

# Vermont

## Comprehensive Policies of Personalization and Proficiency-Based Learning

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## About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative drawing on the knowledge of practitioners, its partners, and an advisory board. The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization, with project management facilitated by MetisNet.



For more information on competency education, you can visit [CompetencyWorks.org](http://CompetencyWorks.org), read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.

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**VERMONT**  
 Comprehensive Policies of  
 Personalization and  
 Proficiency-Based Learning  
*Montpelier School District*

Vermont understands that personalization and proficiency-based education go hand-in-hand. In order to allow greater flexibility, schools need processes in place that create greater accountability for students to reach proficiency and make progress.

Authority from several governing bodies was needed in order to put into place a comprehensive policy that could serve as a platform for a personalized, proficiency-based system. In 2013, the Board of Education approved the **Education Quality Standards**, which went into effect the next year, while the state legislature passed **Act 77** to expand flexible pathways.

**IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT**

The combined power of these two policies has created a clear message that the state is taking a new direction. However, local control is respected in Vermont (as in most of the other states). Thus, supervisory unions have substantial leeway in how they organize a personalized, proficiency-based system. The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) is providing substantial support in the form of training and sample resources, with the understanding that the supervisory unions will develop systems that reflect their communities and build upon their strengths.

Vermont hopes to help supervisory unions and schools reach a deep understanding that can help them launch implementation efforts through a **seminar series** organized by the **Great Schools Partnership**. The series includes sessions on proficiency-based learning, personalization, flexible pathways, student work and norming, grading and reporting, community engagement, assessing transferable skills, student voice, instruction, and graduation. To date, more than half of the state’s supervisory unions have participated in the training.

*Instructional practices shall promote personalization for each student, and enable each student to successfully engage in the curriculum and meet the graduation requirements... Schools must provide students the opportunity to experience learning through flexible and multiple pathways, including but not limited to career and technical education, virtual learning, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment and early college... Students must be allowed to demonstrate proficiency by presenting multiple types of evidence, including but not limited to teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects.*

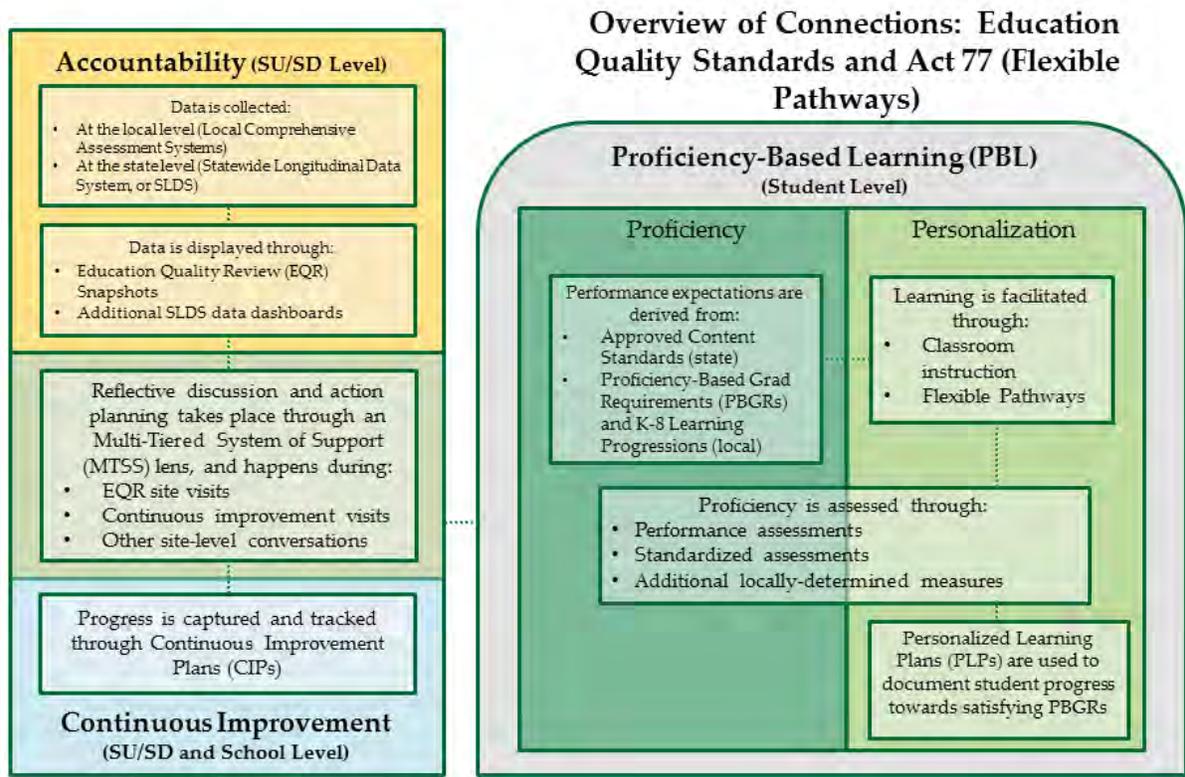
– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY  
 STANDARDS

