# Grading Principles and Guidelines

When building a proficiency-based grading and reporting system, schools should begin by developing—ideally, in collaboration with faculty, staff, students, and families—a set of common principles and guidelines that apply to all courses and learning experiences. The guidelines should represent the school's grading philosophy, including how grading will be used to support the educational process.

In "Starting the Conversation about Grading" (*Educational Leadership*, November 2011), Susan M. Brookhart makes the following recommendation:

> I cannot emphasize strongly enough that getting sidetracked with details of scaling (letters, percentages, or rubrics? Zeros or not? No Ds or Fs?) or policies (What should we do with late or missing work? How can we report behavior? What will we do about academic honors and awards?) before you tackle the question of what a grade means in the first place will lead to trouble. Logic, my own experience, and the research and practice of others (Cox & Olsen, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2010; McMunn, Schenck, & McColskey, 2003) all scream that this is the case.
>
> Grading scales and reporting policies can be discussed productively once you agree on the main purpose of grades. For example, if a school decides that academic grades should reflect achievement only, then teachers need to handle missed work in some other way than assigning an F or a zero. Once a school staff gets to this point, there are plenty of resources they can use to work out the details (see Brookhart, 2011; O'Connor, 2009). The important thing is to examine beliefs and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of grades first. Without a clear sense of what grading reform is trying to accomplish, not much will happen.

The following exemplar guidelines are offered as suggestions to schools as they implement a proficiency-based learning system:

1. The primary purpose of the grading system is to clearly, accurately, consistently, and fairly communicate learning progress and achievement to students, families, postsecondary institutions, and prospective employers.

2. The grading system ensures that students, families, teachers, counselors, advisors, and support specialists have the detailed information they need to make important decisions about a student's education.

3. The grading system measures, reports, and documents student progress and proficiency against a set of clearly defined cross-curricular and content-area standards and learning objectives collaboratively developed by the administration, faculty, and staff.

4. The grading system measures, reports, and documents academic progress and achievement separately from work habits, character traits, and behaviors, so that educators, counselors, advisors, and support specialists can accurately determine the difference between learning needs and behavioral or work-habit needs.

5. The grading system ensures consistency and fairness in the assessment of learning, and in the assignment of scores and proficiency levels against the same learning standards, across students, teachers, assessments, learning experiences, content areas, and time.

6. The grading system is not used as a form of punishment, control, or compliance.

In proficiency-based learning systems, what matters most is where students end up—not where they started out or how they behaved along the way. Meeting and exceeding challenging standards defines success, and the best grading systems motivate students to work harder, overcome failures, and excel academically.

# Grading Principles and Guidelines

**Additional Reading on Effective Grading Practices**
Many educators, academics and grading experts have dedicated their career to untangling some of the thornier issues related to grading and determining how grades can facilitate, rather than impede, the learning process for students. We have included a selected list of books below for those who want to learn more about the grading practices that support student learning. Each work outlines practical strategies that educators can use to build an effective proficiency-based grading and reporting system that values and supports the learning process.

**Susan M. Brookhart**
- *Grading and Reporting: Practices that Support Student Achievement* (2011)

**Thomas Guskey**
- *Answers to Essential Questions About Standards, Assessments, Grading, and Reporting* (with Lee Ann Jung, 2012)
- *Developing Standards-Based Report Cards* (with Jane M. Bailey, 2009)
- *Practical Solutions for Serious Problems in Standards-Based Report Cards* (2008)
- *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning* (with Jane M. Bailey, 2000)

**Tammy Heflebower, Jan K. Hoegh, and Phil Warrick**
- *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* (2014)

**Robert Marzano**
- *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading: Classroom Strategies that Work* (2009)
- *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work* (2006)
- *Transforming Classroom Grading* (2000)

**Ken O'Connor**
- *The School Leader's Guide to Grading: Essentials for Principals Series* (2012)
- *A Repair Kit for Grading: Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades* (2010)
- *How to Grade for Learning* (2009)

**Douglas Reeves**
- *Elements of Grading: A Guide to Effective Practices* (2010)
- *Making Standards Work: How to Implement Standards-Based Assessments in the Classroom, School, and District* (2004)

**Rick Stiggins**
- *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well* (with Jan Chappuis, Steve Chappuis, and Judith A. Arter, 2009)

**Rick Wormeli**
- *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom* (2006)

A comprehensive list or references supporting the principles of proficiency-based learning can be found on the Great Schools Partnership's website: www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency/research.

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**Arter, Judith., Chappius, Jan., Chappius, Steve., Stiggins, Rick. (**2009). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well.*

Bailey, Jane M., Guskey, Thomas. (2009). *Developing Standards-Based Report Cards.*

Bailey, Jane M., Guskey, Thomas. (2000). *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning.*

Brookhart, Susan M. (2011). *Grading and Reporting: Practices that Support Student Achievement.*

Guskey, Thomas., Jung, Lee Ann. (2012). *Answers to Essential Questions About Standards, Assessments, Grading, and Reporting*

Guskey, Thomas. (2008). *Practical Solutions for Serious Problems in Standards-Based Report Cards.*

Heflebower, Tammy., Hoegh, Jan K., Warrick. (2014). *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading.*

Marzano, Robert. (2009). *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading: Classroom Strategies that Work.*

Marzano, Robert. (2006). *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work.*

Marzano, Robert. (2000). *Transforming Classroom Grading.*

O'Connor, Ken. (2012). *The School Leader's Guide to Grading: Essentials for Principals Series*.

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O'Connor, Ken. (2009). *How to Grade for Learning.*

**Reeves, Douglas.** (2010). *Elements of Grading: A Guide to Effective Practices.*

**Reeves, Douglas.** (2004). *Making Standards Work: How to Implement Standards-Based Assessments in the Classroom, School, and District.*

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