

What is competency-based grading?

In a competency-based, or sometimes called standards-based system, teachers report what students know and are able to do relative to the [Iowa Core](#) and District Standards and Benchmarks or Learning Targets. The system includes:

- The improvement of student achievement of required Iowa targets in all content areas,
- The mastery of defined learning targets instead of the accumulation of points,
- The reporting of student achievement toward meeting learning targets at a given time by reflecting on mounting evidence based on various forms of assessments,
- A record keeping system that provides teachers with information that allows them to adjust learning practices to meet the needs of students, and
- A system that encourages student reflection and responsibility.

What are the purposes of competency-based/standards-based grading?

One purpose of competency-based/standards-based grading is to align grading with the state academic standards as measured by consistent and accurate student achievement data and common criteria for grading. Another purpose is to accurately communicate achievement of learning targets to students, parents and educators. The influence of positive and consistent work habits on student learning is reported separately from the academics.

Van Meter Community School District's purpose for competency-based/standards-based grading is to raise student achievement by clearly communicating students' progress toward learning targets.

How does cbg/sbg work?

Traditional grading averages work that a student has done over a semester with other student characteristics, such as work habits. Competency-based grading/standards-based grading removes extraneous factors and focuses solely on a student's academic achievement and continued mounting evidence that indicates a true assessment of the child's present attainment of the learning targets.

How is cbg/sbg different?

- The student's grade more accurately represents the progress toward mastery of competencies or standards than traditional grading does.
- Subject areas are subdivided into big ideas related to standards and their respective learning targets that students need to learn or master.

- Each target is assessed.
- The influence of positive and consistent work habits on student learning is reported separately from the academics.

What are the advantages of competency-based grading/standards-based grading?

- The learning targets are clearly articulated to the students throughout instruction.
- Parents can see which learning targets students have mastered and which ones need reteaching and relearning.

What are the disadvantages of competency-based grading/standards-based grading?

- It's a change, and change takes time to build understanding for everyone involved.
- Traditional grading practices are ingrained in the community. Community members will have to go through the change process along with the other stakeholders.

More FAQ-some are repeated:)

What is the role of homework in SBG?

The purposes for assigning homework include the following:

- Preview - To prepare students to learn new material.
- Practice – To help students master learning targets.
- Evidence – To provide evidence of a student's progress toward a learning target. Failure to turn in this type of homework may negatively impact a learning target grade not as a punitive measure but rather because a key piece of evidence needed to verify a certain level of student understanding is missing.
- Extension – To provide opportunities for extension and application of skills taught in the class to new situations.
- Integration – To provide opportunities to apply many different skills to a larger task. Examples of this type can be projects, creative writing, and I-Search papers.

Work ethic related to homework is reflected separately from the academic grade. Failure to complete homework may negatively impact a student's

learning/employability score.

Students need to understand their responsibility to do homework and the difference that it makes in their grades and, more importantly, their learning.

How does a standards-based report card improve teaching and learning?

Knowing where the students are in their progress toward meeting standards-based learning targets is crucial for planning and carrying out classroom instruction. Teachers teach to the needs of their students. The new grading system is designed to give teachers more information about the student's progress in meeting the level of proficiency required by each standard. In addition, teachers share the standards with students and parents, helping them to better understand the learning that needs to take place.

The parent portal through Infinite Campus shows students and parents the progress report in real time. The portal is updated at least every 15 days at the middle and high school levels and indicates a student's progress toward proficiency on every learning target. The Elementary parent portal is updated at least every 30 days. Such detailed information allows parents to support students in their specific areas of need.

However, at this point, the high school report card looks very similar to the traditional report card with a single letter grade for each course representing a student's performance on all of the learning targets. A new addition to the the report card is being considered. It is a separate grade for "learning/ employability skills." This grade helps parents hold students accountable for their responsibility in the learning process. It is not currently in use.

How does the new report card help improve my understanding of my child's learning?

