

Educational equity means ensuring just outcomes for each student, raising marginalized voices, and challenging the imbalance of power and privilege.

The purpose of a **grading system** is to give feedback to students so they can take charge of their learning and to provide information to all who support these students—teachers, special educators, parents, and others. The purpose of a **reporting system** is to communicate the students' achievement to families, post-secondary institutions, and employers. These systems must, above all, communicate clear information about the skills a student has mastered or the areas where they need more support or practice. When schools use grades to reward or punish students, or to sort students into levels, imbalances in power and privilege will be magnified and the purposes of the grading and reporting systems will not be achieved. This guide is intended to highlight the central practices that schools can use to ensure that their grading and reporting systems help them build a nurturing, equitable, creative, and dynamic culture of learning.

The following tenets must be at the core of the school's grading and reporting practices:

<p>Communicate Information About Learning</p>	<p>Effective grading systems communicate information about learning to help students be proactive, overcome failures, and excel. In equitable schools and classrooms, grades will never be used as rewards, punishments, or tools to force compliance.</p>	<p>See what this looks like in action on page 3.</p>
<p>Design Clear Grading & Reporting Guidelines</p>	<p>When each teacher designs their own unique grading system, consistency becomes impossible. Clear, collaboratively-designed school guidelines for grading and reporting, known and followed by everyone, help create a school culture that supports all students.</p>	<p>See what this looks like in action on page 5.</p>
<p>Use Common Rubrics or Scoring Guides</p>	<p>An essential practice for educational equity is establishing clear, agreed-upon learning outcomes and defining the criteria for meeting those outcomes. These descriptions of what mastery looks like are powerful tools for learning, teaching, and assessment design.</p>	<p>See what this looks like in action on page 7.</p>
<p>Provide Low-Stakes Practice & Feedback</p>	<p>In order for students to learn from practice and feedback, they need chances to practice, make mistakes, and get feedback based on common scoring criteria, without worrying that early mistakes will count heavily against them.</p>	<p>See what this looks like in action on page 9.</p>
<p>Report on Habits of Work Separately</p>	<p>Separating habits of work from academic proficiency ensures that a student's good behavior or work habits cannot mask a lack of proficiency, and that a student's poor behavior or work habits cannot mask their attainment of proficiency.</p>	<p>See what this looks like in action on page 11.</p>

Organize Grade Books Consistently	Design grade book categories in such a way that they will yield the most useful information to educators and learners. The method used for organizing information in gradebooks should be consistent across the school.	See what this looks like in action on page 13.
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Technical Aspects of Reporting:

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, and connected to common scoring guides or rubrics; they should also be used in a consistent way by all teachers.	See what this looks like in action on page 15.
Establish a Process for Determining Course or Standards Grades	Agree upon a consistent method for determining a final grade from multiple assessment grades. (Note: A separate verification system may be built in order to ensure that students can meet standards through internships or out-of-school projects.)	See what this looks like in action on page 18.

Definition of Terms

Grading System: The system that a school has developed to guide how teachers assess and grade student work.

Reporting System: The system that a school has developed for the organization of assignment scores in gradebooks (either online or paper), and the determination of final grades for report cards and transcripts.

Considerations for Schools or Districts When Redesigning Grading Systems

The central challenge for all schools is to create a vibrant and supportive culture of learning. In schools where this culture exists, the faculty believe they can teach all students to reach high standards and have designed school-wide systems to help students get there. Grading and reporting systems can play an important role in helping schools create this culture of high expectations and nurturing support.

In the work of making grading equitable, schools should initially shift culture through the tenets that focus on classroom practice, rather than starting with a change of the symbols that will be used on report cards. Begin redesign efforts by working on common scoring criteria, assessment design, calibration of scoring, opportunities for low-stakes practice and feedback, and systems of academic support. Remember, the point of improving the grading system is to make grading fair, informative, and transparent so students can focus on learning, creating, and growing.

We are grateful to the many extraordinary schools and districts that have contributed to this guide. Their work exemplifies what it means to strive for educational equity.

Communicate Information About Learning

Effective grading systems communicate information about learning to help students be proactive, overcome failures, and excel. In equitable schools and classrooms, grades will never be used as rewards, punishments, or tools to force compliance.

Examples from the Field

In Waukesha, Wisconsin schools, a district of approximately 12,000 students, standards-based grading has been a reality since at least 2009, is [guided at the district level](#), and applies across the PK-12 continuum. District guidelines include the directives that multiple assessment opportunities will lead to more accurate grades and that risk-free practice activities “should not be ‘counted’ towards students’ course grades.” Waukesha’s guidance further states “Homework should always serve a valid learning purpose; it should never be used as a punitive measure.” And, “If homework is late or incomplete, the grade cannot be lowered.”

A Minnesota district’s* public schools, serving approximately 11,000 K-12 students, have adopted a policy of grading and reporting that explicitly prohibits the use of non-academic factors in calculating students’ grades. They identify behavior, homework completion, and other characteristics and habits as not allowed.

