GREAT SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP

Planning Backward: Unit Design in a Proficiency-Based Learning System

What You Need to Know

- Current units may be adapted and aligned with performance indicators and graduation standards as the school transitions to a proficiency-based learning system.
- Teachers need to follow a "backward planning" process to focus first on what the student will need to know and be able to do at the conclusion of a unit.
- Students need to be provided with multiple means and opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.
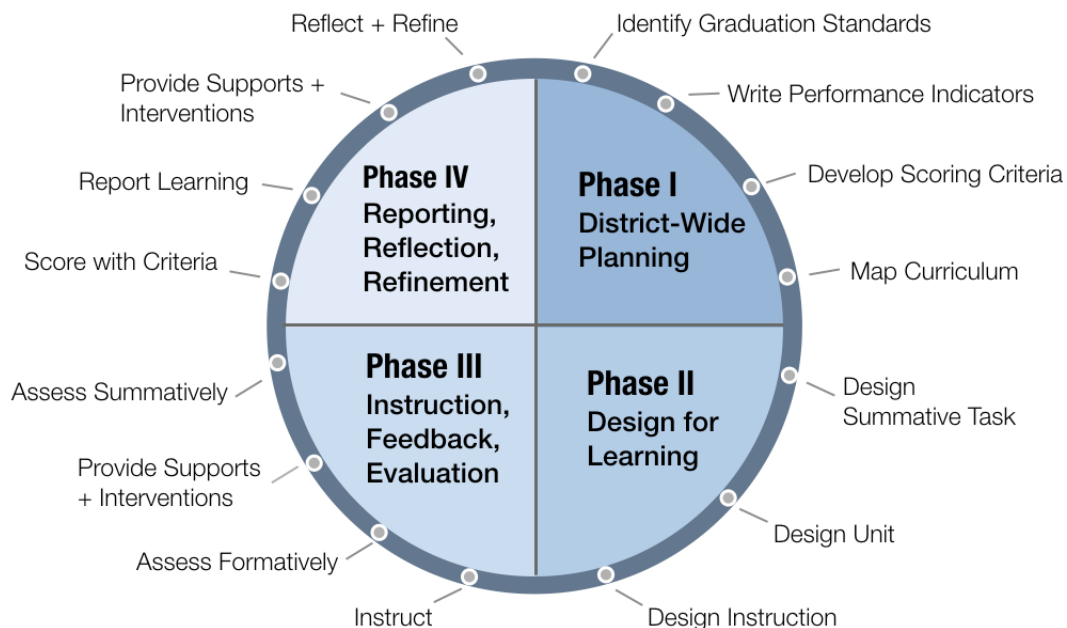
What You Need to Do

- Provide professional development time for teachers to adapt units and assessments to the district's proficiency-based model of teaching and learning.
- Provide time for teachers to collaboratively score common assessments using task-neutral scoring criteria in order to build common understanding of proficiency.

Timeline

Summer 2017 and ongoing throughout each school year.

Reminder: The steps we recommend and the resources we provide are grounded in the PBL Simplified Model we have created and assume a general level of familiarity with it.

Figure 1. Moving from Standards to Practice in a Proficiency-Based System

Reflect + Refine
Identify Graduation Standards
Provide Supports + Interventions
Write Performance Indicators
Report Learning
Develop Scoring Criteria
Score with Criteria
Map Curriculum
Assess Summatively
Design Summative Task
Provide Supports + Interventions
Design Unit
Assess Formatively
Instruct
Design Instruction

Phase IV Reporting, Reflection, Refinement
Phase I District-Wide Planning
Phase III Instruction, Feedback, Evaluation
Phase II Design for Learning

What does it mean to ensure that all students meet the standards for graduation? How will teaching and learning be different? How will students and teachers engage with each other in the day-to-day classroom? How will classroom practice change to ensure a more equitable, personalized, and rigorous learning environment? The GSP "Moving from Standards to Practice in a Proficiency-Based System" graphic, shown above, provides a framework for a "backward-planning" model of unit design that guides students' achievement of graduation standards in a supportive, personalized environment.

