Maine can’t afford to retreat from high expectations for all students (https://bangordailynews.com/2016/03/14/opinion/high-expectations-for-all-students-maine-cant-afford-any-less/)

By The BDN Editorial Board (https://bangordailynews.com/author/bdneditorial/)

Posted March 14, 2016, at 2:23 p.m.

Nearly four years have passed since Maine politicians and educators set an ambitious goal for Maine students — that all would graduate from high school only after proving they’re proficient in all major subject areas.

A proficiency-based diploma shows that a student has mastered various academic skills in order to graduate — not simply slid by with the minimum passing grade that indicates only partial understanding.

Such a diploma for every student was a lofty goal, and Maine won’t truly have achieved it until all students graduate from high school fully prepared for college or a career of their choice. It’s by no means easy to realize, but Maine shouldn’t retreat from it.

The state’s public schools have worked hard since 2012 (https://www.google.com/url?q=https://usm.maine.edu/sites/default/files/cepare/MEPRIProficiencyDiplomaReport_FY2015Task5.pdf&saa=D&ust=1457983269277000&usg=AFQjCNG4bFgMhSvIV1BHUPxcuVjFZZiwg) to implement a truly proficiency-based diploma. They’ve updated policies, implemented the Common Core standards students must master, and worked on allowing students to demonstrate proficiency in whichever way works best for them. That might be through a traditional class; an online class or class at a local college; a hands-on, career and technical education class; an independent study and major project; or an internship at which they apply their skills. Many schools are changing how they grade students and what their transcripts and report cards look like.

But as they have worked toward a new kind of education and a new kind of diploma, educators have encountered the difficulties of carrying out a culture change. How do they ensure students have the chance to achieve proficiency in eight subject areas (https://www.google.com/url?q=http://bangordailynews.com/2016/03/14/opinion/high-expectations-for-all-students-maine-cant-afford-any-less/)?

Maine can’t afford to retreat from high expectations for all students - Main... https://bangordailynews.com/2016/03/14/opinion/high-expectations-for-all-students-maine-cant-afford-any-less/
Administrators have voiced concerns that the requirements of proficiency-based education will force them to cut higher-level course offerings for advanced students as they ensure every student has a shot at proficiency in every subject area. Some educators have said there are simply too many requirements.

In response, a bill pending before the Legislature’s Education Committee would scale back Maine’s graduation requirements so students have to demonstrate proficiency in four, rather than eight, subject areas. While we recognize the challenge of implementing proficiency-based education, we’re concerned to see discussion of a retreat away from the original intent of a proficiency-based diploma before it’s fully implemented.

There are minor points lawmakers could clarify in law—a statement that career and technical education classes are a viable and encouraged means for students to achieve academic proficiency, for example. Lawmakers can also ensure all relevant education statutes are written with the goals of a proficiency-based diploma in mind. Mostly, however, what educators need as they continue to institute proficiency-based diplomas is support for their work—additional guidance and hands-on support from the state Department of Education and opportunities to learn from colleagues in schools that have already made significant progress.

The idea of a proficiency-based diploma shouldn’t sound radical, and it might sound like what schools have long been doing. But if Maine students were really graduating from high school proficient in all subject areas, then the Maine Community College System wouldn’t see 48 percent of incoming students from Maine high schools require remedial math or English courses; the University of Maine System wouldn’t see 28 percent of its first-time Maine students require the same.

Already, the transition to proficiency-based diplomas has shown promising developments. Teachers and administrators are thinking deliberately about what they’re doing and why. A review of districts’ implementation experiences last year by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute found that the process “had encouraged more
professional collaboration in schools, improved transparency in communication about student achievement, and inspired school improvement efforts in some districts.”

A retreat from the full expectations of the proficiency-based diploma at this point could jeopardize that work by sending educators the wrong message — that Maine is retreating yet again from a major educational initiative before it’s implemented. The message they need is that the requirement is here to stay because it’s the right one for Maine’s students — and that teachers will be supported as they adopt a culture of high expectations for all.