Supervisory unions receive \$22,000 for teams of five-to-seven people who participate for two days per month over the course of the school year. The strategy is that at least one member will be trained as a facilitator to support implementation and to train others. The next step is for teams to create implementation plans. In addition, the AOE has created a number of tools to support supervisory unions and schools as they think through the questions they will need to answer for implementing each of the policy elements.

Other efforts that are supporting schools in developing personalized, proficiency-based systems include New England Secondary School Consortium’s **League of Innovative Schools**, the **Vermont Professional Learning Network**, and **Partnership for Change**, which is providing support to Winooski and Burlington.

**VERMONT’S POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Vermont approaches personalized learning broadly with attention to instruction, personalized learning plans, and flexible pathways. The proficiency-based system is primarily embedded within the introduction of a proficiency-based diploma, with additional policy elements in the comprehensive system of assessments and tiered supports.



## PROFICIENCY-BASED DIPLOMA

Starting with the class of 2020, the EQS creates a proficiency-based diploma that expects students to become proficient in Visual & Performing Arts, Global Citizenship, Health Education, English Language Arts & Literacy, Mathematics, Physical Education, and Science as well as the Transferable Skills of Clear and Effective Communication, Self-Direction, Creative and Practical Problem Solving, Responsible and Involved Citizenship, and Informed and Integrative Thinking.

In its efforts to support supervisory unions without insisting on one approach, the AOE has provided sample **proficiency-based graduation requirements** in the content areas as well as examples of performance indicators for each of the transferable skills. Not only may school boards set their own graduation requirements, including transferable skills, but the AOE suggests that they should. Recognizing that the number of standards creates a high degree of granularity, the AOE states, “it is unrealistic to expect that graduation requirements will include them all. Therefore, it will be necessary for local policy to identify the key standards that will serve as the basis for graduation decisions.”

Vermont clearly states in the EQS that students are expected to demonstrate proficiency against the standards and not based on a prescribed number of years (math is an exception). The EQS states that while the previous regulation “allowed for the use of Carnegie units to determine graduation decisions, EQS requires that progression and graduation decisions be based on the demonstration of proficiency.” While making clear that proficiency is “the sole means for determining progress and graduation,” the EQS allows schools an option regarding whether to continue to use credits: *Schools may or may not use credits for the purposes of demonstrating that a student has met the graduation requirements. When used, credits must specify the proficiencies demonstrated in order to attain a credit and shall not be based on time spent in learning. Further, students may receive credit for learning that takes place outside of the school, the school day, or the classroom. Any credits earned must occur under the supervision of an appropriately licensed educator.*

A powerful policy change in the EQS is that the responsibility for curriculum is moved from being a school responsibility to the supervisory union. The intent is to create better alignment and consistency across schools. This is an important change in terms of implementing competency education, as it will improve curricular alignment so that students can advance beyond grade level.



