The Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies: Systemic School Reform Through High-Stakes Assessments and a Network of Schools


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Abstract

The Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies were requirements for promotion from 8th grade to high school. Students were tested in four proficiency areas (communications, mathematics, science, and research) with a blend of performance assessments (some on-demand and others embedded in the curriculum, some scored by the district and others by teachers) and standardized assessments, with multiple measures of performance and multiple opportunities for a student to pass. Analysis is based on 17 interviews conducted in the Milwaukee Public School District in the Spring of 2000. District documents were used to supplement the interview data. Three findings are reported: (1) The Proficiencies had a substantial impact on teaching, learning, and school organization. (2) The ultimate impact of the Proficiencies on student learning is difficult to substantiate objectively because of flaws in the system of standardized testing. Weak evidence of a positive effect does exist. (3) Implementation was shared and rolled out incrementally by actors at multiple levels of the system with a major role played by a network of schools, the Middle School Principals Collaborative.

Discussion suggests two lessons for policy, implementation, and evaluation: (1) The strength of the impact of the Proficiencies is well explained by the framework of authority, power, specificity, and consistency used by Porter et al. (1988) to predict the impact of policies on instruction. An important modification of the Porter framework relates to the key role played by the Middle School Principals Collaborative. In coordinating activities and networking between the policy "top" and the schools at the "bottom," this organization of middle school principals substantially magnified the strength of all of the Porter variables (authority, power, specificity, consistency). In general, the unfolding design of policy was constructed from a marriage of top-down and bottom-up influences, and the ultimate strength of the policy was importantly affected by major decisions in the process of implementation. (2) The weakness of evidence on the ultimate effect of the Proficiencies on student achievement shows the value of a regular program of standardized testing. A tradeoff exists vis a vis measurement reliability and instructional validity in the choice between inexpensive, traditional standardized tests and the more expensive performance assessments, suggesting either that both be used for different purposes (as in Milwaukee), or that a system of standardized performance assessments be adopted.
I. Introduction

This is a study of the Middle School Proficiencies, a system of 8th grade graduation requirements based on performance and other assessments, implemented in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the school district for the city of Milwaukee. Our group, the Center for the Study of Systemic Reform, Milwaukee Public Schools (SSR-MPS), funded by the Joyce and Helen Bader Foundations, does research and offers technical assistance on systemic reform, accountability, and assessment in MPS (Clune, 2000b; Webb, 2000). The district suggested that we study the Proficiencies because they: 1) represent a successful instance of urban school reform aimed at success for all students; 2) rely significantly on performance assessments (a strong tradition in the district); and, 3) involve important lessons for implementation, especially the role of the Middle School Principals Collaborative, an organization of middle school principals that played a strong role in implementation.

A paper on the Proficiencies based on preliminary research was delivered two years ago at AERA (O'Day, 2000). The O'Day paper reported on the inconsistent results of various school improvement policies in the district and hypothesized that the Proficiencies, though they did not nominally represent school improvement policy, should have a stronger impact on instruction because of their specificity (outlining detailed tasks), power over classroom practice, alignment across all three grades of middle school, and authority as a result of support and implementation by teachers (following the theory of instructional impact of policy in Porter et al., 1988). The paper also noted that a strong impact of the Middle School Principals Collaborative might be predicted from research on the importance of cross-school networking, that the unfolding design of policy may be constructed from a marriage of top-down and bottom-up influences (see also Clune, 1990), that the ultimate strength of policy may be importantly affected by major decisions in the process of implementation, and that the strength of policies under the Porter framework might depend as much on the work of an intermediate organization like the Collaborative as on the initial design of the policy.

This paper reports the results of a subsequent full-scale study of the Proficiencies and provides data on the research questions posed by the O'Day paper on consistency of implementation, impact on the capacity and organization of middle schools, impact on instruction, and the power of intermediate organizations, including the Collaborative, as a multiplier of policy strength. The Proficiencies also interested us as a possible example of successful systemic reform because of their breadth (reach across assessments, curriculum, instruction in multiple grades and schools) and depth (influence built around incentives for students and teachers, authority, and extra resources in the delivery infrastructure) (Clune, 2001).

Reflecting the team approach to our research, this paper builds on an earlier technical report, Clune, Mason, Pohs, Thiel, & White (2000) (portions of which are reproduced in Appendices of this paper). Likewise, the O'Day (2000) paper discussed above was a joint effort, with its full authorship given as Jennifer O'Day with Bill Clune, Sarah Mason, and Chris Thiel.
II. The Policy and Research Methods of the Study

Background and history. The Middle School Proficiencies system was developed in response to the MPS Board of School Directors’ call for a high school graduation requirement. In February, 1996, the Milwaukee Public Schools’ Board of School Directors established high school graduation requirements for the graduating class of 2004 in the following areas: mathematical reasoning, scientific reasoning, communication, and community membership. At the same time, the Board requested the establishment of 8th Grade Proficiencies in mathematics, science, and communications for the 8th grade class of 2000. In June, 1997, the Board approved proficiencies in communications, mathematics, science, and research. According to Staten (1998), the Proficiencies were “designed to ensure that students have a sound foundation in each area before entering high school.” First implemented in the 1997-1998 school year, the Middle School Proficiencies were administered to those students who would eventually have to meet the graduation requirements set by the Board. While not a single test, the Proficiencies can be considered a “high-stakes” assessment system, because students who did not pass the proficiency requirements would not be allowed to advance to the 9th grade. Considerably more detail about background and context is provided in Appendix A.

The policy, its purpose, and details. The Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies are requirements for promotion from 8th grade to high school passed by the MPS Board in June, 1997, and first applicable to the 8th grade class of 2000 (the first class that would be subject to the new state-imposed high school graduation requirements in 2004). The purpose of the requirements, as stated by the Board, was to insure that students have a solid foundation in each of the four areas tested before entering high school (communications, mathematics, science, and research). The Proficiencies requirements themselves are an interesting and complex blend of performance assessments (some on-demand and others embedded in the curriculum, some scored by the district and others by teachers) and standardized assessments, with multiple measures of performance and multiple opportunities for the student to pass (achieve proficiency). For example, under the communication proficiency, writing is tested by classroom exercises in four genres (persuasive, narrative, expository, imaginative), scored by teachers, with a requirement of at least one formal (on-demand) assessment, either a district performance assessment or the state standardized test. The classroom assessments can be taken multiple times until proficiency is reached, and the district performance assessment is offered in all three middle school grades (with the highest score counting toward proficiency). An important alternative assessment option (or loophole, in the view of many respondents) was the summer completion project called "Adopt-a-City." The project was intended as a safety net for students who were not promoted under the regular system and was designed to incorporate aspects of all of the regular Proficiencies (writing, reading, oral report, algebra projects, science projects, and a research paper). Students could work on the project during the school year in 8th grade and/or over the summer. Details of the requirements are provided in Appendix B.
Research methods. This analysis is based on 17 interviews conducted in the Milwaukee Public Schools District in the Spring of 2000. District documents were used to supplement the interview data. The interviews averaged one hour in length and were conducted with nine learning coordinators (see below); three middle school principals, one who formally served as the district director of educational services; two assistants to the Middle School Principals Collaborative; one assessment coordinator; one implementer/Title I coordinator; and one former district deputy superintendent who had formerly served as a middle school principal. Interviews were conducted at a total of 11 school sites. A four-person research team conducted three of the preliminary interviews, a team of two researchers conducted ten of the interviews, and a single researcher conducted the remaining four interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for coding. Schools were nominated by the district as representing a range of success with the Proficiencies and a range of student achievement levels. Access to the schools was facilitated through the assistance of a district deputy superintendent. The respondents and schools in our sample were guaranteed anonymity, and neither are identified here.

Thirteen of the interviews focused primarily on the Proficiencies. The interview protocols focused on the history and development of the Proficiencies, changes in school and district policy to accommodate the Proficiencies, and variations in the implementation of the Proficiencies at individual schools. Respondents were asked to describe their understanding of the development of the Proficiencies system—when it began, why it began, who was involved in the process—as well as to provide information on their own involvement with development and implementation. Questions covered expectations of the policy; the connection of the Proficiencies to state and district assessments and standards; the connection to school curriculum and teaching and learning; and the connection between the Proficiencies and accountability measures. In addition, respondents were asked to describe how the details of the Proficiencies had been communicated to school staff by both principals and the district and to explain if and how professional development for teachers was organized around the components of the system. Respondents were also asked about variations in school responses to the Proficiencies, the factors that made implementation easy or difficult, impressions of how the system contributed to teaching and learning, and the overall strengths and weaknesses of the Proficiencies. Although a protocol was used, the interviews were not overly structured and allowed room for a conversational dialogue.

Lacking the resources to interview a meaningful sample of teachers, we interviewed nine learning coordinators who were involved with policy and knowledgeable about the instructional process in schools. As one principal stated, learning coordinators “are the instructional leaders just below the principals”; they walk the line between administrators and faculty and are involved in both district policy and the everyday lives of teachers in their schools. In their unique position, learning coordinators were able to provide information about how changes in policy were made at the district level, how principals reacted to the Proficiencies, and how changes in teacher practice and student learning and behavior occurred. Describing themselves as the “workdogs” of the Proficiencies system, learning coordinators were also in the best position to provide information about the assessment scoring process and other administrative details of the program.
Five of the interviews were conducted using a protocol designed to gain an understanding of the contribution of the Collaborative to the Proficiencies system. Respondents were asked to describe the development process for the Collaborative, as well as initial expectations for the group. Respondents were asked about the operation of the Collaborative; the roles of teachers, principals, and the district in its operation; and how the Collaborative served the needs of school staff. Questions were also asked about the major issues confronting the Collaborative, its strengths and weaknesses, and how the Collaborative contributed to improved teaching and learning throughout the district.

