

Verification of Graduation Standards: Strategies for determining proficiency

What You Need to Know

- Graduation standards reflect the broad, integrated concepts of each discipline and require students to demonstrate, apply, and evaluate knowledge in multiple ways.
- Schools should limit the number of graduation standards to 5–8 per content area.
- Grade-tracking systems must have the flexibility to record assessment results by performance indicator and accommodate multiple attempts.

What You Need to Do

- Ensure that your verification system does not disadvantage any students who may struggle with early demonstration tasks, but does provide opportunities for students who may learn at different paces and in different ways.
- Communicate to stakeholders an explanation of how your graduation standards are verified, including the role of capstone projects and portfolios in the assessment process.

Timeline

Spring 2017

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.

To earn a high school diploma, students must develop and demonstrate both a strong knowledge base and a deep level of conceptual understanding of each required graduation standard. There are actually two verification steps used in a proficiency-based learning system. First, throughout a grading period, teachers accumulate summative assessment scores of student achievement on performance indicators. The collection of these values is aggregated to generate a score that represents student achievement on each performance indicator. Second, the graduation standard score is then derived using the collection of aggregated scores from the performance indicators related to that standard. This information brief focuses on the second step in this process, the determination of graduation standard achievement. This may be accomplished in two primary ways, with some variations: a body of evidence verification or mathematical verification. Some schools use a hybrid of these two approaches as described below.

Body of Evidence Verification of Graduation Standards

This method requires a formal review process to evaluate portfolios, capstone projects and other student work using common criteria. Ideally, teams of teachers review collections of past work, accomplishments, student exhibitions, and accompanying scores using an agreed upon common process. Though more complex and time-consuming, this method encourages students and teachers to thoughtfully review and reflect upon the quality of work produced and the effectiveness of the learning process over the high school experience. This method more easily allows students to include evidence from a range of alternative learning pathways that occur outside of school. It enables teachers to consider learning across multiple efforts and provides a more accurate and comprehensive picture of achievement. Further, when students are actively involved in presenting evidence to teachers, parents, and the community, they take greater ownership in their learning.

Verification by this process requires professional development for teachers in portfolio evaluation. It requires a schedule that provide students with time and support to collect and select portfolio entries. Students will need to grasp the criteria for success, and to choose work that reflects the full body of performance indicators used across courses that are required to meet graduation standards.



In many schools, students meet graduation requirements through a combination of coursework and a capstone project, passage project, or senior project that also includes a portfolio of best works to demonstrate evidence of achievement of standards. It is important to communicate to parents and other stakeholders the role of capstone projects and portfolios in meeting graduation requirements, as schools may include these strategies as part of a hybrid approach that also includes mathematical verification. This strategy assures that students not only meet standards through ongoing course assessments but graduate with the ability to describe their particular strengths and weaknesses and to also share particular talents and interests.

For most schools, it would be logistically challenging and impractical at scale to use a body of evidence approach for content area graduation standards. However, transferrable skills, such as the Guiding Principles and habits of work, are more easily assessed using a body of evidence approach. These are ideals and practices that students learn and refine over time. The advantages of collecting and presenting evidence are increased student engagement, ownership, and deeper learning. While we recognize that transferrable skills are integrated into classroom content and are assessed within content area performance indicators, culminating events, such as capstone projects, illustrate how these skills are applied when students produce quality work of their own personal interest.

Mathematical Verification of Graduation Standards

While there are many strategies that could be used for mathematical verification, we suggest using one of the three following strategies: (1) calculating the average of the aggregate score of all performance indicators aligned to the same standard; (2) requiring minimum proficiency in the majority of performance indicators within a standard; or (3) requiring minimum proficiency in all performance indicators within a standard. Maine's proficiency-based graduation standard is silent on the approach schools should employ. In a 1–4 scoring system, an aggregated score of 3 for content standards is usually required as the minimum threshold for proficiency. A school can provide students with supports and interventions, additional time, and opportunities to re-assess in order to achieve proficiency on each graduation standard. The key is to use one process consistently across the school.

To determine a graduation standard score we recommend the first strategy: calculating the average of aggregate performance indicator scores related to the particular standard. As with the acquisition of any skill or growing understanding of any complex concept, practice, feedback, and time are necessary before mastery can be achieved. If we care most about whether proficiency is actually achieved, then our system for determining eventual proficiency should weigh scores at the performance indicator level from more recent attempts more heavily than those from earlier ones (for more on this, please see [Brief #5](#)). However, once we have aggregate scores for each performance indicator, these scores may be averaged to determine progress toward graduation standards related to those performance indicators.

Schools need to adopt a fair and equitable approach when a student is proficient on most, but not all, of the performance indicators within the same graduation standard. There may be a number of reasons why a student might experience a particular hurdle, even after multiple attempts, on any given performance indicator. Schools will need to adopt a consistent approach in those instances where proficiency is not required on every performance indicator. This is one of the reasons GSP recommends identifying a small and manageable number of graduation standards (5–8) and performance indicators (8–10) as a reasonable approach to determining proficiency in any given content area.

In the early years of implementation, there is reason to allow for refinement and growth in your proficiency system. As with any comprehensive school improvement initiative, the system needs to live in a learning community where improvements and adjustments are constantly unfolding. A proficiency-based learning system is not intended to be unrealistically high stakes, incompatible with real life, nor unforgiving with respect to individual differences and talents.

Students cannot be expert in all things, but they can still be successful. A student might never understand the concept of chemical equilibrium in high school, but may be successful in most other topics in chemistry. Teachers need to collaborate and agree on where there is room for flexibility on required performance indicators and when partial proficiency may be acceptable after multiple attempts. These are challenging decisions. In a traditional system, these issues are not part of the discussion as grades are determined by averaging, and knowledge gaps in one topic can be masked by success in another other topic, or by completing an “extra credit” project to ensure a “passing” grade. As schools evolve to a proficiency-based system there should be safety valves for all participants. Teachers' capacity to design tasks and assessing evidence of learning over time will improve, especially if they have collaborative planning time.

Resources

- *Verifying Proficiency: Graduation Standards*
- *Understanding Standards: A Glossary of Education Reform Guide*
- *Supporting, Collecting, and Analyzing Evidence of Learning in a Proficiency-Based System*