



Policy Spotlight on New England

How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate Proficiency-Based High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools

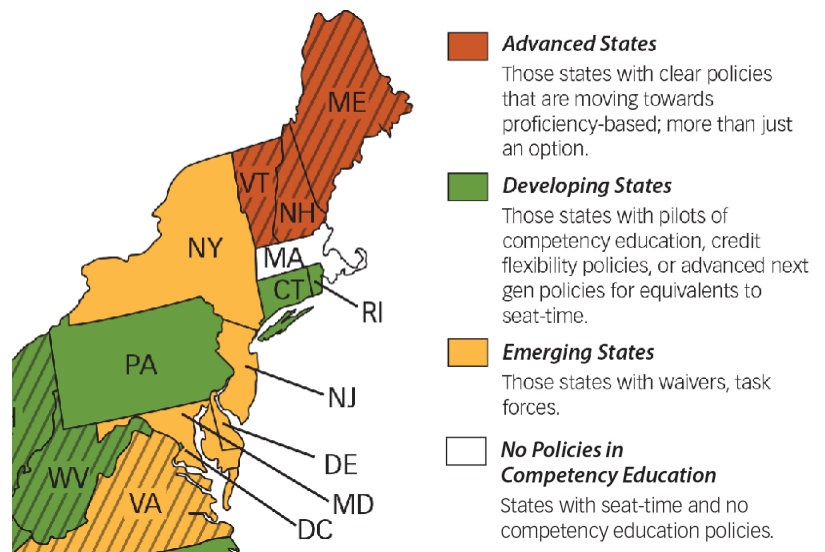
The movement toward proficiency-based learning is gaining momentum at secondary schools across New England and beyond (Figure 1). Proficiency-based learning is the system of instruction, assessment and grading based on demonstration of skills that meet performance standards or “proficiencies.” The goal of proficiency-based learning is to better prepare students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher education and 21st century careers.

As proficiency-based education models become more common across the country and the region, high school students and parents have raised questions and concerns regarding how proficiency-based transcripts will be viewed in the college admissions process—especially at highly selective US colleges and universities. Of greatest concern is whether proficiency-based learning and grading will disadvantage students in the college application and evaluation process.

To help answer these questions, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) and the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) convened a meeting of admissions leaders from highly selective New England colleges and universities and facilitated a robust discussion on the topic.

Overwhelmingly, these admissions leaders indicate that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in the highly selective admissions process. Moreover, according to some admissions leaders, features of the proficiency-based transcript model shared with the group provide important information for institutions seeking not just high-performing academics, but engaged, lifelong learners.

Figure 1: Proficiency-Based K-12 Education State Policies in the Northeast as of March 2015



Notes: Some states use “proficiency-based” while some states use “competency-based” to describe similar learning systems. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont are advancing towards state-wide transitions to proficiency-based education. Connecticut and Rhode Island allow individual schools to decide how students may accrue graduation credits, and Massachusetts has no formal legislation in place regarding proficiency-based education.

Source: Competency Works

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What is Proficiency-Based Learning?

In a proficiency-based model or system, students progress through courses and grade levels by demonstrating individual mastery of specific learning standards. Learning standards may vary by state or school system, but generally represent educational objectives a student should achieve by the end of a course or grade level. In a proficiency-based system, a student struggling to demonstrate proficiency is provided additional support or interventions until the student achieves the required skill or knowledge. Students who demonstrate proficiency engage in learning opportunities to extend or accelerate their learning. Proficiency-based learning allows educators to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses, and monitor learning progress over time.

Proficiency-based transcripts often also capture students' mastery of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills. A sample transcript shared with admissions leaders, for instance, captured cross-curricular skills described as "clear and effective communicator," "self-directed and lifelong learner," and "creative and practical problem solver"—all skills that are in high and increasing demand from both employers and higher education institutions (Figure 2). According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, employers ranked critical thinking and active listening among the most important skills in today's economy. A recent report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education also called for the consideration of "concern for others and the common good" in the admissions process. By capturing habits of work on the transcript, the proficiency-based model provides increasingly relevant information regarding a student's ability to succeed in today's world.

Habits of Work (HOW) Examples

- Attendance
- Participation
- Effort

The terminology to define these practices and policies vary, but they each strive for the same goal: to prepare students to succeed in the 21st century by being college and career ready. At the federal level, the newest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—the Every Student Succeeds Act—recognizes proficiency-based learning and invites new innovative accountability systems based on proficiency-based learning. In Maine, "proficiency-based education" will be required for public high school students graduating between 2018 and 2021. In New Hampshire, "competency-based learning" will be required in all public elementary and secondary schools by 2017. In Vermont, "proficiency-based learning" will be the sole criteria for graduation by 2020. Connecticut and Rhode Island give individual schools the option to determine how students accrue graduation credits, with no date set to transition all secondary schools to proficiency-based models. While there is no formal legislation in place regarding proficiency-based education and graduation in Massachusetts, some schools are currently implementing these practices (Figure 1).

Proficiency-Based Transcripts in the Context of Selective Admissions

As proficiency-based learning models become more widespread in New England states, high school students and families have raised concerns about how proficiency-based education will be viewed by highly selective institutions in the admissions process. In particular, students and families worry that proficiency-based education's perceived departure from traditional transcripts and grading systems will hinder admissions professionals' ability to fully comprehend and evaluate the caliber of candidates applying from these school districts. If this were true, students and parents worry that using a proficiency-based learning transcript would put them at a disadvantage in the competitive selective admission process. To address these concerns, NEBHE and NESSC convened a special meeting of admissions leaders from selective institutions across New England in January 2016.