With permission from participating school and district staff members, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Guided by initial research questions and semi-structured interview protocols, our research staff coded the transcriptions according to a list of predetermined relevant themes (e.g., “professional development”), using QSR NUD*IST 4 (1997) qualitative analysis software. During the coding process, our research staff met to compare methods of coding the transcripts and to identify new themes emerging from the data analysis, to add to the coding scheme. At least two researchers coded each transcript and all coding was merged using QSR Merge (1995) software to ensure consistency. Research staff then summarized the coded themes; this report is an analytical synthesis of that summary.

III. Findings

Three findings are reported here:

(1) The Proficiencies had a substantial impact on teaching, learning, and school organization.
(2) The ultimate impact of the Proficiencies on student learning is difficult to substantiate objectively because of flaws in the system of standardized testing. Weak evidence of a positive effect does exist.
(3) Implementation was shared and rolled out incrementally by actors at multiple levels of the system, with a major role played by a network of schools, the Middle School Principals Collaborative.

(1) The Proficiencies had a substantial impact on teaching, learning, and school organization.

Data reported here are from interviews at the 11 school sites of nine learning coordinators, two principals, and two staff specialists. Discussion will be organized according to impact on instruction, learning, and school organization. The discussion reflects the main points in the abridged interview coding summaries given in Appendix C. The interview coding summaries include quotes from many respondents on the points discussed here (and others, including some counter-points) that give a sense of richness and detail not possible in this summary.
Impact on instruction. A significant impact on instruction is indicated from the simple fact that separating curriculum and instruction from assessment was difficult. As one learning coordinator stated to teachers at her school: "The Proficiencies have become your curriculum." Four respondents stated that the Proficiencies changed teachers' instruction. For example, teachers had students do an increased amount of hands-on work and eliminated “busy work” such as worksheets. Respondents at three different schools explained how the Proficiencies encouraged teachers to re-teach and students to re-do work so that students could meet a proficiency. One respondent explained that grading became more consistent because of the Proficiencies and rubrics. Another noted that, although there was a history in the district of not having a district-wide curriculum, under the Proficiencies teachers who previously were left on their own to decide what to teach had to learn how to follow a common approach. Ten respondents stated that teachers who were “doing their own thing” before the Proficiencies found that the Proficiencies gave them a specific direction and focus they had previously lacked.

Respondents from different schools differed regarding the degree to which they believed creativity in teaching could be maintained while covering the Proficiencies. Four respondents stated that the Proficiencies compromised teachers’ ability to be creative in the classroom (in other words, that there had been a strong common effect on instruction), but that creativity was still possible within the Proficiencies framework.

Impact on student learning. A former district administrator, who indicated that student achievement was the primary goal of the Middle School Proficiencies, noted:

The idea would be to mobilize people around some very clear outcomes for the kids so it would improve the quality of instruction at the middle school level. The goal was to clarify what the expectations were of children and, as a result, improve their performance.

Respondents differed about the subject areas in which their students succeeded most. Six learning coordinators stated that their students did well in mathematics and/or science. Seven said that their students improved in the communications areas of reading and/or writing. Two respondents credited the skill of the particular teacher for student achievement in a given area. One respondent described how Special Education students benefited by being included in the Proficiencies system and working toward meeting proficiency. Two respondents believed that the Proficiencies system helped raise student achievement on state assessments. Four said that students took responsibility for knowing what their Proficiencies scores were and what they needed to do to become proficient. Two said that students asked their teachers when they would be provided with an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency. Three respondents thought that there was variation in response to the Proficiencies among students: 8th graders took more responsibility than 6th and 7th graders, and some students did not seem to care about the Proficiencies. One respondent believed that students’ sense of ownership reflected that of their teachers. Two others spoke of high self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, and even “jubilation.” On the other hand, four respondents said that some students believed
that they would be socially promoted whether or not they passed the Proficiencies (as in the old days).

**Impact on school organization.** Four respondents said that some schools did a major structural re-organization to accommodate the Proficiencies, such as going from multi-age grades to single-age grades, changing enrollment patterns from feeder schools to enroll more students in 6th grade rather than in 7th, and placing all students in the same grade level on the same floor. One respondent stated that the Proficiencies permeated the entire culture of the staff in that all staff, even office staff, asked students questions about their projects. Two described how their schools made a conscious effort to align the scope and sequence of their curricula with the Proficiencies. Three made general comments about how the Proficiencies aligned with their curriculum without explaining the nature of the alignment nor how the alignment occurred.

Programs that supported students’ effort to achieve proficiency were described by respondents as: summer school, after-school tutoring, Saturday Academies, special classes, the ability to re-do work, and the alternative “completion project,” Adopt-A-City. Four respondents talked about “Proficiencies classes” at their schools. These classes took place at a variety of times, depending on the school—during the school day, after school, and on Saturdays. Another said that the Saturday Academies were popular and successful. Three respondents cited their summer school program as a support to students for passing proficiency, as a last resort. One respondent stated that special classes were particularly helpful to students in her school. Another said that after-school instruction helped students at her school reach proficiency and pointed to support at home as another key factor. The opportunity to re-do work was cited by one respondent as an important support to student learning.

**Summary.** Interview data like the above is inevitably somewhat fragmentary and impressionistic—at least, compared with systematic surveys of instruction and classroom observations. But the data do show that school staff members who had extensive contact with implementing the policy believed that the Proficiencies had considerable impact on schools, instruction, and student learning. Reports of a strong, coherent impact of educational policies by field-level staff are unusual in studies of implementation. The more common result is that managers report success, but field-level staff report little or no impact (McLaughlin, 1987).

(2) The ultimate impact of the Proficiencies on student learning is difficult to substantiate objectively because of flaws in the system of standardized testing. Weak evidence of a positive effect does exist.

The data just discussed are indirect evidence of a beneficial effect on learning. Staff at the school level were convinced that many students took more responsibility, worked hard, had more meaningful opportunities to learn, and received additional as well as better focused instruction and attention from teachers. Some were convinced that students did better on standardized tests. But from an evaluation standpoint, such evidence is suggestive rather than conclusive.
District policy makers who passed and implemented the Proficiencies clearly were aiming at a general improvement in readiness for high school. Refusing to promote students from 8th grade who were not ready for high school was not the ultimate goal, because the district remained legally and ethically committed to the continuing education of all students (sometime expressed in the words, “the goal was not to put more fourteen year-olds in the street”). The question then arises as to how increased readiness for high school might be measured.

The district did one study on the high school performance of the students who experienced the Proficiencies (both those who were promoted and those who failed and attended high school in the transitional status called “8T”). For reasons discussed below, that study seems inconclusive. Standardized testing seems the most obvious, and easiest way to measure gains in high school readiness during the actual time that the changes in instruction occurred. What about using scores on the Proficiencies themselves? Supporting that option is the fact that the “multiple measures” aspect of the policy implied that success on the Proficiencies demonstrated success in the various subject matters, even for students who did poorly (or at least could not reach proficiency) on conventional standardized tests. Unfortunately, because the performance assessments were not standardized, there was no way to measure gains for the same students over several years on those tests, or to compare scores on performance assessments with scores on other tests. Scores on the Proficiencies appeared to have very low statistical reliability, in part due to the high implementation expense (i.e., field testing and equating could not even be attempted) and in part because the custom-tailoring of embedded classroom exercises by teachers was not compatible with standardization.

This leaves the option of using the conventional “off-the-shelf” standardized tests administered in the district to evaluate instructional impact. Such tests are the usual method of evaluating changes in learning across time simply because they are standardized—they are designed to measure the same knowledge and skills across in different students and different time periods. Even when standardized assessments are not fully aligned with curriculum, effective instruction usually will be reflected in gains on such assessments. The gains may not be as large as would be reflected with better alignment, and some of the areas of instruction might not be reflected at all, but good instruction should be reflected in measurable gains on a good standardized test. In fact, well designed instruction aimed at higher-order thinking usually matches traditional instruction in gains on tests of basic skills and outperforms such instruction on tests of higher-order thinking (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1997; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Schoenfeld, 2002; Carpenter, Fennema, Peterson, Chiang, & Loef, 1989; Webb & Meyer, 2002). Another reason for relying on the state assessments taken by Milwaukee students is that proficiency on those tests is an important goal of the district, reflected in its official accountability measures and reports.

Unfortunately, that option also proved to be imperfect at best because, as shown below, 1) the testing required by the state at grades 4 and 8 is well suited to evaluate attainment (average score attained), but poorly suited to measure growth; 2) the most relevant grades
4 through 8 comparison was not available due to timing; and, 3) the state testing program during this period experienced unexplained anomalies.

