in part by a commitment to bilingual education and the ambition for all students to achieve the International Baccalaureate diploma offered in the three primary languages of its students. Sixty one percent of students are English Language Learners – 85% are Spanish speakers. The balance speaks English or Russian as a first language.

Woodburn is a small agricultural town off Interstate 5 about halfway between Portland and Salem. When Woodburn High School converted to small schools only 25 percent of students were passing Oregon's 10th grade reading and math assessment, so the school made not only a structural change but a commitment to improve its instructional core as a means of raising student achievement. Today, the principal and entire teaching staff there are on the same page in aligning content standards, lessons, and assessments. They are also pushing into more effective teaching methods, including a workshop class model that generates student discourse and assigns more learning responsibility and ownership to students.

Instructional Coaching. CEL Instructional Coach McDermott provided 35 days of instructional coaching focused on: 1) work with the classroom teacher on the specifics of classroom teaching – how to teach language arts and engage students to be independent learners; 2) work with the teacher leader in coaching methods; 3) work with the Language Arts Teachers Professional Learning Community (PLC) – teaching them how to analyze student work together and use that information to adjust their teaching with individuals and larger class lessons; and 4) including the other 20 faculty in all disciplines who were involved in PLCs and frequently observed the instructional coaching in classroom walkthroughs carried out as part of the principal's instructional leadership practice. This stimulated a desire on the part of these teachers to learn the instructional methods implemented with the two teachers receiving the coaching from McDermott. Teachers learned to prioritize and focus their goals for students rather than editing papers across multiple parameters. The project coaching also leveraged a district wide partnership between Woodburn and CEL/UW, whose focus on classroom observations helped establish a receptive environment among teaching staff.

Teachers recognized very early in the academic year that the learning targets they had worked hard to establish were in fact set too low. The two teachers being individually coached reported that they had learned how to "move the dial" on using effective classroom practices that produced results for students' success. They provided anecdotal evidence in the form of student work that their students had raised the bar on their expectations and levels of success for writing skills. They also reported students were learning to develop important habits of mind such as critical thinking, were more engaged and were becoming independent learners who could advocate for their own learning. Observing these changes in students led teachers to significantly increase the rigor of their learning targets.

By March 10, when AIS hosted a policy panel visit, all teachers in the school were trying out various forms of the teaching practices they were learning about from those receiving the coaching. Panel members observed student ability and behavior in the visit to AIS on March 10. They noted that they were "blown away" by what they saw – students independently doing rigorous work and owning their learning.

Instructional Leadership Coaching. CEL Instructional Leadership Coach Silverman provided 20 days of instructional leadership coaching for the principal, developing criteria for and skill in classroom observations, providing clear and actionable feedback to teachers, and using the collective observations to lead change. He guided the principal to articulate a vision and strategies with staff to pursue instructional improvement. At AIS, the coaching was centered on the school's goal of improving writing as part of the literacy goals within the International Baccalaureate curriculum. During the policy panel visit to his school on March 10 and at the final meeting of that group in April, the principal was able to express clearly what it means to be an instructional leader and how assuming this role has improved his ability to support his teachers in providing a more rigorous level of education for the students, accessible to all. In addition, the principal and six AIS teachers, including the teacher leader training to be an instructional coach, participated in a site visit organized by Silverman to three model schools on the Tyee Education Complex campus at Highline School District. The school team observed these schools with a focus on the instructional core as the leverage point for improving teaching and learning in a proficiency-based framework. The visit was timed strategically to support the language arts teachers by presenting numerous teachers and classrooms that have evolved over several years as the result of expert coaching in literacy as well as other disciplines.

Health and Science School (HS2) in Beaverton

The primary instructional leadership goal of HS2 during the 2009-10 academic year was focused on increasing student engagement through observation of student discourse and targeted feedback to teachers.

History/Demographics. HS2 opened in the fall of 2007 on its own site with six ninth grade classes and a plan to gradually add cohorts over four years until it included grades 6 through 12 as a combined middle and high school of up to 750 students. It was designed in the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB) model, with the intent to prepare all of its diverse students (nearly 40 percent Latino, more than 40 percent low income) for college success through classroom engagement, research, critical thinking, and problem solving in both core academic subjects and studies related to the science and health professions. It began with a commitment to proficiency-based assessment, grading, and awarding of academic credit. In conjunction with the ELOB model, using an assessment and credit system based on clear learning targets and rubrics transparent to students has caused many teachers at HS2 to improve their instructional practices. HS2 became an OSSI small school in 2006 during its planning stage. At the time it joined the Proficiency Project in fall 2009, HS2 had 28 teachers and 490 students in grades 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11, with grades 8 and 12 to be filled out the following year.

