Brian Stack, the principal of Sanborn High School in New Hampshire, an acknowledged leader in the proficiency based education movement, describes his school’s proficiency-based grading practices. “By this, it is meant that assignments are linked back to the competencies that they are designed to assess and student performance is reported in a way that tracks student mastery of the competencies that have been identified for each course. This shift in focus allows the school to use report cards and transcripts to more accurately report what it is a student knows and is able to do” (Smart, 2012).

Start With Common Grading Expectations

At Sanborn, and many other schools that use proficiency-based practices, the first step toward proficiency based (PB) grading is getting agreement on grading practices and expectations. (It is assumed that teachers are familiar with the standards expected in their content fields and are capable of designing assessments related to those standards. That is the subject of a separate Research Into Practice brief.) These expectations include:

Formative vs. Summative Assessment. O’Connor (2009) defines a summative assessment as “a comprehensive measure of a student’s ability to demonstrate the concepts, skills, and knowledge embedded within a course competency. It is an assessment of learning and it is heavily weighted in the grading system” According to Smart, at Sanborn, teachers link summative assignments to the course competencies that the assignment is assessing. Summative assignments must account for at least 90% of a final course grade.

O’Connor (2009) defines a formative assessment as “an assessment for learning and can broadly be described as a “snapshot” or a “dipstick” measure that captures a student’s progress through the learning process. It explains to what extent a student is learning a concept, skill, or knowledge set. In a sense, a formative assessment is practice and is, therefore, not heavily weighted in the grading system.”

Modify Existing Systems to Focus on Achieving Proficiency

Many existing school practices mitigate against achieving proficiency and earning grades that reflect the competencies actually mastered by the student. Some work to a student’s advantage, such as awarding credit for “effort” or “class participation” independent of content mastery. Others work against them: grade penalties for attendance, zeros for missed homework assignments, and grade averaging. Existing grading practices need to be analyzed for their unintended effect on student grades and the ability of the school to report actual proficiency in course content.

Some schools actually design a set of learning expectations associated with student behavior and good school citizenship. Those are assessed independently of the academic content so that course grades reflect only academic mastery. Students must still pass “citizenship” in order to complete the program, but it’s a separate set of expectations, assessments and remedial experiences.
**Rolling Grades:** The term “rolling grade” indicates many schools have eliminated quarter or semester grades. Their grading term starts on the first day of class, and it ends on the last day. Proficiency-based schools do not make use of averaging by quarters or semesters to compute a student's final course grade; instead, student grades are calculated based on all of the work for the entire course. They can “track” their progress by performance on individual proficiency measures throughout the course.

**Reassessment:** Reassessment is a key part of any competency-based grading system. Students learn at different rates, and they need multiple chances to demonstrate mastery of a competency or skill. In PB schools, a student who does not obtain an 80% or higher on a summative assessment has the option to reassess, provided they complete a reassessment plan with their teacher which may include a deadline for completion of the reassessment as well as the completion of several formative assessments at a proficient level prior to taking a summative reassessment.

**Elimination of the “Zero”:** Wormeli (2006) argues that despite the long-standing assumption that a zero can motivate a student to work harder, in fact it does not. Instead, a zero skews a student’s final grade in such a way that it no longer accurately represents what a student knows and is able to do. Giving a student a zero is akin to giving them the option to fail. At Sanborn HS, says Smart, failure is not an option for any student. Teachers will do whatever it takes to get students to complete an assignment.

In PB schools, teachers to use specific strategies in dealing with students who don’t complete assignments. The following checklist from Sanborn shows these strategies in the order that they should be attempted until the student produces the work:

- The student and teacher must have a face to face meeting about the late/missing work to clarify the assignment;
- The student and teacher must agree to an extension of a due date;
- An agreed upon time must be established to allow the student to complete the assignment in the classroom;
- The teacher must make contact with a parent or guardian;
- If appropriate, the teacher must provide an alternative assessment;
- The teacher must contact the appropriate case manager or counselor to make them aware of the situation;
- The teacher must give the student a grade of a incomplete either for the assignment or the course due to “Insufficient Work Shown” (IWS) until the student completes the assignment.
**Course Credit:** Course credit is awarded only upon mastery of specified competencies. The standard for passing is set for both the individual competencies and the overall proficiency list for the course. For example, a student must:

- Pass each competency assignment or assessment with a score of at least 65% **AND**
- Earn an overall course grade of at least 65%.

If both of these conditions are not met, students must complete a competency or credit recovery program to achieve mastery of the required standards. Common examples of this kind of recovery program include:

- Complete an online course or competency module at a proficient level
- Complete a teacher-directed project or recovery plan at a proficient level. The plan may include reassessments of key summative assignments or the completion of an alternative project
- Complete an appropriate extended learning opportunity that is connected with the skill or competency that must be recovered (e.g., Saturday school, online credit recovery, etc.)

**Laying the Groundwork**

In addition to the school-based planning that must go into competency-based grading at the school level, it is important to educate parents and students about this new way of thinking about grades. Key strategies for achieving full understanding of the proficiency-based grading model include:

- Comprehensive internal “public relations” so that the staff is all on the same page. Nothing undermines public confidence in schools more than having mixed messages about an innovation coming from people who work in the building – “those in the know” as far as the community is concerned.
- A full explanation of PB grading for students so that they understand the advantages and challenges of the system. Since one of the biggest complaints of high school drop outs is the perceived lack of fairness in the grading system, PB grading should be especially attractive to students who have struggled with poor grades in the past.
- Support from district officials and the school board is critical, since they are likely to field questions from the public and the press about new grading practices. It is especially important that the district be willing to examine grading policies that may impeded the implementation of PB grading in the schools.