“Course grades will reflect the level of the student’s academic achievement. While nonacademic factors may be highly valued and often contribute to the student’s academic achievement, they should be reported separately from an achievement grade. Relying upon these factors, if merged with achievement evidence, can mask important learning problems and contribute to miscommunication about the student’s knowledge.”

In Kittery, Maine, a system serving just under 1,000 students, and a long-standing member of the League of Innovative Schools, the Shapleigh School is a 4th-8th grade building with a [clear, family-friendly guide to grading and reporting](#). These same grading and reporting practices and beliefs (see page 2) are shared across the K-12 system, including:

“Principle: Grades should clearly communicate what students know and can do.

Practice: Shapleigh School reports student mastery of specific skills and concepts within a course. Traits like participation and effort are scored separately.”

In all of these schools, we find a focus on determining whether students have attained the intended skills and knowledge, as well as a focus on generating grades based upon that determination. Further, we see clear guidance that while non-academic factors matter and may be reported, systems are carefully designed to ensure that these factors do not inflate or deflate academic grades.

**We are still waiting for final permissions to use this district’s name in the guide.*

What We've Learned

A clear grading system is a powerful tool in the effort to build a school culture of learning, connection, persistence, and excellence. If all teachers demonstrate to students that they are using grades to communicate strengths and weaknesses and to help the student improve, this will bolster and strengthen the culture of learning in the building. If teachers set the bar high through their common scoring criteria, provide exemplars of outstanding student work, and work with students to revise and improve until the bar is met, this will bolster and strengthen the culture of excellence in the building.

As schools work to build new grading systems or revise existing ones, they must find ways to engage all groups that use the current systems to see what information it does and does not communicate. Special education teachers, English language learning teachers, paraprofessionals, students, parents, employers, and institutions of higher learning can all play important roles in these conversations.

Quotes from the Literature

“In discussing what actions to take, one teacher admitted, ‘We really don't know why most of them are failing. In fact, a whole group of them may actually understand the content but have compliance issues. We just don't know any other way to grade.’ That admission proved to be the turning point for developing a rigorous yet responsive grading system that measures student understanding of the content standards.”

No Penalties for Practice, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and Ian Pumpian, EL Magazine November 2011

“Guskey (2009) noted, ‘no studies support the use of low grades as punishment. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning’ (p. 14). Motivation is enhanced when students are provided accurate information about achievement, have clear learning goals, and study in an environment that supports learning by not including diagnostic and formative assessment in grades and by being positive and supportive, not negative or punitive.”

O'Connor, K. (2009, January). Reforming grading practices in secondary schools. *Principal's Research Review*, 4(1), 1–7.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Elements of Effective Instruction](#), Element #2, Clear, *Shared Outcomes* stipulates that: “The learning outcomes are shared and internalized by teachers and students. These outcomes anchor and guide the choices of instructional activities, materials, practice assignments, and assessment tasks. Outcomes are understood and used by students to set goals, guide learning, and prompt self-reflection.”

Design Clear Grading and Reporting Guidelines

When each teacher designs their own unique grading system, consistency becomes impossible. Clear, collaboratively-designed school guidelines for grading and reporting, known and followed by everyone, help create a school culture that supports all students.

Examples from the Field

Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine has designed a clear set of grading guidelines that are shared with students, parents, and teachers in a document called the [Casco Bay Family Grading Guide](#). This grading guide ensures that all teachers have consistent policies for late work, retakes, and the grading of formative and summative assessments. Students who go to Casco Bay High School are not confronted with a dizzying assortment of grading policies as they move from class to class; on the contrary, there is a consistent set of expectations all students must rise to in every class. They can count on their teachers to grade the same way.

A Minnesota school district* that has been ranked highly in the state because of its students' high proficiency scores has a district-wide **Secondary Grading and Reporting Pupil Achievement Policy**. This policy document includes clear expectations for the use of scoring criteria, alignment of grades with the standards, and the reporting of non-academic factors (such as habits of work or collaboration) separately from the achievement grade. It also provides a clear framework for how much weight formative and summative assessments have in the calculation of a final grade, how extra credit can and cannot be used, and when teachers can use zeros.

Frank McCourt High School in New York City, a member of New York's [Mastery Collaborative](#), uses its [Mastery-Based Grading Policy](#) to establish clear guidelines for how student work will be graded and how those grades will show up in the school's reporting systems. This policy document contains a conversion chart that shows how the 1-4 grades that teachers assign using rubrics are converted to grades on the 100 point scale for end-of-year reports and transcripts. The McCourt School's emphasis on consistency and calibration in their grading system, combined with their dedication to problem-based learning and strong systems of feedback and support, has enabled them to achieve 79% mathematics proficiency, 95% reading proficiency, and a 97% graduation rate among their students.

For all of these schools, the grading guides are not documents that live in a folder somewhere; they are frequently-referenced blueprints for the work of all teachers in each school. Because the documents are utilized, shared with students and families, and collaboratively revised when necessary, they enable teachers to build systems that are consistent from classroom to classroom.