Instructional Leadership Coaching. CEL Instructional Leadership Coach Silverman worked with the principal using the same methods as at AIS: developing criteria for and skill in classroom observations, providing clear and actionable feedback to teachers, and using the collective observations to lead change. At HS2, as there was not concurrent teacher coaching by CEL, Silverman centered his 20 days of instructional leadership coaching with the principal on raising the level of student engagement, using student discourse as a primary observational criteria. With that focus, the principal was able to raise the visibility of this as a goal in his school. He demonstrated a growth in his ability to observe instruction and give critical feedback to his teachers. The principal, five HS2 teachers and an ELOB instructional coach participated, along with the AIS team, in the site visit organized by Silverman to the model schools on the Tyee Education Complex campus at Highline School District to observe three schools with a focus on the instructional core as the leverage point for improving teaching and learning in a proficiency-based framework.

2. Field Research

A key premise of the Proficiency Project design is that practice should inform policy in education reform at least as much as policy informs practice. To that end, the project team visited schools and school districts where various aspects of proficiency-based practices are in use. We added 11 field visits to early innovators of proficiency-based education with visits centered on 1) meeting and talking with teachers and principals 2) classroom observations and 3) talking to students. These visits informed the project team's thinking and shared understanding of proficiency-based education and seeded the networks which are being launched as the project extends beyond June 2010.

What Oregon Schools Are Doing. In the past several years, more Oregon comprehensive high schools, or departments within such schools, have begun to implement proficiency-based practices. Members of the project team visited a number of those schools, observed their teaching and instructional leadership practices, asked students about learning in a proficiency-based format, and interviewed teachers and principals about their experiences. In particular, the team wanted to understand the various ways proficiency-based practices can take hold and grow in different schools and school districts.

Based on these visits to schools (and the testimonials of students, teachers, and principals at policy panel meetings), the project observed that proficiency-based practices are under way in a range of Oregon schools – large metropolitan high schools, smaller rural schools, small learning communities and autonomous small schools. There are variations in how each initiated its effort, what part of the school or district is involved, and what particular practices or combinations of practices are emphasized.
For example:

- More than two years ago at Scappoose High School (700 students) on the Lower Columbia River northwest of Portland, a few teachers who wanted to improve upon the traditional approach to curriculum and assessment initiated the alignment of standards, lesson plans, learning targets, formative and summative assessments, and letter grades based on demonstrated student proficiencies. Half of the school's 40 teachers had embraced this approach by the fall of 2009 and most of the rest were on track to adopt it by the end of the 2009-10 school year.

- Following the leadership of its principal, Hillsboro High School (1,500 students), 30 minutes west of Portland, began work on a proficiency-based approach four years ago. Key features of this implementation include common agreement on high standards for all students and instructional frameworks that are coherent across the grades in promoting intellectual habits, academic skills, and content knowledge geared to postsecondary success. Hillsboro uses Teaching for Understanding as a common design tool to develop inquiry-based instructional units and assessments.

- The language arts department at Beaverton's Sunset High School (1,900 students) 20 minutes west of Portland has aligned standards, curriculum, lessons, learning targets, assessments, and grades around demonstrated proficiencies. Teachers in the department, in addition, have developed a professional learning community characterized by open classrooms and constant collaboration in planning, assessment, and continuous improvement of instruction.

- Redmond High School in central Oregon (1,800 students) initiated proficiency-based education in its freshman academy more than two years ago. At the same time, the Redmond School District, under the leadership of its superintendent and several school administrators, launched a district-wide effort to move all of its schools to a proficiency-based model. Redmond has backed this intention with a district administrator assigned specifically to proficiency implementation, with expert technical assistance at each school, and with the support of school board members and specific school district policies.

The visits, designed to share best practices through extensive classroom observations and discussion among teachers and principals, leveraged learning and improvement of teaching and learning for the visitors and the hosts. They solidified shared understanding and commitment to the necessity of practice informing policy.

