

What Is Proficiency Based Education?

Proficiency-based education is a systematic approach to classroom teaching and learning that breaks the existing mold in which some students excel, some do OK, and others fail. It helps every student – not just some or most students – acquire and demonstrate increasingly rigorous content knowledge and skills through the grades, until each student meets the high standards of knowledge and skill necessary for postsecondary success. These high postsecondary standards are what every student must reach upon leaving high school in order to succeed in postsecondary studies, work, and everyday life.

In a proficiency-based classroom, knowledge and skills tied to these standards are broken down into learning targets or objectives for each grade level and course. Each student starts a course knowing exactly what the learning targets are, what learning activities are involved in acquiring key knowledge and skills represented by those targets, and what things he or she must be able to do – through ongoing assessments – to demonstrate proficiency. Within lesson plans and learning experiences crafted by the teacher, students take more responsibility, work at mastering knowledge and skills at their own pace, and often monitor their own progress along with the teacher. Adept students can move along faster. Other students can take more time. As opposed to the traditional classroom, learning is the constant and time is the variable.

In a proficiency-based classroom, frequent assessment, or *formative* assessment as it is commonly known, has a key role in revealing how a student is doing in reaching learning targets and how well the instructional plan is supporting that effort. Formative assessment includes test taking, but relies just as much on student presentations, problem solving, group projects, or other forms of evidence that the student has acquired proficiency. In an algebra course, for example, to prove a grasp of real numbers and algebraic symbols, a student could employ a variety of means to evaluate, compute with, and determine equivalent numeric and algebraic expressions with real numbers and specified variables.

When students demonstrate proficiency in the required knowledge and skills, they are assessed, graded, and awarded credit on that basis only. Grading in whole or part for anything other than demonstrated proficiency (for example, behavior, whether positive or negative – or “extra credit” work) is not appropriate because it distorts the record of what a student has learned.

Teachers in this environment frequently collaborate with their peers to improve instruction, assessment, and student outcomes, often in professional learning communities created and sustained for that purpose. Classrooms are open for observation and collaboration.

Oregon has laid a good policy foundation for proficiency-based education, since 2003 permitting the award of credit to students for demonstrating – by means other than seat time and testing alone – that they are proficient in content knowledge and skills. Advocacy groups and teachers who follow this approach are encouraging wider adoption of this practice, along with stronger instructional leadership and professional learning communities in schools, and more professional development for educators in proficiency-based instruction, assessment, and learning.