

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative high schools.

What Is Proficiency-Based Grading?

Proficiency-based learning and grading are motivated by a simple but powerful principle: **Schools not only teach students the most important knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in life, but they also make sure students have learned them.** It's that simple.

Schools that use proficiency-based grading systems may look like any typical American school. The difference is that teachers, parents, and the students themselves know far more precisely what students have learned or not learned, and students have to demonstrate that they have acquired expected knowledge and skills as they progress through their education. Proficiency-based grading is one way that schools ensure that students are prepared before they move on to the next grade or graduate.

The Limitations of Traditional Grading

In many high schools, course grades are calculated by averaging assignment scores over the course of a term, semester, or school year. While schools have used grade averaging for decades, the practice can misrepresent important aspects of academic achievement, particularly the learning progress that students make over time. The chart below, adapted from [Ken O'Connor's book, *How to Grade for Learning*](#) (p. 155), shows how four discrepant sets of averaged assessment scores produce the same end-of-term grade:

	STUDENT 1	STUDENT 2	STUDENT 3	STUDENT 4
Assignment #1	0	63	0	0
Assignment #2	0	63	10	0
Assignment #3	0	63	10	62
Assignment #4	90	63	10	62
Assignment #5	90	63	100	63
Assignment #6	90	63	100	63
Assignment #7	90	63	100	90
Assignment #8	90	63	100	90
Assignment #9	90	63	100	100
Assignment #10	90	63	100	100
Sum Total	630	630	630	630
Average	63	63	63	63
GRADE	F	F	F	F

As the example above illustrates, averaging scores in this way fails to provide a complete picture of student learning. In this case, Student 2 failed every assignment and test, while Student 4 made significant progress over the course of the semester—yet they each received a failing grade. Both Student 1 and Student 3 earned high scores on the assignments they completed, but a failure to turn in work at the beginning of the semester earned them zeros and failing grades. **Does this system accurately capture what these students have learned or not learned?**

In proficiency-based systems, grades more accurately reflect the learning progress that students make, particularly when they struggle early on in a semester or school year. **Progress and hard work are recognized and documented.** If you ask nearly any adult, they will tell you that failures—and learning to overcome them—are often among the most important lessons in life. Yet many traditional grading systems penalize students for a single failure or poor test performance. Failure is nearly always encountered on the path to understanding and success, and proficiency-based approaches to grading allow teachers, students, and parents to focus on the end goal—learning the most important knowledge and skills—rather than the struggles or mistakes made along the way. Proficiency-based grading helps students see failures as opportunities to learn and grow—not as sources of shame.

The following tables, adapted from “[Seven Reasons for Standards-Based Grading](#)” by Patricia L. Scriffiny (*Educational Leadership*, October 2008), reveals another advantage of proficiency-based grading: learning progress and achievement are more clearly documented for students and parents. Consider that any given assignment or test a student completes represents a wide variety of facts, proficiencies, and skills. When grades are given on assignments all those facts, proficiencies, and skills are compiled into a single score, and students may not know what they did well, what they did poorly, or how they can improve. In proficiency-based systems, however, students typically receive grades on specific learning standards—that is, brief, written descriptions of what they are expected to know and be able to do. Proficiency-based grades are connected to specific learning expectations so that educators and parents know, with far more precision, what a student has actually learned or failed to learn:

Traditional Grades

	Homework Average	Quiz 1	Test 1
John	90	65	70
Bill	50	75	78
Susan	110	50	62
Felicia	10	90	85
Amanda	95	100	90

Proficiency-Based Grades

	Objective 1: Write an alternate ending for a story	Objective 2: Identify the elements of a story	Objective 3: Compare and contrast two stories
John	Partially proficient	Proficient	Partially proficient
Bill	Proficient	Proficient	Partially proficient
Susan	Partially proficient	Partially proficient	Partially proficient
Felicia	Advanced	Proficient	Proficient

One School's Approach to Proficiency-Based Grading

[Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning](#) is a small public high school in Portland, Maine, with a student body that reflects the increasing diversity of the city. Founded in 2005, Casco Bay is a school of choice for 325-350 students each year. The school not only uses a proficiency-based approach to teaching, assessing, grading, and reporting, but every student in three out of its five graduating classes was accepted to college. On the annual Maine High School Assessment, Casco Bay students routinely exceeds state and district averages, as well as expectations for different student subgroups.

In 2012, Casco Bay was named one of Maine's top high schools by U.S. News & World Report, and in 2010 the high school was featured on Edutopia's Schools that Work series. Casco Bay is also a Mentor School in the [Expeditionary Learning](#) national network of 165 schools, 4,000 teachers, and nearly 50,000 students. In 2014, Casco Bay was featured in the book [Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment](#) and recognized as one of twenty "deeper learning" schools in the United States by [Getting Smart](#). For a more detailed description of the school, see the [Casco Bay 2013-2014 School Profile](#).