Table 1
National Percentile Ranks of Milwaukee and State of Wisconsin (in parentheses)—
Five Subject Areas on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concept Examinations (WKCE)
8th Grade, Four Academic Years, 1997-98 to 2000-01

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>36 (62)</td>
<td>43 (69)</td>
<td>44 (68)</td>
<td>35 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>33 (65)</td>
<td>37 (70)</td>
<td>37 (71)</td>
<td>35 (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>35 (65)</td>
<td>41 (65)</td>
<td>42 (65)</td>
<td>40 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>32 (66)</td>
<td>39 (69)</td>
<td>41 (69)</td>
<td>33 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>37 (63)</td>
<td>44 (70)</td>
<td>41 (68)</td>
<td>38 (67)</td>
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What can be learned from data on the State’s system of standardized testing is reported in the above table. The time period shown (1997-2001) corresponds to the implementation of the Proficiencies. The MPS trends are in the right direction, but the increases are obscured by technical difficulties. The large increases between the first two years probably is partially explained by a change in test date. Because the 1997-98 test was given in the Fall, while the 1998-99 test was given in the Spring, the students were more than one year older for the second test. The drop in scores in 2000-01, which occurred for Milwaukee and the state as a whole, is not likely to reflect genuine achievement and has not been adequately explained, but may have resulted from the introduction of a new test form in that year. Many observers suspect that the both the gain in 1998-99 and the drop in 2000-01 are over stated, with the "real" trend being one of gradual improvement. The parallel results for Milwaukee and the state as a whole (which includes the Milwaukee results) do not negate a positive effect of the Proficiencies in Milwaukee, because just keeping up with the rest of a generally high-achieving state is a challenge for an urban district. NAEP data for mathematics might have provided a useful comparison at the state level, but Wisconsin elected not to participate in the state-by-state comparisons for the year 2000 (with the result that the last available comparison is 1992 to 1996).

Even if we could be confident about identifying a trend, the state testing program is poorly designed to measure growth because the scores reported are for different cohorts of students, who undoubtedly had different scores when they entered middle school (so that any trend in 8th grade scores could be at least partially due to differences in scores at 5th grade when the students entered middle school). Unfortunately, a 4th-to-8th grade comparison of the same cohort of students is not possible until the 2002-2003 school year because the testing program began in 1997-98, and the 2001-01 8th graders (the most recent shown in the Table) were 4th graders in 1996-97. Even that comparison,
theoretically, of the same students might be inconclusive because of the high degree of mobility in the district. The only really good solution comes from a program of regular testing in middle school of the kind reported by Meyer for a single 7th-8th grade comparison (Meyer, 2002). The Meyer results show the potential of the method but are not applicable to evaluating the Proficiencies because they measure growth over only a single year.

Another source of information is a study done by the district to measure high school readiness by results in high school. This study compared 8th grade Proficiencies scores and high school achievement of students who were promoted to 9th grade and those who were attending high school as 8T students. The study found that the number of all 9th graders promoted to 10th grade increased from 69% to 79% from 1998 to 2001 (having fallen from higher levels in the early 90s). During the one-year period from 1999-2000 to 2000-2001, the average grade point of 9th graders improved from 1.66 on a 4-point scale to 1.75. These totals included students who had not yet passed the Proficiencies and were attending high school as 8Ts. Some reliability of Proficiencies scoring is suggested by the fact that the average grade point of the 8Ts in 2000-01 was .73, while their attendance was 56%, compared to a 79% attendance rate, and 1.75 average grade point for the 9th grade class as a whole. On the other hand, the number of 8Ts in 9th grade rose from 8.5% in 1999-2000 to 12.8% in 2000-2001, and the percentage of students retained in 8th grade also increased. Deputy Superintendent Willie Jude summarized the results of the study to the Board by saying, "It's not a perfect program, but it does give us indications that things are moving in the right direction" (Borsuk, 2002).

The district study is suggestive, but plagued with technical problems and puzzling questions. Neither grade point nor promotions can be considered a reliable measure of increased readiness because they are even less reliable than the Proficiencies examinations. In addition, the data on promotion and retention is ambiguous and quite complex. Were increased high school promotions balanced by increased 8th grade retentions? Could a higher rate of promotions have been explained by a higher drop-out rate (the proverbial 14-year-olds on the street)? A reliable measure of growth in achievement during the middle school period itself would provide much better evidence of the success of the program.

(3) Implementation was shared and rolled out incrementally by actors at multiple levels of the system, with a major role played by a network of schools, the Middle School Principals Collaborative.

This section of the paper draws heavily on Appendix A, Background and Context of the Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies, and Appendix B, Details of the Proficiencies Requirements.

Implementation of the Proficiencies was shared and rolled out incrementally by actors at multiple levels of the system: the district, the Middle School Principals Collaborative, school principals (with some exerting district-wide leadership), learning coordinators in schools, and, of course, teachers and students. The Proficiencies requirements as passed
by the Board of School Directors provided only a general guideline of areas, while the details were determined by an unfolding, often decentralized process of implementation involving multiple parties. Some details of the requirements and scoring were first established by the district in a publication called the *Middle Grades Proficiency Handbook*. But many details of both the activities and scoring evolved and shifted over time amidst much discussion and considerable confusion. Staff development was provided both by the district and by networks formed by learning coordinators working in schools. Methods for informing students of their status and progress were developed only gradually, and communicating the results to parents required additional steps.

Considerable local (school-by-school) variation existed because of the availability of flexible policy options (e.g., writing independently, or across the curriculum) coupled with the variation in the capacity and commitment of principals and staff. The nature of the so-called "transitional program" (what would happen to students who failed) was not defined until the time at which the first failed students enrolled in high school (and a new high school status, 8T, was designated).

The Middle School Principals Collaborative—and other forms of cross-school networking, e.g., meetings of learning coordinators—were effective in shaping and influencing policy. As soon as the policy was enacted, the Collaborative met in a retreat to develop a common vision that would guide implementation, built around the idea that "all children can learn." Later, the Collaborative was instrumental in preventing the repeal of the Proficiencies, successfully advocating the Adopt-a-City transition project as a means of calming fears over excessive retentions in 8th grade, and obtaining extra resources for after-school tutoring of students. District personnel cooperated with the Collaborative on the details of implementation. Innovations of leading schools, like the electronic method of scoring and reporting Proficiencies scores, were initially disseminated through the Collaborative.

Less local variation, more consistency, and higher quality in implementation occurred than would normally be expected via a complex policy requiring substantial definition and development in the implementation stage because of mechanisms of decentralized coordination that developed to manage the process. Early on in the policy development period, a newly founded organization of many middle school principals, the Middle School Principals Collaborative, adopted the Proficiencies as a way of improving instruction for all students (rather than serving as merely a promotional gate). The Collaborative helped organize a network of principals and learning collaborators around key implementation issues and negotiated issues with the district such as the stability of the requirements, extra resources for remedial instruction, and the approval of a safety net for failed students (the aforementioned summer completion project). Learning coordinators in schools became the front-line, "field-level" staff for developing and applying the policy. They found themselves almost overwhelmed by the task and collaborated in a network of other coordinators, the Collaborative, and key people in the central district. A few key principals served as policy innovators and leaders. For example, one principal developed an electronic method of scoring and reporting the Proficiencies that was adopted district wide and that substantially changed the distribution of the requirements—for example, by allowing a student’s high scores in one
area to offset subproficiency in another. On the other hand, these coordinating mechanisms had to cope with strong forces of disorganization, such as frequent changes in policy, a change in the superintendent, inconsistent and independent policies (e.g., a new mathematics curriculum), and shrinking resources for technical assistance at the district level. For example, central scoring of the district performance assessments was abandoned in mid-stream because of budget cuts, at which point all performance assessments were scored by teachers on the basis of district rubrics and anchor papers.

IV. Discussion

Our findings suggest two lessons for policy, implementation, and evaluation: (1) The strength of the impact of the Proficiencies is well explained by the framework of authority, power, specificity, and consistency used by Porter et al (1988) to predict the impact of policies on instruction. An important modification of the Porter framework relates to the key role played by decentralized actors like the Middle School Principals Collaborative. (2) The weakness of evidence on the ultimate effect of the Proficiencies on student achievement shows the value of a regular program of standardized testing. A trade-off exists between measurement reliability and instructional validity.

Policy Strength of the Proficiencies and a School Network as an Instrument of School Improvement

The strength of the impact of the Proficiencies is well explained by the framework of authority, power, specificity, and consistency used by Porter et al (1988) to predict the impact of policies on instruction. High authority existed because the Proficiencies had the force of law and because of a longstanding professional tradition in the district and among teachers in support of performance assessments. High power was present because of the high stakes for students (promotion to high school) and the relatively high level of resources dedicated to implementation. High specificity was an important strength because of the mobilizing role of the clear expectations for student performance. High consistency was present because the Proficiencies represented a detailed, coherent set of instructional goals across all subject matters and all three grades of middle school.

An important modification of the Porter framework relates to the key role played by the Middle School Principals Collaborative. In coordinating activities and networking between the policy "top" and the schools at the "bottom," this organization of middle school principals substantially magnified the strength of all of the Porter variables (authority, power, specificity, consistency) (O'Day, 2000). Indeed, as stated in the introduction, the unfolding design of policy was constructed from a marriage of top-down and bottom-up influences, and the ultimate strength of the policy was importantly affected by major decisions during the process of implementation.

The important role of the Collaborative seems to hold a lesson applicable on a broader scale. Even if the Proficiencies requirements were better fleshed out and developed by the Board of School Directors and the district administration, most of the bread-and-butter questions and problems would still need to be resolved during implementation. The
operational independence of the Collaborative (it had funding from a foundation) allowed it to serve simultaneously as critic, advocate, and instrument of the district policy, while at the same time mobilizing the time and effort of school administrators and teachers. In other words, thinking only of policy at the "top" and schools at the "bottom" is a real limitation. The interesting thing is that the resources for effective guidance at this intermediate level are frequently available for relatively little monetary cost because principals and teachers will commit to making a good policy succeed without much extra compensation. Also frequently overlooked is the power of innovation at the school level by natural policy leaders—essentially the guiding effect of "lighthouse schools."