3. Defining Practice, Informing Policy

The policy panel was designed to bring together education leaders and stakeholders to consider how local and state education policies can support local adoption and statewide scaling of proficiency-based practices. An additional purpose was served by providing information and networking opportunities to Oregon educators and education stakeholders on proficiency practices. An initial convening of practitioners and policy panel members was organized by Springfield School District and hosted by the project at Sunset High School in Beaverton on September 18, 2010. This meeting inaugurated the work of the policy panel by inviting practitioners of proficiency-based education from around the state to compare their implementation strategies to a research-based assessment model. In the course of that mapping exercise, a shared understanding began to emerge among the practitioners about what proficiency-based education is and why schools want to implement it.

During the five sessions hosted by the project between the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010, testimony of students and teachers helped focus understanding of proficiency practices and discussion of next steps, needed resources, and policy issues. Two of these meetings were hosted at the two pilot schools (HS2 January 13 and AIS March 10) so panel members could tour the schools and see proficiency-based teaching and learning in practice. The policy panel's 32 members included school superintendents, principals and other district leaders, state education agency officials, deans of schools of education, nonprofit education advocates and others who are acknowledged leaders in their respective fields and institutions, and who have an interest in raising teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.

We extended the policy panel to include a significant contingent of practitioners – both principals and teachers. They proved invaluable in connecting the practice in the field to inform other education leaders not in school buildings as together the panel formed shared understanding of strategies and recommendations for policy to bring this work to scale.

Two principles were adhered to in the convenings: content and process. In designing and facilitating the day-long meetings, we used a process which modeled best teaching and learning practices, providing learning targets for each session; the goal was that participants evolved as a learning community and experienced developing their own proficiencies first hand. The group reached shared understanding of what "proficiency-based education" is. The result was the comprehensive attributes of proficiency document (see Appendix A) which addresses all areas of practice and provides a base for practice informing policy. We also meticulously documented all of the panel meetings.

Some of the members remarked that the meetings were the best professional development they had ever experienced – for example, district leaders gained expertise in being able to coach school principals as instructional leaders. Two of the five meetings centered around classroom observations, which kept the work grounded in teaching and learning to influence policy. In the last session, education leaders were able to produced recommendations for consideration in bringing proficiency-based education to scale. They proposed to continue the work beyond June 2010.

IV. What we learned and what we recommend

Returning to Our Theory of Action

The project's theory of action 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.

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.

Summary of Key Conclusions

Effective Instruction Appears to be a Vital Missing Link. Oregon and many other states have spent much of the past two decades developing high achievement standards without seeing corresponding results in student attainment. Effective teaching that genuinely engages students in their learning may be the most vital missing link between setting demanding standards and achieving desired student outcomes. Proficiency-based education defines effective teaching and engaged learning.

Proficiency-Based Education Heightens Teaching Effectiveness. Proficiency-based practices require teaching to rise to a higher level of effectiveness. Effective teaching includes mastery of the subject, of teaching methods in general, and of teaching methods especially suited to the subject. Teachers with this mastery are expert in crafting lesson plans to rigorous standards, in writing learning targets and rubrics, and in assessing student work. They instill rigorous habits of mind, help students learn to learn, foster student ownership of learning, and ensure career and college readiness. Rather than using primarily teacher-dependent direct instruction, such teachers are increasingly relying upon differentiated instructional strategies and learning activities, student discourse, independent learning, group work, project work, and flexible open classrooms. To improve their effectiveness, they regularly collaborate with colleagues and look for ways to improve instruction based on student assessment data and observations of one another's classrooms. Supporting such teaching requires principals to develop expertise as instructional leaders. And it requires central district offices and school boards to understand and support this kind of teaching and instructional leadership.

Proficiency-Based Education Has Well Defined Attributes. What we call proficiency-based education is actually a collection of interrelated classroom practices that respond to the need within a maturing standards-based education environment for objective assessment of what students know and can do. Where demonstrated proficiency of high standards for all students is the primary aim of education, everything has to adapt to that aim. For example, learning targets and rubrics have to be rigorous and transparent to students. Grading and credit have to be based on proficiencies that students can demonstrate. Learning has to be the constant and time the variable. Assessment becomes a means of informing and increasing learning as much as a mechanism for accountability.

