

GUIDE

Beyond the benchmark: How to make proficiency stick for every learner

Dr. Bonnie Cochran,
Director of Academic Planning
and Analytics, HMH



It's a scenario I hear echoed in conversations with educators nationwide, a deeply frustrating pattern that undermines even the most dedicated efforts. As they analyze years of student proficiency data, a troubling cycle emerges: a specific group of students consistently oscillates between needing intervention and demonstrating Tier I proficiency, only to slip back again the following year. Does this sound familiar?

These aren't the students who are chronically underperforming, perpetually in need of intensive support. Nor are they consistently hitting proficiency benchmarks with ease. Instead, they occupy an unsettling in-between zone. They are close enough to grasp grade-level expectations with some support, yet they struggle to maintain that success once the crucial scaffolds are removed. This unique and challenging status, one that a group of educators I work with has aptly named, is "fragile proficiency"—the ability to reach proficiency but not sustain it.

The ever-present challenge in an era of tiered support

In today's educational landscape, tiered support systems are the norm. All 50 states have now implemented some form of response to intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) (Zhang, McCart & Sailor, 2023). These frameworks provide essential structure, guiding us in identifying student needs and organizing instruction across distinct tiers:

- **Tier I: High-quality, standards-aligned instruction delivered to all students.** This is our universal foundation, the core teaching that should meet the needs of the vast majority of learners.
- **Tier II: Targeted supports for students who need additional help.** Here, we provide supplemental instruction, often in small groups, to address specific skill gaps.
- **Tier III: Intensive, individualized interventions for those with more significant learning gaps.** This tier offers the most concentrated and tailored support for students with persistent challenges.

When these systems are well-designed and implemented with fidelity, they undeniably lead to significant improvements in student outcomes. However, the critical question arises—one that keeps dedicated educators awake at night: What happens when students don't neatly fit into these defined tiers? What happens when they exit intervention, seemingly successful, and then begin to fall behind once more?

This is the struggle of the fragile proficient learner, a challenge that demands our immediate and innovative attention.

The hidden ripples of fragile proficiency

The observations these educators shared are not isolated incidents. National data unequivocally backs up what they're seeing in their classrooms. Students hovering near that proficiency threshold are remarkably sensitive to even the slightest shifts in their educational environment. Small changes—be it a shift in daily routines, a dip in instructional quality, or even subtle alterations in assessment conditions—can cause them to slip below proficiency just as quickly as they managed to rise above it.

Consider the compelling research from NWEA® (2015) on growth and proficiency. Their findings reveal that students positioned in the 25th–50th percentile of performance are the most likely to fluctuate between proficiency categories. They are often, perhaps prematurely, labeled “proficient,” yet they frequently carry lingering skill gaps that leave them incredibly vulnerable to regression. It's like building a house on a shaky foundation; even a minor tremor can cause it to crumble.

And this inherent instability has far-reaching and often detrimental ripple effects across the entire educational ecosystem:

- **Skewed school and district performance metrics:** When a significant portion of students are consistently moving in and out of proficiency, our performance data becomes muddled. It's difficult to accurately assess the true impact of our Tier I instruction, interventions, and overall instructional programs when the “proficient” group isn't truly stable. This can lead to misinterpretations of progress and hinder effective strategic planning.
- **Teacher frustration and burnout:** Imagine the dedication, effort, and care a teacher pours into bringing a student to proficiency, only to see that progress erode the following year, or even within the same year. This cyclical pattern can lead to immense frustration, a sense of “two steps forward, one step back,” and ultimately, contribute to teacher burnout. It's emotionally taxing to feel like you're constantly refighting the same battles.
- **Misallocated resources:** When students repeatedly require intervention after having already received it, it signals a significant misallocation of precious resources—time, personnel, and funding. We find ourselves dedicating resources to readdressing needs that were ostensibly resolved, rather than moving forward to address new challenges or provide enrichment for those who are securely proficient. This inefficiency impacts the entire student body.
- **A growing sense of doubt and failure in students themselves:** Most importantly, and perhaps most heartbreakingly, this instability takes a toll on the students. Consistently achieving proficiency only to lose it can foster a profound sense of self-doubt. They might internalize the message that they are simply not capable of sustained success, leading to decreased motivation, disengagement, and a fear of failure. This emotional burden can be far more damaging than any academic skill gap.

The challenge of fragile proficiency is not just an academic one; it's a systemic and emotional one that impacts every stakeholder.



Building a bridge: From intervention to lasting independence

The most exciting and hopeful part of this story, the reason I felt compelled to share it, is that the educators I was speaking with didn't just identify this pervasive problem. They committed themselves to solving it.