**Value of Standardized Testing and the Tradeoff Between Reliability and Instructional Validity**

The weakness of evidence on the ultimate effect of the Proficiencies on student achievement shows the value of a regular program of standardized testing. As a result of working with the Milwaukee district on a variety of assessment issues, our research group has come to see a tradeoff between measurement reliability and instructional validity in the choice between inexpensive, traditional standardized tests and the more expensive performance assessments, suggesting either that both be used for different purposes (as in Milwaukee), or that a system of standardized performance assessments be adopted. The power of high-stakes performance assessments to motivate students and teachers and transform instruction seems clear and strong. For statistically reliable measurement, the district relies on the state test (the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations, WKCE) and, recently, a TerraNova test at the interval grades using the same scale as the WKCE. The tradeoff in instructional power and measurement reliability of these two testing systems can be represented by Figure 1 (Clune, 2000a):
Figure 1. Instructional value and measurement value of standardized and performance assessments.
The chart shows typical short-answer standardized tests as having high measurement reliability, making them good tools for accountability, but also having relatively low instructional value. Such tests may accurately measure the effects of good instruction, but teachers and principals find it difficult to organize instruction around them. In contrast, the Proficiencies have high instructional value for organizing instruction but very low measurement value, making them useless for accountability. Standardized performance assessments are shown as combining the virtues of instructional and measurement value. Theoretically, standardized performance assessments could replace both of the other kinds of tests. Unfortunately, many districts feel that they can afford only the standardized test, leaving no choice but to organize instruction with an independent effort that may be less effective or more costly than one guided by the more expensive tests. On the other hand, if a standardized test is the only test, the impact of weaknesses in instructional validity is magnified, and the quality (e.g., conceptual depth) and alignment of the rest with the curriculum become correspondingly more important.

Over time, better evaluation of the effects on achievement of instructional programs like the Proficiencies will be possible as data accumulate from the program of annual testing in every grade begun in the Milwaukee district in February, 2000 (Meyer, 2002).

V. Conclusion

The Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies seems to be an example of a success story that cannot be fully documented or understood because of insufficient evaluation. Indirect evidence suggests that the program had an unusually powerful instructional effect that was produced by an innovative decentralized structure of implementation. But, because of poor data, the district found itself with weak evidence of a positive effect and no real way to evaluate the impact of this very powerful and promising intervention against its goals. Evaluation is always important, regardless of whether a program succeeds or fails, because of the critical need to focus resources on effective interventions. The Proficiencies were very expensive (in labor more than money) to implement, drawing on an enormous amount of energy, work, and dedication by hundreds of people across the district. That same labor-intensiveness made them vulnerable to political compromise in times of budget tightening and shifting priorities. Good evaluation results might have established the value of the program more convincingly and clarified its most effective parts. Such considerations are the main reason that our group has been working with the district to build a value-added system that would allow measurement of growth over time (see the Meyer paper that is part of this symposium, Meyer, 2002).
References


Appendix A
Background and Context of the Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies


This section provides background on the history and development of the Middle School Proficiencies. Information for this section was synthesized from a variety of sources including:

- Seventeen district and school-level interviews conducted in the Spring of 2000
- Milwaukee Public School District documents
- Documents from the Middle School Principals Collaborative

A number of entities were involved in the creation and implementation of the Proficiencies, beginning with the school board, and carried out by the Middle School Principals Collaborative, the MPS Office of Central Services, teachers, learning coordinators, and to some extent, students, parents, and the community.

1990-1995: Background and Context

To fully understand the history and development of the Middle School Proficiencies, it is necessary to go back several years prior to the Board of School Directors’ action that initiated the Proficiencies and describe the organization of the district. In 1991, a $40-million cut forced the central administration to eliminate the substructure of the district. The significance of this action for the Proficiencies was that the district curriculum specialists were further removed from schools, functioning only at the district level. A respondent described the Milwaukee Public School District at this time as a “system of schools,” rather than a “school system.” School staff had more autonomy to choose their own curricula, since the district had no centralized curriculum.

At the same time, the district began to institute district-wide on-demand performance assessments (assessments created and scored by the district requiring a constructed-response from students, as opposed to a multiple-choice test), along with the required state standardized testing. A writing performance assessment, for example, was introduced at the 4th grade level in 1990. A systematic plan to initiate performance assessments in mathematics, science, and writing across grades was generated by the district in December of 1990. In August, 1993, the MPS Board of School Directors mandated a full implementation of proficiency examinations in writing for the high school senior class of 1995, and mathematics proficiency examinations for the high school senior class of 1996. The Board mandated that these proficiency examinations be performance assessments, “representing real-life applications of higher-order skills” (Milwaukee Public School District, September 15, 1998).
The Middle School Proficiencies were part of the district’s trend towards performance assessments. The Proficiencies were comprised of both on-demand performance assessments (explained above) and curriculum-embedded performance assessments (such as projects and portfolios).

**1996: School Board Action and Development of the Middle School Principals Collaborative**

In February, 1996, the MPS Board passed graduation requirements for the senior class of 2004. This cohort of students entered middle school in the fall of 1997 and completed middle school in the Spring of 2000. The board instructed the administration to develop 8th-grade proficiencies in mathematics, scientific reasoning, and oral and written communication for this cohort of students and to submit a recommendation to the Board by June 1997. The Board passed the Middle School Proficiencies on June 18, 1997.

At the time the Board and district were initiating the Middle School Proficiencies, the middle school principals were forming the Collaborative. In April, 1996, led by one principal, 18 of 24 middle school principals attended a meeting to form the Collaborative. At this meeting, the principals agreed to “willingly accept taking a more active leadership and ownership role on behalf of our 17,000+ middle school students” (Milwaukee Public Schools Middle School Principals Collaborative, March, 1999). The Collaborative identified the Middle School Proficiencies as a method to accomplish their goal and took a leadership role in developing and implementing the Proficiencies in the district.

**1997: Collaborative Funding and Efficacy Institute Training**

The district's Director of Educational Services played a prominent role in the initial development and implementation of the Proficiencies and worked closely with the Middle School Principals Collaborative to do this. She assisted the Collaborative in submitting a grant proposal to the Danforth Foundation. As a result, the Collaborative received funds from the Danforth Foundation for professional development and other organizational expenses. The Collaborative received letters of support from the superintendent and from a variety of community and national organizations. In January, 1997, the Collaborative received its first check from the Danforth Foundation for $65,000.

In the Spring and Summer of 1997 the Collaborative utilized the Efficacy Institute to provide teachers and principals with professional development that emphasized the philosophy that all children can learn if given the opportunity. Five middle school principals participated in a pilot program to train all members of their school staff in efficacy. In May, 1997, principals and staff from these schools gave a half-day presentation to the Collaborative. The members of the Collaborative planned to conduct professional development for principals with the Efficacy Institute. During the Summer of 1997, they spent eleven days exploring the Efficacy Institute philosophy and incorporated the Proficiencies in the training. One of the results of the summer institute
was that principals scripted what they would say at their opening staff meetings regarding the Proficiencies and the ability of all students to become proficient.

Staff and administration changes relevant to the Proficiencies occurred in the summer and fall of 1997:

- The original leader of the Collaborative, was appointed Deputy Superintendent.
- The Director of Educational Services was named Director of High Standards Reform. This new position allowed her to concentrate on the Middle School Proficiencies, as well as on mathematics and science reform of the Milwaukee Urban Systemic Initiative (Milwaukee Public Schools Middle School Principals Collaborative, March 1999).
- A new superintendent was elected in the Fall of 1997.

By this time—Fall of 1997—the first students who would be held accountable for the Middle School Proficiencies in the year 2000 were in 6th grade. While we do not have complete information on the development of the Proficiencies up to this point, the Collaborative Chronology (Milwaukee Public Schools Middle School Principals Collaborative, March, 1999) indicates that the Educational Services Department organized a meeting of principals and teachers in February to begin the development of the Middle School Proficiencies. A publication explaining the Proficiencies was disseminated to teachers, and the superintendent wrote a letter to parents explaining the new system.

During this period, the district was also in the process of developing a new set of standards that eventually became the Milwaukee Public Schools K-12 Academic Standards and Grade Level Expectations for the Content Areas: English, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies (Milwaukee Public School District, November, 1998). Two respondents in our sample indicated that even though the development of the Standards and the Proficiencies were related, it was not a united, integrated effort. The developers of the Proficiencies and the Standards faced similar issues, yet it appears that the two efforts were not aligned with each other.

1998: Developing, Refining, and Maintaining The Proficiencies

In January, 1998, the Department of Research and Assessment submitted a much longer (35 pages) and more detailed packet of information entitled, Middle School Proficiencies: Rubrics and Assessment System (Milwaukee Public School District, January, 1998). In addition, a district document entitled Proficiency 2000 Mobilization Timeline (Milwaukee Public School District, February, 1998), revealed a five-page plan listing the timeline and the individuals responsible for each action. A variety of players, including teachers, administrators, and parents, were involved. Despite these efforts to inform the school staff, four learning coordinators in our sample reported that information from the district was confusing, constantly changing and that the Proficiencies policy implementation lacked a strategic plan.
Other activities coordinated by the district office:

- Publication of the *Proficiency 2000 Student Handbook: Questions and Answers for Students by Students* (Milwaukee Public School District, 1998) written by students from Scholes Middle School and district personnel
- Completion of a Proficiencies Orientation Session
- Continuing professional development in mathematics and science
- Briefing paper by the high standards director covering accomplishments and needs for the Proficiencies system
- Appointment of a new person in the role of coordinating proficiency development for the district
- Initiation of a Board initiative in September of 1998 to address changes in Wisconsin Statutes regarding high school graduation and 4th and 8th grade promotion requirements.

