

Communicating the Grading System

In some communities, the transition to proficiency-based grading and reporting can become a source of misunderstanding, tension, and conflict. For this reason, it is critically important that districts and schools develop effective ways to explain new grading systems to their students, parents, families, and community. By being proactive and transparent in their communications about grading, schools can avoid difficult and time-consuming debates about grading symbols, and move on to more substantive conversations about teaching, learning, and proficiency.

What Districts and Schools Can Do

1. Schools leaders and teachers should develop a strong and compelling rationale for the new grading system and be prepared to explain it to different audiences—specifically, why the new system is important and how it will support and improve the learning process for students. In all communications related to the grading system, always lead with the purpose and rationale—why it matters and why it’s good for students—and repeat the message multiple times. It’s easy for community conversations to get sidetracked by debates over grading symbols, so always bring the conversation back to the single most important issue: how the new grading system will improve teaching effectiveness and better prepare students for success in college, the modern workplace, and adult life.
2. For schools that decide to use a 4.0 scale, remind families and community members that most colleges and universities use a 4.0 scale. The system has a long and storied academic history, and it will be immediately familiar and understandable to any college-admissions office in the world.
3. Regardless of its design, every school should develop and publish a guide to its grading system for students, parents, and families. The guide should explain—in clear and understandable language—how the system works, what the grades mean, how it improves student learning, and how it helps teachers and support specialist more effectively diagnose learning needs. Make sure to include clearly annotated examples of progress reports, report cards, online systems, transcripts, and other reporting features that students, parents, and families will receive and have to interpret. For two examples of grading guides developed by schools, see the Casco Bay High School’s *Family Grading Guide* and Poland Regional High School’s *Grading and Reporting at PRHS* guide and *2013 Faculty Grading Guide*.
4. Develop communication assets that explain the new grading system using accessible language and concrete examples, particularly examples that make a strong case for proficiency-based learning and grading. Whether the communication strategy is a guide, website, video, or presentation, use charts, illustrations, side-by-side comparisons, and other features that simplify any complexities and facilitate understanding. While the grading guide will provide a detailed explanation of the new system, your communications materials should avoid technicalities and embrace the big picture: why it will improve teaching effectiveness and student preparation for adult life. For an example of one school’s approach, see King Middle School’s [video on standards-based grading](#).
5. Be proactive. Before announcing the new system, make sure you have your grading guide, website, videos, and presentations ready to go. Meet with parent groups, newspaper editors, and other influential community leaders and organizations in advance of the announcement to brief them on the new system. Try to identify any potential sources of confusion, debate, or resistance, and have a plan to address misunderstanding if it arises. Make sure your community hears your message before it hears someone else’s—after all, it’s your system and you know best how it works and why it matters.



6. In some cases, it might be helpful to provide parents and families with a simple conversion chart that shows how the new proficiency-based grading system compares to more traditional systems. While such a chart may not represent a strict apples-to-apples comparison, it can nevertheless help families understand how the new grading system works. Such an approach can also help schools illustrate how the new proficiency-based grading system will raise the bar for students and better prepare them for life (*please note that the Great Schools Partnership only recommends that comparison charts be used only as a communications tool):

4.0 Scale	Description	Letter Grade	100-Point Scale
4.0	Exceeds Proficiency	A+	98–100
3.8	Exceeds Proficiency	A	95–97
3.6	Exceeds Proficiency	A-	93–94
3.4	Proficient	B+	90–92
3.2	Proficient	B	87–89
3.0	Proficient	B-	85–86
2.5	Partially Proficient	C	75–84
2.0	Partially Proficient	D	70–74
1.0	Insufficient Evidence	F	69 and below