They approached this challenge with a collaborative spirit, asking profound and actionable questions: "How can we build a robust bridge between intervention and true Tier I success? How do we ensure that proficiency, once achieved, genuinely sticks?"

This powerful question became their shared "problem of practice" for a semester-long collaborative professional learning community (PLC) process. This wasn't a one-off meeting; it was a sustained, intentional effort. Over the course of the semester, the team meticulously:

- **Reviewed student learning data trends:** Going beyond surface-level scores to identify patterns in student performance over time.
- **Engaged in root cause analysis:** Digging deep to understand why students were exhibiting fragile proficiency, rather than just observing the symptom.
- **Systematically observed fragile proficient students in class:** Gaining firsthand insights into their learning behaviors, challenges, and strengths in authentic classroom settings.
- **Reviewed cutting-edge research and best practices:** Grounding their solutions in evidence-based strategies.

Ultimately, this rigorous process led them to identify and implement **five key strategies** that, when consistently applied, transformed fragile proficiency into genuine, lasting growth.

1. Intentional transition: More than just an exit

Their first critical step was to create a structured and deliberate transition phase for students exiting intervention. This wasn't merely about "graduating" students from one program to another. It was a carefully orchestrated handoff designed to ensure continuity and prevent regression.

During this crucial period, intervention and Tier I teachers met regularly. These weren't quick hallway conversations but dedicated sessions where they shared detailed insights into:

- **Student strengths:** What makes this student unique and capable?
- **Effective strategies:** Which instructional approaches, scaffolding techniques, or motivational tactics worked best during intervention?
- **Ongoing support plans:** What specific supports would continue to be available in the Tier I environment?

Crucially, students and their caregivers were then invited to participate in this conversation. This fostered a profound sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Everyone involved understood: what support would continue, how it would gradually fade as independence grew, and what role each person played in the student’s ongoing success. This transparent communication built confidence and minimized anxiety for students entering a new phase of learning.

2. Redefine proficiency: Aiming for deeper mastery

The team quickly realized that merely meeting the state’s basic definition of proficiency wasn’t enough for these vulnerable learners. They needed a more ambitious target. They collaboratively defined “independent proficiency”—a deeper level of mastery that unequivocally reflected a student’s ability to succeed without frequent or extensive scaffolds.

This new, more robust mastery target became the operational goal for students’ full transition from intervention to Tier I. It wasn’t about simply passing a test; it was about demonstrating genuine understanding and application of knowledge independently. This redefined goal enabled teachers to align their instruction and assessment more precisely, guiding students toward true self-sufficiency.

3. Strategic, transparent, cross-tier scaffolding

A significant breakthrough came when teachers identified an incredible opportunity: leveraging impactful instructional strategies *across* tiers. They recognized that successful, familiar intervention strategies could be seamlessly integrated into the Tier I environment to support students in grappling with more rigorous and complex content.

The strategies they identified included:

- **Content previews:** Giving students a glimpse of upcoming material to build anticipation and activate prior knowledge.
- **Explicit vocabulary instruction:** Directly teaching key terms and concepts essential for comprehension.
- **Background knowledge boosters:** Actively building and connecting new information to students’ existing knowledge bases.
- **Opportunities for acceleration:** Providing challenging tasks that extend learning for students ready for deeper engagement.
- **Multiple exposures to texts:** Ensuring students interact with content in varied formats and contexts to solidify understanding.

Once these high-impact strategies were identified, the team didn't stop there. They developed **shared instructional protocols** for *how* these strategies would be introduced, practiced, reinforced, and used consistently in daily instruction across all classrooms and instructional tiers. The team frequently reviewed the deployment and effectiveness of these strategies in practice. This commitment ensured that these high-leverage instructional approaches were not isolated to intervention but became embedded in the universal Tier I instruction, creating a cohesive and supportive learning environment.

4. Technology-powered personalization

The team understood that fragile proficient learners had dual instructional needs: addressing lingering skill gaps *and* reinforcing essential grade-level content. They also recognized that each student required a truly personalized instructional path. Human resources and time, however, are always limited.

Their solution was creative: they deployed a digital instructional tool that integrated adaptive learning technology with their universal screening assessment. This powerful combination created individualized learning paths for each student, dynamically adjusting based on their performance. This ensured that fragile proficient learners received the *exact* right level of challenge and support they needed at any given moment.

