

Vermont Proficiency-Based Grading Practices

Purpose

This document provides current examples of proficiency-based grading and reporting practices in Vermont. The intent is to share resources and materials so that leaders and educators in school systems can support one another on the path to proficiency. This is viewed as a living document that will grow over time as more examples become available. This information should be used to inform rather than dictate decisions related to grading practices made at the local level, and act as a body of promising practices to scale statewide implementation of student-centered learning that is both personalized and proficiency-based.

What is Proficiency-Based Grading?

In a previously released document, [Research Brief: Proficiency-Based Grading Practices](#), proficiency-based grading practices are explained.

Proficiency-based grading is one part of a system of instruction, assessment, and reporting that assesses and reports where students are in relation to specific proficiencies (i.e., their knowledge and skills) over a specific period of time, such as a unit or a semester. Proficiency-based grading appears to have some advantages over more traditional grading systems. As Hawes states, “[Proficiency-based] grading procedures are thought to be a more individualized, fairer assessment of student achievement” (Hawes, p. 3).

Clear descriptions of proficiency for content areas as well as transferable skills are essential so that students can determine what they need to do to demonstrate their level of understanding. For example, rather than saying, “Dylan got a 68 on his biology test on plant and animal cells,” a proficiency grade lets Dylan and his parents know that “Dylan is proficient in using evidence to back up claims and approaching proficiency in his understanding of how plant and animal cells function.” Armed with this information, Dylan’s learning can be personalized, and instruction focused on where he needs to improve. His teacher can also use this information to refine and differentiate learning experiences in order to help Dylan reach proficiency. The focus is on the learning and the grading system provides feedback regarding where a student is along a continuum of learning.

Proficiency-based systems are characterized by a relentless focus on student learning, application of learning to new contexts, and the goal of achieving proficiencies for both skills and knowledge. Enabling each and every student to meet proficiencies is a significant change and requires new strategies for communicating this information to students and their families.

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Why are School Systems Moving Towards Proficiency-based Grading?

Moving to proficiency-based learning that requires demonstrations of specific and transparent learning outcomes in which learning is the constant and time is the variable provides an opportunity for stakeholders to revisit their grading and reporting practices. Stakeholders in a school community should determine and agree on the purpose of grades, and the agreed-upon purpose should then drive decisions regarding what and how information is shared with students and their families.

EQUITY SPOTLIGHT: Educators, students, and parents/guardians need to be involved in developing, clarifying, and understanding the purpose of grading to establish a collective commitment to implementation of student-centered learning.

Colchester High School provides an example of foundational beliefs that drive their grading system. Fourteen belief statements that provide a strong foundation for informing grading practices were developed. These belief statements include:

- *We believe that all students can learn and assessment is an integral part of the learning process.*
- *We believe that clarification of learning expectations for students prior to and during instruction AND practice opportunities are beneficial for student understanding and teacher intervention.*
- *We believe that learning is an ongoing process. Students should be given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning so that their grade reflects their current level of understanding. The primary purpose of grading is to communicate the academic achievement status of students to the students, their families, employers, and postsecondary institutions.*
- *We believe that assessment is ongoing. Assessment both informs instruction (formatively) and evaluates learning (summatively), making growth evident to each individual student as well as to the teacher throughout the learning process.*

[The Colchester HS Handbook of Teaching and Learning](#) (p. 8)

[Essex Westford School District](#) clarifies the value of their proficiency-based reporting system:

On traditional report cards, students receive one letter or number for each content area for a specific point in time which is intended to represent the student learning of the classroom learning objectives as a whole. A standards-based, or proficiency-based, reporting system is designed to better inform parents/guardians and students about the child's progress towards achieving specific learning standards, or proficiencies. This report card benefits students, teachers and parents/guardians by:

- *providing more transparency through increased information about how a student is progressing towards meeting standards;*
- *allowing students to be more informed and actively engaged in their learning;*
- *ensuring increased consistency across classrooms; and*
- *providing parents/guardians with a more detailed information about grade level proficiencies.*

Lamoille South Supervisory Union's website, [The Road to Proficiency: Why, What, and How](#), includes a variety of valuable information. [The Assessment and Grading](#) page explains one of the challenges with traditional grading systems:

What does a C mean? While the grade is a familiar symbol, and more or less everyone has received a C at some point, what does the grade actually convey about learning? What was taught in the course? What knowledge did those C students acquire? What skills did they learn? Did the student work hard to improve significantly during the course or slack off? The fact is that familiar C doesn't tell us much about what the student knows, understands, and can do. Proficiency-based grades are connected to clearly defined learning expectations, so educators and parents know, with far more precision, what a student has actually learned or failed to learn.

