

A Study of the Basic Proficiency After Two Years

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Overview

“Basic Proficiency” refers to a modified curriculum designed to offer a “just passing” alternative to struggling students. Any student may choose this plan and students may move back and forth between “standard inquiry” and basic proficiency from topic to topic. The purpose of the plan is to increase the number of students who pass the state tests in social studies. The theory behind the plan is that students who are taught less will in fact remember more.

The working definition of “basic proficiency” is that portion of the state curriculum that has *actually been tested* on a survey of the ten most recent years. The idea is to exploit, for the student's benefit, the fact that the state does not test everything that is in the curriculum. Students' knowledge intake is restricted to *exposure* to the whole curriculum but *effort* applied to only the things tested.

Questions arise as to whether this is effective, whether it is the right thing to do, and what effect it has on the class and success rate of students. Specifically:

- How does the number choosing basic change through the year?
- How do students choosing basic do?
- Who are the students choosing basic?
- Do students on basic meet the state standards?

How does the number choosing basic change through the year?

One important element of the basic proficiency option is that it, by definition, limits the maximum possible grade point average. Wherever the amount of labor or information is reduced on a task, the maximum grade for that task must also likewise be reduced. Furthermore, students choosing basic understand that, on standard class-wide tests, they will encounter questions the answer to which they have not been taught. They accept that they will likely get these wrong, but that they will likely pass the test because they have been taught 65% of the material.

In the 2011-2012 program, two tasks had a reduced maximum score: the basic topic multiple-choice test and the brief written argument task. The multiple-choice test was worth a maximum score of 67 because it represents only about 2/3 of the material students on the standard inquiry plan are learning. The brief written argument was worth a maximum of 71 because students on basic could write this task with open notes, whereas students on the standard plan had to study before writing the composition.

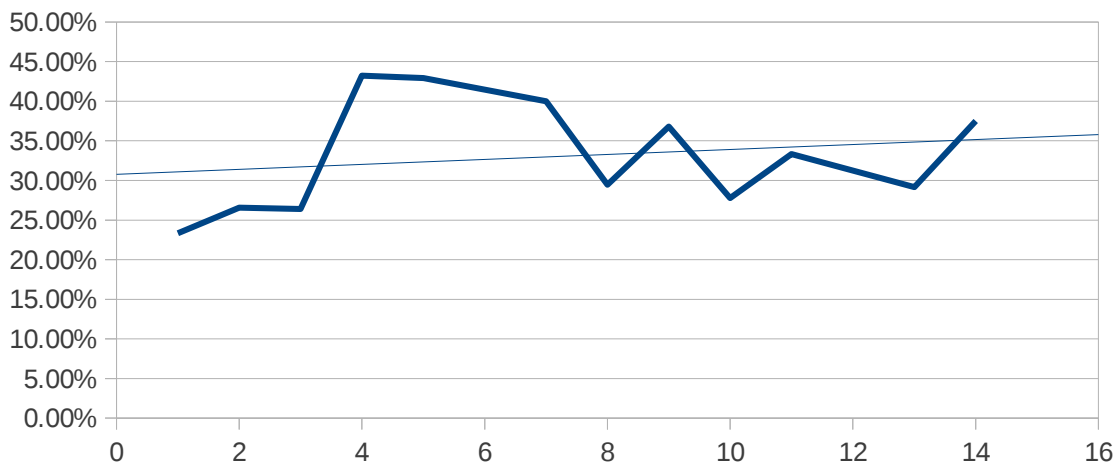
Since students can choose basic on a topic-by-topic basis, the number of students choosing basic through the year fluctuates. Some students take basic all year, others only when they have fallen behind or have been absent and need to catch up. (A positive side effect of having a basic plan in place is that even stronger students can use it in emergencies).

The trend for all 65 of my students was a slight increase as the year progressed. This number was pushed up by ninth graders, in which class the number of students on basic increased as the year progressed. In eighth grade, the number was fairly constant. In seventh grade, I was happy to see a decrease in students on basic as the year progressed and students on basic were willing to take the risk and try the standard plan. On average, about a third of students were on basic through the year.

To encourage students to take the risk and try the standard inquiry plan, they were allowed to try standard and if it went poorly, I gave them time and permission to do the basic plan for a higher mark.