It Has Potential to Elevate Public Education Performance. The effectiveness of proficiency-based practices, many of them corroborated by previous research [see Appendix D], supports the project hypothesis that this approach to education delivery in the classroom has great potential to elevate

effective teaching practices, and, in turn, student learning, achievement, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and education equity. In particular, what the proficiency project has learned demystifies what constitutes effective teaching and how teachers can become far more effective with marginalized and mainstream students, moving all students closer to realizing their full potential.

It Is Scalable. This approach to teaching and learning is scalable in large comprehensive high schools. This is important because these schools dominate the secondary education landscape and are attended by the vast majority of students. Capacity can be built through highly leveraged professional development which is applied at the classroom level with teachers and supported by developing the instructional leadership expertise of principals. Effective teaching and instructional leadership are sets of professional expertise which can be learned through applying expert coaching, embedded in the practitioners' daily workplace, in the classroom, with students.

What the Project Learned From the Coaching Strategy/Actions at Both Schools

- Embedded professional development, especially skilled, knowledgeable coaching, is probably the most effective method of improving teacher effectiveness. The short-term cost is higher than workshop or seminar training, but the change in teacher practice and the benefit to students are longer lasting and more profound. For example, improvements in the effectiveness of teaching at AIS accelerated at an unexpected rate and drove teachers to re-write their learning targets for courses at a more rigorous level.

- Instructional leadership is a critical support for improving teacher effectiveness.

- Grounding both levels of coaching in classroom observation, with teachers and principals, is a fundamental aspect of focusing on the primary elements of the instructional core.

- It is essential that follow up practice of new methods learned in coaching occurs between the coaching sessions. Related to this, the role of the principal in following up with teachers between coaching sessions reinforces and supports the improvements they are striving to make. These two elements distinguish this approach from much traditional professional development, in which teachers or leaders go to workshops, or may even receive in-house coaching, but do not have the opportunity for practice and reflection.

- PLCs used in a focused, targeted manner centered on a clearly articulated instructional improvement vision and strategy can highly leverage the investment in the professional development delivered via coaching.

What the Project Learned from Field Research

- Schools come to proficiency-based practices through three entry points or portals: 1) alignment of curriculum and lessons to standards; 2) revision of assessment and grading practices on the basis of proficiency; and 3) focus on improving teaching and learning through emphasis on student engagement and effective teaching.

- Every school we observed wants students to be ready for postsecondary work.

- Regardless of the entry point, all three areas should be fully developed to maximize the potential of proficiency-based practices.

- This work is about adults attaining proficiency in content, in teaching that content, and teaching habits of mind that support postsecondary success for every student.

- Expertise in instructional leadership is needed to determine where to start, how to maintain consistency and appropriate levels of support to develop all three areas fully.

What the Project Learned From the Policy Panel Convenings

Policy Panel Commentary
At the last panel meeting, participants were asked to reflect on what they learned from their experiences during the project. The following is a sample of their comments.

- An important aspect of panel participation included visiting sites – observing practitioners in their classrooms; talking to students and teachers; networking with others engaged in proficiency work to share issues and concerns; and developing shared understanding of effective teaching.
- Proficiency-based education requires significant role shifts. Teachers have to shift their practice to focus on facilitating and differentiating learning. Principals need to become instructional leaders and provide supports for teachers. Students need to become more engaged and self-directed. "We see how much HS2 and AIS have done with this in just one year," said a panelist.
- "What we've seen at Highline (SeaTac) shows the importance of consistency in practice," an administrator remarked. "It's off the charts there."
- "I see the power of the instructional coaching model to supercharge the change process," commented one panel member.
- We need a fundamental shift in comprehensive high schools around issues of time for collaboration and professional development.
- Communication is critical – it needs to be based on common understanding of proficiency-based education with a clear focus on teaching and learning (the instructional core).
- Proficiency-based education creates the effect of an almost one-on-one teacher-learner experience for students.
- There are additions and deletions to policy that could facilitate the implementation of proficiency-based education.

Policy Panel Recommendations:
The following recommendations emerged from the panel's conclusions that effective instruction appears to be a vital missing link, proficiency-based education heightens teaching effectiveness, proficiency-based education has well defined attributes, it has potential to elevate public education performance and is scalable.