Designing learning to ensure equitable outcomes and a culture entailing personalized, rigorous expectations for all requires a broad commitment to collaborative practices, transparent processes, and consistent reflection and refinement. This graphic illustrates that some areas of work require full school engagement, while other areas are best undertaken individually or through small group collaboration. This brief outlines the important steps nested inside each of these four quadrants. When a system invests in this process, educators have the opportunity to build their capacity and be more responsive to the needs of their students. The graphic is a visual guide to the ongoing process of unit design, instruction, assessment, and refinement. The first quadrant reflects work that is done at the district level and, once in place, needs minimal revision. Though described here as an orderly sequence of steps, it's important to remember that in schools, the remaining three quadrants represent aspects of the teaching and learning cycle that are simultaneously at work on an ongoing basis.

I. District-Wide Planning: Alignment of standards with curriculum

To ensure an equitable learning experience for all, course curricula and units of study are aligned with locally developed content standards, performance indicators, and scoring criteria. These provide the scaffolding upon which to build a clear and transparent system of expectations and provides a means to increasing student agency in the learning process. Having clarity about what it means to become proficient in content areas and cross-cutting standards is an important start. Considering when and where students will have opportunities to demonstrate their learning of the standards and performance indicators is critical to a proficiency-based system. Identifying a limited number of indicators per course allows educators to design learning that emphasizes depth of knowledge and lifelong learning skills over coverage.

A school or district leader may find that the investment in the curriculum mapping process focuses conversation on learning and increases understanding about what is taught and when.

II. Design for Learning: Units designed to achieve core understandings

Oftentimes, and with the best of intentions, units are developed around interests that may engage learners but may not result in consistent outcomes. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) have suggested, designing units with the end in mind, "backward design," provides educators with the ability to connect their intended learning outcomes with students' interests. Such an approach encourages personalization, ensures equity, and supports every student in achieving the same rigorous outcomes.

Our backward design process guides teachers through the development of assessments and units. By first referencing their curriculum map, educators identify key understandings (performance indicators and related task-neutral scoring criteria). Then they consider how students might demonstrate their learning (i.e. assessment tasks). The evidence reported in a summative score may derive from exams, presentations, projects, a portfolio, or other means often chosen by the student.

Once there is clarity around the content of learning and ways in which learning will be assessed, then educators can develop learning targets and engaging experiences to support growth and understanding. Before the unit is implemented, it is most beneficial for educators to share their work and receive feedback from colleagues either during a common planning time or within a professional learning group.

III. Instruction, Feedback, Evaluation: Personalized classroom practice

In a personalized learning environment, students will have considerable choice in determining not only how they will reach the understandings associated with a unit, but also how they will provide evidence of achievement. The instructional process requires teachers to decide how they will assess students formatively, checking for understanding and providing timely and descriptive feedback to students against learning targets. Educators utilize a variety of processes to ensure that each student is getting what he or she needs in a timely manner and, ultimately, achieves and grows.

Proficiency-based learning is most productive and meaningful in an interactive, socially-connected environment—not in isolation—and where the emphasis is also on supporting the achievement of Maine's Guiding Principles. While technology

can be a powerful tool for teaching, learning and assessment, it should be just one of a broad spectrum of strategies used by teachers and students to plan, collaborate, and demonstrate learning. In a proficiency-based system, each student in a classroom may be at a different place in their learning journey due to individual strengths, needs and interests. This learning environment requires teachers to carefully orchestrate daily activities, making adjustments along the way to meet students' needs and support their timely progression.

While figure 1 depicts an orderly progression of essential steps, they may not necessarily be experienced in this way. For example, the steps from "formative assessment" through "scoring with rubric" form a sequence that may be repeated as a student works toward proficiency. In this environment, teachers continuously identify where various supports and interventions are needed and where the quality of work needs to be improved-all prior to first attempts at a summative assessment. This is a stage of productive struggle and early learning that is quite often a bumpy process. Ideally, teachers and students collaboratively decide when to attempt summative assessment tasks, understanding that more than one attempt may be needed to achieve proficiency. A system that provides students with multiple opportunities to attempt a summative assessment may be a challenging concept for some teachers and parents to embrace. It's important to underscore that in a proficiency system, what matters most is that students are able to demonstrate that they have learned, not how quickly they did so.

