PROFICIENCY SCALES IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Create a progression for learning and achievement.

Measuring student progress and designing instruction to maximize it can be challenging. That's why many districts are increasing their use of or are committing to proficiency scales.

"The proficiency scales provide clarity on learning targets and current level of performance," explains Debbie Aholt, principal of Meridian Elementary in Meridian, Idaho.

And that's crucial because educational research suggests that teacher clarity positively influences student achievement.

A CLEARER PATH TO INSTRUCTION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Proficiency scales boost clarity by establishing a progression of knowledge and skills encompassed within standards. From there, teachers can develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

The scales enable improvements in:

INSTRUCTION. Proficiency scales support standards-based learning by defining mastery of the most valuable standards and topics. Lesson plans move from a list of activities to clear learning targets and instructional strategies that are more student-centered and differentiated. The clarity and ownership that proficiency scales provide can also lead to stronger professional learning communities.

LEARNING. Students also benefit from the clarity; they understand precisely what they must know and

do to demonstrate proficiency. They're empowered to take ownership of their learning, improve the accuracy of their self-reporting on current levels and next steps, and set more effective goals for learning.

ASSESSMENT. With scales in place, a teacher or a team of teachers can be more confident that they're evaluating effectively. This boosts instructional quality and effectiveness across grade levels and within content areas. It also improves accountability at the room, PLC, building and district levels.

GRADING AND REPORTING. Proficiency scale-based grading and reporting use multiple scores within a content area or course based on mastery. For example, a fourth-grade student could earn multiple mathematics scores, one for each of the four proficiency scales taught during the grading period:

1. **Place Value = 3.0**

2. **Addition = 2.5**

3. **Subtraction = 2.5**

4. **Adding & Subtracting Fractions = 3.0**

With more data points tied to specific standards and skills, each student's learning and progression comes into clearer focus, and strengths and areas needing improvement are easily identified.

TRANSITIONING TO PROFICIENCY SCALES

"The shift [to proficiency scales] can be challenging for educators because many do not know how to talk with their colleagues about learning and may feel a lack of expertise," Aholt explains. "The same idea applies to administrators discussing learning with their teachers, and likewise, teachers talking to their students about learning."

To ease the transition and improve adoption:

ROLL OUT GRADUALLY. Using scales requires some adjustments to instruction, assessment and feedback practices, which can cause concern and resistance. Minimize this roadblock by developing a timeline for development and implementation. A gradual approach reduces anxiety and allows educators to learn without pressure. "We took our time and allowed teams to start small in order to build confidence, ownership and success," Aholt recalls.

What are Proficiency Scales?

Proficiency scales are used to articulate learning progressions and inform lesson-planning and assessment. They show growth toward goals with three levels of difficulty:

1. **target content**

2. **simpler content**

3. **more complex content**

Teachers use the scales to plan what students need to know for mastery and test performance. They can also use them to structure direct instruction, practice time, deepening lessons and knowledge application activities; and design assessments for each unit or topic addressed. When shared with students, both pupil and instructor are engaged in working toward higher achievement. ■

Becoming a High-Reliability School

By providing deeper insight into student achievement and teacher effectiveness, proficiency scales create high-reliability schools that support:

- **A safe, supportive and collaborative culture.**

- **Effective teaching in every classroom.**

- **A guaranteed and viable curriculum.**

- **Standards-referenced reporting.**

- **A competency-based education.**

PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT. Scaffolding teachers builds confidence in creating their own scales. "Providing more training, like short video lessons, would be helpful for those small bursts of learning that we do in our schools," she advises. "We continually need refreshers and instruction that pushes us to do better."

EMPHASIZE COLLABORATION. The most important cultural change for many schools is increased teacher collaboration. PLCs and other teacher teams that collaborate frequently on creating and refining proficiency scales experience more success in and satisfaction from implementation. Thus, a much stronger focus on the PLC process is a key consideration for any building or district leader. "The creation of the scales in collaborative teams was critical to our guaranteed and viable curriculum. The time we spent writing proficiency scales ensured that teachers agreed on prerequisite skills, vocabulary, proficiency and extensions," Aholt says.

EMPOWER STUDENTS. Students have more agency in their learning when they know what they're trying to achieve and can track their own progress. "Our students use the proficiency scale to explain what they are learning and how they will know when they have learned it," Aholt explains. At Meridian Elementary, scales are posted in every classroom and students keep them in their data notebooks.

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS. Proficiency scales and standards-based learning are iterative processes that take time to produce results. Creating and sharing a timeline reduces frustration, improves understanding and yields quality products. Start with developing scales, gradually implementing them, then refining them continually. "Patience and perseverance are needed as you take the time to learn and provide the ownership and clarity your staff and students deserve," she asserts.

Aholt is a true believer in proficiency scales and their effect on instructional effectiveness and student learning. Her advice to principals and administrators considering a shift? "Jump! Just jump! Waiting for it to be perfect won't happen, but the student and teacher achievement gains will."

"We had struggled in the past with instruction not being at grade level, and many of our students were not reaching proficiency," recalls Debbie Aholt, principal of Meridian Elementary in the West Ada School District.

MERIDIAN ELEMENTARY'S MOVE TO PROFICIENCY SCALES

To address the problem, the Idaho-based district engaged Marzano Resources to implement proficiency scales.

"We transitioned to proficiency scales because the clarity and ownership they created were undeniable, and we knew that student achievement would increase. The scales make it clear the level at which all learning must occur." They also improve student engagement, ownership and achievement by teaching them to explain what they're learning and how they will know they have learned it.

The results are clear:

- Learning goals included more prerequisite skills.

- Instructors charted a dramatic increase in the level of direct vocabulary instruction.

- PLCs increased the use of formative assessments to drive instruction, "unlike anything we had seen before," Aholt notes.

- Checks for understanding were increasingly written into lesson plans and were clearly connected to proficiency scales.

"The visibility and exposure to the levels of student ownership [we were] building with proficiency scales increased the level of ownership in our staff," Aholt adds. ■

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>
> — **DEBBIE AHOLT,**
> *Principal, Meridian Elementary in Meridian*

HOW MARZANO RESOURCES MAKES THE TRANSITION SMOOTHER

Marzano Resources' skilled and knowledgeable experts help schools and districts transition to proficiency scale-based learning. "They know about what has worked in other schools and districts, how to plan for successful implementation, and how to overcome the common pitfalls and challenges," explains Jan Hoegh, an author and associate for Marzano Resources. "We have a wealth of resources to support the implementation of proficiency scales in a school or district, including books, example documents, and already developed proficiency scales that can be customized to meet the needs of a particular school or district."

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Learn more about Marzano Resources' proficiency scale services.