What We've Learned

For schools that are considering grading changes in order to achieve greater consistency, a good first step is to examine current grading practices, beliefs, and guidelines. Start by exploring the impacts of your system on your students. Read and discuss relevant articles. Use this guide to explore how other schools have done this work. Visit another school with well-crafted practices. Include students, school leaders, teachers, and community members in your conversations. Subsequent changes in grading practice can be explicitly linked to the conclusions that are drawn by this team.

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Once the school has established clear guidelines for grading and reporting, teachers need additional technical training to actually implement these agreements. Hands-on training should be provided both with student work examples and with the gradebook software. It is also critical that teachers be given ample time for scoring student work collaboratively, using their common rubric, so that they can calibrate their judgments. Teachers often refer to this collaborative scoring time as the best professional development they have ever received.

Quotes from the Literature

“According to Carifio and Carey (2009), ‘Many schools lack a coherent and uniform grading policy, resulting in extensive variations in student assessment from teacher to teacher, and even between students taking the same course with the same teacher.’ It’s therefore crucial that all schools and districts have public, published policies and procedures that all teachers are expected to follow and for which they can be held accountable if students, parents, or administrators identify concerns with their grading practices’.” —O’Connor, K., & Wormeli, R. (2011, November). Reporting student learning. *Educational Leadership*, 69(3), 40–44.

“School leaders are ultimately responsible for students’ grades. Although teachers assign grades for students’ work, it is school leaders who are ultimately accountable for those grades when challenged.” (McElligot and Brookhart, 2009).

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [This Grading Audit](#) can be used to design surveys or discussion questions that schools can use to assess how consistent the grading practices are in their school.
- [Protocol for Collaborative Scoring](#) can be used to organize and run collaborative scoring sessions.

Use Common Rubrics or Scoring Guides

An essential practice for educational equity is establishing clear, agreed-upon learning outcomes and defining the criteria for meeting those outcomes. These descriptions of what mastery looks like are powerful tools for learning, teaching, and assessment design.

Examples from the Field

In the school district of **Meriden, Connecticut**, teachers from the two public high schools (Orville H. Platt High School and Francis T. Maloney High School) worked together to define district-wide Graduation Standards, indicators, and scoring criteria. These common criteria are used as banks from which teachers draw to craft rubrics for assessments. Although teachers might be using different materials or texts in the two schools, students will be scored using the same criteria for success. (Here is [an example](#).) These common criteria have also enabled teachers to craft common assessments that require students to demonstrate their mastery of the standards through rich and complex tasks. Teacher Kelly Roman, speaking about her experience with the common criteria, said, "As soon as we wrote these scoring criteria, I realized that I was making a commitment to get all of my students there."

In Maine School Administrative District #6, teachers have been engaged in an ongoing process to define the [standards, indicators, and criteria](#) that are used in all schools and for all students. Teachers worked across the district's eight schools to align the work K-12, guiding the creation of curriculum and the feedback that students receive. During the collaborative process, the teachers took—and continue to take—opportunities to review student work together, calibrating their judgements and crafting a shared vision of the skills that they expect all students to attain. The district maintains these public online documents for all teachers, students, and families to reference to ensure that students are held to clear and consistent expectations across all classes.

At **University Park Campus High School in Worcester (UPCHS), Massachusetts**, which was ranked among the top 100 schools in Massachusetts despite a student population with many students who begin high school below grade level, teachers use common scoring criteria to assess and track student progress towards meeting school-wide expectations. Teachers at this school work to incorporate indicators from these school-wide rubrics into all assignment rubrics; additionally, the school is working on an electronic way to track student growth on each indicator. This system will also enable teachers to review their curriculum and find gaps. The common rubrics are one element of UPCHS's approach, which puts its diverse population into an all-honors or AP curriculum, regardless of past educational achievement. By building student voice and agency, and through utilizing a set of coherent instructional strategies that scaffold material for all learners, this school has achieved extraordinary results.

In all of these schools, the shared scoring criteria enable teachers to craft their own learning experiences for students while grounding their curricula on a common foundation. This common foundation is one source of equity, ensuring that all students have opportunities to learn the vocabulary, skills, and knowledge that the teachers, working together, have defined as essential.