IV. Reporting, Reflection, Refinement: Ensuring students have met the standards

Thoughtful collaboration and mutual decision-making among teachers are characteristic of a supportive culture that promotes ongoing reflection and refinement—practices that ultimately lead to student success. Ideally, teachers score student work collaboratively and develop a shared agreement of proficiency over time, and also collect exemplars that represent quality student work aligned with performance indicators and standards.

A hallmark of any highly successful school is a learning community that continuously reflects upon its work and is unafraid to address important questions. In a proficiency system, these include: Will students put forth their best effort on the first attempt? Will they procrastinate on completing unit tasks? How much is enough time? How many "retakes" will be allowed? Will students will be required to achieve proficiency on all or some performance indicators for any given standard? Schools and districts will need to examine current grading beliefs and practices, engage in dialogue about the purpose of grades, and then collaboratively develop consistent grading practices that ensure equity for all students. In the end, raising these questions using this framework will guide the school's approach to grading and will provide consistent and clear communication of student progress.

As students adjust to this system of learning, especially in the early stages of implementation, teachers will need to provide coaching and support to students. This is particularly important in the areas of time management, making informed decision about the choices available to them, and recognizing when to access supports and interventions.

Reference

Wiggins, G, and McTighe, J. (2005). Understanding by design. (2nd. ed.) Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Resources

- *Assessment Pathways Simplified*
- *Policy Exemplar on Multiple Pathways*
- *Assessing Learning in a Proficiency-Based System*
- *Global Best Practices, 2nd edition: Teaching and Learning Best Practices*
- *Instruction in a Personalized Classroom*
- *Supporting, Collecting and Analyzing Evidence of Learning in a Proficiency-Based System*
- *Harnessing Teacher Knowledge: A Guide to Developing School-based Systems for Professional Learning and Planning*
- *First Response: A Guide to Designing and Delivering Classroom Interventions*
- *Sample 8th Grade Social Students Unit*

- *Designing Units of Instruction for Competency-Based Learning—Colorado Seminar Series Presentation, June 2016*
- *Unit Design: Stages and Steps*
- *GSP Unit Planning Template*

Addendum

Moving from Standards to Practice in a Proficiency System: Key to Steps

1. Identify 5 to 8 required **graduation standards** for each core content area. These may be adopted or adapted from the Maine standards, Common Core standards or from another school.
2. Develop, adopt or adapt 8 to 10 grade span **performance indicators** aligned with graduation standards.
3. Develop, adopt or adapt task-neutral **scoring criteria** to score performance indicators. Scoring criteria may be common across multiple courses or content areas.
4. Review/revise **curriculum maps** to ensure alignment of content with learning standards. Teachers develop curriculum maps as a way to organize content, avoid redundancies, and to ensure an orderly progression of concepts.
5. Design **summative assessment tasks** that will assess key understandings (performance indicators) aligned with standards. The planning backward design model involves designing assessments before identifying unit tasks.
6. **Design the unit**, including varied learning targets and materials needed to prepare the student for the summative assessment.
7. Include a range of strategies when **designing instruction** to meet a range of student needs and interests.
8. Ensure students interact with essential concepts in the **instruction** phase of the unit.
9. **Formatively assess** students to check for understanding during the learning process and make adjustments based upon the results.
10. **Provide supports and interventions** when students struggle with key concepts or need enrichment.
11. **Assess students summatively** at the end of the unit when they are ready to demonstrate proficiency.
12. **Score** summative assessments using task-neutral criteria.
13. **Report** proficiency-based learning progress to students and parents on a regular basis.
14. Provide ongoing **supports and interventions** when summative assessment scores indicate more work is necessary to achieve proficiency.
15. **Reflect and refine** collaboratively to ensure this process will continuously improve and increase student learning.