

Evaluation Brief

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Defining Proficiency as High-Quality Work

North Carolina has established the goal of helping all students to be well-prepared for each succeeding grade level. It is crucial that educators clearly define what is proficient, high quality, on-grade-level work. Teachers, students, and parents need to have a clear image of what proficiency looks like - not just in the gateway years - but for quality education for every year.

Models of students' work can clearly, accurately, and precisely define the expectations set forth in the *Standard Course of Study*. They can serve as guides for student self-assessment and quality instruction. They also are helpful as teachers and schools are developing individual student plans, serving as exemplars for the type of work that is being targeted through interventions and assistance for individual students. This does not mean that there need to be models for every goal and objective; rather, there must be sufficient models to demonstrate quality work for a variety of important goals and objectives.

Knowing what is quality work is important for all disciplines. Whether science or social studies, the arts or health and physical education, second languages or workforce development, English language arts or mathematics, teachers need to provide a clear vision for their students about what proficiency looks like. Because of the emphasis on English language arts and mathematics in the state's gateway years, this brief uses examples from these disciplines only.

There are many possible ways to assemble collections of student work that serve as exemplars or models of grade-level expectations. No matter what specific process is used, discussing goals, defining criteria for judging work, and agreeing on standards of excellence can be a valuable professional development endeavor. There are many pathways (classroom activities, discussions, and assignments) that can lead students to similar goals, so a collection of exemplars should be diverse. The process of developing these models is a way to deepen teachers' understanding of their practices and expectations.

For students to achieve at high levels, they must know what quality work looks like and understand the criteria for proficiency.

The process outlined in this brief involves:

- Looking at the *Standard Course of Study* and deciding what is critical for students to know and be able to do,
- Establishing criteria and descriptors of what proficiency looks like,
- Collecting exemplars and models of student work, including national samples, that illustrate these criteria,
- Assembling an annotated collection of student work, and
- Sharing information with the school community - parents, students, and teachers.

The process begins with goals, a plan, and a timeline for reaching them.

How do we begin this process?

Schools are likely to organize their work in different ways based on factors such as number of students at a grade level, faculty assignments, previous experiences with using rubrics, and self-contained or departmentalized configurations. However, no matter what the organizational pattern, the process of defining proficient work should involve teachers, administrators, and perhaps even parents.

The first step is to organize into small teams of teachers that are clear about what they are trying to accomplish. This means that they will agree on how to disagree and resolve differences. They need to establish a plan for how they will function as a group of reflective practitioners. For example, some teachers in the same grade may choose to work on English language arts while others work on mathematics. In high school, teachers teaching the same type of courses are likely to work together.

When there are only 1 or 2 teachers at a grade level or teaching the same course, there needs to be collaboration with other faculties.

Teams of teachers need to decide what goals (strand or content from the *Standard Course of Study*) they will choose to focus on first. In some schools the groups at different grade levels will work on similar goals, focusing on the continuum of growth across the grades. If elementary teachers choose to focus on the development of paragraphs or on problem solving, they will want to define what is the evidence that illustrates proficiency and how it is different from grade to grade. In other instances, the teams of teachers may work on different, yet important, goals. Second grade teachers may decide to focus first on place value concepts, but fourth grade teachers may choose to begin with multiplicative reasoning. Seventh grade teachers may choose to begin with argumentative writing, while eighth grade teachers could focus first on writing a research report.

Standards for quality work must be high for North Carolina students to be successful learners and productive citizens.

Once teams decide where they will begin, they may wish to examine resources that will provide some models from outside their own classrooms. This is where Central Office staff or teachers with particular expertise in content areas can provide resources. National models include the work of the New Standards Project and exemplars from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), or the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Building administrators should also contribute to discussions

through their content knowledge and leadership. Using models from outside North Carolina along with work from students in the school will help to establish benchmarks that are rigorous from both LEA and national perspectives.

How does the process continue?

