

Theory of Action: Academic standards represent a collective commitment around what students should learn each year. The state assessment asks students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and understanding related to these standards using a common measure. The resulting data allows us to see patterns in performance that should guide school and district improvement, helping identify areas of strength and opportunity.

Role of Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) in Defining Proficiency: PLDs bridge state assessment to classroom instruction and the systems of formative assessments that guide local instruction and choices about individual students. Academic proficiency represents a range of observable student performance characteristics. There are multiple pathways to proficiency, and students rely upon their strengths differently within that range of performance.

Proficiency and Difficulty: A student's ability to demonstrate proficiency is influenced by the difficulty of the texts or stimuli presented, tasks they're asked to complete, and the contexts in which they are engaged. As student performance improves, students are typically able to handle more challenging texts/stimuli, tasks, and contexts, and are able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge more accurately and consistently.

Let the following questions guide your review of performance level descriptors (PLDs).

1. How well do the PLDs capture the range of “proficiency?”

- Consider three dimensions that shape our collective understanding of “proficiency” framed in the sub-bullets below. If there are differences between your expectations across these three dimensions and the PLDs, how might the PLDs be revised to better reflect expectations for proficiency?
 - How well do the PLDs align with expectations in the Illinois Learning Standards?
 - How well do the PLDs reflect the learning objectives outlined in your curriculum and instruction?
 - How well does the description of proficiency in the PLDS align with your perceptions of what proficient students know and can do?

2. How well are the PLDs vertically and horizontally articulated?

- Are the performance levels distinct and measurable (e.g., with minimal ambiguity in terms of what distinguishes a “proficient” student from an “approaching” student)?
- Are the levels detailed enough to provide meaningful distinction, but not so specific that they create unnecessary complexity or make expectations too rigorous?
- How well does the progression from one grade to the next represent the progression of skills and knowledge described in the Illinois Learning Standards?
 - Are there areas where there seems to be a lot of overlap or a significant jump in expectations?
 - Is this same overlap or jump present in the standards?

3. How well do the PLDs suit the intended audience and purpose?

- Is the language straightforward and easily understandable?
 - By educators?
 - By parents?
 - By students?
- Are terms used consistently across different subjects and grades? Is there a clearly identified reason if there are different terms used?
- Are the terms that are used precise and well-defined?
- Do the PLDs describe observable/testable student skills or results rather than interpreting them or suggesting what might have caused them?
- Do the PLDs avoid language that might unintentionally favor certain groups or cultures over others?
- The Every Student Succeeds Act requires that all students be assessed on grade-level standards. How could the PLDs be improved, without changing the expectations for proficiency, such that they better represent the kinds of supports and accommodations students may need to reach the highest levels of performance?