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Research Brief: Proficiency-Based Grading Practices

Introduction

Vermont is moving towards proficiency-based¹ systems of learning with the expectation that students will graduate in 2020 by demonstrating proficiency in content knowledge as well as transferable skills ([Education Quality Standards](#), Graduation Requirements, 2120.7). As a result, educators are designing new grading systems that communicate where a student is along a continuum of learning. Although communication of student learning is important, there are many other components of a proficiency-based (PBL) system that need to be in place before grading practices are changed. Supervisory Union/District policies need to align with principles that support proficiency-based learning (PBL). Parents/guardians, students, and community members need to understand why schools are moving in this direction. Once a foundation for PBL has been created, educators, students, parents/guardians, and community members need to work together to design a grading system that effectively communicates student learning over time. Additionally, grading is only one part of a larger reporting system that can include student-led parent conferences, newsletters, digital portfolios, open houses, emails, and phone calls.

Proficiency-based grading within this document refers to a system of identifying where a student is along a continuum of learning, often with a four-point scale (e.g., beginning, developing, proficient, and expanding) rather than a percentage scale that has been used traditionally. Practices that support proficiency-based grading represent a major change in how we think about grading. In a traditional system, grading is used to evaluate how much work is done and how students compare to one another, but not necessarily to show how much students have learned. In a proficiency-based system, the purpose of grading is to let all stakeholders—parents/guardians, children, educators, and community members—understand what students know and how they perform in relation to expected learning outcomes.

Educators are the intended audience for this document and they served an important role in its development. Through feedback given by educators serving in a variety of roles, the document was revised and improved while still maintaining a focus on current research and recommendations from experts. The information should be used to **inform rather than dictate decisions** related to grading practices in a personalized and proficiency-based system.

Ideally, different sections would be read over time with ample opportunities for rich discussion. Sections could be selected based on the specific needs of a school community. Questions for discussion are incorporated into each section with the hope of provoking conversations that are vital for developing a shared understanding of proficiency-based grading practices. Readers will also find a best practice summary statement at the end of each section.

¹ Proficiency-based grading is also called mastery-based grading (Connecticut) or competency-based grading (New Hampshire). These terms are used interchangeably depending upon the state.

What is proficiency-based grading?

Proficiency-based grading is one part of a system of instruction, assessment, and reporting that assesses and reports where students are in relation to specific proficiencies (i.e., their knowledge and skills) over a specific period of time, such as a unit or a semester. Proficiency-based grading appears to have some advantages over more traditional grading systems. As Hawes states, “[Proficiency-based] grading procedures are thought to be a more individualized, fairer assessment of student achievement.” (Hawes, p. 3)

Clear descriptions of proficiency for content areas as well as transferable skills are essential so that students can determine what they need to do to demonstrate their level of understanding. For example, rather than saying, “Dylan got a 68 on his biology test on plant and animal cells,” a proficiency grade lets Dylan and his parents know that, “Dylan is proficient in using evidence to back up claims and approaching proficiency in his understanding of how plant and animal cells function.” Armed with this information, Dylan’s learning can be personalized, and instruction focused on where he needs to improve. His teacher can also use this information to refine and differentiate learning experiences in order to help Dylan reach proficiency. The focus is on the learning and the grading system provides feedback regarding where a student is along a continuum of learning.

Proficiency-based systems are characterized by a relentless focus on student learning, application of learning to new contexts, and the goal of achieving proficiencies for both skills and knowledge. Enabling each and every student to meet proficiencies is a significant change and requires new strategies for communicating this information to students and their families.

Based on a review of multiple resources, other facets of proficiency-based grading may include:

- More information in general about what a student understands and is able to do.
- Expectations that students apply skills and knowledge to new contexts in order to demonstrate proficiency of intended learning goals.
- Consistent scoring across classes and grades since proficiency is clearly described; teachers build a common expectation of proficiency, leading to increased professional collaboration, such as sharing resources, analyzing student work, and refining proficiency scales.
- Grading systems that separate academics from behaviors; habits of mind, habits of work, and/or transferable skills are assessed and scored separately from content.
- Multiple opportunities and additional time and support, if needed, to meet proficiencies.
- Proficiency-based performance assessments and grading that . . . “create room for growth and allow students to make mistakes and take risks.” (Gilmore, online)

What is the purpose of grading?