All admissions leaders at the meeting overwhelmingly agree that students applying from proficiency-based educational systems will experience no disadvantage in the evaluation and admissions process.

In particular, admissions leaders point to the characteristics of their holistic review processes. Considering applications holistically allows for careful consideration of each applicant in his or her individualized context, as thorough attention is given to each part of the application and decisions are rendered based on the totality of an applicant's academic and personal profile, rather than grades or test scores alone. This requires a deep, comprehensive understanding of each applicant and the academic context from which he or she is applying.

Selective admission leaders at this meeting stressed how their institutions receive applications from across the country and around the world, which represent a diverse range of high school environments and a variety of grading scales, terminology and transcript design. Admissions officers work diligently to understand the nuances of each learning environment, which informs the context in which applicants are evaluated. Once admission officers thoroughly understand this context, they are able to evaluate the extent to which a student has taken advantage of the opportunities available in that particular learning environment.

In light of these institutions' use of the holistic review process, it is crucial that the documents which proficiency-based high schools provide to colleges and universities in their students' applications provide a clear and accurate picture of the learning environment and its particular characteristics. Transcripts and school profiles are especially important tools that admission officers rely on to learn about less familiar grading models. Given the trend toward proficiency-based learning in recent years, admissions leaders present at this meeting emphasized how clear, transparent transcripts and school profiles continue to help them understand necessary aspects of the proficiency-based learning model so they can review applications as accurately and efficiently as possible. This efficiency is especially important given the high volume of applications these selective institutions receive every year.

Key Takeaways:

- Holistic review allows admission professionals to carefully consider each applicant in his or her individualized learning environment
- Proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles should explain what learning standards mean within the context of the particular high school
- The inclusion of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills on proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles are particularly useful to admission leaders

For proficiency-based high schools, admissions leaders emphasize that the transcript and school profile should explain what learning standards mean within the context of the particular high school. While the transcript provides information about an individual student's achievements, the school profile provides contextual information about the curriculum, grading procedures, standardized testing history and record of college attendance, as well as information on school and local community demographics. The school profile also provides an opportunity for high schools to clearly and directly highlight important characteristics that differentiate one school or learning environment from others—information that admissions lead-

ers emphasize is especially helpful. While the admissions leaders present unanimously agreed that students from proficiency-based systems receive no disadvantage in the admissions process, they also caution that lack of information or transparency in transcripts or school profiles can present a hurdle in an admissions officer's attempt to accurately assess a student's achievements.

Admissions leaders were particularly enthusiastic about the inclusion of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills on the proficiency-based transcript (Figure 2). Information regarding students' habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills are increasingly of interest to selective admissions offices as they seek to admit students who will contribute fully to campus life. In addition to academic achievements, selective colleges and universities report that they are deeply interested in the behaviors and attitudes, such as love of learning and intellectual curiosity, that make students great learners and full contributors to the vibrancy of a campus community. The incorporation of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills into the grading system, and evaluated in concert with letters of recommendation from teachers and counselors, help to assist admissions officers in identifying students best suited to thrive at their institutions.

Figure 2: Maine's Cross-Curricular Skills Featured on Sample Proficiency-Based Learning Transcript

Graduation Standards: Cross-Curricular Skills		Proficiency Level
Maine Learning Results Guiding Principles *The achievement of graduation standards is verified over time as students demonstrate proficiency through multiple assessments, projects, portfolios, and exhibitions.	Clear and effective communicator	3.0
	Self-directed and lifelong learner	3.25
	Creative and practical problem solver	3.50
	Responsible and involved citizen	3.75
	Integrative and informed thinker	4.0

Notes: These cross-curricular skills, coupled with Habits of Work (HOW) related to participation and effort, were of particular interest to admission professionals present at this meeting.

Source: Great Schools Partnership

Final Thoughts & Recommendations

As secondary schools in New England and across the country continue to shift toward using proficiency-based learning models, higher education institutions will see increasing numbers of applicants sending proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles. The admissions deans and directors of selective colleges and universities convened by NEBHE and NESSC agree that students from proficiency-based high schools will not be disadvantaged in their holistic review processes, especially if proficiency-based high schools develop clear, cohesive transcripts and school profiles that articulate the nuances of their proficiency-based learning standards and show how each student has performed in their learning environments. The inclusion of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills are particularly exciting to these selective admissions leaders, as they convey important insights about how students will contribute to campus life beyond the grades they earn and the extracurricular activities in which they participate.

In light of the results of this meeting with selective admission leaders, proficiency-based high schools should consider whether their current transcripts and school profiles are providing admission officers with these important insights into their schools. High school leaders may visit the Great Schools Partnership website to see examples of proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles. College-bound students and their families may also research admission policies and practices at individual institutions to which they are interested in applying, as admissions philosophies and practices vary across institutions. Most institutions provide detailed information regarding their specific admissions process on their website and are available to field phone calls from prospective students and families. Overall, students and families should feel reassured that selective admission professionals strive to gain a holistic understanding of every student's high school context as they review applications for admission.

Next Steps for Students and Schools:

- Students are encouraged to review the admission philosophies and practices of individual institutions to which they are applying
- High school counselors and administrators can utilize resources on the Great Schools Partnership website to help improve the proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles they provide to colleges and universities

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About the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)

Established in 1955 by six visionary New England governors, NEBHE is a regional compact that works across New England to: help leaders assess, develop and implement education practices and policies of regional significance; promote regional cooperation that encourages efficient sharing of education resources; and strengthen the relationship between higher education and the regional economy. Learn more at www.nebhe.org.



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