

The Maine Heritage Policy Center Testimony to Support LD 985 “An Act To Maintain High School Diploma Standards by Repealing Proficiency-based Diploma Standards”

Senator Millett, Representative Kornfield and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Adam Crepeau and I am a policy analyst at The Maine Heritage Policy Center. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 985, “An Act To Maintain High School Diploma Standards by Repealing Proficiency-based Diploma Standards.”

The Maine Heritage Policy Center supports the original form of this bill because it would repeal the proficiency-based diploma standards. In 2018, the legislature decided to allow school districts to choose one of two grading systems; either a proficiency-based system or credit-based structure.¹ This was a change in pace from mandating that school districts implement proficiency-based diploma standards. While giving school districts the option to choose which standards they use was a step in the right direction, it did not give districts complete local control. Local school districts should have complete autonomy to choose how they educate their children based on the needs of each community.

The most glaring issue with Maine’s proficiency diploma law is that the term “proficiency” is not defined, making it difficult for teachers to assess their students. Since “proficiency” is not defined, local school districts are given a large degree of discretion in deciding what “proficiency” means. Therefore, students across the state may be achieving different levels of “proficiency” based on their school districts’ definition, but not receiving the same quality of education. This was faux local control; districts were trying to achieve something purely conceptual.

Another issue with proficiency-based diplomas is the grading system used to determine whether or not a student is proficient. Proficiency grading uses a 1-4 grading scale whereas the traditional system uses a scale of 1-100 to determine a letter grade. Not only is the 1-4 structure confusing for parents, but colleges and universities are finding it difficult to determine which students stand out. Under the proficiency model, one student may be more gifted than another and have grasped more material, but both students would be awarded a 3 or 3.5 if they did not achieve a mastery level of the content.² The traditional grading system helps identify which students are high and low achievers in the classroom and gives students, families, and college admissions counselors a clearer understanding of why they received a grade.

Further, proponents of proficiency-based grading believe this grading system allows for students to master subjects without the pressure to perform. However, proficiency-based grading can have the

¹<https://www.pressherald.com/2018/06/27/lawmakers-vote-to-eliminate-proficiency-based-education-mandate-in-maine/>

² <http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getTestimonyDoc.asp?id=85601>

opposite result. Instead of allowing students to learn at their own pace, they could learn to procrastinate or put off their work. Schools in Albany, Oregon have used proficiency-based standards since the 2013-14 school year. When the Greater Albany Education Association surveyed middle-school teachers, 80 percent of respondents said the standards led to a decrease in student effort and 51 percent thought it led to a decrease in student growth and knowledge.³ Also, less than one-third of teachers surveyed from all grade levels in Maine agreed or strongly agreed that proficiency-based graduation requirements “increase academic rigor.”⁴ Additionally, one in three teachers “believed that their school district should continue to implement proficiency-based requirements for earning a high school diploma if the state mandate were removed.”⁵

In February, only 25 percent of Maine’s superintendents believed their school districts would continue to adhere to proficiency based diplomas.⁶ Approximately 38 percent of superintendents thought their school districts would revert to the credit-based diploma and 26 percent were going to pursue a hybrid version.⁷ Therefore, over 60 percent of superintendents surveyed thought their districts would opt out of solely using proficiency-based diploma. There is a clear trend among Maine school districts and teachers in opposition to the exclusive use of the proficiency system to award diplomas. Thus, school districts should be able to choose how to educate their students without having to adhere to top-down mandates.

We urge the committee to vote, “Ought to Pass” on the original language of LD 985 to ensure all students in Maine are receiving the education they need to succeed. To be clear, we do not support the amendment to this bill from the Department of Education. Thank you.

³https://democratherald.com/news/local/education/albany-to-change-middle-school-report-cards/article_dbbf60b9-6d7c-57b4-9f76-51b8ad54de4a.html

⁴https://usm.maine.edu/sites/default/files/cepare/Proficiency_based_High_School_Diploma_Systems_in_Maine_Educator_Perceptions_of_Implementation.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wpsites.maine.edu/dist/e/97/files/2016/09/Superintendent-Survey-of-PBE_Web-1phrfq1.pdf

⁷ Ibid.