Moving to a proficiency-based system provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to discuss the true purpose of grading and reporting. Agreement on the purpose can then drive decisions regarding what information is shared with students and their families as well as how this information is shared. Educators, students, and parents/guardians need to be involved in clarifying the purpose of grading and report cards so that a collective understanding can be developed.

Based on a review of multiple resources, proficiency-based grades and report cards should:

- communicate what a student understands and is able to do at a given point in time in relation to specific proficiencies;

- provide feedback based on clear criteria related to a student’s level of performance that informs the student and their family about what they do well and what additional work may be needed for a student to demonstrate proficiency;
- serve as a record of student achievement and thus measure growth over time; and
- be used to drive conversations among all stakeholders about interventions, enrichment, and next steps for an individual student.

The key point is that everyone understands what proficiency was measured and how the student performed relative to that proficiency. Most importantly, the report card communicates information to facilitate improvement in student learning. The report card should be seen as one part of a continuous and ongoing reporting process.

Questions for Discussion

- ★ What is the current grading policy in your school and/or district?
- ★ Do you think that current grading practices are equitable? Why or why not?
- ★ What is the purpose of grades?
- ★ How do teachers and parents/guardians feel about grading and reporting? What matters to each group, and why?
- ★ “The goal is to develop and nurture talent, not simply to discriminate, sort, and select it.” (Guskey and Bailey, p. 20). Do you agree with this quote? How might different grading practices connect to this philosophy of grading?

Recommended Best Practice: A clear purpose for grading and reporting is developed with community input and explained to students and their families at the top of the report card or distributed with the report card.

What should be included on a report card in a proficiency-based system?

There are some general guidelines which can be used to inform the development of a report card. Guskey explains, “The best report cards clearly communicate what students were expected to learn and be able to do, how well they did those things, and whether or not that level of performance is in line with expectations set for this level at this time in the school year.” (Guskey, p. 17) The language used within the report card as well as organizational choices should help to make the information that is reported clear to parents/guardians and students alike.

Guskey and Jung recommend translating detailed, academic standards into broader, more general reporting standards that are clear, precise, and written in parent/student-friendly language. In Vermont, proficiencies represent those broader categories. There should be enough information to be meaningful, but not overwhelming to the reader. These authors suggest listing four to six proficiencies in each subject area or course that best represent the major concepts and skills students need to master. (Guskey & Jung, p. 22) For instance, under English language arts could be the broad categories of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. Each broad category would then have a finer level of detail. Foundational Skills, for example, could be included under Reading. Rather than using educational jargon such as “demonstrates phonemic awareness” to further explain the learning that has taken place, parent friendly language, “sounds out words,” could be included. (Guskey, Swan, & Jung) For parents/guardians who want additional information, the specific skills and learning goals related to a proficiency can be provided through an online curriculum resource.

Finally, an additional section on the report card for comments allows teachers to enter two or three sentences that clarify the focus of instruction as well as the student's relative strengths and areas where additional work may be needed.

Based on a review of multiple resources, a proficiency-based report card should include:

- proficiencies, both core content knowledge and transferable skills, that students are expected to meet;
- the student's level of performance or proficiency;
- a comparison of the student's proficiency level to expectations at the time of reporting; and
- descriptive comments aimed at acknowledging strengths and identifying areas of focus for the future.

Questions for Discussion

- ★ Think about the quote, "The best report cards clearly communicate what students were expected to learn and be able to do, how well they did those things, and whether or not that level of performance is in line with expectations set for this level at this time in the school year." (Guskey, p. 17) Does your current reporting system do that? How or how not?
- ★ What information is essential to communicate to students and their families?
- ★ In having conversations about redesigning report cards, who would need to be included?
- ★ How can all stakeholders be given a voice?
- ★ How will student progress be reported?

Recommended Best Practice: Construct report cards that provide each student and their parents/guardians with a clear understanding of where a student is along a continuum of learning and communicate the student's strengths as well as challenges.

What needs to be in place for proficiency-based grading to be implemented?

A move towards proficiency-based grading should only take place after other key elements of proficiency-based systems are in place. (Colby, Sturgis-Part 1)

Three prerequisites that are essential for successful implementation of proficiency-based learning are:

- a broad conceptual understanding of proficiency-based learning;
- structures to enable student learning at different paces; and
- a clear communication plan to develop community understanding and support.