In 1998, the middle school principals sent a letter and the draft of a student progress report to parents along with a survey form to encourage parent feedback. Also in 1998, an ad hoc group of K-8, middle, and high school principals prepared a document entitled, *Administrative Procedures for Students Who Do Not Meet Proficiency by Grade Eight* (Milwaukee Public School District, 1998). This document indicated that transitional students would not be placed in high schools, but would instead be enrolled in a separate program run by the Milwaukee Public School District.

In June of 1998, the Collaborative gave a presentation to the Board of School Directors expressing their support of the Proficiencies. In November, the superintendent met with the Collaborative to discuss the Proficiencies, because the school board had reportedly been considering abandoning them. At this meeting, the superintendent recommended that the Middle School Proficiencies be phased in more slowly, beginning with the mathematics proficiencies, for example. Collaborative members emphasized that they wanted to keep the system intact. The meeting was followed up with a letter from the members of the Collaborative to the superintendent, stating their requests for assistance from the district:

- The Middle School Principals Collaborative requested the support of the superintendent and resources from the district to provide student supports such as summer school and after school programs.
- The Collaborative also proposed an alternative form of assessment for students who did not meet the established proficiency requirements. This proposal eventually developed into the “Adopt-A-City” project, which will be described below.
1999: Coordinated Action on Proficiencies

The Collaborative actively addressed the following issues involving the Proficiencies:

- The Transitional Program (The Collaborative gave the district a deadline of July 1, 1999, to come to a decision about the transition program. If the district did not reach a decision, then over-age students would be promoted to high school.)
- Eighth Grade Completion Project (The Collaborative decided that subject area teachers should participate with the district in creating the project, and the proficiency coordinator agreed to recruit teachers.)
- A Proficiency Action Plan.
- Funding for after-school tutoring and Saturday Academies (the Deputy Superintendent agreed to fund after-school tutoring).
- Database to track the Proficiencies (created by one of the middle school principals and then used district-wide).
- *Strategic Learning Steps for the Middle School Proficiencies* (Milwaukee Public School District, 1999).
- Changes in the Proficiencies program were halted, beginning in the Fall of 1999.

On May 26, 1999, the Board approved a Transitional Program Plan. The general points of the plan were:

1. Students who have not demonstrated proficiency will not be promoted to 9th grade
2. The conceptual framework and design criteria models were approved for those students who do not meet proficiency requirements
3. MPS District administration was required to submit a proposed detailed plan and cost analysis in January, 2000.
4. Funding would be included in the proposed FY2001 budget.
5. The Transitional Program would be implemented in the 2000-2001 school year.

2000: Uncertainties at the Last Hour

Despite the Collaborative’s effort to maintain consistent implementation of the Proficiencies in the 1999-2000 school year, previously unanswered and unresolved questions continued to plague school staff members as they attempted to implement the Proficiencies. For example, even though the MPS district administration and the Collaborative worked on a transitional program, funds were not available to house the program outside of the high schools. As late as May, 2000, four respondents indicated that the high schools did not have a uniform system to deal with the transition students. In addition, four respondents indicated that the transition students would not be considered high school students and would not participate in high school activities. At the end of the 1999-2000 school year, no uniform plan was in place to enable high school teachers to
work with the transition students to bring them up to proficiency for the upcoming school year.

Another unresolved issue, described by six respondents, was confusion over the requirements students needed to complete 8th grade and move on to high school. Five respondents reported that, according to district policy, students only had to pass the Proficiencies and that the students’ grades did not matter.

To resolve these and other matters, learning coordinators shared information on what they were doing in their own schools. Often, the information shared by one learning coordinator became de-facto district “policy,” when other learning coordinators followed suit. Since the coordinator of the Proficiencies Program for the district left her position in the Fall of 1999 and was not replaced, no one at the district level was directly responsible for answering questions related to the Proficiencies.
Appendix A
References


Milwaukee Public School District (September 15, 1998). *School board innovation/school reform committee, item 6.*


Milwaukee Public Schools Middle School Principals Collaborative (March 1999). *Collaborative chronology.*
Appendix B
Details of the Proficiencies Requirements


Following is a description of the requirements of the Middle School Proficiencies system for students completing 8th grade in the year 2000. Information for this is based on the document, Proficiency 2000: Middle Grades Learning Proficiency Handbook for Teachers and Administrators, (Milwaukee Public School District, October, 1999). Information about the Adopt-A-City Completion Project is based on the document entitled, Adopt a City: Milwaukee Public Schools Middle Grades Learning Proficiencies Grade 8 Completion Project (Milwaukee Public School District, November 1999). Additional information comes from the 17 interviews conducted in the school district in the Spring of 2000.

Board Action Establishing Proficiencies

In February, 1996, the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of School Directors established high school graduation requirements for the graduating class of 2004 in the following areas: mathematical reasoning, scientific reasoning, communication, and community membership. At the same time, the Board requested the establishment of 8th Grade Proficiencies in mathematics, science, and communications for the 8th grade class of 2000. In June, 1997, the Board of School Directors approved the Proficiencies in communications, mathematics, science, and research. According to Staten (1998), the Proficiencies were “designed to ensure that students have a sound foundation in each area before entering high school.”

In the original plan, students were required to meet acceptable performance in the research project and in two of the three Proficiencies for each subject area. “Acceptable performance” translated to a score of 3 or better on a 4-point rubric. This method of determining student proficiency came to be known as the “two-out-of-three rule,” since a student had to become proficient in two-out-of-three subareas in each subject area—except research, which contained no subareas. Later, a group working on a data system to track the Proficiencies developed a point system for determining proficiency. In the 1999-2000 school year, students were able to meet proficiency using either the two-out-of-three rule, or the point system.

Proficiency Areas and Sub-Areas

The four major subject areas covered by the Proficiencies system were:

♦ Communications
  o writing, reading, and oral speech
♦ Mathematics
Algebra topics, formal assessment, three-dimensional scale modeling, and on-demand (MPS, TerraNova, or WSAS)

♦ Science
  o science portfolio, formal assessment, and a science project (MPS or WSAS)

♦ Research
  o research paper

Communications
Communications was subdivided into the three areas of writing, reading, and oral speech.

♦ Writing proficiency
The writing proficiency consisted of four genres in which students were assessed: 1) persuasive—“convincing someone to make a change”; 2) narrative—“describing someone, a thing or an event,” 3) expository—“giving factual information about a topic,” and 4) imaginative—creating a story. Students were given multiple opportunities to show proficiency in writing in the four genres: classroom writing in grades 6, 7, and 8; MPS on-demand performance assessments in grades 6, 7, and 8; and state assessments (TerraNova in grade 7 and WSAS in grade 8). However, one of the scores used to calculate proficiency was required to come from one of the formal on-demand assessments. Scores were based on a 4-point rubric.

Using the two-out-of-three rule, students were required to earn a score of 3 or better on a 4-point rubric in each of the four genres for the sub-area of writing, to count as proficient. Using the point system, the highest scores in each of the four areas contributed to an overall score in the Communications area, with a total of at least 18 required to pass proficiency. The school district provided a conversion table for state and MPS assessments, converting these scores to a scale score of 1 to 4.

♦ Reading proficiency
The reading proficiency consisted of an on-demand reading assessment (Gates-MacGinitie, Metropolitan, Woodcock, STAR, Jerry Johns, TerraNova in grade 7, or WSAS in grade 8); and the MPS Reading Assessment Instruction Card. Students were required to achieve a grade level of 7 or above in reading to pass the on-demand reading assessment. The Reading Assessment Instruction Card was developed in the Summer of 1999. According to a learning coordinator, one primary reading strategy was taught and assessed at each grade level. Students were required to read a story at his or her grade level and to answer related questions on an assessment. The teacher assessed whether or not the student was using the reading strategies assessed. The reading card came with a rubric for scoring the reading strategies. The student received three scores, one for grade 6, one for grade 7, and one for grade 8. These scores were totaled and then converted to the overall score using a conversion table provided in the Middle Grades Proficiency Handbook (Milwaukee Public School District, May, 1998). Students required a score of 3 or 4 in both the reading strategies (the Reading Assessment Instruction Card) and a 3 or 4 in the on-demand reading assessment, to be proficient in reading, using the two-out-of-
three rule. Using the point system, both the on-demand assessment and reading card scores contributed points to the Communications area and required a total score of 18.

♦ **Oral Communication** proficiency
For the oral communication proficiency, students were required to demonstrate skills in preparing and presenting a 3- to 5-minute videotaped demonstration speech, persuasive speech, or an interview. One oral communication score was used to determine a student’s Communications proficiency point total. Students earned points in this area through classroom speeches or a presentation of the science project, the 3-dimensional scale modeling project, or the research paper. Using the two-out-of-three rule, students met proficiency in this area by receiving a score of 3 or 4 on a 4-point rubric. Otherwise, their highest score on an oral communication contributed towards the overall point total for the Communications area.