***“Proficiency-based learning” and “proficiency-based graduation” refer to systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.***

– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY STANDARDS

### Personalizing Instructional Practice

Vermont's policy regarding personalized instruction is simple. Instruction should be research-based and it should be effective in helping students meet the graduation requirements. The state is also emphasizing the importance of the tiered system of support in ensuring students are successful.

### Personalized Learning Plans

Act 77 sets the expectation that all seventh through twelfth grade students will have **personalized learning plans** (PLP) that include any additional supports students require to be successful in school. Vermont sees the PLP as an important step in engaging students in owning and reflecting upon their education as well as creating a formal mechanism to engage parents or legal guardians on an annual basis. Vermont also wants the PLP to be a catalytic tool for creating more experiential learning opportunities based on students' interests and aspirations.



*Personal Learning Plans are the mechanism designed to engage students, parents, and educators in a partnership to design a student's unique flexible pathway to graduation. The intention is to put students at the center of the construction of their own learning experience, which evidence indicates will result in greater relevance and engagement, and therefore better outcomes.*

– VERMONT EDUCATION QUALITY STANDARDS

To support supervisory unions in developing the PLP capacity, Vermont created a work group to provide guidance, a self-assessment tool for supervisory unions and schools, a conceptual framework, critical elements, and a sample template of a PLP. They also issued guidance on the relationship between individualized education programs (IEPs), personalized learning plans (PLPs), and proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGR).

On the understanding that proficiency-based learning isn't just about flexible use of time, but also about the delivery of flexible instructional support, Vermont requires supervisory unions to offer a system of support to be specified in the PLP in the EQS.

### Flexible Pathways

**Act 77, Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion** was designed with three purposes in mind: 1) to encourage and support school supervisory unions to provide high-quality educational experiences; 2) to promote post-secondary readiness; and 3) to increase school completion and pursuit of post-secondary learning. Specifically, it creates opportunities for students to: *demonstrate learning through flexible and multiple pathways, including but not limited to career and technical education, virtual learning, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment and early college.* Pathways must be aligned with standards and supervised by appropriately licensed educators.

A flexible pathway is defined as “any combination of high-quality academic and experiential components leading to secondary school completion and post-secondary readiness, which may include assessments that allow the student to apply his or her knowledge and skills to tasks that are of interest to that student.” Although the legislation includes a list of different types of programming – dual enrollment, early college, virtual learning, and work-based learning – it is designed to enable students to create unique pathways. Understanding that some students leave school without completing their diploma for a variety of reasons, they have also included High School Completion Programs and adult diploma programs as part of the flexible pathways. To further support anytime/anywhere learning, Vermont awarded a grant to the Expanded Learning Coalition, a collaborative effort of supervisory unions and schools to increase the use of expanded learning opportunities within flexible pathways.

### **Comprehensive System of Assessments**

The regulations in the EQS took a more direct approach in requiring supervisory unions to have a comprehensive system of assessments. It starts with the expectation that students should be able to demonstrate proficiency through multiple types of evidence. It articulates seven qualities of the system of assessments:

1. assesses the standards approved by the State Board of Education;
2. employs a balance of assessment types, including but not limited to, teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects;
3. includes both formative and summative assessments;
4. enables decisions to be made about student progression and graduation, including measuring proficiency-based learning;
5. informs the development of Personalized Learning Plans and student support;
6. provides data that informs decisions regarding instruction, professional learning, and educational resources and curriculum; and
7. reflects strategies and goals outlined in the supervisory union’s Continuous Improvement Plan.

In addition, Vermont requires that the performance criteria be transparent to students, parents, and educators.