For a more detailed description of Casco Bay's approach to grading, you can read the [Casco Bay High School Family Grading Guide](#) or watch the following videos made by Expeditionary Learning:

- ▶ [Why Use a Standards-Based Grading System?](#)
- ▶ [Understanding Grades in a Standards-Based System](#)
- ▶ [Habits of Work Prepare Students for College—Standards-Based Grading](#)
- ▶ [Descriptive Feedback Helps All Students Reach Proficiency—Standards-Based Grading](#)
- ▶ [School-wide Structures for Standards-Based Grading](#)

Grading Principles and Practices

At Casco Bay High School, grades are intended to support and enhance student learning. To earn credit at Casco Bay, students need to demonstrate that they have acquired expected knowledge and skills by meeting ten to fifteen clearly articulated learning standards for each course. To create a learning culture focused on proficiency rather than competition, Casco Bay does not rank students or weight GPAs. The following principles and practices guide every dimension of how the school assesses student achievement and communicates learning progress to families:

PRINCIPLE #1	Grades should clearly communicate what students know and are able to do in each class.
PRACTICE #1	We report on student mastery of specific skills and concepts within a course (called "course standards"); traits like participation and effort are reported on separately.
PRINCIPLE #2	Students should have multiple opportunities to show what they know and can do.
PRACTICE #2	We ask students to build a body of work to demonstrate their mastery of each course standard.
PRINCIPLE #3	Schools should support students in acquiring all of the essential knowledge and skills in a course, versus just a portion of them.
PRACTICE #3	To earn credit, all of the course standards must be met.

PRINCIPLE #4	Academic knowledge and work habits are both important to acquire for college and life.
PRACTICE #4	Students receive both academic grades (based on course standards) as well as habits of work (HOW) grades for each class.
PRINCIPLE #5	If students are working hard (as shown by their habits of work grade) to meet standards, they deserve more time and support to learn the material.
PRACTICE #5	Students receive additional time after the term has ended to meet course standards if they have a "3" or above in habits of work.
PRINCIPLE #6	All students should have the opportunity to excel.
PRACTICE #6	Achieving "with honors" is an option for all students in all courses.
PRINCIPLE #7	Regular communication with families about student progress supports deeper learning.
PRACTICE #7	We formally report progress ten times a year through report cards, progress reports, and conferences. Infinite Campus, our online grade book, is updated frequently by teachers and is always open to parents.
PRINCIPLE #8	Learning cannot be averaged: students need time to practice and learn from mistakes.
PRACTICE #8	We determine trimester grades based on trends, and take more recent performance into account. Trimester grades reflect a student's current level of achievement.

How HOW (Habits of Work) Grades Work

Grading student behaviors, habits of work, and character strengths separately from academic achievement is one of the foundations of proficiency-based grading. When academic grades and behaviors—such as attendance or class participation—are averaged together, the resulting picture of student achievement is muddled: it is no longer clear which percentage of a given grade is attributable to academics or to behaviors. Did a low course grade result from poor test scores or a failure to turn in work on time? What, specifically, is the student struggling with: A particular concept or skill, or the behavioral expectations for a class? And what kind of support does the student need to address the issue and succeed in the course?

Proficiency-based-learning systems are designed to identify specific learning gaps and academic needs, which teachers can then use to inform instructional adjustments and academic support, which requires learning progress to be monitored and reported separately from behavior. Strong habits of work and character traits are essential to academic success, which is why should be monitored and reported for students and parents. At Casco Bay High School, habits of work expectations are monitored, graded, and reported separately from academic standards. For Casco Bay teachers, students, and parents, strong habits of work are as important as the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire. The list below describes the habits of work traits that Casco Bay's faculty teach and assess.

Work Ethically

- Behave ethically and treat others with respect
- Accept responsibility for personal decisions and actions

Work Collaboratively

- Work actively and cooperatively to achieve group goals
- Perform a variety of roles within a group
- Fulfill individual responsibilities within the group

Be Accountable

- Complete homework; prepare for class
- Use class time effectively
- Meet deadlines and established criteria

Persevere

- Persevere when things are hard
- Complete revisions when necessary
- Access appropriate resources to solve problems

Be Community

- Participate effectively and positively in class
- Make sure class members feel safe and comfortable
- Demonstrate Stewardship

Pursue Personal Best

- Be willing to try new things; take constructive risks
- Seek from setbacks and feedback
- Seek challenge and solutions

Additional Reading on Grading and Assessment

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)

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 Wormeli

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

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is a new england secondary school consortium resource

newenglandssc.org/leadership_in_action