In the electronic parent portal, parents see the learning targets addressed each grading period and their child's progress in achieving those learning targets. Because the learning targets are clearly articulated for each course and public to all, and the learning targets are consistent within each course, more information can be determined from the assessment of learning targets than in a traditional system with test averages and letter grades. Please realize that each parent will view the progress of his/her child only; each student's performance is kept completely confidential. Based on assessments directly related to the learning targets throughout the grading period, teachers, parents and students are made aware of progress toward the learning targets and can work together to enhance achievement. Standards are an effective way of giving students and parents the targets for concept mastery when

they are in school. Doug Reeves (*101 Questions and Answers about Standards, Assessment, and Accountability*, 2004) makes this point in the following quote:

“By comparing one child’s performance to a clear standard, parents, children and teachers all know precisely what is expected. Every time a student attempts a task, the performance is compared to the standard, not to other children’s performances. The most important advantages for children and families are fairness, clarity, and improved learning.”

How will students’ growth be reported?

In a standards-based report card, progress toward learning targets is documented during each grading period in the grade book. On the elementary report card, progress toward achievement is reported for each big idea or learning target. On the secondary report card, the academic achievement for each course is converted to a letter grade. The high school and middle school reports reflect a student’s performance on all relevant learning targets, using an established scoring rubric. At all levels “learning/employability skills” or “characteristics of a successful learner” are being developed and will be reported separately.

Progress reports, viewable through the Infinite Campus parent portal, indicate the student’s progress toward each of the learning targets for the course. Progress reports are updated at least every 15 days at the middle and high school levels and every 23 days at the elementary level.

Students and teachers monitor students’ progress toward learning targets on a regular basis. Parents should be able to receive additional feedback from the student and the teacher at any time.

Why does SBG use most recent assessments vs. averaging?

Every student starts a grading period with a certain amount of background knowledge, some accurate and some not, related to a topic/learning target. Through assessments during the grading period, teachers are able to determine students’ levels of achievement of the learning targets. Since the goal is to document each student’s level of achievement based on learning targets, averaging all scores throughout the marking period dilutes the information, underestimates the students’ ending performance, and corrupts the determination of whether or not the student has achieved the targets.

How do teachers give one standards-based grade when there are multiple standards

per quarter?

At the elementary level, a student's performance will be reported for each learning target or big idea taught throughout the year. At the middle school and high school levels, summative grades will be determined from evaluating a body of evidence based on the learning targets taught that quarter. At all levels, a need for additional support or intervention can be noted through comments on the report card or through direct contact with the parent.

Do we report out on the student's proficiency for the end of the year target, or is the grade based on proficiency for that time of year?

The IA Core academic standards give us benchmarks along with an achievement timeline. The report card grade is summative information about the level of proficiency of the learning targets that are taught each marking period. Therefore, the grades throughout the year communicate a student's progress as compared to where we would expect him/her to be at that moment in time. By the end of the year/course/grade level, students are expected to be proficient or advanced for each standard.

How does standards-based grading affect transcripts for colleges?

Other than the fact that the grades on the transcripts are derived from standards-based grading and assessment, there is little change in the appearance of the transcript. Standards-based grading is not a deterrent to college acceptance. In fact, evidence of proficiency of IA Core standards should be a strong indicator of college/career success. A research company conducted a study of 30 institutions across the state and country. They found no indication of any adverse implications of standards-based grading for college admissions. According to the report, "Generally, admissions offices treat all grades as welcome indicators of high school performance while implicitly acknowledging that every school has a unique perspective, student body, and system."

Additionally, a new PDE report states that a higher GPA isn't the key to improving students' chances for college acceptance. Rather, better college entrance exam scores and more rigorous courses are. With standards-based grading, we are increasing the rigor and improving changes that students will perform well on entrance exams. We continue to communicate to colleges that our transcripts are based on more rigorous grading practices.

How does SBG prepare students for college?

The components of standards-based grading have the capacity to enhance

achievement of learning targets and increase students' understanding of the specific skills, strategies, knowledge and processes to succeed through the use of well-articulated targets and formative assessment. Students are better able to learn self-advocacy and do the necessary work to achieve the learning targets prior to summative assessments. Students are able to take increased ownership of their learning. It also helps them develop grit which research from Angela Duckworth would indicate has a greater impact on academic success than IQ.

In addition, SBG assists students in meeting high school graduation requirements in preparation for college. We are developing or have developed end-of-course exams that students will be required to pass to graduate. Using standards-based education will better prepare our students for success on these exams.

Doesn't SBG lead to grade inflation?

If a grade truly represents the level of mastery of standards, the grades students have earned represent the level of their understanding of the course material. It should provide an accurate picture of the student's performance, neither inflated nor deflated.