What We've Learned

- **Refer to student work while designing or revising scoring criteria**
When writing common criteria for learning outcomes, all discussions should be grounded both in the required standards and in collaborative examination of student work. The best way to improve the criteria once they are written is to use them on student work and to revise them together.
- **Define the highest level of the rubric clearly**
Some schools run into trouble by defining the highest level in their rubrics (whether they label this “4,” “A,” “Exceeds,” or anything else) in a vague or unattainable manner. The criteria for the highest level of performance should be a clear description of what excellent work looks like at that grade level. When the highest level on a rubric is only achievable by doing lots of extra work or doing work at the next grade level, students and parents can get the unintended message that most students should not bother trying to achieve excellence. This message can be demotivating for students and can upset parents. If various teachers in the school have different ways of defining the highest level of work, this can also be demotivating and confusing for students.
- **Use what you have created in all classrooms**
Once common scoring criteria have been written, the school or district needs a system for ensuring that all staff use them—and use them consistently. This work will only produce consistency if all teachers use the criteria in their classrooms and have time to score work collaboratively with other faculty. At **Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont (CVUHS)**, groups of teachers wrote common scoring guides called Learning Scales, and are working to use those scales for collaborative assessment design. At CVUHS, the learning scales are not just for scoring; the school is working to create a culture in which the scales guide instruction and assessment design and in which teachers look at student work together, asking, “What do these results tell us about how we should adjust our teaching?”
- **Select exemplars of student work collaboratively, and use them in teaching**
As Ron Berger describes in his book *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*, it is essential for teachers to work together to build a collection of exemplars of student work. These exemplars transmit the culture of excellence to each new class of students, and the collective selection of them provides powerful training and calibration for teachers.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Scoring Criteria - Design Guide](#)
- [Assessment Pathways](#)
- [Elements of Effective Instruction](#): Clear Shared Outcomes

Provide Low-Stakes Practice and Feedback

In order to support students' need for practice and feedback, students should have opportunities to practice what they are learning in ways that give them a chance to make mistakes without hurting their final grade.

Examples from the Field

In Waukesha, Wisconsin schools, a district of approximately 12,000 students, standards-based grading is [guided at the district level](#) and applies across the PK-12 continuum. District guidelines include the directive that “students must have multiple practice and assessment opportunities to demonstrate what they know and are able to do, so teachers can make accurate judgments.” Further, their guidance states, “Students benefit from risk-free practice opportunities, ... these activities should not be ‘counted’ towards students’ course grades.” Such guidance has enabled the schools to create consistent student experiences across all grades and all subjects.

Casco Bay High School (CBHS), in Portland, Maine, is an Expeditionary Learning School where educational practices are guided by core educational principles. The school’s [Family Grading Guide](#) provides this relevant excerpt:

Principle: Learning cannot be averaged: students need time to practice and learn from mistakes.

Practice: We determine trimester grades based on trends and take more recent performance into account.

This guidance enables CBHS teachers to give students clear feedback based on shared outcomes so that the students can acquire proficiency even after failure.

In Michigan*, a highly effective district with a robust International Baccalaureate program in middle and high school grades has worked to craft a district-wide approach to providing opportunities for practice. Their published guide to district best practices asserts, “Students will be well-informed (i.e. feedback, knowing the standard, self-assessing their learning, etc.) prior to receiving a summative grade.” Teachers are expected to assign “meaningful formative assessments (at-home or in-class practice that is not factored in the course grade) with timely feedback as practice for mastery of skill without penalty.”

In all of these systems, there is a commitment to separating preparation and practice from performing or demonstrating for a grade. Students and teachers alike are able to identify what they are practicing for and what passing or exemplary work will look like.

What We’ve Learned

Students have to be able to practice and not pay a penalty if there are imperfections in their practice work. Teachers must create ways for this to happen. Formative assessment informs learners about their progress without punishing them for partial knowledge. Formative assessment also informs the teacher about how each student is doing, how the class is doing as a whole, and whether any adjustment of instruction or re-teaching is needed. Getting feedback and practice routines right can reduce the need for multiple rounds of retakes and redos by ensuring that students are well prepared for summative assessments on their first attempt.

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Although it is important to provide students with chances to practice without being penalized for errors, it is also important to track whether students are doing their practice either in the form of homework or classwork. This record of practice and effort may inform the work habits grade.

When peer-to-peer feedback and self-assessment become routine classroom norms, this shifts the responsibility for learning closer to the students.

Quotes from the Literature

“Feedback in an assessment for learning context occurs while there is still time to take action. It functions as a global positioning system, offering descriptive information about the work, product, or performance relative to the intended learning goals. It avoids marks or comments that judge the level of achievement or imply that the learning journey is over.” Chappuis and Chappuis, *The Best Value in Formative Assessment*, ASCD 2007.

“Learning and performing aren’t the same... When everything we ask a student to do comes with a judgment (grade, score, or mark), it diminishes a student’s capability to operate outside their comfort zone — instead, it breeds fear and anxiety.” *What We’ve Gotten Wrong About the Fail Forward Movement*, Adam Dyche, *The Medium* blog September 2018

“[T]eachers take time to guide students through practice activities. As they guide, teachers help make sure students attend to the proper issues and understand the rationale for their actions.....the teacher was not satisfied to hear students offer the correct answer. She wanted to hear students explain why each step made sense.” Johnson, J., Uline, C., and Perez, L. (2013). *Teaching Practices from America’s Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders* (1st ed.) (p. 77). New York, NY: Routledge.

“Do not grade every piece of writing a student creates. In fact, research shows that the very act of placing a grade on a student’s work ends the learning.” Cheryl Mizerny, 6th Grade English teacher, Bloomfield, MI; author of *The Accidental English Teacher* blog.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- Elements of Effective Instruction, ([The Learning Environment; Feedback and Practice](#))
- Elements of Effective Instruction ([Varied Content, Materials and Methods resources page](#))

Report on Habits of Work Separately

Separating habits of work from academic proficiency ensures that a student's good behavior or work habits cannot mask a lack of proficiency and that a student's poor behavior or work habits cannot mask their attainment of proficiency.