State Policy
- Distribute the attributes of proficiency document referenced above in this report, which reflects the shared understanding reached by the panel, to practitioners and policy makers at all levels for their use as a base in devising policy to support proficiency-based practices.
- Involve maximum participation of teachers in any ongoing scaling efforts to ensure that practice informs development of policy.
- Support broader implementation and scalable development of proficiency practices including tools and instruments for assessment, learning targets, grading rubrics, curriculum moderation and other resources through a statewide network.
- Ensure that the new diploma requirements integrate proficiency-based education.
- Develop a common K-20 message. Educators and parents want to make sure this works with admission standards and college success.
- Dedicate resources to measure results and publicize them with multiple stakeholders – parents, teachers' unions, school boards, teacher prep institutions, etc.
- Calculate the cost to benefit ratio of proficiency-based practices.
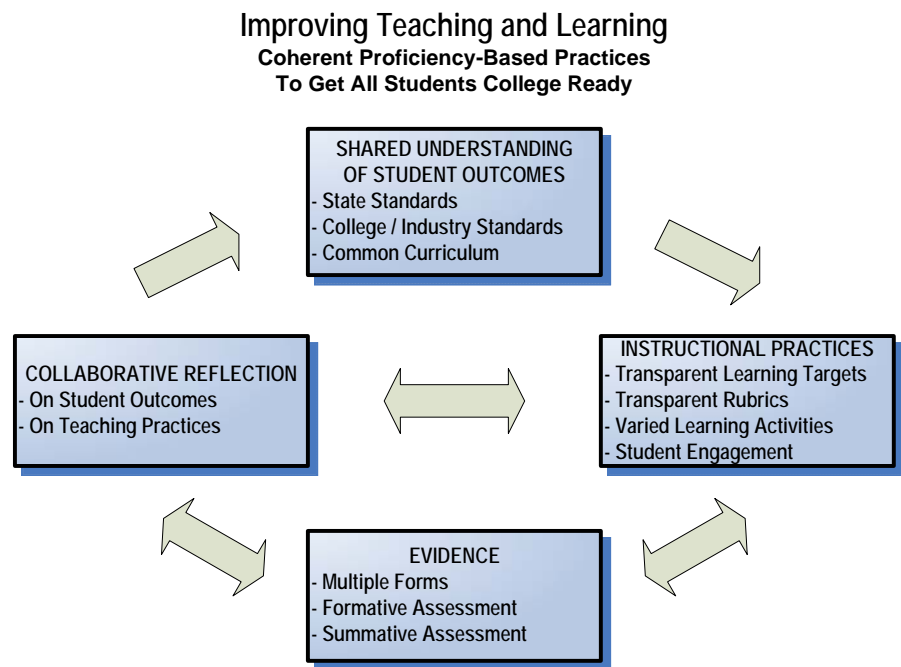
District Policy

- Consider supportive funding of this work at the school district and ESD levels.
- Communicate fully and clearly with parents/community/students to understand the benefits available to students from implementing proficiency-based education.
- Determine the necessary conditions required for the adults at the district, building and classroom, and provide resources in order to implement fully proficiency-based education across the three areas of entry: 1) teacher practice, classroom structures and student engagement; 2) standards and assessment; and 3) curriculum alignment and articulation.

V. A model for improving teaching and learning

From what early adopters in Oregon and elsewhere are doing, we have compiled distinct attributes of proficiency-based education. These attributes, which are Appendix A, assume a framework of rigorous college and career readiness standards that all students are expected to meet. Helping all students meet such standards by demonstrating proficiency requires instruction that expands the role and responsibilities of students as learners, giving them a clearer understanding of the requirements they must meet, involving them in a wider array of learning activities, encouraging them to interact more thoughtfully with the lesson and with one another, and engaging them in assessment as a part of the learning process. Grading them and awarding them credit on the basis of proficiency also makes their work more straightforward and transparent.

Teachers must have exceptional skills and expertise to accord students these roles and responsibilities. They must be expert in their subject matter and they must become more skilled and creative in building lessons, learning targets, rubrics, and a tool kit of differentiated instructional strategies and learning activities to support student attainment. They must become more skilled in assessment (especially formative assessment), and they must become adept at interpreting assessment data both to gauge and guide student progress and to improve their teaching. Proficiency-based teaching is more collegial and collaborative. Teachers open their classrooms to one another to share practices and feedback. They often collaborate to plan curriculum and lessons and to assess and score student work.

