



Defining Proficiency Through Teamwork

One school uses both vertical and grade-level teams to tackle proficiency.

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by Teresa Tulipana

Ask average teachers to tell you about No Child Left Behind, and they will mention that NCLB requires all students to be proficient by 2014. Proficiency has, without a doubt, become the buzzword in education.

Defining proficiency is a difficult task that demands collaboration from many stakeholders. It requires:

- Educators to engage in frequent and regular conversations about what they believe to be worth knowing, and what students should be able to do;
- A focus on standards-based work that allows students and staff to be on the same page about what is important; and
- The loss of autonomy and the development of common goals.

One School's Journey

Hawthorn Elementary School, located in Missouri's Park Hill School District, began its journey toward defining proficiency three years ago when it joined the Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project. The project works toward raising student performance on the Missouri Show-Me Standards by requiring staff to collaborate regularly. In a collaborative effort, staff members define proficiency, examine student work through collaborative teaming, and habitually rethink and revisit how student work is assessed and how students learn.

As Hawthorn's staff developed into a professional learning community, our initial tasks were to establish a collaborative culture and define proficiency. Grade-level expectations are a foundation for proficiency that had been provided to all Missouri schools. Grade-level expectations define what students should know and be able to do, as well as prepare students for the Missouri Show-Me Standards. The Park Hill School District aligned its curriculum with Missouri's grade-level expectations, leaving little to chance. Though it may appear that defining proficiency at the school level would be an easy task, it was not.

The Team Approach

Understanding expectations and systemically interpreting them are two distinct tasks. Some expectations are more clearly stated than others. For example, the grade-level expectation that requires students to be able to "demonstrate concepts of print: upper and lower case letters," is much more explicit than the grade-level expectation that requires students to be able to "write narrative text that includes related sentences."

Tackling the ambiguity of grade-level expectations requires extensive professional dialogue. To accomplish this task, Hawthorn Elementary established two levels of collaborative teams. Vertical teams were created to address mathematics and communication arts across grade levels, while grade-specific collaborative teams were created to enhance common expectations for student learning.

Vertical Teams

Our efforts with vertical collaborative teams had a rocky beginning. We established group norms, focused on student data, dedicated time to our work, and communicated our efforts to the school's leadership council. We thought we did everything right, but we missed a critical element. We failed to shift our focus from products to results. For example, our vertical teams produced programs, like family reading nights, to enhance student learning. Though the programs were beneficial, they did little to help create a common definition of proficiency, or address expectations. And there is little evidence as to whether the programs contributed to improved student results.

During the second year of our collaborative efforts, vertical teams were required to engage in more substantial discussions of student data and grade-level expectations. They also analyzed how the district curriculum supported the achievement of these expectations, and explored how work at one grade level contributed to the efforts of the next. Though the word proficiency was never explicitly discussed, the year of conversation created a culture that focused on common expectations and, inadvertently, proficiency.

Grade-Level Teams

Though it may have been a rocky start for Hawthorn Elementary's vertical teams, grade-level teams quickly embraced the focus on expectations and proficiency. They created common assessments to address essential outcomes for each content area. These common assessments were then used to regularly monitor student progress toward mastery of expectations. Common assessments, however, are only effective when they are scored in a similar fashion. To overcome this obstacle, grade-level teams created scoring guides to set the proficiency criteria for each assessment. Connecting scoring guides to criteria was one of Hawthorn's first steps toward creating a common definition of proficiency.

The next steps for our staff were to examine and discuss student work, and to create a system of checks and balances. This process was helped by an examination of student work led by the district's instructional coaches. We also revisited the idea that examining student work has two purposes: 1) to lead us to diagnostic conclusions about a student's strengths, as well as opportunities for improvement, and 2) to encourage teams to consider how feedback is provided to students.

Currently, Hawthorn Elementary's vertical teams are targeting areas for improvement, and building upon the successes of grade-level teams. Each vertical team is studying methods of gaining proficiency for a single area of student achievement. The study includes an analysis of grade-level expectations, curricular support for the area, and a review of proficiency assessments across grade levels. This work has resulted in both a better understanding of the reasons students struggle to meet particular expectations, and the steps the system needs to take to develop student proficiency.

The process of defining proficiency expectations is time-intensive, but it is also beneficial. The staff at Hawthorn Elementary has come to realize that developing common expectations assures that all students are held to the same level of proficiency. We have discovered that defining common proficiency expectations enhances our ability to provide feedback to students, and makes us better prepared to share criteria for success with students and families. We have come to value the benefits of engaging in professional conversations, and have learned that though we may sacrifice autonomy in the classroom, we gain common goals for success when we collaboratively define proficiency.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How might the faculty work together to define proficiency?
2. What would we need to do to develop performance standards or grade-level expectations for English/language arts and mathematics?
3. What might we do to align common formative assessments to the essential performance standards at each grade level?
4. To what degree does the faculty examine student work as a team in order to inform instructional practice?

5. What role do rubrics and benchmarks play in defining proficiency?
6. To what extent do we communicate to students and parents what quality work and proficiency look like?

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