There are several appropriate ways to proceed as teams begin examining student work. Teachers in a team may decide to have their classes complete the same assignment or task. This will allow them to discuss their expectations and proficiency across classrooms. In other cases, teachers in a team may choose to bring samples of student work from a variety of assignments that relate to the same goal. This procedure encourages discussion about the multiple ways students can display proficiency of the same goal. Another example of diversity in the process is how criteria for judging the work are determined. Basic criteria for proficiency should be established as assignments are being developed and they may evolve as teachers are examining the student work.

The process for identifying exemplars becomes more structured as teachers come together with student work. Procedural guidelines for studying student work and defining proficiency follow:

- Each teacher should choose 4 samples of student work that he or she judges to be at or above grade level. Teachers will not need to examine samples that are obviously not at grade level since the purpose of this work is to establish standards that exemplify expectations for **all** students.
- Each teacher should remove student names from papers and any comments or scoring. Colleagues need to examine the work without preconceptions related to students.
- Each teacher should make a copy of each paper for all teachers on the team. Teachers will need to work independently at first to evaluate the work.
- As discussions of student work begin, both the prompt and purpose of the activity need to be very clear to the team. This means that the discussion group needs to know the context of the assignment – what the teacher hoped to accomplish and what the students were responsible for doing.
- Teachers group the set of papers into three piles – above proficient, proficient, and less than proficient. Grouping papers independently will make clear the need for discussions about the criteria for judging work and help to establish high expectations.
- The team will discuss the groupings in order to reach consensus. Through these discussions teachers will be able to refine the criteria for scoring and better describe what is and is not proficient work.
- From the student work teachers should choose 3 or 4 examples that illustrate high quality, proficient work related to the goal.

Indicators of Proficiency

- *Exhibits consistent performance*
- *Can apply, model, and explain concepts*
- *Needs minimal assistance*
- *Responds with appropriate answer or procedure*
- *Completes tasks accurately*
- *Applies strategies in most situations*
- *Takes appropriate risks*
- *Makes applications and extensions*
- *Exhibits fluency*
- *Shows flexibility in thinking*
- *Recognizes cause and effect relationships*

What happens after teachers have reached consensus?

The process does not end with one group of models. The teams reconfigure or stay together to choose another important goal and complete the cycle again. This process continues until they are satisfied that they have a collection to share with parents and students. This collection should illustrate the depth and breadth of what students should understand and be able to do in a proficient manner so that they can be successful at the next grade level.

Before these collections of student work are made public, teachers need to annotate the samples in order to communicate expectations clearly. These annotations should tell the context for the work, the specific assignment, and why the sample is judged as proficient.

Discussions among teachers about quality work have the potential to improve instruction across classrooms.

This process of setting benchmarks is a long-term endeavor. While assembling collections of quality student work may seem like a simple task, experience indicates that it is a highly interactive professional activity that requires extended discussion, justification of criteria, and reflection. This long-range endeavor involves continuous refinement; therefore, a realistic schedule that continues over a number of months needs to be put into place. The process should result in a collection of models that can be displayed in every school to inform educators, parents, and students.

While it is ideal for schools in a school system to begin the process of defining proficient, high quality work together, individual schools can undertake the process for themselves. School systems will need to coordinate the work of individual schools so that system-wide expectations are consistent and well-articulated. There needs to be professional development to assist teachers in using these models in their classrooms to maintain consistent standards and evaluate student work accordingly. There should also be in place a system for providing professional feedback to a teacher if student work is not being evaluated (scored) according to the agreed upon standards.

Teachers can use a similar process within their own classrooms to determine quality work.

- *Define the goals: What is important for students to learn and what will accomplishment look like?*
- *Identify appropriate tasks to help students reach their goals: What specifically must students know and be able to do?*
- *Give clear, precise assignments: Do all students understand what is expected?*
- *Focus on levels of achievement: Can students and teachers differentiate levels of achievement?*
- *Make collections of quality work that can inform students and parents: Are there anchor papers to model consistent scoring?*