

Report Grades Clearly and Consistently

The numerals, letters, or other codes used to designate various levels of achievement or proficiency should be clear, easy to understand, connected to common scoring guides or rubrics, and they should be used in a consistent way by all teachers.

Reporting is what teachers do after they have graded a series of assignments, usually at the end of a grading period or course. Somehow, they must coalesce information drawn from a series of assessments into an understandable score or set of scores communicating the learning of students. While some schools use narrative reports regarding this learning, most schools are simply unable to follow this process due to time restraints, and must use a “code” (A- F, 1-100, titles, etc.) of some sort. Equitable schools craft consistent systems for this and carefully select the codes that they will use on reports and transcripts.

Examples from the Field

Some schools use rubrics based on a 4-point scale in class, but use more traditional grades on report cards: **Champlain Valley Union High School (CVUHS) in Vermont** uses a 1-4 grading system at the classroom level. They explain the rationale for this in their [online resource](#) that describes the school’s adoption of standards-based learning (SBL): “The smaller the scale, the greater the accuracy and consistency among teachers. As with most schools in the nation that have moved to SBL, we have chosen a 4-point scale for its ease of conversion to the traditional college GPA scale and for its clarity.” CVUHS’s report cards utilize an A-F system calibrated to the 1-4 scale. This standards-based approach to classroom grading, combined with a report card conversion to A-F grades, allows teachers to focus on the teaching of each standard and students to focus on their attainment of each standard, while providing their communities and colleges a familiar report card and transcript. In time, the teachers at CVUHS hope to adopt a reporting system that does not require translation from one set of symbols to another. However, for now, this system allows the community to become familiar with the 1-4 grades that are being used in the classroom.

Some schools use traditional A-F letter grades: The **Waukesha, Wisconsin school district** includes schools that have been rated among the best in Wisconsin by the U.S. News and World Report. The Waukesha [district-wide grading guide](#) provides a grading scale that enables teachers across the district to align A-F grades with the levels on the common rubrics (see page 17 of the linked document). This system allows the district to use standards-based rubrics to give all students consistent feedback while also using symbols on the report card that are familiar to parents.

Some schools use their own set of codes to describe levels of mastery: **The Young Women’s Leadership School in Astoria, New York**, a member of New York’s [Mastery Collaborative](#), is an all-girls 6-12 school that has been practicing mastery-based approaches to teaching, learning, grading, and reporting since 2008. The school boasts strong achievement scores and is host to a globally diverse student body. In their [school-wide grading guide](#), there are only three grading codes: MS (meets standard), ES (exceeds standard) and NY (not yet). The school’s software platform (JumpRope) uses an algorithm to convert standards codes into a more traditional course grade. This has enabled The Young Women’s Leadership School to focus course design, classroom instruction, and students’ attention on the acquisition of skills and knowledge instead of the earned course grade, GPA, or class rank. The faculty works together to review and improve their system regularly.

What We've Learned

In our years of working with schools, we have learned that much change is possible for teachers' grading practices without changing the outward-facing reporting system. There is no such thing as a set of grading symbols that by itself will transform teachers' practices or schools' belief systems. We have found highly effective and equitable schools that use 1-4 symbols. We have also found schools that use 1-4 symbols or other non-traditional grades, but which have not been successful at creating an equitable or effective learning culture. At the same time, traditional grading codes (A-F or 100-point scales) can support practices that lift all students to high levels. The most important thing is to ensure that the system of symbols or numerals does not create situations where students lose hope and quit, or where students can be passed along without demonstrating mastery.

In the work of making grading equitable, it is wise to start shifting culture through the other tenets described in this document, like **Common Scoring Criteria** or **Consistency and Transparency**, rather than starting by changing the symbols that will be used on report cards. The point of improving the grading system is to make grading fair, informative, and transparent so that students can focus on learning, creating, and growing. Here are some moves that can support this effort:

- **Reduce the number of increments or values available in scoring student work.**
When schools use a 0-100 scale for grading, very low grades can affect the class grade in a way that makes students lose hope because they perceive that they cannot possibly pass, no matter what they do. The very low grade can also affect the class grade in a way that conceals the progress or proficiency the student has actually attained. When we talk to students about why they skip class or drop out, many of them mention this situation. Schools can remedy this by requiring teachers to enter failing grades as a 50 or 60 (called minimum grading) or to adjust failing quarterly grades to a 50 or 60. This simple fix allows the gradebook to indicate failure while not creating a situation where students get in a hole so deep they can't get out. (This system does not apply to situations where the student did no work at all.) This approach is only effective when paired with a robust support and remediation system that helps students achieve proficiency after failure.
- **Be consistent.**
Ensure that grading symbols are used the same way in all classrooms and supported by professional development and periodic collaborative scoring.
- **Engage the community in any change.**
Switching from a familiar system of symbols to one that is unfamiliar with too little explanation or community engagement can cause anger and confusion. School systems that are thinking of changing their reporting symbols should work with the community to determine where change is needed then build systems that address these concerns.
- **If translating between two sets of symbols, ensure the integrity of the "cut" score.**
Frequently schools use a 1-4 grading system on rubrics where a 3 or 4 demonstrates acceptable levels of performance while a 1 or 2 indicates additional learning is required. It is easy to use a conversion system where a 4 equates to an "A" and a 2 equates to a "C." This will have integrity only if assessments are designed in such a way that students who earn a "C" have demonstrated the baseline level of proficiency as defined by the teachers. Schools that want to use this method will find that it no longer makes sense to pass students with a "D" because the conversion chart will make clear how little skill that student has acquired.

Quotes from the Literature

“The authors performed a quantitative study of seven years of grading data from one school where minimum grading had been implemented ... Statistical analyses revealed no evidence that minimum grading was inducing either grade inflation or social promotion.” The Minimum Grading Controversy, Results of a Quantitative Study of Seven Years of Grading Data from an Urban High School. 2012. Theodore Carey & James Carifio, Educational Researcher, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 201–208.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Designing a Grading System](#)
- [Communicating the Grading System](#)
- [Selecting an Online Grading System](#)
- [Selection process rubric](#)