Scores used to determine a student’s proficiency point total in Communications:
1. Persuasive writing
2. Narrative writing
3. Expository writing
4. Imaginative writing
5. Formal Reading Assessment (school-selected, TerraNova, or WSAS)
6. MPS Reading Assessment Instruction Card
7. Presentation, Speech, or Interview

Students were required either to earn a total of 18 points, or to have a proficient score in two out of the following three areas: writing, reading, and oral communication.

**Mathematics**
Mathematics was divided into the subareas of algebra topics, formal on-demand assessment, and three-dimensional scale model. Students required a total of 21 points to be proficient in mathematics, or to be proficient in two-out-of-three areas (with a score of 3 or above in two-out-of-three areas).

♦ **Algebra topics:**
1. Patterns of Change, grade 7
2. Linearity, grade 8
3a. Mathematical Models, grade 8
   b. Exponential Functions, grade 8
4. Quadratic Functions, grade 8
5. Symbolic Mathematics, grade 8

The handbook provided general directions for completing the algebra topics. For example, the following were the instructions for Algebra topic 1, “Patterns of Change”:

*Use data organized in graphs or tables to identify patterns. Analyze a pattern or relationship in a graph or table to identify variables and interpret the relationship between the variables. Recognize linear*
relationships and express them in written, symbolic, tabular, and graphical form. (p. 14)

♦ **Formal Assessment**
Students were required to take the MPS mathematics performance assessment, the WSAS, or the TerraNova (when offered). A student’s highest score was converted to a 4-point scale and applied to his or her overall mathematics score. MPS performance assessments were offered twice a year, 6th through 8th grade, and the WSAS was offered in the 8th grade.

♦ **Three-Dimensional Scale Modeling/Package Design**
The directions for the scale modeling were also general:

> Students create a three dimensional scale model or package design that demonstrates understanding of measurement, proportional reasoning and geometric relationships. The score earned on the 3D/Scale Model Project will be used to determine the total proficiency points earned in mathematics. (p. 15)

Students were allowed to complete this project in either the 7th or 8th grade—whenever it was offered in their classroom. School 2 offered a special “Three Dimensional Scale Modeling” class.

**Science**

Science was subdivided into the areas of 1) Science Portfolio; 2) Formal Assessment; and 3) Science Project. Students required a 7-point total to be considered proficient in science (or receive a score of 3 or higher in two of the three areas).

♦ **Science Portfolio**
The science portfolio was created over a three-year time period. Each year, beginning in 6th grade, students submitted ten pieces of proficient work to be included in their science portfolio. In the Spring of their 8th grade year, the student received a total score of 0 to 4 on the portfolio. The type of work in the portfolio included investigations, written responses, reports and projects, assessments, and student evaluations.

♦ **Formal Assessment**
Students used their highest score from either the MPS performance assessment or the science portion of the WSAS. The manual provided conversion tables on a scale of 0 to 4. District assessments were offered twice a year in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades and the WSAS was offered in the 8th grade.

♦ **Science Project**
Students could complete the science project in grades 6, 7, or 8. Students were required to complete three parts:
1. The Project Proposal included selection of topic, background information, question, hypothesis, procedure, and materials list.
2. The Project Investigation included the collection of data, analysis of data, and conclusion.
3. The Project Presentation included a display, written paper, or oral presentation.

♦ Research
The research area was different from the other three areas, since it was not subdivided. Students required a score of 3 or higher to be proficient in this area. Students could complete the research project during 6th, 7th, or 8th grade (provided with the appropriate instructional opportunity).

Each student project was required to include a research paper and an oral presentation of the paper. The project consisted of the following requirements:
1. Use of statistical data to analyze a problem, interpret, and report the results. The project could include a survey or an experiment.
2. The paper was required to follow the standard format (MLA or APA.) and document the sources used to gather information.
3. Whenever possible, the student was required to use the computer to conduct research and write the paper.

Scoring

MPS Performance Assessments
The on-demand formal district performance assessments in writing, mathematics, and science were created at the district level. Originally, the assessments were scored at the district level by groups of teachers paid by the district. A budget cut in the 1999-2000 school year transferred the scoring of performance assessments to the school level. The MPS Central Office scored a sample of papers and identified anchor papers to be used as models representing each level of the rubric. The district administration then returned the assessments and anchor papers to the schools for internal scoring. A learning coordinator indicated that at her school, two teachers scored each assessment to increase the reliability of the scoring. Additional proficiency assessments such as the Algebra Topics, were scored by classroom teachers.

The Point System Versus The “Two-Out-of-Three” Rule

Part of the result of the creation of the electronic tracking system was the creation of the “point system,” which replaced the original two-out-of-three rule. In the original plan, students were required to achieve proficiency in each subject area at a level of 3 or better on a 4-point scale in at least two subareas. With a computer system in place, the Task Force changed the definition of proficiency to a point system, whereby students were required to earn a certain number of points in each subject area. One result of the point system was that some subject areas were inadvertently weighted more heavily than others. For example, students were required to earn 21 points in mathematics, versus 7 points in science, to be proficient.
Another result of the point system was that students did not have to perform well in every subarea of a particular subject to meet the proficiency standard. According to a respondent from School 3, this change in the method by which students could meet proficiency was an intentional effort on the part of the district task force, based on the reasoning that it was better for students to receive partial credit for the work they did (even if it was at the “one” or “two” level).

Students were able to pass proficiency using either system in the 1999-2000 school year. The point system replaced the two-out-of-three rule, beginning in the 2000-2001 school year.

**Adopt-A-City Completion Project**

As a result of a meeting with Superintendent Brown on November 4, 1998, the Collaborative proposed the Adopt-A-City Completion Project as an alternative method for the 8th grade class of 2000 to meet the Proficiencies. Rather than scaling back on the Proficiencies or getting rid of them altogether (as the superintendent was proposing), the Adopt-A-City Project was instituted as an alternative method for the 8th grade class of 2000 to meet the Proficiencies. Principals and district personnel were concerned that because the Proficiencies system was new and had undergone numerous changes, students needed another opportunity to meet the Proficiencies requirements. The Adopt-A-City Project was developed by Mary Staten of Educational Services, and a group of teachers specializing in relevant subject areas. The project was piloted during summer school in 1999 with 8th graders who were not required to follow the Proficiencies accountability system. The project was then revised, expanded, and implemented in a number of middle schools across the district for all students, upon the recommendation of the Middle School Principals Collaborative.


> *Adopt-A-City is a comprehensive academic project which integrates many of the mathematics, science, writing, and research skills addressed in the Milwaukee Public Schools Middle Grades Learning Proficiencies. The project is aimed at reaching students who have not responded to the forms of assessment that the current Proficiencies present.* (p. 34)

Each student participating in the Adopt-A-City project was assigned a city to research. Students contacted the Chamber of Commerce of their chosen cities and requested information, and used other methods to gain information about their city. The central question of the project was: “Is this a city where I would like to build my future?” The subject areas covered by the project were: 1) communication; 2) research; 3) mathematics; 4) science; and, 5) social studies. Scoring for the project was less clear than for the regular Proficiencies. The Adopt-A-City manual provided rubrics for individual
components of the project (e.g., a business letter rubric) and also contained a very general overall rubric that teachers were to use to score the entire project.

**Adopt-A-City Communication**
1. Graphic Organizer of what student’s ideal city should possess
2. Daily Project Log of progress on the project
3. Business Letter to the Chamber of Commerce of student’s chosen city
4. Writing Types (expository, imaginative, narrative/descriptive, and persuasive)
5. Oral Presentation at the completion of the entire project (videotaped)
6. Research /Position Paper of the overall project that answered the question “Is this a city where I would like to build my future?”

**Adopt-A-City Research**
1. City Outline and Planning Guide
2. Planning Sheet
3. Research/Position Paper Guide
4. Internet Search
5. Fun Facts

**Adopt-A-City Mathematics**
1. Assessment #1: Patterns of Change: “Rent a Truck” or “Summer Jobs”
2. Travel from Milwaukee to Your City: Costs and travel time via different modes of transportation
3. Assessment #2: Exponential Functions: “Population” or “Exponential Growth”
4. Analyze Your City’s Actual Population

**Adopt-A-City Science**
1. Biomes Readings and Questions
2. Biomes Art Projects
3. Laboratory Investigations about climate
4. Assessments: Climatic Data Analysis

**Adopt-A-City Social Studies**
1. Cover Page, including a map of the city
2. Timeline to illustrate important issues and events in the selected city
3. Map Skills Studies
4. Fun Facts Outline
5. Travel Brochure

**Adopt-A-City Culminating Activities**
1. Display
2. Interviews by other students and/or family and community members
References

Appendix B


Appendix C

Interview Coding Summaries
Impact on Curriculum and Instruction, School Organization, and Learning

These are a selected sample of quotes from respondents who gave us permission to use them in this paper. We have included quotes from two coding summaries: Curriculum and Instruction (which also includes information on school organization) and Student Learning.

Curriculum and Instruction and School Organization

This theme includes the effects of the Proficiencies on curriculum and instruction and school organization—respondents’ perceptions of how the Proficiencies influenced or changed curriculum content and teaching practices in classrooms and schools.