Teachers can learn and improve in all of these attributes, especially with purposeful embedded professional development, expert coaching, and skilled instructional leadership, which, in turn, can be taught and learned through both formal training and expert coaching. The adjacent diagram illustrates the dynamic nature of improving teaching and learning in a proficiency-based system. Here instructional practices flow from rigorous standards. Multiple forms of evidence through assessments reveal the effectiveness of instruction.

Improving Teaching and Learning
Coherent Proficiency-Based Practices To Get All Students College Ready

SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT OUTCOMES
- State Standards
- College / Industry Standards
- Common Curriculum

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES
- Transparent Learning Targets
- Transparent Rubrics
- Varied Learning Activities
- Student Engagement

EVIDENCE
- Multiple Forms
- Formative Assessment
- Summative Assessment

COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION
- On Student Outcomes
- On Teaching Practices

Teacher reflection on the evidence is used to inform instructional improvement, develop additional assessment, and make adjustments in shared understanding of desired student outcomes. The process itself assures effectiveness, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Required supports. The second half of the appended attributes document describes both local and state conditions necessary to support and scale proficiency-based education. Community engagement, instructional leadership, professional development, and central office commitment are vital to proficiency-based education's success and sustainability. While the project is not focused on changes to pre-service teacher education, the teaching methodologies used to improve teaching effectiveness would apply to pre-service teacher preparation. An important step in bringing proficiency-based practices to scale would include introducing those methodologies to pre-service teacher education programs.

VI. What's next?

Next Steps: 2010-11 School Year, July through December

OBC/E3 plan to carry out three primary activities which will capitalize on Oregon's policy environment, continue the networks and tools built during the past year's work, and be a bridge to larger scale implementation beyond 2010. During this period the project will seek funding to continue to build capacity.

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 will receive intensive support in teaching and instructional leadership. All three schools will participate, additionally, in the instructional leadership network and the teacher leader network, as described in #2 below. Products of the technical assistance will include standards based assessment tools, rubrics, learning targets, lesson plans and grading systems to be shared across a network of schools.

2) A network of affiliate schools will be convened to make and assess progress toward the development and improvement of proficiency practices and support elements.

> a) Principals from 10-12 selected schools, including large, comprehensive high schools, will form a network to develop skills to lead and manage the building of capacity in proficiency-based teaching and learning.
> b) Teacher leaders from some of the schools in the affiliates' network will 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* will continue to expand the role of the current Policy Panel. The Panel will follow the progression of strategies and tactics we have pursued this year:

> Problem $\rightarrow$ Theory $\rightarrow$ Practice $\rightarrow$ Policies $\rightarrow$ Scale Implementation
> Statement   of Action   & Tools   & Systems

Appendix – Documentation and Tools

A. Attributes of Proficiency-based Education and Conditions Required to Support It and Take It to System-Wide Scale
B. Entry Points to Proficiency-Based Practices
C. Oregon Proficiency Project Brief 2009-10
D. Report: Meeting 1, Proficiency Project Policy Panel - October 13, 2009
E. Oregon Proficiency Project Policy Panel Visit to HS2 – January 13, 2010
F. Report: Meeting 2 Oregon Proficiency Project Policy Panel – January 20, 2010
G. Oregon Proficiency Project Policy Panel Visit to AIS – March 10, 2010
H. Report: Meeting 3 Oregon Proficiency Project Policy Panel – April 21, 2010
I. The Fiscal Return on Education: How Educational Attainment Drives Public Finance in Oregon
J. Assessment Triangle
K. CEL Website: http://www.k-12leadership.org/ contains tools posted by both schools, including: standards based rubrics for assessment and grading; standards based learning targets; staff handbooks; sample communications to parents; classroom observation criteria; classroom conference protocols; PLC agendas; professional development plans and agendas and other documents for PLC and staff meetings.
L. DVD documenting progress at three points in the year at AIS posted on the CEL web site: http://www.k-12leadership.org/ Instructional Leadership Elements for Self Assessment
M. Roster of Policy Panel and contributors

OBC/E3 extends its appreciation to the participants in the policy panel convenings, who are listed in the attached Policy Panel Roster. The learning, conclusions and recommendations which have resulted from this project are in large part due to their dedicated participation in the process, willingness to open up their schools to visits from the project team and/or bring practitioners to the meetings, extended visitations to schools and enthusiastic embracing of their roles as members of a professional learning community.