Examples from the Field

Durango, one of Colorado's rural K-12 systems, serves students from diverse backgrounds. They publicly commit to equitable, consistent, and transparent systems of grading and reporting. Regarding the separation of habits of work from academic grades, their [Guiding Principles](#) document includes the following: "Academic progress and achievement are monitored and reported separately from work habits, character traits, and behaviors such as attendance and class participation, which are also monitored and reported." Durango's policy of separating habits of work grades from academic grades helps teachers communicate clearly with both students and their families about the areas in which students are excelling, areas where they need more practice or support, and whether or not challenges stem from their habits of work.

Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont has a long-standing and well-articulated commitment to equitable grading practices. In the school's online guide, [Standards-based Learning FAQ](#), they write: "While Habits of Learning are essential to the learning process, these habits do not provide evidence of what a student knows, understands, or can do with reference to the learning targets in a class. In a standards-based system, Habits of Learning are reported separately from academic grades, and students receive feedback on these habits throughout the year." This distinction has enabled the school to provide more accurate reports of academic learning while also supporting student growth in the qualities that help one succeed in the world.

Foxcroft Academy in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine is a member of the League of Innovative Schools and one of Maine's independent town academies; it provides a comprehensive program that serves all publicly-funded local students as well as a diverse and international student body. Foxcroft has developed a unique but time-tested approach: Each course at Foxcroft Academy includes between three and five subject-area standards. Each course also includes one standard called "academic initiative" that represents the student's class participation and engagement, appropriate use of technology, homework completion, timely completion of extended assignments, and appropriate use of academic resources and supports as needed. All standards are graded and appear on the report card. Foxcroft Academy offers students a unique possibility for academic initiative remediation. The school monitors student performance in the quarter immediately following a failed academic initiative grade, and then grants retroactive credit when students demonstrate an improved pattern of academic behaviors. This practice has enabled the school to use the academic initiative grade as a way to motivate students to improve their habits of work.

In all of these schools, habits of work are prioritized and monitored while not allowing them to artificially inflate or deflate reports of students' academic learning.

What We've Learned

Schools that find success work hard to ensure that the habits of work rubrics or criteria become a part of the culture and common language of the school, with teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, social workers and other support staff all referencing them in conversations with students.

- **Habits of work must be explicitly taught**

Schools must commit to teaching habits of work more than simply deciding to grade them and add a new report card category. As with social studies, mathematics, or music, habits of work is an area of learning for students and it deserves instruction. Unlike these subject areas, however, teaching habits of work is an endeavor which must be undertaken by the school as a whole and done so with common performance expectations. All teachers and support staff must be committed to the idea that habits of work can be taught and the school should have a comprehensive, school-wide plan for supporting students' growth.

- **The list of "habits of work" should be short**

Most systems select three to six habits of work categories that they identify as critical to student success. Selecting a large number of scored habits of work attributes can result in more paperwork, less alignment of scoring, and less clarity. Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, for example, reports out on their "big three" (complete homework; meet deadlines; participate effectively - including attendance). In designing habits of work rubrics (such as this one [from Colorado's Westminster Public Schools](#) or [this one from Maine's A.R. Gould School](#)), focus on patterns of performance, and find ways to calibrate teachers' reporting judgments regularly.

- **Habits of work should matter**

HOW Honor Rolls, HOW-informed eligibility, and reporting on student's Preparedness on official transcripts are often used as strategies for ensuring that students see Habits of Work as important. In some schools, HOW are not reported on the transcript, but they determine whether students can access re-dos and re-takes for assessments. When designing a system for Habits of Work, it is important to remember that some Habits of Work, while very important in terms of feedback and reflection, can be challenging to assess, and unconscious bias can affect this assessment. The only Habit of Work that should be included on a transcript is Work Completion or preparedness, because that is more clearly measurable than attributes like "Persistence" or "Engagement."

Quotes from the Literature

"A far more effective consequence [than a zero] for assignments that are late, missing, or poorly done is the consistent requirement that students get the work done... often it will be during the school day, when the most meaningful consequence a student can experience - restrictions on time and the possibility to earn freedom on how to use time - can be used to get work done..."
"Busting Myths About Grading," Douglas Reeves, All Things PLC Magazine, Spring 2017.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Habits of Work Grading and Reporting](#)
- [Verifying Proficiency: Scoring Criteria](#)

Organize Gradebooks Consistently

Design gradebook categories in such a way that they will yield the most useful information to educators and learners.

