The Report Card: Communicating Student Learning in a Proficiency-Based System

What You Need to Know

- The proficiency report card should reflect achievement on graduation standards through aggregation of scores on performance indicators.
- Habits of work and Maine’s Guiding Principles may be assessed within the various subject areas as well as within senior projects, capstone experiences, or student-led conferences—but it is helpful to the student to record proficiency in these areas separately on the report card and transcript.
- Scoring must be consistent across learning standards.

What You Need to Do

- Develop a shared understanding of the purpose of grades in your district.
- Establish or apply GSP Grading Principles and Guidelines in developing your grade reporting system.
- Monitor the system for consistency in practice across the district.
- Develop a system for assessing and reporting Maine's Guiding Principles.
- Develop a system for assessing and reporting habits of work.

Timeline

Immediate action needed

Reminder: The steps we recommend and the resources we provide are grounded in the PBL Simplified Model we have created and assume a general level of familiarity with it.

While no two reporting systems need to look alike, GSP offers useful strategies to consider when designing a grading and reporting system that fulfills the promise of proficiency-based learning. A rich selection of free resources on the GSP website offers guidance in rethinking grading (scoring assessments), the report card, and the high school transcript. Before establishing grading and reporting policies, schools need to develop a common understanding of the purpose of grades. Proficiency grades should specifically reflect student achievement on content area standards Maine’s Guiding Principles. Behavior, attendance, and homework completion—habits of work—need to be recorded in some other way on the report card.

Grading vs. Reporting

GSP suggests that schools and districts not shift to an entirely new reporting system abruptly as successful implementation requires authentic engagement with parents and the community. Given this, districts need to immediately engage in conversations about proficiency-based grading within the classroom, as that is where the shift in thinking takes place. Teachers need time to look at student work together and to develop a shared understanding of proficiency. What do we mean by proficient? What does it look like on our assessments? How will our assessment process change? How many assessments are enough? Schools need to help parents and higher education institutions understand how the new grading and grade-reporting system is more reflective of what students are learning and how that learning is experienced in classrooms and other learning venues.
We recommend schools consider the following GSP Grading Principles and Guidelines when developing their grading 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 clear information about where students end up—regardless of their challenges 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.

About Proficiency-Based Grading

Before discussing the report card, more needs to be said about proficiency-based grading. The Great Schools Partnership supports a system that assesses proficiency using common scoring criteria. This involves recording achievement on performance indicators based on four levels (1–4), with a 3 usually indicating proficiency. Some schools also use additional gradations (e.g. 2.5 and 3.5) to provide a bit more flexibility. It is important for teachers to work collaboratively to determine the meaning of each proficiency level for each performance indicator within a content area and for the Guiding Principles. The 1–4 level grading system gives teachers the opportunity to note students who are working toward proficiency but who are not there yet. The focus becomes less upon a grade, but more on the quality of work and progress toward proficiency.

Why is this a preferred system? With a shared understanding of each level of proficiency, teachers can be assured that there is consistency both within the school and throughout the district. Daily skill- and knowledge-building assignments serve as formative assessments aligned with daily learning objectives whose scores are not entered in the grading system. When students complete summative tasks (e.g. tests, projects, presentations, etc.), their work is assessed using scoring criteria and reported on a 1–4 scale. After a period of time, such as at the end of a trimester, student achievement is presented in a report card. In a proficiency system, grades and report cards are used to communicate learning progress toward standards, not as a form of punishment or control. Habits of work—student behaviors, attitudes, ability to collaborate, leadership traits, etc.—impact a student’s capacity to achieve both content area and Guiding Principles standards and are thus important to integrate into daily classroom activities.

The Proficiency-Based Report Card

The report card reflects progress on standards in each subject area. A score of 3 in a specific math standard, for example, denotes the aggregated score on that standard during the reporting period in question. It is not advisable to report out the score on each performance indicator as this would generate a lengthy report card—though many online grading systems provide parents with access to this helpful information. Ideally, a final course grade on the report card reflects the student’s progress on “getting to proficiency,” not all the missteps along the way. The proficiency report card is far more reflective of how the student completed the race—where he finished, not how he trained day to day.

Within the course curriculum, teachers are also assessing Maine’s Guiding Principles and other transferable skills, including habits of work. A key element of a proficiency system is to assess and record habits of work independently from core content as these habits provide insights into the day-to-day behaviors that impact learning. These habits include how a student works with others, promptness, timely homework completion, responsibility, organizational skills, etc.
Assessing student work using scoring criteria for both content-area and cross-curricular skills leads to the independent recording—and reporting—of progress on the Guiding Principles. Rather than developing a separate set of scoring criteria for the Guiding Principles, some schools have integrated these skills into content area and habits-of-work performance indicators. While reducing the number of scores to enter, this approach will not lead to a reporting of separate proficiency on the Guiding Principles.

It’s important to keep in mind the differences between the report card and the transcript. The transcript reflects proficiency levels on graduation standards from cumulative results within each discipline and across several courses at the end of a student’s high school career. It also reflects achievement of the Guiding Principles and habits of work over this time period. The school profile and the cumulative transcript should provide a clear description of the how the grading system works.

We have emphasized that a collaborative approach to understanding proficiency and the shifts required in classroom practice are where teachers need to place their energy. The actual change in the eventual look of the report card requires considerable community conversation. During that transitional time period, schools may wish to report on proficiency using both the 1–4 scale aligned with the current letter or number scale (for more, please see a sample hybrid translation model we developed here). Discussions on such thorny issues as when or whether to grant credit may help move the process as you transition from a report card from one that is hybrid to one that is exclusively proficiency-based.

Changes in both the report card and transcript are important entry points for parent involvement. They will want reassurances that any new system will not disadvantage their students in any way with respect to the college application and admissions process. It is important for districts to reach out equitably to all stakeholders to authentically include them in these important decisions. Plan ahead to consider where parents may serve on committees, be welcomed into classrooms, or assist with service learning, making sure all demographic stakeholder groups are included. Ideally, parents will develop an understanding of how classroom practices and assessments require a revised report card because it represents what students have actually learned while reflecting the vision for learning the district and community have established.

Resources

- Grading Principles and Guidelines
- Designing a Grading System
- 69 New England Institutions of Higher Education State that Proficiency-Based Diplomas Do Not Disadvantage Applicants
- Communicating the Grading System