My student used to make high grades but doesn't now.

Similar to the answer about grade inflation, the grade reflects the student's progress toward standards. Under the prior system, grades reflected a combination of ability and compliance. Now, the student's participation and effort are reported in a separate grade for each class. SBG provides a more accurate representation of what a student knows and is able to do.

Is there research to indicate that standards-based grading significantly increases student achievement?

Research on standards-based grading shows overwhelmingly that students learn their subjects and perform better when instruction and assessment are each implemented with great fidelity. The works of people such as Popham, Reeves, Marzano, Pickering, McTighe, Wiggins, Stiggins, Guskey, Brookhart, O'Connor, and the *High Schools That Work Breaking Ranks* program are good sources of evidence. Specific resources are listed at the end of this section.

Isn't there subjectivity in standards-based grading?

There is subjectivity in all grading. With SBG, for the first time, we have identified and published standards for the students to aim for. Traditionally grades were derived from assessments of varying levels of difficulty depending on the teacher. Grades

were not defined. Teachers across the district are working together on a regular basis to emphasize consistency in expectations and grading.

If students are allowed to retest, why should they try the first time?

“Retest” is not the most accurate description of what occurs. Having multiple opportunities to reach a standard should not be a repeat of the same performance. Prior to an additional chance for assessment, evidence of “correctives” should be indicated. Significant remediation should occur between the first attempt and the re-assessment.

The additional opportunities to show evidence of achievement of learning targets should be presented in an alternative form. Authentic performance assessment should occur repeatedly in any grading system. Choosing only one of those to be the recorded score is artificial. Consider college freshman writing courses – they all provide chances for feedback and revision. The goal is to teach students how to best prepare for summative assessments. Most students learn quickly that it takes less work to do it right the first time. If students feel they are not getting multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency, they should talk to their teachers or administrators to address the issue.

How are “incompletes” be handled in the high school?

If we use standards-based grading to report a student’s progress toward the achievement of a standard, it is an on-going process. For management reasons, we need to establish deadlines by which that progress needs to be reported. However, if a student is still progressing toward the standard at such a time when a report is needed, such as report card time, an incomplete may be given. If, two weeks after that deadline has passed, the student hasn’t demonstrated his full potential on the standard (through reteaching and correctives), the grade should be recorded based on the preponderance of the evidence that the teacher has, or continue as an incomplete if the student’s performance is still progressing. The principal should be consulted and parents informed in extreme cases.

How will parents continue to be educated for this change?

Ongoing updates have been placed on the website. Parents are also encouraged to ask individual teachers or building principals questions regarding grading practices at specific levels.

Is SBG more work for teachers?

In the first few years of implementation, perhaps, but it is a system designed to be

fair to students and increase achievement, so it's worth the time. However, it will save time in the future. Rather than having to assign and grade a predetermined number of assignments, teachers will need to gather only the evidence required to demonstrate a student's level of proficiency. Teachers and students use information specific to learning targets to plan instruction designed for individual student needs. Students clearly understand the target, their needs, and the course of action to achieve the target. Once students are familiar with the system, they work with the teacher to reach for the proficient and/or advanced scores. This partnership makes teaching and assessing more efficient.

Are there concerns about bi weekly eligibility?

No. Students who are making acceptable progress towards proficiency in the standards for a course would be considered to be passing the course. Teachers will continue to provide biweekly status reports regarding students' eligibility.

Did the District implement this practice too quickly?

The consideration of standards-based grading began in VMCS D in 2009. The process has evolved since then. We continually assess our progress and make necessary adjustments.

Will students with superior abilities have a chance to excel?

We are asking all students to strive for higher performance. To earn an advanced score, students must operate on a higher level of critical thinking, not just get more questions correct. There is no limit on how high a student can perform. Teachers continue to provide enrichment opportunities to students.

Suggested Reading

Guskey (2007/08). *The Rest of the Story. Educational Leadership, 65(4), 28-35.*

Kallick and Costa. *Habits of Mind.*

Marzano (2006). *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work.*

O'Connor (2002). *How to Grade for Learning.*

Scriffiny (2008). *Seven Reasons for Standards-Based Grading.*

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct08/vol66/num02/Seven_Reasons_for_Standards-Based_Grading.aspx.

Wormeli (2006). *Fair Isn't Always Equal.*