Teaching Style

Four respondents stated that the Proficiencies changed teacher’s instruction—teachers began to require students do an increased amount of hands-on work, and the Proficiencies eliminated “busy work” such as worksheets:

*It’s changed teaching because—and I’ve said to the staff—“Gone is the day of the worksheet teacher.” You cannot be a worksheet teacher and teach kids the Proficiencies. . . . Teachers now come in and they do hands-on activities. They engage kids. They empower kids. They’re teaching them the skills for the future.*

*It’s real-world problem solving. Another thing we do a lot of here is we do cooperative learning and we use constructiveness teaching techniques. Hands-on project based learning. That’s what the Proficiencies measure. That’s what the performance assessments are all about. If anything, the Proficiencies helped us focus more, as a greater strength.*

Another way the Proficiencies impacted teaching was to cause teachers to take more time with students, to re-teach concepts, and to give students a chance to re-do work. Respondents at three different schools explained how the Proficiencies encouraged teachers to reflect on their teaching to enable students to meet proficiency:

*Teachers are working really hard. Things that kids missed in 7th grade, they’re going back and pulling kids out in special classes. Eighth grade teachers finished their curriculum and they’re now going back to the kids that got one or two points on the math patterns of change. They’re re-teaching it, having them reassessed.*

*We’ve become more diligent in most cases in developing a case of ownership—this is my problem, it’s not the kids’ problem. If they can’t
write, what are we doing? More often, I hear people coming down and asking me, you know, we really didn’t do well on this, do you have any suggestions on how we can re-teach or is there another way that I can get this point across?

One respondent explained that grading became more consistent because of the Proficiencies and rubrics:

*I think that one of the things too is just more consistency in how we grade. Because now you can go to almost any classroom and any of our FAVE’s. . . all the teachers had rubrics in their rooms so that the kids knew. . . “You’re being graded this way in writing in your language arts class, that’s the way you’re going to be graded if you write something in art.”*

A respondent at another school stated that the Proficiencies did not change the way teachers taught, because they were already doing hands-on learning and performance assessment in that school. The Proficiencies brought confirmation of what they already were doing:

*I didn’t see any hesitancy [among teachers]. Because people were saying, “Well, look—the district’s finally catching up to the way we teach already. . . .” As far as the teaching and learning that occurred in this building, it was just kind of a continuation of good teaching; what we always considered to be good teaching.*

**Focus**

One respondent explained that since there was a history in the district of not having a district-wide curriculum, teachers were often left on their own to decide what to teach. She explained many teachers had a lack of knowledge of how to follow a curriculum scope and sequence because they previously were not required to:

*For years there was this notion that we were not a school system, but a system of schools and each school had its own curricular foci. The problem with that was that when these [district curriculum] binders came out, there wasn’t—I mean there were a whole bunch of teachers who had no sense of scope and sequence because basically people had been doing what they wanted to up to that point.*

Many respondents stated that prior to the Proficiencies, teachers were “doing their own thing,” and ten respondents stated that the Proficiencies provided teachers a specific direction and focus they were previously lacking:

*Like I said at the start, having some clear things to focus on—let’s get the kids to write these four genres, let’s get the kids to read at this level, let’s*
get the kids to be able to do these kinds of algebra investigations, let’s do a science project—those kinds of things have been very well received, those things that we have control over. Our standards here have been very high.

I think what people appreciated with Proficiencies, as limited as they might be viewed, it was the first time that people said, “Someone has deemed this is what learning is and this is what is important learning for our kids in the district, and we now know what our jobs are.”

It’s kind of reinforced the importance of following the scope and sequences in the curriculum. . . . The Proficiencies have definitely helped that accountability. The teachers will say, “Well, you’re not allowing [for] my creativity.” Well, you are allowed your creativity, but you still have some guidelines to follow. Make sure you’re completing your guidelines within this framework, and then you can veer off.

I think as a result of the Proficiencies, our curriculum has tightened up. . . . I think this has focused our teaching in the point that there are skills that we need to develop within the kids, and that has to come first.

It gives us direction in our curriculum, as well as for the teachers and the students. . . . They have now a curriculum that has to be accomplished. They know what has to be done, when it has to be done.

I think the Proficiencies have changed the way we teach. I think it’s made teachers accountable. I think it’s made teachers work harder over the last three years and a sense of ownership and a sense of responsibility that I have never seen before.

Alignment of Curriculum and Proficiencies

Related to the topic of teachers’ focus on the curriculum is curriculum alignment. These two respondents described how their schools made a conscious effort to align the scope and sequence of their curriculum with the Proficiencies:

We also put a lot of time and effort the past two years aligning our curriculum with the Proficiencies, making sure we’re teaching and covering all aspects of the curriculum and aligning it per grade and per content.

In this building, we did do a lot of our own curriculum work where we’d focus on skills and concepts in each subject area and what grading period they would be covered in. We had a skeleton for that, at least, so we tried to put the two together.
This respondent indicated the curriculum at his school was already aligned with the Proficiencies:

*I think they [teachers] view the Proficiencies as each of the components, in math, in science, as what we’ve taught all along here. I think all of it was fairly relevant.*

This respondent differentiated between teaching to the Proficiencies (teaching to the test) and “teaching the curriculum to address the Proficiencies”:

*Well, the teachers have accepted it 100%, across the board. They’ve accepted the Proficiencies and they’re teaching to the Proficiencies. They’re teaching the curriculum to address the Proficiencies. . . . Teachers have taught like I’ve never seen them teach.*

**Creativity and Curriculum Integration**

Respondents from different schools differed in the degree to which they believed creativity in teaching could be maintained while covering the Proficiencies. Four respondents stated that the Proficiencies compromised teachers’ ability to be creative in the classroom, but that creativity was still possible within the Proficiencies framework:

*The negative side of that here is that we lost a lot in our curriculum integration and creativity. People are trying so hard to learn and cover what they have and cover what they have to for proficiency that they don’t always see or have time or know how to infuse proficiency skills into a project based assignment or an integrated unit with somebody else because they don’t have a handle on it themselves yet. . . . Just because there are standards and requirements doesn’t mean there are standardization or that you can’t still do some of the creative things that you started out doing, or focus on multiple intelligences, or any of the number of things our school believes in.*

*The teachers will say, “Well, you’re not allowing my creativity.” Well, you are allowed your creativity, but you still have some guidelines to follow. Make sure you’re completing your guidelines within this framework, and then you can veer off.*

The following two responses were given by the same person. While the respondents’ comments above indicated they believed creativity is possible within the framework of the Proficiencies, this respondent described how teachers in his school provided rich, creative opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency within an integrated curriculum:

*In the arts classes, they all do reflective or self-assessed pieces and they also do an oral presentation, so that hits on the Proficiencies. . . . They*
write in a visual arts class. They write in a math class, they write in a science class; and they can fulfill the writing proficiency if they have a paper that follows the rubrics. If they have a 3 or a 4 . . . . they can meet the proficiency in some class that’s not even related to an English/communications class.

We set up that 8th grade schedule where one hour of the day they would go and work as an integrated arts class with the Proficiencies. Three teachers took research, three took communications, three took math—whatever it was. Three took science. It wasn’t just the classroom teachers. It was with the stage technology teacher. . . . with a Spanish language teacher. . . . with a visual arts teacher. . . . It was a combination of arts teachers and regular classroom teachers that did that, addressing the Proficiencies but not giving up their specific content. The stage tech teacher said “I’m going to do something on 3D scale modeling when we do something for a stage, and this is how we’re going to create a set, but it’s going to hit the 3D and the scale modeling of the Proficiencies.

Fine Arts and Vocation Education Integration

Four respondents described how their schools integrated the Proficiencies into their Fine Arts and Vocational Education classes (FAVE’s), by having students do a proficiency project in those classes, such as oral presentation or writing:

Each FAVE teacher had to decide what area they were going to support. For example, our art teachers and phy ed teachers decided that they could help out in the area of oral communications. They could teach the kids how to do demonstration speeches. We have demonstration speeches with kids doing a volleyball serve or a gymnastics stunt. . . . or how to make a bologna sandwich from start to finish. Every teacher in this building plays a role in assisting the kids in becoming proficient. It’s not just the academic teachers.

What we’ve tried to do is have the Proficiencies be incorporated in there. Our art teacher does a lot of the oral presentations. Our health teacher did persuasive papers on smoking and he did a lot of oral presentations. They want to participate. Our music teacher really wants to do some of the things because they just feel left out.

So what it [Proficiencies] did is create parity so that all classes across the board—the dance teachers and the visual arts teachers were probably saying, “Hey—now you’re in the same boat as the rest of us.” If you fail the dance class, that wasn’t considered one of the major subjects. In a sense, it kind of made us all equal across the board.

They also did research in their health classes. We wanted to bring the
FAVE in. We didn’t want the FAVE to be left out in the cold. . . . We did put the FAVEs in through our health department where they could do their research paper there.

In one school, all the FAVEs were replaced with Proficiency classes, in striking contrast to the schools in which the Proficiencies and FAVEs were integrated with each other:

We did substantially change our curriculum. We got rid of the arts, basically, and put in proficiency classes. Instead of taking shop, or home ec, or art in some cases, the kids take this scale modeling project, they take an extra writing class, and they take a research class and they take a science fair project class.

Proficiencies Classes

Four respondents talked about “Proficiencies classes” at their schools. These classes took place at a variety of times at each school: during the school day, after school, and on Saturdays:

So that instruction, it was great fun and tremendously worthwhile for the teachers involved to develop the curriculum for those [Proficiencies] classes. That’s been a boon for the whole school because it was done in a very wonderful, systematic way. The kids do quite well in those classes. They do a great job on those particular Proficiencies. There’s a lot of kids who do make it.

We even have a special class for oral communications at this school. Every six weeks it changes and we filter new kids through and work on public speaking.