A school culture with a broad conceptual understanding of proficiency-based learning is built upon the belief that proficiency-based learning can provide equitable, relevant, and rigorous learning opportunities that engage all students and foster the skills, knowledge, and habits of work necessary to be successful in the 21st century. Within this culture, there needs to be a willingness to question traditional grading practices and to continually strive for more effective strategies for reporting student progress. Within this grading system, it should be clear to all learners which pieces of work will be used for determining grades and which pieces will serve as formative assessments. Students need to understand what constitutes evidence of learning and also have opportunities to practice self-assessment. Additionally, an electronic platform or software that enables students to collect and reflect on evidence of their learning over time allows students to document their progress.

In order to establish reliability and equitable scoring practices, educators require time to develop authentic assessments, discuss student work, and calibrate scoring. “When curriculum teams make collaborative decisions about student evidence that demonstrate learning growth, we support more equitable learning environments across different classrooms. When these same teams calibrate and interpret evidence based upon agreed-upon expectations, we guarantee accurate and consistent feedback across classrooms.” (Gobble et. al., p. 4) Additionally, in a proficiency-based system, students should play a role in assessing their work and have opportunities to provide feedback to peers. As students move into the role of being a driver rather than a consumer of their educational experience, they will need to learn new skills. This skill development is crucial and needs to be scaffolded beginning in the early grades.

Based on a review of multiple resources, other components that are critical for successful implementation of a proficiency-based grading system include:

- clear descriptions and a shared understanding of proficiencies;
- proficiency-based learning targets written in student-friendly language that are explicit, rigorous and identify what is necessary to demonstrate proficiency;
- an understanding about the power of productive, actionable feedback;
- time built into a school schedule for teachers to provide rich feedback to students;
- assessments aligned to learning targets;
- electronic gradebooks, when used, need to have the flexibility to allow the teacher to determine the final grade based on demonstration of proficiency rather than a calculated score;
- a gradebook format/platform that allows teachers and students to document evidence of learning related to learning targets over time;
- professional development to assist teachers in setting up, reflecting on and utilizing the electronic gradebook to meet their assessment goals;
- time for students who need additional opportunities to demonstrate proficiency; and
- clear communication with the community regarding shifts in grading practices.

Questions for Discussion

- ★ What is the evidence that there is a broad conceptual understanding among educators, students, parents/guardians, and community members about proficiency-based learning?
- ★ What professional learning opportunities are necessary to support educators as they move to proficiency-based grading?
- ★ How do teachers provide productive, actionable feedback that moves students towards proficiency?
- ★ What components (e.g., proficiencies, performance indicators, learning targets, and proficiency scales) of a proficiency-based grading system are currently in place?
- ★ How is time allotted for teachers to calibrate and interpret assessment data?
- ★ How have the community and students been involved in the move towards a proficiency-based grading system?
- ★ How are grading practices communicated to students and their families?

Recommended Best Practice: Engage students and the community in all levels of the process of transitioning to a proficiency-based grading system and provide opportunities for collaboration among educators in order to create an equitable system for determining grades.

What is the grading scale in a proficiency-based system?

“Competency [Proficiency]-based grading systems must be built in such a way that every grade communicates performance on an agreed-on definition of competency. Schools and districts must agree on what constitutes the proficiency scale in their grading system.” (Colby, p. 122) The grading or proficiency scale should include language that will be meaningful to learners and their families. The proficiency scale can be strengthened by including a “title” for each part of the scale that communicates a student’s performance level. One example of language for a proficiency scale is beginning, developing, proficient, and expanding. Additionally, scales of four or five proficiency levels can result in more consistency among grading practices if teachers have opportunities to calibrate their scores.

Questions for Discussion

- ★ How many levels does your current grading system include?
- ★ What is the ideal number of levels for a scale that will accurately communicate what students have learned?
- ★ What titles on the scale will help to communicate the student’s performance level?

Recommended Best Practice

Use specific language for proficiency-based grading scales that communicates a student’s current level of performance. These scales should include clear descriptions of each level so that parents/guardians, and students know what has been learned.

How will teachers actually determine grades in a proficiency-based system?

Grading in a proficiency-based system represents a major philosophical shift. Consider the following ideas in order to develop a shared understanding of proficiency-based grading.