Additionally, the [North Country Union High School Profile](#) states:

North Country Union High School (NCUHS) is shifting to a proficiency-based system. Demonstrating proficiency will help ensure students graduate truly ready for college and career. Traditional grades often included information that was not directly tied to achieving learning standards, such as work ethic, attitude towards learning, and behavior. While these areas are important, they are not necessarily related to content standards. Our changing world requires students to be able to adapt quickly to new learning and make changes based on feedback from peers, colleagues, and supervisors. Proficiency-based learning promotes growth, revision, and persistence to achieve a set goal.

The key point is that everyone understands what is being measured and how the student performed relative to the related standard or proficiency. Most importantly, grades in a proficiency-based system communicate information to facilitate improvement in student learning.

Current Proficiency-Based Grading Practices in Vermont

This is not a comprehensive list of the work that is happening throughout Vermont. Rather, it is the current information that was shared by a variety of leaders and educators. These examples reflect how education communities are modifying their grading systems to reflect proficiency-based practices.

A number of schools and systems have created informational documents that clearly describe their proficiency-based grading and reporting system:

Hartford SD: [Understanding your Child's Report Card](#)

- Infographic: [What is Proficiency & Personalization](#)
- Infographic: [Proficiency-Based Learning Outcomes](#)
- Infographic: [Transferable Skills](#)

Barre: [Understanding your Child's Report Card](#)

Central VT Supervisory Union: [Understanding your Child's Report Card](#)

Mt. Abraham MS/HS: [The Making of a Grade](#)

Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union: [A Parent's Guide to Standards-Based Report Cards](#)

Union-32: [Understanding your Child's Report Card](#)

The **Champlain Valley Union High School (CVU)** includes valuable information on the [CVU Learns](#) webpages. Under Standards-Based Grading (SBG), the reasoning behind the four-point grading scale is explained:

Why should we assess using a 4-point scale?

“Percentage grading systems that attempt to identify 100 distinct levels of performance distort the precision, objectivity, and reliability of grades. They also create unsolvable methodological and logistical problems for teachers. Limiting the number of grade categories to four or five through an integer grading system allows educators to offer more honest, sensible, and reliable evaluations of students’ performance. Combining the grade with supplemental narrative descriptions or standards checklists describing the learning criteria used to determine the grade further enhances its communicative value.”

Woodstock Union Middle School and High School have a [grading policy](#) in place that clearly describes the system:

Woodstock Union Middle School and High School will use a hybrid grading system that unites proficiency-learning with traditional grading. The system will incorporate elements of proficiency learning such as standards-based reporting, separation of Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLS) from performance on standards, and valuing growth over time with a traditional based 4-point grading system. Grading will clearly communicate objective feedback to parents and students regarding the students’ individual strengths and challenges and be easily understood by stakeholders and external organizations. The Board will hold the Administration responsible for successfully identifying, implementing, and communicating the procedures in a clear and consistent manner.

Platforms such as JumpRope are used to communicate student progress. In [Understanding Mt. Abraham Proficiency-Based Report Cards](#), a sample section of a JumpRope generated, proficiency-based report card is explained: “This report shows final student progress in a class at the end of the semester. In the Mt. Abraham proficiency-based system, students receive two scores per course*, an **Overall Academic Mastery** score and an **Overall Habits of Work Mastery** score. For High School these scores are also reported separately on the school transcript.”

[The Making of a Grade](#) document from **Mt Abraham Union MS/HS** below provides another way to understand the grading system.

Habits of Work Grade
U - 4 Scale

Habits of Work:

- Honest
- Engaged
- Appropriate
- Responsible
- Timely

School-wide Habits of Work learning targets and scales are used to determine HOW grades and align to the Personal Development and Self Awareness Transferable Skill. They also determine co-curricular eligibility and needed supports.

HOW success leads to academic success!