We had a research class and a communications class. We had our 8th grade class in the research class, and that didn’t work so well. Next year, we’re putting our 7th grade students through the research class to take a little pressure off.

What we have done this year is we have developed what we call Saturday Academy, where kids. . . . If they’ve already done it in class and they didn’t meet proficiency on it or they didn’t get it finished, we’ll have a Saturday Academy. . . . We’ve done it for all of our assessments. . . . We have been very successful. . . . We will run anywhere from 55 to 60 kids on a Saturday.

The Saturday Academies were reportedly very popular:
It wasn’t until after we gave the kids the proficiency report cards and they saw what they needed and the urgency of it. This Saturday, we turned kids away that weren’t even invited.

Interesting Stories

One school in particular stood out in its ability to integrate the Proficiencies into complex, fun, and meaningful projects for students:

They gave me this T-shirt just the other day, and I said, “Tell me what this is all about.” They said, “Well, actually, we did this with our social studies, English, and math teachers,” but it was something about the historical clash of the cultures. Here were the native cultures of the Americas and here were the Europeans coming in. They created a graphic arts piece down in our graphic arts studio and they made a T-shirt from it. They did the research, they did the artwork, they did the social studies—it’s another example of what’s hanging on the walls here. It’s all performance-based. That’s what the Proficiencies are like. It goes on regularly around here. I wanted to know, “Well, what are these symbols?” I was at the 8th grade picnic Friday and said, “Tell me what this T-shirt is all about because I don’t understand it.” The kids crowded around, “We did this, and that’s why we did this.” “East meets west.” They all had the explanations. I could have done oral presentations out there in the park. They were all so enthused about it. It goes on regularly around here. It’s fun.

In one school, the Proficiencies united the school in a common dialogue about curriculum and assessment. The school also provided students with an enjoyable way to focus on learning through competition:

We found out that the more we talked as a school, the better off we were. That’s how we got into the idea of the writing genre every month. I started out by saying, “This month is your expository. What is expository? Gotta write this, don’t forget, you’ve got three more weeks for that.” The dialogue was the same. The kids were coming into the office. The secretary: “Do you have your science project? What are you writing about in the narrative?” It gave us common dialogue. The other thing that we did and, again, this was the school leadership team suggesting it—I kind of took it and ran because this was right up my alley—we started the school year asking questions. We had a competition over the air. We asked academic questions every morning. . . . Every day we started off the announcements with questions. That set the academic tone. Learning is important. You learn in different ways. It kind of came off of “Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?” We called it, “Who Wants to be Proficient?”
Student Learning

This coding summary includes information on student achievement and learning; student improvement and successes; student behavior, attitudes, and development of student ownership and responsibility regarding the Proficiencies; and supports for student achievement.

Student Achievement and Learning

An interview with a former district administrator indicates that student achievement was the primary goal of the Middle School Proficiencies:

> The idea would be to mobilize people around some very clear outcomes for the kids so it would improve the quality of instruction at the middle school level. The goal was to clarify what the expectations were of children and, as a result, improve their performance.

Student Improvement and Successes

There was variation among schools regarding subject areas in which their students were most successful. Six learning coordinators stated that their students did well in math and/or science:

> We have several kids that have met in science because of the 2-out-of-3 rule because they met in our MPS Performance Assessment and their science project, so they don’t need a portfolio score. . . . There were several in math that met—same kind of deal—the project and the test score.

> Our kids did very well in science.

> I can show you. . . for all our scale modeling projects and our science projects, we have a photograph. Each of the kids had to do an extensive written explanation of what they did and why; I don’t think you’ll find that at many schools and across the middle schools. That has been satisfying to see the kids rise to that level of performance.

> I’m hoping that when we get our results back for our science and math assessments that we will see some improvements in math and science. We did see some last year, we did see some improvement last year in the performance assessment scores and I’m thinking we’re going to see a bigger improvement this year because the teachers are now feeling comfortable with it because the kids have had it for three years.

> They’ve done consistently better on their performance assessments, and some of the performance assessments, I think, have been quite difficult. . .
the thinking that's involved in the mathematical reasoning, they're not afraid to try it on.

Seven respondents believed their students did better in the communications areas of reading and/or writing:

We’ve done very well in the reading areas.

We’ve definitely made great gains in writing. . . . [and] I looked at our WSAS scores today; we’re up in reading.

Our kids, even though it doesn’t show up on the state tests, our kids have done better and shown a steady growth in their writing. They’ve done really well on the district writing problems.

Two respondents credited the teacher for student achievement in a given proficiency area:

Math is pretty strong. . . . A lot of the English areas are strong. I think it depends on the teacher.

Two respondents believed the proficiency system helped raise student achievement on state assessments:

I did a presentation with our parents, just three weeks ago, in here, and around the district and other places. I can show you in a three-year period of time how our test scores continue to improve.

Student Behavior, Attitudes and Development of Student Ownership and Responsibility

Four respondents stated that students took responsibility for knowing what their proficiency scores were and what they needed to do to become proficient:

I’ve been teaching 23, 24 years now. I’ve never seen students take responsibility for their education the way these 8th graders work this year to achieve proficiency. Not only just to achieve it, but they understand. . . . They’d say, “Yeah, I need one more point on that quadratic algebra prompt because. . . I need to redo it. . . .” They know exactly what they need to do and it’s not just, “Yeah, that thing for math.”

I think it’s hit them that they have to do well on proficiency in order to move on. It’s generated an interest. They come to me and they say, “Can I see my proficiency report card? How did I do here? What do I have to do?” . . . Or, when they know they haven’t done well and they find out they have another opportunity then, yes, they’re excited to come to me. They want to see.
I think they [students] feel more accountable for their work. . . . There’s a lot of students who want me to run them another report. . . so they can see exactly where they are with their points.

Two respondents stated that students took responsibility to the extent that they asked their teachers when they would have the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency:

*Because of these Proficiencies, the kids have stayed on the teachers to make sure they’ve gotten what they need to do to be proficient. “When are we going to do our science project in class? When are we going to get our next portfolio item?”*

Three respondents explained that there was variation among students’ responses to the Proficiencies. Eighth graders took more responsibility than 6th and 7th graders, and there were some students who did not seem to care about the Proficiencies:

*Our staff would say to me, “It’s amazing how our kids are focusing.” But then, on the other hand, they would say, “But there is this group that’s really lagging behind,” and part of that is just human nature.*

Two respondents spoke of high self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, and even jubilation:

*There’s a real sense of ownership on the [part of the] kids. The kids know what’s expected of them. I’ve got 8th grade kids that—I believe that this class of 8th graders probably has the highest self-esteem, the highest sense of accomplishment of any class I’ve ever seen as a teacher or as an administrator.*

During one interview, a student came in to check one of his scores and expressed the jubilation mentioned above:

*Student came in during interview to inquire about his math proficiency. The Learning Coordinator showed him his scores—at first, he didn’t understand that he passed, but when he realized that he passed proficiency in math with the “two-out-of-three rule,” he was overjoyed.] Yeah, at first he didn’t, it looked like he didn’t quite understand, and then he said, “I really have to work on math,” and he does, but Milwaukee has the two-out-of-three [rule], and that was his second, which he needed. That was cool.*

This respondent summarized succinctly how the Proficiencies affected student behavior:

*Kids have never worked harder in their lives than this 8th grade.*
Some students didn’t believe they would be affected by the Proficiencies—they believed they would be socially promoted whether or not they pass. Four respondents described this phenomenon:

[They reacted] with disdain and without believing that it was going to have any real impact on their lives. They’re still anticipating social promotion.

They don’t believe that they’re going to be held back, some of them, because MPS has always had a history of age being promoted, and it’s very difficult for some of them to accept that.

One respondent described a group of students who were hard to reach due to truancy and problems at home:

Like I said, there’s the nine or ten kids out of the 26 [not passing] that are chronic, for whatever reason. They’ve got problems at home, they show up once every three weeks, whatever. If they’re not here, you can’t reach them.

Another respondent described students’ negative attitudes towards frequent testing:

Oh, they get tired of taking tests. They’re very tired of taking tests. It seems like every other week or so they’re having tests.

Supports for Student Achievement

Supports for students to achieve proficiency were described by respondents as: summer school, after school tutoring, Saturday Academies, special classes, the ability to re-do work, and the alternative “completion project,” Adopt-A-City.

Three respondents cited their summer school program as a support to students for passing the Proficiencies as a last resort:

Our viewpoint here was that our kids are going to have to work for it, because we’ve been telling them for three years that they’re not going to move on without being proficient. And that’s something that we have stuck to. They will have to finish Adopt-A-City up in summer school, if they’re not totally proficient.

Some schools created special classes to help students achieve proficiency. One respondent stated that those classes were particularly helpful to students in her school:

The kids produce quite well in those FAVE classes. They do a great job on those particular Proficiencies.
One respondent described an after-school program to help students reach proficiency. She also pointed to support at home as being key to students achieving proficiency:

> And we sent out letters, and we sent out reminders, you know, “This test is coming up,” or “These Proficiencies are due,” and there’d be that core group—that kept growing—but you’d point out the ones that had that support at home. And then there were the kids that were struggling and we’d try to pick those kids up through after-school activities and after-school proficiency help.

Another respondent described how successful students were in the Saturday Academies:

> We have been very, very successful with our Saturday Academies. We will run anywhere from 55 to 60 kids on a Saturday. . . . I can’t tell you that they’re getting everybody in there that they need to get in. But they do get those who are interested and those who believe in this process. They are coming in.