Examples from the Field

[Hunter’s Point Community Middle School \(HPCMS\)](#) in Long Island City, New York, a member of New York’s [Mastery Collaborative](#), has created an instructional model based upon three attributes: scholarship, creativity, and community. Eight schoolwide standards define these attributes. (The model and standards can be found in the [curriculum design section of this page](#)). When teachers enter students’ scores in JumpRope, each content-area standard is nested within the category of one of these eight schoolwide standards. In this way, the organization of the gradebook makes clear how every piece of work done by the student is intended to strengthen the eight essential skills described in the instructional model. This approach has resulted in such strong results for students that HPCMS was named as a “Recognition School” by the state of New York in 2019.

At [Noble High School in North Berwick, Maine](#), teachers worked together to create graduation standards with the lists of skills and knowledge that comprise each one. The teachers’ gradebooks are organized by these graduation standards so that each time a teacher scores a piece of student work, they will enter a grade for each of the graduation standards assessed by that piece of work. This system allows teachers to see where students are struggling or succeeding and also allows them to see gaps in their own curriculum. Work habits are graded separately, so the gradebook yields a clear picture of the level of a student’s skills and knowledge within each standard. This approach enables teachers to design [projects that are authentic and integrated](#) while still giving students very specific feedback on standards and skills.

At [The Young Women’s Leadership School of Astoria in Queens, New York](#), a member of New York’s [Mastery Collaborative](#), the teachers use a JumpRope online gradebook to record each student’s progress towards the school’s ten learning outcomes. The targets within each class are aligned to these outcomes, and so when teachers enter grades for assignments, those standards grades will always be entered within the categories of the outcomes: Argue, Be Precise, Collaborate, Communicate, Plan, Discern, Conclude, Create, Innovate, Investigate. This means that by looking at the gradebook, a student or teacher can get a sense of how the student is doing both in the specific academic skills of the class and the larger outcomes of the school. This approach has enabled the school to achieve an impressive level of achievement, with 84% of students completing the Regents successfully. Additionally, post-secondary enrollment is far above that of surrounding schools.

At each of these schools, the teachers have worked together to design gradebook organization strategies that will best organize the information in the gradebook into a coherent picture of each student as a learner. And all teachers at each school are following the same process.

What We’ve Learned

The organization of a teacher’s gradebook plays an important role in establishing and keeping track of the course’s priorities. Gradebooks that are organized using only traditional categories (tests, homework, projects, quizzes, participation, etc.) convey little specific information about a student’s learning or in what areas support, remediation, or extra challenge may be needed. When the gradebook is organized by the central competencies or standards being taught and assessed, then the student’s strength, weakness,

avoidance of a particular type of work, or potential for growth become much more apparent and can become the focus of parent-teacher conferences, teacher meetings, and student reflections and planning.

As schools discuss how to organize gradebooks, teachers should be given the chance to determine the categories that will enable them to see a clear picture of student skills. Too few categories will deliver a vague picture; too many categories will be confusing or overwhelming for students and parents, may cause teachers to spend too much time on data entry, and may push teachers to craft simplistic assessments that are focused on discrete skills rather than crafting assessments that push students to apply sets of skills to complex tasks.

As in all areas of grading and reporting, consistency across teachers in the organization of gradebooks is very important. Teachers need time with their colleagues to craft a system of organization that is manageable and that will help them make sense of each student's progress and needs.

Quotes from the Literature and Resources

"...categories like Class Activities, Participation and Engagement [when factored into an omnibus grade, rather than reported separately] are more subjective and undefined.... Research has found that in classrooms taught by white teachers, black students "are typically rated as poorer classroom citizens" - meaning the kinds of behaviors that often included in Participation and Effort categories - than their white peers (Downey and Pribesh, 2004). When we create a Participation or Engagement category that is populated nearly entirely by subjective judgements of student behaviors, we are inviting our biases to infect our judgements, particularly when we're white and our students are black or brown." Feldman, Joe. [Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms](#). 2019: Corwin Press, California.

"[What Is Mastery-Based Learning?](#)" Video by the Mastery Collaborative of the New York City Department of Education. In this video, students and teachers from Frederick Douglas Academy in Brooklyn, NY, talk about why the organization of grades and instruction by standards has been so helpful for them.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Grading Principles and Guidelines](#)

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](#)

Establish a Process for Determining Course or Standards Grades

Agree upon a consistent method for determining a final grade from multiple assessment grades. (Note: A separate verification system may be built in order to ensure that students can meet standards through internships or out-of-school projects.)

This technical process represents an area of intense effort and questions posed consistently to Great Schools Partnership staff from the field. While we would be excited to present a single solution for this process, our experience has demonstrated that any aggregation system has benefits and concerns--and these frequently change based on local context. Ultimately, we would urge schools to weigh the pros and cons of multiple systems to determine a final system that aligns with their needs, addresses the tenets we have outlined in this resource, and which they believe best promotes equitable and rich learning for every student.