- **Prioritize the most recent evidence rather than earlier practice demonstrations.** If a student struggled to understand a concept, scoring poorly on initial assessments, but ultimately mastered the concept and demonstrated proficiency, how should this level of understanding be reflected in grading? Consider the student work in the video, [Austin’s Butterfly](#). Although Austin’s initial attempts to accurately draw a butterfly are lacking detail, his final drawing certainly demonstrates proficient work.
- **Consider how to address missing work.** Teachers should take into account the many reasons for missing assignments. A zero cannot serve as a proxy for missing data. Students should be offered multiple opportunities to improve their work in order to reach proficiency.
- **Think about types of assessment and their purpose.** Reflect on how a given assessment or evidence of learning connects to the learning targets, standards, and proficiencies for the course. Determine which assessments give the best picture of student knowledge and skills. The assessment system should provide opportunities for students to apply their learning to new contexts in order to demonstrate proficiency.
- **Clarify how assessment data are used.** Formative assessments, for example, should be used to inform next steps in instruction and to provide “actionable” feedback to students. Although formative assessments may be scored to provide information to students and parents/guardians about a current level of achievement, those scores should not be part of a final grade. Incorporating formative assessments into a final grade may prevent students from seeing them

as an aid to learning. Performance assessments can be used as tools for checking student understanding at a point in time and determining a proficiency level for the report card.

Questions for Discussion

- ★ How do teachers currently determine grades?
- ★ How are different types of assessment data currently used?
- ★ What are the most *comprehensive* assessments when trying to determine students' progress, understanding, and skills?
- ★ How might a shift to proficiency-based grading change instruction and assessment practices? What challenges might arise when trying to make this shift?
- ★ What needs to happen to help students and families understand changes in grading practices?

Recommended Best Practice: Grades should be determined by using the assessment evidence that best describes the student's current level of performance.

What additional information should be included for students with learning differences?

Report cards for students with learning differences may include additional or slightly different information. For instance, the Vermont state special education regulations still use the term, standards, so that reference is used in this document rather than proficiencies.

Questions to ask before considering grading and reporting for students with learning differences are: What is being assessed? What proficiencies or standards-are being used to guide the curriculum? What can a student do independently, with support, accommodations and/or modifications?

An initial step in assessing students with learning differences in any subject area is to consider the grade and content standard. An accommodation or modification of the standard is possible if the Educational Support team and/or the Individual Education Plan team decides that the student will be unable to meet the standard during the current marking period or academic year without any changes or special support.

An accommodation is defined as a change that provides access to the general curriculum but does not fundamentally alter the grade level standard. Lee Ann Jung of the [ASCD Student Growth Center](#) has a great way of explaining this using a science assessment as an example. The purpose of the assessment is to determine the student's level of proficiency on a number of science standards. Support of any skill or behavior, then, other than with the science standards-is an accommodation. We may have a student respond orally if there are significant needs in the student's writing that affect the quality of response. The student may require additional time or a separate testing environment if test anxiety is a factor. An adult may read the questions to the student if there is difficulty with reading. Each of these adaptations changes is an accommodation because each one supports a skill that is different from the science standards being measured and reported.

A modification fundamentally alters the grade level standard. Modified standards should still be directly linked to the grade-level standards, based on data, and still be comparably rigorous, but have achievable outcomes. For example, a modification to a spelling test would be to shorten spelling tests to focus on mastering the most functional words which may be different from the content specific words.

Modifications are not permanent and may change at some point. Teachers report on a student's progress towards that modified expectation. A score should include descriptive feedback about how to improve and what to do next. As Wormeli states regarding the importance of feedback, "Students can learn without grades, but they can't learn without timely, descriptive, feedback." (Wormeli, online)

How is a modified standard communicated on a report card?

Report cards that have modified standards can look different. An asterisk or broad notations on the report card, such as "based on modified standard," are acceptable since they can then be used for students who require modifications for a variety of purposes, not necessarily for a student with a disability. Additional information should be available to inform families and students regarding how students are being helped to meet expectations. The information on a report card needs to be confidential in that it must not include information that would personally identify a student as having a disability.

It is important that any modifications are noted on report cards, so that everyone understands exactly what skills are being assessed. As long as modifications are available to any student, the wording "modified standard" is a legal notation. (Freedman, p. 46) For all students, including those who receive special education services in Vermont, FERPA guidelines need to be adhered to when reporting progress.

What Really Matters?

In addition to securing students' legal right to privacy, what matters most is that families, teachers, and all learners understand what standard is measured and how the student performed relative to what was measured. Modifications and accommodations provide access to the full general curriculum and grading should communicate the student's progress towards grade level standards in kind and respectful ways.

Recommended Best Practice: Use a grading system that is sensitive to a student's change in learning or behavior and clearly communicates what is being measured.

Resources

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