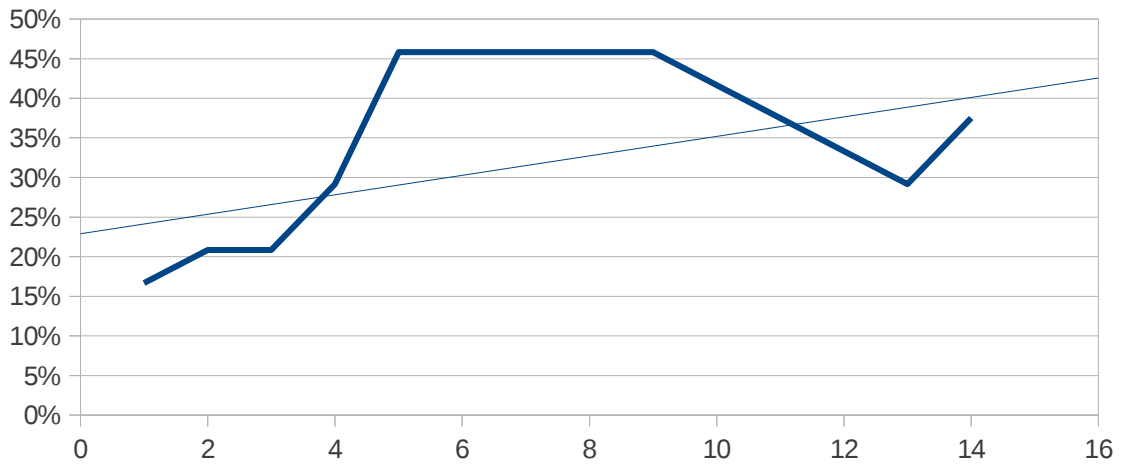
Percentage on Basic Plan Topic-to-Topic

All 7th, 8th, and 9th Graders (N=65)



