

**CompetencyWorks** ISSUE BRIEF

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Progress and  
Proficiency:  
*Redesigning Grading for  
Competency Education***

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# PROGRESS AND PROFICIENCY: REDESIGNING GRADING FOR COMPETENCY EDUCATION

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*Casco Bay High School is harder than other schools, but you learn everything. You can't pass by with a 78 and not know half the material. I used to pass by with a B-, but when I got to Casco I didn't know half of the material I was supposed to have learned in middle school because that was the half I didn't learn.*

– Student from Casco Bay High School in Expeditionary Learning's "[Why Use a Standards-Based Grading System?](#)"

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This paper is part of a series investigating the implementation of competency education. The purpose of the paper is to explore how districts and schools can redesign grading systems to best help students to excel in academics and to gain the skills that are needed to be successful in college, the community, and their workplace.

## Understanding the Weaknesses of the Traditional Grading System

Letter grades and age-based grades are the way we currently track student progression through the system. Grades play many functions — communicating performance, providing motivation and feedback to students, criteria for guidance, and input for instructional planning and administration<sup>1</sup> — although not as effectively as we would like.

Although designed with best intentions to motivate students and communicate student achievement, both past and potential, as students move through school, our A–F grading scheme is undermining the very core purpose of our education system: learning. There are several weaknesses in this grading system. First, it is not a reliable indicator of achievement, often misleading parents into believing that their children are making progress toward college and career readiness. Second, it allows students to advance without fully mastering skills, creating a problem of “swiss cheese achievement.” Finally, it is an ineffective tool for motivating students.

The cost of this time-based grading system is enormous. We invest heavily in an education system that consistently produces gaps in learning. Drop-out rates, retention, credit recovery, and remediation in college are all direct consequences. Yet, it's hard to let go of the familiar A–F system. Robert J. Marzano emphasizes that “Americans have a basic trust in the message that grades convey — so much so that grades have gone without



You can learn more about competency education at [CompetencyWorks.org](https://www.competencyworks.org), as well as find links and materials for all the resources mentioned in this paper on the [CompetencyWorks wiki](#).

challenge and are, in fact, highly resistant to any challenge.”<sup>2</sup> Districts and schools converting to competency education will need to be prepared to help students and parents understand that those As, Bs, and Cs are a result of a profoundly idiosyncratic process that does little more than differentiate and rank students.

## Redesigning Grading

The process of redesigning grading policies and practices for competency-based schools begins with thinking through the purpose and the design principles. In competency education, student learning and achievement is always the primary purpose. Grant Wiggins, President of Authentic Education, proposes the following criteria to use in redesigning grading:<sup>3</sup>

- Honest feedback about one’s standing
- Fair to each student and other students
- Transparent and without mystery
- Credible to clients and constituencies
- Valid assessment against key long-term learning goals
- Useful (actionable) and user-friendly information about performance and how to improve
- Pedagogically wise — it sends the right message and gets the incentives right for learners

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY EDUCATION?

Competency education is an approach to ensure that all children are successful in developing the knowledge and skills they need for life. Competency education has a laser focus on learning that challenges century-old assumptions about schools and schooling. The five essential elements of competency education are that:

- Students advance upon mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Depending on where you live, it may be called proficiency-based, performance-based, standards-based, or mastery-based education. In this paper, the term competency education will be used except in examples from districts and schools in which we will use their preferred terminology.

As schools begin the conversion to competency-based education, they have choices along a continuum of incremental steps to a full redesign. Although there is a lot of variation in how competency-based districts and schools are redesigning grading policies, six elements are followed in most, if not all, competency-based schools.

**1. Embrace explicit learning progression or standards so that everyone will have a shared vision of what students should learn.**

The first step in building a competency-based grading system is to develop the learning progression that indicates what students are expected to know and be able to do. A learning progression can be organized to stretch from kindergarten all the way through graduation or to be as short as what is to be learned in a specific course. States, districts, and schools are using a variety of competency frameworks to clearly define the essential standards or performance indicators upon which students will be graded. It is important to remember that students will be starting at different points along the larger learning progression, and teachers will need to be able to assess, grade, and track learning gains for skills at earlier stages, as well as later, beyond the specific skills to be taught in a specific course.

**2. Develop a clear understanding of levels of knowledge so that students and teachers share an understanding of what proficiency means.**

Competency education assumes that proficiency means the ability to apply skills or content, sometimes referred to as higher-order skills and sometimes as deeper learning. Therefore, competency-based schools need a common framework to help teachers and students communicate about the depth of knowledge or learning target for any specific standard that students are expected to meet. Examples of knowledge frameworks include Bloom's Taxonomy, Webb's Depth of Knowledge, and the New Taxonomy on Educational Objectives developed by Robert J. Marzano and John S. Kendall.

As schools review their curriculum and assessments in the process of implementing the Common Core State Standards and competency education, they often find that they have been setting proficiency at retrieval and comprehension, rather than the higher levels of analysis and utilization. Calibration, an essential mechanism for sustaining high expectations, is attained by bringing together teachers from different grade levels to create a shared understanding of what proficiency looks like, according to different levels of knowledge along the learning progression.

**3. Ensure transparency so that educators, students, and parents all understand where students are on their learning progression.**

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*When you have a culture of transparency, then and only then will acceleration of learning occur.*

– Rich Delorenzo

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Transparency is a core value in competency education. It is the magic ingredient for increasing students' agency and ownership of their education. Competency-based grading is transparent so that students know where they are on their learning progression, what they need to do next, and what proficiency looks like. Monitoring their own learning progression sparks students' ownership and responsibility for their learning. Students become active participants and co-designers in their education.