**Proficiency-based Grading at
Mt Abraham Union MS/HS**

2020  2021

Proficiency Scales (for grading and reporting)

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 Extending | The learner demonstrates an in-depth understanding. The student can apply his/her knowledge and skills independently and/or across content areas. |
| 3 Proficient | The learner has met proficiency for the targeted knowledge and skills by demonstrating sufficient understanding through application. |
| 2 Developing | The learner shows partial understanding of the foundational material, but more targeted practice is needed. |
| 1 Getting Started | The learner shows little to no understanding of the material or is lacking evidence to support demonstration of his/her knowledge and skill. Remediation is necessary. |
| U Insufficient Evidence | The learner has not provided enough evidence to accurately measure achievement. |

Academic Grade
U - 4 Scale

Academics:

Clearly stated content and skills-based **learning targets** guide learning and descriptive grade scales are used to provide **formative feedback** and evaluate **summative evidence** of student work.

If a student earns below a 2.0 for an academic course the student will need to retake the course or find an alternate course that assesses the same proficiencies.

Some schools have created conversion charts to translate proficiency-based grades into traditional letter grades that are familiar to families and admissions officers. **Champlain Valley Union High School** and **Montpelier Roxbury High School** provide two examples.

The [Champlain Valley Union HS Handbook](#) (p. 10) explains:

Students are assessed on a 1-4 grading scale for formative and summative assessments. At the end of reporting periods, these scales translate into a letter grade based on the conversion chart below.

| Letter Grade | Score |
|--------------|---------|
| A+ | 3.9-4.0 |
| A | 3.7-3.8 |
| A- | 3.5-3.6 |
| B+ | 3.3-3.4 |
| B | 3.0-3.2 |
| B- | 2.7-2.9 |
| C+ | 2.4-2.6 |
| C | 2.0-2.3 |
| C- | 1.8-1.9 |
| D+ | 1.5-1.7 |
| D | 1.3-1.4 |
| D- | 1.0-1.2 |
| F | 0.0-0.9 |

Montpelier High School (MHS) Proficiency Conversion Chart

| Raw Proficiency Score | Description | Letter Grade |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| 3.80 to 4.0 | Exceeds Proficiency | A+ |
| 3.60 to 3.79 | Exceeds Proficiency | A |
| 3.40 to 3.59 | Exceeds Proficiency | A- |
| 3.20 to 3.39 | Proficient | B+ |
| 3.00 to 3.19 | Proficient | B |
| 2.80 to 2.99 | Proficient | B- |
| 2.50 to 2.79 | Partially Proficient | C+ |
| 2.20 to 2.49 | Does Not Meet Proficiency | C |
| 2.00 to 2.19 | Does Not Meet Proficiency | C- |
| 1.80 to 1.99 | Does Not Meet Proficiency | D+ |
| 1.60 to 1.79 | Does Not Meet Proficiency | D |
| 1.50 to 1.59 | Does Not Meet Proficiency | D- |
| Below | Insufficient Evidence | F |

The [Enosburg Falls High School and Cold Hollow Career Center Personalized and Proficiency-Based Learning](#) document (p. 9) explains why a conversion chart is needed at this point in time.

Growth mindset and the idea of developing talent rather than sorting talent are at the heart of proficiency-based learning. As we transition in our school, state, and country, we decided that the conversion charts would provide useful bridges of communication and trust-building. The use of 1-4 versus Beginning / Developing / Proficient and Exemplary and the traditional A-F can be seen as arbitrary. The instruction and learning that those symbols represents is the important part. The traditional GPA also serves as a bridge. In the traditional system a 93% in a course earned 4.0 points on the GPA scale. Our current system also allows for less than perfection to contribute the traditional 4.0 points with the 3.6 proficiency score and up earning 4.0 GPA points (see Conversion Chart). This helps focus the course on learning with less quibbling over the minutiae of a “perfect score” which may remain overvalued by many students as we work to provide more nuanced reporting of learning and a more growth-oriented mindset in our students.

Final Thoughts

Traditional grading practices have a long history within our educational system. Changes to that system can only take place once a culture within a school has been created where the traditional system that sorts students no longer works ([Categorical Inequality: Schools As Sorting Machines](#)). However, it is equally important to recognize that proficiency-based systems can coexist with traditional reporting scales if there is a collective commitment that a “grade” is a reliable and fair proxy for what students know and can do (i.e., proficiency).

Enabling every student to meet high expectations and keeping track of their progress is a significant adaptive change for many school systems. Working together, Vermont educators along with colleagues from across the country, can meet that challenge.

References

Domina, T., Penner, A., & Penner, E. (2017). [Categorical Inequality: Schools As Sorting Machines](#). *Annual review of sociology*, 43, 311–330.

Hawes, Kathryn M., "[An Examination of Standards-Based Education Relative to Research-Based Practices in Instruction and Assessment](#)" (2015). *All Theses & Dissertations*. 171.