Examples from the Field

At **York Middle School in York, Maine**, teachers arrive at a final score for each standard by calculating the mean of each student's summative assessment grades (given on a 1-4 scale) within that standard. Habits of work grades are recorded separately. (This school does not calculate overall course grades.) They use this method because teachers believe it best represents the preponderance of evidence that a student has produced over a period of time. They have tried many strategies—mode, most recent score, and power law—but have settled on this because the teachers feel that it most frequently provides an accurate picture of where the student is. They also employ a teacher override function. If the mean does not seem like an accurate reflection of the student's level of proficiency, teachers can experiment to see what the various calculations would be using different formulas. Teachers can also drop a score that is an outlier or which the teacher decides is unreliable. This respect for the professional judgement of the teacher is a cornerstone of the system.

Montpelier High School in Vermont includes in the [Montpelier High School Personalized & Proficiency-Based Learning Guide](#) the following instructions for deriving course grades from an array of summative assessment scores and other data: “Summative scores for content-specific indicators will not be averaged across marking periods. Instead, the highest score achieved on a summative assessment within a given content proficiency indicator will be the score given to that proficiency indicator for the course. This is called “high mark” scoring. When the course concludes, the highest achieved summative scores from each content proficiency indicator will be averaged equally, with the course's identified learning expectation indicators' scores to make up 80% of the total grade. The remaining 20% of the course grade is determined by the Habits of Learning-Preparedness score.”

Frank McCourt High School in New York City uses the grading system JumpRope to record assessment grades and calculate final grades. Their [grading guide](#) explains: “JumpRope calculates and presents an evolving course average based on the number of times an outcome is used to give feedback and whether any tasks are weighted. Some tasks are weighted more heavily because more time is spent working on and coaching into them, or because they come at the end of the unit when the course has provided more of a chance to improve and master the skill. The running average is provided in JumpRope and impacted by rubric scores entered. Each outcome is required to have at least 5 grades in JumpRope for each term. Averages in JumpRope are on a 4 point scale and grades are reported on the transcript on a 100 point scale.”

Although each school has arrived at a different way of calculating a final grade from the scores given on student work, within each school there is strong consistency among teachers in how they do this. The teachers have worked together to design a method that works well to communicate accurately what the student has achieved; they use this method reliably so that students are not encountering wildly different systems in every classroom. This enables the school to be consistent and equitable in its practices.

What We've Learned

The most important consideration for a school that is exploring new methods for calculating final grades is to be very thoughtful about the balance between maintaining consistency and allowing for teacher judgment. There is no formula that will perfectly capture the progress and performance of every student with perfect accuracy. The key is for the faculty of a school to decide what information they want their grades to convey, what gets counted, what process all teachers will use with fidelity, and to incorporate systems that allow teachers to recalculate any grade they feel does not accurately reflect the student's learning and performance.

Before making any final agreements on any algorithm, we would strongly advise testing each one. For example, while power law and decaying average may value later work more heavily than earlier work, either strategy can be highly inaccurate if only used with a handful of graded assessments. Similarly, simply averaging grades can lead to erroneous scores based on an outlier grade. In addition, counting on a teacher override system can lead to untenable teacher overloads. In each case, we are not arguing for or against these strategies but for schools to engage in thoughtful conversations that weight the pros and cons for each system within their local context.

Quotes from the Literature

“In choosing an appropriate reporting form based on purpose, educators must seek a balance between detail and practicality. ... a standards-based report card should be compact and understandable and should not require inordinate time for teachers to prepare or for parents to interpret (Linn & Gronlund, 2000)... Report cards consisting of multiple pages with long lists of skills and multiple categories of information are not only terribly time consuming for teachers to complete, they typically overwhelm parents with information they do not know how to use.” — Guskey, T., & Baily, J. M. (2010). *Developing standards-based report cards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- This [set of resources](#) from the Great Schools Partnership describes a variety of ways to calculate grades for standards and indicators.

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- The school district of Durango, Colorado
- Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont
- Foxcroft Academy in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine
- Hunter's Point Community Middle School, Long Island City, New York
- Noble High School, North Berwick, Maine
- The Young Women's Leadership School of Astoria in Queens, New York
- York Middle School, York, Maine
- Montpelier High School, Montpelier, Vermont
- AR Gould School in the Long Creek Youth Development Center, South Portland, ME

Resource Links

Communicate Information About Learning

1. Waukesha, Wisconsin: Practices in Grading and Reporting Administrative Guidelines
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2D1FBh223vOMVF2Q0IFeE5kdHFBOE1BTU14Vm9zZEIKTXFB/view>
2. Kittery, Maine: Guide to Grading and Reporting
<https://docs.google.com/a/kitteryschools.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=a2I0dGVyeXNjaG9vbHMuY29tfHNoYXBsZWlnaHxneDplNDc3YjA3OTQ4NjJwYjM>
3. Elements of Effective Instruction
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/resources/elements-of-effective-instruction/>

Design Clear Grading and Reporting Guidelines

1. Casco Bay High School: Family Grading Guide
https://cbhs.portlandschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1098483/File/Migration/Casco-Bay-Family-Grading-Guide.pdf
2. Frank McCourt High School: Mastery Collaborative
<http://www.masterycollaborative.org/>
3. Frank McCourt High School: Mastery-Based Grading Policy
<https://bit.ly/2BUokgl>
4. Grading Audit
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DTNghHZUdfbgPIFKv-osgE-_VL8rTPdbc6js4C_SSeU/edit
5. Protocol for Collaborative Scoring
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IDCORdPJY0mSg0jaYc06r2FLV1Yq37o7/view>