Although proficiency based grading makes logical sense, and is indeed in common practice in other aspects of our lives (such as driver license testing or other professional licensing tests), it is a departure from more than a century of school practice. As such, it requires scrupulous planning, clear models and examples, and open communication. Fortunately, there are numerous resources, presented below, that can help school leaders bring about a smooth transition to PB grading in their own school settings.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC for EPI and Oregon GEAR UP. Authored by Howard Johnston, Ph. D., Professor of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida in Tampa. You may contact the author at hojofl@gmail.com.
References


Resources

Assessment of learning with competency based grading.

An outstanding profile of how they implemented proficiency-based grading in Sanborn HS in New Hampshire – a leader in the proficiency based education movement.

What Proficiency Based Grading Means for Your Student

A blog posting that is useful for explaining PB grading to parents and the public.

Competency Based Grading FAQs (with table comparing CBG with other models)

This is a short-hand comparison of PBE with other, traditional education models. It’s a good introduction for faculty and other school personnel.

Five Things that Changed at My School When we Adopted a Competency-Based Model.
http://connected principals.com/archives/7007

A memoir by Brian Stack, principal of Sanborn High School (NH), about how PB grading changed other important aspects of his school and program.

Portland Area Schools Debate Proficiency Based Grading

A review of some of the initiatives in the Portland (OR) area, including some of the pushback from parents about the move to PB grading. This is helpful in planning for a community information campaign.

Overview of Standards and Competency Based Reporting

This website provides a very explicit PB model and info for parents and the public in a NH school district. It’s very useful for presenting information to the lay community as well as to school personnel.

A Comparison of Traditional and Proficiency Based Education
http://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/home/departments/instruction/proficiency/comparison-of-traditional-and-proficiency-based-education/

From Beaverton, OR, this website summarizes the differences between traditional education and Oregon’s PBE model. This is another good community education tool.
Proficiency Based Instruction and Assessment  
From the Oregon Department of Education, this shows how credit for proficiency can be linked to state standards for instruction.

Schools, Districts, and States Transform Seat-based Requirements into Competency-based Pathways to College- and Career-Readiness  
This overview of PBE and competency-based assessment from the US Department of Education showcases several alternative models or “pathways” to proficiency.

Proficiency Grading Resources  
https://sites.google.com/site/madisonbetterthanx/proficiency-grading-resources  
This is a compendium of PB grading resources, including models, reporting systems, and assessments used in school districts across the US.

Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire’s Competency Based System  
http://www.all4ed.org/files/StrengtheningHSTeachingLearningNH.pdf  
This overview of New Hampshire’s CBE system describes the mandate, the programs, and the results in NH schools.

Van Meter Secondary (Iowa) Grading Philosophy  
This is a well-articulated philosophy of grading from an Iowa school district that can serve as a model for other schools moving toward proficiency based grading.

10 Ways to Improve Your School  
Great Schools Partnership  
http://lis.newenglandssc.org/webinars  
This issue (May, 2013) focuses on Grading and Reporting and provides a wealth of information about alternative grading systems designed to report actual student learning.

Capturing True Student Performance Through Proficiency Based Grading in Mathematics  
https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/10098/ProficiencyBasedGrading.pdf?sequence=1  
From the University of Oregon, this shows how PBE works in mathematics.

Standards Based Grading – Box Elder (UT) Schools  
http://www.besd.net/curriculum/standards.php  
A comprehensive description of PBE from a Utah school district that is noted for innovation and school reform.

A GPS for Competency Based Education  
Denver Public Schools CASE STUDY  
http://www.competencyworks.org/categories/case-studies/  
This case study gives a detailed overview of the implementation of CBE, including grading, in the Denver Public Schools.

Blog Posts and Articles from Schools on Competency-Based Grading  
http://www.competencyworks.org/?s=grading&x=0&y=0  
Competency Works is an organization devoted to the implementation of CBE in US schools. Their blog posts are informative, practical, and helpful.
General Toolbox: Proficiency Based Grading
http://generaltoolbox.wordpress.com/teacher-resources-2/proficiency-based-grading/
This blog post is actually a compilation of tools for principals and teachers interested in implementing PBE in their schools.

Making High School Grades Meaningful
An outstanding article by Tom Guskey providing the rationale for and overview of competency based grading practices.

7 Reasons for Standards Based Grading
This is an outstanding article by Patricia Scriffiney to share with teachers to start the discussion about PBE in your own school.

The Challenges of Standards Based Grading
Tom Guskey
After creating a strong rationale, Guskey explores some of the challenges and pitfalls of moving toward PBE.

Standards Based Grading and Reporting: A Model for Special Education
http://cec.metapress.com/content/18mn34800n3kxg22/fulltext.pdf
PBE seems especially well suited to special education, and this article provides helpful tips on how to implement it for special needs kids.

How I Overhauled Grading As Usual
An outstanding article from Educational Leadership on one school’s experience in changing their grading system. This is a must-read for principals.

Five Obstacles to Grading Reform
http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov11/vol69/num03/Five-Obstacles-to-Grading-Reform.aspx
This is a thoughtful article by Tom Guskey about the institutional and cultural barriers to grading reform. It’s especially useful for school leaders as they prepare to launch a PBE initiative in their schools.

Starting the Conversation About Grading
Susan Brookhart’s article outlines a process for beginning the discussion of grading reform in individual schools. It’s great preparation for starting the discussion in your own setting.

Assessment and Grading Articles
A listing of ASCD resources and materials online
This is a comprehensive list of links and resources on assessment and grading – including PB grading – from ASCD.

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