### **Ensuring Quality through the Qualitative Review**

There are many strategies for states to determine quality of the schools, with end-of-year state accountability exams serving as only one of them. Vermont policy contains a broader perspective of quality than simply the performance of student achievement. The EQS requires AOE to conduct regular qualitative reviews. The AOE is building this capacity by having conducted eight reviews of supervisory units this year with a goal of twenty reviews in the coming year. The focus is now on the supervisory union level as compared to the school level based on the strategic goal of building more coherence and consistency through the supervisory union, as well as the practical reason that the supervisory units tend to be small.

Currently, Vermont does not intend to use the reviews within their accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Instead, they hope that the qualitative reviews will become meaningful opportunities for technical assistance. Given that the reviews will include peers from other supervisory unions, this will also help to strengthen networks, disseminate effective practices, and contribute to future system-building.

### Going Forward

Vermont is in the midst of a dramatic change of their education system, with four workgroups being developed at AOE to help guide the process of alignment: 1) Proficiency-Based Learning; 2) Personalization & Flexible Pathways; 3) Multi-Tiered System of Support Team; and 4) the Education Quality Review/School Effectiveness. With their strong history of community engagement, and with school budgets passed by citizens at town meetings, the sense of reciprocal accountability is very strong. The AEO is also collaborating with Great Schools Partnership, educators from around the state, and generating student feedback to create the Vermont Transferable Skills Assessment Supports (VTSAS) including transferable skill-specific sample tasks, task models, scoring criteria, and student work samples.

Most supervisory unions are small, as are the classroom sizes, making it easier to engage communities and educators in moving through the powerful change in values and mindset. Many schools have the pieces of a personalized, proficiency-based system in place with full implementation expected to start in the coming year in leading supervisory unions. Thus, CompetencyWorks will be making visits in 2017 after schools have had a full year of implementation.

## A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN VERMONT

### MONTPELIER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Montpelier School District has been using personalized learning plans since the late 1990s, and now link to graduation proficiencies. With the comprehensive policies of the state to advance personalized learning, flexible pathways and proficiency-based learning, Montpelier is thinking more deeply about how to use the plans to engage and motivate students. One of the first steps is to operationalize the seven **transferable skills** – reading, writing, communication, problem-solving, habits of learning, citizenship, and creativity – so that educators can effectively **assess and provide effective feedback** on key skills across the curriculum and over time. Another critical element is the reflection and goal setting provided by exhibitions of learning.



*The state created a set of policies that are all around the same work. The common theme is building student agency. We want our students to know themselves as learners, to have the skills to be successful learners, and to have opportunities to build the transferable skills all along their path from kindergarten to graduation.*

– MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM & TECHNOLOGY, MONTPELIER SCHOOL DISTRICT, VERMONT

Montpelier High School (MHS) uses the Understanding by Design (UBD) framework (Wiggins & McTighe) to start with the end in mind, namely college- and career-readiness demonstrated by proficiency in transferable skills supported by rigorous content-area knowledge. Teachers identify one transferable skill to focus on for each unit as an enduring understanding. For example, a science unit might emphasize organization and evidence in writing in biology class. Drawing upon the learning objectives developed by teachers, the district will then begin to build the framework for the entire district. The goal is to create a **common set of language for educators to discuss improvements in instruction and assessment** as they increase their intentionality of what students should know and be able to do.

One tool MHS is finding helpful in managing implementation are key documents that can engage a broad set of stakeholders in understanding and helping create the new system. The following documents can be powerful leverage points for engagement:

- Description of the graduation requirements
- Program of studies or the list of courses with the specific standards that students will be expected to demonstrate within each course.
- Proficiency-based report cards
- Transcript changes
- School profiles that include description of pedagogy, what they want for students to learn and be able to do, extended learning opportunities, and data to describe performance in a personalized, proficiency-based structure

Throughout the year, Montpelier has invited the community into the conversation in a four-part series titled The Future of School. In so doing, families and stakeholders had the opportunity to be both early learners of the changes, as well as design partners.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study on **Montpelier School District**.*

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