Crucially, this tool was used *within* the Tier I classroom. Teachers smartly built their daily class schedules to include a rotational model, allowing fragile proficient students to access this personalized instruction during what would typically be independent practice time, work that was often well beyond these students' independent ability. This innovative approach maximized instructional time and provided targeted support without requiring additional staff or time.

5. Cultivating consistent routines

Finally, the educators recognized the cognitive load placed on students when expectations and routines differ significantly between intervention and Tier I settings. To minimize this, they unified classroom expectations and instructional routines across both environments.

They collaboratively identified and implemented consistent routines for:

- **Student engagement:** How students would actively participate in lessons.
- **Classroom procedures and participation:** Clear guidelines for transitions, group work, and asking questions.
- **Use of academic vocabulary:** Consistent language used by teachers and students to describe learning.

This consistent structure across environments and tiers helped students focus their precious cognitive energy on *learning*—not on adjusting to ever-changing expectations. It created a predictable, safe, and efficient learning space.

The indispensable role of leadership: Culture, collaboration, and clarity

As I observed with this dynamic team, this kind of profound instructional shift doesn't happen by accident. It requires visionary and committed leadership. This group of educators was empowered by leaders who:

- **Created dedicated time for teacher collaboration:** They understood that successfully transitioning students from intervention to Tier I demands intentional coordination, joint planning, and open communication among educators. They built this time into schedules, signaling its importance.
- **Invested in high-quality professional development:** Leaders recognized that teachers needed more than just a mandate; they needed the right instructional tools, effective strategies, and engaging routines to confidently support these students in the Tier I environment.
- **Championed a culture in which short-term support transitions into long-term independence:** The long-term goal of independence for *all* learners was not just a platitude but an understood and aligned priority that permeated every decision and conversation.
- **Monitored the right data:** They moved beyond static proficiency scores to track accurate indicators of sustained growth, student engagement, and the efficacy of their new strategies. This data-driven approach allowed for continuous improvement and celebration of true progress.

Key questions for reflection and action

As you reflect on your own schools or districts, I urge you to consider these crucial questions:

- How are we truly supporting students as they exit intervention? Are our handoffs smooth and intentional, or are they often abrupt?
- Are we genuinely equipping them to succeed independently in Tier I, or are we inadvertently creating a cycle where they only temporarily meet benchmarks before regressing?
- What specific routines, digital tools, or professional learning opportunities might we implement or strengthen to support a more robust and lasting transition for our fragile proficient learners?

The takeaway is abundantly clear: it is no longer enough to simply help students *reach* proficiency. Our critical, evolving job in education is to empower them to *keep* it—and to truly thrive independently in their learning journeys. Let’s commit ourselves to building the robust, well-supported bridges these students desperately need to cross from fragile proficiency to enduring success.

References

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CHECKLIST

Bridging fragile proficiency to enduring success

1. Intentional transition: A 9 week bridge

Identify students transitioning from intervention to Tier I.

Schedule collaborative meetings between intervention and Tier I teachers.

- Discuss student's strengths and areas of growth.

- Share effective intervention strategies.

- Determine Tier I support strategies.

Involve student in transition conversations.

- Explain how Tier I will be different.

- Discuss available support systems.

Involve student's caregivers in transition conversations.

- Communicate changes in instructional approach.

- Provide information on how to support the student at home.

2. Raising the bar: Redefining proficiency

Define "independent proficiency" beyond state standards.

- Identify specific skills and behaviors that demonstrate deeper understanding.

- Establish clear criteria for determining independent proficiency.

Communicate the concept of "independent proficiency" to:

- Teachers

- Students

- Caregivers

Align instruction and assessment to target "independent proficiency."

3. Strategic and transparent scaffolding

Develop a plan for scaffolding within the Tier I environment.

- Identify essential grade-level content.

- Determine appropriate scaffolds (e.g., previewing, background knowledge, acceleration, multiple exposures).

Ensure scaffolds are:

- Aligned with student needs.
- Designed to promote independence.
- Gradually faded over time.

Document the scaffolding plan and share it with:

- Intervention teacher
- Tier I teacher
- Student
- Caregivers

4. Technology-powered personalization

Select a technology-based resource that provides:

- Personalized practice to address skill gaps.
- Additional practice on grade-level content.

Provide students with consistent access to the technology resource.

Monitor student progress and use of the resource.

Integrate technology use into classroom instruction.

5. Cultivating consistent routines

Identify key instructional routines to use across intervention and Tier I.

Select student engagement routines that promote active participation.

Ensure consistency in:

- Classroom expectations
- Procedures
- Academic language

Provide explicit instruction on routines in both settings.