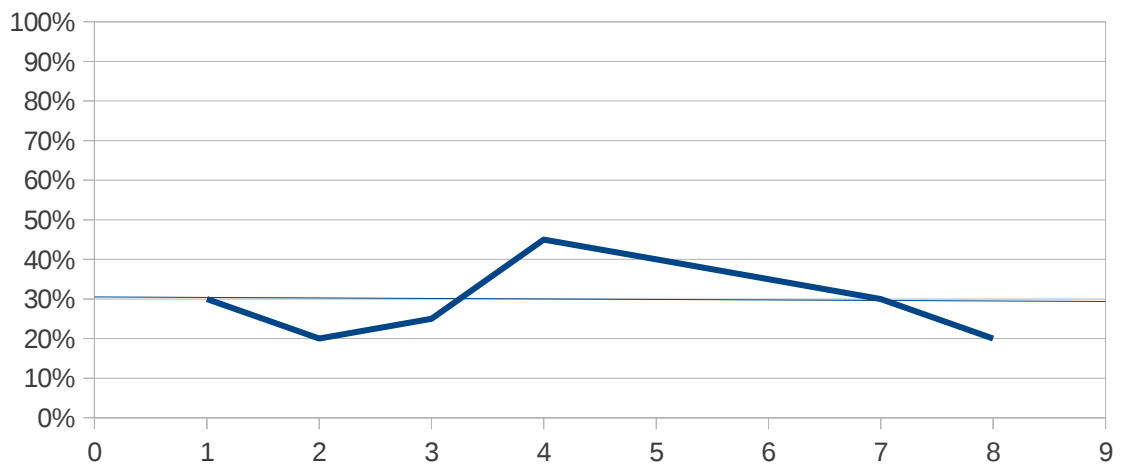
Ninth Graders Choosing Basic

Topic-to-Topic, N=24



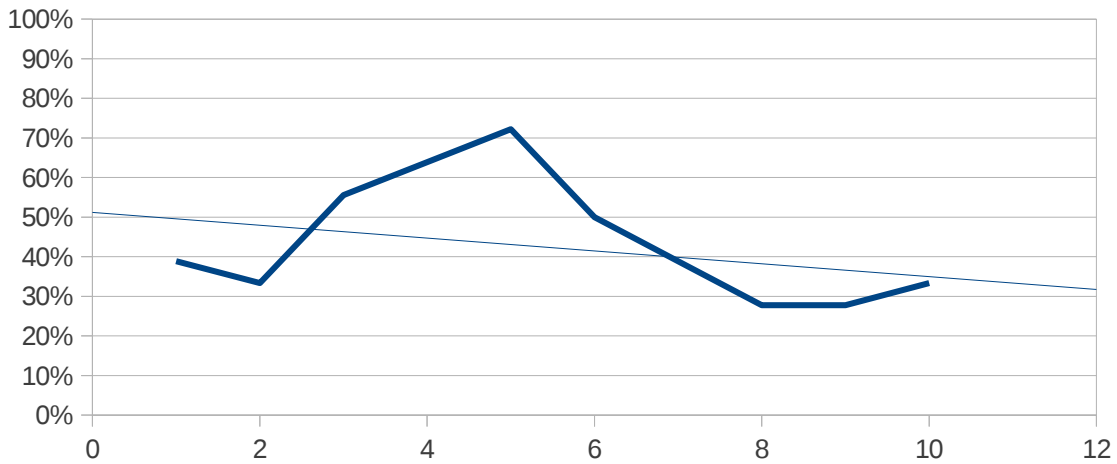
Eighth Graders Choosing Basic

Topic-to-Topic, N=20



Seventh Graders Choosing Basic

Topic-to-Topic, N=18



How do students choosing basic do?

Since the number of students fluctuates from topic to topic, it is necessary to identify first which students were on basic so often that it was their dominant plan. For this study, students who chose basic at least 80% of the time are studied.

Nineteen students (29%) of seventh through ninth grader chose basic 80% or more of the time. The average score overall for these nineteen students over four quarters and a final examination was 65%, a passing mark.

	YTD Qtr 1	YTD Qtr 2	YTD Qtr 3	YTD Qtr 4	FinEx
Mean	62	61	66	67	66
Median	62	62	66	68	61
StDev	14.46	13.29	9.70	8.85	14.25
Percent Passing	47.4%	47.4%	73.7%	68.4%	47.4%

It is interesting, the number of students of these nineteen who were able to keep their averages above 70 and above 80 for each quarter and even on the final exam. Three of the nineteen never passed a single quarter nor the final exam. Five of the nineteen passed every quarter and the final exam.

70 and above	21%	11%	26%	32%	32%
80 and above	16%	11%	11%	11%	16%

Do students on basic meet the state standards?

Without a state test, it is difficult to answer this question. In separate documentation, I address the reliability and validity of the grading system used in the class. If it may be assumed that passing the class does indeed represent meeting the state standards, then 12 of the 19 (63%) met the standards on the basic plan. What is surprising is the number of students who maintained averages well above just passing even when the focus of their effort is only on just enough to pass. Clearly, they were gaining additional information from experience in the class. Eight of the 19 have an IEP.

Conclusion

91% of all 65 7th-9th grade social studies students passed the class in 2011-2012. I attribute this high number to a package of differentiated instruction methods that includes basic proficiency as a principle element. By controlling how much information students must learn and by identifying which information has the greatest priority, students can learn and retain more.

Appendix A: How many On Basic Each Topic

	Number of Students On Basic – 7th (N=18)	Number of Students On Basic – 8th (N=20, 2 left by end year)	Number of Students On Basic – 9th (N=24)	TOTAL
Topic 1	n/a	30%	17%	23.33%
Topic 2	39%	20%	21%	26.57%
Topic 3	33%	25%	21%	26.39%
Topic 4	56%	45%	29%	43.24%
Topic 5	*	40%	46%	42.92%
Topic 6	72%	*	*	
Topic 7	50%	30%	*	40.00%
Topic 8	39%	20%	omit	29.44%
Topic 9	28%	*	46%	36.81%
Topic 10	28%	*	*	27.78%
Topic 11	33%	*	*	33.33%
Topic 12			*	
Topic 13			29%	29.17%
Topic 14			38%	37.50%
Topic 15			**	
Topic 16			*	
Topic 17				
Topic 18			*	
			* condensed basic all	
			** condensed, not basic, a	

Appendix B: Stats on the 19 who chose basic at least 80% of the time

	Student's YTD Qtr 1	Student's YTD Qtr 2	Student's YTD Qtr 3	Student's YTD Qtr 4	FinEx	Number Passing Columns
Student 1	86	84	76	82	79	5
Student 2	80	80	72	77	67	5
Student 3	50	51	54	58	56	0
Student 4	65	69	66	69	60	4
Student 5	82	61	70	76	89	4
Student 6	67	67	61	68	61	3
Student 7	55	56	65	54	45	1
Student 8	44	39	50	55	44	0
Student 9	39	36	50	53	42	0
Student 10	75	70	75	73	75	5
Student 11	62	66	71	67	59	3
Student 12	55	54	65	61	61	1
Student 13	71	69	67	67	58	4
Student 14	53	59	68	72	85	3
Student 15	70	76	83	81	79	5
Student 16	61	62	65	65	61	2
Student 17	70	66	83	74	77	5
Student 18	56	62	66	68	86	3
Student 19	33	39	53	59	67	1