Use Common Rubrics of Scoring Guides

1. Meriden, Connecticut: Common Scoring Criteria Example
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z6cubg55s_WISMINOAAxo6Y9KcBwZTBQ/view
2. Maine School Administrative District #6: Standards, indicators and criteria
<https://sites.google.com/bonnyeagle.org/curriculum/content-standards-indicators>
3. Scoring Criteria Design Guide
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/assessment-verification/verifying-proficiency-scoring-criteria/>
4. Scoring Criteria Design Protocol
<https://greatschools.egnyte.com/dl/D6pqvrbZvA/>
5. Assessment Pathways
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/assessment-verification/learning-and-assessment-pathways/>
6. Elements of Effective Instruction: Clear, Shared Outcomes
<https://greatschools.egnyte.com/dl/MgJtvzTKn5/>

Provide Low-Stakes Practice and Feedback

1. Waukesha, Wisconsin: guided at the district level
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2D1FBh223vOMVF2Q0IFeE5kdHFBOE1BTU14Vm9zZEIKTXFB/view>
2. Casco Bay High School: Family Grading Guide
https://cbhs.portlandschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1098483/File/Casco%20Bay%20Family%20Grading%20Guide.pdf
3. Elements of Effective Instruction

<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/resources/elements-of-effective-instruction/>

4. **Elements of Effective Instruction: Varied Content, Materials and Methods**

https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/EEI_3_Varied_Content_Materials_Methods_2018.pdf

Report on Habits of Work Separately

1. **Durango, Colorado: Guiding Principles**

https://www.durangoschools.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=459019&type=d&pREC_ID=1318414

2. **Champlain Valley Union High School, Vermont: Standards-based Learning FAQ**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fNjn0cnwo1Vd7He58Uu3VURhPP6BICKwonj7VZKPkyY/edit>

3. **Foxcroft Academy, Maine**

<https://www.foxcroftacademy.org/academics/curriculum/>

4. **Colorado's Westminster Public Schools**

<https://www.westminsterpublicschools.org/Page/9103>

5. **A.R. Gould School, Maine**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/11yUv3fDdz5BFVKSF6gtnCcJNBkKbgwsAKXGJ1ZWXo/edit?ts=5d66d3ac>

6. **Habits of Work Grading and Reporting**

<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/grading-reporting/habits-work-grading-reporting/>

7. **Verifying Proficiency: Scoring Criteria**

<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/assessment-verification/verifying-proficiency-scoring-criteria/>

Organize Gradebooks Consistently

1. **Hunter's Point Community Middle School**

<https://www.hunterspointcms.org/home/partnerships-and-resources>

2. **Hunter's Point Community Middle School: Curriculum Design section of this page**

<https://www.hunterspointcms.org/home/partnerships-and-resources>

3. **Noble High School, Maine: Projects that are authenticated and integrated**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MoxRZS6jvI>

4. **The Young Women's Leadership School: Mastery Collaborative**

<http://www.masterycollaborative.org/>

5. **Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms**

<http://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/grading-for-equity/book258205>

6. **What Is Mastery-Based Learning**

<https://vimeo.com/159998673>

7. **Grading Principals and Guidelines**

<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/grading-reporting/grading-principles-guidelines/>

Report Grades Clearly and Consistently

1. Champlain Valley Union High School: Online resource
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fNjn0cnwo1Vd7He58Uu3VURhPP6BICKwonj7VZKPyY/edit>
2. Waukesha, Wisconsin: District-wide grading guide
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2D1FBh223vOMVF2Q0IFeE5kdHFBOE1BTU14Vm9zZEIKTXFB/view>
3. The Young Women's Leadership School: Mastery Collaborative
<http://www.masterycollaborative.org/>
4. The Young Women's Leadership School: School-wide grading guide
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WdoqkKoENOWJFic_REOIX0KEmzF0DE4LgBEvZkcf6HI/edit
5. Designing a Grading System
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/grading-reporting/designing-grading-system/>
6. Communicating the Grading System
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/grading-reporting/communicating-grading-system/>
7. Selecting an Online Grading System
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/grading-reporting/selecting-online-grading-reporting-system/>
8. Selecting an Online Grading and Reporting System Rubric
https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/GSP_Selecting_Online_Grading_Reporting_System_Rubric_August_2016.pdf

Establish a Process for Determining Course or Standards Grades

1. Montpelier High School: Personalized Proficiency-Based Learning Guide
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1G6ERB1nqWerW15ZSmA5UOvo4x4KvAIFYGvgR7tHYh6o/edit>
2. Frank McCourt High School: Grading Guide
<https://bit.ly/2Wgok3C>
3. Great Schools Partnership Set of Resources
<https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/proficiency-based-learning/assessment-verification/verifying-proficiency-graduation-standards/>