#### **4. Create a school-wide or district-wide standards-based grading policy.**

In competency-based schools there is a commitment to help all students become proficient in the standards. Not some, or a few, but all. This means that schools have to establish a standards-based grading policy, not just a standards-referenced approach. In his book *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading*, Robert J. Marzano explains the difference. “In a standards-based system, a student does not move to the next level until he or she can demonstrate competence at the current level. In a standards-referenced system, a student’s status is reported (or referenced) relative to the performance standard for each area of knowledge and skill on the report card; however, even if the student does not meet the performance standard for each topic, he or she moves to the next level. Thus, the vast majority of schools and districts that claim to have standards-based systems in fact have standards-referenced systems.”<sup>4</sup> The implementation of a standards-based policy is consistent with the primary principle of competency education — students continue to learn until they are proficient. They are not passed on to the next course or teacher unprepared.

Rose Colby, a national leader in competency education, points out that although there are many similarities between standards-based and competency-based grading, there are important differences. “First, competency-based requires teachers to be able to assess and grade the application of skills or performance tasks whereas not all standards have that quality of deeper learning. Second, competency-based grading assumes that students may be Not Yet Proficient and need to take the time to get help and continue practicing in order to have a reassessment.”<sup>5</sup>

Competency-based schools create school-wide or even district-wide grading policies, rather than having individual teachers setting the policy. Grading systems include scoring mechanisms to indicate how students are progressing toward proficiency, use trends rather than averages to summarize learning, and separate academic progress from behavior.

#### **5. Offer timely feedback and meaningful reassessments so that students can continue to progress and stay on track.**

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*One of the fundamental things you look for in a grading policy is the elimination of Ds and Fs. You simply can't give credit for less than a minimum level of proficiency. There is no reason to report it other than as Not Yet Proficient.*

– Rose Colby

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Competency education depends on educators sharing a growth mindset that believes that students, as well as adults themselves, can develop and build skills with the right mix of feedback, supports, and time to practice. A number of the policies and practices in competency-based grading are rooted in this mindset, including the ideas that 1) students should never be penalized for mistakes that take place during the learning cycle, 2) practice is never graded, and 3) it is acceptable and even expected that students may not reach proficiency the first time through a cycle of learning.

Providing opportunities for meaningful reassessments of the specific standards, not taking the same test over and over or taking an entire course over, is a core policy and practice in competency-based schools. Brian Stack, principal at Sanborn High School in New Hampshire, emphasizes that “Making reassessments a school-wide

practice changes the learning culture for students from one where they are trying to earn enough points to *pass* to one in which they are held accountable for everything they need to know and be able to do.<sup>6</sup> To support students and teachers alike, it is important to implement school-wide systems of supports so that there is no excuse for a student to reach the end of the semester not having met the standards.

Schools need to clearly design reassessment policies around students who are not yet proficient. Reassessment policies for students not yet proficient usually require a work plan and evidence that the student participated in more practice or study, such as individual or small group tutoring, before resubmitting evidence of learning.

### **6. Provide adequate information infrastructure to support students, teachers, and school-wide continuous improvement.**

One of the big changes in standards-based grading is that teachers organize their grade books around measurement topics rather than assignments and assessments. Instead of distributing points across tests, projects, homework, and behavior, grade books — or perhaps they should be referred to as “progress books” — are designed around what students are expected to learn with information on how students are progressing under each one, based on evidence of learning or assessments.

Tracking student progress according to measurement topics or standards generates an extraordinary amount of information about student learning. Thus, many schools turn to platforms that allow them to collect and use the data for supporting individual students, informing teachers’ professional development, and embarking in continuous improvement of school performance. One of the key elements of the technology platforms is to provide transparency on how students are progressing, where they are in their learning cycle within a unit or standard, and what they can do next. Students, teachers, and parents all see the same information about a student so that they can have informed conversations about how to best support the student.

Although the technology platforms allow real-time access to student progress, report cards continue to be important tools for communicating with parents. Standards-based report cards provide significantly more information about how students are doing in their learning than traditional report cards, and they separate academic progress from lifelong learning competencies. Similarly, states, districts, and schools are revising the high school transcript to communicate what students know and can do.

## Conclusion

As in any major systems redesign, when you pull on one thread, you find yourself pulling on many. As districts and schools convert to competency-based grading, they quickly find that they need to address other practices in their schools. As innovators have learned, once grading is revised, it is impossible to avoid revising classroom management practices and adjusting support systems. As school capacity increases regarding the use of the Common Core State Standards, our knowledge of the learning sciences expands, and learning management systems catch up to the innovators of the field, we will be able to see the full benefits of competency-based grading.

Although at times the new structures of competencies, learning progressions, depth of knowledge, and grading systems can feel complex, as districts and schools become comfortable with the structures and terms, the language of competency education will be as familiar to us as the As, Bs, and Fs of our traditional grades. As many have pointed out during school visits, our students will be the ambassadors and translators, explaining to family members, colleges, and employers what they have learned, how they have learned it, what they want to learn next, and what they need in order to be successful.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Marzano, *Transforming Classroom Grading* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Marzano, *Transforming Classroom Grading*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> "[Grant Wiggins on Grading](#)," Authentic Education, retrieved November 20, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Marzano, *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading* (Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory, 2010), 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Rose Colby, May 16 and August 12, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Stack, "[Reassessments and Retakes: A Necessary Part of a School-Wide Grading Policy](#)," [CompetencyWorks](#) (2013), retrieved November 20, 2013.